

GRAYSON BAILEY

**UNSTABLE PRACTICES – ELEMENTS, SPACES,
AND STATES OF {*ADISCOURSE.NET*}**

[INTRO]

{*adiscourse.net*} is an engagement with the contradictory condition of the discursive field, an oscillation between incoherent overdetermination and coherent delimitation, without attempting to hierarchically simplify discourse into underlying parts or overriding assemblies. The method of this engagement is built primarily through a discursive interface in the browser, which allows users to submit textual content in the form of *discourseElements* (the material code objects that combine text with position with inter-object connections in the project). The discursive interface requires no user account for interaction, and so avoids the usual requirements of authorship and security.

Asynchronous and collaborative discourse implies a breaking down of the inherited practices which privilege final-formats and static discourse objects, substituting an interminable negotiation between withdrawn surplus and the momentary isolation of discursive “states”. The discourse, similar to any database or quantum object, cannot be judged in terms of completion, and can only be examined or measured through attenuation and intervention. Disrupting any chance for a linear organization of discourse, {*adiscourse.net*} is a dissolution of meta-structure into the flat ontology of discursive objects. In contrast to the values of data fetishism, non-authorial contribution and the negation of resolved outcomes resist unitary metrics and performatively enact the conditions of “unfixity” within the discursive field.

The intention of {*adiscourse.net*} is to act as an anarchic subversion, undermining the hierarchical processes of academic and social discourse, and otherwise enact what Laboria Cuboniks has described as the annexation of “incessantly proliferating tools” for appropriation outside

of the exclusive interests of capital.¹ In order to contingently reformat the illusive protocols and objects of discourse, the call is to react to the manner that “transmission itself means being able to manipulate” and become a manipulator without being recuperated into the tragics of technology.² Within this essay, the theoretical basis for the discursive production and review in {*adiscourse.net*} is described in terms of “discourse” and the “state-form”. First, the conceptual foundations for discourse are described in connection to the political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and related directly to the code objects in {*adiscourse.net*}. Second, the state-form of reviewable discourse objects is described in terms of materialism and of political and media theory.

[DISCOURSE]

Rather than confining discourse to disciplinary boundaries or specific protocols of exchange, the definition used in {*adiscourse.net*} includes all forms and practices of semiotic exchange and negotiation among various human and non-human agents. Communication between browser client and server is considered discursive, as is the negotiation of values of the JavaScript class objects which overwrite and manipulate the position and context of each other.

The subsequent terminology appropriated in {*adiscourse.net*} – *discourseElement*, *discourseSet*, *discourseSpace* – relates to the language used by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their discussion of discursive objects in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Laclau and Mouffe’s “element” is taken to be any isolated articulatory act, and the discourse “moment” is a collection of articulatory acts which contingently build an aggregate meaning. Nodal points are the largest and most sedentary discourse object from Laclau and Mouffe, as they are the pinned sites of meaning in any ideology and the center of importance in any hegemonic construction of discourse.³ The recursive organization of element, moment and nodal points in what Laclau and Mouffe call the “discursive field” recalls the regression/progression of Object-Oriented Ontology in the manner that objects can be comprised of other objects while also comprising still other objects – all without determining a primary level of resolution. Discursive objects, in both Laclau and Mouffe’s political discourse as well as in {*adiscourse.net*}, pull back from any total description, even while the specifics of element, moment, and nodal point can be contingently diagrammed or performed simply.

¹ Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, New York NY, Verso, 2018, p. 35.

² Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol*, Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 2004, p. 57.

³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, New York NY, Verso, 2014 [1985], p. 92.

In *{adiscourse.net}* the *discourseElement* is the most rudimentary assemblage of meaning, the only articulatory act available to the user within the discursive interface. Moments are built with the coordination of these *discourseElements*, by the connection or disconnection of elements, and by the choice of locations which either reinforce or challenge the site of surrounding elements. Within the full *discourseSet* (the collection of *discourseElements* in the browser) there is the discursive field in which all the articulatory actions of *{adiscourse.net}* are inserted, persist and are repeated with each new frame.

discourseSpaces, the potential multiplicities of theme and categorization, are as much the presentational arena for articulation as was Hannah Arendt's "Space of Appearance"⁴, even while the user is obfuscated and the performance of utterances takes place only locally before being distributed and visualized in each open browser and the server. The specifics of each discursive operation or duplication are not structurally determined in *{adiscourse.net}*, though there is a general set of assumptions which orient the terms of discourse. Three conceptual foundations for the discursive field provide the basis for discourse in *{adiscourse.net}*: (1) materiality, (2) lack of organizing level, (3) overdetermination.

[1] Materiality

The discursive field is a material field inasmuch that discourse either requires materiality for exchange or uses material objects/material operations as a site of meaning. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have extended the political terms of discourse in their inclusion of political action and political organization as "articulatory acts."⁵ This inclusion of physical action built on the progression from structuralism's division between spoken and written language through Claude Levi-Strauss' anthropological semiotics and Roland Barthes connection between media and the production of myth.⁶

In terms of electronic transmission, this material basis becomes all the more invisible and inescapable, with the emergence of translational formats in signal processing and communication, as noted in Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*.⁷ This is as true between radio towers as it is in the imaginary divide between software and hardware. The discourse is always related back to their "voltage differences" – a

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958], pp. 199–212.

⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 82.

⁶ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", in *Mythologies*, New York NY, Hill and Wang, 1998 [1957], pp. 109–159.

⁷ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 1990.

stark reminder of the materiality within “virtual” interfaces.⁸ In {*adiscourse.net*}, this materiality is performed as a surface effect in the browser, with *discourseElement*'s negotiating a 2-dimensional scroll. However, the material storage, transmission and duplication of discourse are also constants within server-client communication. The reminder that each element is occupying physical memory of computers as a material inscription and called upon as a set of voltage differences in complex sets of internal and external wiring is just as easily forgotten as the material events of voice and bio-chemical memory.

[2] *Lack of Organizing Level*

Discourse lacks an organizing level – there is no site of discursive determination. Relating to Lacan's declaration of there being no “metalanguage” beyond language,⁹ Laclau and Mouffe also deny an organizing level of the political.¹⁰ Rather, political actions and subjectivities emerge within the discursive field as their own objects for examination. This lack is also a basic assertion of Object-Oriented Ontology, in which the acts of undermining (locating central determination in very small objects, i.e. atoms) and overmining (locating central determination in very large objects, i.e. god)¹¹ are eschewed in favor of a recursive field of objects and inter-objectivities.¹²

The final-format – the resolved composition of the body in the book or article – is negated in {*adiscourse.net*} in favor of more visible assembly of levels – *discourseElement*, *discourseSpace*, *discourseSet*. The negotiation of meaning within a sentence takes place in the same fight as the negotiation of meaning in the aggregate. Everything is down in the mud.

[3] *Overdetermination*

Laclau and Mouffe describe overdetermination as the inequality between locations of meaning and the number of meanings which can potentially occupy that location. All elements of discourse are overdetermined, as their potential meanings considerably outnumber their capacity to express meaning. This surplus of meaning not only creates the opportunity for shifts in meaning, but precludes entirely the permanent

⁸ Friedrich Kittler, “There is No Software”, *Stanford Literature Review*, 9 (1), 1992, pp. 81–90, here: p. 84.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, New York NY, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 688.

¹⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 90.

¹¹ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, Ann Arbor MI, Open Humanities Press, 2013, p. 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

fixing of meanings.¹³ The “unfixity” of the discursive field is linked with overdetermination, and also with the inability for discursive objects to stabilize autonomously. As an example, Laclau and Mouffe propose the impossibility of society, “there is no sutured space peculiar to society, since the social itself has no essence.”¹⁴ This instability of the discursive (social) field is not a condition to mitigate or approach safely, but rather to embrace joyously as Christoph Spertz embraces constant negotiation among mutable groups in “Free Cooperation”.¹⁵

The free cooperation of {*adiscourse.net*} is available on the surface, in the constant fluidity of the discursive interface. An un-sutured discourse, always able to be overturned locally, is displayable when the exchange is not formatted to tighten around the illusion of the final-format or the linear feed. With avoiding user-tagged submissions, {*adiscourse.net*} also attempts to pull back from the mundane expression of the sutured persona – truth which comes from the authentic/author. The negotiation presented is disconnected from the mind and the material overdetermination of JavaScript and natural language is jostled without the intention of settling.

[STATE-FORM]

A bifurcation of fluid and rigid organization appears in the production of discourse. Opposite to the dynamic negotiation of positions and meanings in the interface, the limited form of a reviewable discursive content takes form as a *state*. The discourse state is a trajectory in the way that Michel de Certeau’s conceives a trajectory as suggesting “a movement, but it also involves a plane projection; a transcription, a graph is substituted for an operation.”¹⁶ External presentation, the casting of review to another plane, is also the framing of the impossibility of directly addressing the discursive field in Michel Foucault’s triad of rules for determining the location and context of disciplinary discourse. Surfaces of emergence, alongside authorities of delimitation and grids of specification, fit well with de Certeau’s understanding of trajectories and the discourse state as an examinable form based in its separation from the discourse itself.¹⁷ In {*adiscourse.net*}, discourse states are produced as

¹³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 82.

¹⁵ Christoph Spertz, “Free Cooperation”, in Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz (eds.), *The Art of Free Cooperation*, New York NY, Autonomedia, 2007, pp. 65–180.

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, “The Practice of Everyday Life”, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 3rd Edition, London, Pearson Education Limited, 2006 [1994], pp. 516–527, here: pp. 521–522.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Formation of Objects”, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, New York NY, Pantheon Books, 1972, here: pp. 40–49.

cross-sections of a specific set of discourse spaces, projecting them as trajectories to a reviewable plane. These cross-sections are the closest analog to final-format outputs, which have always been prized for their convenience and clarity, even though thought and action are rarely sequentially rational.

The production of discourse states is parallel to the versioning process of software, in which reference frames of development replace the expectation of any final resolution. In similar terms the production of states also builds on John May's description of the transition from drawing to image as the abandonment of final orthographically composed objects.¹⁸ While the drawing was a terminal achievement, a static outcome in itself, John May's "Image" is a mutable vision which is born from data processing,¹⁹ and occupies real-time in order to momentarily represent an oscillating potential outcome from the list of potential outcomes.²⁰ The discursive interface of {*adiscourse.net*} is an image in this manner, and the discourse state is the further production of images, as the dataset is no longer updated but the potentials for curatorial processing of the dataset/content is always present – what used to be representation is now always real-time presentation. The politics of such image/state production moves from the center of the static content into "the structure, composition, capacities, and limitation of imaging itself."²¹

However, the derivative positions of such field vs. state-form politics are not new to John May's image or his description of telematic politics. Rather, the politics between body and representation/presentation is already theorized in anarchist Gustav Landauer's inversion of the political state (*Staat*) as temporary state (*Zustand*), writing that "the state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings" which is altered only by endeavoring to change the underlying social relations from which the state is produced.²² The political state is a reviewable abstracted form of a non-reviewable body.

In Tiqqun's *Introduction to Civil War*, their described "modern State" also takes on a simplified status in comparison to the permanent fluidity of civil war. Just as the traditional discourse state (article, book, etc.) claims to stabilize discourse within the final-format, the modern State, which "purports to put an end to civil war, is instead the continuation by

¹⁸ John May, *Signal Image Architecture*, New York NY, Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 41–45.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

²¹ Ibid., p. 109.

²² Gustav Landauer, "Weak Statesman, Weaker People", *Revolution and Other Writings*, Oakland CA, PM Press, 2010, pp. 213–215, here: p. 214.

other means.”²³ Discourse states as well are a “mere reaction process to this permanence” of fluid conditions which are unable to resolve.²⁴ The network, according to Alexander Galloway, is also an example of this deceit, in which the static network diagram is an illusion constituted by situated protocols: “Every network is a network because it is constituted by a protocol. If networks display any of the tropes described previously, it is because there is an infrastructure that enables such properties to emerge. Not networks, but protocols.”²⁵

Object-Oriented Ontology involves a similar concept of *withdrawal*, which is the operation of every object refusing (or being unable) to present itself in total. Discourse states are delimited explanations of an illusive whole which cannot be accessed, demonstrably addressing the difference between discourse and the observable forms which might clearly present certain aspects of the discourse. As with M. M. Bakhtin’s *chronotopes*,²⁶ the discourse state represents a medium which is inherently lacking, but the lack is emblematic of the same discursive frontiers in Laclau and Mouffe’s political theory – the unresolved is necessarily reviewed in limited and compacted material.

The discourse state, as much as Tiquun’s modern State, requires a bouncing back and forth between fluid and rigid presentations. In order to access the discursive field of Laclau and Mouffe, the discourse state is produced as a contingent proxy which is useful only in combination with the overdetermined field that cannot be directly accessed – much like a map is only useful when paired with the area it represents. The simplified discourse state is able to show a glimpse of direction, much as Landauer’s state is able to be appraised as presenting a form or sociality, but reaction directly to the state is merely a distraction from what is behind the curtain.²⁷

[OUTRO]

{*adiscourse.net*} focuses on discourse in a limited manner, one which is concerned with the exchange and cooperation achievable with a tactical set of discursive tools in the browser, and one which hopefully breaks with final-formats and introduces a difference in authorial method and the process of discursive production. As it states in Computer Lib/Dream Machines, the search is for “THE TRY-AND-TRY-AGAIN

²³ Tiquun, *Introduction to Civil War*, Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 2010, p. 79.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 70.

²⁵ Galloway, *Protocol*, p. xviii.

²⁶ M. M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel”, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin TX, University of Texas Press, 1981, here: p. 84.

²⁷ “Weak Statesman, Weaker People”, p. 214.

INTERPLAY of PARTS AND DETAILS against OVERALL AND UNIFYING IDEAS WHICH KEEP CHANGING.”²⁸ While academic and social discourse tend to obfuscate these continued and asynchronous negotiations, {*adiscourse.net*} is a minor attempt at alterity.

As with the previous calls for tactical and alternative media, the point is to continue to problematize the social and technical protocols at our disposal, especially those which seem the most normalized. Keller Easterling describes this new scope of design orientation in *Medium Design*, which turns its gaze toward various environmental operating systems and organizing structures as described by John May’s telepolitics in order to “disrupt loops and binaries.”²⁹ Rather than single sites of development or focus, Easterling sees no “single new technology or magic bullet, but rather a shift in the relationships between things.”³⁰ As with Landauer’s state as relational conditions, the dissolution of the current condition is not an issue of content, but rather of the interconnections and protocols behind the state – “we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another.”³¹

As Ted Nelson put it, we must continue to “design the media, design the molecules of our new water”,³² and resist any urge to fall into the slip stream of a new telos which becomes more prescriptive than explosive. This design is always the medium design of a politics and praxis which is “sensitive to the insidious return of old power structures, yet savvy enough to know how to exploit the potential”³³ of whatever point in the network we are at.

In this critical companion essay, a set of intentions in {*adiscourse.net*} have been discussed in their intellectual and theoretical terms. These conceptual intentions both absorb and are absorbed by the technical deployment of the software within {*adiscourse.net*}, which is also described in the accompanying video. This essay and the accompanying video should feed into the context of each other, with the technical and conceptual negotiating themselves just as the rest of the discursive field.

²⁸ Theodor Nelson, *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, Sausalito CA, Mindful Press, 1975, p. DM43.

²⁹ Keller Easterling, *Medium Design*, New York NY, Verso, 2021, p. 11.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

³¹ Landauer, “Weak Statesman, Weaker People”, p. 214.

³² Nelson, *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, p. DM2.

³³ Cuboniks, *The Xeno-Feminist Manifesto*, p. 75.