3

Neoliberal Logics and Field Theory

Chapter 2 introduced our principal discourse theoretical categories and related them to a discussion of two distinct types of neoliberal formation. We now need to clarify the general implications for the rest of the book. Integral to all the discourse theory concepts we have considered so far has been the concept of logics (in the plural). When Laclau (2004) speaks of a hegemonic, discursive, antagonistic or heterogeneous logic, he is “not referring in the least to formal logic in the usual sense” (p. 305). Rather, like Lacan, Deleuze and others, he subsumes the three branches of the medieval university curriculum – grammar, rhetoric and logic – under the category of logic. Laclau emphasizes the “context-dependent” nature of logics, dismissing “the very idea of a general logic” (p. 305): the image of structures and systems with absolute logical foundations. “A logic is nothing else than a rarefied system of objects governed by a cluster of rules which makes some combinations and substitutions possible, and excludes others” (p. 305).

Glynos and Howarth (2007) position the concept of logics as the “basic unit of explanation” (p. 8) of discourse theoretical social analysis. They organize their logics-based approach around an analytical distinction between social, political and fantasmatic logics. Social logics describe naturalized social practices whose “rules and grammar” (p. 34) are internalized in the objectivity of the social order. They signify a horizon of social sedimentation, a concept Laclau (1990) appropriates from Husserl to describe the taken-for-granted dimensions of everyday life – the routinized practices that “forget” and “conceal” the conditions of their own emergence (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 34). Political logics signify, in contrast, the conditions of possibility of those practices, their radical contingency and their structural vulnerability to dislocation.1 They signify, in other words, the logic of hegemony: how institutionalizing “society” is ultimately a terrain of hegemonic struggle and political contestation. Fantasmatic logics describe the psychic and affective dimensions of signifying practices: the fantasies that sustain a subject’s
attachment to a particular discourse. They help explain subjects’ identification with sedimented social routines and practices (social logics). And they energize the discursive construction of political antagonisms (political logics), where different identities find commonality through their shared opposition to an identifiable Other(s).²

**Neoliberal and neoliberalized logics**

Glynos and Howarth’s methodological schema is not applied programmatically in this book. Nor do I theoretically explore how their three master logics might potentially be supplemented by a specific conception of media and journalistic logics, though I invoke the latter categories at different points in the book.³ However, their privileging of the concept of logics shapes my theoretical account of neoliberalism. The basic intuition of my approach can be simply stated: instead of over-relying on appeals to a reified “neoliberalism”, it is more analytically productive to conceptualize neoliberalism as a series of discursive “logics” that are always hegemonically articulated with other discursive logics. A neoliberal logic is a logic that neoliberalizes the social, either in the form of reproducing an already sedimented social logic or in the form of a political logic that extends and intensifies the process of neoliberalization. Put in simplified definitional form, I define neoliberalization as:

The process where market-based logics and practices, especially logics of market determinism, commodification, individualization, competitive ritual and self-interest, are dialectically internalized and generated in particular social regimes.

This simple shift in orientation has, I argue, important implications for how we might think and write about neoliberalism and how we articulate it in relation to other social phenomena. It engenders caution about representing the concept as a causal or deterministic force in its own right, as if “neoliberalism” existed in some pure ontological or ideological form that entirely colonizes the practices and subjectivity of social actors. And it focuses our attention on variegated processes of neoliberalization, rather than the image of a monolithic neoliberalism (Peck, 2010). Neoliberalism is, as we saw in Chapter 1, a useful term for identifying political, ideological and cultural continuities between different social domains and practices. As an object of political antagonism, it energizes the demand for a different kind of social order that breaks