

***We and the terrorist Other: On the construction of the French and Danish national political ‘we’***

- *An analysis of the public debates in France and Denmark after the terror attacks of January and February 2015*

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**Abstract:**

A central claim of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) is the need of any identity to delimit itself from a constitutive *Other*. When it comes to the articulation of a national political identity – a People - explicit attempts of such articulations are relatively rare: in day to day politics, agonistic relations tend to dominate the political landscape. However, the public debates following the terrorist attacks in France (January 2015) and Denmark (February 2015) several political leaders addressed this very question in explicit antagonistic terms: one of the central issues of these debates were exactly that of the identification of a particular national People in relation to the Other.

The two events took place within few days, and triggered equivalent, yet different, articulations in the two countries. Apart from that France and Denmark are interesting cases since they belong to different tradition of state- and nationhood, the republican, universalist and the cultural, respectively. Whereas Mouffe has argued liberal democracies are based on allegiance to the principles of freedom and equality for all (and the left should seek their radicalisation, rather than replacement), in any actual articulation of basic principles, we do not only see specific interpretations, we (of course) also find their articulations with other principles and logics.

Through an analysis of a selection of articulations from the two debates, we compare and discuss the way the two debates construct the national *We* through a chain of equivalence of a series of central signifiers linking constitutive principles and logics to the national political communities, i.e. the People. Intimately linked with the question of *We* is the question of the Other. A central, but as of yet, undeveloped challenge in the Laclau and Mouffe tradition, is how we can analyse the 'We' by way of the exclusions of the Other.

Finally, normatively, our analysis provides elements for a democratic criticism of the construction of the national in France and Denmark.

## 1. Introduction:

This paper provides an analysis of political leaders' public statements immediately following the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo and Krudtønden in early 2015 in France and Denmark, as well as the following attacks in France on Bataclan and in Nice. Our specific focus is the way in which the responses address and articulate the national-political 'we' which had been attacked. What kind of 'we' is it being attacked by the terrorist 'them'? Such explications are rare. Normally the 'inner' divisions and competitions tend to dominate. But when the political community is (or considers it self as) threatened (or in states of grand transitions) the 'basic principles' are stated explicitly.

The way leaders articulate basic principles is significant from a number of perspectives. Firstly, there is the historical one, given by the simple observation that it is rare it happens. From the perspective of discourse theory any identity is shaped by its limits, by the way it negates its 'other'. It is fair to say terrorism to a very large extent occupies the position of the constitutive other for western democracies. We therefore expect reactions to the two attacks to address 'constitutive' matters, what might be called their 'basic principles'. In the theory's vocabulary we expect to find articulations of the hegemonic discourses shaping (the dominant) common sense of the national-political 'we'. Any 'we' must be delimited from a 'them', inclusive of democracy. Democracy is not universal inclusion, but based on specific principles. These can be negated, and as such draws boundaries between a democratic 'we' vs a non/ anti democratic 'they'. Democracy is special in that it allows for inclusion of more differences than any other political regime, inclusive of ongoing questioning of its own foundations, but even democracies hold certain principles which cannot be negated.

Both Denmark and France are liberal democracies, and therefore, as Mouffe has argued based on the principles of equality and liberty for all. Our use of the term 'basic principles' follows Mouffe's (Mouffe 2005), i.e. they are universals, which by definition can never be realised as such, but will always be objects of numerous interpretations. In this paper we analyse the dominant interpretation of the basic principles of equality and liberty for all in Denmark and France respectively. However, as Mouffe's is a normative argument – liberal (and radical) democracies *ought* to base themselves on equality and liberty for all – when doing historical analysis one can expect to will find a much more blurred picture than 'simply' specific interpretations of equality and liberty. That is indeed the case in this analysis.

One of our *leitmotifs* tricking our interest was we expected to find the two national-political communities placed on each side of the *political vs. cultural* divide. Whereas France incarnates (almost is) the political, universal imagination of the political community, basing herself purely on the universal principles of *libeté, égalité et fraternité*, Denmark belongs to the cultural tradition of commitments to a particular tradition and common history. As we shall see, this expectation was not unfounded, but (of course) historical reality proved to be much more complex.

We also have an analytical strategic ambition with the analysis. One of discourse theory's (and most branches of 'post-structuralism') basic claims is the constitutive relation of the 'the other' to 'one': 'we' are ultimately 'not-they'. However discourse theory has not provided analytical tools for capturing 'we' through the negations of 'them'. When starting out we had the ambition of helping to provide tools for such an endeavour.

Summing up, these different perspectives meet in the following specific aim of the paper: To make explicit and compare the dominant discourses of Denmark and France, respectively, as national-political communities as they were articulated in confrontation with and as responses to the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo and Krudttønden in early 2015. Partly to be able to identify possible differences in the articulations of the hegemonic basic principles, partly to open up a – informed – debate on the state of democracy in the two national political communities.

Before introducing the central concepts guiding our analysis, one final point. Why focus on the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and Krudttønden? None of the two attacks were the first. France has a long and sad story of terrorism, and even in Denmark there has been attacks before, in 1985. However, the responses to Charlie Hebdo and Krudttønden stand out, with marches, a number of public speeches and debates following. Of course a more thorough analysis of the national-political communities would have to include material from other incidences as well. However, with the 'symbolic weight' these two attacks acquired they are quite obvious choices.

## 2. Theoretical considerations

In our reading, the most central term of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is *articulation*, the practise of contingently linking elements so that their identity is modified (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The basic anti-essentialist claims of the theory is expressed through articulation. No social objects, no identities hold essences, guaranteeing an inner kernel despite eventual 'surface fluctuations'. There are no terrorism *as such*, no true French- or Danish-ness lurking behind their appearances. Whatever the Danish or French national-political communities are, it is only due to contingent historical articulations forming them in specific ways – ways which 'essentially' could have been otherwise, and which most often is questioned by alternative articulations.

This is the logic behind the notion of hegemony. In a radicalisation of Gramsci's writings laclau and Mouffe universalise the term, underscoring the general impossibility of any proper universality. The dominant imagination of the French national-political community is not a manifestation of true French-ness, it is a specific hegemony. More precisely, in a successful hegemonic relationship, some particular (interpretation) comes to stand in for, to 'incarnate' the impossible universal 'France'. The more successful the more the particularity of the hegemonic articulation is forgotten, and the more it takes the form of a general common sense.

Since articulations and hegemonic relations are contingent – they could have been otherwise, and might not have been at all – there is an element of exclusion involved. All the attempts at alternative articulations which were not realised must have been excluded one way or another. Such exclusions can take on many forms. They may be day to day routine acceptance of not getting one's way all the time. They may be agonistic relations, in which opponents recognise each other's legitimacy, but where the losing part maintains its right to keep struggling for the realisation of its articulations; or finally, antagonistic relations, in which the excluded other is no longer considered legitimate, but as a threat to the very identity of the other part.

As we have mentioned in the introduction, this goes for democracies as well. Democracies accepts, are based upon, disagreements. But despite the 'for all' in their basic principles, even democracies need to draw boundaries towards identities which cannot be considered agonistic. Where such boundaries must be drawn is obviously a matter of dispute, but (at least according to the theory) they must be there. As such the articulations of such borders – and the enemy behind them – are highly significant for understanding the identity of actual existing democracies. This is the main

focus of our analysis. However, as our aim is to make explicit the ‘basic principles’ of each of the two communities, our analysis deviates from a ‘normal’ pluralising analysis of hegemonic projects. We do not seek to find the alternative articulations to the dominant ones, but rather seek to shed light on what appears to be *the* hegemonic articulation in the two settings (respectively).

In a discourse theoretical interpretation basic principles are hegemonic. This has two central consequences. Firstly, ‘basic’ does not refer to foundations, but rather to an ‘ethos’, points for identification. It means they are always only relative, never simply present. Most of the time they have a ‘shadow-like’ existence, and are only brought to the fore, explicit articulated, in exceptional circumstances. Secondly, as all articulations, they only exist in articulated, particularised forms, and are always contested to a greater or lesser extent. A central analytical question is therefore *which* articulations to take as indicative of the ‘actual’ basic principles. Our answer to that question is primarily given by formal positions: head of states, but also leaders of major oppositional parties, etc. Thirdly, as we are dealing with specific hegemonic articulations, we expect to find more than simply different interpretations of equality and liberty for all. Any actual hegemony is a set of articulations drawing on many sources, traditions and specific historical conditions. E.g. in France, the moment of *laïcité* (secularism) holds a prominent place, and it cannot simply be seen as an interpretation of equality and liberty. In Denmark, as we have already mentioned, the ‘cultural tradition’ means many of the universal principles are presented as ‘Danish values’.

Lastly a comment on the very object of our study. We have referred to this as the ‘national-political’ community. We do not carry out a ‘cultural study’ of national culture and history in the two settings. We do not claim to be able to say much about cultural forms of French- and Danish-ness. But we do claim there is hegemonic ‘national-political’ identities shaping the ‘general’, overall, (more-or-less) democratic ‘we’ in the two countries: the two we’s which were attacked in the Charlie Hebdo and Krudttønden- incidences early 2015.

### 3. Analytical strategic considerations and methodology

#### 3.1 Analytical strategic considerations

In order to conduct a discourse analysis of the public debates in France and Denmark following the terrorist attacks in early 2015, some analytical challenges in the Essex-school style Discourse Theory (DT) must be considered.

First, as the empirical material consists of a series of texts from public debates, which we define as various *articulations*, the discursive practice under analysis here is consequently limited to textual material. Following Laclau and Mouffe (1985), an articulation can take a various set of forms, including gestures, pictures, symbols etc., whereas our analysis can be restrained to only including articulations of textual character. We define, however, ‘texts’ in a broad sense: a text can be both a written document, a filmed speech or a press release. Any text which has been signed by a social actor is furthermore to be considered an *utterance*: it communicates and produces meaning through the installation of a discursive (or semantic) link between discursive elements that do not have any necessary relationship beforehand (Liisberg 2017). A text is in that sense considered the very materialization of a discursive practice which we shall name, following Laclau and Mouffe (1985), *articulation*.

Second, as the concept of articulation is defined through a series of analytical concepts, we suggest a reading of these concepts as being equally present and concretized in any text: consequently, every term, in as far as it participates in the production of meaning, is a *discursive element*. When articulated in a specific text, the element is furthermore considered a *discursive moment* being a term associated with the meaning evoked by the particular utterance (Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

Any articulation constructs relations of *equivalence* and *difference* between the discursive elements by linking them to each other. The meaning communicated by an articulation is always the result of a discursive construction. We call the materialization of this construction *chain of equivalence*, which designates the form of relationship between discursive moments combined in the text through which a certain meaning is presented. In sum, an utterance can be considered a series of discursive elements which are part of a chain of equivalence materialized in a text.

Some moments, which are part of the same discourse, can gain an oppositional character in an articulation: by drawing boundaries they in turn provides unity to the equivalence. This is the case in the discursive construction of an *antagonistic frontier*. When the position of the enemy is identified, then this position, in its negated form, becomes part of the self-construction represented

by articulation of the political ‘we’. As we shall see, the oppositional moments – the moments identifying the enemy – are just as important in the articulation as the “positive” moments – identifying who ‘we’ are – articulated into the chain of equivalence. The negated moments create inter-discursive relations which can help indicate the presence of an antagonistic frontier in the discursive struggle of meaning (Laclau & Mouffe 2014).

Finally, our analysis aims at identifying hegemonies in concrete articulations, we must therefore discuss how to identify a hegemony in an utterance. We suggest an empirically based solution to this problem, related to the preliminary findings in our empirical material which give some indications of how to identify a hegemonic articulation in a text:

First, the *position of the speaker* in the debate seems to be crucial for the installation of a hegemonic articulation; some speakers are granted more time in the medias, which is both an indication of their centrality as well as arguably making it even more likely they become predominant voices in the debate. In our empirical body, this seems to be the case particularly regarding state leaders (governments, presidents, prime-ministers etc). Secondly, our material indicates a link between the number of times a particular articulation is reproduced and whether or not this articulation is of a hegemonic character. Thus, a statement such as “Nous sommes en guerre” (which was systematically repeated by the French government after every terrorist attack) seems to be of a hegemonic character in the French debate. We suggest that the significant role this statement came to have during the French debate, it is indicated as well as further supported by frequent repetitions by prominent voices in the debate. A last indication of a hegemonic articulation, we argue, is time span between the dislocating event and the appearance of the articulation in the public debate: in the French debate, there has been several attacks over a larger period of time and our reading of the material indicates the presence of unified and hegemonic articulations the sooner after the dislocating event the articulation appears in the public debate<sup>1</sup>.

We will conduct the analysis of hegemonic articulations with these considerations in mind by working on the empirical material resembled into an archive. Before we do so, let us briefly present some methodological reflections and our empirical body of work.

### **3.2 Methodology**

The empirical body of material is a series of texts from each of the two debates. The archive is constituted of 82 texts, mostly of textual/written kind but some also of non-written kind (filmed interviews, press conferences, filmed speeches etc). The texts chosen have all been published

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1 See also Laclau 1990 on this point.

through a major public media. Overall the empirical material included in the archive stems from four cases:

<b>Case</b>	<b>Date of first attack</b>	<b>Time period of collected material</b>	<b>Amount of texts</b>
<i>1: Charlie Hebdo</i>	07-01-15	7/1 2015 – 13/5 2015	26
<i>2: Krudttønden</i>	14-02-15	14/2 2015 – 2/3 2015	24
<i>3: Bataclan</i>	13-11-15	13/11 2015 – 11/12 2015	15
<i>4: Nice</i>	14-07-16	14/7 2016 – 7/10 2016	17

Regarding the concrete analytical tools, we have already above suggested a series of reflections to guide our analytical strategy when approaching texts in the public debates in France and Denmark. We have also suggested some additional considerations to provide solutions to some of the challenges of DT concepts in a methodological context.

Methodologically, an initial reading and coding of the ensemble of texts have been conducted through the qualitative coding program *Nvivo*. This initial analysis helped us identify word frequencies (which indicated a significant presence of the basic principles in the texts as well as other discursive elements in the chain of equivalence), and the co-relation of some codes in the archive, as well providing a general overlook of the texts. On the basis of the initial coding and *Nvivo* results, we then selected a series of “representative” utterances to analyze in detail. We have included, in this paper, some of the analyzed utterances which we found particularly interesting.

## 4. Analysis

In the debates following the shootings at Charlie Hebdo, Paris, and Krudttønden, Copenhagen, during the first months of 2015 it is striking how the terrorist attacks are articulated into a conflictual relationship between what we shall call the national political “we” and the Other, being the terrorists. Generally speaking, in the articulations from the two public debates, it is not only the victims of the shootings – the 17 casualties from the Charlie Hebdo attacks or the two casualties in Copenhagen – which are targeted by the Other. The shootings acquire a symbolic status; what is *actually* targeted by the terrorists is the national political “we” in France and Denmark respectively.

In this section, we provide an analysis of the debates in the two countries. During the analysis we discuss what and how the national political “we” is discursively articulated in the two debates respectively. As we shall see, some signifiers are significant to both of the debates, yet, despite these similarities, our analysis simultaneously reveals a series of differences. In doing so, we wish to identify and describe how the national political community is discursively constructed and how the hegemonic articulations from each of the debates differ from each other.

### 4.1. The Danish public debate (February 2015)

#### 4.1.1. Constructing the Danish ‘we’ through a hegemonic articulation

Speaking to the Danish people on the night of the 16<sup>th</sup> February during a gathering in memory of the victims, the Danish Prime minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt (HTS), states the following:

*We are full of sorrow, we are burdened. How are we supposed to react when terror and hatred hit our country? Our answer is clear: when others try to frighten us and split us apart, then our response will always be to reunite. We are determined in the protection of our values. We insist on our freedom. We take care of each other. (...) Let us unite and continue the everyday life that we know. Say, what we think. Believe what we believe. Live our life in freedom. Be who we are. That is what we are doing tonight. We stand side by side. Muslims, Jews, Christians. Humans of different political beliefs. We stand side by side as Danes. Just like we stand side by side with the democratic and free countries next to ours. (Archive text: 2:04).*

In this speech, it is striking how HTS emphasizes two aspects of the attacks: first she installs a conflictual relationship between the ‘we’ and the Other, then she articulates what the national political community (‘we’) consists of. The latter is shaped by terms such as ‘way of living’, i.e. a reference to a common identity (e.g. ‘be what we are’). The underlining of the cultural aspects of the political ‘we’, seems to indicate what we shall understand as a ‘cultural discursive logic’, which

is in fact rather recurrent in the Danish debate<sup>2</sup>. This particular logic is especially present in the prime minister's speech. In a press release, published right after the attacks, we find a quit clear chain of equivalence providing meaning to the political community from above:

*No one should get away with attacking the open, free and democratic Danish society*  
(Archive text 2:03)

Whereas the antagonism is clearly articulated in the speech (through the use terms such as 'hits' or 'others try to frighten us and split us apart'), the press release articulates the political national community through a chain of equivalence including the basic principles (democracy, freedom).

Thus, the discourse constitutes a discursive relation between the signifiers « open », « free », « democratic », « Danish », which again is identified as the 'we' of the antagonism. Adding to the speech, this chain of equivalence is inscribed in a discursive logic of being grounded on specific, Danish cultural particularities.

In sum, in the articulation of an antagonistic relationship between the terrorists (as the aggressor) and the Danish people (as the victim), the cultural logic on which the articulation of the national political community is founded relates the chain of equivalence of signifiers such as 'free', 'democratic', to something particularly 'Danish'. These three aspects are important to what we shall consider the hegemonic articulation of a Danish political community in the Danish debate, and we find them all represented in the clearest way, in the discourse of the prime minister.

Chronologically, these texts are some of the first texts which appears in the public debate, and they seem to generate a proliferation of articulations of the national political community in the debate (thus, we see a range of texts commenting on, or reproducing elements of the prime minister's speech (see texts 02:21; 02:22; 02:09; 02:10; 02:11)). Some of these reprises are critical towards particular elements of the hegemonic articulation<sup>3</sup>, yet, as a general rule, they all seem to agree with the HTS-articulation of the basic principles, the cultural logic and the identification of an antagonistic frontier between the 'we' and the terrorists.

In these reprises, especially two signifiers are recurrent: 'freedom' and 'democracy'<sup>4</sup>. What is interesting is how these signifiers and the chain of equivalence from the hegemonic articulation are sometimes articulated to other central elements, in which way the chain of equivalence is expanded. Thus, by exploiting the privilege of the hegemonic articulation and adding new signifiers to the chain of equivalence, a new articulation in the public debate might be able to gain a hegemonic status. This, we argue, is the case in the following articulation which is an extract of a

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2 See for instance archive texts 02:21; 02:22; 02:09; 02:10; 02:11; 02:15

3 Mainly her non-use of the term 'war' (text 02:21; 02:09) or how she managed the situation in general (for instance text 02.09 )

4 Both understood as representatives of each their lexical field, thus, we also consider these terms in other forms as being part of that field (e.g. free, democratic etc)

comment to the newspaper, Politiken, by Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the leader of the Liberal Party ('Venstre') (at that time, the main party in the opposition):

*It is a cowardly act and an attack on the peaceful and democratic way of life, we have chosen to lead in Denmark.* (Text 02:03)

In this utterance, even though Rasmussen is normally considered an ideological adversary of the prime minister, he nevertheless articulates what is arguably the *same* chain of equivalence as we have just seen in the discourse of the prime minister: Rasmussen installs an antagonistic relationship, he relates a series of signifiers to characterize the political 'we' ('peaceful', 'democratic'), and finally he inscribes the articulation in a cultural discursive logic through the turn 'the way we have chosen to live our lives in Denmark', thus, once again, emphasizing the unity of the national political community through a shared 'way of living'<sup>5</sup>. This example shows us how the hegemonic articulation is appropriated and represented across the political specter, in an agonistic relationship (Mouffe 2005a).

In sum, in the Danish debate we can identify a hegemonic articulation which is based on the establishment of a chain of equivalence through the articulation of the following signifiers: 'freedom' (or 'freedom of expression'), 'democracy', 'rights', 'justice', 'unity' to which more signifiers are sometimes added. In addition, the predominant presence of the cultural discursive logic seems to be represented in the Danish debate as well, which we therefore argue, is part of the hegemonic articulation.

#### 4.1.2. "Freedom of expression" as a central signifier

One of the discursive elements frequently articulated in the hegemonic characterisation of the Danish national community is that of 'freedom' and - especially - 'freedom of expression' (for instance: 02:01; 02:02; 02:03; 02:08; 02:09; 02:23). By studying the specific articulations of these signifiers, it becomes clear that the signifier is extremely floating in its meaning. How come what seem to be the *same* signifier is able to evoke *different* meanings? We have suggested some ways to describe the hegemonic articulation in the Danish debate. Now, let us briefly consider two utterances which are both part of the hegemonic articulation but in which different meanings are associated to the same signifier.

The first articulation of 'freedom of expression' is rather unique in the Danish public debate. It is articulated in a debate letter by the author Carsten Jensen, who is normally considered a critical left-wing voice in the Danish public debate:

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5 Moreover, the use of "chosen" is interesting in relation to the French debate as it seems to provide an understanding of the basic principles as the result of a political compromise, whereas, in the french debate, we see a very clear awareness of how these values have in fact been reached only through a fight which – concretized in - for example – events like the french revolution (ex 01:15; 01:22; 01:23).

*The problem with freedom of expression in Denmark was never its misuse. Rather, it was the insufficient use; that not enough of the Danes reacted (Text 02:09)*

As Jensen's utterance is one of the first in the public debate who articulates a particular meaning to the signifier "freedom of expression", his articulation in turn generates new 'utterables' in the public debate, new discursive rules in the debate. This utterance is therefore quite interesting: by pointing to the 'problem with freedom of expression' in the first segment, Jensen consequently questions the presence of this particular moment (that is: freedom of expression) in the hegemonic articulation, and, thus, he challenges the hegemonic articulation, constructing a counter-discourse.

Jensen also provides three negated signifiers in his articulation of "freedom of expression" which forms the following chain of equivalence: *NEG-misused; NEG-used enough; NEG-Danes replied*. Through the chain of equivalence, in which all the elements are negated, the utterance simultaneously articulates a "positive" chain of equivalence which rather schematically can be paraphrased as "*a good use of freedom of expression is characterized by active usage, the more Danes participating in the debate the better, and there can be no misuse of freedom of expression*". In that sense, Jensen articulates a meaning to this signifier through an encouraging to critique and public debate. So, contrary to the articulations of the signifier as we see elsewhere in the Danish public debate (02:10; 02:18), "freedom of expression" is articulated as a sort of "freedom to say whatever in the public debate".

Whereas this first articulation of "freedom of expression" is rather unique in the Danish public debate, the second articulation which we shall shortly analyze is more representative of the way in which this signifier is commonly articulated, and moreover, to the meaning criticized by the Jensen-articulation: whereas Jensen articulated "freedom of expression" as the freedom to say whatever in the public debate, our second articulation is rather a question of "how to speak" in the public debate. The following is an extract from a debate letter published in the newspaper, Politiken:

*Freedom of expression is engaging in a dialogue, to listen, understand and learn. Not in order to place guilt and reproach. (Text 02:10)*

Note how this articulation of freedom of expression differentiates from the one by Jensen which we have just analyzed: here, freedom of expression is articulated through the chain of equivalence comprising the discursive elements "dialogue", "listen", "understand", "learn" as well as "NEG-place guilt" and "NEG-reproach"<sup>6</sup>. Whereas the first articulation was strictly negatively defined, this articulation is positive, which provides a meaning to the discursive element "freedom of expression" as the point of departure for the reaching of a mutual understanding.

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6 We especially see the last two elements articulated in other texts as well.

In the Danish debate the discursive struggle of the articulation of the meaning regarding the signifier “freedom of expression” seems to divide the debate into two “camps”, where the articulations we have just analyzed represent each their “camp”. Yet the struggle of meaning associated to its articulation is not a left-wing versus right-wing struggle. On the contrary, it is a struggle dividing the political spectra and the alliances in the public debate in new ways: both articulations as we have seen are signed by social actors who proclaim a left-wing position in the debate.

A central question, which ought to be discussed more thoroughly, is how this “turn” of the debate (towards a discursive struggle of the meaning of this signifier) effects the debate in general, and how the debate becomes centralized around this discursive struggle in particular and not any other signifier. One answer could be, that once the signifier “freedom of expression” is installed in the debate, the attack and the public debate is inscribed into a line of events in which the incidences of the Muhammed drawings<sup>7</sup> (2005) are also situated. In that sense, following Lescano (forthcoming) “freedom of expression”, in a Danish context, can be considered a “suturing point” which installs a link between two discursive fields, and thus permits a “flow of meaning” between these two fields<sup>8</sup>.

## **4.2. The French public debate (January 2015)**

### **4.2.1. The hegemonic articulation of a French political community**

Whereas discourses in the Danish debate are generally founded upon a cultural discursive logic, in the French debate, there is but very few texts in which we find the cultural logic articulated regarding the national political ‘we’. With an exception of a couple of texts (mostly right-wing speakers) this logic is almost absent in the French debate<sup>9</sup>.

The hegemonic articulation is however closely entangled with what we consider a ‘republican discursive logic’, which promotes the ‘universality’ of the ‘republican values’” and can be considered distinct from a cultural logic. As a matter of fact, according to the French hegemonic articulation, the values of the Republic are not intrinsic to a particular French national culture (as was the case in the Danish debate in which they were associated with the national history or

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7 These attacks – or attempts – counts for instance those on Fleming Rose (Responsible editor at JyllandsPosten) and Kurt Vestergaard (cartoonist at JyllandsPosten).

8 See also the works of Courtine on the concept of discursive history. (Courtine 1981)

9 The texts touching upon this aspect are very limited in the archive, yet they do exist; for instance, we find articulations in which is mentioned elements which could be considered part of the “national-cultural” tradition, such as a “une France fière de son langue”, “l’Histoire” (note : capital H), or the idea of remaining true to ancient traditions (Text 01:13, 01:22)

identity). In the French debate, however, the basic principles are generally considered the result of (violent) struggle<sup>10</sup>. In that sense, these principles are essential, universal principles of the Republic, or as the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo puts it: the ‘DNA’ of the Republic (01:08; 01:15; 01:22).

We find the republican discursive logic almost everywhere in the French debate. It is especially the universality of the basic principles in the Republic that is emphasized in the articulations, and it is especially present in the articulations of the French government, that is, in the speeches and press releases by the President François Hollande and the members of the government (Valls, Vallaud-Belkacem etc). Once again, as these articulations are often reproduced and therefore supposedly have a strong influence on the shaping of the debate, we argue that the articulations of the government and the President constitute hegemonic articulations in the French debate.

The following is an extract of a press conference the President Hollande gave right after the attack on Charlie Hebdo which represent the French hegemonic articulation of the national political community:

*The Republic equals freedom of expression; the Republic equals culture, creation, it equals pluralism and democracy. That is what the assassins were targeting. It equals the ideal of justice and peace that France promotes everywhere on the international stage, and the message of peace and tolerance that we defend – as do our soldiers – in the fight against terrorism and fundamentalism. (...) Finally, we ourselves must be mindful of the fact that our best weapon is our unity (...) France is great when she is capable of rising to the test, rising to a level that has always enabled her to overcome hardships. Freedom will always be stronger than barbarity. France has always vanquished her enemies when she has stood united and remained true to her values. (Text 01:01)*

In this extract the basic principles and the political national ‘we’ are discursively constructed and articulated into a chain of equivalence by explicitly defining what the Republic ‘equals’ and also installing an antagonism (through the use of terms such as ‘targeting’, ‘fight against’, ‘freedom’ vs. ‘barbarity’ etc.) between the ‘we’ and the terrorists. Second, – contrary to the Danish hegemonic articulation, analyzed above – this text articulates the national political community and certain of the values of the Republic (such as ‘peace’ and ‘tolerance’”) into a chain of equivalence closely related to signifiers from what could be considered the lexical field of ‘war’ (through terms such as ‘defend’, ‘soldiers’, ‘fight against’, ‘weapon’, ‘vanquished’, ‘enemies’ etc). The installation of this lexical field in the articulations of the French political ‘we’ provides a characterization of France as a ‘war-leading nation’ (which is also the case in Denmark, yet rather absent in the Danish debate<sup>11</sup>).

In sum, in the French debate generally speaking the majority of articulations reproduces somewhat the same chain of equivalence as we see articulated by the President here: it includes

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10 The French republic is founded on a series of civil wars, revolutions and religious struggles (the issue of the law of Laïcité in 1905 is the latest in this series of events).

11 See text 02:21 and 02:09 from the archive.

elements such as ‘freedom of expression’, ‘pluralism’, ‘democracy’, ‘peace’, ‘justice’, ‘tolerance’, ‘unity’.

Whereas the hegemonic articulation is quite unified especially in the debate triggered by the Charlie Hebdo attacks, during the development of the debates both after Bataclan (November 2015) and Nice (July 2016), the hegemonic articulation gradually becomes less unified; discursive elements within it are often questioned or criticized by other social actors in the debate (ex. 04:13; 01:20). The debate thus seems to take a turn. It becomes fragmented and agonistic rather than characterized by a strong hegemonic articulation, transcending the relations between the discourses in the debate right after the dislocating event, the attack on Charlie Hebdo. This suggests a fragmentization of the debate as the first dislocating event becomes distanced, and terrorism is normalized (see also Laclau 1990).

If the hegemonic project is very strongly articulated and unique in the French debate after Charlie Hebdo, there is, however, as in the Danish debate, some discursive struggles about the articulation of some particular discursive elements in it. This holds for instance both in the French and the Danish debate for the signifier ‘liberty of expression’. But as a series of ‘incidences’ in the public schools<sup>12</sup> occurs during the minute of silence in memorial of the victims, the day after the Charlie Hebdo shootings, the minister of education, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, is summoned in the Assemblée nationale to respond to questions on children's training in the ‘laïcité’<sup>13</sup>. The debate thus suddenly takes a turn: due to these incidences and the debate in the Assemblée nationale the signifier ‘laïcité’ was attributed a significant role in the discursive struggle about the identification of a French national political ‘we’.

#### 4.2.2. « Laïcité » as a central, floating signifier

If laïcité is commonly considered the fourth founding principle of the French Republic, it is perhaps not very surprising that this signifier is just as central in the debate as the three famous ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’. However, except some very fragmentary articulations, the three original

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12 Which caused a debate in the french parliament, in which the minister of education, Najat Vallaud Belkacem, was summoned to answer questions in front of the parliament. In this debate, the minister framed the incidences as a counter-hegemonic articulation of the principles, which contributed to a construction of a new antagonistic relation between the state and the french society and the children who refused to say “je suis charlie” in the french schools. This antagonism was soon appropriated by the entire government and provoked, in turn, a debate about the legitimacy about this division and alienation of children (01:17).

13 The concept of ‘Laïcité’ is by some viewed upon as the fourth founding principle of the French Republic and is the state acknowledgment of secularism in the public institutions, thus, also, in the educational system. The concept was integrated in the french constitution in 1905 through a “préambule” yet it does not have a legal status. It has been noted that the concept rests on three principles: the neutrality of the State, the freedom of thought and pluralism. In 2007, Chirac created the so-called “Observatoire de la laïcité” which is an neutral institution whose function is to supervise and monitor the level of laïcité in the state institutions (Cf: <https://www.fonction-publique.gouv.fr/lobservatoire-de-la-laicite>).

principles are not near being as important in the French public debate as ‘laïcité’: we find articulations indicating a meaning to the signifier “laïcité” as both a *conception*, an *organization*, a *system* as well as a *principle* (Cf. 01:22; 01:25; 03:14; 04:13). Yet, all these terms distinguishes it from being an opinion or a conviction, i.e. the signifier also indicates the universal character of what we earlier named the ‘Republican logic’.

For instance, Lydia Guiros, former national secretary of laïcité under the Sarkozy-government, in a debate letter, articulated the meaning of this signifier the following way:

*Laïcité is an inalterable principle. More than a principle it is an intangible rule of organization in the Republic. It is not up to laïcité to adjust to the constraints of a multi-religious society, but this society to adjust to the imperatives of the laïcité.* (text 01:22)

In this extract we can identify both the definition of laïcité as a principle and as a rule of organization of the society. The principle is universal – it is ‘invariable’. But as a rule of organization, this principle comes to have a practical function in France, which ‘cannot be touched upon’ according to Guirous, as it is universal in both of the meanings. Therefore, according to Guirous, society should adjust to the the principle and not the principle which should adjust to society. In that case, laïcité becomes one of the universal - and most of all - essential foundations of the French political community.

Whereas the debate on the practices of the laïcité were intensified right after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in the wake of the incidences in the schools just mentioned, it seemed to disappear slightly from the public debate in the aftermath. Especially, the discursive struggle over this signifier was gradually abandoned in the debate following the attacks in November 2015 and the debate following the attacks in Nice of July 2016. Despite the decrease in articulations of this signifier, it is nevertheless still present in the hegemonic articulation and, especially, in the governmental articulations.

### **4.3. The naming of the event**

Whereas the articulations of the basic principles in relation to the hegemonic articulation are rather similar in the two debates, there is a central difference in the articulations of the very events, that is, the naming of the events. The naming of the event has a crucial effect on the shaping of the debate, and, presumably the way in which the event is talked about might even have central democratic implications in a broader, societal context.

Whereas the French debate is quite univocal regarding the naming of the event after Charlie Hebdo, the voices in the Danish debate are more agonistic on this point. Thus, in the French debate we see a discussion especially about the definition and the naming of the event as an “act of war”, adopted very early in the debate by Hollande (and appropriated by the government discourse). In

the Danish hegemonic articulation, however, the term ‘war’ is absent: the prime minister classifies the events in Copenhagen as an ‘act of violence’ which she later on specifies as an ‘act of terrorism’. However, the term ‘war’ is never employed by the prime minister, which leads to several critics pointing to the absence of this term in the Danish hegemonic discourse (cf: 02:09; 02:21).

Also, the very naming of the event as a ‘terrorist attack’ is questioned in both of the debates, immediately in the Danish debate and in France only after the attack in Nice (july 2016). It is the fact that only one person conducted the attack, which generate expressions as ‘solitary wolf’, or discussions of whether or not the terrorist was just a singular case, which should not be categorized as a terrorist (text 02:11; 04:13). In any case, once the antagonism has been installed in the debate, the definition of the particular kind of antagonism becomes relevant: are we in fact facing a ‘cultural struggle’ (02:13; 02:15), a ‘war between religions’ (02:15), a ‘struggle of values’ (02:03) or is the deed the act of a mentally deviant or criminal (02:18; 02:12; 04:13), and should perhaps not be categorized a terrorist attack?

For instance, in an editorial in the newspaper Berlingske on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2016, we find a set of recurrent elements from the hegemonic articulation accompanied by the discussion of the naming of the antagonism:

*Terrorism has become the loyal and terrible companion of the free and open society (...) it is a war on culture and values, but also a sort of war of religions. We have to acknowledge that if we are to defend our society. (Archive text 02:15)*

Notice how this articulation first establishes an antagonistic relationship between the terrorists and the ‘free and open society’ and then, second, classifies the antagonistic relationship as being a ‘war of cultures and values’ which is then, finally, specified as a ‘war of religions’. Now, if the utterance had been cut in the second segment (before the ‘but’) this articulation could have been considered a reproduction of the hegemonic articulation. However, by adding the segment ‘war of religion...’ the articulation simultaneously develops a new version of the hegemonic articulation. Thanks to the new version, the utterance is able to introduce a new term to name the antagonism (‘war of religions’), which hitherto had not been part of the hegemonic articulation. This introduction becomes ‘legitimized’ by the last segment and its urge to defend the Danish society against the Other.

If we take an example from the French debate (an extract from a speech by Valls a week after the attack on Charlie Hebdo) religion is not near being the core of the antagonism, rather, Valls articulates religion with regards to the republican discursive logic, which introduces a significant distinction between the role of religion in the French political community:

*The Republic (...) [is] compatible with all religions on the national territory which accept the principles and values of the Republic. (Text 01:15)*

So, whereas the French hegemonic articulation does not establish an antagonism through any differences there might be between religions or cultures in the French society (01:22; 04:08; 01:05), some attempts are made in the Danish debate to appropriate the hegemonic articulation in order to construct and enlarge this articulation and identify the antagonism at the level of religions. In that sense, according to those articulations, some religions are incompatible with the Danish political 'we' (which thus have to be defended against these religions) (02:03 02:16; 02:12; 02:24). This kind of articulations is rather common in the Danish debate whereas rather absent in the French. In fact, the articulations of this kind, which we see in the French debate, seems to be counter-discourses and agonistic to the hegemonic articulation, whereas in the Danish debate, they are more easily embedded in the hegemonic articulation as such articulations do not meet much resistance in the debate.

This major difference in the French and the Danish debate raises the question of how the naming of the event and of the antagonism can help define the very semantic-discursive foundation of the debate, that is, the discursive rules of the particular debate.

Especially the development of the Danish debate is significant in this respect: when the national political 'we' is defined in terms of religion, and an entire religion is placed in an antagonistic relation to what is defined as the 'we', the discursive construction of this 'we', is correspondingly excluding, and, moreover, positioning the Danish people in a conflict with the Other. In the French debate, this discursive phenomenon is named an 'amalgam' (01:09; 04:04) and is condemned across the political specter (even by Marine Le Pen (01:09)). In that sense, one could argue, the Danish debate, by installing these classifications of the events as a 'war on religions' is also creating an antagonistic frontier in terms of religion, that is, identifying the Other as the 'muslim', which in turn could come to have democratic consequences for the development of the debate in Denmark, and – what is more critical – how the national political 'we' more generally is viewed.

## 5. Concluding remarks

This study set out to identify and discuss how the hegemonic articulation of a political national “we” is discursively constructed in the debates after the terrorist attacks early 2015 in France and in Denmark. The central aim was to analyze articulations of the “basic principles” of the liberal democracy as defined by Mouffe (2005a; 2005b) in the two public debates in order to discuss the differences and similarities between the two countries, and further discuss how the particular articulations of these principles might have democratic implications for how the constitution of the political national “we”.

In order to do so, the theoretical outset is the concepts and theories developed in the tradition of the discourse theory of the so-called Essex-school, and especially the concepts of antagonism, articulation and hegemony. As the articulations of the terrorist attacks often installs an antagonistic frontier between the political national “we” and the terrorists, we have focused on the naming of this frontier, I.e. its discursive articulation and which meanings are associated to the “we” in the two debates. We have done so through the analysis of central articulations and signifiers in the two debates. First, we have identified the hegemonic articulation in each of the two debates, and second, we have discussed two cases of signifiers in which articulations provides different meanings to what appears to be the same signifier, thus revealing a discursive struggle of meaning related to a particular signifier.

The results of these analyses have lead us to the following conclusion: the hegemonic articulations are rather similar in the two debates: they are both articulated by a governmental discourse, and they both install more or less the same signifiers into a chain of equivalence, with some differences when it comes to certain signifiers: the French hegemonic articulation connects signifiers such as “freedom of expression”, “pluralism”, “democracy”, “peace”, “justice”, “tolerance”, “unity” and last but not least “laïcité”, whereas the Danish hegemonic articulation also adopts some of these signifiers in order to articulation the following chain of equivalence: “freedom” (or “freedom of expression”), “democracy”, “rights”, “justice”, “unity”.

Whereas the two hegemonic articulations are rather similar, it is the discursive logic which differentiates the hegemonic articulations in the two debates: whereas the Danish debate is articulated through what we have called a “cultural discursive logic” installing the basic principles into a cultural context in which they are inherent to a particular Danish culture. The French national political “we” is held in a strict “republican discursive logic”, thus defining the basic principles as being raised above the cultures and religions of the political “we”.

Despite the similarities in how the signifiers are articulated, we have identified differences regarding the central discursive moments and their articulation in each of the debates (Freedom of

expression in the Danish debate; laïcité in the French debate), and also we have discussed how the naming of the event is undertaken in the two debates, and finally, we argue that this naming might come to have democratic consequences for the constitution of the national political we.

In sum our project has proved the relevance of a series of questions which could be studied in future research: first, which roles should be attributed to the discursive we have named the “cultural” and “republican” logics in relation to the hegemonic articulation? How does these underlying logics interfere in the shaping of the debate in general? How come the discussion of the freedom of expression becomes so important in the danish debate whereas it is rather absent in the french debate? And finally, a the naming of the event in relation to the democratic implications of the debate should be undertaken, as to decide our point to how certain discursive characteristics and the choice of signifiers could either restrain or enlarge the democratic debate

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