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The Discursive-Material Knot

Cyprus in Conflict and
Community Media Participation



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THE INTRODUCTION OF A TRIPTYCH

It is unusual to refer to a book as a triptych. The concept of the triptych is often associated with the world of painting, and eras that have long since passed. It may even suggest an old-fashioned mind-set and/or an outdated perspective. Nevertheless, the allocation of such a prominent role to the concept is intentional, because it is vital for describing and understanding this book's intellectual project. A triptych consists of three panels that have a certain degree of independence but that are also part of a whole. These panels are three interdependent representations of reality, and that is exactly what this book aims to do, by creating three different platforms, bound together in one book.

This notion of the platform is equally helpful in explaining the approach that is used in this book. Inspiration has been found in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, although my book is a more modest version, with its ambition to offer only three platforms, and not a thousand. Still, the idea that each platform has a degree of independence, and can be accessed on its own right, remains, and the reader is invited to find her or his own way through the book. This independence is generated through the diversity of issues that are raised in the three platforms, and the different levels of abstraction that characterize them. At the same time, these platforms are still interconnected, articulated in one book, connected through the materiality of the paper on

which the book is printed (or of the e-file by which it is distributed), but also by their alignment in the same research project. The three platforms came to fruition together, cross-fertilizing and affecting each other, talking to each other, and sometimes giving the author an idea of their collective agency, with one platform making demands on the other platform (luckily still requiring the author's intervention). In a slightly more down-to-earth version: The interconnection of the three platforms is generated and protected by the iterative-cyclical methodology deployed throughout the entire research project. Whatever version is preferred: The collective genesis of the three platforms binds them together, in a more intimate way than the platform metaphor, or the book's unavoidably linear way of writing, might suggest, even when the three platforms continue to claim their independence, inviting to be read in their own right.

What unifies these platforms, and characterizes this book, is a choice for a radical combination of theory and empirical research. This implies, first of all, a very strong presence of high theory, and the high levels of abstraction that coincide with high theory. Moreover, the book consistently uses the constructionist paradigm, and is deeply invested in post-structuralist theory, both of which have a tendency to come across as more abstract (even though I would contest this, as the sense of abstraction is also influenced by conceptual familiarity). In particular, the first platform, with its discussion of the ontology of the discursive-material knot, might give the reader the feeling of being catapulted into an orbit around the planet, finding herself, or himself, in the position of reading a text that is disconnected from the realities of everyday life. Again, this needs to be contested. The production of high theory in itself is of crucial importance, even if it does not immediately serve empirical research. Also, the first platform—with its ontological focus—speaks clearly about, and to, our world, in the most fundamental way possible. But Platform 1 does even more: It also prepares the ground for a series of theoretical re-readings of very different, but still very needed, theoretical concepts, from a variety of fields, namely, participatory theory, community media theory, conflict theory, conflict resolution/transformation theory (all in Platform 2), and theories of nationalism (in Platform 3).

But these theoretical reflections, as found in Platform 1, were not produced in a void. A radical combination of high theory and empirical research implies a confrontation between this high theory and a specific social reality, where the latter is entitled to talk back to the theory, to challenge, alter, and enrich it. Even if the data are always mediated through theoretical frameworks, this

does *not* mean that these theoretical frameworks should be given the right to colonize a social reality, impose themselves upon it and smother it in the process. In this book, the choice was made for a particular socio-organizational reality: The Cyprus Community Media Center (CCMC) and its webradio station, MYCYradio, within the context of the Cyprus Problem—a choice that brings about the risk of simply adding to the libraries of books that have already been written about this conflict. The theoretical tools developed in Platform 1 and Platform 2 will be used (as sensitizing concepts—an analytical strategy that will be discussed at the end of Platform 1) for an analysis of the role that CCMC and MYCYradio, as a participatory community media assemblage, can play in the transformation of the Cyprus Problem, or, in other words, in the transformation of antagonism into agonism.

This third platform, with its two chapters, is extensive, as it contains a detailed analysis of the Cyprus Problem, first reverting to a factual historical narrative, providing an academic-historical anchorage point that is very necessary in a conflict where almost every historical event is contested. This historical narrative is then re-analyzed to comprehend the workings of the discursive-material knot in the Cyprus Problem. Although this extensive contextual analysis might seem superfluous at first glance, this analysis has intensively strengthened both the theoretical analyses in Platform 1 and Platform 2, and the CCMC/MYCYradio analysis in the second chapter of Platform 3. In the second chapter of Platform 3, CCMC and MYCYradio are analyzed, first as a participatory assemblage, and then as an agonist assemblage. The concluding reflection analyzes the articulation of participation and agonism.

This (finally) brings me to the main title of my book, to what provides the foundation of this entire book, with its three platforms, namely, the concept of the discursive-material knot. This concept has been chosen (and developed) to emphasize the need for bringing the discursive and the material, both theoretically and empirically, closer together. Different theoretical frameworks and traditions have identified this need, and this book is definitely not the first plea to study what Hardy and Thomas (2015: 692) have very recently called “[...] the material effects of discourse and the discursive effects of materiality [...]” I even have the luxury of being able to point to an earlier article of my own (Carpentier, 2012), where I argued for this theoretical model to be developed. This is not an easy project, though, and many of the existing reflections on the discursive and the material have ended up (implicitly or explicitly) privileging one of the two components.

The theoretical framework of the discursive-material knot that I want to introduce and support with this book does not privilege the discursive over the material, or the material over the discursive. The discursive-material knot is a non-hierarchical ontology that theorizes the knotted interactions of the discursive and the material as restless and contingent, sometimes incessantly changing shapes and sometimes deeply sedimented. But this relation of interdependence will never result in one component becoming more important than the other. In this sense, the metaphor of the knot is important to express this intense and inseparable entanglement, but we should also acknowledge the limits of this metaphor and keep in mind that the knot can never be unraveled or disentangled. What we can do, as analysts of the discursive-material knot, is follow the rope (a bit like Actor Network Theory (ANT) researchers ‘follow the actor’—see Law, 1991; Ruming, 2009). Even then, we should remain realistic about what (academic) language allows us to do, and the constraints it creates. Having to work with (academic) language sometimes, for merely analytical reasons, causes the discursive and the material component to be discussed separately, in a particular order. One component always has to come first, but this is done without ever implying that their relationship is hierarchical.

Equally important to keep in mind is that the ontology of the discursive-material knot operates at all levels of the social. Here, Foucault’s (1977) ‘micro-physics of power’ offers a good parallel to the multi-level nature of the discursive-material knot. Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish* that the workings of power enter the micro-processes of the social, structuring all our social relations. A similar argument can be made for the discursive-material knot. The knotted interaction of the discursive and the material—in always particular and contingent ways—structures large-scale assemblages, such as state apparatuses, armies, or markets, but it also enters into the micro-processes of the everyday without these different levels ever becoming disconnected.

In order to capture the translation of the discursive-material knot into social practice, the concept of the assemblage is used. While the discursive-material knot is located at the ontological level, the assemblage is positioned in this book at the ontic level, in order to theorize how the flows that characterize the social, with their endless range of possibilities to become fixated and to fixate, are arrested and channeled into particular combinations of the discursive and the material. It is the assemblage that enables us to think of the social as a tapestry, characterized by assemblages with their increased densities, surrounded by ever-moving flows. This is very reminiscent of Laclau

and Mouffe's (1985: 112) description of how a discourse functions (which is explicitly inspired by Lacan), and can be expanded to the workings of the discursive-material assemblage: "Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre."

In developing this theoretical reflection about the discursive-material knot, one has to start somewhere, and as the previous citation already suggests, Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory will be the starting point to construct my theoretical reflections about the discursive-material knot, as their discourse theory has been my theoretical and intellectual home for a very long time (and still is). These dialogues with discourse theory will lead to a mild re-thinking of Laclau and Mouffe's work, taking some of the critiques on discourse theory into consideration,¹ oscillating between loyalty and disloyalty, in always respectful ways for their work, and for the closely related work of some of their colleagues (in particular Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997). This re-thinking is aimed at expanding discourse theory, infusing (or infecting) it with the material, and using the mutation to feed further theoretizations and empirical research. At the same time, this re-thinking remains faithful to the basic logic of discourse theory, which results in a radically consistent use of the discourse-theoretical conceptual frameworks (e.g., the distinction between discourses and signifying practices) to think through the discursive-material knot in its entirety.

As this book remains firmly grounded in discourse theory, I need to briefly explain the particularity of its approach towards discourse, which is defined (following Laclau, 1988: 254) as "[...] a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed [...]." This definition implies the preference for a macro-textual usage of the discourse concept—related to what is known as a big D discourse definition—which treats discourse as a concept closely related to (but not synonymous with) ideology (as will be explained more in Platform 1). Although discourse theory continuously emphasized the importance of the material (see, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe's (1990: 101) reference to radical materialism), there is still a need to expand the theoretical reflections on the discursive-material knot, and the ways that the discursive and the material are interconnected. Moreover, this reconciliation is also constructive from an analytical point of view, as it allows for a much richer analysis, not merely focusing on media talk, for instance, but also on the contextualized processes of discursive-ideological production and their material components.

This expanding-discourse-theory project loudly acknowledges the accomplishments of ‘old’ materialisms—after all, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory is a post-Marxist theory—but it is particularly sympathetic towards the developments in the field of new materialism,² which aims to rethink and revalidate the role of the material in cultural theory. In this approach (or set of approaches), the material is seen as “agential matter” (Barad, 2007: 246) or “generative matter,” a concept that Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012: 93) attributed to DeLanda (1996). Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012: 93) immediately added to their reference to “generative matter” that the new materialist approaches are aimed at avoiding being locked in the dualism of “matter-of-opposed-to-signification.” Instead, new materialism “[...] captures *mattering* as simultaneously material and representational [...]” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012: 93), a crucial position that prevents either the role of the discursive in producing meaning, or the agentic role of the material, being ignored. A similar position can be found with Rahman and Witz (2003: 256), when they wrote:

“The social constructionism being worked at here is not one that is limited by physical matter, but rather one that is able to incorporate body matters as an indivisible part of lived, gendered experience and action. Thus the scope of the social or the cultural evoked [...] confronts the limits of constructionism, whether sociological or discursive, by sometimes admitting, sometimes asserting the body as a problematic yet inescapable component of a social ontology of gender and sexuality.”

The new materialist agenda is translated in a focus on a “material-semiotic actor” (Haraway, 1988: 595), or the use of a “material-discursive” (Barad, 2007) approach, which is indeed closely related to the discursive-material knot approach advocated here. At the risk of engaging in a semantic play: The order of the two concepts, as the discursive-material, matters. It is important, first of all, to emphasize that the starting point of my book is discourse-theoretical, which is then combined with an effort to make the material more visible in this discourse-theoretical strand. This more developed approach towards the discursive has an additional advantage, as it enriches new materialism and enables us to think more in detail *how* the discursive and the material are entangled. Also, the label of the discursive-material knot is used here to generate distance from some of the new materialist stances that are not shared. Although I am very sympathetic towards the idea of moving away from the discursive-material dualism, and I applaud the existence of pleas to strike a balance, the alleged domination of the representational, and the need

to give the representational and linguisticity “[...] its proper place, that is, a more modest one [...]” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012: 98), is sometimes hard to agree with. There are more kind versions (e.g., Kirby, 2006), but also some of the new materialist language towards post-structuralist authors, such as Butler, is slightly uncomfortable. This citation from Barad (2007: 145—my emphasis) contains some of the language that generates my discomfort:

“[...] however, Butler’s concern is limited to the production of human bodies (and only certain aspects of their production, at that), and her theorization of materialization is *parasitic* on Foucault’s notions of regulatory power and discursive practices, which are limited to the domain of human social practices.”

This quote also brings us to the post-humanist agenda, which is (sometimes) part of new materialism. Again, much sympathy exists here for the idea (developed within ANT) that the agency concept can be applied to the material, but I am less sympathetic towards the idea that also the notion of discourse (production)—at least in the way I use it in this book—can, and even *should*, be more than a social-human process. This opens the door for the idea that non-humans are able to produce discourses. Barad (2007: 148) formulated this post-humanist approach towards discourse as follows: “However, the common belief that discursive practices and meanings are peculiarly human phenomena won’t do.” Actually, for me, it will do perfectly. Or, in other words, the choice of the label of discursive-material analysis (and not for Barad’s “material-discursive” approach) is also legitimated by my preference for a more anthropocentric definition of discourse, as will be used in this book.

To further support and enrich the combination of the discursive and the material, a second dimension, the structure/agency dimension, will be added. This addition is not intended to undermine the importance of the discursive-material knot, but the structure/agency dimension assists in better explaining the workings and dynamics of the discursive-material knot. Also, discursive-theoretical frameworks are sometimes perceived as structuralist, and, as such, as being at odds with human freedom and agency, while new materialist theories are seen to exaggerate the role of agency. By explicitly incorporating the structure/agency dimension into what will be visually represented as a four-component model (in Platform 1), a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between the discursive and the material, its structuring capacities, and the ways it actually allows for human freedom and agency, will be provided. Finally, the introduction of structure and agency into

the analysis also enables a more nuanced perspective on the social, where the overdetermined and contingent logic of structure, which is both enabling and disabling, is combined with a plurality of subjectivations and identifications, invitations and dislocations.

The theoretical development of the discursive-theoretical knot aims to engage scholars from a number of academic fields in a constructive dialogue. One of these fields is communication and media studies, the field in which I am still very much embedded (and indebted to), which is also a field whose theoretical backbone needs further strengthening. Communication and media studies' embrace of the discourse concept has been ambiguous, even though discourse is a crucial vehicle for communicating ideas, and merits a more prominent position in communication and media studies. Although some progress has been made (e.g., Colman, 2014), it is also time for the material to become more explicitly visible in all subfields of communication and media studies. Secondly, I would like to argue that the development of the discursive-material knot is one way to take a step back from the still-existing tension (or semi-latent struggle) between cultural studies and (critical) political economy. This ontology offers another route of thinking about the relationship between the discursive-representational and the materiality of the economy. This strategy might be better than each side trying to explain to the other that the self has been misunderstood (as Garnham, 1995, did), or trying to create a new enemy to unite both (as Babe, 2010, did). By now, the reader can guess that I am not too sympathetic towards Babe's (2010: 196) proposal to solve this conflict, summarized as follows: "Reintegrating critical political economy and cultural studies also means, most fundamentally, setting aside poststructuralist cultural studies. In fact, if poststructuralist cultural studies is disregarded, political economy and cultural studies (cultural materialism) are united already." In contrast, I would like to argue that a way out of this conflict might be to organize a more fundamental reflection about the discursive and the material, as this book does in its own way, accompanied by the immediate acknowledgement that many other routes remain open. Finally, the development of the theoretical framework of the discursive-material knot might also reach out to scholars committed to discourse studies and to new materialism, calling upon them to make further progress in better theorizing entanglement and in genuinely balancing the material and the discursive, without one of these two components (and together with that one, the entire field of its academic supporters) having to win a glorious victory, not even in the last instance. A tie is just as good.

Notes

1. Some of these critiques were discussed in Carpentier and Spinoy (2008).
2. Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012: 93) located the origins of the label ‘new materialism’—with the work of Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti from the second half of the 1990s.