



Special Issue: Reflections on post-Marxism: Laclau and Mouffe's project of radical democracy in the 21st century

RESEARCH

The limits of post-Marxism: the (dis)function of political theory in film and cultural studies

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This article first sets out the value of the political discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. It argues that this work was central to the development of cultural studies, in its theorisation of social and cultural practices as being part of 'political discourse'. This confers a dignity, status, value and political importance on cultural practices of all kinds. However, the article seeks to probe the limits of this approach to cultural politics, and it does so through a necessarily unusual exploration. First, it takes an example of something ostensibly trivial from the realms of film and popular culture and explores it in terms of Laclau and Mouffe's categories, in two different ways. The 'trivial'/pop cultural example is Bruce Lee. Could Bruce Lee be regarded as 'politically' significant or consequential? He was certainly an enormously influential film and popular cultural icon of the 1970s, one who arguably ignited a global 'kung fu craze'. Moreover, Bruce Lee also had his own 'hegemonic project', seeking to transform and unify martial arts practices. In this paper, Bruce Lee's own 'project' is first examined in the terms of Laclauian categories. These are shown to be extremely useful for grasping both the project and the reasons for its failure. Then the article moves into a wider consideration of the emergence of globally popular cultural discourses of martial arts. However, Laclau and Mouffe's approach is shown to be somewhat less than satisfactory for perceiving at least some of the 'political' dimensions entailed in the spread martial arts culture and practices, from contexts of the global south into affluent contexts such as Hollywood film and Euro-American cultural practices. The paper argues that this is because Laclau and Mouffe's approach is *logocentric*, which leads it to look for and to perceive a very limited range of factors: specifically, political *identities* formed through political *demands*. However, to more fully perceive the political dimensions of culture, the paper argues that different kinds of perspective, paradigms and analysis are required. Adopting or developing some of these would enrich the field of political studies.

Key words film • Laclau and Mouffe • martial arts • post-Marxism

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Introduction: from too theoretical to not theoretical enough

One value of Laclau and Mouffe's political theory of hegemony and discourse is that it can so readily and productively be translated into and applied or deployed in studies of all kinds of things in all kinds of academic disciplines and fields. As theorised by Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is a relational concept that enables us to conceptualise hierarchies, conventions, structures, values, norms, biases and preferences of all kinds, in terms of the interplay of relative gravities of different kinds of power and the formations and transformations of relations and kinds of influence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Importantly, the concept of hegemony can be expanded, extracted or extrapolated from the realms of political discourse proper, and applied to show that there can often be said to be hegemonies in such things as aesthetics, styles, fashions, norms, practices, relationships, and in fact in conventions of any kind. There can be hegemony in international relations, in interpersonal relationships, in the most private ways of thinking, and of course in conventions and regimes of representation.

As such, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse and hegemony enables such ideas as the otherwise oxymoronic formulation 'cultural politics' to come into its own. Arguably, taken to its ultimate conclusions, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse and hegemony could actually be said to transform a term like 'cultural politics' from being an *oxymoron* into being a *pleonasm* – transforming 'culture' and 'politics' from being regarded as ostensibly discrete and different to their being regarded as inextricably intertwined, two sides of the same coin, or tied like a Gordian Knot. Arditì and Valentine (1999) called this 'the contingency of the commonplace', a perspective which means that, from this point of view, anything and everything is *at least potentially* political.

Consequently, by theorising the contingency of all practices – whether ostensibly political, cultural, social, or whatever – the theory of hegemony and/as articulation (or of hegemony as established by articulatory practices) has long been found highly useful across a range of academic disciplines and fields of the arts, humanities and social sciences. In the prominent 1990s essay 'Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies', for instance, Angela McRobbie argued that Laclau and Mouffe's theory actually provided a kind retroactive theoretical foundation – one that retrofitted and explicitly spelled out the ontological basis – of what had been going on for a while in a very wide range of more or less 'politicised' postmodernist and poststructuralist academic and intellectual efforts, such as cultural studies (McRobbie, 1992). In other words, although Laclau and Mouffe's 'post-Marxist discourse theory' was born in the realms of political studies, it derived from and fed back into wider academic understandings of politics and the political across the university, and especially within the realms of what was increasingly referred to as (capital-t) Theory.

The term 'Theory' emerged to evoke a shifting cluster of literary theoretical, postmodernist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and related forms of cultural theorising, in which a number of prominent authors and texts managed to transcend or transgress erstwhile disciplinary boundaries and to find a very diverse readership (Hall, 2002; Birchall and Hall, 2006). This meant that works of Theory from one field or discipline – whether from literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics, history, or others – would often find a readership in some very different disciplinary contexts. Laclau and Mouffe's ground-breaking work of political theory, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics* (1985) is perhaps an exemplary case of this.¹

This is not to say that Laclau and Mouffe's work was universally accepted or that it did not draw criticism (Bowman, 2007). It received a lot of criticism, especially from other political theorists, and particularly from those who saw themselves as remaining true to Gramscian Marxism in ways that differed from Laclau and Mouffe's radical poststructuralist rereading. Ironically, *Hegemony and socialist strategy* also received criticism from cultural studies' own 'father figure', Stuart Hall, whose own (influential) understanding of cultural and political processes had earlier been significantly informed by Laclau's first book, *Politics and ideology in Marxist theory* (Laclau, 1977). However, like many others, Hall regarded Laclau's second book, *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (co-authored with Chantal Mouffe), to be a step too far – too far into 'theory' and too far away from paying close attention to the specificities and complexities of variable historical contexts and formations (Hall et al, 1996).

The terms of this and other criticisms of Laclau and Mouffe's work are familiar. Such criticisms have often involved the claim that Laclau and Mouffe's work is 'too theoretical'. However, while my own exploration of their theoretical and analytical orientation is informed by such criticisms, I would like to make a different kind of critique here. This still derives from a politicised tradition of cultural studies, and relates to Stuart Hall's criticism that Laclau and Mouffe's seminal work moves too far away from the specificity of what Hall called conjunctural analysis, and relies too much on a kind of overarching theory of everything, so to speak. But my criticisms will also come from a different direction. In my critique, Laclau and Mouffe's approach will not be presented as too theoretical. Instead, it will actually be presented as *not theoretical enough*.

A key early iteration of the critique I will develop can be found in a 1992 book by John Mowitt, in which he urges cultural studies scholars to hesitate before adopting what was then called the 'post-Marxist discourse theory approach' of Laclau and Mouffe (Mowitt, 1992). Mowitt advocated a critical hesitation before diving into the conceptual universe organised by terms like discourse, hegemony, articulation, antagonism, equivalence, difference, and so on, on the basis of the argument that *there is a lot that this sort of paradigm is constitutively incapable of seeing*.

The book in which Mowitt sets out this argument is *Text: the genealogy of an antidisciplinary object* (1992). One of the initial and initialising genealogical observations made within this work is that the term 'discourse', as theorised by Laclau and Mouffe, is demonstrably both historically and conceptually derived from *and reductive of* an older and more expansive notion: namely, 'text'. Mowitt's argument is that the elaboration of the notion of the text and the cluster of terms that emerged alongside it – such as textuality, intertextuality, deconstruction, and so on – was a significant intellectual (and immanently political) achievement. Moreover, it is an achievement that should be developed in all of its subtlety, complexity and sophistication, rather than formalised, standardised and reduced – which is what Mowitt claims the Laclau and Mouffe approach ended up doing.

Whether or not we agree with this, Mowitt's genealogical study of the emergence of the notion of the text reveals that, before the development of 'discourse theory', the elaboration of the notion of the text was already a hugely significant paradigm shift in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Moreover, it was an advance that the subsequent theoretical formalisation of 'discourse' carried out by Laclau and Mouffe entirely relied upon. The problem, for Mowitt, is that it was a theoretical elaboration

that simplified and homogenised the historically and conceptually prior notion (or paradigm) of text and textuality.

This may not appear to be too much of a problem. Indeed, the metaphor of 'discourse' seems to offer advances on 'the text' in many ways. For instance, discourse certainly seems to convey a sense of *process*, of *movement*, of temporal change and development, whereas the metaphor of 'text' might seem to imply a bounded object, in isolation and fixity. In fact, the common sense understanding of the relationship of text to discourse is that discourses are made up of texts. Nonetheless, taken to its extreme, the critique that Mowitt stages of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory involves the claim that their theoretical paradigm does not simply generate insights into the world, or produce a new kind of visibility. It also produces or enables specific kinds of blindness. This becomes a reason why (to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall) cultural studies might want to 'say yes and no at the same time' to this kind of theory. Yes, the concept-metaphors of discourse theory are massively suggestive, generative and productive, enabling us to capture key dynamics and processes of the social, cultural and political world; but still, there are dangers and limits.

This can be expressed by using a pair of terms favoured by poststructuralist discourse theory: the *onto* and the *ontic*. The term 'onto' refers to 'ontological', while 'ontic' means 'actually existing'. Using these terms, poststructuralist and postfoundationalist theory contends that *ontology* is 'the political', whereas actually existing institutions are the realm of *politics*, which is 'ontic' (Mouffe, 2005; Marchart, 2007). Normally these terms are deployed in discussions about 'the world'. But if we focus them on post-Marxist discourse theory itself, then we might say that this kind of theory prefers an '*onto-*' focus over an '*ontic*' one. It prefers to talk about 'big processes' or 'fundamental ideas about reality', rather than about particular details and matters of reality. In such discussions, the '*onto*' focus (talking about 'fundamental ideas about reality') can easily come to appear to be a 'macro' focus (talking about 'big processes'). Consequently, whether onto or macro, this kind of orientation might actually come to work to make our analyses blind to many of the realities of either 'micro' or otherwise (merely) '*ontic*' events, processes and situations of the world.

This criticism may strike some readers as very complicated or convoluted. This is because it is formulated in the kind of language and concepts preferred by many poststructuralist political theorists. However, in a way, it is just a restatement (in user-unfriendly terms) of the kind of criticisms that Stuart Hall made about the direction that post-Marxist political theory appeared to be taking in the 1980s. To evoke and expand slightly on Hall's words, the claim is that, in this kind of theory we hear a lot of talk of 'positionalities' but very little of actual positions, a lot about 'contingent articulations' but a lot less about what these actually are and what is contingent upon what, how that works in specific contexts, and so on. The claim is that such 'political' theorists tend either to deal with 'macro-political' issues, or to trade in '*onto-political*' theory, rather than seriously attending to specific details, particular contexts, specific encounters, particular relations, specific institutions, particular media, and so on. In what follows I hope to show some of the ways in which this tendency may be (or become) limited and limiting, and to offer some suggestions for reorientation.

Fighting literal discourse with particular texts

Specifically, the line of criticism that I would like to explore here boils down to the following assertion: that the approach of Laclau and Mouffé in 1985 (and all subsequent ‘Laclauian’ theory) is *literalist and realist*. In what follows, I will try to explain what I mean by this, and how it helps us to see the limits of the field of applicability of Laclau and Mouffé’s theoretical understanding of cultural or discursive politics and the political. I will do so, first, by way of a reflection on the ‘discursive status’ of the emergence, proliferation and development of martial arts within multiple areas of global popular culture and in diverse discursive contexts. This reflection will begin by posing ‘Laclauian’ questions to and about both the texts and the ‘hegemonic project’ of Bruce Lee – a martial arts film star who was arguably both pioneer and pinnacle of the so-called ‘kung fu craze’ of the 1970s (Bowman, 2010b). From a political studies or discourse analysis perspective, the question to be posed would be whether the international kung fu craze of the 1970s and the subsequent growth and proliferation of martial arts in and as popular culture has any ‘political’ charge or political dimensions at all. Because of constraints of space, this will be a necessarily truncated account of only some key aspects of what we might call the popular cultural discourse of martial arts. But it will set the stage for my concluding discussion of an ostensibly simple Hollywood film. My ultimate conclusion will be that even supposedly ‘simple’ action films may have complicated cross-cultural consequences and even cultural-political force and value, in unexpected ways – ways that cannot be predicted or perhaps even perceived within an orthodox deployment of the theory (Chow, 1995; Bowman, 2013a).

The principal action film considered at the end will be *The Bourne Identity* (2002). The ultimate point of the journey from Bruce Lee through global mediatised martial arts discourse to this particular Hollywood film is to suggest some ways in which ‘cultural/political’ discourse, or the political dimensions of popular culture, can be said to outrun or outpace the Laclau/Mouffé paradigm – a paradigm that in one sense may seem to capture all of this but in another sense remains completely blind or insensitive to it.

Before proceeding further, a note on the texts I will be using. What follows will principally deal with elements of what might be called the later Laclau. Accordingly, I will refer less frequently to ‘Laclau and Mouffé’ and more to ‘Laclau’, often using the adjective ‘Laclauian’. This is because, after co-authoring their 1985 *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, Laclau’s and Mouffé’s work went in slightly different directions. They would occasionally publish articles and chapters side by side in the same publications, as in Mouffé’s important 1996 edited collection *Deconstruction and pragmatism* (Mouffé, 1996). But Mouffé went on to write more about different matters in politics with reference to a range of theorists, while Laclau concerned himself principally with developing his own theory of politics (or rather, *the political*). This work was arguably a direct development from the shared approach announced in 1985, but much was new. Consequently, what follows will often refer only to the name Laclau, or use the term ‘Laclauian’. This is because much of the relevant refinement of ‘their’ argument took place in Laclau’s subsequent single-authored publications.

For instance, it was only later on in his career that Laclau argued that antagonism produces an entity or identity in, through or as the production of a *demand* (Butler et al, 2000; Laclau, 2005). This (Lacanian) line of argumentation is certainly consistent

with the orientation of *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, but it is not until much later that Laclau decides to claim that the fundamental unit or focus of political analysis should be *the demand*. Similarly, it was only after 1985 that Laclau argued that cultural particularities contest and compete with each other for dominance, universalisation and/or hegemony. Such arguments can be projected back onto *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, but it is only post-1985 that Laclau states them in these terms.²

There are other such developments, but I single these out because it is with these that we will begin. For, I want to see what might happen when we use some of these Laclauian terms in the analysis of an example that is ‘outside’ of the field of politics ‘proper’. As mentioned, the example is Bruce Lee, king of the global kung fu craze of the 1970s, enduring icon of martial arts culture internationally, and also easily categorised as ‘trivial’, ‘pop cultural’ and (accordingly) ‘not political’.

However, Lee was no mere image or empty vessel. Rather, he developed and disseminated some hugely influential arguments about his understanding of and hopes for the realms of martial arts. He had, in fact, a kind of hegemonic project.

Particular Lee Laclauian

Non-martial artists should be aware that the eternally returning question of martial arts is ‘which martial art is best?’ Whenever Bruce Lee was asked such a question, he would answer with words to this effect: as a species, humans only have two hands and two feet – so really, how many ways to fight can there be? The implication here is that there should be only *one* universal martial art. Lee preferred to say that he was against styles: styles ‘separate and divide us’, he would say. In Laclauian terms, Lee could be said to be *against particularisms* – whether local, regional, national, institutional, traditional, or disciplinary. He was *for* universalism. He was *for* rational ‘scientific’ experimentation; for testing and verification; for *working out what worked best*. He was against ‘tradition without reason’, and rejected the idea of *necessary* or *inevitable* differences between cultures, styles or traditions in martial arts. To him, these signalled only limitation (Lee, 1971). He often made this argument in writing, and sometimes this argument made it onto the screen: Lee’s famous fight with Chuck Norris in *Way of the Dragon* and his unfinished film, *Game of Death*, for instance, are both structured as lessons about the importance of emancipation from cultural and disciplinary strictures and stultification (Bowman, 2010b, 2016).

In effect, Lee believed that martial arts *plural* should be universalised as martial art *singular*. Regional, ethnic or disciplinary styles should be overcome, and *one* set of (*human*) parameters and potencies should be uncovered. The proper route to this would be through research and experiment. This would necessarily be iconoclastic, colour-blind, transcultural, and universalist (Miller, 2000).³ However, in his apparent belief in the *one*, the *ultimate*, the *universal*, both history and theory reveal Lee’s theory to be *idealistic*: the inevitable failure of Lee’s theory, hope or prediction illustrates what Laclau would term the mutually constituting and reciprocally subverting relations between universalism and particularism (Laclau, 1992, 1996; Zerilli, 1998). Singularity is permanently deferred.

Given our current interest in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, I will explore this point and this relation. But, I want to be clear that this will be done in the spirit of exploration and enquiry rather than as an effort merely to prove one thing ‘right’ and another thing ‘wrong’. In other words, I am not merely going to use or abuse

Bruce Lee to ‘*prove*’ this or that point of political theory. Instead, I want to *explore* Bruce Lee and other issues in order to probe some of the *limitations* of this kind of political theory. Ultimately, however, I will suggest that this political theory – one that has been so influential in media, cultural studies, and other areas of the university, and from which we draw such suggestive terms and concepts as universalism, particularism, antagonism, articulation, hegemony, and so on – may nonetheless turn out to yield a rather limited conception of politics and the political, and indeed have a rather limited field of applicability in the study of the complexity of media, culture and society, and their relations, including those that have a political charge or are politically consequential. I hasten to add, however, that none of this will necessitate a *rejection* of Laclau and Mouffe, although it will suggest the need for ‘translation’ and reconstitution, in order to produce more (and quite possibly better) insights. To put this as provocatively as possible, my suggestion is that *perhaps this political theory – and maybe even political theory per se – has only very limited applicability, even when used to analyse ‘cultural’ politics.*

All of this might seem theoretical. But it matters, in two directions: first, insofar as any kind of *politicised* media or cultural studies *needs* concepts of politics and the political; and second, insofar as political studies surely also reciprocally need concepts or understandings of media and culture. Given the necessity of political theories and concepts, it may seem reasonable for media or cultural studies to import them directly from the field of political theory (Bowman, 2007). But, it deserves to be asked: can we actually *trust* the concepts of politics and the political that have been built in political theory? Do they actually *work* in (or for) media and cultural studies? Are they the best conceptualisations? Can they be universalised, or translated, or are they particular or singular to political theory?

To phrase this in terms of Mowitt’s suggestion that the ‘discourse paradigm’ might be regarded as a reduction of the earlier ‘textual paradigm’ from which it derives, we might ask: what might the Laclau/Mouffe discourse paradigm not be able to see? One polemical possibility might be that it cannot ‘see’ what we call culture; that it cannot ‘see’ the complexities of media; and that it cannot ‘see’ any of this because this theory – these sorts of theory, or the terms and concepts that organise them – is essentially *logocentric*.

Consequently, if this poststructuralist political theory turns out to be fundamentally logocentric (and maybe therefore also phonocentric, anthropocentric, realist and metaphysical), then it becomes important to establish what status its concepts have when our concerns lie with media and culture. Such fields are not necessarily dominated or driven by written or spoken words, or by intentionality, demands, assertions or collective wills, and they do not necessarily entail self-present entities and identities demanding things of each other. Yet, in Laclauian theory, media and culture are a key part of what Laclau calls the contingent and therefore political ‘discursive terrain’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). As Laclau put it in 2000:

We gain very little, once identities are conceived as complexly articulated collective wills, by referring to them through simple designations such as classes, ethnic groups and so on, which are at best names for transient points of stabilisation. The really important task is to understand the logics of their constitution and dissolution, as well as the formal determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate. (Laclau, in Butler et al, 2000: 53)

All of this suggests that media and culture are in a sense *crucial* for a Laclauian understanding of ‘politics’, even though Laclau himself never seriously undertook any analysis or anatomy of them. This is why I will highlight some differences between the ‘ways of looking’ (or paradigm) of political studies, on the one hand, and the paradigm of ‘politicised’ film, media or cultural studies, on the other. This exercise might be read either as signalling the extent to which disciplinary particularisms and limitations are inevitably involved in the building of any theory; or it might be read as the effort to establish a field, topos, or site of cross-disciplinary *disagreement*, which *may* constitute a contact zone that might creatively modify both fields.

So, to pose a provocative and hopefully productive question: what happens when we think about universalism and particularism not in terms of ‘political processes proper’ but by way of things that traverse the putatively distinct but entangled realms of media, culture, body, *psyche*, and which may even supplement politics – such as mediated martial arts?

The pair ‘universalism and particularism’ in Laclau’s work come from Hegelian philosophy. They are a complex and important pair, with many dimensions and ramifications. I want to zone in on that, in Laclau’s work, they are what Jacques Derrida (1982, 1987) would call *logocentric*: they are words about words; and moreover, words that presume that *what matters* – whether *exclusively* or *most* – are arguments (about arguments) about ‘consensus’. For instance, in the mid-1990s, Laclau had this to say about the ‘dominant tendencies’ in approaches to questions of universalism and particularism:

We could say, with reference to the contemporary scene, that the dominant tendencies have been polarized around two positions. One of them unilaterally privileges universalism and sees in a dialogical process a way of reaching a consensus transcending all particularism (Habermas); the other, dedicated to the celebration of pure particularism and contextualism, proclaims the death of the universal (as in some forms of postmodernism). (Laclau, 1996: viii)

Here, Laclau’s formulation of the political problematic is dominated (or hegemonised) by the idea of ‘consensus’, and specifically of whether consensus is possible or impossible. It is to this extent that Laclau’s focus and his discourse is logocentric. As already suggested, perhaps this is necessarily the case with *all* political studies: political studies is a field so structured by *words about words about actions* that the discourse of politics is surely what Derridean deconstruction might regard as the most ‘metaphysical’ of all discourses. What this means for us here is that we might start to wonder about the extent to which such a discourse can help us to think about – let alone to ‘understand’ – the complexities of mediated cultural politics.

Universal Lee

To return to the universalism of Bruce Lee, let’s note that despite repeated and ongoing efforts to realise Bruce Lee’s universalist ambition the vision or dream of a kind of global levelling in martial arts practice has not yet come to pass. There have certainly been drives towards the eradication of particularisms in martial arts, as the emergence and growing hegemony of ‘mixed martial arts’ (MMA) today attests. But

one 'universal' martial art has never been found. However, this failure is not, as Bruce Lee believed, because martial artists are so blinkered, conformist and shackled to this or that particular tradition or stricture that they are unable to 'break free' from the fetters of 'style' and to 'liberate [themselves] from classical [disciplines]' (Lee, 1971). It is rather because, as Laclau argued, each and every *universalism* – each and every sense or theory or claim of *universality* – is constituted from some *particularism* or *particularity*: there is no escape from contingency; context is everything. Difference happens.

We can see the work of a (hegemonising) particularity that becomes placed in the position of a universal in Bruce Lee's own particular ideas of what is universal. Lee's ideas about the essential, the necessary and the best were based on a belief in the superiority of directness and straight lines in attack. This belief comes from his formative training in *wing chun* kung fu, a style that privileges straight lines and directness. Subsequently, Lee sought out direct linear techniques wherever he could – most famously championing Western boxing's 'straight lead' and European fencing stances (Tom, 2005).

However, as every martial artist knows, once your opponent knows *how you fight*, then your techniques, moves, strategies and tactics can be comprehended, anticipated and combatted by counter-moves, strategies and tactics. There are no objectively superior techniques. Indeed, *if* there is any 'essence' to fighting, it is not (as Lee once argued) that it is 'simple and direct'; it is rather that fighting is a bit like the game 'rock, paper, scissors', or the Chinese idea of the 'five elements': *A* might beat *B*, but *C* can beat *A*, and *B* can beat *C*, and so on and so on – in a potentially endlessly moving, morphing, modifying and modulating process. As mentioned, Lee's belief in the superiority of simple directness was arguably little more than a reflection of the extent to which his own thinking about combat had been hegemonised at an early stage by the theory underpinning a *particular* style – the art of *wing chun* kung fu.

This particularism would remain actively dominant in Lee's theory and practice, even though later on he would come to say that he had abandoned Chinese kung fu *as such* – precisely because he wanted to transcend particularism. Indeed it is clear that his own approach (that he named *jeet kune do*) is indebted much more to the principles of European fencing and the approach to punching advocated by boxers such as the Welsh Jim Driscoll than to anything specifically or necessarily *Chinese* (which is not to say that these same principles are not present in specific Chinese martial arts; Tom, 2005). The point to be emphasised is that Lee's avowed abandonment of his formative *wing chun* kung fu approach still retained quite a residue – or strong traces – of the preference for certain of *wing chun* principles and preferences (Inosanto, 1994). In other words, despite Lee's convictions about *universality*, we can see that his thoughts and practices were *hegemonised* throughout by one very precise sort of contingent *particularity*.

Media ties

Hopefully this quick analysis of one of Bruce Lee's positions on an abiding concern for all martial artists shows how unexpectedly useful and relevant Laclauian political theory ideas can be, even when wrenched from their 'proper' political theory context and applied in unusual 'cultural studies' cases. However, we have not yet discursively situated Bruce Lee or clarified why any of this might matter to anyone anywhere. And certainly, an elementary question for any discourse analysis might be: why

single out Lee as important? A subsequent question for us will then be: how might any such example (in this case, of mediated martial arts discourse) supplement our understanding of politics?

To take the first question first. Many commentators have argued that Bruce Lee was immediately a pole of what Bill Brown (1997) calls 'cross-ethnic identification'. Moreover, both T.M. Kato (2007) and Vijay Prashad (2001) argue that Lee functioned as a key player in decolonisation struggles – specifically what Kato (following Jameson) calls the struggles to decolonise postcolonial consciousness. Lee's amazing choreographies redirected transnational multi-ethnic desires towards an Asian set of activities ('Oriental' martial arts), and he was the first major male alternative to the ubiquitous white Western movie hero (Bowman, 2010a, 2010b, 2013b).

We could go on – situating Bruce Lee as important and influential in context after context, in different ways and for different reasons with different effects. However, doing so achieves more than demonstrating his macro-discursive status or importance. Rather, as even this fleeting overview of *some* interpretations of Bruce Lee suggests: any textual or discourse analyses of Bruce Lee are inevitably going to take us far afield, and lead us in different directions. For there was much more going on in, through and around Bruce Lee and the emergence of an international multicultural popular cultural discourse of martial arts in the 1970s. (I have filled two books with discussions of this 'much more', and I still feel that I have barely scratched the surface.)

One thing that it is pertinent to mention in this context is the place that the cinematic texts of Bruce Lee (along with other Hong Kong martial arts films), via their global distribution, played in cross-ethnic and postcolonial cultural processes. What Bill Brown calls Lee's 'generic ethnicity' and the emotive 'ethnic-underdog-versus-the-oppressor' plots of his Hong Kong films offered was a kind of imminently politicising (albeit fundamentally fantasy) vision of agency. For these reasons alone, Bruce Lee could be written into many more kinds of postcolonial media or popular cultural histories than he has been.

In more obviously 'discourse theory' or 'discourse analysis' terms, Lee 'himself' must be situated in the flows between a hypercapitalist Hollywood and a colonial Hong Kong. But this does not necessarily make the 'effects' of Lee's texts either simply capitalist or simply to do with Hong Kong or British colonialism. In fact, the *effects* of his texts seem to have been 'felt' most powerfully in postcolonial and ghettoised/racialised contexts, although they were certainly not limited to them. And an interesting thing, widely noted by commentators, is that what was *seen* in these celluloid spectacles was widely received as being *somehow political* in ways that were not necessarily perceived in other ostensibly 'similar' martial arts films (Bowman, 2013b).

In a literal sense, in Bruce Lee's and other martial arts films of the 1970s, virtually all viewers, the world over, were seeing what they believed to be *ancient* martial arts, from China and Japan.⁴ Of course, these were only ever, at most, 'invented traditions' (Anderson, 1991; Said, 2005), or even Baudrillardian simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994). Indeed, the very *object* or *field* called 'martial arts' was effectively invented in popular cultural discourses *through* these cinematic '(re)presentations' or simulacra. Accordingly, this mediated discourse arrived fully-formed, *as if* it were ancient and timeless. Moreover, it had our opening question already inscribed within it: *which style is best?* This question was there from the start, and it *remains* the animating problematic of discourses about martial arts (even if the answer given by Bruce Lee films was always the same: what is best is what Bruce Lee does).

Since the 1970s, at least, such mediatisation has always both fuelled and impeded – or skewed – the evolution or development of martial arts (like the Lacanian object-cause of desire). The drive to answer the question ‘which style is best?’ via the institution of ostensibly no-holds-barred MMA competitions such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) first deconstructed and even seemed to jeopardise the very idea of particular styles surviving. But over time ‘mixed martial arts’ inevitably became just one institution or approach among others. Moreover, as brutal and efficient as MMA is, people now know that it is fundamentally a *sport*. And sport – surely – is a very different thing to the martial. Accordingly, those looking for ‘the ultimate’ *martial* art continue to look. And one place they look is to the unequivocally martial practices of the military.

Natural Bourne identities

The most well-known military martial arts styles currently available in some form to civilians include the US Marine Corps Martial Arts Programme (MCMAP), the Russian military style called *sistema*, the Israeli martial art, *krav maga*, and Filipino martial arts, variously called *arnis*, *kali* or *escrima*. There are others. However, none of these martial arts are anywhere near as well known as the arts disseminated cinematically in the 1970s, such as ‘kung fu’, ‘karate’ and ‘taekwondo’. This difference likely arises because military styles are often ugly, bloody, brutal, necessarily painful and unpleasant to practice, plus they have no immediate sporting interpretation or application. So they cannot easily be branded as either pleasant or uplifting. Indeed, to extend arguments made by both Bill Brown and Slavoj Žižek at different times: these arts cannot easily be *existentialised* or ideologically recuperated as ‘spiritually uplifting’ or as ‘paradoxically peaceful’ (Reid and Croucher, 1984) or ‘self-improving’ practices (Brown, 1997; Bowman, 2010b, 2013a). Nevertheless, one such military martial art was selected to be the style of fighting used by a Hollywood action hero in a film that immediately transformed mainstream movie fight choreography by setting a new standard. This was the Filipino art of *kali* or *escrima*. It was chosen as the style of fighting used by Jason Bourne in the *Bourne Identity* series of films.⁵

What happens when we expose this to the questions of universalism and particularism? In Laclau, the universal is an empty place that is variously hegemonised by *words*, *claims*, or, in Laclau, *demands* (Laclau, 2005). These words, claims, demands and assertions are always traceable back to complexly articulated political wills. So a demand can always be tied to a particular entity, an entity that Laclau regards as having come into existence with and through and in the formation of the demand. The aim of the group/demand is to universalise or hegemonise the demand until it is satisfied and they/it can recede into the slumber of realisation/satisfaction. ‘They’ will only persist as an entity to the extent that they are implicit (because hegemonic), or should they need to wake from the slumber of their satisfaction in order to defend their achievements.

So far, so logocentric. However, what I hope to be able to suggest in the light of the cases of the mediatisation of martial arts that I have mentioned is the way that what we might call *mediatised universals* (in our case, the *performance* of the superiority of various particular martial arts at particular times via complexly articulated technological platforms, relations and contexts) do not necessarily arise as the result of some simple claim. Claims can be and are made. But the visual spectacle (and

the textual complex) is not reducible to the logic of consensus or dissensus that hegemonises political theory (Laclau, 1992, 1996).

Moreover, in relation to the political theory claim that universals are produced through the political constitution of the group, let us recall that all of the major popular fashions in martial arts of the world have a complex and shifting relation not only to media but also to colonialism, postcoloniality and/or decolonial projects. However, they cannot be simply attached to any one identity or any one claim.

The kung fu craze of the 1970s emerged from what Rey Chow has taught us to regard as the highly complex location of colonial Hong Kong (Chow, 1998) and it flared up first (and most) in a range of particularly politically and socioeconomically complex urban centres and ghettos, the world over. The first US martial arts actors were trained in the Japanese and Korean arts that they had learned as a direct consequence of American military action and occupation in these areas (it was Japanese and Korean arts that were first imported to America *en masse*, by returning servicemen; Krug, 2001). *Karate-do* itself had already been reconstructed as *Japanese* by its 'founder', Funakoshi Gichin, who actually *took* the art from Okinawa to Japan in the early 20th century. In Okinawa, it had long been called not 'karate-do' (which was Funakoshi's *Japanification* of the name, meaning as it does *empty-hand-way*), but '*China hand*' – a name that registers the multiply-colonised status of the Ryukyu Islands themselves (Funakoshi, 1975).

There are many other examples of complex processes and relations between martial arts and the moves from colony to post colony to nation. In Brazil, for instance, there is the case of *capoeira* – which was first an art of African slaves and then a martial art of the Brazilian underclass. All kinds of authorities have, by turns, tried to outlaw it, to sportify it, to gentrify it, to standardise it and otherwise to domesticate or nationalise it (Assunção, 2005; Downey, 2005). There have been similar cases in Shanghai with *Jing Wu*, in China generally with *wushu*, in Indonesia with *pencak silat*, in Europe with fencing, and so on (Eichberg, 1983; Wilson, 2009).

The point to be made here is that each of these arts clearly in some sense hegemonised various cultural, countercultural and mainstream scenes, but no audible *claim* has been made arising in formation with them. This is doubtless why critics like Žižek and a number of people (such as those discussed by Bill Brown) regard the constitution of identities via martial arts films to be symptomatic of *failed class longing* (Brown, 1997). But, I would add: when we are dealing with the forces or flows of media and culture, the matter of collective or political identity constantly moves and recedes, and never seems to be fully or properly present, like the parallax of a rainbow.

Of course, there is always the rejoinder: media and culture are not politics. Yet, to reiterate, they must have *some* relation to politics. As Laclau himself argues: the universal is an empty place, variously filled with hegemonic contents and contestations in the discursive terrain. Media and culture *are* the Laclauian discursive terrain.

So what, then, might we make of the curious simultaneous centring and erasing of Filipino martial arts in *The Bourne Identity* films? I say centring *and* erasing because at no point in the films is the *Filipino* character of Jason Bourne's fighting style ever indicated. Quite the contrary, in fact: Jason Bourne is the ultimate *secret* product of the *US* government. His fighting style is presented as a pinnacle only attained by the most elite soldier of the *US military*. In other words, here a Filipino particularism is passed off as American dominance.

In Laclauian terms, the universal is always a particularism that has become hegemonic. But here, *US* universalism is represented by a *Filipino* particularism ('under erasure' or '*sous rature*', as poststructuralists used to say). This is something that Laclauian theory seems ill-equipped to deal with; at least, not until its residual realist, literalist phonocentrism – its inheritance from political theory 'proper' – has been somewhat displaced, or indeed *decolonised*. For, to stay with our example: this hegemonic particularism does not *literally* or '*really*' relate to or reflect the achievement of any kind of Filipino demand or reflect any kind of Filipino political entity. Indeed, if we were to regard culture as *property*, then it would be easy to conclude that a nasty white Hollywood has once again expropriated the cultural heritage of one of its own former colonies. This would be one kind of anti-colonialist mode of reading. However, it would be premised on a problematic belief in culture as involving property and ownership rights. This is a common belief, but it is one that plays into the hands of ethnonationalist essentialism (do you really have to be Filipino to 'do' Filipino martial arts?).

Of course, I do not want to disparage claims of lineage or the importance of heritage. Far from it. I am aware that the Filipino martial arts are in a complex and ongoing dialogue with processes of decolonising, nation-building, community-building, culture construction, heritage preservation, economic stimulation, and so on, in much the same way as are many other martial arts and sports the world over. I am equally aware that many Filipino martial arts masters have died in poverty and that unknown numbers of family schools and styles and lineages have vanished without trace (Wiley, 1996). And it is for these reasons and more that I also feel uneasy when I see clips on YouTube of martial arts classes in shiny clubs in the US or Europe in which students are dressed up in traditional Filipino outfits to practise the art.

But, at the same time, I have also heard Filipino masters state (again, on YouTube) that the situation is simply this: as soon as Westerners get into something, they dominate it, they master it – and not in a bad way: they dominate it through love, time, effort and commitment. The vast majority of people in the Philippines do not have the money or time to devote to these arts. Comparatively affluent Westerners do. Which is why the martial arts themselves travel, become diasporic, and are much more mobile than the people of the places from whence they come. They can even be, so to speak, paradoxically *disembodied bodily diasporas* – physical practices moving from body to body without physical contact.

Reciprocally, in response to the mainstreaming of Filipino martial arts in Hollywood choreography, new drives have been initiated both in the Philippines and in diasporic Filipino communities to embrace and showcase *their* martial arts. Documentaries are being produced, traditions are being constructed, reconstructed, (re)invented, fleshed out, fabulated. The postcolonial Philippines and Filipinos are not simply victims. No one has been 'duped' (Chow, 1993). In fact, the translation between cultures that is occurring here, in and through and around – because of – the image, constitutes the bringing into visibility of that which may otherwise have remained occluded.

Of course, the main text of the *Bourne* series makes absolutely no reference to the Filipino dimensions of Jason Bourne's fighting style. But one need not be Sherlock Holmes to find out about the choreographic style. A quick Google search will suffice. And as the many 'making of' clips on YouTube and the 'how to fight like Jason Bourne' websites that sprang up in the wake of the film's success all let us know: it is *Filipino Kali*.⁶

So what can we see here – or not – in this simple action film? What is happening in it, through it, or because of it? I would suggest: we can see some ways in which non-literal, non-direct, and constitutively mediated transactions between cultures can both take place *and* not take place. Western appropriation, here, may not be so unequivocally despicable. The ‘fake’ image, the simulation, can also be a source of cultural encounter. Cultural dialogues can be non-logocentric. The forging of cultural relations can be both between or across cultures, *and between a culture and itself*, and on both sides of the spectacle. The film can be read *simultaneously* as yet another moment of the ‘internal’ relationship Hollywood has with itself, and with other cultures, *and* as a moment of the ‘internal’ relationship that a postcolonial culture can come to have with itself, its others and its own otherness through the processes of mediatisation. It is a cultural translation. And in the words of Rey Chow: ‘If translation is a form of betrayal, then the translators pay their debt by bringing fame to the ethnic culture’ (Chow, 1995: 202).

Filipino martial arts have achieved increased fame recently, thanks to DVD and post-DVD technologies and conventions, involving the production and dissemination of ‘extras’ like ‘making of’ mini-documentaries and interviews with directors, stunt performers and fight choreographies (Hunt, 2014). With these technological developments, the long-unacknowledged centrality of Filipino martial arts in Hollywood fight choreography has received some redress, and a whole host of economic, cultural and even political consequences have flowed from this. Filipino martial arts have gained prestige and importance both in the Philippines and internationally, in multiple ways with multiple consequences.

And this is just one ‘little’ case. An ‘orthodox’ political discourse analysis might have been inclined to write it all off as trivial at the outset. However, it is my hope that a new generation of readers of both media/culture and politics/political theory will continue to employ the contributions of the late (great) Ernesto Laclau in analyses of objects, practices, phenomena, institutions and encounters from all areas of, across, between and among cultures, without limiting the use of Laclau’s texts to ‘politics proper’ and without forcing cultural analyses to operate in terms of ultimately simplifying universalisms at the expense of complex particularities. To make the best use of Laclau’s (and Mouffe’s) theoretical advances, my suggestion is that the logocentrism that silently hegemonises or universalises this corpus be noted and interrogated with a view to its productive displacement and eventual decolonisation.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Nonetheless, as Jennifer Slack (1996) has argued, Laclau and Mouffe’s contribution to the development of cultural studies and cultural/political theory has often been unjustly ‘written out’ of many of the ‘official’ histories of cultural studies.
- ² My choice of these two examples of arguments is motivated or tendentious. I single them out here because the relations between demand and political identity and particularity and hegemony are not only at the core of Laclauian political theory but also pertinent to my critique. For both of these arguments imply some problematic assumptions. One is the assumed relation between politics and identity. For instance, one often sees in Laclau the assumption that a group has its own proper identity. This

may not be permanent or total, but Laclauian theory makes a claim that political identities are constituted through the antagonism and the demand. Postcolonialist scholars or theorists may worry that therefore this paradigm remains deaf and blind to all but the noisiest and most present of entities and identities. What of the subaltern? What of the silent or silenced? The unseen? The unheard? The postcolonial media theorist might want to ask: what if the element expropriated from the silent or the silenced is actually showcased and moved centre stage? What if that which becomes universalised or hegemonic in the mainstream of the mainstream – in other words, hegemonic in the hegemony – is something from the subaltern place, context, people, community? As will become clear, I am thinking specifically of the incorporation of Filipino martial arts into the choreography of *The Bourne Identity* trilogy – which is discussed at the end of this article.

- ³ Not unlike science. However, Lee did not use the term martial *science*. He retained the term martial *art* – because, for him, every individual practitioner should find their own way to ‘honestly express’ themselves. His belief in the inevitability of *individual* difference (but *not* cultural difference) is why, for Lee, hand-to-hand combat remained *art* and not science. There is no ‘one size fits all’ formula; there is only *feel* and *flow* and degrees of effectiveness, and no simple objectivity: *what works* is what *you can make work*. As he once reputedly put it, ‘the fastest punch is the one that lands first’. So, Lee’s universalist humanism allowed for *singularity* (*individual* uniqueness) but not *particularity* (local, regional or institutional *cultural* uniqueness).
- ⁴ Of course, no matter how ‘old’ or ‘young’ these arts may ‘really’ have been, the martial traditions, first of China and then of Japan were thoroughly mediatised – by Hollywood, Hong Kong, Japanese and other regional film industries – throughout the 1970s. But the term ‘real’ is problematic here: for, with Lee, we were not *really* seeing ancient Chinese arts, but rather his own hybrid style; just as with the Japanese enemies in his films, we were not *really* seeing *real* Japanese arts, but rather those arts as imagined in Hong Kong.
- ⁵ The series itself involved more than one director, and a very varied crew; but along with the main character, Jason Bourne (played by Matt Damon), one other crucial thing at least that remained constant in the production of the films was the films’ fight choreography, and the films’ fight choreographer, Jeff Imada. This is particularly pertinent because, arguably, it was in large part the fight choreography (along with the cinematography) that ‘made’ these films – that made them stand out, that defined them, that made them unique and memorable. The fight choreography certainly caused ripples that reached the very heart of mainstream movie production discourse, to the extent that even action staples like the eternally returning James Bond movies reacted by changing their cinematographic and action-choreographic styles in response to the paradigm shift effected by the *Bourne* choreography.
- ⁶ The fight choreographer, Jeff Imada tells us: Bourne does kali combined with some military stuff and – in his words – ‘some Bruce Lee stuff’. Is this the casual, blasé nonchalance of an arrogant westerner who simply regards all this ‘stuff’ as ‘stuff’, and conflates it indiscriminately? Maybe. But Jeff Imada is himself the protégé of Dan Inosanto. Dan Inosanto is both ethnically Filipino and a close friend and senior student of Bruce Lee. Indeed, Inosanto is one of the very few people authorised directly by Bruce Lee to teach his martial art. After Bruce Lee’s death in 1973, Inosanto continued to teach both Bruce Lee’s *jeet kune do* and the Filipino martial arts, before going on

to work in fight choreography. Jeff Imada, a contemporary and friend of Bruce Lee's son, Brandon, followed Inosanto into this work.

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