

Nico Carpentier, **The Discursive-Material Knot: Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation**, New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2017, 472 pp., \$63.68 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

Yupei Zhao

Zhejiang University of PRC, China

When discourse and materials interact with each other, it is called the hierarchical ontology of the discursive-material knot grounded in contingency. What does the context mean here? Does it refer to material process or agency? How does material work every day with agency, and how does the matter work with agency? I began to read Carpentier's triptych two years ago when he delivered a seminar in Guangzhou (China) about **The Discursive-Material Knot: Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation**. This is a highly inspiring, interdisciplinary, and dynamic concept that contains three panels, each having a degree of independence and refers to three platforms unified by a radical combination of theory and empirical research. Most importantly, the title of this book encapsulates what Nico Carpentier aims to contribute, that is, to emphasize the need to reunite the discursive and the material, in particular, offer the relationship between discursive-representational and the materiality of the economy, both theoretically and empirically so that they are unraveled, restless, and contingent, but with no decision made as to which is over the other.



This book starts from an ontological analysis and an understanding of the first platform of the discursive-material knot which provides a theoretical ground-building, but needs to be recharged in context-bound concepts in terms of (a) participatory theory, (b) community media theory, (c) conflict theory, (d) conflict resolution/transformation theory (all in platform 2), and (e) theories of nationalism (in platform 3). Generally speaking, I greatly appreciate Carpentier's disposition between theory and social reality. More precisely, platform 1 (chapter 1) and platform 2 (chapter 2; as a participatory community media assemblage) are employed to investigate the case studies of the Cyprus Community Media Center (CCMC) and its Web radio station, MYCradio, to understand the transformation of antagonism into agonism. Platform 3 (chapters 3 and 4) extensively reexamines the necessary historical narrative about the discursive-material knot in the Cyprus problem, combined with material participatory (pp. 326–347) and material agonist (pp. 380–389) assemblages and practices.

The discursive is used as the starting point to understand Carpentier's theoretical voyage. The detailed development of the theoretical framework of the discursive-material knot (chapter 1 and the entire book) that Carpentier aims to develop draws on and extends discourse theories like Foucault's (1977) "micro-physics of power," Laclau's (1988) "macro-textual usage of discourse," and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, 1990) "discourse function." Moreover, the author responds well to Haraway's (1988) "material-semiotic actor" and Barad's (2007) "material-discursive approach" throughout this book. Thus, Carpentier's *Discursive-Material Knot* contributes to the call for an explicit position of materials. He extends this to look at various approaches to thematizing the material by "incorporating reflections about machines and

assemblages; technologies and architectures; bodies, signifiers, and languages; and organizations" (p. 33), which aims to align with Laclau and Mouffe's use of "the political" and "the social" theories. In this regard, Carpentier not only reconciles a fundamental organization of the material with the discursive in media and communication studies but also works to achieve an inclusion of the knot within cultural studies through a political economic perspective. However, there is no clear overview of the different relationships between structure, the discursive, material, and agency within the knot, which Carpentier also says "illustrates the difficulties in visually representing these relations, but also shows how difficult it is to discuss these relations in a linear text" (p. 67).

Chapter 2 sheds light on participation theory where it helps to understand Carpentier's platform 2 by providing the discursive/material dimension to reanalyze community media theory and its conflict transformation process. This will be useful for both sociological and political studies. Just as how participation is driven by ideas and equality (power), the participatory process is all about sharing power. Carpentier demonstrates that "participatory processes are engulfed in an assemblage of discourse and materials . . . and as a signifier, it is, in itself, the object of discursive struggles, which, in turn, are part of the permanent and larger struggle over democracy" (p. 94). He discusses clearly that there is a difference between several related concepts (access, interaction, empowerment, etc.). Indeed, as he claims, different dimensions, different actors (citizens, ordinary person, the expert, the owner, the leader), either from minimalist or maximalist participation, differ from "many in-between positions . . . not a dichotomy" (p. 91). However, I have a concern when reading his platform 2 in terms of what engagement means here in the process of participation and decision making. What are the boundaries of the decision-making process and participation? Is this just a matter of producing materials, including content? Or is there any possibility that freedom will affect the final decision? On the whole, Carpentier demonstrates that "it is important to distinguish participation from its effects and from its conditions of possibility" (pp. 91-92), and he claims this by evidently providing Dahlgren's (2009, 2013) definition. However, it would be promising to see how Carpentier is able to argue this discrepancy from the perspective of the materialist dimension and its components, which means, where is the crossroad of the material and the discursive?

In chapters 3 and 4 (platform 3), Carpentier deploys the discursive-material knot as an analytical strategy to revisit the cases of Cyprus conflicts and historical issues, particularly examining nationalist discourses that have problematized issues within Cyprus. This is represented by the material elements and embedded in discursive struggles, which have had far-reaching effects on historical and textual studies with the logic of contingency. Here, I appreciate Carpentier's "reflection on discursive-material analysis (DMA)" and "figure 39: sensitizing concepts: levels, definitions and usages." While the text and cases have understandably concentrated on Cyprus and its community media (e.g., CCMC/MYCYradio), as Carpentier illustrates, "participation has fluid nature" and "much embedded in different democratic discourses, which has turned into a floating signifier," it will not only be a major challenge but will also be an interesting (and exciting) transformation for worldwide scholars to further examine whether the DMA effects and the trends identified in Carpentier's triptych are evident in other democratic, or even nondemocratic, societies.

I conclude that Carpentier's discursive-material knot is a dynamic, creative, and brilliant remark in either discourse studies or from the point of view of material access. The interactions between the discourse and the material eventually prove to be an ongoing effort by Carpentier, who is very much committed to

embracing discourse studies in the communication and media field, in order to study a nonhierarchical buffer zone.

References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahlgren, P. (2013). *The political web*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Laclau, E. (1988). Metaphor and social antagonisms. In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 249–257). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London, UK: Verso.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1990). Post-Marxism without apologies. In E. Laclau (Ed.), *New reflections on the revolution of our time* (pp. 97–132). London, UK: Verso.