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Chapter 3

Rationality and Discursive Articulation in Place-Making

Huib Ernste

Late-Modern Action-Theoretic Approaches and “Rational” Interventions

Rationality is the ability to design, follow, and have knowledge about a systematic procedure for the redemption of validity claims. In classical philosophy the term denotes the ability of the mind in terms of reason (*nous, intellectus, Vernunft*) and rationality (*logos, ratio, Verstand*) (Mittelstraß, 1995, p. 470). The *logos* provides the argumentation for the views one holds. Logos is the capacity not just for making statements but also for providing their proofs, and a statement is proven by being derived as a conclusion from premises (Welsch, 1999). But these premises themselves cannot be secured through argumentation. It is here that reason comes in. Traditionally, reason is therefore conceived of as the faculty capable of guaranteeing these first premises, by intuition (Plato) or induction (Aristotle). One could say that reason provides the specificity of the situation at hand, the context from which rationality is supposed to draw its conclusions.

It was the paradigmatically modern philosopher Immanuel Kant who, with his Copernican turn, stated that it is actually the other way around, that rationality provides the constitutive categories and principles of cognition and that reason provides only regulative ideas, through which one experiences particularities as parts of a destined whole.¹ In modernity, therefore, rationality is regarded as the most important ability, and reason can ultimately be done away with (Feyerabend, 1987). Seen in this way, rationality autonomously establishes its own principles, methods, and

¹In Kant’s terminology the idea of a *soul* prescribes us to link particular psychological appearances to a whole; the idea of a *world* prescribes us to connect all our singular observations to a unity called world; and, finally, the idea of *God* urges us to see things as result of a causal chain. Together these ideas create a systematic unity in our perception (Störig, 1989, p. 404).

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perspectives. In modernity it is also recognized that there is not just one single type of rationality but different types, which cannot be reduced to each other. Each type determines its own principles. Developing Kant's ideas about theoretical, practical, and aesthetic rationality further, Habermas (1984) paradigmatically distinguished between cognitive, moral, and aesthetic rationality. Habermas built not only on Kant's work but also on that of Max Weber, who first made rationality a key concept in modernistic thinking and used the term specifically in the sense of purposive rationality or economic rationality, the meaning it is also often has in colloquial language. It thereby denotes the strategic choice of the best means to reach a certain goal. In this way rational decision-making became of central interest and positioned rationality and action theory as core concepts in high modernity. Weber elaborated the role of rationality for individual everyday actions and called attention to the tendency toward disenchantment, that is, toward continuous differentiation and rationalization.

Rationalization in this sense designates a historical drive toward a world in which "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber, 1919/1946, p. 136), by rational decision-making. This process of rationalization was not limited to the economic sphere but was extended with its own rational logics also to law and administration, the social and political spheres, and other domains. As a prerequisite, a peculiarly rational and intellectual type of personality or person of vocation was presupposed. Modern scientific and technological knowledge slowly pushed back the germinating grounds of human knowledge, such as religion and metaphysics, and created a culture of "objectification" (*Versachlichung*). At the same time, there was a loss of substantive-value rationality, the emergence of a polytheism of value fragmentation, and the related tensions between these two developments, in other words, rationality without reason in practice.

It is in this framework that one must also situate geographical action theory as put forward by Benno Werlen (Chap. 2, in this volume or 1987, 1995, 1997) in the phenomenological tradition of Alfred Schütz (1932). According to this school of thought, the internal mental intentionality directed to outer objects is what ascribes meanings to these objects, as people do through their everyday place-making and everyday spatially differentiated actions. This geographic action theory can be interpreted as the subjectivist version of what Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Savigny (2001) and Reckwitz (2002) designated as the mentalist paradigm in social theory. This approach contrasts with the objectivist version of mentalism, which stems from classical structuralism as exemplified by de Saussure (1916/1972) in linguistics, Lévy-Strauss (1969) in anthropology, Althusser (1965/2005) and Emerson (1984) in Marxist economics, and Piaget (1970) in psychology. One could also add the more contemporary version of psychological structuralism (Lacan, 2002); behaviorist psychology (Skinner, 1938; Watson, 1913); and cognitive psychology (e.g., Broadbent, 1987), including cognitive linguistics (Fauconnier, 1999). The approach diverges from behavioral geography (Golledge & Stimson, 1996) as well, for which human behavior is an effect of structures in the unconscious mind in relation to structured situations and is thus part of the objectivist mentalist tradition.

In geographic action theory, on the other hand, the assumption is that the active mind is in charge. In this case, however, the sources of spatial structurations are not unconscious cognitive structures in hard-wired reaction to external structures but rather the sequence of intentional acts as conscious decisions. The aim of analysis from the angle of this social phenomenology is to describe the voluntarist subjective act, mental interpretations of agents and subjective logics, and rationalities of decision-making and behavior. This intentional goal-oriented kind of geographic action is thus clearly related to the late-modern project based on Weber's ideas of rationalization as a purely subjective mental process and individual rational interventions in the surrounding world. Even in Schütz's (1932) version of social phenomenology or Mead's (1934) social behaviorist approach, in which meanings are grounded in social relations, the individual subjective mind is still the seat of judgment and rational choice. Mental structures and mental activities, therefore, are treated as an incontestable "center" of social and spatial structuration (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 247).

Habermas's (1984) stance on rationalization differs in this sense from Werlen's approach in that Habermas partly decenters rationalization from the individual subject to the pragmatics of social interaction. "In speech acts, the agents refer to a non-subjective realm of semantic propositions and of pragmatic rules concerning the use of signs" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). For geography, this language-pragmatics approach was detailed by Zierhofer (2002) and Schlottmann (2007). This approach can be seen as a critique of the pure mentalist program but does not reject it entirely, for there are still interacting agents endowed with minds (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). In that sense one can speak of a further development in action theory or of late-modernist views on rational action and intervention, where agency is partly decentered from the individual actor to external pragmatic procedures of interaction² and structural relationships within whose framework these interactions occur. Reckwitz (2002, p. 249) and Moebius (2008, p. 67) call these intersubjective performative approaches *intersubjectivism*. A third stream of social theory in their systematics is based on poststructuralist thinking.

Poststructuralist Theories of Practice and "Critical" Interventions

With the advent of poststructuralist thinking, there has been great reluctance to conceptualize human behavior as conscious rational actions, and in most poststructuralist literature the term *action* is generally avoided. Systematic content analysis would probably reveal a shift in the discursive use of the term even in those poststructuralist writings that do not explicitly address this change in conceptualization. Foucault's early work, for example, shows a preference for the term *practice* rather than the

²This understanding of rationality is not restricted to purposive economic rationality; it is refigured as a *praxial* (pragmatic) form of rationality and rational critique (Schrag, 1992, p. 57–59).

term *action*. In a seminal paper on this change, Schatzki et al. (2001) even coined the expression *practice turn*. Talking about practice instead of action indeed amounts to a novel picture of human agency and rationality (Reckwitz, 2008, p. 98) and opens up a certain way of seeing and analyzing social phenomena, which inevitably also imply a certain political and ethical dimension. For lack of a better word, Reckwitz, writing about theories of practice, describes this poststructuralist endeavor as *textualism*. In contrast to Benno Werlen, with his subjective mentalist approach of geographical action theory, and to Zierhofer (2002), who advocated the language-pragmatics approach in geography, poststructuralist thinkers do not tend to place structures inside the mind or in pragmatic procedures of interaction but rather “outside” it—in chains of signs, in symbols, discourse, or text. The subject is thereby decentered even further, that is, into discourses about sign systems. These discourses are seen not as mere representations of mental qualities behind them but as a sequence of external events from which symbolic structures are manifested. In a similar way, but with different arguments, Geertz’s (1973) symbolic anthropology and Luhmann’s (2002/2013) constructivist theory of social systems also focus on the structural aspects of society outside the subject. What all these textualist approaches have in common is their critical perspective on the essentialization of a universal and fixed principle of rationality and their celebration of the contextually and historically dependent logics of structuration and discursive meanings. But that is then their only critical thrust, and one could ask whether it spells the end of critical rational deliberations or what will be next? To a certain degree the view of poststructuralist thinkers is not that different from the late-modernist view of action theory or from language pragmatics. The poststructuralists proceed along the same line, only going a bit further. They, too, advocate a plurality of kinds of rationality, and list a wide range of possible frames for action but do not describe them as types of rationality but rather as systems of meanings and logics of structurations of power. Furthermore, poststructuralists emphasize that there is no single standard version of a given rationality, that each rationality contains multiple paradigms, each establishing its own set of principles, institutions, and lines of conflict that need to be taken into account.

In this context it is important to be aware that relationships between different players within this language game are described only in terms of power relations, which make it difficult to imagine some kind of metarationality regulating this plurality of differences. The relational sense in which Foucault and most of his poststructuralist followers use the concept of power makes clear that power is everywhere and that it is not an attribute of individuals. Yet that understanding subsumes almost all relational issues under the highly ambiguous concept of power, reducing it to a merely descriptive term and sapping most of its critical potential. Both late-modern and poststructuralist approaches thus lack of a metanarrative.

However, what started as a reconceptualization of human actions as practices—a change that began in early poststructuralist approaches in order to counterbalance the mentalist roots of action-theoretic approaches—ultimately overstated structuralist effects of discursive systems of meaning and obscured rationality’s critical potential to solve struggles of difference. Full-fledged theories of practice as

discussed by Schatzki et al. (2001) and Reckwitz (2002) are bids to find a real balance between body and mind, things and knowledge, discourse and language pragmatics, structure and process, and the agent and the individual.

Current theories of practice constitute an effort to reformulate the Aristotelian conception of *phronesis*, which implies that practice is seen as the basis and purpose of theoretical knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2001). That conception also implies an escape from the dualism of the subjective and objective (Bernstein, 1971; Stern, 2003, p. 185). Schatzki is seen as one of the leading thinkers in this approach, and he bases his practice theory on a new societal social ontology in which the dualism of ontological individualism and holism is overcome (Schatzki, 2006). He calls his new ontology *site ontology*, defining *site* as a type of context in which human coexistence takes place and which also includes the social entities themselves. Social events can thus be understood only through an analysis of this site. The close relationship between this concept of site and the geographic concept of place (Tuan, 2001) is evident:

Practice theory places practices at the center of the socio-human sciences instead of traditional structures, systems, events, actions. None of the practices can be reduced to a sum of its elements, which are of a complex character: they are mental and material, factual and relational, human and material, individual and supra-individual, etc. This conception also overcomes the dualism action/structure,...Each practice then operates in a typical regime, according to particular scenarios, it has its inherent normativity, etc. (Višňovský, 2009, p. 391)

Because these particular practices are interlinked and intertwined, there arises the issue of how one can rationally deal with this host of situations. With this question in mind, it is worthwhile to explore some of discourse theory's new developments that may be able to offer important answers.

Discursive Articulations and the Return of “Rational” Interventions

In a review of different theoretical approaches to analyzing the restructuring of space and place in urban regions in Hungary and England, Varró (2010) shows the genealogy of what she called a “Politics of Space Approach” (p. 59) based on application of discourse theory to the analysis of spatial change. Focusing chiefly on discourse theory, she refers to the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985; see also Andersen, 2003). Laclau and Mouffe draw on Gramsci's (1992) concept of hegemony, which denoted the capacity of the ruling class to eliminate oppositional forces by incorporating them into a collective will based on a shared system of meanings (values, attitudes, beliefs, and morality). “Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge, and carry forward, Gramsci's proposition to see collective will as formed through the articulation of various identities, i.e., processes where identities are ‘brought together’ and mutually modify each other” (Varró, 2010, p. 46). But they disapprove of Gramsci's (1992) class reductionism and the assumed dominance of

economic relations in the making of space. Social and spatial identities are thus fundamentally “unfixed” (p. 88) and are only partially fixed through hegemonic practices of articulation. Discourse becomes “an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112). Discourse can therefore be seen as the totality of an act of performance, including linguistic and nonlinguistic elements (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). This inclusiveness brings in an element of political, strategic, or deliberative interaction and thus opens room for the process of rational deliberation, though Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1987) refrain from using the qualification *rational* for this inherently political process of radical democracy. Jessop (1990) and Howarth (2004, p. 271) have criticized Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1987) for not illustrating how such a radical democracy can be characterized and institutionalized. Mouffe (2005) does not get much further than stating that the crucial issue for democratic politics is not the eradication of conflict via consensus but rather the legitimation of a multiplicity of opinions, attributions of meaning, and identities—in short, the legitimation of conflict or a consensus on difference. His observation seems to imply that the potential hostility and *antagonism* of political forces is turned into *agonism*, where opponents are seen not as enemies to be destroyed but as legitimate adversaries whose ideas can be countered (Mouffe, 2005). As Jacob Torfing (1999) observed,

post-structuralist insights might help to sustain an *agonistic democracy* that is capable of transforming enemies into adversaries....the nomadization and hybridization of identity might contribute to the dissolution of antagonistic frontiers (Mouffe, 1994, pp. 110–111). Nomadization refers to the attempt to undercut the allegiance of a specific identity to a certain place or a certain property, and thereby to show that all identities are constructed in and through hegemonic power struggles. This will tend to denaturalize social and political identities and make them more negotiable. Hybridization refers to the attempt to make people realize that their identity is multiple in the sense of constituting an over-determined ensemble of identifications. (p. 255)

In Laclau and Mouffe’s thinking this idea of an agonistic democracy is also extended to their own normative claim for radical democratization, as the very nature of the process of radical democratization is itself part of an agonistic debate and depends on a contingent, but at least largely shared, symbolic space (Mouffe, 2005, p. 121). This extension, however, still does not explain how such a political debate or deliberation takes place and what the radical democratic politics look like in action, not just as a starting point or outcome. At this juncture the interactionist outlook seems to be more useful. In general it is clear how the different traditions of social theory, ranging from mentalist and interactionist to textualist points of view, each address different complementary aspects of the political praxis put forward by Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

To develop this approach to praxis theory further, it is essential to rethink concepts of reason and rationality so as to create space for pluralistic forms of rationality and for transversal reflections (Welsch, 1999), even for rational interventions. This space seems to have been obscured thus far by the concepts used by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), which were inspired mainly by Marxist and poststructuralist

thinking, and by some misinterpretation of the original concept of rationality in this context. Varró (2010) noted a similar misunderstanding with respect to the concept of discourse between critical realist thinkers and discourse theorists.

In the de-essentialized and dynamic, but nevertheless highly structuralist and imprisoning, interpretation of discourses and practices reminiscent of early Foucault (1972) and the practice turn (Schatzki et al., 2001; Višňovský, 2009), there seems little space for rationality or reason in the traditional modernist sense. In this framework, politics—and thus also spatial politics—seems to be defined primarily as authority and power and seems to deal only with the effects of power relations and not with the structure of the deliberations that take place in the framework of these relations.

As part of the misunderstanding of rationality, rationality is seen only as a foundational universal concept, for it was forwarded by enlightenment at a time when reason had actually been expelled from the view of the human being's abilities to deliberate about the world. However, Welsch (1997, 1999) prompted the question of how to differentiate and judge the various systems of meaning and logics, or the various forms of rationality involved, without some all-embracing perspective. Distinctions and judgments based on any one of these types or paradigms of rationality would necessarily misrepresent the others. Welsch suggested that there must be a different type of functioning that underlies human reflective capacity. It is this type of reflection that he reintroduced as reason, enhancing rationality—or better, enhancing rationalities. In a seminal book written in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, Schrag (1992) took up and endorsed this very specific kind of reason. Both scholars called it *transversal reason* (Schrag, 1992, p. 148; Welsch, 1997, p. 315). Because transversal reason relates geographic realities and geographic differences to each other, it is crucial for the geographic perspective as well. As the reflexive ability to recognize and clarify the differences as well as the relationships between the various forms of rationality, transversal reason is actually a necessary condition for the theory of plurality and difference.

Related to the current situation of plurality and hybridity, this kind of transversal reason is not a new invention but rather a skill that is increasingly used consciously or unconsciously in everyday practice and that is becoming more and more an inner constituent of people's reasoning and life designs. The present age is not one seemingly bereft of rationality but rather one in which reason and rationality are reunited as a mental and reflective activity operating at every step of rational deliberation on discursive articulations.

Reason and rationality are not two separate faculties, and in a sense are not faculties at all, but rather signify different layers and functional modes of our reflective activity. 'Reason' refers to the basic mechanism, 'rationality' to the various concrete, object-directed [or place related] versions of this activity. (Welsch, 1999, Pt. III, sec. 5, par. 2)

From this standpoint geography is primarily about developing these skills of reason and rational deliberation in a situation characterized by social and geographical diversity. The latest advances in social theory and in their operationalization in human geography—possible to outline only very tentatively in this chapter—yield

a research program on human geography that combines several schools of thought with that discipline's political commitment to create a knowledge base and reflective skills for subsequent rational interventions.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I offer a summary of the main steps in my argumentation. First, I have tried to show that rationality was separated from reason during the philosophical development of modernity and that it assumed a universal and fixed principle of rationality. In late-modern times this discernment led to recognition of different types of rationality, each with its own logics of deliberation and argumentation. Second, I have shown how these views are intricately involved in late-modern geographical theories of action and in language-pragmatic approaches in geography. At the same time, I have pointed out the mentalistic inheritances of this approach. Third, I have noted that proponents of poststructuralist theories, in a quest to emphasize the structural aspects of discourses, seem to have totally done away with rational deliberations. However, advocates of full-fledged theories of practice do not go that far and really seek a middle road. Fourth, I have tried to show that newer forms of discourse theory in the tradition of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) seem to offer this space for a real theory of practice and seem to reopen an opportunity for reflective political deliberations in the different fashions of discursive articulation. Finally, I argued that combining Laclau and Mouffe's discursive approach with new forms of rationalization that include transversal reason (Schrag, 1992; Welsch, 1997) might result in a framework for a rational approach to the politics of space as a core business for human geographers.

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