

Dislocation

Zoya Masoud

From a medical point of view, '[a] dislocation happens when extreme force is put on a ligament, causing the ends of 2 bones to come apart' (Johns Hopkins Medicine 2019).¹ After such an incident, two bones are out of place, potentially causing the patient much pain until they meet at the joint again. From a linguistic point of view, the prefix 'dis-' means 'do the opposite of', 'deprived of (a specified quality, rank, or object)', 'exclude or expel from', 'opposite of, absence of', or simply 'not' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The term consequently refers to the absence of location, the opposite of location or being deprived of being located and the not located. Etymologically, it is derived from the Latin word 'locus', referring to a specific place within a 'topographical structure' that has been 'pushed "out of place"'. (Marchart 2018, 94; 2021, 107). These insights from different disciplines indicate a state of exception, which sounds as if it should and could be repaired by putting it into a location within the structure of topography. The anomaly of being out of location connotes a deviation from a set of 'common rules' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Consequently, the concept reveals two aspects. First, only when taking it as given that everything has a location does the dislocated appear to be different and abnormal, dislocatory to a regular sequence of events, which were supposed, whenever it happens to result in the same outcomes. Secondly, this regularity is to be observed only in comparison with the irregular.

This line of thought derives from post-foundational and post-structural thinking, which perceives regularity (e.g., the social) as founded on absolute reason, although the latter is simply impossible or absent. The absence of absolute reason(s) or the last-instance constitutes regularity (the social) (Landau, Pohl and Roskamm 2021, 9). In these schools of thought, the 'world' or 'reality' is understood as unstable and unsolid, which is 'always receding, always emerging from a fundamental void or absence of grounds' (ibid, 22). The goal of post-foundationalism is not to blow up all grounds. On the contrary, it places grounds under focus to study their instability and spot their cracks; it is preoccupied with the rest of the alleged whole. This theorizing has the potential to investigate how the foundations are continuously newly inscribed and (re-)formed to understand what hinders them from being complete.

This contribution ventures into the main theoretical features of dislocation. It proposes dislocation as a lens to examine the presence of absent last-instance

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and to approach global dis:connectivity. Especially that the latter underscores the importance of ‘the active absence of connections in global contexts’, as discussed in the introduction to this volume (→ **Introduction**). This is relevant in this particular moment of time that Achille Mbembe features on the one hand as ‘a time of planetary entanglement’ to describe the contemporary world. This is marked globally by massive efforts for efficiency through advanced technologies resulting in unprecedented acceleration and ‘intensification of connections’, ‘fast capitalism’, and ‘soft-power warfare’ (Mbembe 2019, 93). On the other hand, Mbembe points out that each entanglement is contaminated with ‘contraction, containment, and enclosure’ (ibid, 96). Roland Wenzlhuemer argues further that connective and dis-connective aspects ‘reciprocally constitute each other’ (Wenzlhuemer 2022, 13). The dislocatory lens offers an approach to study global dynamics, revealing both the proliferation of connections and their inherent disconnects. It provides a nuanced understanding of the field of global dis:connectivity to explore the anxieties around structural tensions and to open up a horizon of possibilities for studying regularity, its shortcomings and its potential. By emphasizing the conditions of the exclusive nature of any foundation, the dislocatory lens seeks to grasp the constitutive character of disruptions, disconnections and irregularity in constituting each continuity, connection and regularity.

Ernesto Laclau calls such regularity simply a ‘system of meaning’, be it structure, topography, identity, discourse, society or ‘space’ (Laclau 2010, 41). According to Laclau, each system of meaning engenders stability by comparing and stressing the differences with a ‘constitutive outside’, which is ‘radically’ different from it and cannot be integrated within it (Marchart 2014, 164). Due to this irreducible character, the constitutive outside prevents the discourse from being a ‘complete totalization’: To have an inside and contrast it to an outside, the totality is characterized by being a closed terrain with the boundaries to shut out the excess of meaning from the outside. However, these attempts at domesticating the infinitude of meanings from outside are only partial, as the process of fixation of all meanings in a system is consequently impossible: 1) The system will never be whole by itself, as it needs the outside with which it contrasts its inside radically. 2) The system is infiltrated, traversed, penetrated, (Roskamm 2017, 179; Marchart 2019, 107; Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 127) and permeated by the outside. Because the system’s foundation is located outside it, the structure has limited capacity to control the infinite flow of meanings from the outside over time. Laclau defines this ‘constitutive ambivalence’ as dislocation, which infiltrates the inside.

Michel Foucault describes how every discourse claims homogeneity within its elements. This homogeneity is presented by comparing objects of the discourse to the unintegrable and irreducible ‘Other’ in the discourse itself. He names the discourse here a ‘Same’ (Foucault 1971, 23–72ff.) and the irreducible outside an

‘Other’. Thus, every ‘Same’ is dependent on an ‘Other’. By contrasting the latter, every ‘Same’ identifies itself.² If ‘such an “Other” is absent, it must be invented.’

Jacques Derrida provides critical insights into how the Same contrasts itself with the Other and how dislocation infiltrates. He coins the term ‘ontopology’ – an amalgamation of two words: ontology and topology – to describe the process of establishing certainties within a system of meaning. This process involves ‘linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being to its situation.’ While ontology is concerned with what exists, the topos seeks to attribute its elements to determinate meanings. Any stability is necessarily localized and dependent on the present determination of locality (Derrida 2006, 102–3).

Derrida analyses a character from literature, the ghost of Hamlet’s father, to introduce the spectre, a dislocated figure pushed out of its place, which haunts, paying unpredictable visits. For the ghost, ‘there are only displacements’ (Derrida 2006, 169–170). Its subject is unidentifiable; it cannot be seen, localized, or fixed in any form, hovering between hallucination and perception. As it oscillates between life and death, presence and absence, it makes essentialities vacillate (Davis 2005). The spectre owns a body of absence and possesses a ‘paradoxical incorporation’; it is anxious, ‘impatient and nostalgic for a redemption’. Its ambition is to become a spirit, which it will never become, as it will never die (Derrida 2006, 5). It is condemned to be a ‘deferred spirit’ and will unpredictably delay the pre-supposed chain of sequences or rupture the imposed ‘linearity of consecutive historical development’ (Roskamm 2017, 333–34). Its dislocation represents discontinuity to this linearity and dis:connectivity to the connection. This dislocated figure – the ghost – is an event, thus temporal, unforeseeable, unholdable, unexpected, and usually, its visits are inconvenient.

Laclau’s antagonism theory and its considerations on sedimentation and original institution are significant here. Sedimentation represents the totality’s attempts to gain objectivity through repetitive chains of sequences, creating a sense of predictability and naturalizing repetition in social practices. For instance, we all assume that the church bells will ring every Sunday or that the Mosque will call to prayer five times a day, though there is no biological or natural necessity to repeat and perform these events. The routinization conceals the moment of laying the first layer of sedimentation or the ‘moment of the original institution’ (Laclau 2010, 34). Grounding a system of meaning leaves room for only one foundation to be laid without any other alternatives (Landau, Pohl and Roskamm 2021, 20) and marks a ‘moment of exclusions’, denying the validity of any alternatives except for their

2 Allan Megill recalls Kojève’s exegesis of Hegel: ‘every “master” needs a “slave”’. (Megill 1985, 192; Kojève 1980).

claimed certainty (Marchart 2007, 139–42). In a nutshell, each positivity is based on negation, and all objectivities could have been different. This concludes what contingency means. In the moment of the original institution, the structure localizes (or tries to and necessarily fails to holistically localize) other potential foundations in the domain of the Other and the dislocated.

Sedimentation and original institution do not oppose each other. Rather, the latter witnessed the violence of laying the first layer of the former. Any ground achieves the excluding of its alternatives by integrating struggle over the power resources used to fix and localise meaning in a certain hierarchy (Marchart 2021, 105). Though that moment of the original institution has fallen into oblivion, it always has the potential to be reactivated and thus unpredictably happens again as a dislocation. Because the systemization of meaning rejects all Others, they cannot be integrated into the horizon of expectation. Being unanticipated makes them threatening (Marchart 2018, 94). Nevertheless, this threat is constitutive for the system and emerges simultaneously when the sedimentation starts. Antagonism, according to Laclau, is not only the elements that are separated on two sides, but rather the borders and elements together constitute the antagonism. The latter only exists through difference. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau approached this term as the ‘identical something’ that binds the chain as a shared orientation toward ‘what is not’: its negative, threatening exterior (Marchart 2021, 105). Thus, according to Derrida, the ghost is as ‘archaic as the archaism that it has always dislodged’ (Derrida 2006, 103), namely as the totality itself. Dislocation is negated by the structure and contaminates all foundations with contingency.

Striving to lay a foundation is a defence mechanism of the structure to control the uncontrollable future and project objectivity by predicting what will happen next. In this context, the dislocated spectre sounds frightening, an unpredictable, unholdable ghost, which distorts (if not destroys) the image of objective structure. The system of meaning tries to blind all fears inside it with the Other (Derrida 2006, 218) and faces all dislocatory events with much irritation and anxiety. Precisely this act of being frightened by a ghost conjures the spectre and makes the ghost present in its absence. But this fear is nothing but fear of one’s own sedimentation process and repression of all other alternatives to one’s own version of structuring since the moment of the original institution. The ghost of dislocation haunts each structure and threatens its grounds with an abyss: One’s own fears, according to Derrida, of becoming the ghost of oneself and for oneself. Sedimentation features a ‘make-one-self-fear’ when being frightened of oneself (Derrida 2006, 199). Fear of the moment of reactivation comes from the inability to predict dislocation, as the event of the impossible. Thus, the ‘outside inhabits the inside’ (Roskamm 2017, 181).

If we understand dis:connectivity as challenging features of temporal succession (Dogramaci 2022, 39), dislocation will be a figure of the past and a figure of the

future carrying the promise of change (Roskamm 2017, 339–352). Still, it is undetermined what exactly this change is. Ghosts do no more than disavow the undeniable itself (Derrida 2006, 123). The dislocatory moment of reactivation does not mean returning to the original institution, but rather rediscovering it when new antagonisms and contingency take over to constitute a new structure with a new objectivity. Only then does the fragility of the sedimented structure become apparent (Marchart 2018, 93). When the Arabic Spring erupted in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, its dislocatory moments exposed the vulnerabilities of seemingly stable longstanding regimes in those countries. However, the outcomes varied: Tunisia and Egypt underwent a relatively peaceful shift towards democratic elections, while other countries were drawn to war. The Bahraini government effectively quelled the uprising, while the Syrian regime endured 14 years of armed conflicts before dramatically falling. These events initially held the promise of change, but ultimately resulted in diverse consequences, giving rise to different discourses than those they initially disrupted and dislocated (or at least aimed to disrupt and dislocate).

A prominent example of such a system of meaning is the concept of a nation state, which is as young as the 19th century. Then, many of these states had to be drawn on maps to indicate their boundaries. However, in the 21st century, we take it as given that whether you like it or not, where your passport is issued determines what you are (on the questions of ‘where are you from?’ and ‘what are you?’ see Appiah 2019, xi). The French nation excludes all Germans from being French, all Russians are not South Africans, and all Georgians are not Turks. This structure of the nation state presents itself as the only legitimate way to maintain security and distribute resources in specific territories; it is, we have often been told, the unquestionable source of identification. One can illustrate this by means of the COVID-19 lockdown policies, which showed how the structure of nation states was taken advantage of to deliver vaccination and block (or at least limit) trans-border movements. It was as if keeping people in different territories was natural to manage the crisis. The moment of the original institution (sometime in the 19th century) was absorbed and transformed into the alleged objectivity of the structure. However, the pandemic lockdown was only an extreme case of closing borders. Closed borders in the face of immigrants have been the structural ‘solution’ (Mbembe 2019, 98) to maintain security and preserve the claimed objective concept of state. Nevertheless, the state (inside, Same) will never exist without the refugees (the constitutive outside, Other, the dislocation). Nikolai Roskamm argued that ‘welcoming culture’ (*Willkommenskultur* in German) is a term in which many ghosts find themselves at home, which is less about the humanistic activity of civil society but instead has something of a constitutive character to it (Roskamm 2017, 349).

In contrast to the medical term, dislocation does not describe a pathology of the space. Rather, it accompanies each grounding, allowing it to exist while preventing it from being a complete totality. This paradoxical condition of each system of meaning is featured with contingency and conflict, which are the propellants of any discourse. As identical repetition is impossible, each iteration is condemned to aberration, according to Laclau. This means that events of dislocation happen daily, but they are noticeable only when they are intensified or when the system dismantles itself. The absent foundation of objectivity can be perceived only retrospectively, when it is on the brink of an abyss and collapse.

Each discourse exists only through its dislocation and adopts new articulations to control the flow of temporality. When the system fails to hegemonize this flow, the moment of the political or reactivation manifests itself, and a new discourse emerges. Dislocation is, in that sense, not only a theoretical reflection and concept but also offers a category for analysis within dis:connectivity to examine the contingent, historical, and power-based moments or events of globalisation. It is an attempt to practice ‘radicalized, unfinishable and infinite critique’ (Roskamm 2017, 335), in which we do not chase the spectres away but rather sort out, critique, ‘keep close by, and allow to come back’ (Derrida 2006, 109). To explore through the lens of dislocation means, and here I borrow Roskamm’s parlance, to ‘gain access to the absent present bodies of knowledge’ (Roskamm 2017, 333). Dis:connectivity provides a novel counter-stance to the dichotomy of connection/disconnection, while the dislocation lens stresses the constitutive and irreducible nature of that eliminated from the narrative: Each regularity depends on its excluded irregular. The latter is the condition of the former that affords its possibility, which is the one that makes its totality impossible.

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