

# What is a decision? A post-structuralist exploration of the trinity of decidedness, undecidedness and undecidability

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## Abstract

Decidedness has been celebrated in many societal spheres as the unquestioned, fetishized and ultimate moment of the exercise of political agency, where political or business leaders wield their powers and authorities. Conversely, the failure to decide, undecidedness, is seen as the failure of political agency, of leadership, and of politics or business itself. This chapter offers a more nuanced perspective on decidedness and undecidedness, by exploring their interdependent relationship, grounded in a deconstructive strategy. The relationship between these binary opposites will be enriched and deepened by introducing a third notion, undecidability, which is a broader concept that describes the ontological impossibility of a discursive order to ultimately fixate reality. In the first parts of the chapter, the usages of decision and indecision, decidedness and undecidedness, are discussed in combination with an explanation of the notion of undecidability as it has been developed in post-structuralist theory (in particular, in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse-theoretical framework). These reflections provide support for the definition of the decision as a temporary fixation, which does not escape from the context of undecidability. It is this context that produces undecidedness. Decidedness should not be discredited either, as –despite its limitations– it remains a requirement for the political to function and a significant driving force. The importance of decidedness, and the coping strategies developed to deal with its failures, is theorized in the last part of the chapter, by reverting to the psychoanalytical concept of the fantasy. The conclusion then invokes the idea that in order to understand the social and the political, we need the conceptual strength of the trinity of decidedness, undecidedness and undecidability.

*Keywords:* decision, indecision, decidedness, undecidedness, undecidability, post-structuralist theory, discourse theory, leadership

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## 1 Introduction

In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.

Theodore Roosevelt (quoted in Manganelli/Hagen, 2003, p. 11)

The concept of the ‘decision’ is frequently used in academic writing, but despite some of the work in political and organisational theory, it is often invoked without much reflection or consideration for its meanings, as they are seen to be part of the realm of everyday language. Examples of this frequent usage can be, for instance, found in the fields of government and business (studies), where the decision and decision-making are (obviously) omnipresent. Also in organisational sociology, the notion of the decision features at the many different levels that organisations have (and are studied). To give one more example, in Hartley’s (2012, p. 121) *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*, he defines the gatekeeper as follows: “[...] the gatekeeper refers to key decision-making personnel in the choice of which news stories will be published, with what prominence.”

The definitional vagueness in relation to the decision is not without consequences, as it leads to the underestimation of the complexities of this notion, in particular, when we accept the existence of a context of contingency and indeterminacy, which we can also label a context of undecidability. The challenge then becomes one of reconciling the notion of the decision, which implies fixity, and the context of undecidability, which implies unfixity. Here, it is important to first clarify a terminological issue. The notions of ‘decision’ and ‘indecision’ are used in this chapter to refer to the act of deciding (or not deciding), while ‘decidedness’<sup>1</sup> and ‘undecidedness’ refer to the state of being able to decide, or not. These four concepts are all situated at the ontic level<sup>2</sup>. Undecidability, in contrast, is located at the ontological level. Through this confrontation of these four concepts at the ontic level, with the context of undecidability at the ontological level, we can strengthen the definitional grounds of the decision (and the related concepts), and offer a better understanding of these notions.

In order to further deepen this analysis, and to underline the complexities embedded in the notion of the decision, a third concept will be introduced, namely the decision’s opposite –indecision. As will be argued later, undecidedness<sup>3</sup> is often represented as a problematic notion, referring to the incapacity

1 Another concept – ‘decisiveness’ - is not used in this chapter.

2 This chapter uses the distinction between the ontic and the ontological, where the ontic refers to the world of concrete practices, while the ontological “concerns the very way society is instituted.” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9)

3 (In)decision is used here to refer to the act of deciding (or not), while (un)decidedness refers to the ontic (im)possibility of deciding.

of decision-makers to reach a decision, which is in turn articulated as a failure. Decidedness has been celebrated in many societal spheres as the unquestioned, fetishized and ultimate moment of the exercise of political agency, where leaders in politics or business (whether they are traditional or not, authoritarian or democratic, directive or delegative) wield their powers and authorities. Conversely, the failure to decide, undecidedness, is seen as the failure of political agency, of leadership, and of politics or business itself. If we return to our context of undecidability, the argument can be made that undecidability produces undecidedness, which should lead us to reconsider the latter's negative connotations. Moreover, this approach also leads us to reconsider the notion of decidedness itself, and emphasize its limits without ignoring its necessary existence to create (temporary) fixations<sup>4</sup> and stabilities.

This conceptual analysis is embedded in a discourse-theoretical framework (showing its capacity to rethink key notions like the decision, which is relevant for a wide variety of academic fields – including communication and media studies), and driven by a deconstructive strategy. The former is closely related to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) work, while the latter remains within shouting distance of Derrida's interpretation of the deconstruction, as is summarized by Culler (1982, p. 86): "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies ...". At the same time, I consciously move away from the focus on the deconstruction of a particular text, inspired by the work of authors working in the discourse-theoretical tradition (Norval, 1996; Howarth, 2000), in order to discuss the theoretical (and interdependent) workings of the binary oppositions of decidedness and undecidedness. Undecidedness thus becomes identified as the weak side of the binary opposition of decidedness/undecidedness (and their materializations of decision/indecision), arguing that undecidedness is necessary and unavoidable. The argument is not that decidedness is non-existent or undesirable – after all, this is a deconstruction, and it is "not destruction, is not annihilation, is not negative" (Derrida, 1999, p. 77) – but that decidedness is dependent on, and intimately connected with its counterpart, undecidedness. Moreover, the relationship between these binary opposites will be enriched and deepened through the third notion, undecidability, which is a broader concept that describes the ontological impossibility of a discursive order to ultimately fixate reality.

The first part of the chapter shows how the notions of decision and indecision feature in a variety of academic and cultural fields. Then we will shift to a more theoretical discussion, clarifying the notion of undecidability, as it has been developed in post-structuralist theory. After this, we can reconsider the

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4 The notion of the 'fixation' is a discourse-theoretical concept (see later). In this theoretical context, it does not have the connotation of neuroticism that it sometimes has in everyday language.

notions of decision and indecision, as their positioning in the ontological context of undecidability also clarifies and enriches their meanings. Even though, ultimately, total decidedness can never be reached, it remains a requirement for the political<sup>5</sup> to function and a significant driving force. We should be careful not to discredit decidedness either. Its importance, and the coping strategies developed to deal with its failures are theorized in part 5, by reverting to the psychoanalytical concept of the fantasy.

## 2 Evaluating the decision

Political theory has traditionally placed a strong emphasis on the notion of the decision, and its connection to power in decision-making processes. This tradition placed decision-making within the framework of rationality, where rational actors are concerned to identify problems and the factors that influence these problems, investigate the alternatives for resolving the problems and select the option that maximizes benefits and minimizes costs (Riemer/Simon, 1997, p. 308). Within this framework, these rational actors are also deciding actors, who exercise their power. Here, Weber's (1947, p. 152) understanding of power, as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests," shows the connection between the power and the decision ("carrying out his [sic] own will"). Also with later authors we can find this connection: Dahl's (1957, pp. 202-203) definition ("A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do") similarly emphasizes overt decisions. In later critiques of these approaches, the notion of the decision becomes more explicit, for instance in the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1962), with their emphasis on covert decisions (or non-decisions), which prevent decision-making or exclude subjects or participants from the process, and Lukes' (1984) analysis which connects power to latent decisions (or no-decisions) that persuade people to act against their own (class) interest.

One concept that can be used to show the significance of the decision (in combination with power differences) is the notion of leadership. Although many different forms of leadership can be distinguished<sup>6</sup>, the leadership con-

5 Following Mouffe (2005, p. 9), the political refers to the "dimension of antagonism [that is] constitutive of human societies", while politics is "the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organising human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political."

6 See, for instance, the difference between authoritarian and democratic leadership developed by Lewin and his colleagues (Lewin and Lippitt, 1938; Lewin, Lippitt and White, 1939; Lewin, 1950; White and Lippitt, 1960), and the difference between directive and delegative leadership described by Bass and Bass (2008, p. 460).

cept, and the ways it highlights the importance of individuals (and organisations) in making decisions, is omnipresent in theory and practice. Writing from an anthropological perspective, Lewis (1974, p. 3) observes: “Whether or not a society has institutionalized chiefs, rulers, or elected officials there are always, in any society, leaders who initiate action and play central roles in group-decision-making.” In more traditional (19th and first half of the 20th century) approaches, leadership was mainly seen as a unidirectional process, where the leader controlled the decision-making process, “impressing the will of the leader and inducing obedience” (Bass/Bass, 2008, p. 24). This locates the decision with the leader. Weber’s (1947) classic distinction between charismatic, traditional and rational legal authority can be seen as an illustration of these logics, as it takes the legitimization (strategies) of the decision-making of particular persons or institutions as starting point (in all three cases, but mostly in the first two). When focussing more on democratic theory, we can find another illustration of the decision (the ‘power to decide’) located with the leadership, namely in Schumpeter’s definition of democracy. In the 1940s, Schumpeter (1976, p. 269) defined democracy in the following way: “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”

Later, organisational leadership models changed (without their diversity disappearing) and leadership became (in an organisational context) more geared towards “the ability to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute to the effectiveness and success of the organisations of which they are members” (House et al., 2004, p. 15, quoted in Bass/Bass, 2008, p. 23). From a media studies perspective, Sánchez-Taberner (2006), for instance, refers to leaders as “builders of great teams”. Also in discussions of political leadership, the emphasis is placed more on how “leaders and followers are involved in a circular process of motivation and power exchange that is often difficult to break up into a causal sequence,” although leaders are still seen to “mobilize a significant number of followers to accept their diagnosis of, and policy prescriptions for, collective problems or crises,” (Masciulli/Molchanov/Knight, 2013, p. 4) which returns us to the importance of the decision. Some, such as Molchanov (2013, p. 48), would argue that the decision has only increased in importance: “The importance of individual decision-making – the ability to take charge, to act quickly and decisively – increases as demands for political accountability are voiced across the world.”

Despite their differences, these models have the explicit or implicit tendency to articulate the decision as the core component of (applying) power, which also impacts on how decidedness and, in particular, undecidedness is articulated (and problematized). In some cases, the nature of (some) decisions is of course deemed problematic (e.g., because they go against the self-interest

of an actor, see Lukes (1984), or because of their destructive nature), and particular types of leader are considered more prone to taking these problematic decisions. Moreover, in contemporary political theory, there is a considerable focus on the limits of reason. As Weimann and Kaplan (2011, p. 171) put it: “Sometimes decisions can be based on well-defined data and their clear implications, but many decisions, and these among the most important ones, must rest only on vague impressions and trust in one’s judgment. Reason has a part to play throughout, but the part may be no more than a supporting role.”

But the inverse idea becomes easily problematized, when there is an absence of a decision, not because of a conscious political strategy, but because of the mere incapacity to reach a decision, or in other words, when there is undecidedness, defined as the ontic impossibility of deciding. Through this problematization, undecidedness becomes synonymous with failure and impotence, in sometimes subtle ways. For instance, in organisational theory, when Bass and Bass (2008, p. 460 – my emphasis) describe the directive-delegative continuum, they describe the (delegative) “extreme of the continuum” as a situation where “some leaders may completely abdicate their responsibilities.” In political theory, we can find another illustration in the work of Deutsch (1978), who distinguishes between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ leaders, and describes the personal qualities of the latter as having weak and indecisive personalities, while they were disconnected from the ‘spirit of the times’.

Also, in political practice we can find these problematizations of undecidedness. One major location for the articulation of undecidedness is that of populist projects. These projects are characterized by “a particular logic of articulation” (Laclau, 2005, p. 33) that creates an opposition between the people and the elite, where the old elite is seen as disconnected from the people – unable to represent it – and needs to be replaced by the new political (populist) movement (which is still among the people). One of the populist rhetorical strategies for critiquing the political ‘establishment’ is to point to their inability to decide (and to move towards radical change). An example can be found in the acceptance speech for the Free Speech Award by the leader of the Dutch populist Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*) Geert Wilders in which he presented his ideas on: “ten things we would have to do to stop the Islamization of the West” (PVV, 2009). The tenth item on his list was: “Get rid of the current weak leaders. We have the privilege of living in a democracy. Let’s use that privilege and exchange cowards for heroes. We need more Churchills and fewer Chamberlains.” (PVV, 2009)

One other location for the critiques on undecidedness is the cultural sphere. Terry Gilliam’s 1985 dystopian film *Brazil* relentlessly exposes the impact of an authoritarian bureaucratic system (Wheeler, 2005, p. 99; Mathews, 1988, p. 22), which can only be escaped through death or madness. But at the same time the film represents the undecidedness within this authoritarian

bureaucratic system, whether it involves taking simple administrative decisions, exemplified by the main character's boss, Mr. Kurtzmann (played by Ian Holm), who is described by Wheeler (2005, p. 99) as "the archetypal slave to the system: a scared and paranoid individual who locks himself away in his office rather than face a reality outside that terrifies him", whether it concerns dealing with problems (with a wrongful arrest or with the failing apartment heating system of Sam Lowry, the main character (played by Jonathan Pryce), or whether it concerns dealing with the revolt, the terrorist resistance movement(s) and the renegade plumber Archibald 'Harry' Tuttle (Robert de Niro)). One scene contains a subtle reference to undecidedness when Sam Lowry is promoted to the Department of Information Retrieval, and receives a present from his mother. When he, during his first day in the office, unpacks the present, it turns out to be an 'Executive decision-maker', a tool which has a plunger that can be dropped to fall to one side of a divider, with one side marked 'yes', and the other side 'no'.

Also Shakespeare's work contains structural critiques on undecidedness. Here, apart from Hamlet, Macbeth (Shakespeare, 2009) – the tragedy about the Scottish general - comes to mind, as a timeless representation of self-doubt and undecidedness, and the damage it can cause. After hearing a prophecy from three witches predicting he will be king of Scotland, and spurred on by his wife, the ambitious Macbeth murders King Duncan to take his throne. Indecisive as King Macbeth is, Lady Macbeth "tips the scales in favour of manly action." (Sadowski, 2003, p. 276) Further prophecies trigger more uncertainties and anxieties, and Macbeth continues to eliminate possible contenders and becomes a tyrannical leader. In the play, there are repeated references to his inability to decide and to his doubts as to whether he will lose the throne again. For instance, when Macbeth hears that Banquo's son, Fleance, another possible contender to the throne, has not been killed together with Banquo, he says: "But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears [...]" (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 62) These fears materialize, as Macbeth is defeated by an army raised by Duncan's son, Malcolm, who is joined by Macduff, the Thane of Fife, who kills Macbeth in battle.

### 3 The context of contingency/undecidability

In order to bring in the logics of contingency and undecidability, I want to employ a discourse-theoretical framework, and more specifically Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, because their theoretical model provides a toolbox that can be used to analyze the social within the dynamics of fixity and fluidity, emphasizing contingency and undecidability while allowing sufficient space for its (temporary) fixation.

In order to initiate the discussion on undecidability, we can point to Laclau and Mouffe's concept of articulation, which brings in the logics of contingency and undecidability at the level of discourse itself. Articulation is seen as "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau/Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). The articulation of elements (or moments) produces discourses that gain a certain (and very necessary) degree of stability. Discursive stability is enhanced by the role of privileged signifiers, or nodal points. Torfing (1999, pp. 88–89) points out that these nodal points "sustain the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings." Simultaneously, the field of discursivity has an infinite number of elements, which are not connected to a specific discourse at a given moment in time. Instability enters the equation through the idea that these unconnected elements can always be articulated within a specific discourse, sometimes replacing (or disarticulating) other elements, which affects the discourse's entire signification. Due to the infinitude of the field of discursivity and the inability of a discourse to permanently fix its meaning and keep its elements stable, discourses are liable to disintegration and re-articulation.

In discourse theory, contingency and undecidability are not only intra-discursive, but also generated by an inter-discursive political struggle. Discourses are often engaged in struggles, in an attempt to attain hegemonic positions over other discourses and, thus, to stabilize the social. Through these struggles, "in a field crisscrossed by antagonisms" (Laclau/Mouffe, 1985, pp. 135-136), and through attempts to create discursive alliances, or chains of equivalence (Howarth, 1998, p. 279), discourses are altered, which produces contingency. In contrast, when a discourse eventually saturates the social as a result of a victorious discursive struggle, stability emerges. Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of hegemony for this stability, a concept that they borrow from Gramsci. Originally, Gramsci (1999, p. 261) defined this notion as referring to the formation of consent rather than to the (exclusive) domination of the other, without however excluding a certain form of pressure and repression: "The 'normal' exercise of hegemony [...] is characterized by the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another, without force exceeding consent too much." Following Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation of the concept, Torfing (1999, p. 101) defined hegemony as the expansion of the discourse, or set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action. In this scenario, a dominant social order (Howarth, 1998, p. 279), or a social imaginary, is created, which pushes other meanings beyond the horizon, threatening them with oblivion.

This argument is founded on the claim that hegemonic practices require an open system. In a closed system there would only be repetition, and nothing would be left to hegemonize (Laclau/Mouffe, 1985, p. 134). It takes more than



mere articulation, however, to speak of hegemony. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985, pp. 135-136), hegemony implies that antagonistic practices link elements in so-called chains of equivalence. They claim, “in other words, that hegemony should emerge in a field criss-crossed by antagonisms and therefore suppose phenomena of equivalence and frontier effects. But, conversely, not every antagonism supposes hegemonic practices.” It is important that this stabilization, or sedimentation, is temporal. As Sayyid and Zac (1998, p. 262) formulate it: “Hegemony is always possible but can never be total.” There is always the possibility of resistance, of the resurfacing of a discursive struggle, and of the re-politicization of sedimented discourses, combined with the permanent threat to every discourse of re-articulation. And, again, this generates structural contingency. Citing Mouffe (2005, p. 18): “Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counterhegemonic practices, i.e., practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony.” Some have argued that the many contestations and de-stabilizations have led to the demise of hegemony itself, as for instance Scott Lash does:

I do not want to argue that hegemony is a flawed concept. I do not want indeed to argue at all against the concept of hegemony. Hegemony as a concept has I think indeed great truth-value. What I want to argue instead is that it has had great truth-value for a particular epoch. I want to argue that that epoch is now beginning to draw to a close. I want to suggest that power now, instead, is largely *post-hegemonic*. (Lash, 2007, p. 55 - emphasis in original)

I would like to argue that hegemony still serves its purpose. Hegemony “remains a central and productive concept in the study of culture, open to further elaboration and practical work” (Brooker, 2003, p. 121) and post-hegemonic theory has “a marked reduction of social complexity [...]. It is strange, however, that the result is viewed as the end of hegemony rather than as a new hegemonic moment.” (Johnson, 2007, p. 102) At the same time, we should continue to argue that undecidability structurally affects hegemonic orders, making it difficult for them to be imposed.

#### 4 From undecidability to decision

If we follow this argumentation, which locates undecidability at the level of the ontological, the question then becomes: what is the role of the decision (and decidedness)? Laclau argues that contingency requires decisions to constantly supersede the undecidability (Laclau, 1996, p. 92). In Laclau’s vocabulary, the notion of the decision refers to the moment of fixation, where discourses are articulated in particular ways and discursive struggles are waged, leading to particular outcomes. This renders it a political process, as Mouffe (2000,

p. 130) formulates it, in her call for a “proper reflection on the moment of ‘decision’ which characterizes the field of politics.” She adds to this idea that the decision – as a moment of fixation – entails “an element of force and violence.” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 130) Another way of understanding this is to refer to Deleuze and Guattari’s (more materialist) metaphor of the machine, which is “a system of interruptions or breaks”, which “is related to a continual material flow [...] that it cuts into” (1984, p. 36 – emphasis removed). For Laclau, the decision is the moment that arrests the continuous flow of meaning and signifiers, bringing it to a (temporal) halt and structuring it in a particular way.

In Laclau’s work, the decision is closely connected to the subject, who is both free to decide and bound by already-created structures. In a long footnote in *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau (1996, p. 18) includes an earlier interview with him, by David Howarth and Aletta Norval. There - summarizing their interpretation of Laclau’s position - the interviewers raise the following question: “The failure of the structure fully to constitute the subject, forces the subject to be subject, *to take a decision*, to act, to identify anew.” (Howarth and Norval, quoted in Laclau, 1996, p. 18 – my emphasis) In his response, Laclau emphasizes that freedom itself “is both liberating and enslaving, exhilarating and traumatic, enabling and destructive,” and he resists an interpretation where being “forced to respond” means that “we are unfree.” (Laclau, 1996, p. 18) At the same time, he agrees with the conclusion of the two interviewers that “the moment of freedom and possibility is simultaneously the moment of my greatest constraint, of unfreedom.” (Howarth and Norval, quoted in Laclau, 1996, p. 18) The decision then becomes what constitutes the subject “who can only exist as a will transcending the structure.” (Laclau, 1996, p. 92) And again, Laclau points to the interrelationship of the decision (the will), decidedness and the structure:

Because this will has no place of constitution external to the structure but is the result of the failure of the structure to constitute itself, it can be formed only through acts of constitution. (Laclau, 1996, p. 92)

In discourse theory, the role of the decision, as a temporary moment of fixation, is also used in relation to the concept of hegemony. A very short and clear formulation can be found in their “Preface to the second edition” of Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where they write that “One can see hegemony as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable domain.” (Laclau/Mouffe, 2001, p. xi) Also, on a previous occasion, Laclau, when comparing Derrida’s deconstruction with his approach to hegemony, formulated a similar point, connecting hegemony with the decision which fixates discourses within a context of undecidability:

This is exactly the point at which deconstruction and hegemony cross each other. For if deconstruction discovers the role of the decision out of the undecidability of the structure, hegemony as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain requires that the contingent character of the connections existing in that terrain is fully shown by deconstruction. (Laclau, 1996, p. 89)

This reflection on the decision, within a context of undecidability, then allows us to return to the discussion on undecidedness. Contingency first of all impacts on the context of the decision, rendering it unstable. If the decision is a temporal fixation of meaning, or - to use Deleuze and Guattari's terms - an (equally temporal) interruption of a flow, then the decision is permanently susceptible to change. Undecidedness, as the ontic impossibility of deciding, then refers to the possibility that every decision can be altered by a new decision. This idea is echoed in Lefort's (1986, p. 305 – emphasis in original) statement that: "This society is *historical society par excellence*", especially in the way that this statement is clarified by Rushton (2013, p. 147): "The decisions made in democracy are never fixed 'for all time'. Rather, they are always historically dependent and have to be instituted under their own weight and at each time anew." From a discourse-theoretical perspective, the impossibility of ultimately fixating the social (with decisions) is seen as a key characteristic of the social. When we shift our gaze from the ontological to the ontic level, undecidedness, just like decidedness, and connected in an intimate relationship with it, then becomes an inherent part of the political, an argument which should caution us against the negative connotations often connected to undecidedness.

The argumentation mentioned above is only partial, as it tends to black-box - to use one of Latour's (1987) conceptual instruments - the decision itself. Without ignoring the contingency of the decision (because of it being embedded in a context of undecidability), we should also acknowledge the presence of undecidability in the decision itself. Again, Deleuze and Guattari's (1984, p. 36) machine metaphor can be used, when they say that "every machine is the machine of a machine," arguing that the machine is a flow itself. It is seen as the law of the production of production: "[...] every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow, in relation to the machine connected to it." Another way to argue this position is to state that, just like 'fully constituted identities' cannot exist, so 'fully constituted decisions' cannot exist. From this perspective, decisions already contain the seed of indeterminacy engrained in them, for instance, because it is impossible to perfectly represent them through language. In Laclau's (2000, p. 70) words, we have to take the "autonomization of the signifier" into account. Or to use more Lacanian language, the Real is seen always to resist its representation. But also the always immanent possibility of interpretational differences, as thematized by Hall (1980) within the field of Cultural Studies, destabilizes the decision as

such. From a more materialist perspective, decisions are undermined by the equally persistent presence of the resistances that decisions provoke, as Foucault (1978) and de Certeau (1984) have argued.

One final addition to this argumentation is that the identity of the decision-maker is also affected by the context of undecidability. In other words, the subject position of the leader can be articulated in different ways. One example of this is the labels of weak and strong leader, used by Deutsch (1978) in his analysis. Obviously, in social practice (and not only in academic analyses), leaders' identities are also articulated using signifiers related to weakness and strength. This articulation affects the capacity of the decision to be a decision, or to be accepted as a decision. If the subject position of the leader becomes articulated as a "castrated leader" (to use a term Žižek [2000, p. 262] uses), then it is unlikely that the actions of this leader will be transformed into, or accepted as, decisions. In more traditional organisational theory (and research) there are several references to the acceptance of decisions by subordinates, which brings us back to the Weberian discussion on leadership authority and legitimacy. To give one example, Vroom and Yetton (1973, p. 28) refer to the "circumstances in which the leader's decision has high prior probability of being accepted by subordinates," which are grounded in the relationship between leader and subordinates. The argument that is made in this chapter is that the articulation of the subject position of the leader (but also of the subordinates), and its (potential) re-articulations over time and place adds instability to the decision itself.

## 5 Fantasies of decidedness

This discussion then raises questions about the explanation for the positive connotation attributed to decidedness and the negative connotation of undecidedness. Here I would like to introduce the concept of fantasy. In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which has heavily influenced discourse theory, fantasy is conceptualized as having (among other functions) a protective role (Lacan, 1979, p. 41). In providing the subject with (imaginary) frames that attempt to conceal and finally to overcome the major internal psychic cleavage of the lack (Lacan, 1994, pp. 119-120), fantasy functions as "the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'." (Žižek, 1989, p. 44) Subjects "push away reality in fantasy" (Lacan, 1999, p. 107); in order to make the reality (imaginary) consistent, social imaginaries are produced, accepted and then taken for granted. Nevertheless, this ultimate victory remains out of reach, and eventually all fantasies are again frustrated. Their limits become visible, showing the contingency of the social.

In an earlier text (Carpentier, 2011), I have argued that there are three distinct fantasies at work in policy-making: the post-political desire to attain political consensus in the face of social conflict, deploying, in a contradictory manner, strategic power to attain it; the fantasy of social ‘makeability’, based on the belief that political agency (via formal politics) can realize its objectives to impact on (parts of) society – to ‘make a difference’ – and can successfully apply what can be considered as a form of social engineering; and the fantasy of universality, which envisions political and social-cultural unity among citizens but is confronted by manifestations of the non-incorporated particular, and by the Other.

Although more fantasies can be distinguished<sup>7</sup>, it is possible to argue that the cultural importance of decidedness (and the failure to recognize the significance of undecidedness and the context of undecidability) is fed by a cluster of fantasies, made up out of social makeability, political agency and leadership. A more general formulation of the agency fantasy is provided by Contu (2008, p. 370), when she describes it in the following terms: “the fantasy of ourselves as liberal, free, and self-relating human beings to whom multiple choices are open and all can be accommodated.” When applied more to the political and business realm, the agency fantasy is strengthened through the leadership fantasy, envisioning leaders as actors who can solve societal or organisational problems, as they are omnipotent and omniscient (Gabriel, 1999, p. 151). As mentioned before, social makeability refers to the ability of political and business actors to achieve an impact on the social, through their decisions. These three interlocking fantasies establish the decision as the key moment of the exercise of agency and leadership, which has a clear and unilinear impact on the social, whether this is at the macro, meso or micro level. The decision thus becomes an anchorage point for some key desires that define these fields (such as politics and business) and commit people (and resources) to these fields. In this way, the decision can be seen to embody the sense that the political (and politics and business) matter.

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter is a cautionary tale about the decision, which plays a crucial, but sometimes hidden role in political theory and is often engulfed in positivity, driven by the fantasies of social makeability, political agency and leadership (that also affect (academic) theory development). At the same time, the decision is very much needed to halt the incessant flow of the social (and the political), but its fantasmagoric celebration and articulation with the normative first of all blinds us to the importance and unavoidability of undecidedness.

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<sup>7</sup> One example is the unmediated access to the Real. See Carpentier (2014).

Undecidedness exists, because the decision is unstable and changeable, and because the decision itself incorporates undecidedness, as no full and final decision can exist in a context of contingency. The articulation of the decision as positive (and undecidedness as negative) is problematic, because it ignores the complexity of the political and the workings of a series of political fantasies. Moreover, it is equally problematic because it ignores the unavoidability and the democratic importance of the reversibility of decisions, and the absence of full and final decisions that would exclude the possibilities of (re)interpretation and resistance.

But at the same time this chapter has aimed to show the importance of a third concept, which contextualizes both decidedness and undecidedness: namely undecidability. This concept entails the very necessary move into the realm of the ontological, which provides meaning to both decidedness and undecidedness. Undecidability theorizes the inability to reach an ultimate decision, and opens a pathway to acknowledging the importance of undecidedness. In addition, undecidability also allows an emphasis to be placed on the need for the decision, as a temporary fixation, without which the political cannot exist. To paraphrase Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 112): the absence of any fixity implies psychosis, but unfixity has to be conceived at both the ontic and ontological level. This then brings us to the conclusion that to understand the social and the political, we need the conceptual strength of the trinity of decidedness, undecidedness and undecidability.

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