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Returning to the Empirical after the Discursive Turn?

A Response to Hubert Seiwert

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Ernesto

I'm not saying that global warming did not exist independently of the discourse which called it global warming, because that would be absurd. What I'm saying is that global warming is a way of classifying something which is there with...

[*End of tape 1*]

Roy

... you admit that it is existentially intransitive with respect to discourse, but then want to take it back to the level of the signifier or signified and say that this object only exists in my discursive constructions. In other words, you are contradicting yourself to say, 'Here, that thing has a reference independently of human beings', but at the same time you are not having a rigorous enough concept of reference, you are pulling the referent back to the level of transitive, to its constitution in discourse. (Laclau and Bhaskar 1998, 14).

Reading Hubert Seiwert's critical realist perspective on the study of religion, I became very intrigued by his specific concern with the study of religion as an empirical discipline and the urgency with which he voices his concerns. In the subchapter "Separation of Historical Research and Theoretical Discourses in the Study of Religion" he implies that the empirical study of religion has been brought with its back to the wall by theoretical discourses and critics of the history of religion coming from the cognitive science of religion and "the so-called Critical Religion approach" (Seiwert 2020, 210). The urgent need to return to the empirical after the discursive turn seems to be one of the underlying messages of his text.

I want to start my response from a reconstruction and discussion of Seiwert's notion of the empirical as laid out in his text. I will argue that the underlying issue is not realism vs. anti-realism, as Seiwert suggests, but rather foundationalism vs. post-foundationalism. Secondly, while the empirical cannot be arrested in a non-

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discursive, stable foundation (intransitive reality), it can be grounded in the iterative struggle of scholars for the truth-value of their statements grounded in a reflexive and theorized observation of the social world.

Seiwert fleshes out the meaning of ‘empirical’ largely on page 213, beginning with the claim that “empirical disciplines aim to produce true knowledge about the world”. He goes on to explain that discursive communities define the criteria by which truth claims are measured. In the present case, the discursive community consists of scholars who understand the study of religion as an empirical discipline. He presupposes thus a discursive community of scholars united by the understanding of the study of religion as an empirical discipline and agreeing upon what is to be considered true or false in an empirical discipline. Though he later on states that this community “reflect[s] on the methods of how to arrive at statements of fact” and that historians need to provide evidence according to intersubjectively accepted methodological rules, there is no reference to the struggles, disagreements, methodological debates, personal interests, institutions and material structures that are part of these discursive communities. The verbs “agree” and “reflect” veil these powerful dynamics in their unmarked neutrality. In general, the socio-linguistic concept of discursive (discourse) community and similar notions such as community of practice or speech community have been criticized for their tendency to reify idealised and homogenous notions of communities (see for instance Kim and Vorobel 2017, 276). In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault (1981, 62–63) writes that “[societies of discourse] function to preserve or produce discourses, but in order to make them circulate in a closed space, distributing them only according to strict rules, and without the holders being dispossessed by this distribution.” This more ‘troubled’ perspective on discursive communities leads us to, among others, two questions: What are the exact rules that scholarship in the study of religion has to apply in research in order to be labelled “empirical”? And what is thereby excluded?

Going through the text (in particular pages 213–216), I can discern the following claims concerning the empirical:

1. Empirical disciplines presuppose a reality independent of researchers.
2. Knowledge produced by researchers somehow needs to refer to this reality.
3. Empirical arguments necessarily refer to facts that exist independently of the academic discourse.
4. The empirical study of religion does not confine itself to the analysis of discourse, but also includes things “that discourses are about or that are not even conceptualised in the discourses under consideration” (Seiwert 2020, 216).

Let us start with claim 4: The term “discourse” appears here in its widespread popular usage as debate or talk about a specific topic or thing. However, within

the family of discourse theories, discourses are not simply thought of as a collection of linguistic products (texts) or linguistic elements united by a shared theme. Rather, discourses include language and go beyond language by comprising materialisations, subject positions and practices. I lack the space here in order to delve deeper into the different intricate conceptualisations of discourse, the genealogy of the concept and its role in (empirical!) discourse analysis. I will therefore continue here for the sake of argument with the common ground of discourse theory and analysis in its poststructuralist variation: the (social) world is constituted through relations of difference. This means that no single element of social reality is able to constitute itself through its own positive essence or nature, but only in relation to that which it is not or from which it is different. Furthermore, there is no grounding principle that fixes and stabilizes these relations of difference. In this sense, discourse theories—like most theories or approaches classified as poststructuralist—are post-foundationalist. Such a post-foundationalist perspective should not be confounded with anti-realism or idealism. Rather, discourse theories are very much interested in the constitution, genesis and transformation of institutions, material structures, objects, bodies and practices. Therefore, the possibility of a world beyond discourse is not necessarily rejected. What is rejected is the claim that objects—yes, also tables, mountains and climate change—constitute themselves outside of the discursive conditions of their appearance as bounded objects or structures (see Dyk 2012, 189; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 107; for a discussion with reference to the study of religion, see Martin 2019 and Harrison 2019).

Returning to the list of claims about the empirical outlined above, from a discourse theory perspective, claim 1 (Empirical disciplines presuppose a reality independent of researchers) could be acceptable but is irrelevant. For sure, objects can be constituted in any discourse, not just in the academic discourse. However, as soon as researchers and scholars start making claims or produce articulations concerning an object, they are part of its discursive reproduction. More importantly, however, we cannot say anything about the reference between this supposed non-discursive reality and our own social world. From a post-foundationalist perspective, we cannot remedy this by refining concepts, methods, technologies and so on in order to get closer to a supposedly objective, naturally given reality. Furthermore, there is no need to establish such a reference between our world and a reality beyond the discursive (claim 2), since we as subjects, the social, and the material are effects and elements of discourses. When Seiwert writes that “the objects of social research are real if and because they have real effects that can be observed, and they are intransitive because their existence does not depend on the investigations of which they are objects”, a post-foundational discourse theory perspective would answer: Scholars do not magically call objects

into existence by just naming them. Scholars co-constitute the world and the objects within it by citing, iterating or re-producing that which is already existing their social world. Here, Judith Butler's (1997) translation of Jacques Derrida's notion of iterability into social theory is insightful in order to understand such a discursive post-foundationalist perspective: A practice is a citation of an earlier practice without being the exact copy and without having an origin. Every citation bears the opportunity to break with the previous context and, thereby, with its signification. Therefore, repetition involves the potential for a deferral or shift. Butler uses this concept in order to theorize and maintain the possibility of resistance against hegemonic power through wrong citation and skilful parody. Therefore, the production of the social world or of social order is an ambivalent process in which we are doomed to cite or repeat in order to be legible and produce meaning. However, every repetition (citation) engenders the potential for a shift. Identity, coherence or materiality is in such an anti-essentialist perspective the effect of a performative iteration which will always remain instable due to the temporality of repetition and citation (see Schäfer 2015, 2016). To break it down, a table and climate change become objective due to the repetition of practices (or citational chains) constantly producing, individuating and actualising both. "The things of the world do not individuate themselves" (Martin 2019, 168). Therefore, yes, the objects of the social world have effect and can thus be observed. But not because they are intransitive, but because they are caught up in a potentially endless chain of citational practices through which they congeal or sediment into seemingly fixed structures (for a similar argument, see Maltese 2019). In this line of argument, claim 3 (empirical arguments necessarily refer to facts that exist independently of the academic discourse) constitutes an impossibility, since facts are truth claims and, as Seiwert acknowledges, discursive communities define what is to be considered true or not, also in academia.

Does a post-foundationalist perspective lead us to the point where "anything goes", rendering empirical work futile, since the knowledge or truth it produces is just as good as any other truth claim coming from, let's say, supporters of Donald Trump, Sufi adepts or journalists? A quick glance at the abundance of work in discourse analysis, ethnography, global entangled history, as well as genealogical approaches all inspired by discourse theory in the last decades already suggests a negative answer. Scholars of religion have added to the wealth of post-foundationalist empirical work in recent years (in the German context for example Bergunder 2016; Maltese 2017; Stegmann 2017). The grand names usually identified with poststructuralism and discourse theory object to a relativist nihilism. According to Foucault, we escape the domination of truth "not by playing a game that is a complete stranger to the game of truth, but in playing it otherwise or in playing another game, another set, other trumps in the game of truth" (1987, 126).

The fixed, ahistorical, objective and universal foundation in whatever guise gives way to the multiple conflicts for a different foundation, for temporary stabilisation and for its simultaneous de-stabilisation (Dyk 2012, 191). “If we live in an era of deconstruction”, writes Ernesto Laclau (1994, 1–2), “it is because the crisis of essentialist universalism as a self-asserted ground has led our attention to the contingent *grounds* (in the plural) of its emergence and to the complex processes of its construction”. At stake is not the rejection of a foundation in principle (anti-foundationalism) but the problematisation of the repressive character of purported ultimate justifications.

What does this mean for the study of religion as an empirical discipline? It is of no use to ground the empirical in an intransitive reality outside of discourse and untouched by theorisation. Rather, we need to engage in the work of finding new grounds, filling the void, destabilising it—and doing this all over again. Other disciplines have already embarked on this endeavour with reference to the empirical (for sociology, see Adkins and Lury 2009). In these continuous reflexive investigations into the struggles over truths, not any idea has the same truth value and an idea does not become true because somebody wants it to be true (Angermüller 2018). We have to show that our truth claims are more valuable in comparison to other truth claims when it comes to the observation of the social world by a thorough post-foundational theorisation of the core practice of empirical research: observation. The discursive turn was inspired by a different reading of the observation of the social world. This has changed the empirical endeavour but not abolished it.

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