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Sadler, N orcid.org/0000-0002-6700-4968, Baker, M and Engebretsen, E (2023) Translation and the Political: Antagonism and hegemony. Translation Studies. ISSN 1478-1700

https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2023.2186944

Translation and the Political: Antagonism and Hegemony

Interest in the political dimensions of translation is well established. There has been less focus in translation studies, however, on understanding the nature of the political itself. This leaves the concept fuzzy and limits its analytical power. We begin to address this gap here by drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in order to offer a precisely articulated understanding of the political. We illustrate this approach through examination of divergent concepts of 'translation' in translation studies and in the field of knowledge translation in medicine, suggesting that antagonism and hegemony, key aspects of the political in Laclau and Mouffe's approach, play central roles in both cases. This approach, we argue, allows the political to be more clearly differentiated from the social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of social life while also bringing the relationships between the political and those other dimensions more clearly into view.

Scholars of disciplines such as anthropology, history and postcolonial studies have long acknowledged the role that translation plays in constructing political identities and boundaries (Asad 1986/2010, Dodson 2005, Young 2013, Gal 2015, among others). There is now also a growing body of scholarship on translation as a form of political intervention within translation studies – Fernández (2020), Gould and Tahmasebian (2020) and Duraner (2021) are among the most recent examples. Once considered a 'controversial' issue best avoided by a discipline that had long attempted to align itself with the empirical sciences and had championed neutrality for both scholars and professional translators, the significant political consequences and power of translation are no longer a matter of dispute. Nevertheless, translation scholars frequently take the nature of the political for granted; they accept that translation is implicated in relations of dominance and subservience, centrality and peripherality, without asking what the political itself means or how it operates, beyond specifying a range of themes or genres which are considered 'political' *per se* (Gagnon 2010, Hsieh 2020). Failure to address the nature of the political is compounded by generally limited engagement with political theory within the discipline, resulting in ambiguity about what translation can or cannot do that is specifically *political* rather than, say, social or cultural.[i]

We begin to address this gap by examining the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The concept of translation itself is conspicuously absent from this body of work and the limitations of Laclau's own understanding of translation are evident in his unsatisfying response to Butler's argument that political theory demands cultural translation (c.f. Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000). Nonetheless, we argue that there is great value in Laclau and Mouffe's work on antagonism and hegemony as key concepts for understanding the political as it relates to translation. These concepts allow us to demonstrate that political action relies on the formation of collective identities through the establishment of 'antagonistic frontiers' – frontiers that define groups in relation to one another through processes of inclusion and exclusion. As we explain in more detail below, hegemony is understood in this context as a process through which otherwise unrelated signifiers are linked together, or 'articulated', into 'chains of equivalence' organised around privileged signifiers that serve as 'nodal points'.[ii] This process of articulation in turn plays a central role in establishing and stabilising the antagonistic frontiers that underpin collective identities. A carefully theorised approach to the political, as in Mouffe and Laclau, allows us to move beyond the widely accepted

assumption that the political extends beyond formal politics towards a detailed understanding of how it actually functions at different levels and in a variety of contexts.

We explore these issues by examining the relationship between translation and the political in contemporary translation studies and contrasting it with the treatment of the political in the field of knowledge translation in global health. We argue that political factors play a significant role in defining the field and shaping the specific understanding of translation used in each context: each involves the articulation together of intrinsically unconnected concepts, has its limits defined by constitutive antagonisms, and is stabilised as a system of differences through the operation of hegemony. We also argue, however, that these two contexts differ significantly in terms of the extent to which they can be understood as political beyond their own disciplinary boundaries. Despite an increasing emphasis on political engagement in translation studies in recent decades, its limited influence beyond scholars active in the discipline means that it is only political in a narrow sense – it is itself defined by antagonisms and hegemony but plays a minimal role in shaping antagonistic frontiers and hegemonic formations beyond its own boundaries. The field of knowledge translation (KT), on the other hand, plays a significant political role in society at large, despite the fact that knowledge translation is typically discussed as an apolitical practice. KT is defined as the 'exchange, synthesis and ethically-sound application of knowledge' (Graham et al 2006). Translation is understood in this context as the scientific process of testing the applicability and validity of research results in real-world settings through a standardised procedure consisting of several steps and stages, often depicted as a translational chain or pipeline. Political, social and cultural factors are considered potential barriers to translation and treated as external to the production of knowledge. Knowledge, in turn, is assumed to have reached its culmination in the 'secluded space' of controlled experiments, and it is the results from these experiments that should then be transported to, and implemented in, practical care situations (Engebretsen, Sandset, Ødemark 2017). And yet, the redefinition of established hegemonic formations and antagonistic frontiers has frequently been central to successful knowledge translation, rendering the outcome political beyond the field's own boundaries.

The nature of the political

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's work offers a distinct and powerful theory of both the nature of the political and the position of discourse within it (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1996; 2005; Mouffe 1993).[iii] Key assumptions in their work are that the political is ultimately a matter of how collective identities emerge and are constructed, and that politics must be understood ontologically – it concerns what we are and how we come into being, rather than merely how a pre-existing reality is interpreted. Central to the latter assumption is the idea that the collective identities formed in any particular context do not derive from the positive properties associated with a given group and assumed to be inherent to it. For Laclau and Mouffe, the key illustration of this is the demonstrable failure of classical Marxism to sustain the assumption that the working class has an inherently revolutionary character (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Rather than being defined by the positive qualities each group attributes to itself or are attributed to it by others, collective identities are understood as differential on a fundamental level – any group can only be the group that it is by differentiating itself (and being differentiated by others) from other groups. This is reminiscent to some extent of the differential understanding of meaning in Saussure and, in various guises, in much of the literature in contemporary translation studies. But Laclau and Mouffe go beyond this differential view to argue that the central, ontological importance of identities in politics necessarily

entails an equally central position for antagonism, however much we might strive for harmony, consensus or neutrality. As Mouffe (2009:6) puts it,

> The political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear by simply denying it, by wishing it away, which is the typical liberal gesture; such a negation only leads to impotence.

The reason antagonism cannot simply be wished away is that the we/them relation necessary for the emergence of differential collective identities always has the potential to be conceived and experienced as a friend/enemy relation (Mouffe 1993: 3):

> this can happen when the other, who was until then considered only under the mode of difference, begins to be perceived as negating our identity, as putting in question our very existence. From that moment onwards, any type of we/them relation, be it religious, ethnic, national, economic or other, becomes the site of a political antagonism.

From this perspective, it becomes impossible to restrict 'the political' to the institutionalised politics of parliaments, courts and similar sites. Rather, the political, understood in terms of the us/them relation and the potential for antagonism, must be acknowledged as integral to every society, at every level. While scholars such as Niranjana (1992), Venuti (1993) and Tymoczko (1999, 2000) have long argued that translation is political, the value of Laclau and Mouffe's approach does not lie in reiterating the reach of the political beyond formal politics as they and others have done. Rather, it lies in the compelling account they provide of how the political works in *all* contexts, and how it functions through discourse. At the same time, it also offers a coherent explanation of why some of what is often discussed as political in translation studies is best described using other terms, such as cultural or stylistic innovation, for instance, because in practice it has no impact on the formation of collective identities or the redrawing of antagonistic boundaries.

Laclau and Mouffe take the 'demand' as the basic unit from which collective identities arise. A demand is understood as a claim made in relation to some kind of established political order – for example, access to healthcare, recognition of minority group rights, or special treatment for adherents of a particular religion. Different demands are frequently connected to one another: in contemporary left-wing activism in Europe, for instance, demands for social, economic, gender and racial justice are intertwined; for many Western democrats, liberalism, democracy and capitalism necessarily entail one another (Mouffe 1993). The connection of demands with one another in this way is not restricted to contexts traditionally thought of as political: understandings of professionalism in translation connect notions of neutrality, faithfulness and accuracy (but not empathy, for example); the dominant collective identities for clinicians in the Global North are built around connected ethical principles of beneficence (doing good), non-maleficence (do no harm), autonomy (maximise patients' freedom to choose) and justice.

For Laclau, the key point here is that the joining together of different demands does not follow any necessary path that can be known in advance. There is nothing in the demands themselves that links them together. Rather, they are joined through a process of 'articulation': 'accuracy' and 'neutrality' are linked in the context of professional translation only because they are articulated together in the currently dominant understandings of translation in the Global North. Likewise, there is nothing intrinsic to the notions of beneficience and justice in medical contexts to require them to be articulated together. And yet, the fact of their being articulated together profoundly shapes the contours of an 'established order' against which claims can be made. It is only when democracy is

articulated with capitalism that economic growth as a means of maximising individual autonomy appears as a legitimate demand while degrowth becomes an irreconcilable one. Likewise, it is only when beneficence is articulated with justice that it becomes legitimate to demand equal standards of care for all and that calls for differing or lower levels of care to be given to members of different groups, such as refugees, become irreconcilable.

Antagonism also plays a crucial role in shaping collective identities by introducing the negative as a 'constitutive outside'. One example comes from the searing criticism directed at the Babels network of volunteer interpreters (some of whom had extensive professional experience) by an established conference interpreter and member of AIIC ((the International Association of Conference Interpreters). In describing Babels volunteers who interpreted at a World Social Forum event as 'self-appointed non-professional interpreters', Peter Naumann articulates them as the constitutive outside of paid professional interpreters who, by definition, have 'the ability to distance themselves and treat matters objectively' (quoted in Boéri 2008: 38, 40). Likewise, articulating signifiers and concepts together in the field of medicine creates systems of meaningful, positive, differential relationships and a constitutive outside. The four ethical principles mentioned above are defined in relation to one another and create an antagonistic boundary that places those who do not follow them outside the field. At the same time, the overall systems of difference that constitute the field of interpreting and medicine cannot be defined in relation to any specific difference within the system. These overall systems exist as totalising domains within which more specific systems of difference can operate (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 134/144):

> a formation manages to signify itself (that is, to constitute itself as such) only by transforming the limits into frontiers, by constituting a chain of equivalences which constructs what is beyond the limits as that which it is not. It is only through negativity, division and antagonism that a formation can constitute itself as a totalizing horizon.

In theory, if not in practice, left-wing activism excludes big business; liberal democracy excludes autocrats; medicine excludes profiteering; professionalism in translation excludes political engagement. In each case, the excluded other cannot be subsumed as an additional difference within the signifying system. Where these antagonistic and exclusionary boundaries are drawn therefore comes to assume central, ontological importance. Challenging their location becomes a privileged site of the political: Tony Blair's 'New Labour' in the UK sought to accommodate big business within left wing politics; Donald Trump sought to incorporate autocracy within liberal democracy; the privatisation of healthcare brings the pursuit of profit into medicine; groups of activist interpreters have sought to bring political engagement into conference interpreting practice[iv] (Boéri 2008). In each case, a previously excluded other is brought into the system of differences and a new excluded other defined, causing the entire system to be reconfigured. All can be understood as examples of *political* activism because each is concerned with the renegotiation of ontologically constitutive antagonistic frontiers.

Articulation, discourse, and chains of equivalence

Closer examination of the political and of differentiated identities and antagonism as outlined above requires engaging with four interrelated concepts in Mouffe and Laclau: articulation, discourse, chains of equivalence and hegemony.

Articulation is intrinsically discursive, in that it is only through discourse – translated or otherwise[v] – that individual demands can be recognised and articulated with one another. For Laclau and Mouffe,

discourse is necessarily understood to incorporate both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. While arguing that 'no conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices' (Laclau 2005: 67), Laclau also states that discourse is not to be understood as 'restricted to the areas of speech and writing', but as 'any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role'. In both cases, elements (be they linguistic or otherwise) 'do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it' (Laclau 2005: 68).[vi] This approach weaves together the linguistic and the non-linguistic to acknowledge the ontological role that language plays in shaping how things and phenomena come into being and can be recognised, at the same time as avoiding the pitfalls of naively constructivist approaches which bluntly assert that language creates reality. It resonates with arguments made by scholars who wish to extend the definition of translation, and hence the remit of translation studies, beyond purely verbal artefacts, to encompass not only semiotic but also 'metaphorical' understandings of the term.[vii] Beyond translation studies, the concept of translation – like that of discourse – has similarly been redefined beyond the linguistic. In the field of health, for instance, knowledge translation is not understood as crossing boundaries between languages but as 'cross[ing] the space between biomedical science and practical healthcare'. As with interlinguistic translation, the expectation is that 'there should be an 'equivalence' of some sort between the message produced by science and its application in practice in hospitals and clinics' (Ødemark, Henrichsen, Engebretsen 2021:149). The aim of KT is ultimately to transfer 'pure' scientific knowledge from 'bench to bedside' by testing its applicability in clinical and other practical settings, while at the same time being faithful to the original scientific message. As is clear from this definition, the 'message' is not understood as a verbal artefact, and translation is cast in metaphoric rather than interlingual terms.

Articulation is furthermore characterised by a fundamental and unresolvable tension between particularity and universality. Different demands cannot be connected with one another so long as they exist in a relationship of pure particularity (Laclau 1996: 47–65). 'Pure particularity', Laclau argues, 'has to define itself by its differences with other particularities, and the system of these particularities necessarily reconstructs a certain universality'. Thus, for example, the universal notion of equality is necessary to connect the interests of any group to those of another: equal pay for women, equal access to justice, equal rights for the disabled, and so on; a universal notion of professionalism is needed for it to function as a common reference point in otherwise diverse fields such as translation, law, medicine, and business. Articulating intrinsically unconnected demands with one another requires the establishment of a relationship of equivalence among them. This, in turn, necessitates the identification of something universal which links them together. Yet, influenced by the tradition of post-modernism, for Laclau this universality is not the a priori ground of the articulation but must be a consequence of it; the universality only emerges through the process of articulation:

> perhaps the paradox proceeds from believing that this universality has a content of its own, whose logical implications can be analytically deduced, without realizing that its own function – within a particular language game – is to make discursively possible a chain of equivalential effects, but without pretending that this universality can operate beyond the context of its emergence. (Laclau 1996: 56)

Once produced, however, the universality can henceforth act as if it had always been there and 'what was simply a mediation between demands now acquires a consistency of its own. Although the link was originally ancillary to the demands, it now reacts over them and, through an inversion of the relationship, starts behaving as their ground' (Laclau 2005: 93).

As multiple demands are linked together, we see the emergence of 'chains of equivalence'. The establishment and maintenance of such chains through articulation is at the core of the political as understood here. If individuals present individualised demands, they can be readily absorbed within an established order – for instance, an individual woman calling for pay equal to that of an individual man. When demands are brought into chains of equivalence – many women calling for equality of pay as a broad category, establishing a relationship of equivalence between individually separate cases – collective identities can emerge: once many women come to see their demands for equal pay as equivalent to one another, if not identical, it becomes possible to collectively make demands and challenge established orders.

These processes are apparent in relation to both TS and KT: in each case, intrinsically unconnected concepts are linked together and defined in relation to one another. TS consists of a field of differences: court interpreting, literary translation and medical translation are recognised as occupying very different positions within the system. Likewise, subtitling, voice over, dubbing and audio-description occupy different positions within audiovisual translation, itself a subsystem of TS. Nonetheless, all are understood as linked by a certain universality in the sense that they are all types of 'translation'. Likewise in KT, synthesis, dissemination and application are recognised as differential positions within the system but are all linked by common reference to a (rather different) notion of 'translation'. In each case, this universality did not pre-exist the articulation of the relevant differences together, but through the process of inversion described by Laclau has served as the basis for further development of each field, acquiring a solidity and consistency of its own. The establishment of chains of equivalence in each case has also permitted the emergence of new collective identities – TS and KT scholars who identify as such – and the possibility of presenting collective demands which could not be simply absorbed within the established orders in relation to which they initially emerged. For there to be a discipline of TS and a field of KT, there must be a sense of universality which allows otherwise diverse practices and concepts to be viewed as somehow equivalent.

Laclau's understanding of equivalence, then, is fundamentally at odds with how the term was traditionally understood in translation studies but aligns him with more recent work in the discipline. Early approaches to equivalence assumed that equivalence is something which pre-exists and provides the ground of translation. With the rise of descriptive translation studies in the 1980s, this idea has come to be seen as untenable. Equivalence, as in Laclau and Mouffe, is now understood as an intertextual relation that is created through the act of translation itself. In Toury's terms (1980:39), it is a descriptive rather than theoretical term, not 'an abstract, ideal relationship, or category of relationships between TTs and STs, translations and their sources' but a relationship to be discovered after the fact (ibid.). Beyond TS, scholars of anthropology have likewise adopted broadly similar definitions of equivalence as created by 'communicative processes', which 'organize connections among practices' (Gal 2015:226). Laclau's account follows a similar path but enriches it with considerably more detail and nuance while also showing the broader political significance of the concept. In KT, on the other hand, the concept of translation is ontologized in the sense that it is considered to operate on things or actions that are already constituted in the world. This reduces the open endedness and the creative potential of the concept. Translation – as used in translational medicine and knowledge translation – is also conceived as a strongly instrumentalised process: there are standardised protocols and procedures for how to perform translation in the correct way, and the assumption is that there is only one correct way to perform it. This correct way consists of converting findings from laboratory settings into clinical studies and summarising such studies into clinical guidelines through systematic reviews.

Establishing articulation as the foundation of the political means viewing it as irreducibly fluid. Articulation is characterised by constant challenge and development. It creates 'a contingent social construction, as it does not result from the positive, ontic nature of the objects themselves' (Laclau 2005: 224), with the development of any such construction ultimately 'depend[ing] on the system of differential and equivalential articulations within which it is located' (Laclau 2005: 87). In one sense, this is again reminiscent of structuralist approaches to language which emphasise the mutability of the system of differences that constitutes language, stressing that 'evolution is inevitable; there is no example of a single language that resists it' (Saussure 1970: 51). Yet, for Mouffe and Laclau, the instability reaches beyond shifts in the differences internal to the system and extends to the structure itself. The limits of any signifying structure are as significant as the differences within it.[viii] To inquire into the chains of equivalence underpinning TS and KT, then, means both asking about the differences linked together in each chain as well as what is *not* included within the chain. In TS, for instance, 'clinical practice' is not typically considered an element of the chain linked by a universal notion of translation; in KT 'clinical practice' is part of the chain but 'linguistic mediation' typically is not.

Two important points arise here. First, the word 'typically' is significant. What exactly is included within a given system of differences is never wholly clear because differences are always 'overdetermined' in the sense of being subject to multiple overlapping determinations at any one time, with the consequence that the system as a whole can never be brought fully into view. The system of differences constitutive of TS, for instance, is characterised both by the simultaneous operation of mutually incompatible understandings of the system as a whole and by its embedding in multiple other layers – for instance within other academic disciplines and other non-academic arenas of social practice. It would never be possible to produce a complete account of the system of differences constituting either TS or KT, in the same way as it is never possible to produce a complete account of any field in Bourdieusean terms. This leaves us in the complex position where individual parts of the system mean what they mean (and are what they are) only in relation to one another and to the system as a whole, at the same time as the structure as a whole can never fully stabilise or, to use Laclau and Mouffe's term, can never be 'sutured'.

The second point is that determining what is *not* included within a chain of equivalence can result from two distinct situations: either it simply does not occur to those involved to add a given concept to the chain (for whatever reason), or there is a deliberate act of exclusion. Our focus here is on the latter, with such acts of exclusion understood as grounded in ontologically significant antagonisms. Current debates in TS over how 'translation' should be understood, then, hinge around disputes regarding the limit of the system of differences: should primarily non-linguistic forms of translation – such as knowledge translation in medicine or communication between non-humans (Marais 2019) – be incorporated as nodes within the system (with the re-definition of the differential networks internal to the system that this requires), or should these forms be deemed an excluded other and used to recognise the limits of the system. In other words, this disagreement hinges not only on conceptual issues, regarding the utility of alternative sets of theoretical terminology and approaches, but also on a constitutive antagonistic relation.

We see the political dimension of this antagonism in two additional ways. First, it is apparent that questions of collective identity are involved in this discussion. The definition of what it means to be a translation scholar is also at stake: who can be recognised as belonging to that group, what differential positions can be recognised within the system (for instance recognising 'empirical'

translation scholars and 'postcolonial' translation scholars as different but still, nonetheless, translation scholars), and who should be understood as located outside the discipline/system altogether. This in turn influences the kinds of demands that can be made. If a largely linguistic understanding of translation is followed, it is reasonable to call for more funding to support research into understudied languages such as Uzbek and Swahili, but not to demand research on communication between humans and animals (Cronin 2017). If an equivalence is understood to obtain between TS and KT in the wider system of knowledge production, it is plausible for scholars from both fields to share a common cause and make wider demands; if no principle of universality is understood to underpin both areas then relating the two particularities within a universal demand ceases to make sense.

Like articulation more generally, these antagonistic frontiers are both overdetermined and always being renegotiated and reconfigured, leading to inevitable shifts in patterns of collective identity and exclusion. Nonetheless, we do see broadly durable established orders which, as with language, are a basic requirement for intelligibility. Within TS, there is broad agreement that translation has something to do with communication but little to do with, say, injection moulding in the plastics industry; in KT, there is broad agreement that translation is about connecting research and clinical practice but has little to do with, say, court interpreting. This makes it possible for scholars holding radically different perspectives to nonetheless communicate effectively.

The stability of articulations derives from the fact that, while the links in the chain are *equivalent*, they are not *equal* in status. Rather, one link in the chain, the 'nodal point', comes to represent and signify the others. In the context of activism for the UK to leave the European Union in the run up to the 2016 referendum, the signifier 'sovereignty' came to stand for myriad, and often contradictory, demands for both greater economic openness and increased protectionism. In TS, the term 'translation' is a nodal signifier, standing for and representing the system as a whole, incorporating a range of differences which, in and of themselves, resist direct and full description. Its meaning is overdetermined in that it must link concepts which are not only intrinsically unlinked but also potentially opposed – for instance the contradictory positions that translation is most effectively understood through speculative or empirical approaches.

Nodal points, furthermore, allow the antagonisms which define the discursive field to come clearly into view (even if the appearance of clarity masks the extent to which the limits are overdetermined). In the context of TS, the nodal signifier 'translation' allows a seemingly neat us/them distinction to be drawn between those who primarily study translation and those who do not, even if they are otherwise interested in many of the same issues (for instance language, culture and identity); in the context of KT, the nodal signifier 'translation' allows a similarly neat distinction to be drawn between those concerned primarily with the integration of research into medical practice and those concerned primarily with the production of medical knowledge in and of itself, again despite the fact that both groups are otherwise interested in many of the same issues (for instance, evidence, sustainability and minimising patient morbidity and mortality). As such, disputes over the meanings of nodal points are much more politically significant than over other parts of an equivalential chain, since to contest the nodal point is to contest the boundaries of the entire system of differences.

The process whereby one link in the chain comes to stand for and represent the others is termed 'hegemony' in Mouffe and Laclau. The establishment of hegemony temporarily arrests the flux of articulations, even if the resulting stability is only partial. Hegemony complicates the tension between particularity and universality: to serve a universalising function, the nodal point must be

partially emptied of its own particularity. As discussed earlier, 'translation' in both TS and KT represents whole chains of equivalents and therefore takes on a universalising role. At the same time, it remains a particular difference – it continues to be defined in TS by its differential relations with other concepts within the chain, such as localisation, adaptation and intercultural communication, among others. Hegemony suppresses the visibility of this tension but does not eliminate it. Likewise, the other links in the chain unavoidably lose some of their particularity through their being represented by a nodal point embodying the universal: 'equivalential inscription tends to give solidity and stability to the demands, but also restricts their autonomy, for it has to operate within strategic parameters established for the chain as a whole central to the production of this universality' (Laclau 2005: 129).

The further the chain is extended, the greater the emphasis on universality over particularity. This, again, can be shown with the development of TS. As concerns with (intrinsically unconnected) notions of class, race, sexuality, materiality, ecology and so on entered the field, a more abstract notion of translation was required to provide the necessary universalising representation that can hold these particularities together. A hegemonizing operation is required to maintain the integrity of the chain as a relatively stable, if expanding, system of differences defined in relation to a shifting antagonistic frontier.

This understanding of hegemony is at odds with its history of use in translation studies as a transparent term synonymous with 'domination' and as something wholly negative that must be resisted.[ix] Tymoczko (2009: 414) laments the perils of buying into 'hegemonic thinking in the service of dominant global powers'; Jacquemond (1992: 148) criticises the 'hegemony of Western discourse over the Arab world's endogenous discourse'; Cronin briefly discusses Stuart Hall's theory of hegemony before slipping back into conflating it with domination in references to English as 'the hegemonic language on the island [of Ireland]' (2003: 161) and 'the hegemony of US cinema in France' (2003: 57); Venuti (1996: 92) writes of his 'political agenda that is broadly democratic: an opposition to the global hegemony of English'; Carcelén-Estrada (2018: 260) argues that 'translation as a political act is an engaged activity that resists hegemony and provides an intercultural alternative space to address issues of identity, citizenship, and nation-building'. The term is not defined or theorised in any of these examples. In each case, being hegemonic is unreflectively articulated with moral badness and being counterhegemonic is articulated with moral goodness.

Laclau and Mouffe lead us in a different and more ambivalent direction. On the level of theory, they argue that hegemony underpins all stable articulations, not only those deemed regressive, authoritarian or racist. The relatively stable articulation among the contemporary far right of women, Muslims and black people as threats to the nodal 'Judeo-Christian' tradition establishes a hegemonic relation, but so does the articulation of demands for the rights of women and people of colour hegemonized by the nodal signifier of 'justice' in progressive political movements.[x] Hegemony itself cannot be either good or bad since it has no intrinsic content or meaning of its own. The question therefore changes from asking *whether* there are hegemonic relations in a given context to inquiring into *what* the hegemonic relations in that context are. On the level of strategy, Laclau and Mouffe show that collective political identities are a necessary component of collective action and that hegemony is necessary for the emergence of these identities, by allowing metonymic relationships of pure particularity to be overcome within relatively stable equivalential chains. This suggests, in turn, that genuine political engagement can never be limited to simply opposing hegemony in and of itself. If the hegemonic relations obtaining in a particular situation are deemed problematic, the question is not only how they can be challenged but also how they can be *replaced* with an alternative set of hegemonic relations.

The operation of hegemony as a means of stabilising articulations is readily apparent in TS and KT. A field of study or practice, after all, is a relatively stable collective endeavour that involves inquiring into a particular set of phenomena or issues built around the articulation of signifiers and stabilised through a hegemonising nodal signifier – 'translation' in the two contexts under consideration here. From this perspective, the question of what constitutes the legitimate scope of TS appears as much political as it is conceptual. Gentzler's call for translation to be understood as 'a cultural condition underlying communication', making it necessary to 'bring in academics from other disciplines such as politics, sociology, anthropology and psychology, from linguistics and literary studies' (Gentzler 2017: 7), is distinctly political as it is concerned with questions of inclusion and exclusion and of the composition of the equivalential chain which constitutes TS as a distinct discursive field. To broaden the definition of translation is to further extend the chain, incorporating new differences as equivalent. The position of 'translation' as a nodal point, rather than one difference among others, means that to call for its redefinition as a particular difference is also to call for a change in the hegemonic formation it binds together. This puts increased pressure on the universalising function of the nodal point. To 'open up to the different ways in which the term [translation] is used in other disciplinary domains in order to reach a better understanding of the notion within translation studies itself' (Guldin 2022: 26) is to permit ever greater overdetermination of the nodal point, with more and more mutually contradictory meanings superimposed upon one another. Doing this, nonetheless, also increases the range of differences that can be recognised within the system. It entails redefining the antagonistic frontier so that formerly excluded phenomena (for instance, the bartering of food and drink between allied forces and civilians during World War II, as discussed in Footitt 2022) can enter as differences within the system. This then also allows a wider range of people to be incorporated (in principle at least) within the collective identity of translation scholars, possibly enabling broader collective action.

Conversely, opposition to further expansion of the notion of translation is also political as well as conceptual. The more universal 'translation' is rendered, the hazier its own ability to function as a particular difference. As attempts are made to integrate previously excluded others within the system, it is possible for a previously clear antagonistic frontier to become increasingly fuzzy. This may, in turn, blur the limits of the structure as a whole, impeding the capacity of 'translation' to hegemonise and universalise by serving as a nodal point, and may cause the 'system' itself to collapse. The collapse in this case would not be conceptual – on a purely theoretical level it is clear that any concept can be used with any other – but political in the sense that it might obliterate or weaken the discursive field of TS as an established order.

On the other hand, many of the issues currently recognised as political in TS – for instance, those relating to power, gender rights and acknowledgement of historical violence against the colonised – may involve the study of political phenomena but are not recognised as political themselves by the approach adopted here, because they do not challenge established patterns of antagonism within or beyond TS. For, as Laclau argues, what makes a demand political is that it 'presupposes a constitutive heterogeneity — it is an event that breaks with the logic of a situation' (Laclau 2005: 232). TS itself is characterised by the dominance of established hegemonic formations. Calls for greater recognition of translators, expressions of resistance to dominant cultures and opposition to gender discrimination do not challenge these formations. Given that these demands do not 'break with the logic of the situation', they are not political in Laclau's sense, even in the narrow sense of breaking with the logic of the discipline, let alone other established orders.[xi]

Translation as an activity clearly can be political in the sense presented here, as a wealth of studies have demonstrated. Textual and conceptual processes of translation (including translation of Mouffe

and Laclau's work) were important in the reconfiguration of Spanish society that accompanied the rise of the leftwing political movement *Unidos Podemos* (Fernández 2018). The translation of Marx's *Das Kapital* into Russian was one component in a broader political process of re-aligning the antagonistic frontiers and systems of difference in Russian society in the late 19th century (Reiss 1970). Tymoczko's account of the long-lasting influence of the Irish translation movement in the late 19th and early 20th century shows that it was successful not only because it challenged established hegemonic articulations of the Irish as backward, uncultured and lazy but also because it contributed to the development of new hegemonic articulations in which the Irish were portrayed as 'tragic, militant, noble and chaste' (2000: 42), held together by Irishness as a nodal point. First-hand accounts by various activists in *Translating Dissent: Voices from and with the Egyptian Revolution* (Baker 2016) show that translation contributed in numerous ways to reconfiguring hegemonic formations in the context of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. In each case, the translation practices involved did not simply draw on existing collective identities but actively contributed to bringing new ones into being. In each case, translators did not opt for 'resistance' in Venuti's sense of promoting 'cultural innovation by proliferating the variables within English' rather than trying 'to erect a new standard or to establish a new canon' (Venuti 1996: 93). Rather, all sought to both challenge established hegemonic relations *and* bring about new ones. It is here that the political significance of the translation activities in each context lay, rather than in any specific textual strategies or theoretical perspectives.

Laclau and Mouffe, then, allow us to recognise the limitations of generic calls for resistance as a political strategy and to adequately theorise Tymoczcko's intuitive apprehension that no single translation approach can be recommended because that would be 'like trying to prescribe a single strategy for effective guerrilla warfare' (Tymoczko 2000: 42). The contingency of political and social reality makes it impossible to know the political significance of any translation approach outside the concrete situation of articulations and hegemony within which it is employed. The view of hegemony advanced here also suggests, nonetheless, that achieving political impact is much more complex than simply requiring that 'a text and a group that uses the text must have widespread and general appeal' (Tymoczko 2000: 41). Above all, it suggests that effective political engagement beyond the discipline does not consist in making demands which accord with established patterns of hegemony.

In contrast to TS, where the idea of political engagement is now widely embraced but the actual issues raised rarely challenge established orders within or beyond the discipline, research in KT is often grounded in an explicit rejection of the political. It relies, as emphasized by Greenhalgh and Wieringa (2011), on a number of hidden assumptions: (1) knowledge is equated, more or less, with objective, impersonal research findings which are separable from the people who develop or use it; (2) knowledge and clinical, public health or policy decision-making are depicted as separate and separable (a view reflected in frequently-used metaphors such as "know-do-gap" or "bench to bedside"); and (3) decision-making is depicted as a process of making rational decisions based on scientific research findings. Common to these assumptions is the idea that KT consists of a scientific and purportedly non-political practice, while social, political and cultural differences are viewed as 'barriers' to the transmission of evidence into action (Engebretsen, Sandset, Ødemark 2017). Accordingly, it is assumed that the political only appears in exceptional cases, as when political institutions actively interfere in the research process, and is as such, by definition, an external threat to the process of KT. The validity and credibility of results from laboratory studies, randomised controlled trials, systematic reviews, as well as clinical guidelines rely strongly on the systematic approach used and the controlled environment under which the studies are performed (Timmermans and Berg 2003). The necessary systematics can only be secured through purification

from external, real-world, human interference (Wieringa et al. 2017). The scientific space is, as such, secluded and shut off from the political space.

This is not wholly incoherent. Much KT in medical contexts is apparently concerned with the technicalities of clinical care – issues which have, at least on the surface, relatively little to do with hegemony and antagonism as we have used the concepts here. And yet, as shown by Stengers (2013), the whole idea of knowledge application implies political interests (in the commonly used sense of 'political') because it serves an instrumental purpose that often goes far beyond what the knowledge was originally meant for. Importantly, too, engagement with KT does at times produce demands that challenge established hegemonies, and are therefore political in Mouffe and Laclau's terms. The growing success in the treatment of HIV around the world in recent decades is a case in point. This has been driven, in part, by advances in medical science. Equally significant, however, have been efforts to de-stigmatise the illness in order to increase the uptake of treatment and more generally improve the lives of those who are HIV positive. HIV activists also played a key role in defining what constitutes evidence by promoting 'pragmatic trials': rather than testing whether an intervention works under optimal and experimental conditions, they sought to reflect the complexity of ordinary clinical practice by conducting trials in the real-life settings in which the intervention is intended to be applied (Patsopoulos 2011). Others highlighted the rigidity of clinical guidelines, arguing that once the formal guidelines had been issued, all remaining uncertainties tended to be largely ignored (Epstein 1996). These actions are political in precisely the sense put forward by Mouffe and Laclau – a group formerly excluded as an antagonistic other has been integrated into the system of differences, facilitating effective mass action against the virus. KT practitioners may typically eschew political language and conceive of their work as apolitical but antagonism and hegemony remain important factors.

Concluding remarks

Our aim here has been to advance a carefully theorised conceptualisation of the political to better understand how it relates to translation. We have suggested that Laclau and Mouffe's concepts of antagonism and hegemony offer a powerful framework for achieving this end and confer major benefits. First, they allow us to flesh out and further justify the broadly accepted assertion that the political is everywhere; from this perspective, the political is to be found anywhere that antagonism and hegemony operate, irrespective of genre or type of context. It is as evident in what appear to be purely conceptual, academic debates about the boundaries of a discipline as it is in the halls of government. At the same time, these concepts allow us to demonstrate that the political is *not* everywhere, that it does not equate with calls to denounce injustices, for example, that are already widely denounced. For an act to be political it has to involve reconfiguring existing formations and boundaries and, importantly, to aspire to creating new ones. This highlights that while KT may make few claims to being political, and emphasise that its underpinning assumptions are grounded in an epistemology which specifically seeks to exclude 'political' factors, its political nature must nonetheless be recognised – not as an intrinsic problem but as a necessary criterion of success in certain circumstances.Focusing our attention specifically on the operation of antagonism and hegemony, then, allows us to rigorously describe and analyse the operation of the political in diverse contexts. We have illustrated our points through reference to the very different understandings of 'translation' in the fields of translation studies and knowledge translation, arguing that hegemony and antagonism play a key role in both cases. The same approach could be usefully adopted in numerous other contexts – both those which have been traditionally understood as political, such as activist and postcolonial translation, as well as those which have not, such as literary translation and the datafied practices of the contemporary translation industry. In all these cases, shifting

antagonistic frontiers held in place through the operation of hegemony play important roles in determining patterns of inclusion and exclusion underpinning the possibilities for collective identification and action.

Another advantage of this approach, as indicated above, is that it helps us recognise the limits of the political. It enables us to isolate and analyse the specifically political dimensions in wider social, cultural and institutional configurations. In so doing, it ensures that the political remains a sharp analytical concept rather than a fuzzy catch-all category and allows us to determine what is most usefully approached from other perspectives. The political is everywhere but not everything is political. Antagonism and hegemony play an important role in the examples discussed in the previous paragraph but so, to varying degrees, do affect, aesthetics, ethics, technology, economics and culture. Political analysis can be useful in most contexts but can never account for everything.

Clearly there are limits to the approach that we have adopted. Our analysis is grounded in close reading and careful application of one major strain of political theory. Even limiting ourselves to contemporary left-wing thought, much could be enhanced through the addition of insights from thinkers such as Žižek, Negri, Butler and Rancière. Nonetheless, we hope that what has been sacrificed in terms of range is compensated for with the depth of engagement and tightly defined notions of hegemony and antagonism that we have been able to offer.

As a final remark, it may seem that an emphasis on antagonism and hegemony inevitably leads to a rather bleak understanding of the political – a sort of Darwinism wholly characterised by a constant struggle for dominance. While a possibility, reality tends to be more complex as the struggles within translation studies over the nature and future of the discipline attest. Rather than any single articulation emerging as wholly dominant and excluding all alternative possibilities, we see a more complex, overdetermined situation in which multiple antagonistic frontiers sit on top of one another, resulting in exclusions that are only ever partial and temporary. The tensions themselves, furthermore, often function as productive forces of innovation. This suggests that while conflict may be inevitable, and antagonism unavoidable, it need not be seen as zero sum – to the extent that it can be channelled into agonistic rather than predominantly antagonistic directions, 'where the opponents are not enemies but adversaries among whom exists a conflictual consensus' (Mouffe 2013: xii). As with all political relations, we should be careful about negating one another's identities, but this does not mean that we should fear conflict or strive for final harmony.

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Notes

[i] Rather than political theory, scholars of translation tend to draw on postcolonial, feminist, sociological or narrative theories, and often on no specific theoretical model at all.

[ii] Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of hegemony is heavily influenced by, if not identical to, that of Gramsci, (c.f. 1985 47-148). A consideration of Gramsci's own ideas on language and translation is beyond the scope of this article but can be found in the existing literature (Boothman 2002, 2007; Ives and Lacorte 2010; Lacorte 2018).

[iii] While Laclau and Mouffe's work is little known within translation studies, some use has been made of the broadly similar approach of Jacques Rancière in other fields in relation to translation (Doerr 2013, 2018; Chambers 2016). For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Laclau and Rancière's approaches, see Laclau (2005: 244-250)

[iv] This is particularly significant because unlike literary translation, for example, conference interpreting is closely regulated by AIIC, a powerful institution which has long acted as gatekeeper of the profession and controlled the codes of practice for professional interpreters.

[v] Although Laclau and Mouffe do not engage with translation, this is an obvious point to make, both in terms of the narrow and broader definition of discourse and of translation (see below).

[vi] Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 112) here build on Derrida's notion of an arche-writing, a textual interplay that has no outside (il n'y a pas de hors-texte). Similarly to Derrida, they abandon the idea of a transcendental signified on which the meaning underlying the flow of differences is fixed.

[vii] Although it is not the focus of this article, we note ongoing debates in translation studies as to the extent to which non-verbal translation should be thought of as metaphorical (c.f. Marais 2016, 2019; Blumczynski forthcoming)

[viii] This aspect of Mouffe and Laclau's approach draws substantially on Derrida's critique of Saussure, which highlights the inadequacy of assuming a straightforward internal/external distinction in relation to any system (Derrida 1974: 27–73). It also brings their perspective closer to the semiotics of Yuri Lotman in which the question of the boundaries between 'semiospheres', and processes of translation across those boundaries, assume a central role (c.f. Lotman 1990: 131-142).

[ix] There are exceptions to this (e.g. Lacorte 2018, Ben-Ari 2010, Bandia 2010).

[x] From a slightly different but complementary perspective, in discussing normativeness as a feature of all narratives Baker (2006:98) asserts that even oppositional movements that work for justice and equality produce their own hegemonic understandings and cannot do otherwise if they are to remain intelligible, attract adherents, and effect durable change.

[xi] Bassnet and Johnston implicitly address this issue when they ask 'who actually uses translation theories and methods outside the pool of TS scholars?' (2019: 186).