

## Can public policy be counter-hegemonic? Toward a pragmatics of 'contingency' and 'disruption'

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### ABSTRACT

'Public policy' functions discursively as both the scholar's favorite example of ideology, and our most enduring, hoped-for site of truly democratic social change. Intersections of theory (post-Gramscian, Lacanian, postcolonial feminism, narrative) with case studies reinforce the insight that both discourse and social practice always hold a myriad of possibilities for either countering or reproducing structural forms of inequality and subordination. An evaluation of the metaphors of 'contingency', 'horizon', and 'disruption' is combined with research on the *Mi Comunidad* program in Guanajuato, Mexico, a 1996-2001 state-run job creation policy, in order to argue that even transformative and equality-driven social and political projects should be based in:

(1) careful attention to the language and norms of any planned motion toward some future, especially regarding descriptions of those who qualify for inclusion in the envisioned future; and (2) a continuous interrogation of their own foundations in inequality, e.g. in clientelism, paternalism, and hierarchized bureaucracy.

### Introduction

The case of the *Mi Comunidad* (My Community) job creation program in Guanajuato, Mexico offers a mixed set of insights for those concerned with fostering transformative social change through public policy. While many developments of value emerged in the everyday practices of this paradoxical case, the implementation of the program failed to sustain its official goals, and indeed contributed to a reproduction of pre-existing gendered, economic inequalities. The program was run by two conscientious and capable administrators, however, it was marred by its own ambitious, self-contradictory, and dogmatic agenda. Both the official discourse and the everyday practices of the program intensified an urban/rural division between program participants, invoking an ideology of mobility or, more specifically: *capacity for mobility*. Left out of the promising world of advance and progress were those who inhabited the category of 'rural female', a pejorative classification reserved for the laborers in the government-sponsored factories. This category was reproduced in part by the two female, professional- and middle-class administrators

of the program; it eventually became the primary source of blame for the program's failures, deflecting attention from other problems.

However, short of radically democratic procedures, broadly-based redistributive justice, or projects that dismantle the violent or coercive aspects of states, how surprising it is that a public policy would end up reproducing structural and personal forms of domination? Is it possible that even the most high-minded public policies are often doomed before they hit the ground, by virtue of the contexts of their design and imposition? Indeed, for many contemporary scholars, it is common sense if not axiomatic that public policy is complicit with and reproductive of dominant power, ie. hegemony. The logic of public policy, with its teleological orientations and its roots in ancient Western thought regarding 'the public good', is *prima facie* suspect from the perspective of much critical theory; some strands of anti-essentialism excavate and systematically undermine the very notion of 'the public good'. Yet, if one takes seriously the existence of contingent and multiple realities and subject positions, etc., then there

## Byrnes

are always spaces for re-opening and disrupting hegemony, *even within* public policy language and implementation. Below, I combine case details with insights from authors who have sought to apply post-humanist and post-Marxist theory to organizational settings or public management, testing some ideas which I think are most relevant and promising for public policy.

### Policy: Hope or Euphemism?

For critical theorists, a key problem with public policy is its seemingly inevitable orientation toward one single, specific future, attainable through one specific means, and easily metaphorized through vague terms drawn from the dominant rhetoric of globalization. For example, policymakers advocating 'reform' of plan economies do not always consider the distributive effects of policies because, trapped by the idea of 'a single or optimal set of market rules and institutions', they apply the language of 'management and functionality' to legal rights, promoting 'a culture of tolerance for inequality' which makes anything but the market model appear to be merely "special" rather than universal goals and interests' (Rittich 2000: 261). Moreover, public policy discourse and the associated media and other 'preparations' for it (Neu et al. 2001) are often marked by a sense of imperative and urgency derived from the exigencies of political timing (for example, election campaign deadlines and funding) rather than by awareness of the specific contexts of complicated cases. If policy is oriented toward some unexamined vision of the future and aimed at 'solving' social problems through some specific, purposive action, its language can be blindly normative and prescriptive. Applying what are taken to be universal liberal principles without any 'normative challenge', policymakers may reproduce stigmatizing categories such as 'the victimized, infantile, and helpless third world woman', generating oppressive restrictions and circumstances for those who do not fit dominant sexual norms, etc. (Kapur 2005: 95-136, 141). Moreover, the identification of 'problems' can determine the language and

logic of their 'resolution'; it is difficult to interrogate these processes if they are dominated by experts and insiders. While all of these and more characteristics allow for interesting analyses of the gap between the Law and the Real, the universal and the particular, etc., they can also prevent politicians and managers of public enterprises from admitting problems, mistakes, or failures.

Its connection to 'politics' also seems to render 'policy' hopelessly tainted. This may stem from a long skepticism in the West about the uses of rhetoric. Debates attending public policy are obviously rhetorical, in seeking to persuade voters, fellow politicians, etc. In Aristotle's scheme of oratory, policy debates would fall under the rubric of 'Deliberative' or political oratory, because they use exhortation, consider the future, and have as an objective 'establishing the expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action' (1984: 33). The art of rhetoric relies upon a series of 'artistic proofs'; for Aristotle, the most convincing proof for deliberative oratory was the ethical (as opposed to the logical and the emotional), in which the character of the speaker was a crucial factor. The speaker must 'make his own character look right ... he should be thought to entertain the right feelings toward his hearers' and he must 'inspire confidence' through an image as a 'person of good sense, good moral character, and goodwill' (*ibid.*: 91-2). Such a powerful and complex form of rhetoric is easily abused; we understand more fully now that assumptions about 'character' and 'goodwill' are strongly influenced by mainstream norms and wider considerations of power.

Beyond these linguistic, rhetorical, and normative inheritances of policy, there are many problems in policy implementation, at all levels of analysis. Both negative (problem-based 'wars' on a given issue) and more proactive or positive public policies (building or fostering some value such as empowerment, human 'capabilities', etc. (Nussbaum and Sen 1993, Nussbaum 1999)), face similar obstacles, in part because they freeze ideas,

which are necessarily fluid and inchoate, into regulations, buildings, codes, systems, rules, forms, etc. (Zabusky 1995). It is also clear that 'bureaucratic discourse ... produces *clients*; that is, it produces individuals whose subjectivity is molded and shaped by the parameters of the discourse' (Ferguson 1984: 136). Moreover, there is the enduring issue of structural inequality, which seems to be either an acceptable or an invisible condition for many policymakers at the international level. The World Bank has emphasized the need for more 'flexible, merit-based compensation' in labor markets because 'Greater disparity of wages, income and wealth is - up to a point - a necessary part of transition, because allowing wages to be determined by the market creates incentives for efficiency that are essential for successful reform. More-efficient workers must be rewarded for their contribution to growth' (1996: 66). Behind this euphemistic language are many assumptions which contribute to a worsening of conditions for many workers, especially women. Three noted scholars of social movements and democratization seem to offer an excuse for placing issues of inequality on the back burner of development: 'Although democratization does not depend on elimination of material inequality in the population as a whole, it does depend on the formation of buffers between major day-to-day inequalities and public policies' (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 284). They do note the importance of such processes as the 'dissolution of coercive controls', education systems, and communication which reinforce 'exploitation and opportunity hoarding' (*ibid.*: 275), but their remarks fall far short of the criticisms of destabilizing, endemic inequality which have been leveled by others (Farmer 2003, Pogge 2001). At least the World Bank is more explicitly addressing some of the facts of global poverty and inequality, noting for example that 'Clearly the biggest impact is if growth is combined with a shift to a more equal distribution of income' (2004: 31), although poverty is still presented in the text as a domestic or internal issue, rather than being linked up to an account of the historic

inequities in the international trade system. In short, many characteristics of policy urge a serious consideration by policymakers of its relationship to hegemony, defined most broadly as the reproduction of the power of a dominant group through the deployment of certain ideological and behavioral norms as 'common sense' or natural, thus evoking the spontaneous consent of a subordinated group. The notion of hegemony is usually traced to Antonio Gramsci, who subtly elaborated Karl Marx's thoughts on ideology and 'superstructure' in society. Michèle Barrett summarizes Gramsci thus: "Hegemony is best understood as *the organization of consent* - the processes through which subordinated forms of consciousness are constructed without recourse to violence or coercion" (1994: 238). These processes of 'construction' were understood by Gramsci to be complex and contradictory, for example in the realms of consciousness, belief, action, and common sense. He writes:

It signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes - when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it (1971: 327).

Later writers have developed the concept of hegemony in important ways, addressing its workings, its metaphysics, and other features which I will not attempt to summarize here. At the risk of over-simplification, it seems possible to conclude that, if movement toward (impossible) closure and totality characterizes hegemony (Laclau 1998), then, conceivably, all public policy may be inescapably hegemonic. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe state:

## Byrnes

[T]he project for a radical democracy ... [is] a form of politics which is founded not upon dogmatic postulation of any 'essence of the social', but, on the contrary, on the affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every 'essence', and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism. Affirmation of a 'ground' which lives only by negating its fundamental character; of an 'order' which exists only as a partial limiting of disorder; of a 'meaning' which is constructed only as excess and paradox in the face of meaninglessness - in other words, the field of the political as the space for a game which is never 'zero-sum', because the rules and the players are never fully explicit. This game, which eludes the concept, does at least have a name: hegemony. (1985: 193).

This conceptualization seems tantamount to a rejection of most contemporary public policy, which is usually oriented toward a normative and closed vision of a future presumptive of 'order' and 'meaning'.

From the perspective of psychoanalytical theory, public policy can also be seen as part of the general ideological workings of hegemony, explicitly through desire and fantasy. In combining Laclau's work with that of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, Jason Glynos suggests that one must accept 'society' itself as a discursive conception and thus as 'constitutively lacking... It is *because* our symbolic representations of society are constitutively lacking that politico-hegemonic struggle is made possible' (2001: 197). This is where the role of fantasy, derived from clinical studies, enters into the discussion. If 'fantasy's primary aim is to *sustain* the subject's desire by telling it *how* to desire' (*ibid.*: 200) and 'the hegemonic status of a particular ideological meaning is ... [sustained by] *fantasy*' (*ibid.*: 208), then social fantasy sustains desire (and its impossibility), thereby enabling pleasure or *jouissance* in its subjects, even as it holds them in thrall. But

the fantasy 'must remain implicit ... in order to retain its status as that which simultaneously escapes-transgresses *and* supports (through this very transgression) the symbolic order' (*ibid.*: 202).

This analytical move uses pleasure to explain the 'grip' of hegemony, getting 'inside' of, so to speak, the Gramscian organization of consent. To the extent that policy is oriented toward making the fullness of an empty master signifier appear to be possible, as in Glynos's example of 'Justice for All', then policy is quite simply a part of domination in society, since it pretends that such a signifier is linked to 'concrete content' (*ibid.*: 198-9). Moreover, when policy relies upon fantasies of the Other, masking its own implicit norms, there are serious effects for those who are thereby subjected to social stigma, oppression, etc.; this is an ongoing issue which policymakers must confront, since 'there will always be another Other who will come along' (Kapur 2005: 11).

Must we thereby conclude that *all* public policy that claims to be about 'the public good' is necessarily oriented toward an illusory, misrecognized 'fullness' which is always empty and unachievable, and which risks constituting a subaltern Other, however depicted? One Marxist author frames a general social goal thus: 'de-alienation and human emancipation involve the progressive realization of social conditions that are relatively free from all forms of external domination. It is a state of affairs in which individuals and communities take control over the products of their human activity while interacting in a cooperative climate of mutuality and reciprocity' (Schweitzer 1992: 45). But, would even a policy that is oriented toward such laudable goals as fostering greater human potential and creative capacity inevitably fall into a mode of producing a problematic kind of subject/subjectivity? For, as Laclau cautions us, even 'emancipation' should not be taken to be a total or universal concept:

... is it not the case that ...

emancipation involves the elimination of power? Only if we are thinking of an emancipation which is total and attains a universality that is not dependent on particularities - as in the case of Marx's 'human' emancipation. The latter, however ... is impossible. But I would go further: I would argue that the contamination of emancipation by power is not an unavoidable empirical imperfection to which we have to accommodate, but involves a higher human ideal than a universality representing a totally reconciled human essence, because a fully reconciled society, a transparent society, would be entirely free in the sense of self-determination, but that full realization of freedom would be the death of freedom, for all possibility of dissent would have been eliminated from it. Social division, antagonism, and its necessary consequence - power - are the true conditions of a freedom which does not eliminate particularities. (2000: 208).

i\_ek seems to recognize the practical knots posed by combining radical pluralist democracy, postmodern theory, and Lacanian perspectives: 'If we are to play the postmodern game of plurality of political subjectivizations, it is formally necessary that we do *not* ask certain questions (about how to subvert capitalism as such, about the constitutive limits of political democracy and/or the democratic state as such ...).' (2000: 98-99). Yet, there *are* openings proposed by the Lacanian and anti-essentialist authors, areas which suggest possible avenues for change beyond mere 'struggle'. For example, if we understand how ideologies manipulate us, recognizing the 'payment' we receive for serving the Master, we can 'traverse the fantasy,' disrupting that which keeps us bound up in domination (i\_ek 1997: 48). We can do this by accepting the fact that there is no 'secret treasure' (which Lacan calls 'agalma') inside of the person, and taking the 'empty gesture' (the offer to be rejected), literally: 'trust the

forced choice as a true choice', this 'suspends the phantasmic frame of unwritten rules which tell him how to choose freely' and is thus a subversive act (*ibid.*: 10, 29).

But, in the case of severe oppression, who is 'us'? what role does 'choice' even have in such cases? And again, can policymakers ever hope to design a policy which does not reproduce *some* kind of domination? Does the clinical notion of desire help in this analysis, or in thinking through the policy process itself? Glynos argues rather pointedly: 'the social subject is *responsible* for this enjoyment [social fantasy and *jouissance*] and thus for the power an ideology holds not only over others but over itself. The critique of ideology, indeed, becomes a question of social ethics...' (2001: 212). So, if we agree that there is an ethical problem with the 'fantasmatic content' behind an image which is 'secretly accepted as 'typical' of the situation in a way that enables it to play a fantasmatic role' (*ibid.*: 209), then we must ask: can public policy be a part of displacing or disturbing 'fantasmatic content'? Policy which is based on research and knowledge that critically examines ideology, displacing its fantasmatic content, seems to be one kind of solution, yet even 'this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty' or else one returns to ideology (i\_ek 1994: 17).

There is also the related issue of consensus and policy. Mouffe writes: 'all forms of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion' (1993: 85), thus, to the extent that policy is driven by consensus, it cannot be anything but exclusive. She argues that it is the very notion or dream of a 'fully inclusive community where antagonism, division, and conflict will have disappeared' which must be relinquished, explaining that 'a radical democratic approach views the common good as a 'vanishing point'', which can never be reached and which functions as a 'social imaginary,' playing the role of a horizon or 'the condition of possibility' (*ibid.*). She advocates accepting a state of permanent conflict and antagonism as constitutive of 'the political', an 'irreducible plurality of values' (*ibid.*: 152).

## Byrnes

To summarize then: can power and antagonism co-exist with both the disruption of domination and some kind of 'public good'? Could a radically democratic, pluralist, *jouissance*-displacing, self-emptying, agonistic, ever-receding horizon of the political work in practice, in a productive relation with public policy? Moreover, how best can such structural inequalities as deep poverty be conceptualized and changed, so as to move beyond the important realization that 'inequality' is constitutive of 'equality', and yet arrive at a point of making real differences in people's lives and life chances? I will leave aside the issue of whether or not it is psychologically better for individuals and for whole societies to never realize the impossibility of fullness, desire, closure, etc. even when they are trapped by ideology. For my purposes here, the more important issue is: how best to conduct public policy so as to *not* intentionally manipulate and dominate citizens through large-scale social fantasy. In self-consciously crafting any positively-framed counter-hegemonic public policy, what forms are least damaging?

To consider these issues more concretely, I use details from the Mi Comunidad case, after a brief methodological point and a review of background information on the case. 'Mobility' emerged in the Mi Comunidad case as a central ideology and a set of social practices. To the extent that this word was linked with an exclusionary meaning of economic success, it can be considered an ideological or hegemonic metanarrative, but, as a cautionary point, I also argue below that the metaphors of 'contingency' and 'horizon' that are embraced by radical democratic and post-Marxist scholars can just as easily intersect with neoliberal metaphors, thus a careful examination of all such notions is justified.

### **A Note on Practice, Discourse, Fantasy, and Narrative**

Laclau and Mouffe have argued 'that any distinction between linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice, is either an

incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured under the form of discursive totalities' (1985: 107). However, the circularity in the arguments of Michel Foucault, Laclau, Mouffe, and other post-humanists has been noted: 'The sense-making, coherence-(trans)forming capacities denied in 'human being' are tacitly displaced to an Idealized 'stuff' of culture/episteme' (Zipin 2004: 230). Other authors, especially those writing from different feminisms, have stressed the crucial insights that are afforded by an emphasis on non-discursive aspects of life such as everyday practice, lived experience, and physicality. I follow Judith Butler and others to suggest that an emphasis on practices remains crucial as long as actual bodies are subject to violence, coercion, and control (Bourdieu 1977, Butler 1993). Zipin also prefers 'Bourdieu's 'true agent ... [who] actively (re)makes and *transforms* the received forms of meaning which *inform habitus*' (*ibid.*: 232). This model seems to offer one way out of the circularity of an emphasis on discourse, however, Zipin's solution is, perhaps necessarily, somewhat vague. In arguing for human agency as also a part of the process, Zipin suggests 'deep human desires,' a notion drawn from novelist A.S. Byatt. Byatt writes of human desire for 'coherence and closure ... [as] presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable' (cited in Zipin 2004: 219-220).

Of course in the realm of public policy, both discursive and 'deep human' levels of analysis coexist and are deeply intertwined, as my case illustrates; these levels of analysis may require some combination of narrative theory with concepts from Lacanian theory. Attention to narratives allows for some understanding of 'an embodied who of discourse' that is implicated in the statement: 'My body as lived is who I am', which is at the heart of the ontology of narrative (Schrug 1997: 54). Leaving aside in the interest of brevity both the definitions from linguistic theory of performative and illocutionary speech acts, in which an utterance is also an

act (a declaration, a denial, etc. (Austin 1962), and the lengthy philosophical and psychoanalytical debates about language and being, I argue for the pragmatics of an admittedly very sketchy methodological compromise: one that shifts between discourse, narrative, fantasy, and social practices. This stance allows for awareness of the persistent emergence of counter-hegemonic discourses and practices, or what we might call continuous 're-openings'. One theoretical approach is through those illocutionary speech acts which, going beyond a Wittgenstenian level of language games, become transformative and even 'emancipatory narratives' when used in the public sphere (Pia Lara 1998). The concept of 'emancipatory discourse' is also notable in this regard (Laclau 2000: 207-212). As I will describe below, the Mi Comunidad case suggests that emancipatory re-openings of any kind are rendered much less likely when concepts such as 'rurality' and 'immobility' combine to help keep certain women 'in their place', to use Claudio Lomnitz's characterization of hegemony in Mexico (1992).

I believe that researchers who are interested in the contradictory workings of hegemony can, without presuming anything about motivation, cognition, individual sense-making, etc., nevertheless observe and analyze social practices and discourse, and combine those observations with an analysis of individual narratives, understood as 'the emplotment of a personal history through individual and institutional action' (Schrag 1997: 43). For example, individual actions, self-descriptions of action, and the state level discourse of the Mi Comunidad program all confirm that the program administrators emplotted themselves within a narrative of assistance to the rural females of isolated communities, regardless of the details of their own practices or the official discourse which they reproduced. This disjuncture is not explicable as merely false consciousness or self-denial. A good part of it has to do with presentation of self to outsiders through narrative, a presentation which is always

intertwined with the varying deployments, recraftings, and fluid adaptations of dominant ideologies which are drawn upon in the course of self-narration. These narrations must necessarily involve the workings of fantasy and desire, but in my view the theorization of this at the individual level becomes very problematic. Overall, my research affirms that it remains important, if not necessary, to incorporate both discourse and everyday practice in some kind of mutually illuminating tension, as distinctive, but deeply intertwined analytical and experiential aspects of research in the social sciences.

### Case Background

The Mi Comunidad program was initiated in 1996 by then-Governor Vicente Fox Quesada. As a freshly elected Governor of the state of Guanajuato and with one eye firmly on the Presidency (which he indeed won in 2000, ending the 70 year dominance of the ruling party, known by its acronym of the PRI), Fox's official aim in this program was to diminish high emigration rates by creating jobs in poor, rural areas. This goal was consistently repeated in documents, press reports, and official statements. The plan was to build small-scale textile factories (*maquilas*) which would be owned and operated through a unique partnership between the state government of Guanajuato and the groups of investors (*socios*) who had left Guanajuato and who were living and working in the United States. Since males have in the past been more likely to migrate than females, the maquila jobs were intended to be occupied by men as well as women. Indeed, men were shown in government-produced films and photographs about the program: working in various capacities, including while seated at sewing machines.

The combination of state funds and migrant remittances marked a stroke of political genius, evoking contributions from migrants who had settled in the U.S., but who maintained contacts (including voting power and influence) in their home regions. Using money contributed by the migrants, new businesses could be established in the same

## Byrnes

regions that migrants had 'left behind', creating a kind of symbolic and financial circle of loss, guilt, obligation, responsibility, and hope.

In its daily implementation, the program was run by two female bureaucrats in the office for Support to Guanajuatense Communities Abroad, the acronym for which in Spanish is DACGE. I studied this program for a total period of three years, which included a seven month period in 2000 as a full-time volunteer, working in the DACGE office and traveling across the state with the two administrators.

By 2000, the official program rationale had shifted to one of providing work for the women left behind by the migrants, or: '*las que se quedan*'. This rationale was phrased as a 'social services' mission, but the economic goal of facilitating small businesses also remained in place. The state authorities told a documentary filmmaker and other outsiders that there were 26 factories in the program, but numerous problems existed in the program, and this number was more a product of hope. For example, while some of the factories were constructed and operational, others were delayed by protracted struggles to procure electricity, water, and paved roads. Others faced problems with landlords, equipment, quality, high turnover and absenteeism, and financial indiscretion. The government had subsidized several of the maquilas in 1999, which included paying the salaries of all the managers. Rather than fulfill Fox's goal of 10 more maquilas annually after the 10 of the initiation year (1996), at the start of 2000 there were still only 10 working maquilas, many of which were at risk for survival, with several more said to be 'in the works' in various stages. By 2001, the program was officially in a state of 'bureaucratic limbo', with its factories closed, but with continued hopes for revival.

This case highlights key ideological issues related to the concept of mobility, discussed below. However, it also illustrates the problems of complexity which bedevil any

comprehensive social policy. For if a public policy is implemented along the lines of pre-existing policies and classical management models, while linked with an exploitative external context like the global assembly industry, even the best intentions to 'develop' and 'help' rural females may be doomed not only by their own discursive and logical inheritance, but by the practices which are employed in implementation. Leaving aside these more structural aspects, I turn to this pervasive idea or metanarrative of mobility, which may be an inescapable part of policy discourse.

Among its many connotations, mobility has an experiential component, as in physical motion (across a border, inside a factory, traveling down a highway, and so on) and a discursively expressed normative component, as in phrases which refer to the forward progress of an idea, a person, a nation, an economy, humanity, etc. Both of these components were present in this case. Indeed, the Mi Comunidad program was steeped in the very idea and reality of mobility: designed at first to *prevent* the motion of some citizens but later, to help those who remained behind, motionless.

Mobility has a positive connotation in current marketization rhetoric, most notably, it is linked with the political and economic ideals of freedom and autonomy, in both of their classic Western liberal senses, grounded in individual agency: freedom *from* and freedom *to* (Fineman 2004). Neoliberal prescriptions for economic reform emphasize a metaphor of freedom from constraints; any obstacles to the otherwise freely and naturally flowing market forces are inefficient, nonproductive of growth, and must be eliminated. For example: 'By eliminating politically imposed constraints on development and improving transparency and accountability, the government frees economic actors to seek economic returns' (Henisz 1999: 351).

Some of the meanings of mobility in the Mi Comunidad case can be understood through the concept of articulation, which refers to a 'recombinant relation or a 'joining' that creates

new identifications and social formations (Althusser 1971, Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Nelson 1999). Thomas Diez describes articulation for the case of Europe:

In order to fill the contested concept of European governance with meaning, this discourse draws on others, which therefore operate as its metanarratives. In bringing these metanarratives in, each articulation simultaneously attempts to stabilize a field of discourses through the pinning down of specific meanings in the metanarratives, which often remain unquestioned or are presented as 'natural' or taken for granted... (2001: 16).

Overall, mobility in the Mi Comunidad case had a positive connotation through its linkage with the general goals of growth and progress for Guanajuato and for Mexico. As a policy associated with the relatively 'right' and pro-business political party known by its acronym as the PAN (Political Action Party) in Mexico, the Mi Comunidad program drew upon the positively valued, dominant ideology's 'free' and 'globalizing' connotations of mobility. The Mi Comunidad program discourse articulated new social formations of gender, class, and geography, and stabilized a set of meanings which were unexamined by those who reproduced them. 'Mobility' reproduced a teleology of unrestrained growth and progress in combination with an urban/rural dichotomy, which already bore some mainstream cultural presumptions about the inherent moral qualities and potential of individuals within the specific contexts of Guanajuato. The new meanings distinguished those who did, and those did not, have the potential to participate in the positively valued, forward motion that would benefit the state of Guanajuato and the nation of Mexico. These divisive meanings of social class cut across the citizen/client population that was being served by state officials, precluding gender-based solidarity or sensitivity which might have benefited the rural females who were hired to work in the government-

sponsored factories. The urban/rural dichotomy was also productive of a shared middle or professional class identification between the male managers and the two female bureaucrats involved in the program, in which gender differences were downplayed. This shared class identification was built in opposition to what was seen as the needy, impoverished, immobile, and essential rurality of the female workers (always referred to *las muchachas*, or girls). The program functioned, in both discourse and practice, in part to keep rural women 'in their place'; its effects thus had some parallel to international migration and trafficking policy, which, by 'discouraging women's mobility and stigmatizing their third world families conveys a simple message: to keep the 'native' at home' (Kapur 2005: 142).

In the Mi Comunidad case, discourses of gender and rurality helped to mask contradictions and problems within the program by offering a fairly broad explanation or easy excuse for its failures, deflecting attention from other sources of problems. Issues of 'quality' were said to have been one of the main problems in the program; this word, both as a noun and as an adjective, consolidated a series of allegations about the rural female workers. The prevailing stereotypes about these women as laborers and as rural females included both physical and moral characteristics. The fetishized polysemy of the category *las muchachas* included: *both* laziness and potential trouble (restiveness, absenteeism, etc.), units of and yet impediments to managerial performance, dirtiness and closeness to nature (including flirtatious behavior, etc.), mentally or intellectually suspect, ie. *both* uneducated ignorance and untrustworthy craftiness, heads of household and well-trained (when being described to program outsiders), yet backward and available, a material to be improved, and yet something inherently impeding development.

It is important to investigate the conditions that produce 'the category of woman' in specific settings (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 117) and even more specifically, to 'transform discourses, practices, and social relations

## Byrnes

where the category 'woman' is constructed in a way that implies subordination' (Mouffe 1993: 87). In this case, social class cut across gender differences in a notable way, further complicating the social construction of 'woman'. The category of *rural* female was produced in ways which maintained the cultural and economic devaluation of women who could be considered to belong to this category. This category was produced in direct distinction to that of urban, sophisticated, and educated professional women, i.e., those who were administering the program. The immobility of 'rural females' which has often been negatively associated with 'stagnation' and 'backwardness' in development and nationalist projects was reproduced as a natural, common sense characteristic *by other women*. Meanwhile, the category of 'rural male' was not fully elaborated; rather, in the program literature and in practice, all the males of the program symbolized foundational capital and entrepreneurship (seeking work in the U.S., willing to invest in the factories or to manage them). The rurality of the males in the program was subsumed either by their official status as migrants (seen as both a problem for the program but also as a sign of entrepreneurial spirit which could be redirected back home, once Fox was elected), or by their potential status as investors in the program. Their identities were summarized in far more diverse and individualistic ways, as well as in terms of their actual acts of motion or their capacity to participate in forward motion. Moreover, although the men who were managers of the businesses were also in need of state assistance (loans, information, advice on establishing their businesses), these men were presented as evincing only a *temporary* need. This was in distinction to the female laborers, whose needs were emphasized as more permanent, essential, and even debilitating.

The everyday practices of the Mi Comunidad program clearly illustrated the contradictory, dynamic character of hegemony. Two female bureaucrats were charged with implementing the program; their actions in doing so reproduced paternalistic and hegemonic

social relations, yet their own self-descriptions indicated that they saw themselves in a positive role with regard to the female laborers. The administrators often referred to the fact that they were helping the rural women by virtue of the simple fact that they were administering the program, and thereby providing an opportunity for work to the rural women. The existence of the program itself, and the fact of the jobs which it created, were sufficient to support this narration or self-employment of assistance. Indeed, the program administrators also clearly enjoyed the fun, status, sociality, and freedom of an urban, professional job, albeit one marked by hard work and stress. Ironically, their pursuit of pleasure, of professional goals and middle class values, and their enactment of what they saw as government altruism, were all a part of the means which served to reproduce a patriarchal relationship between government and citizens, while precluding their own female solidarity with *las muchachas*. As noted, they developed shared interests with the male managers and investors, despite the fact that many of these men were themselves from rural areas and thus presumably bore the same lower class status as the female laborers. Visions of global connections, future travel, and the hoped-for advance by means of the Mi Comunidad program proved to be illusory, as the program declined. Yet the fact that the pursuit of fun and freedom, a 'natural' enough pursuit for two urban women, contributed to the reproduction of systemic inequality for the rural women, presents a sobering illustration of the limits of public policy and the seductive aspects of this metanarrative of mobility.

In the Mi Comunidad case, both a presumptive and a factual condition of structural inequality was fixed and reproduced as inherent to the rural females of the program as a group. Their 'neediness' and 'lack' were a theme of the bureaucratic discourse about them, both as clients of the state and as laborers in the maquilas. As human beings, they became defined by their *lack* (of work, of a male wage-earner in the household, of a skill, of

moral and hygienic sense, of a work ethic or *una cultura de trabajo*, etc.). Note that the only service that was being provided to the female workers was the provision of a job. Yet this was seen as a gift from the state: a gift of the initial, government-paid training period and the later job. Program discourse obscured the relation between the women and their value as low-waged laborers through assertions about the training period and provision of work as a gift that was contingent upon the worker's moral merit.

Clearly, any policy which targets a given population as 'in need' or lacking some resource or ability risks falling into the same paternalistic traps. The discourse of 'need' obscures the ancient roots of, and important, lengthy debates within, Western political philosophy regarding the collective good, debates which underpin and legitimate a modern system of state assistance to the vulnerable. Need discourse mystifies the fact that human life includes fluid, dependent, vulnerable, and relational identities (Anderson and Honneth 2005, Fineman 2004, Tietjens Meyers 2005). These contexts are lost in the discourse of largesse from the state, a largesse which must be continuously earned by the recipients through proofs of their moral merit. Contemporary language and norms of welfare discourse in the U.S. are the most obvious example (Fineman 2004, Glynos 2001, Gring-Pemble 2001, Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]).

Attention to both Lacanian theory and postcolonial feminist theory highlights the workings of these metaphors of completion and lack, suggesting the connections between policy, hegemony, and desire. Beyond drawing attention to the problems of the impossible desire for fullness and completion (for example, through an unexamined usage of universal, liberal concepts) which is sustained through the ideological construction of the Other's 'lack', does the analytical category of desire provide ideas for alternatives, ie. for other, better possibilities?

### **Toward Counter Hegemonic Policies-Contingency, Horizon, Disruption**

The works of Laclau and Mouffe offer some

guidance, albeit quite abstract, on the construction of counter-hegemonic policy. One key concept is 'contingency', which is historically posed in counter-distinction to that of 'necessity', which can include connotations of both 'certainty' and the inevitable. In classical philosophy and logic, contingency is the 'merely possible' when used to describe events; when used for statements of truth, it can mean 'those which merely happen to be true' (Hamlyn 1967: 198). As a concept, contingency is surprisingly unelaborated by three of its key proponents in their unique, dialogic work published in 2000 bearing the title: *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. It is not until pages 223-228 that *iek* finally delves into this concept, which he claims is wrongly presumed by both Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau to stand in a kind of totalizing opposition to essentialism (2000a: 223-5). He sees the problem instead to lie in cases where the contingency of origins is masked or 'sublated' as instead an apparent 'necessity', giving, among several examples, the history of capitalism (*ibid.*: 225). Elsewhere he writes: 'all hegemony tries to re-totalize and to make as necessary as possible the contingent links on which its articulating power is based. In this sense, it tends to metaphorical totalization' (1998: 13).

Applying these ideas to the case of New Labour politics, Anthony Clohesy interprets the post-Marxists to be arguing that: to the extent that political projects 'seek to conceal the contingency of their origins', a key task in radical pluralistic democracy is 'revealing and unraveling of the fragile threads that seek to preserve the ideological unity of the various discourses that comprise it' (2002: 51). Others note this key analytical move: 'Rendering contingency *visible*, therefore, grounds the process of ideological critique' (Glynos 2001: 191). To rephrase these ideas, then, as a recommendation for an anti-hegemonic public policy *at the discursive level*, we can suggest that policy must make its own contingency (its fragility, uncertainty, non-inevitability) explicit, as one possible way of working against the promotion or

## Byrnes

presumption of ideological unity. However, this sense of contingency can go quite far, for Laclau notes that 'democratic politics ... involves the institutionalization of its own openness and, in that sense, the injunction to identify with its ultimate impossibility' (2000: 199). This much of an admission seems unlikely in most cases of public policy, but it might be an interesting intellectual exercise for those involved in policy design.

Within the public policy literature, the 'public value' model seems to build a sense of contingency and openness into its outlines and assumptions, moving away from a market-state dichotomy to advocate an 'evidence-based' approach to the delivery of public services. This model was developed in part out of a sense of the limitations of the New Public Management (NPM) model, which has been critiqued for its inappropriate application of individual rationalism, agency theory, and organizational economics to the public services realm in the marketisation and 'contractualism' phases (O'Flynn 2005). The public value model includes a recognition that 'because the funds they expend are raised through coercive power, the managers must be consistently responsible for fairness in the way the government operates, even when they are delivering services' (Moore 1995: 210). Managers in public service should seek to incorporate the opinions of their opponents, and to 'distance themselves from ... common sources of comfort. They must be skeptical of their convictions about their purposes because they have to hold open the possibility that their view of public value is wrong, or idiosyncratic, or not suitable to the times' (*ibid.*: 306). Indeed, Moore embraces the notion of contingency itself: 'Their [managers of public enterprises] views, for which they labor so mightily and with which they are closely identified, must be held *contingently*' (*ibid.*: 307, author emphasis). The public value approach allows for multiple objectives and multiple hybrid models of accountability; public value could be created through many forms, such as listening, innovating, or any number of other qualities. Certainly, this model seems suited to the evidence of the pragmatic and dynamic,

decision-making processes undertaken by managers in everyday decision-making, for example in contracting out and contracting back in (Hefetz and Warner 2004).

Another way to critically analyze and disrupt ideological unity is through the investigation of metanarratives, an approach outlined above for the Mi Comunidad case, for we must understand: 'the nature of policies not as outcomes of politics, but as an integral part of politics in constituting powerful discursive practices that are not only shaped by, but also reproducing and reasserting their discursive contexts. They thereby disseminate the meaning of their metanarratives...and establish or reinforce them as a reference point for the political debate at large' (Diez 2001: 17). Again, to rephrase this as a policy recommendation which is a slight variant on the previous point: policies should be written in ways which do not reproduce metanarratives, ie. fixations of unquestioned 'natural' meanings for what are in fact deeply contested concepts. Highlighting the contested nature of key concepts in a policy could help to preclude a reproduction of false or empty, fantasmic signifiers.

Incorporating both contingency and a sense of multiple, contested meaning into policy design and implementation could include a broadening of the concept of stakeholders to its widest extent. Such inclusion might have made a significant difference in the case of the welfare reform hearings and legislation held in the late 1990s in the United States. Because Congressional testimony did not include welfare recipients until fully two years into the proceedings, and the lone voices of the common citizen invoked were limited to *former* welfare recipients, the tone and directions of the reform debate relied upon key stereotypes rather than being based upon accounts from those affected by the policies (Gring-Pemble 2001: 360). Building participatory, pluralistic discussion into policymaking from its very inception, an old idea, clearly remains important. This hopeful sense of hegemony existing in a kind of creative relationship to ever-widening

democracy is found in Judith Butler's remarks: 'My understanding of hegemony is that its normative and optimistic moment consists precisely in the possibilities for expanding the democratic possibilities for the key terms of liberalism, rendering them more inclusive, more dynamic, and more concrete... new social possibilities emerge - at various levels of social action through a collaborative relation with power' (2000: 13-14).

Mouffe's discussion of radical, plural democracy as emergent from agonistic debate and as a necessarily ever-receding horizon provides two more important clues. Clohesy addresses both. He describes the important metaphor of the frontier or horizon: 'As well as allowing us to understand how political settlements come about and are consolidated, frontiers force us to acknowledge that, because something always lies beyond our individual and collective identities/settlements, they can never be complete. It is this acknowledgement that represents the ethical or democratic moment within the logic of hegemony' (2002: 50-51). Further elaborating: 'The frontier is that contingent construction that provides a limit to a field of intelligibility, thus allowing for the emergence of identity and meaning' (*ibid.*: 55 fn. 53). The latter quote combines the metaphors of contingency and frontiers nicely, but Clohesy stops short of fully embracing Mouffe's argument for the centrality of conflict in politics, arguing from the pragmatics of the case of New Labour.

To summarize, some implications of contemporary critical theory are that: counter-hegemonic policy should make explicit the contingent and incomplete nature of its own project(s), and should allow for many possible meanings to emerge, while acknowledging the multiply contested and fluid, unfixed or unstable nature of key terms, and even their impossibility or inaccessibility. How might these ideas work in practice? Certainly, given the current scholarly emphases on multiple meanings, contention, the importance of contingency and context,

and metaphors of horizons/frontiers, it is especially important to note that all of these metaphors can very easily lend themselves to co-optation within a globalizing discourse in which movement toward some horizon by only a select group of citizens is valorized, with the consequence that openness toward 'flexible' policies will be increasingly encouraged, despite evidence of the damage which such policies can have. It seems that one aim should be to retain the critical and anti-essentialist *impulse* behind the concepts (i.e. their foundation in critical, postcolonial, feminist, and anti-hegemonic stances) by implementing practices and discourses that *actually result* in transformations of inequality for individuals and groups, rather than in the creation of new managerial buzzwords. Mouffe's and others' use of the metaphor of the horizon is, for example, far less clearcut than it appears. While it seems to promise open-ended potential and the possible unfoldings of many meanings, rather than a single, supremely valued goal or means, it lends itself quite readily to a linkage with market metanarratives. The effects in practice of the normative and universalizing language of neoliberal policy are obviously problematic, as many scholars, activists, and groups affected by plan to market and other reform and 'globalizing' policies have noted (Nash 2001, Rittich 2000). Yet, the appeal of words which imply forward motion and progress remains unabated; indeed, it seems senseless to speak in other ways and even, irresponsible while illness, poverty, and the structural conditions for violence and oppression persist. Even Marxists employ this terminology of freedom and barriers: 'The humanistic alternative stressed by Marx and others after him involves the removal of all barriers to self-determination and human growth. It involves the elimination of all obstacles that waste, cripple, or suppress human potentialities and creative capacities for a fully spontaneous, egalitarian, and reciprocal communal life' (Schweitzer 1992: 45).

Perhaps here is where, instead, the notion of 'disruption' which comes from the Lacanian texts may actually prove to be of greater

## Byrnes

value than those of 'contingency' and 'horizons'. Because the latter metaphors might still privilege specific views of the future, exclusivist or unequal policies, and so on, they may not provide sufficient impetus to the kinds of radical rethinking which some policy cases require. Again, applying critically the idea of disruption and displacement to the ideologies and images which serve to reproduce damaging social fantasies certainly has some potential. However, in examining psychoanalytical theory for more insights into the role of human desires as part of any pro-active design, one encounters at once the notion of humans as seeking pleasure through both transgression and through inherently impossible desire. It is important to remember that transgression of boundaries is not always a pleasurable experience, given historical experience of violent social movements, riots, revolutions, etc. (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Moreover, there was no 'secret' pleasure in transgression in the Mi Comunidad case, since blaming rural females was openly done by state officials and managers, in contrast to the example of the welfare queen used in one Lacanian analysis (Glynos 2001). Nevertheless, an attempt to think through the relation between policy and desire is certainly merited. Notably, the Lacanian standpoint does not stress a vision of progress through any 'healthy' relaxing of barriers:

Our *commonsense* view predicts that the removal of social and technological barriers will result in a healthy burgeoning of pleasurable experiences. This is what a permissive liberal-capitalist ideal might be seen to promise, *But*, due to the impossibility *inherent* to desire, we have an alternative and plausible model with which to explain why the removal of obstacles may lead to a far more oppressive state of affairs in which we are threatened with the very extinction of our desire, *and therefore of ourselves as subjects of desire*. (Glynos 2001:203).

The task of applying Lacan's opus to this topic in depth will, hopefully, be a fruitful topic for future scholars.

## Conclusion

At the least, one may observe that if political ideals (understood as empty signifiers but as nevertheless important, contested values, the contexts and historically-specific meanings of which must be continuously debated) of pluralism, equality, and freedom are to be balanced within democratic and even growth-oriented policy frameworks, much care is needed in avoiding metanarratives of unity, consensus, the elimination of all obstacles, indeed any kind of totalizing 'closure'. To make contingency explicit, and to employ the usage of frontiers and horizons, seems to constitute a positive application of the most important critiques of hegemony. Yet even these laudable 'open-ended' emphases might instead very readily privilege the dominant discourse and practices of upward mobility that will reproduce many other ideological connotations and inferences about individuals, for example about their social class and the differences in ability to 'contribute' to some kind of universal economic teleology. Thus, it seems just as likely that even intentionally anti-disciplinary discourse might unwittingly reproduce structural inequalities and subordination, if only because policymaking (and human life) seems to be so deeply inscribed with teleological presumptions and the often-foreclosing tendencies of narrative. If 'horizons' and 'emergent' identities are to be used as metaphors, they must be themselves understood as contested, incomplete, and empty signifiers. Meanwhile the concepts of disruption and displacement, in combination with a critique of social fantasy and the political uses of the Other, may actually provide a sufficient counter to teleological imperatives and market valorizations, at least enough to generate some alternative perspectives and insights, and thereby possibly to shake up convention-bound regulatory language, political discourse, and bureaucratic practice.

Clearly there is a need for care in the crafting of policy language regarding the future, and any implied norms about a

specific future. Moreover, officials and bureaucrats should consider their own structural positions in unequal systems, whether marked by clientelism, paternalism, hierarchized bureaucracy, or other problematic relations. Short of intentionally undermining itself with each new day's schedule (a self-erasing day planner?), perhaps the best that can be hoped for in a given policy is a continuous process of self-interrogation on the part of state officials, and efforts to incorporate as many means as possible for emphasizing that policy is a shared, incomplete project undertaken *with* citizens. The overall project of public policy is one that must be explicitly acknowledged as paid for by citizens not only by their taxes, by their own and their descendants' and ancestors' life chances, and by their relative positions within an unjust economic and educational system, but also through their ongoing psychoanalytical engagements with the state and its cadre of relatively comfortable employees.

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