Studying affect through discourse theory: Towards a methodology of practice

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Abstract

This article presents a methodological argument for examining the affective dimensions of political identity formation, with a pivotal focus on the role of *practice*. Grounded in a psychoanalytically inspired discourse theory framework, it advocates for expanding research beyond textual sources to investigate the affective investment inherent in political engagement and the process of collective identity formation. Through an examination of two empirical case studies—the Just Stop Oil movement in the United Kingdom and the ascent of Javier Milei in Argentinean politics—the article proposes four principles to study the articulation of political identities through practice: Signifiers are not just words; beyond counting words; policy is central, and fantasy is a cipher. By underscoring fantasy as a critical dimension in identity formation and, suggesting that, by transcending the conventional Schmittian friend/enemy divide, novel avenues for analysing collective identities will surface.

Keywords: discourse theory, affect, practice, fantasy, transgression, Just Stop Oil, Milei

Introduction

Empirical work in discourse theory (DT) has traditionally focused on linguistic expressions of politics, centring primarily on speeches or text-based sources. In mostly assuming *discourse* as *language*, discourse theorists have maintained a formal focus in their analysis, neglecting less apprehensible (however plainly palpable) aspects of our always discursively mediated social reality. In this article, we outline the theoretical and methodological case for studying discourse and its affective aspects, through non-text-based methods—a turn to *practice*. We do so by refining, interconnecting and expanding psychoanalytically inspired works which have highlighted the centrality of affective investment in identity formation (Glynos 2012; 2021; Stavrakakis, 2006; Eklundh 2019; Ronderos 2021; Espindola 2023). Our approach takes inspiration from the current performative turn, particularly in its exploration of *transgression* and the integration of structural sociology concepts, such as Bourdieu's *habitus* (Ostiguy et al 2021; Aiolfi 2022; Venizelos 2023; Rojas-Andrés et al 2023). However, by relying on a psychoanalytic perspective, we aim to advance these insights by offering principles that address the force (and not only the form) of political practices, moving beyond pure (populist) modes of antagonism.

While remaining faithful to DT, our central observation underscores the limitations inherent in the logocentric (text-focused) tendencies of much DT work when analysing the articulation of political identities. We propose a turn to practice to fully capture the breadth and depth of political identities today. However, this shift is not merely an effort to diversify sources; it represents a substantial departure from an overly rigid focus on 'form.' By doing so, our approach transitions the analytical lens from treating the signifier as an isolated unit of analysis to exploring *how* and *why* we engage with it, stressing how desire is staged through practice (Ronderos 2021). Furthermore, we emphasise affect as a constitutive dimension of political articulation, moving beyond its reduction to mere bodily sensation (Eklundh 2019). While the concepts of difference and equivalence remain central to all signifying processes, we argue that their intersections often manifest in nuanced ways that challenge straightforward analysis based solely on principles of 'rhetorical applicability.' By foregrounding enjoyment and anchoring our empirical inquiry in practice, we propose a discourse theory research strategy that integrates affect into the study of political identities. This turn to practice, therefore, signifies not only a move beyond text-based analysis but also a departure from an overly reductionist focus on 'form.'

By reading affective investment as fantasy (Glynos 2021), we can better understand not only *that* we engage affectively with signifiers, but also *how* and *why* we engage with them (Glynos 2008; Ronderos & Glynos 2023). Importantly, we are interested in seeing how a focus on *enjoyment* can broaden the concept of *antagonism*. Instead of seeing the antagonist as simply something external—our main enemy—we propose that the antagonist can also manifest internally, within the subject (Žižek 1990). In this vein, we contend that the antagonist in DT should not only be read in terms of an 'externality'. Rather, understanding antagonism as also internal to the subject enables an analysis of certain social elements that should be purged. This argument yields significant methodological consequences. If the antagonist is not simply an 'other', such as 'the elites' or migrants, then we must also adapt our methods to capture how antagonistic relations operate not as a clear-cut in-out frontier, but as a dynamic interplay with signifiers through which the subject's desire gains structure (Ronderos 2021).

In the first section, we demonstrate the need to move beyond the methodological overreliance on the written and spoken word, but without falling into the trap of seeing the

contextual (such as material conditions) as outside of discourse. In the second section, we argue that affect is a fundamental component of any discursive articulation. We then explore the construction of political identities beyond textual sources and propose *four principles* for developing an affective methodology which views affect as a central form of political articulation rather than simply a bodily sensation. In the last section, we deploy our principles to analyse two empirical case studies, the Just Stop Oil movement in the United Kingdom and the emergence of Argentinean politician Javier Milei. By following our principles, we provide a step-by-step research strategy for examining the affective dimensions of discourse. We argue that practice is both a constitutive and constituting dimension of discursivity, emphasising its role in understanding the affective force involved in the identity formation process.

In this article we make three main contributions. First, we address the overreliance on text present in DT and provide a way forward to place affect in the centre of political analysis. Second, we contribute methodologically by affirming the distinctive virtues of a practice-based psychoanalytical approach. Specifically, we contend that a focus on fantasy provides added value in the study of practice. Third, our empirical contribution delves into two contemporary cases—Just Stop Oil and Javier Milei—that, despite garnering significant public interest, remain largely unexplored. These cases help illustrate the empirical potential of our practice-based principles, setting a clear roadmap for a DT research agenda that takes the role of affect in identity formation processes seriously.

Studying discourse as text

Discourse theory has a long tradition of studying discourse through language, but how does it do it? There is a strong recognition in Laclau and Mouffe's works that discourse is always, to some extent, material and that there is nothing 'outside' of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 107). However, we argue that there is a preponderance within discourse theoretical studies to methodologically favour discursive expressions through the written and the spoken word and the need to develop a practice-based discourse theory approach. A cursory examination of the most influential sources within DT over the last decade reveals that its emphasis is still firmly linguistic. A close examination of the excellent volume edited by Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt (2021) reveals a recurring suggestion that the current limitations of discourse theory highlight the need to move beyond the written and spoken word, pointing to the potential for a more affective and practice-oriented approach to discourse (particularly in the context of populism). However, when looking at the most cited works in the Journal of Language and Politics and the Journal of Political Ideologies (two outlets that publish much of the contemporary scholarship on DT), it becomes evident that text is still the preferred form of data. Out of the ten most cited works in the Journal of Language and Politics, only one article refers to practice and suggests studying anything else beyond speeches or newspaper articles.[1] This issue has been thoroughly debated by the fields of Discourse theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 2022; Fairclough 1992). While these theoretical discussions have been fruitful, we aim to advance the conversation by offering a more concrete roadmap for empirical analysis. From a DT perspective, we argue that understanding context and practice as internal to discourse offers valuable analytical insights

[1] https://www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/15699862

into contemporary political phenomena—insights that remain underexplored in current scholarship and which necessitate moving *beyond ontology*.

In this article, we aim to explore the study of practice from a discourse-theoretical perspective, one which does not place social practice outside of the discursive realm, as CDA does (see Chouliaraki & Fairclough 2022). In doing so we are joining a nascent group of scholars who are integrating discourse analysis with a focus on practice (Pignot, Nicolini & Thompson 2020; Makarychev, Terry & Siva 2024). The reason for this is two-fold. First, there is a methodological argument, where we contend that a practice-based analysis is capable of capturing identity formations which cannot be captured fully in text. Second, there is a normative argument, which recognises that labelling only linguistic expressions as speech follows historical patterns of favouring certain kinds of speech over others. As argued by much feminist scholarship (Hemmings 2012; Åhäll 2018, 43), to constantly position non-linguistic expressions as not pertaining to discourse negatively impacts how certain groups in society are perceived and limits their political legitimacy. This article aims to demonstrate that practice is always discursive, and thus equally important to the study of politics.

It can be argued that many studies on political identities make no claim to cover the affective elements of discourse, and therefore the criticism that they do not becomes void. The problem remains, however, if we engage with sources which specifically study the emotional aspects of discursive articulations. For instance, many of the current studies on emotions in populism use only text in order to map how what they label 'emotional words' signal the particularly emotional aspects of populism (Salmela & von Scheve 2017; Valentim & Widmann 2021; Widmann 2021). Furthermore, other studies on emotions in populism, also rely on exclusively text-based sources in order to study 'emotional narratives' (Skonieczny 2018; Wirz 2018). Others still treat emotions and affect as 'semantic subcategories' also to be studied through textual sources (Breeze 2019). In opposition to this trend, this article draws on DT's premise which views discourse as always being affective and develops a methodological effort to back this up.

While still marginal within much of DT work, discourse theorists have made some strides in moving beyond the field's logocentric focus. This shift is particularly evident in the stylistic turn, which emphasizes the aesthetic and performative dimensions of political expression and engagement, situating these practices within their socio-cultural contexts (Ostiguy et al 2020; Casullo, 2020; Dean, 2019). By placing greater emphasis on performance, this body of work has advanced key concepts that address extra-linguistic elements of discursive interventions, most notably the concept of transgression, providing valuable agenda-setting foundations for moving beyond the textual dimension of discourse (Aiolfi, this SI)—an approach closely aligned with our own.

Nevertheless, by not centring on affect these strides remain confined to the formal foundations of discursive formation (Stavrakakis, 2004). Even when not strictly linguistic, the focus still tends to centre on *form* or visual rhetoric in structuring discursive difference, leaving the affective dimensions that explain the underlying *force* and interplay of political practices and their emotionally charged character underexplored. As Laclau noted, "rhetoric can explain the form that an overdetermining investment takes, but not the force that explains the investment as such and its perdurability" (Laclau, 2004, 326). This makes it more difficult to account for the grip of transgressive and customary practices in sustaining or challenging social representations. Moving *beyond text and populist politics*, our turn to practice seeks to foreground principles that allow for

the analysis and explanation of not only the form but also the force through which *fantasmatic enjoyment* shapes collective identities, thus also moving *beyond ontology*.

Studying affect as discourse

Conceived as an *articulatory practice*, a way to construct an identity, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) elevate the notion of *discourse* to an ontological status. More than a linguistic expression, discourse entails for Laclau and Mouffe the expansive horizon of meaning-making (Howarth 2000, 9). We can say that discourse is expressed as an *articulatory* practice since it renders visible the relational systems of meaning through which social structures come about (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 85-6). But discourse can also be understood as an articulatory *practice* in the sense that it encompasses an active, affective engagement of subjects in a political project (136). The close relationship (and sometimes complete elision; see introduction to this SI) between *practice* and *articulation* thus provides the basis for understanding the logics through which linguistic and non-linguistic expressions can be thought of in terms of meaningful elements through which broader social representations are constructed and contested (107-8).

Laclau's solo work significantly expanded DT by drawing on a psychoanalytic, Lacanian-inspired approach, conceived as 'the only fruitful approach to the understanding of human reality' (Laclau 2004, 326). Central to this is the Freudian notion of *Spaltung* (splitting), which Lacan expanded upon to challenge the Cartesian notion of the *subject as cogito*—indicating a clear division between thinking and feeling—, defining it instead as a *subject of lack*—where thinking and feeling are intertwined (Fink 1997, 43). This shift allowed Laclau to incorporate affective investment, revealing that subjects engage in continuous, yet ultimately futile, attempts to realise their true selves. They may identify with markers such as gender, nationality, or youthfulness, which offer temporary self-representations. Although these partial identifications never fully account for the subject's existential endowment, they generate a sense of enjoyment (*jouissance*), driving the subject's engagement with the symbolic order.

Paradoxically, the subject's relentless quest for a stable identity unfolds against the backdrop of inherent contingency, exposing the tension between the desire for a fixed identity and its ultimate impossibility. This symbolic limit underscores the constitutive lack in human existence, which subjects try to conceal by articulating partial fixation points through identificatory practices. However, this process of partial fixation falls short in fully integrating the symbolic limit into meaning through *naming* (Laclau 2005, 119), leading certain objects, expressions, images, or even body parts to become representations of the absent fullness the subject, time and again, seeks to attain—what Lacanian theory refers to as *object a* (Žižek 1989). In this process, conscious and unconscious mechanisms overlap, as subjects engage in socio-political events, attempting to reinvest in and restructure their identificatory supports through *bodily practice* (Glynos 2012).

The concept of fantasy is crucial here, as it illuminates the primary role of affect in identity formation. In psychoanalytic terms, fantasy stages desire within (dis)identificatory processes, referencing both an idealized (beatific) scenario and, by implication, a catastrophic (horrific) one (Glynos 2008a). These narratives form the libidinal foundation of the logics of difference and equivalence, shaping how desire and lack/loss drive the affective force at play in identity formation. Fantasy helps explain how, via enjoyment, subjects are *gripped* by ideas, norms, and practices. Nevertheless, enjoyment is not reducible to pleasure or simple joy; rather, it is

experienced by the subject as "always-already lost", propping up the subject as an "estimate subject of desire" (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008, 261). In this sense, enjoyment is experienced as a *pain-in-pleasure*, a bodily thrill derived from the transgression of elements tied to the lack experienced in the body (Hook 2017).

As Žižek (1985) aptly captured, in the post-Marxist framework, the concept of *antagonism* is developed to comprehend the original 'trauma' of what Lacan referred to as the *lack in the Other* (i.e., the impossibility of closure). However, for Lacan, not only is the *lack* constitutive of 'the Other' (e.g. the law, culture, language), but more importantly, of the subject itself. Žižek further expanded on this point, critiquing the post-Marxist account of antagonism for framing it solely in terms of externality (Žižek 1990, 254) This enables a modality of antagonism that is not 'external' but rather 'internal' to the subject, an idea hinted at by others but still underdeveloped (Thomassen 2005; Marchart 2018).

This return to subjectivity and other modalities of antagonism brings relevance to the notion of *self-transgression* in identity formation (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). The understanding of power structures needs to take issue with its gripping force, through which the relentless desire of the subject assumes a position of symbolic submission. It particularly highlights moments when subjects seem to simultaneously affirm and transgress an idea or norm (Glynos 2008b).

The analytical and critical consequences of this are significant. Consider populism, where most studies focus on explaining identity formation through the transgression of a clearly delineated exteriority, an 'us versus them'. What if the key antagonistic source of collective identification for a populist movement is internal rather than external to its articulatory practices? Could external elements function as identificatory supports within the internal chain of equivalence? If so, the libidinal dynamics of desire would be far more blurred than structuralist or Schmittian theories suggest (Schmitt 2007), for symbolic elements representing a limit of enjoyment can come to function as sources of enjoyment themselves (see the exploration of Milei below).

Our central observation underscores the limitation of formal signifying logics (text-only) in analysing the articulation of political identities. As mentioned earlier, we also highlight a 'rhetorical reductionism' in the field, which relies on a mechanical principle of direct semantic applicability that tends to oversimplify the us/them antagonistic frontiers through a straightforward juxtaposition of logics of difference and equivalence. In contrast, we argue that the relationship between affect and meaning-making is far more intricate and nuanced, with internal and external antagonistic frontiers being much more blurred. This demands deeper analytical engagement with the affective underpinnings of political practice.

Towards an affective methodology

Thus far, we have established a theoretical foundation that problematizes the dual emphasis discourse theorists place on two key dimensions in empirical research: 1) the written and spoken word, and 2) the focus on form, whether it be written, spoken, visual, or otherwise. This focus on form tends to sideline the emotional dimension, overlooking crucial layers and logics within identificatory processes. Our shift towards practice advances these theoretical insights, broadening the scope of discourse analysis by proposing four key principles to develop an affective methodology.

1. *Signifiers are not just words*

   Our framework suggests looking beyond the 'Signifier as word'-nexus can broaden DT's analytical potential. Can we measure a political ideology by looking at the occupation of a square? Can we measure political identities through artwork, cinema, or music? Can resistance be operationalised as a hand gesture? We answer these questions with a resounding yes, arguing that DT must recognise that Laclau never intended for the signifier to be thought of only as a word. Drawing on the insightful contributions of Bleiker and Hutchinson (2008), we argue that visual and moving image analysis must occupy a much more central position in discourse analysis (Harman 2019).

2. *Beyond counting words*

   Discourse analysis traditionally focuses on identifying specific words that signal commitment to certain norms and values when studying political ideologies and identities. But what if, instead of counting the words, we count other things? What if we count likes and shares on social media, or the number of people at a protest or a political meeting? In addition, some signifiers can be more important than others, without necessarily occurring more often. A signifier can be performed only once, and still render a significant response from an audience. Consider the recent events of self-immolation as a form of protest – these only happen once but are, we would argue, carrying very strong affective investment. We suggest that going beyond the simple counting of words is necessary to operationalise practice. Measuring only the prevalence of words, such as in survey research on emotions, misses the mark in terms of how affect is operationalised. Instead, we could use ethnographic and participatory methods to measure the intensity of affective investment. Being *in place* offers a different level of engagement with affect and the way it is staged (Juris 2008).

3. *Policy is central*

   Rather than separating the discursive from the extra-discursive, as Fairclough and others suggest, we argue that everything should be treated as discourse. While DT often includes institutions and actions within its theoretical definition of discourse, it tends to focus primarily on the written and spoken word in practice, leaving these other dimensions underexplored (see introduction to the SI). Following Foucault (1977) and Bourdieu (1977), we contend that political institutions and their actions are just as, if not more, important than political rhetoric, and must be analysed as part of discourse itself. While the concept of habitus as developed by Bourdieu is vital, we also suggest going beyond it to incorporate a stronger psychoanalytical perspective. By placing practice on equal footing with rhetoric (while recognising the very practical and material effects of rhetoric) we want to combat the rhetorical reductionism in the field. Legal and institutional practice form the backbone of discourses, and only measuring electoral rhetoric risks missing how political actors often implement different policies than what they promise. We suggest bringing in a more holistic approach, also including the laws implementing policy, and, importantly, the effects of those laws, which can be measured in economic terms, in the numbers of arrests, in *the actions* of the state. We draw on methodological insights from critical legal studies (Matthews and Wall 2022), which emphasise the materiality of the encounter with the law.

4. *Fantasy as a cipher*

   Many discourse analyses acknowledge the importance of affective investment in a signifier for discourses to form and sustain themselves. We suggest reading affective investment as fantasy, which enables us not only to understand *that* we engage affectively with signifiers, but most importantly *how* and *why* we do so (Glynos 2008; Ronderos Glynos 2023). Rather than assuming the signifier as a direct identificatory element, psychoanalysis suggests that our engagement with signifiers is intermediated by distinctive modes of enjoyment, and that these matter when investigating identity formation processes (Ronderos 2021).

   Importantly, we are interested in how *enjoyment* can broaden the concept of *antagonism*. Instead of seeing the antagonist as simply something external—our main enemy (as per Schmitt 2007)—we propose that the antagonist can also be internal to the subject (Žižek 1990; Marchart 2018; Thomassen 2005). What prevents our enjoyment can be a different part of ourselves, or a former version of ourselves. Even, the prevention of enjoyment can become a source of enjoyment itself. In this vein, we contend that the antagonist in discourse theory should not be read only in terms of an 'externality'. Rather, understanding antagonism as also internal to the subject enables an analysis of certain social elements that should be purged. As such, the function of *object a*, and enjoyment in particular, cannot be simply applied, via difference and equivalence, in political analysis, for oftentimes discursive elements, perceived as the limitations to enjoying fully, are required in the process of *transgression* as identificatory supports. Enjoyment shows how difference and equivalence can operate simultaneously, through self-transgression, in the identity formation process. We thus build on excellent scholarship in the field which argues that transgression and performance are central to identity formation (Aiolfi 2022; Sorensen 2021), but we want to accentuate the phantasmatic element of such transgressions and render visible the nuance of antagonistic modalities that circumvent the in-out divide.

Below, we will use the four principles to analyse two case studies and illustrate how they can be applied. The case studies are chosen due to their political salience and contemporary nature. We do not aim to compare and contrast them, simply to show how one can use an affective methodology grounded in discourse theory. We also do not defend any claims to universality of this method, only that it should serve as an important complement to existing methodologies.

Just Stop Oil

Just Stop Oil (JSO) is a non-violent civil resistance group which was started in the UK in February 2022. The group is an environmental social movement, which has become known for their focus on civil disobedience. JSO believes that government inaction to combat climate change is detrimental to our future, and works to raise awareness of global warming and its devastating consequences. In many ways, JSO is similar to many social movements of the past who have used non-violent civil disobedience to further their political claims. We argue, however, that JSO is an excellent example of where an affective approach to discourse is needed, and one which recognises the role of fantasy in constructing political identities.

It is evident from the very start that the goal of JSO is exactly that—to build a community around fighting climate change, and is in this way quite similar to other green movements. On

their website, they argue that “Every one of us feels alone in this. But when we come together, then we can start to grapple with the challenge of our lifetimes. When we come together, we are powerful, and we can create meaningful change and make history”.[2] However, the ways through which JSO chooses to build this community does not lend itself very easily to an analysis of language. Most of their actions, and the responses to them, are practices not always expressed through language, which means that the tools we use to understand them must be adjusted accordingly. Using the four principles, we assess how JSO have managed to build one of the most noted and criticised social movements of today.

Signifiers are not just words

For JSO, action is key. Instead of writing their way to political impact, JSO are acting out what they believe. One of the most significant forms of action involved blockades, and JSO has carried out a large number of physical protests or blockades since its inception. Some of their most notable actions have included a blockade of the M25, the main motorway around London, as well as throwing orange paint at a Van Gogh painting (orange being the signature colour of JSO). By employing this type of action, JSO are using their bodies as a physical presence of a signifier. In a protest action in April 2022, around 100 activists camped outside of an oil terminal, putting their bodies in the way of oil transport. The body thus becomes the signifier. Paint in the colour orange has become one of the key signifiers of Just Stop Oil. They have conducted several actions where they spray or throw paint at for instance private jets, the MI5 building (the British Intelligence headquarters), the Bank of England, and some universities, such as King’s College Cambridge pictured below (Burrell 2022). Another one of their most criticised actions was when they threw orange paint at Van Gogh’s masterpiece *Sunflowers* at the National Gallery in London (It should be noted that the artwork was behind a protective screen, and therefore not damaged in the action), and subsequently glued their hands to the wall, causing a major outcry. The common nominator for all these actions, the signifiers which unites the claims and demands, is thus the orange paint, something which we cannot analyse through textual analysis. The orange, a striking colour, becomes the empty space which enables the articulation of a political identity. Importantly, there is strong affective investment associated with this colour, and the fact that the paint is somewhere it should not technically be. The paint and the colour are therefore transgressive, which is another key element when wanting to understand why signifiers may be successful (Aiolfi 2022).

[2] https://juststopoil.org/

By AFirehawk - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=139595803

Beyond counting words

One way of measuring the successful impact of JSO is to notice the effect they have on the political conversation as well as the institutional response. We are using a multi-pronged approach to understand how affective investment functions over time. The first measure is to identify particularly important moments in the discourse around Just Stop Oil. Using Google Trends, we have looked at the moments when people have used Google to search for the term 'Just Stop Oil'. From this graph, we can detect that there are peaks in November 2022, and July 2023. During the first peak, JSO staged a blockade on the M25, and in the second one they performed the action of throwing paint at the Sunflowers. It is thus evident that these actions are not simply isolated or unnoticed events, but gain significant traction. JSO has 86,000 followers on YouTube, and their most popular videos of their actions include the interruption of a football match between Everton and Newcastle, which currently has more than one million views. Another way to understand the intensity of the movement is to look at the number of arrests made, since the political response to JSO has been very strong. According to JSO, the police have arrested over 2,100 people since February 2022, and 138 people have spent time in prison (Just Stop Oil 2023).

Policy is central

It is clear that the institutional response to the protests has been to use the full force of the state. The Crown Prosecution Service advocated for long prison services for activists who have caused traffic disruption by climbing a bridge in London, which falls under the offence of causing a public nuisance. When handing down the sentence, the judge specifically admitted that the long sentences of three years in prison were intended as deterrents and to avoid 'copycat actions' (Horton 2023). Some activists, however, have managed to avoid prison sentences, such as the 12 activists arrested for causing disruption on the M25. This has led the Conservative British Government to redesign the Public Order Act which dictates the possibilities for public protest. In a newer version of the law, the police will be given increased powers to, for instance, stop slow walking protesters that disrupt traffic ('Police to Be given Clearer Powers on Slow-Walk Protests', 2023). As such, the tool of slow-walking as an alternative to occupation is becoming increasingly difficult to enact. This policy response, designed to limit the power and articulations of groups like Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain, highlights the role of practice-as-discourse in shaping institutional reaction. The state's strong response demonstrates the affective investment in this issue—without such investment, the actions of this relatively small group would have minimal impact. Instead, policies are being adapted to directly counter these groups, as seen in the September 2024 sentencing of two protesters who threw a can of soup at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, receiving prison terms of two years and twenty months, respectively. This highly repressive institutional response exemplifies how discourse is enacted through policy to regulate dissent.

Fantasy as a cipher

Above, we have demonstrated the affective investment in non-linguistic signifiers, and the strength of that investment felt both by the subjects and their antagonists. However, one of the key aims of this article is to connect these practices to the construction and sustention of phantasmatic structure. Drawing on the beatific and horrific as analytical categories, we can easily detect such patterns in the political actions of JSO. The desire driving these actions emanates from a loss of enjoyment felt strongly by the green movement (Burnham & Kingsbury 2021). The actions signal a loss and a destruction of things that we find beautiful, such as Van Gogh's Sunflowers. This can be interpreted as a wider destruction of the beauty of human life, now threatened by its own existence. The actions thus physically crush the idea of fullness or wholeness and blame this lack of fullness on the antagonists (the Conservative Government, Big Finance, political elites). It is important, however, to point out that the theft of our enjoyment is not simply caused by these traditionally-conceived antagonists. The green movement and JSO are also identifying a horrific narrative within ourselves—humanity as a whole has lived beyond its means. This becomes particularly evident in the act of destroying artwork. By taking away the enjoyment of the art, JSO are playing on contemporary and historic subjectivities. Our historical selves are to blame for the situation we are in, and the artefacts of this time (and contemporary times) are therefore to be destroyed. Similar acts have been used by others, for example when Ai Weiwei broke a Han Dynasty urn in 1995 (Guggenheim Bilbao 2024), citing that the old must be destroyed before the new can be born. Below, JSO protesters threw milk and Rice Krispies at an artwork picturing the sound of milk and Rice Krispies at the Museum of Portable Sound, while gluing themselves to the wall.

Photo: Jon Kannenberg (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

The simple dichotomy between the protesters and the global elites causing climate change is therefore not straightforward, and we must consider the importance of self-transgression in the construction of the JSO political identity. By engaging with the practices of JSO and using a phantasmatic analysis, we argue that we can thus see simultaneous horrific and beatific logics in the identify formation. Importantly, it is not the written political documents that sustain the movement or cause anger, but their actions and practices; and the same could be said about the policy-lead institutional response. Therefore, JSO are clearly articulating a phantasmatic narrative.

Javier Milei

Javier Milei, a radical right-wing economist, emerged as a captivating political figure in Argentina, known for his unconventional and transgressive style. His rise, marked by theatrics like wielding a chainsaw at rallies, turned campaign events into spellbinding spectacles. After being elected as National Representative for Buenos Aires in 2021, he secured the presidency in November 2023. Most academic analyses (Giménez 2023; Ariza et al. 2023; Ben 2022; Pullero and Collazo 2021), including those informed by discourse theory (Seco 2021), have, until now, solely focused on the verbal and textual elements of his persona and movement.

Signifiers are not just words

Between 2015 and 2020, as Milei established himself as a prominent media pundit, his persona evolved through distinct traits that resonated deeply with his audience. His grave intonation, dark-toned voice, furrowed eyebrows, and distinctive hairstyle became emblematic, symbolized visually by the metaphor of a lion's mane. The lion soon became the core signifier. Since his first major gathering at *Luna Park* stadium[3] in November 2021, Milei's appearances, marked by his passionate performances of *La Renga's* song "Panic Show", became a ritual that evoked a collective sentiment of defiance. This defiance harkens back to the youth movements of the 1980s that resisted Argentina's military dictatorship through rock music. However, Milei re-signifies these historical expressions of democratic freedom, repurposing them with an anti-progressive discourse that opposes statist rule. His supporters often don orange handkerchiefs and scarves emblazoned with the image of a black lion—a symbol reminiscent of the green feminist handkerchiefs and the white scarves of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, two powerful icons of progressive movements in Argentina. Additionally, Milei frequently leads chants of football anthems in his rallies, accompanied by the widely recognized Argentine football gesture of an outstretched arm with a forward thrust—signifying collective support and identity rooted in the habitus of the football fandom.

[3] The Luna Park holds immense cultural and political significance, having hosted events ranging from Frank Sinatra concerts to serving as the site where Colonel Juan Domingo Perón and Eva Duarte (commonly known as 'Evita' or 'Eva Perón') met for the very first time.

Photo: MidiaNinja (CC BY-NC 2.0) https://www.flickr.com/photos/midianinja/albums/72177720312401199/.

Beyond counting words

By 2018, Milei had become Argentina's most sought-after economist for interviews, accumulating 193,547 seconds of airtime that year alone (Martins 2021). From 2021 to 2024, his YouTube channel provides insights into how his practices resonated across wider societal spheres. The collective occupation of physical spaces, catalysed by his 2021 Luna Park event, became a hallmark of his political identity. These gatherings, marked by passionate singing and chanting—particularly *La Renga's* "Panic Show"—demonstrated the intensity of his supporters, who expressed their fervour through enthusiastic shouting and laughter. Further signalling the strength of collective identification, his followers consecutively donned lion-themed ornaments and waved orange handkerchiefs. The repetitive use of these visual markers, combined with the consistent turnout of between 10,000 and 25,000 participants from 2021 to 2023, reflect the deep emotional investment and intensity. Finally, Milei's achievement of securing the highest number of votes in Argentina's presidential election underscores the highly charged and intense nature of his political practice at both the grassroots and institutional levels.

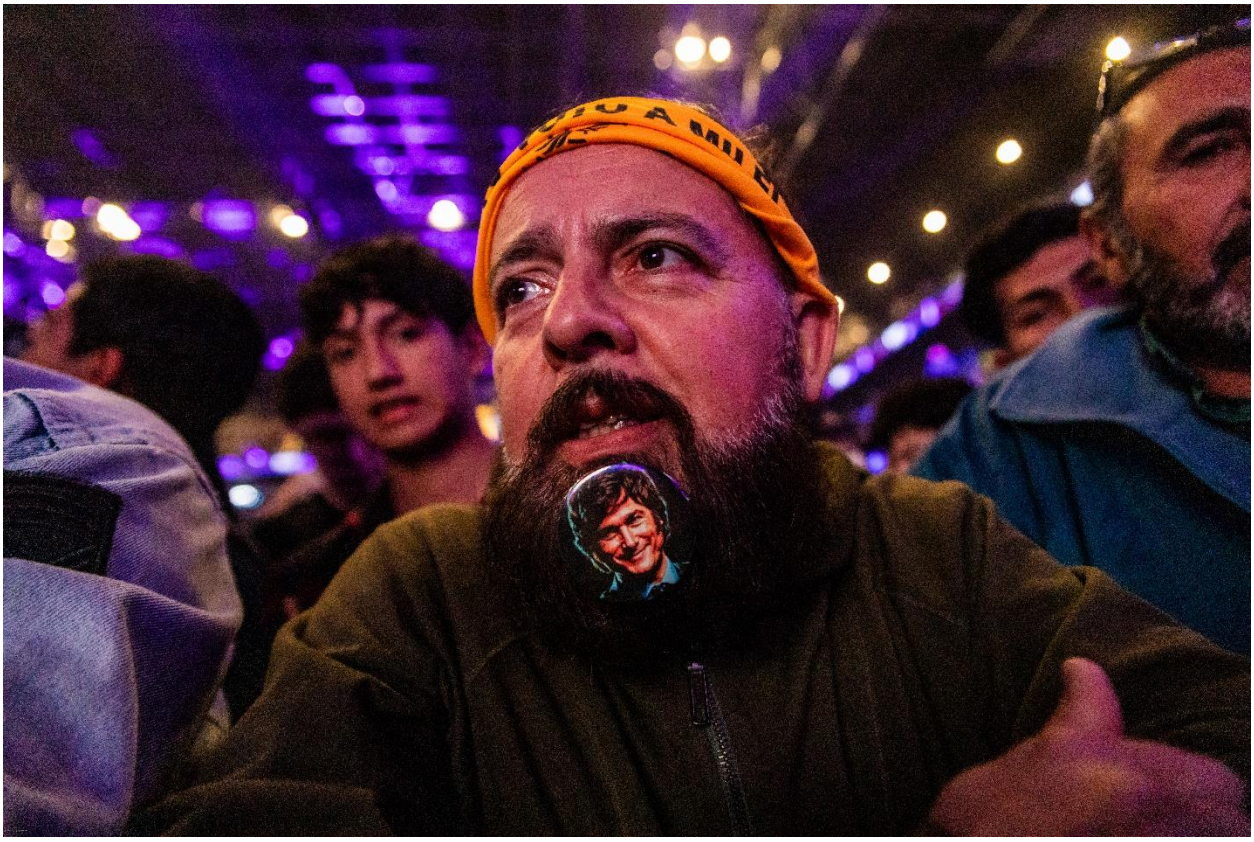

Photo: MidiaNinja (CC BY-NC 2.0).

Policy is central

Upon taking office, Milei sought to bypass the legislative branch by declaring a state of emergency, aiming to secure sweeping powers over economic, financial, security, energy, and administrative matters. Central to this effort was the 'omnibus law,' a 646-article project designed to implement emergency measures, including limiting public spending, enforcing strict fiscal control, curbing social protests, and expanding privatisation in key sectors, such as the national bank. However, Milei's agenda quickly met institutional resistance. Both the Chamber and the judiciary struck down the labour reform element (30/01/2024), and the courts ruled it unconstitutional for the executive branch to unilaterally dismantle public sector organs (06/02/2024). As a result, the omnibus law collapsed when its legislative approval deadline passed. This highlights a core point in our argument: political practice is not only shaped by rhetoric but equally—if not more—by policy implementation. While Milei's rhetoric championed collective and individual freedom, his policy actions revealed a personalised, top-down approach to governance. This disconnect underscores the importance of understanding policy as a discursive practice, one that actively constructs political identity through action, not just words. Focusing solely on what is 'said' in political discourse is insufficient for grasping the full scope of political dynamics. What is 'done'—through legal and institutional practices—plays a crucial role in shaping political movements and exposing the underlying normative preferences guiding actors and the force of their actions. In Milei's case, while his rhetoric promised radical change, Argentina's deeply embedded institutional habitus resisted such shifts. Beyond institutional constraints, Milei's administration faced widespread public opposition, with over 1.5 million people

protesting by January 22, 2024—the shortest period of public contestation in the country's history. These protests, alongside institutional pushback, illustrate the broader hegemonic struggles within Argentine society, where entrenched socio-political structures resist Milei's disruptive vision. As we argue, policy lies at the heart of this discourse, revealing how political actors are bound by the socio-symbolic frameworks of existing institutional and legal frameworks.

Photo: MidiaNinja (CC BY-NC 2.0).

Fantasy as a cipher

The mimetic and spellbinding aspects of Milei's appearance and facial expressions, vividly replicated and reacted to by his supporters, combined with the centrality of the lion figure, reveal a highly affectively charged sense of virility, a militarised masculinity (Miller-Idriss 2017). This discursive articulation positions Milei as a 'protector'—both as the guarantor and defender of popular enjoyment (Ronderos & Glynos 2023). The violent and transgressive aspects ingrained in this representation are central to his identity construction. On one hand, these elements evoke investment through bodily expressions of overexcitement directed to the identified gestures and signs. On the other hand, they foster a sense of commonality and belonging among supporters through shared rituals, images, and styles. A focus on enjoyment can help further unveil critical aspects of the identificatory dynamics of self-transgression at work in Milei. Their libidinal structure is rooted in key idiosyncratic features of the Argentine cultural habitus. Interestingly, the cathected character of these libidinal investments is reinforced by an internal purge of contested elements. Milei's use of symbols like rock music—historically tied to freedom and anti-dictatorship movements—and handkerchiefs—associated with political action of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and feminism—, taps into a fantasmatic narrative that transforms ontological lack into empirical

loss. Contrary to most analyses of the radical right, which assume that horrific representations are external to the subject (e.g., immigrants or communists), Milei grapples with a horrific representation *within* the 'popular-national' identity, promising to cleanse it. Plainly put, objects that signify the limits of enjoyment, like handkerchiefs or rock, can come to represent precisely the possibility of enjoying fully. This shows that the function of *object a* cannot be simply applied in political analysis to a simple differential (horrific) or equivalential (beatific) representations, for oftentimes discursive elements, perceived as the limitations to enjoying fully, are required in the process of transgression as identificatory supports.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued for a strengthened focus on the role of affect in the construction of political identities. We have observed that large parts of the literature which uses discourse theory to explain identity formation has a heavy preference for text-based sources. We believe that this is insufficient to fully comprehend the mechanisms of identity formation. Instead, we have chosen to accentuate those aspects of discourse theory which do not treat affect or practice as something external to discourse. In doing so, we have also emphasised how signifiers, while always affective, are also situated in a phantasmatic narrative. Drawing on insights from cultural studies and feminist theory, we have identified both methodological and ethical imperatives for broadening the methods used when studying political identities.

We have offered a methodological framework which consists of four main principles: Signifiers are everywhere; Beyond counting words; Policy is central; and Fantasy as a cipher. Through these principles, we contend that affect and practice can (and should) be more prominent in analyses of political identities. Importantly, we suggest not only to look at different types of data as signifiers, but we are also interested in *how* we engage with those signifiers. Using a psychoanalytical framework, we argue that a focus on enjoyment can render affect and practice more legible. We have also proposed that this broadens the definition of the antagonist within discourse theory and moves away from a Schmittian idea of the friend/enemy dichotomy which we find unhelpful in our empirical analysis.

We have applied the four principles to two case studies to show the reader how such analysis can be done. By studying Just Stop Oil in the UK and Milei in Argentina, we have demonstrated that a framework which takes affect and practice seriously is able to uncover identificatory practices which are not obvious in text. Importantly, we have also shown how those practices form part of phantasmatic narratives, which can also explain their success. We believe that this perspective has the potential to greatly enrich discourse theory and, more broadly, enhance political analysis by following an affect- and practice-based research strategy in a way that can supplement/complement text/speech-centred approaches.

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