

**Investigating hegemony struggles:
A perspective on cultural political economy
and its potential synergies**

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Abstract

Against the background of enduring crisis dynamics, an increasingly popular (neo-)Gramscian line of interpretation has the merit of shedding light on the ambivalences of the present political scenario as a series of ongoing struggles for hegemony. *Yet how to concretely conceive, structure and operationalize empirical investigations interested in these struggles?* I suggest that cultural political economy (CPE), historical materialist policy analysis (HMPA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of practical argumentation can be productively combined into a transdisciplinary research framework for critical policy analysis focused on conflicts over the making and challenging of hegemony. The first synergy between CPE and HMPA, I argue, can further enhance the analytical strength of CPE empirical analyses and their operationalization. The second synergy between CPE/HMPA and CDA of practical argumentation, in turn, can strengthen the first two in addressing questions of strategy and strategic action in the vaster domain of hegemony struggles.

Keywords

Gramscian hegemony theory; policy analysis; strategy; cultural political economy; historical materialist policy analysis; critical discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

For ten years now there has been a continuous talk about crisis: economic and financial crisis, sovereign debt crisis, euro crisis, EU crisis altogether. On the one hand, the continuous confrontation with these enduring crisis dynamics has prompted a variety of political strategies going in the most different directions: from attempts to restore the status quo to expressions of social unrest and dissatisfaction. The capitalist model of development has become again the object of critical debates, while the re-politicization of the process of European integration is going hand in hand with the strengthening of right-wing populist forces both in the European political scenario and worldwide. On the other hand, the daily experiencing of crisis situations often seems to suggest a basic lack of alternatives coupled with a fundamental inability to act. The hope in deep-going transformations opening a way out of the crisis dynamics above starts vanishing. Where to start in order to investigate these partially contradictory trends?

Building on the work of Antonio Gramsci ([1971] 2012), the ambivalences of the present situation may be interpreted as the many facets of an ongoing struggle for the maintenance – or the achievement of a new kind – of *hegemony*. Far from describing a situation of sheer predominance in a given balance of forces, a Gramscian conception of hegemony necessarily implies a complex balancing of consensual and coercive elements. Indeed, in recent years there has been a proliferation of studies concerned with crisis and crisis management at European level from a more or less explicit neo-Gramscian perspective, with a specific interest in questions of hegemony

with its mix of consent and coercion as well as in main shifts in the balance of forces under observation (e.g., Bieling 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Georgi and Kannankulam 2015; Heinrich 2012; Heinrich and Jessop 2013; Jessop 2013; Kannankulam and Georgi 2014; Konecny 2012; Oberndorfer 2012, 2015).

The present paper draws inspiration from these analyses and, reflecting on the results of broader conceptual and empirical research work (Caterina 2014, 2017), aims to make a contribution to this strand of literature from a theoretical-methodological standpoint. More precisely, I argue that an in-depth confrontation with the studies mentioned above raises some key theoretical-methodological questions: First, *how to conceive, structure and operationalize concrete empirical investigations of struggles concerning the making and contestation of hegemony?* Second, and building on this, *how to investigate strategies and strategic action in this context?* And finally, at a more general level, *how to perform these tasks while trying to overcome the weaknesses of traditional policy analysis, interpretive policy analysis¹ and historical materialist approaches alike?* In line with Brand (2013), the present paper namely shares the insight that each of these three understandings of policy analysis is confronted with some key difficulties. First, the rationalist paradigm faces critique concerning its functionalist bias, the lack of a macro-perspective as well as its tendency to bracket questions of power and domination; second, interpretive policy analysis, emerged as a response to many of these critical aspects, is still seen to suffer from a basic deficit in state theory; third, an opposite problem plagues historical materialist approaches, in which the dimensions of polity and politics often come to obscure the own dynamics of specific policies and these latter, as a result, are interpreted as the more or less functionalist “outcomes” of predominant social relations, especially of class relations’ (425).

Cultural political economy (CPE) as developed by Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum, I argue, constitutes an overarching research programme able to tackle such multiple pitfalls (Jessop and Sum 2001; Jessop 2004, 2009; Sum and Jessop 2013). CPE’s contribution as an approach to critical policy analysis is strongly related to its key research interest in struggles for hegemony, which finds expression in a research agenda focused upon ‘a series of *what*, *who*, and *how* questions in the examining of the making of hegemony’ (Sum 2009, 198, emphasis in the original). *Yet what does it concretely mean to adopt CPE as a research framework in empirical investigations interested in the making and challenging of hegemony?* And, building on this, *how to operationalize CPE in order to investigate questions of strategy and strategic action in the more overarching context of hegemony struggles?* Starting from the multiple potentialities of CPE, I argue that two main synergies can be useful in this respect,

¹ Concerning interpretive policy analysis, see Brand (2013, 429): ‘In the context of the critique of the rationalist and positivist assumptions of policy analysis and the dichotomy of knowledge and policy, a broad current in policy analysis has been developing since the 1990s which focuses more on discourse and meaning, language, and argumentation and rhetoric as essential for the policy process and, therefore, too, for policy analysis. [...] Describing this kind of policy analysis as “interpretive” [...] is the lowest common denominator’.

namely a transdisciplinary dialogue between CPE and historical materialist policy analysis (HMPA) as well as between these two and a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of practical argumentation.

More precisely, I suggest that CPE, HMPA and CDA can be productively combined into a transdisciplinary research framework for critical policy analysis able to overcome the pitfalls of traditional policy analysis, interpretive policy analysis and historical materialist analysis alike in conducting empirical investigations of the making and challenging of hegemony with a specific interest in questions of strategy and strategic action. As for the synergy between *CPE and HMPA*, I argue that HMPA can enhance the analytical strength of CPE empirical analyses of hegemony production and contestation in three respects: first, by introducing the concept of ‘hegemony project’ to analyze contending constellations of societal forces in relation to specific conflicts; second, by conceptualizing the relationship between hegemony projects and specific more limited political projects; third, by structuring empirical investigations into context, actor and process analysis. Regarding the synergy between *CPE/HMPA and CDA*, I argue that a CDA of practical argumentation can enhance the potentialities of CPE/HMPA in addressing questions of strategy and strategic action in the vaster domain of hegemony struggles. Both CPE and HMPA, in fact, *imply* a process of practical reasoning – i.e. the development of concrete practical arguments in favor or against a certain course of action in the face of political problems and conflictual situations – as a key element in their respective approaches to critical policy analysis. This implicit concern, I suggest, should be made explicit and a CDA focusing on practical argumentation can be an ideal candidate to increase the analytical strength of CPE and HMPA in this respect. On the one hand, I thus support and substantiate the argument advanced in Fairclough (2013) concerning the potentialities of a transdisciplinary dialogue between CPE and CDA of practical argumentation (on previous collaboration between the two, see e.g. Fairclough 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Jessop 2002; Sum 2011, 2012). On the other hand, I add a further layer to this argument by pointing out the added value of a still unexplored transdisciplinary dialogue between HMPA and a CDA.

The paper will develop these arguments in three main steps. The first step focuses on CPE and on its interest in (counter-)hegemonies as a specific sub-field of its broader research agenda (section 2). The second step introduces HMPA as a recent attempt to make insights from materialist state theory useful also for policy analysis; moreover, it sheds light on how the synergy between CPE and HMPA can enhance CPE’s analytical strength in empirical studies of the production and contestation of hegemony (section 3). Step three focuses on the potential for transdisciplinary collaboration between this joint CPE-HMPA perspective on hegemony and a CDA of practical argumentation (section 4) before resuming the main points advanced in the paper (section 5).

2. CPE and the focus on the making and contestation of hegemony

2.1 Main features and research agenda

CPE is basically concerned with the constitutive role of semiosis, i.e. the intersubjective production of meaning, in the articulation of the economic and the political as well as in the ways these two get embedded in more overarching complexes of social relations (Jessop 2009, 226). The approach rests on a philosophical grounding in critical realism (Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer 2004; Sayer 2000) and a strategic-relational approach to the sociological question of structure and agency (Jessop 2006, 2008). Both founding paradigms endow CPE with a particular sensitivity for the role of semiosis in social reality and a basic dialectical understanding of the social world, i.e. of structure and agency as well as of the material and the ideational. Against this background, CPE proposes itself as a ‘third way’ between the opposite risks of structuralism and radical social constructivism, while always remaining strongly committed to a critique of ideology and domination (Jessop 2009, 339–340; Sum and Jessop 2013, 175–181). This specific mix of intents, I argue, represents the most prominent gain in adopting CPE and distinguishes it from partially competing approaches. Two examples may suffice in this respect. First, contrary to other approaches interested in the role of semiosis in the (re)making of social reality, CPE’s cultural turn takes place at an ontological level, as it is grounded in the existential necessity to reduce complexity in order to go on in social life; this, in turn, distinguishes it from other kinds of cultural turns, as in the case of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008, 2010). Second, contrary to other approaches interested in issues of continuity and change in capitalist economies – most notably, institutionalist perspectives such as the ‘varieties of capitalisms’ approach (Hall and Soskice 2001; Hancké, Rhodes and Thatcher 2007) – CPE draws on an understanding of capitalism as grounded in a respective social theory; this key difference motivates CPE’s peculiar concern with detecting power issues and the reproduction of structures of domination (Bieling and Brand 2015).

CPE’s research agenda is remarkably broad, as it encompasses a variety of interests and foci (Sum and Jessop 2013). Among others, the approach is particularly interested in the study of (counter-)hegemonies. This middle-range research agenda, as pointed out in the introduction, constitutes one of CPE’s main contributions as an approach to critical policy analysis. Building on Gramsci, CPE focuses on the ‘production of hegemonies’ as

the processes and mechanisms in and through which ‘political, intellectual, and moral leadership’ is won and secured in and across the differentiated and dispersed organizations and institutions of civil society – organizations and institutions that often exist and work across several scales (Sum 2012, 9–10).

CPE is mainly concerned with the interplay of semiotic and extra-semiotic aspects involved in this process. Questions belonging to this middle-range CPE research agenda include:

(1) Where do particular policy ideas and their related discursive networks originate; (2) which actors, individual and collective, get involved in the policy discursive networks that constructs objects of economic governance; (3) what ideas (or knowledge brands) are selected and drawn upon to recontextualize the referents of these objects; (4) how do these ideas enter policy discourses and everyday practices; (5) how do these modes of thought discipline and/or governmentalize the organization of spaces, policies and diverse populations; (6) how do they become part of the hegemonic logics and challenge by diverse social forces; and (7) how are they challenged and negotiated to maintain unstable equilibria of compromise? (Sum 2009, 186).

Issues of governmentalization and disciplinary normalization (questions 4–6) play a minor role in the present paper, which, as dealt with in detail in section 4, is more focused on issues of strategy and strategic action in the context of the making and challenging of hegemony (questions 1–3, 7).

2.2 The study of (counter-)hegemonies: selectivities and scales

Besides the above distinctions, a CPE approach to the study of (counter-)hegemonies focuses on two main aspects: first, on ‘the significance of four modes of selectivity: structural, discursive, (Foucauldian) technological and agential in the consolidation and contestation of hegemony and domination’ (Sum and Jessop 2013, 23); and, second, on the emergence of discursive and genre chains across three multi-scalar arenas involved in these dynamics.

As for the four modes of selectivity, the concept of *structural selectivity* indicates ‘the asymmetrical configuration of constraints and opportunities on social forces as they pursue particular projects’ (Sum and Jessop 2013, 214). Its investigation in policy analysis thus means to focus on how given social forms, institutions, organizations and specific contexts exert some kind of strategic selectivity. The asymmetrical effects of this selectivity highlight its inherently relational and relative nature; moreover, path-dependent legacies play a relevant role in constraining the possibilities for path-shaping social practices. Second, structural selectivity is dialectically related to *agential selectivity*, which basically refers to the capacity agents have to strategically ‘react’ to and interact with the other three modes of selectivity. To focus on agential selectivities means ‘to distinguish different social forces, their subjectivation as bearers of specific identities and ideal and material interests, their capacities for strategic calculation and their capacities for action’ (217). This task, as I argue in more detail below, offers a crucial link to integrate CPE, HMPA and CDA (see section 4). Third, *discursive selectivities* are asymmetrical just like structural selectivities, since also semiosis exerts asymmetrical constraints and opportunities in the form of genres, discourses and styles. To be sure, the emphasis on discursive selectivities does not amount to discursive reductionism. On the contrary, this selectivity is regarded as the complex result of the coupling and co-evolution of the semiotic and extra-semiotic (Sum and Jessop 2013, 215–216). Finally, *(Foucauldian) technological selectivities* indicate ‘the social technologies involved in constituting objects, creating subject positions and recruiting subjects and, in

particular, in this context, creating relations of power/knowledge and possibilities of governmentalization' (216–217).

Adding to this focus on selectivities, CPE also acknowledges the importance of a scalar perspective in the study of the production of hegemony, sub-hegemony and counter-hegemony. For this reason, Sum suggests to distinguish among 'three mediating sets of arenas' in which 'economic, political and intellectual actors compete across different scales to remake the objects of governance discursively and materially' (2012, 10). The first arena comprises international organizations and institutions; the second arena is located at the level of single states but also of supranational entities such as the EU; finally, the third arena refers to the sphere of (trans-)national civil society. The introduction of this scalar dimension into a CPE research framework helps shedding light on the inherently dynamic and multidirectional nature of the discursive and genre chains that emerge to reinforce or challenge a given hegemony (Fairclough 2003). Moreover, this spatial perspective also enables a clearer understanding of *sub-hegemonies* in their role as key junctures, i.e. as central 'nodes of translation of global trends' (Sum 2012, 21) located especially in the second multi-scalar arena.

To sum up, CPE's contribution as an approach to critical policy analysis is strongly related to its research interest in (counter-)hegemonies. To this aim, CPE empirical analyses focus both on the interplay of four main modes of selectivity and on the emergence of discursive and genre chains across three sets of multi-scalar arenas. However, to investigate these questions represents just an intermediate – albeit fundamental – step in the broader CPE research agenda, whose basic aim remains rooted in a critique of ideology and domination. The focus on selectivities and scales, in fact, is regarded as a powerful instrument in conducting 'an ideological critique that exposes the socially constructed nature of hegemonies and dominations in which discourses and social practices produce strategic logics that legitimize the sectional interests of particular groups at the expense of others' (Sum and Jessop 2013, 230). *Yet how to operationalize these CPE insights? How is it possible to make the process of the production and contestation of hegemony a more concrete object of investigation?* The next section introduces the synergy between CPE and HMPA as a possible answer to these questions.

3. HMPA: a candidate for enhancing CPE

HMPA basically represents the attempt to make insights from the field of materialist state theory also useful for empirical analysis (Brand 2013; Buckel et al. 2012, 2014; Georgi and Kannankulam 2015; Kannankulam and Georgi 2012, 2014). The synergy between CPE and HMPA is intended here to fully enfold CPE's potentialities in the analysis of specific policies, yet without losing sight of the more overarching context of the production and contestation of hegemony in which they are located. In the attempt 'to call attention to the fact that policy analysis needs to look beyond mere

policies’ (Brand 2013, 427), CPE and HMPA share the same theoretical cornerstones: first, the approach to state theory and hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci; second, Nicos Poulantzas’ state theoretical account; and, third, the perspective on the power/knowledge relation elaborated by Michel Foucault. HMPA’s underling aim, as in the case of CPE, is to avoid not only the pitfalls of the rationalist paradigm in policy analysis but also to escape the opposite risks of discursive reductionism or of a too functionalistic understanding of policies as the sheer result of dynamics at the level of politics and polity (425–430).

Against this background, CPE and HMPA are also faced with similar difficulties, first of all: How to concretely operationalize insights from hegemony and materialist state theory ‘for the empirical analysis of concrete historical struggles, relationships of forces and, thus, processes of political and institutional change’? (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 63). An answer to this key question is suggested in empirical research work that, drawing on Brand’s theoretical discussion on the ‘contours of a HMPA’ (2013), has focused on migration management in the European Union (Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa 2014) as well as on issues of European integration and crisis management (Buckel et al. 2012; Kannankulam and Georgi 2012, 2014). In short, so the main argument advanced in these studies, ‘[f]rom a materialist perspective all policies go back to societal struggles and can be made accessible by analyzing the dynamics, institutional stabilizations and relationships of forces related to these struggles’ (Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa 2014, 256, own translation). Regarding its basic assumptions, unfortunately, much gets lost in the English translation of ‘HMPA’. The original German definition, in fact, puts emphasis on its essence as a ‘historisch-materialistische *Politik*-Analyse’ and not ‘*Policy*-Analyse’; in other words, it indicates its commitment to the investigation of patterns of power and domination – mostly located at the level of ‘*Politik*’, i.e. *politics* – when reconstructing the concrete emergence and reproduction of specific *policies* (Buckel et al. 2014, 43). At the same time, this approach is explicitly defined as *historical-materialist*. First, this implies its commitment to a Marxian-inspired vision of the process of capitalist socialization; second, it means that, in a HMPA, the multiple power relations inherent in the structuring of society are not regarded as atemporal; rather, so the claim, their concrete instantiations in time and space differ depending on the specific policy fields or constellations of conflict under observation (43–44).

Against this background, HMPA makes three steps that, I argue, not only are compatible with a CPE research framework but can also enhance it. First, it introduces the concept of ‘hegemony project’ to analyze the contending constellations of societal forces at play in the observed empirical conflicts (section 3.1). Second, it conceptualizes the relationship between hegemony projects and more circumscribed political projects (section 3.1). Third, it suggests structuring concrete empirical investigations into context, actor and process analysis (section 3.2).

3.1 Hegemony projects and political projects

The concept of ‘project’ represents the starting point for the development of HMPA as a research method on its own. The idea of ‘project’, so the argument, ‘enables to distinguish among actors, interests and strategies’ and avoids hasty correlations between the position of a given fraction of capital in the process of accumulation and their respective interests and strategies (Kannankulam and Georgi 2012, 20, own translation). In particular, HMPA scholars build on Jessop’s state theoretical account (1990), which is appreciated for its tripartite distinction into accumulation strategies, state projects and hegemonic projects. However, so the central claim, Jessop’s definition of ‘hegemonic project’ falls short of clarity concerning its actual status, i.e. it does not explain whether a project has already achieved a hegemonic status or not. As a solution against this ambiguity, HMPA scholars suggest to distinguish between already successful hegemonic projects and ‘hegemony projects’ (*Hegemonieprojekte*), i.e. societal projects that are struggling to achieve such a hegemonic status but have not reached it yet (Kannankulam and Georgi 2012, 34; Buckel et al. 2012, 20–21; Buckel et al. 2014, 45). The basic aim of this concept is to offer a way to

aggregate the myriad of actions, practices, tactics and strategies that are pursued by an often unaccountable number of actors in any given societal conflict, and that are chosen by actors before the background of their vastly different, specific power resources (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 64).

The peculiarity of actors’ strategies in a given conflict thus constitutes the key criterion to distinguish different hegemony projects, also defined as ‘bundles of strategies pursuing the same goal’ (Buckel et al. 2014, 46, own translation). Most importantly, hegemony projects are not ascribed any deliberate central organization or coordination; they should rather be seen as mere analytical abstractions of ‘*aggregations* of similar but not necessarily consciously motivated tactics and strategies of actors’ (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 64, emphasis in the original).

In this context, a key aspect of this HMPA conceptual innovation is the relationship between hegemony projects and political projects. In order to become hegemonic, in fact, it is argued that a given hegemony project must succeed in the realization of a series of specific political projects offering ‘the politico-strategic “terrain” on which a hegemonic project can consolidate’ (Kannankulam and Georgi 2012, 35, own translation). The concept of ‘political projects’ is borrowed from Bieling and Steinhilber, who define them as ‘specific, concrete political initiatives representing the solution to urgent social, economic and political problems’ (2000, 106, own translation). The relationship between hegemony projects and political projects is crucial; hegemony project, in fact, so the claim, ‘can be analysed only on the basis of the involvement of their actors in the conflict over concrete [political] projects’ (Buckel et al. 2014, 48–49, own translation).

Summing up, I argue that the concept of hegemony project can play a relevant role in enhancing CPE empirical analyses of the making and challenging of hegemony thanks to two main aspects: first, in the light of the distinctive nature of hegemony

projects as ‘not-yet-actual’, which is an analytical category absent in CPE; second, because of the focus on the key relationship between overarching hegemony projects and the series of concrete limited political projects with their related societal struggles on which hegemony projects draw. This can help, in fact, to better structure CPE analyses of hegemony struggles, as the nature of hegemony is made more concrete thanks to its decisive links to specific political projects. In order to further substantiate these arguments, the next section will introduce the three main steps suggested to operationalize a HMPA.

3.2 HMPA operationalization

HMPA attempts to operationalize a materialist state theory perspective by focusing on concrete political conflicts and analyzing them in three steps: context, actor and process analysis (Buckel et al. 2012, 23, 2014, 53–59; Kannankulam and Georgi 2012, 36–40, 2014, 63–68). Such a systematic focus on specific conflicts, I argue, can represent a useful contribution to CPE empirical analyses, as each of the three HMPA steps shows some considerable potential for integration between the two approaches.

First, the *context analysis* aims to reconstruct the observed conflict ‘as a specific *historical situation* to which social and political forces reacted differently and in opposition to each other, and which was brought about by a complex set of historical conditions and processes’ (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 63, emphasis in the original). Given HMPA’s concern with a critique of power and domination, the context analysis is particularly interested in detecting the emergence of these patterns out of the interplay of structural factors and contingent societal processes (Buckel et al. 2014, 54; Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 63). This first HMPA step thus shows some relevant common ground with CPE’s attention to the dialectics of structural and agential selectivities. Drawing on these similarities, I suggest that the guidelines of the context analysis can be useful in structuring CPE empirical investigations, too.

Second, the *actor analysis* aims to ask which actors reacted how and why to the same problem (Buckel et al. 2014, 55). ‘Actors’ are understood broadly in order to embrace not only governments and established social partners, e.g. trade unions, but also a variety of other protagonists present in the state in its ‘inclusive’ sense (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 64). Against this background, the actor analysis aims first of all to reduce the complexity inherent to the observed conflict. Such an exercise of simplification and analytical abstraction, however, is not straightforward and requires at least four intermediate passages. First, the *analysis of competing strategies* asks: Who are the main actors involved? What did they say? How did they act? In other words, which strategies have they been pursuing throughout the observed conflict? Second, the identified strategies are analytically *grouped into different hegemony projects*, thus assuming that ‘the actions, practices and actors conceptually subsumed under a hegemony project’ basically ‘pursue complementary strategies’ (Buckel et al. 2014, 56, own translation). Third, the competing hegemony projects are subjected to a

detailed scrutiny encompassing (56–57): 1) the situation analysis of a given hegemony project, i.e. what is identified as the basic problem and which causes are ascribed to it; 2) its overall strategic objectives independently from the circumscribed objectives pursued in the conflict under observation; 3) its central strategy in the analysed conflict; 4) its social basis. Finally, the analysis of the various hegemony projects is followed by the *investigation of their relative power position* in the observed conflict, which is regarded as dependent on the availability and relative weight of four main kinds of resources (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 65): 1) organizational resources (e.g. money, bureaucracies, use of force) that are under actors' more or less direct control; 2) systemic resources referring to actors' ability to take (mainly economic) decisions with relevant consequences for the overall system; 3) discursive, ideological and symbolic resources concerning the degree to which actors are able to make their own perspective broadly accepted; 4) institutional or strategic-structural selectivities concerning the degree of complementarity between actors' strategies and their respective social (politico-economic) context. Especially the investigation of the third and fourth type of resources is indicative of the strong similarities between HMPA and CPE with its emphasis on the interplay of four modes of selectivity. More in general, also the overall analogies between actor analysis and the investigation of agential selectivities in CPE are striking. At the same time, we have seen, the concept of 'hegemony projects' represents a key HMPA innovation that is absent in a CPE research framework. This concept, I argue, if operationalized in a coherent and systematic way, can make a substantial contribution to strengthen a CPE approach to the production and contestation of hegemony.

Third, the *process analysis* aims to reconstruct 'the dynamic process in which the investigated conflict between the identified hegemony projects unfolded through different phases and turning points, and against the background of its broader historical context' (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 67). Given this systematic focus on the reconstruction of different conflict phases, I argue that HMPA can enhance the concrete structuring of CPE empirical analyses also in this case – in particular concerning the identification of potential correspondences and/or overlaps between these phases and the various discursive-material moments in the making and challenging of hegemony. In the face of the complexity of social reality, the main focus of the process analysis can be shifted onto different dimensions of the observed conflict, from the actors' diverging problem definitions to the material consolidation of a given balance of power into concrete institutions and laws (Buckel et al. 2014, 58). This variety of research interests is in line with the many facets of CPE's research agenda on the making and challenging of hegemony with its mix of *how*- and *why*-questions.

Summing up, I argue that HMPA not only does share some relevant theoretical common ground with CPE but, also in their operationalization, these approaches feature some key correspondences that can lead to a synergy between them. More precisely, as resumed in table 1, I suggest that CPE empirical investigations may gain

from integrating three main distinctive aspects of HMPA: first, its conceptual distinction between actually hegemonic projects and hegemony projects still striving to achieve this status in the context of specific societal conflicts; second, its conceptualization of the inherent link between political projects and hegemony projects; and, third, its operationalization framework structured into the three steps of context, actor and process analysis. The synergy between CPE and HMPA, however, represents only part of the argument put forward in the present paper. The aim of the next section, in fact, is to discuss the key contribution that a CDA focused on practical argumentation can make to this transdisciplinary enterprise.

	<i>CPE</i>	<i>Enhancement through HMPA</i>
<i>General aspects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Focus on the production and contestation of hegemony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Circumscribed focus on concrete societal conflicts and policies – Adoption of ‘hegemony project’ (HP) as analytical category vs. conflation actual/not-yet-actual – Conceptualization of the relation between hegemony projects and political projects
<i>Operationalization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Four modes of selectivities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Structural (S) ○ Agential (A) ○ Discursive (D) ○ Technological (T) – Three multi-scalar arenas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ International organizations/institutions ○ (Supra-)/(sub-)states ○ (Trans-)national civil society – Emergence of discursive and genre chains 	<p>Embedding of CPE focus on different selectivities and scales into:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Context analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interplay S/A selectivity – Actor analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A selectivity [general focus] ○ Interplay S/A/D/T selectivity [4th sub-step: HP relative assessment] – Process analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interplay S/A selectivity [results of context + actor analysis] ○ Interplay S/A/D/T selectivity [results of 4th sub-step of actor analysis: HP relative assessment] ○ Potential overlaps with CPE’s discursive-material moments

Table 1: Correspondences between a CPE research framework focused on the production and contestation of hegemony and HMPA: potential for integration and reciprocal enhancement (own compilation).

4. CDA of practical argumentation: enhancing CPE and HMPA in their approach to strategy

Despite the potentialities discussed above, I argue that the interplay of CPE and HMPA still presents some key gaps concerning the concrete investigation of questions of strategy and strategic action. These gaps, I claim, may be tackled by means of a further synergy between CPE and HMPA on the one hand and a CDA of practical argumentation on the other hand. However, before developing this argument in its complexity, some clarification about CDA is paramount. CDA of practical argumentation is just the most recent variant of the approach to the critical study of

language and of its dialectical interaction with social reality developed by Norman Fairclough since the 1980s (e.g., Fairclough 1989, 1992, 2003, 2006, 2013). In line with the triplet language-ideology-power that characterizes the much broader current of CDA, Fairclough's approach is committed not only to detecting power *in* discourse but also power *behind* discourse, which corresponds to CPE's adhesion to *Ideologie- and Herrschaftskritik* (Fairclough 1989, 2015, 49). While remaining true to these core concerns, Faircloughian CDA has developed over time in the light of specific historical constellations and shifting research interests (Fairclough 2015). Three main phases can be identified, each focused on a different aspect of critique: critique of ideological discourse (Fairclough 1989); critique of discourse as a part of social change (Fairclough 1992); and critique of discourse in political debate and policy-making (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012), whose elaboration in Fairclough (2013) is at the core of the arguments advanced in the present paper. In very short terms, CDA's argumentative turn in this third phase aims to overcome the weaknesses of an exclusive focus on representations (discourses) by means of an enlarged focus on discursive action (genres).

Against this background, *why to connect CPE, HMPA and CDA of practical argumentation?* I argue that a transdisciplinary dialogue involving these three perspectives is *implied* by the very concerns of CPE and HMPA respectively. As for CPE, in fact, the previous discussion has shown its interest in agential and discursive selectivities as well as in their interplay with structural and technological ones. At the same time, it has been shown that also HMPA is highly concerned with the role of agency and strategy, as it becomes evident in the introduction and operationalization of 'hegemony projects' as its key analytical category. In short, both CPE, in the form of agential and discursive selectivities, and HMPA, through the analysis and aggregation of strategies, share a focus on the dynamics of political debates and controversies, as well as in the strategies of action developed in this context. Consequently, I argue, these concerns should be investigated in a systematic and coherent way, which necessarily includes the analysis of semiotic action, i.e. of argumentative and non-argumentative genres (especially representations), with the latter seen as embedded within the first (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 242). In other words, so my claim, if we concentrate on the specific research interest of CPE and HMPA in the investigation of strategies, then it is also necessary to focus on practical argumentation in order to make sense of these strategies fully. To say it with Fairclough (2013, 194):

What social actors engaged in political activity and in policy making and debate above all do discursively is argue practically, and, if one is concerned [...] to analyze political, political-economic and policy-making processes in a way that includes the contribution of the agency of social actors to shaping the character and outcomes of these processes, one must surely find ways of analyzing their practical argumentation.

To be sure, the focus on strategies represents only one specific aspect in the more encompassing CPE research agenda concerning the making and challenging of hegemony. This latter, we have seen, also embraces issues of governmentalization and

disciplinary normalization and is interested in the peculiar role played by technological selectivities in this respect. Albeit limited in its scope, however, so the argument advanced here, the focus on strategies still represents a first fundamental step in order to comprehend mechanisms of hegemony production and contestation in their entirety. Most importantly, I subscribe to Fairclough's view that a perspective on practical argumentation should not be excluded a priori from research work on the making and challenging of hegemony in the (neo-)Gramscian tradition just because of an alleged necessary commitment 'to the "deliberative democracy" associated especially with Habermas and Rawls' (Fairclough 2013, 193). 'Deliberation' is namely used in CDA in a descriptive way, i.e. as the act of balancing reasons in favor or against a given course of action (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 14). As such, it is inherently related to the development of strategies, which are central both in CPE and HMPA. For this reason, the proposal advanced here to engage in a productive transdisciplinary dialogue between CPE, HMPA and CDA of practical argumentation shares Fairclough's insight that such a concern with argumentation not only is consistent with a Gramscian position but is also highly recommended in a critical policy analysis approach interested in the strategic moment of the production and contestation of hegemony (Fairclough 2013, 194). More precisely, I argue that the contribution of a CDA of practical argumentation to this transdisciplinary enterprise is twofold and relates both to the reconstruction (section 4.1) and the evaluation of strategies (section 4.2).

4.1 Enhancing the reconstruction of strategies in CPE and HMPA

In order to enhance the analytical strength of a CPE/HMPA perspective on the reconstruction of strategies, I suggest integrating a focus on the process of practical reasoning in political debate and, accordingly, to conduct a detailed, theoretically informed reconstruction of the respective practical arguments on the basis the scheme elaborated in CDA (Fairclough and Fairclough 2011, 2012; Fairclough 2013). This scheme, whose core claims are resumed in table 2, basically draws on the insight that agents engage in practical reasoning, i.e. reasoning about what to do, when they are faced with problems; as a result, they come up with practical arguments whose premises provide them with external reasons to act. The conclusion in favor or against a given course of action (claim) is the complex resultant of the interplay among circumstantial, goal, value and means-goal premises. Besides reasoning from these premises, agents may also start reasoning from the negative consequences of a given proposed or refused action and, as a consequence, they may come up with some counter-claims.

On the one hand, CDA can thus provide CPE's concept of 'strategy' with greater analytical force by regarding it as 'a plan for action for achieving a goal through potentially highly complex chains of means-goals-circumstances relations' (Fairclough 2013, 184). CDA's emphasis on the emergence of practical arguments out of the interplay of premises and/or potential negative consequences can help CPE to

point out the essence of a strategy as the ‘necessary “chaining” of actions’ with a certain orientation, which distinguishes such a strategy from ‘a random sequence of unrelated actions’ (Fairclough and Fairclough 2011, 248).

C	CIRCUMSTANCES	Agent’s context of action composed of: (a) natural facts, (b) social, institutional facts, e.g. agent’s value commitments	
G	GOAL	A future state of affairs G in which values V are realized	<i>Determined by V</i>
V	VALUES	What the agent is actually concerned with or ought to be concerned with	<i>At the basis of G</i>
A	CLAIM for ACTION	Agent (presumably) ought to do action A, i.e. A is (presumably) the right thing to do	<i>Drawing on G and C</i>
M/G	MEANS-GOAL	If the agent does action A, he will (presumably) achieve G, i.e. A is the means (presumably) taking the agent from C to G in accordance with V	<i>The conclusion follows only presumptively</i>
NC	NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES	Doing A will have NC that will make G impossible to achieve, i.e. if the agent does A, she will not achieve G	
CC	COUNTER-CLAIM	Agent ought not to do action A, as it would impair the pursuit of G/V	

Table 2: Key elements in practical arguments (own compilation on the basis of Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 45–51).

On the other hand, also HMPA may gain from this CDA understanding of strategy. Moreover, we have seen that HMPA heavily relies on the concept of ‘hegemony projects’ and on its operationalization through the stage of the actor analysis. However, in order to perform such a difficult task of analytical abstraction, some crucial intermediate steps are necessary, first of all the investigation of actors’ conflicting strategies of action in the observed conflict. A fundamental aspect in this respect, we have seen, is to reconstruct how the actors have interpreted and thus represented the circumstances of action, which goals they are striving for and on the basis of which concerns/values. HMPA scholars hint at the necessity to investigate these aspects ‘by primary research, including “grey literature” such as informal publications (e.g. brochures and pamphlets), media analysis and expert interviews’ (Kannankulam and Georgi 2014, 64; see also Buckel et al. 2014, 56). Yet they do not enter into the details of this crucial part of the analysis, whose analytical coherence is a prerequisite for a principled aggregation of the observed material into different hegemony projects. Is there any specific criterion guiding the reconstruction of strategies – each with its own (perceived) set of circumstances, its goals and underlying concerns/values? Which analytical guidelines could be followed in reconstructing strategies in their crucial chaining of means-goal relations?

<i>HMPA – Actor analysis</i>		<i>Enhancement through CDA reconstruction of practical arguments</i>	
<i>Key questions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Who said what? – Who did what? 	1) Who said what – to support which course of action? 2) Who did what – building on which argument?	
<i>Key sub-steps</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Actors' strategies [Reference to specific conflict under observation] 	⇒	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reconstruction of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Circumstances ○ Goals ○ Values/concern ○ Means-goal relation ○ Main claim ○ (Negative consequences) ○ (Counter-claim)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Aggregation into hegemony projects – Analysis of hegemony projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Situation analysis ○ Overall strategic aim(s) ○ Conflict-related strategy ○ Social basis – Assessment of hegemony projects within the overall relationships of forces 	⇒	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reconstruction of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Circumstances ○ Goals + values/concerns ○ Claim + means/goal relation

Table 3: Correspondences between HMPA actor analysis and CDA reconstruction of practical arguments: potential for integration and reciprocal enhancement (own compilation).

In the face of such a methodological gap, I argue that a CDA of practical argumentation constitutes an ideal candidate to overcome this weakness in HMPA's operationalization. The correspondences between the two, in fact, are striking: just as in CDA, also in the second step of a HMPA the basic aim is to reconstruct the strategies of agents who, in the face of problems or conflictual situations, are willing and/or forced to take actions based on their representation of the context as well as on their own goals and values. The synergy with a CDA framework for the reconstruction of practical arguments would allow this logic that is *implicit* in HMPA to become explicit. As a result, this can enhance the analytical strength of HMPA with a view to the successive step of abstraction and aggregation of the reconstructed strategies into different hegemony projects. These latter, in turn, can equally be reconstructed and analysed in terms of practical arguments by following the same line of reasoning sketched out above. Also in this case, I argue, the analytical coherence of a HMPA can be improved, as resumed in table 3. A CDA perspective namely allows a more systematic understanding of situation analyses as the reconstruction of circumstantial premises in arguments; moreover, the overall strategic aims of a hegemony project can be reconstructed as the basic goals supported by a set of key concerns and values at the core of a given hegemony project; finally, the conflict-related strategy of such a project can be investigated in CDA terms as the conclusion of the argument (claim) supported by a specific means-goal relation.

4.2 Enhancing the evaluation of strategies in CPE and HMPA

The potential of a CDA of practical argumentation is not limited to the mostly analytical-descriptive task of reconstructing strategies. A further key aspect is that this approach

allows us to identify extrasemiotic as well as semiotic aspects of the pairing of problems and solutions in the texts we discuss, so that we go beyond, in Jessop's terms, 'the narrative resonance, argumentative force, or scientific merit' of the argumentation to include elements of the extrasemiotic 'selectivities' (structural, agential, technological) (Fairclough 2013, 190).

More precisely, CDA offers a set of critical questions to critically evaluate practical arguments and thus strategies – which is a core concern for both CPE and HMPA. Critical questions may either challenge the argument (critique of the rational acceptability of premises; critique of the validity of the argument) or rebut the claim (critique of the conclusion of the argument). The critical evaluation of practical argumentation is regarded in CDA as a key contribution to the exercise of explanatory critique. To be sure, this is not intended to reduce critique to the realm of mere arguments; rather, 'such analysis and evaluation [of argumentation] can be integrated within social theorizing that is specific to various fields' and, in this way, 'it can contribute to a better understanding of agency, of social action, and thus to an explanation (and normative evaluation) of social processes and practices' (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 243).

Following Fairclough (2013, 190–192), CPE may profit from asking each type of critical questions suggested in CDA. First, critical questions directed at the *rational acceptability of premises* focus on how agents represent, interpret and thus problematize their circumstances of action. In this context, CDA can make a crucial contribution to CPE thanks to its key insights on the nature of representations as premises in practical arguments, which are regarded as providing agents with more or less compelling external reasons for action (191–192). In the field of crisis research, for example, different ways to frame the existing state of affairs – and thus the problems agents are (supposedly) faced with – exert a key impact on the effective scope and scale attributed to the crisis under observation. Second, an argument can be challenged on the grounds of its *validity* by questioning the necessary and/or sufficient nature of the suggested means-goal relation. Highly relevant in CPE terms are cases in which the analysis exposes the stated goals not to be the real goals at the basis of a strategy. In the same vein, this kind of CDA critical evaluation can enhance CPE in questioning the compatibility between the stated values and the means-goal relation put forward in the strategy under observation. In either case, CDA can strengthen CPE's attention to a critique of ideology and domination and sharpen its focus on the role of agential selectivities. In short, this kind of critical questioning

raises questions about, in Jessop's terms, the semiotic and the extra-semiotic mechanisms which may allow dominant social actors to secure the selection of a particular meaning-system. So [...] agential selectivities are brought into critical evaluation of arguments within deliberation (191).

Finally, criticism of the *conclusion of the argument* comprises those critical questions able to rebut the claim for action. As for CPE, the integration of this kind of critical

evaluation can shed further light on the relation between structural selectivities and the conclusion of the argument; to rebut a claim, in fact, implies arguing over the extrasemiotic, i.e. over the structural effects of adopting a given strategy (Fairclough 2013, 190–191). In sum, in a CDA of practical argumentation there is actually room for all four modes of selectivity at the core of a CPE approach to the production and contestation of hegemony, not only for discursive ones. On top of this, the procedure of critical questioning can make a substantial contribution to CPE’s commitment to the critique of ideology and domination – not relegating this latter to the level of mere semiosis but providing CPE with a further tool to question particularly successful and unchallenged lines of argumentation in a systematic way.

<i>Critical questions</i>	<i>CDA contribution</i>	<i>Added value for CPE</i>	<i>Added value for HMPA</i>
<i>Rational acceptability of premises (soundness)</i>	Representations (discourses) as premises in practical arguments providing agents with external reasons to act	Enhanced focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Varying scale/scope of (perceived) context of action and problem interpretation influencing the nature/extent of advocated measures 	Critical questioning of the situation analysis in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Conflict-related strategy – Hegemony project
<i>Validity of the argument</i>	Means-goals: necessary and/or sufficient? Stated goals: real goals? Stated values: compatible with means-goals?	Enhanced focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Agential selectivities – Their interplay with semiotic and extrasemiotic factors – Contribution to critique of ideology and domination 	Critical questioning of the necessary/sufficient means-goals relation in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Conflict-related strategy – Hegemony project
<i>Conclusion of the argument</i>	Focus on the consequences of action	Enhanced focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Structural selectivities – Their interplay with other modes of selectivity 	Critical questioning of the basic claim of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Conflict-related strategy – Hegemony project
TO SUM UP:			
		Increased attention to all four modes of selectivity	Additional instruments to detect ideological arguments and internal contradictions in an analytically founded and systematic way
		Additional instruments to question arguments otherwise not easily challenged	
		Enhanced focus on critique of ideology and domination	Enhanced focus on the detection and discussion of issues of (ideological) power and domination

Table 4: CDA critical questioning and its links to CPE and HMPA (own compilation; CDA and CPE columns drawing on Fairclough 2013, 190–192).

Table 4 resumes the key aspects of a CDA evaluation of practical arguments and the main gains for a CPE research framework integrating these insights. Yet besides supporting this argument first advanced in Fairclough (2013), I suggest that also HMPA can profit from a synergy with CDA. What is more, as shown in the fourth column of table 4, CDA critical questioning can be adopted here at two main levels. On the one hand, in fact, all three kinds of critical questions can be addressed to the relationship between a specific strategy and the concrete observed conflict to which it refers. More precisely, they allow critically questioning such a strategy in relation to the rational acceptability of its premises, the validity of the underlying argument as well as its basic claim. On the other hand, HMPA can rely on CDA critical questioning also to evaluate the overarching strategy of each hegemony project pointed out in the analysis, especially with regard to its relationship with the concrete political projects instrumental to its successful retention. Also in this case, CDA can provide HMPA with powerful analytical instruments to investigate the existence of ideological lines of argumentation, implicit overriding goals at odds with the stated values of a certain project as well as other kinds of contradictions. Finally, as in the case of CPE, CDA's commitment to explanatory critique represents a further tool to help HMPA reassessing and operationalizing its fundamental aim, namely the detection and critical discussion of issues of power and domination.

5. Conclusions

The aim of the present paper has been to make a theoretical-methodological contribution to the study of hegemony struggles. I have argued that CPE, HMPA and CDA can be productively combined into a transdisciplinary research framework for critical policy analysis interested in investigating the making and challenging of hegemony with a specific focus on strategies. More precisely, I have suggested two main synergies: first, between CPE and HMPA in order to better conceive, structure and operationalize empirical studies focused on the production and contestation of hegemony; second, between CPE/HMPA and CDA of practical argumentation in order to enhance the analytical strength of the first two in reconstructing and evaluating strategies and strategic action.

Reflecting on the results of first implementation attempts (Caterina 2014, 2017), the rationale behind each synergy can be resumed in two main points respectively. As for the integration of CPE and HMPA, first, the adoption of the concept of 'hegemony project' may turn out to be a highly fruitful entry point into the empirical investigation of specific conflict situations in which none of the observed projects eventually manages to become hegemonic. Furthermore, the conceptualization of the relationship between political projects and hegemony projects may prove crucial to shed light on the complex intermeshing of structural, agential, discursive and technological selectivities at play in the observed conflict; by the same token, this conceptualization can be extremely useful to assess the specific role played by a specific reform or

political project of any kind in the more overarching context of the production and contestation of hegemony in a given country.

Regarding the synergy between CPE/HMPA and CDA of practical argumentation, first, directly proportional to the size of the corpus of primary sources on which empirical investigations draw – which can run from some dozen (Caterina 2014) to several thousand (Caterina 2016) – the suggested CDA approach is crucial to ensure the degree of coherence, accuracy and complexity necessary to reconstruct the political and hegemony projects under observation by taking a variety of structural, agential and discursive selectivities into account. Building on this, the process of CDA critical questioning may be key to raise issues of critique of ideology and domination at the core of CPE's and HMPA's research interest. It namely allows to question powerful unchallenged arguments by pointing out their role in reproducing the dominant balance of forces and thus by giving voice to actors with no real voice in the observed conflict. Moreover, CDA critical questioning can uncover striking similar positions behind the polemic tones of heated debates and offer an instrument to detect key differences behind similar criticisms or similar proposals. Starting from this, an ongoing dialectical exchange between further empirical work and subsequent theoretical-methodological reflection is paramount to consolidate the reciprocal gains of this transdisciplinary enterprise and shed light on new common avenues of research.

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