'Deconstructing 'Smallness':
Critical theoretical considerations for the study of 'small European' states'

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Introductory points

The purpose of this presentation is to provide some critical theoretical insights for the study of 'small European' states, responding to the need to develop, rather than keep "holding back, theoretical understandings" (Thorhallsson, 2006) to the study of 'small' states. The aim of this seminar is to unpack discourses of 'West' and 'Europe' demonstrating the "layered nature of these discourses". At the same time, what we also want to explore at this seminar is the position of 'small European' states within a changing world, where the meanings of 'West' and 'Europe' are changing. In this presentation I will show why and how we need to take a step back before engaging into this critical discussion: we first need to unpack discourses of 'smallness' and look at how they have been developed in the context of (constantly changing) discourses of 'West' and 'Europe'.

Moreover, in this seminar, changing the focus (on large and 'powerful' states) of the current debate on transatlantic relations, we turn the centre of attention to 'small' European states. This presentation discusses *whether or not* and *in what sense* this change of attention is important. 'Small' states exist; however, is it useful or possible even, to study them as a separate, distinct category? And if yes, why? I argue that there is a space for the study of 'small' states and that it is important, because discourses of 'smallness' construct understandings, subject positions, norms and expectations and therefore state preferences, thus affecting states' behaviour. 'Small' European states should be studied as much as the large ones, by also taking into account that their 'smallness' is not an 'objectively' definable category but a construction. It is not only size that matters (Smith et al. 2005), nor "what you do with it"; what is mostly important is the way actors *attribute meaning to* size and its fall-out.

The arguments I present here have been initially developed for the study of 'small' EU member-states. However, they are worth taken into the study of, not only 'small' states in any other context, but also 'state size' in general. The EU provides a good context in which 'small' states can be studied. In the Union decisions are largely made under an informal 'consensus' rule; states are supposed to be equal; and, however, the cleavage between 'small' and 'large' member states is said to be rather strong. In order for the study of 'small' EU member-states as a distinct category to be significant and necessary, size has to have implications for these states' behaviour and the role they (are expected to) play in this political and economic organisation.

I argue that one way of researching 'small' states' role in an EU or any other context is to deconstruct 'smallness': see how 'smallness' has gained its meanings in a context through cultural, discursive and historical processes, how these meanings have grown to be seen as one, natural, given meaning of 'smallness' and the ways in which this given-ness has been affecting states' behaviour.

My argument, not yet fully supported by further research, and admittedly at its very initial stages, is that we need to study:

⇒ the ways in which 'small' as an empty signifier has come to hegemonise the relations between states in Europe;

⇒ the extent to and the sense in which 'small' is a category of states constructed in and through discourse – a result of people's attempts to make sense (and simplify the 'meaning') of the world in which they find themselves;

⇒ how this categorisation *per se* influences the behaviour of, and relationships between, states;

⇒ the ways in which states' subject positions are constituted by the very operation of discourses of 'smallness', accepting that the category of 'small' makes (analytical) sense only in that it affects states' subject positions;

My analysis comes in opposition to mainstream International Relations theories, which ignored the study of 'small' or 'weak' states (for a critique of this literature see Elman, 1995) and strongly agree with the argument that there is indeed a "void in political science – the absence of a theory of scale, the absence, in other words, of a theory that explains behaviour in relation to the size of polities" (Warrington, 1994). As it will be shown, such a theorisation is important, not because of the need (or our conviction) to create a new category of states, but in order to see *how the process of attributing meaning to size* impacts upon states' behaviour in the first place.

In short, I argue that we need to unpack the concept of 'small' as it has so far been used in the relevant literature. The purpose of this analysis is to problematise the (taken for granted) usage of the concept and to depict its inessential, unfixed nature. I argue for a study of the processes of meaning production from a discourse 'perspective', particularly informed by a post-Marxist theory of hegemony – as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). The category of hegemony – here understood as "the act of articulating specific discursive structures" (Pia et al, forthcoming) – can contribute to an alternative understanding of the relationships between states. States are constituted as subjects in different – not necessarily contradictory, though undoubtedly co-constitutive – subject positions; and what is important to study is the ways in which this process seems to affect their behaviour.

Approaching 'small'

The development of my arguments will follow those developed within the broad category of post-marxist discourse theory, influenced, more particularly, by the works of Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

By looking at the social and political world from this perspective one is, first and foremost, ready to engage in a critique of "the methodologies, analyses and conclusions of conventional or traditional approaches" (Simons, 2004: 5) to a particular subject-matter. The analyses developed in 'mainstream' small states literature fall short of reaching an understanding of the topic leaving big question marks as to what the behaviour of small states 'is'; what a 'small' state is; what it really 'means'; why 'small' has developed as a category of states in the first place; and lastly, and most importantly, how this categorisation *per se* influences the behaviour of, and relationships between, states.

Laclau and Mouffe's work has been profoundly influenced by Derrida – the frameworks of deconstruction (especially that of undecidability and différance) have played a substantial role in the development of their theory of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The conceptual and theoretical framework that they have developed informs my approach to the specific topic of 'small' European states and can prove to be very useful in shedding light to this analysis. At the same time I follow the argument that in order to understand and make full use of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony and "new grammar of political analysis" (Norval, 2004) one has to, practically, go back to the basics: that is, re-read the infrastructures of deconstruction, especially 'undecidability', iterability and heterogeneity (see especially Norval, 2004, Thomassen, 2005 and Critchley, 2004). However, I contend that a conceptualisation of hegemony a là Laclau and Mouffe is *not* incompatible with a re-reading and re-introduction of Derrida's infrastructures; rather, the latter can contribute to our understanding of hegemony and, more importantly, help us move one step beyond its theorisation.

Although Derrida himself would not label deconstruction a 'method', and although deconstruction has, admittedly, an "eminently philosophical operation" (Gasché, 1986:

123), it can be used as a kind of "methodological principle" (ibid) that uses distinct but inextricably related steps to go about analysing a particular 'text'[1]. Using Gasché's words, deconstruction "starts with a systematic elucidation of contradictions, paradoxes, inconsistencies, and aporias constitutive of conceptuality, argumentation, and […] discursiveness […]" (ibid: 135). By deconstructing 'smallness' and 'small' we proceed "by means of a double gesture [….] and overturning of the classical opposition" (Derrida, 1982 [1972]: 329): we reverse the oppositional relationship 'small/large' created in discourse, showing its inessentiality and unfixity. Secondly, we put the pieces back together, that is, attempt to re-conceptualise 'smallness' and 'small' European states.

Following the above theoretical arguments, I will now briefly show how the study of 'smallness' and 'small' states is going to be approached here.

'Smallness' is a discourse, that is, "an ensemble of signifying sequences" (Torfing: 40). In this way, discourse does not represent only linguistic or non-linguistic elements but a set of both social practices and material factors. In this way we allow the material or for some, 'objective' aspects of 'smallness' to come into the analysis, but also the ways in which 'smallness' and its effects are understood and given meaning to in a particular context. Moreover, in this way, one needs not define 'small' according to measurable criteria, not least because such an attempt would be done in vein. What matters is how people attach meaning to size and the ways in which the category itself impacts upon their practices.

Furthermore, 'small' and 'smallness' have become empty signifiers in a chain of equivalence[2]. This is comprised of 'elements' such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Finland. These 'elements' or floating signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105) come together in this particular chain as a result of their 'equivalence' which is nothing more than their 'smallness'. They are given meaning through their positions in this particular chain, in which all their differences are immediately deferred, in sake of their opposition to the Other: that is, the 'large' states.

These ('small') states are constituted as subjects in Europe, the European Union or in international relations not because of their similarities but because of their (shared) opposition to the Other; because of what they are *not*; and because of the existence of something that they cannot *be*. The 'chain', however, does not indicate a tautological relationship in the meaning of the 'elements'. At the same time, we also find another chain of equivalence or the continuation of the first[3] in which 'elements' or floating signifiers such as 'honest broker', 'neutral', 'adaptable', 'smart' etc are added (for such a 'naturalisation' of the relation between a 'small' state and its "classical role as mediator and honest broker" see Baillie, S. 1998). 'Small' becomes an 'empty signifier' – "a signifier of the pure cancellation of difference" (Laclau, 1996: 38) that represents the elements found in the chain, against the antagonistic opposition ('large'). However, the relationship between the 'elements' is not an essentially fixed one. Moreover, this increasing number of concepts 'chained' together construct (and are constructed by) the discourse on 'small' states. This extended chain, however, will "at the limit […] be pure communitarian being independent of all concrete manifestation" (Laclau, 1996: 42)

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[1] 'Text' according to Derrida, is "not simply verbal" (Derrida, J. 1990), but every 'con-text' as well, discourse, practice or experienced 'reality'.

[2] Here I follow Laclau and Mouffe's analysis of the concepts: 'chain of equivalence', 'element', 'hegemony' and 'antagonism'. For a detailed analysis of the operation and 'meaning' of these concepts see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985.

[3] Whether these elements are a continuation of the initial chain of equivalence, or merely another separate one, is a significant theoretical problem that I will have to deal with in the process of conducting this research.

In and through these practices states 'receive' their identities or subject positions as 'small' or 'large'. All social identity is shaped in and through hegemonic practices. Hegemony here "involves the articulation of social identities in the context of social antagonism" (Torfing 1999: 14). In the case of large and 'small' states, 'large' states do not allow 'small' states to remain equal partners in the institutional framework of the European Union. The antagonistic relationship begins with the (said) fact that the large states want to impose their views to the 'small', to threaten their identity or interests, to exclude them from the making of important decisions etc.

'Small' between East and West, Old Europe and New Europe
There have always been attempts to conceptualise the relations of states within the European Union, Europe or in international relations, in terms of binary oppositions, be it as Northerners/Southerners, old-members/new-members, net-contributors/net-recipients, Eastern/Western, small/large, and so on – in all the inherent and veiled hierarchy existent in these oppositions. States 'take up' discursively constituted 'subject positions' or rather, 'discursive positions' that, however, do not say much about "the type of relation that could exist among them" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001 115 [1985])
These categorisations operate in a similar way as the one discussed above concerning the 'small'/'large' division or its extended version, i.e. 'small'/'large'/ 'medium'/'micro'.

This brief presentation provides us with some starting points to the discussion of the questions that this seminar put on the table:

  ⇒ What identity challenges face Europe's small states in the context of renewed debates about 'Europe' and 'Westernness'?
  ⇒ What constitutive power do small states possess in terms of agenda setting?
  ⇒ Do Europe's small states share a common view of the identity of Europe/West?

In order to answer these questions one has to consider the way in which 'small' is understood and given meaning to in relation to the particular issues at stake. Since there is no essentiality in 'smallness' one can not expect 'small' states – even if we narrow it down to 'small' *European* states – to have identical preferences, attitudes and views. As the presentation of particular cases will probably show, 'small' European states understand their 'smallness' in different ways, they are constituted as subjects within similar or dissimilar discursive contexts and hegemonic practices. One cannot expect 'small' states to have a common view of the identity of 'Europe'/'West', to face the same challenges in the context of debates around 'Europe' and 'Westernness' and to have the same agenda-setting power.
If one, however, looks at particular cases as part of an attempt to start conceptualising the above questions, one should also take into account the fact that 'smallness' like 'Westernness' or 'Europeanness', are not essential categories, but discursive constructions, results of hegemonic practices of articulation.

In terms of conclusion, I quote Edward Said – a quote worth taking into account in our discussion on 'smallness'. Explaining what Orientalism is, he was writing:
"…it is a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness […], an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction […] but also of a whole series of 'interests' which […] it not only creates but also maintains; it *is* , rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different […] world. It is above all, a discourse […]" (Said, 1995 [1978]: 12, original emphasis)

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