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Gloria Perelló and Paula Biglieri

ON THE DEBATE AROUND *IMMANENCE* AND *TRANSCENDENCE*

Multitude or the *people*

There has been a profound debate about new ways of looking on emancipatory politics among progressive political theoreticians. One of the most important consequences of this contemporary debate has been the emergence of three related controversies: transcendence versus immanence, the people versus the multitude and negative ontology versus positive ontology. Our argumentative strategy will be to present these controversies first, through Hardt and Negri's point of view, and then through a Lacanian lecture of Laclau's perspective, author who places the psychoanalysis where philosophy traditionally located ontology.

Keywords transcendence; immanence; people; multitude

Introduction

After the fall of the Berlin wall and the deconstruction of Marxism, particularly as carried out by Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2000), Laclau (1990) and Derrida (1989), there has been a profound debate about new ways of looking on emancipatory politics among progressive political theoreticians. One of the most important consequences of this contemporary debate has been the emergence of three related controversies: *transcendence* versus *immanence*, the *people* versus the *multitude* and *negative ontology* versus *positive ontology*. In this presentation, we will focus on the first pair but taking into account, of course, the other two.

Our argumentative strategy will be to present these controversies first, through Hardt and Negri's point of view, and then through a Lacanian lecture of Laclau's perspective, an author who places psychoanalysis where philosophy traditionally located ontology. At this point, we will present our hypotheses, which interrogate the classical notion of transcendence to draw some considerations.

Immanence or the near side of multitude

Hardt and Negri (2000) present their notions of *empire* and *multitude* as two sides of the same coin, which would allow us to interpret social order in our present time. These concepts are rooted in an ontology of a given immanence as it was understood by Deleuze in his reading of Spinoza. Having in mind the idea of immanence, Hardt and Negri state that we are witnessing the decline of the nation-state paradigm of sovereignty and the rise of a new manner of sovereignty: the *empire*.

Hardt and Negri characterize *empire* along two axes: space and time. Regarding the authors' conception of space, we find that *empire* is thought to be *decentered* and *detrterritorialized*. It does not have boundaries. *Empire* implies a strong sense of spatial totality because it does not have any transcendent elements working as a reference to pass sense or unity onto it. It does not have an exact *locus* or centre, it is everywhere and it has no outside. Regarding these authors' conception of time, they state that *empire* has brought about a permanent present. Therefore, *empire* is presented not only as a regime without frontiers but as regime at the end or outside history as well. *Empire* proposes the Kantian ideal of perpetual peace – a perpetual and universal peace outside history – (although it produces episodes of bloodshed). But within the *empire* there are forces of liberation: the *multitude*.

Hardt and Negri state that production within the *empire* – that is, biopolitical production – takes the form of an imperial machine. But this imperial machine is an empty, spectacular and parasitical machine. Because it does not produce positivity, it does not produce an ontology; on the contrary, it takes its energy from the ontology built by the *multitude*. Hardt and Negri think of biopolitics in positive terms, that is, they consider that this way of life production holds the potentiality of the *multitude*. The *multitude* is the expression of life and Hardt and Negri give it priority over the *empire* because for them it is the *multitude* who builds ontology, not the *empire*. It is the productive potentiality of the *multitude* what dismantles the *empire*.

Based on their conception of positive biopolitics, Hardt and Negri define their concept of social cooperation as a strategy of the *multitude* and their notion of *naked life* as a positive potentiality of production. 'Social cooperation is not a result of the investment of capital but rather an autonomous power, the *a priori* of every act of production. When human power appears immediately as an autonomous cooperating collective force, capitalist prehistory comes to an end. In other words, capitalist prehistory comes to an end when social and subjective cooperation is no longer a product but a presupposition, when naked life is raised up to the dignity of productive power, or really when it appears as the wealth of virtuality' (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 366). This quotation shows that for Hardt and Negri it is possible to overcome alienation, getting into history and leaving behind capitalist prehistory once *naked life* is raised up to the dignity of productive power. It

is obvious that if there is a possibility to overcome alienation, then we have the possibility of unalienated being, that is, fullness of being. That is why they propose social cooperation (the *multitude*) with an ontological and logical priority over the *empire*. Old young Marx once again!

If the *empire* does not have an ontological status, *multitude* is a positive ontology, an ontology of excess, an ontology of fullness because it stands up from its own existence and needs. Hardt and Negri mention a new subjectivity and a new political ontology that emerges from an immanent conception of *multitude*. Multitude is a new political subjectivity, a new subject of history that has the potentiality to build a democratic political device in the heart of the *empire*.

Multitude has two main features: the immeasurable and the virtual. The authors describe the first feature as what is outside measure and stands for an ontology of immanence. Let us say that they conceive the political subjectivity of immanence and through this argument they present their idea of foundation as 'non foundation', that is the possibility to create a foundation from each particular situation or the needs of a specific context. That is the reason why they recover the legacy of the revolution of Renaissance humanism '*Ni Dieu, ni maître, ni l'homme* (Neither God, nor master, or man) – no transcendent power or measure will determine the values of our world. Value will be determined only by humanity's own continuous innovation and creation' (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 356). For the second feature, the place of *multitude* is a new place, the non-place, a permanent *detritorialization* and *territorialization*. These two features leave the *empire* without any possibility of counting or calculating. Facing the imperial government we have nomadism and miscegenation.

The body of the *multitude* is not a body which is well demarcated or fixed in an individual or collective subject, as it was thought by Hobbes. The body of the *multitude* is a multiform one. It is elusive, evasive and irrepresentable. Therefore, the *multitude* is presented through a shape: monstrous flesh. A figure that helps the authors to present the idea that humanity produces things in common, because the characteristic of the multiform flesh of the *multitude* is the production of what is common. The production of the common originates in a concrete situation of need. The common is not, for Hardt and Negri, something pre-established from transcendence.

At this point it is obvious that Hardt and Negri oppose Hobbes and, through him, the whole notion of the nation-state paradigm of sovereignty. Therefore, they reject any idea of the *people*. Why? Because for Hobbes, to have a *people* we need two simultaneous actions: first, frightened individuals who establish a contract among each other to transfer their natural rights to a third person and, second, this third person becomes the representative of those frightened individuals who then become the represented. In other words, for Hobbes the *multitude* becomes a *people* through contract and representation. That is an external element that gives sense and unity. Only through a transcendent element we may have the *people*, a nation, a state and so on.

Hardt and Negri extend this Hobbesian conception to any conceptualization that uses the figure of the *people*.

This is where the main problem lays for Hardt and Negri: the *people* is a transcendental construction that has nothing to do with the immanence of *multitude*. For them the *people* is as artificial as the Leviathan, the *people* 'comes always from above', the *people* is never given. This is why they think that the *people* crushes the differences, it synthesizes them, it creates one extended identity that drowns all singularities, in other words, it makes everything uniform. Therefore, Hardt and Negri's most important objection to the notion of the *people* is not that it involves the idea of the completeness of being – as a matter of fact they always see the notion of the people as the people-as-one – because, in any case, *multitude* involves an idea of the completeness of being as well.

Finally, Hardt and Negri expect us to stop thinking in these terms. In opposition to the figure of the body of the king they propose the monstrosity of the flesh; and the idea that the *multitude* is the only subjectivity capable of effecting a democracy based on the use of what is common and not through the notion of private property.

Transcendence or the *people* and *its beyond*

As we have just seen, Hardt and Negri believe in Hobbes' conception of *people*. But Laclau does not believe and develops a completely different notion of the *people*. Laclau's conception of the *people* falls within his notion of populism, that is, a *plebs* that claims to be the only legitimate *populous* (Laclau 2005). This is a partiality (the *plebs*, as the least privileged – the underdog) that intends to function as the totality of the community (the *populus*, the *people* as the name of the whole community). In this way, we have populism when a partiality identifies itself with the totality and produces a radical exclusion within the communitarian space. In other words, to have a populist articulation we need the prevalence of an equivalence chain over a plurality of social demands, the emergence of the figure of the *people* and an antagonistic borderline between 'us, the *people*' and 'them, the enemies of the *people*'.

The *people* show the absent fullness of the community, that is, 'the impossibility of the object society' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2000, p. 160). How does this happen? In populism the *people* come into being because of the impossibility of any closed, coherent and unified order (objectivity, identity, etc.). The *people* shows up, right there, in perpetual unachievable search of the fullness of the community. That is the reason why it involves a radical borderline, because its own presence is the effect of constitutive social antagonism. Therefore, 'without this initial breakdown of something in the social order – however minimal that something could initially be – there is

no possibility of antagonism, frontier or, ultimately, “people” (Laclau 2005, p. 85).

In contrast to the notion of *multitude*, in Laclau’s notion of *people* we do not have any sense of totality, or a given immanence, or full presence, or any ontological priority of any kind, or homogeneity within the social space or even less so, the possibility of the *people-as-one*.

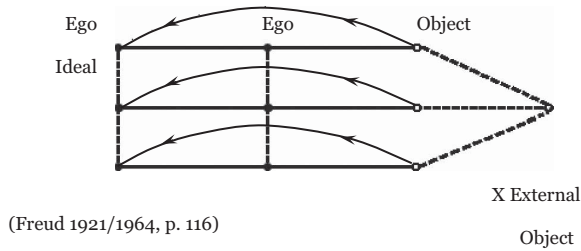
If we say that the *people* emerge from the impossibility of the object society, it is because social order is not something homogeneous. What is more, there is nothing in common among the members of the social space. That is, because the main feature of the subject is the impossibility of the social relation. Then, what makes a multiplicity of heterogeneities become a community is the impossibility of social relation; it is the impossible, heterogeneity and the Real (The Real in the Lacanian sense). In any case, if there is an affective attachment, if there is a bond, it is because the relationship is impossible. When we say impossibility, we do not mean impotence, nor an ideal of potency as conceived by Hardt and Negri in their concept of *multitude* (the only one subjectivity capable of effecting a democracy based on the use of what is common).

Laclau’s conception of the *people* does not refer to a Hobbesian conception of the *people*. Laclau’s *people* do not refer to rational individuals who decide to transfer their natural rights to a third person, creating an imaginary unity through a symbolic contract.¹ Those who think in Hardt and Negri’s terms mistake the homonymy of the terms with conceptual status, when they establish a homology between Hobbes’ *people* and Laclau’s *people*. In this way, they ignore a central topic in the theoretical development of the later: the notion of *cathexis*.²

The constitution of the *people* is not just the figure of the leader as a transcendent element that gives sense to everything it represents. We can see this clearly on Freud’s graphic of *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (Freud 1921/1964, p. 116), which is taken up by Laclau’s in *On Populist Reason* (2005). Hence, are we denying the notion of transcendence in Laclau’s argumentation about the *people*? No, surely not. But let us examine in detail what this notion of transcendence means for Laclau – a notion that he takes from psychoanalysis – because it has nothing to do with the way in which Hardt and Negri conceive of it.

In *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego*, Freud presents the way in which a mass is articulated with its leader. We can see this very briefly through a Freudian formula (Freud 1921/1964, pp. 109–110). Freud shows the centrality of *cathexis* (in terms of *identification* and *being in love*) in this type of articulation, and points out that the *identification* among the members of the mass is possible because each of its members *is in love* with the leader (in other words, because of a relation of idealization towards the leader that emerges from each member of the mass).

Freud asserts (1921/1964, p. 116) that ‘a primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego. This condition admits of graphic representation’:



Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego (Freud 1921/1964) and its formula show the relationships among the elements that participate in the articulation of the mass with its leader. Let us consider each parallel line as one member of the mass, and in each line there are three elements represented: Ego ideal, Ego and object. At the same time, we can see through the dotted line the *catexial* bond. This *catexial* bond takes place among the different Egos through *identification* and among the different Ego Ideals through *being in love* with the leader. However, those *catexial* bonds are possible because each subject has resigned his direct sexual satisfaction – related to the object of the drive – when investing an external object (that is to say, when resigning the sensual tendency). In this way, any direct sexual satisfaction is excluded and the subject – now with inhibited sexual drives – is linked to the external object (this is what corresponds to *being in love* or, in other words, idealization). If we pay attention to the direction of the arrows, we can see that there is a kind of logical movement that goes in the opposite direction of the hands of a clock, so we have the following sequence: the subject resigns the satisfaction of his own object, invests an external object, this external object is located in the place of the ideal (idealization or *being in love*) and then we have the identification among the different Egos.

In this Freudian formula there is a sort of knot which shows the *catexial* bonds constitutive of a mass, but it also shows an essential element, that is, all those little objects among which there is no bond at all, but which make the articulation possible (notice that in the formula there is no dotted line among them and they are drawn with an empty centre). All these little objects – which could be assimilated to the Lacanian object *a* – anticipate something that might be called transcendence. We may venture our hypothesis, that is, that this transcendence does not belong to the ontological order. Or if we wanted to refer to an ontology, we ought to refer to it as an ontology of the Real.

How is this possible? To understand formally how reality is instituted, its grounds and significations – this is the problem with which ontology deals – we may refer to the Lacanian idea of ‘unconscious causality’. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan (1964/1998) asserts that all effects are under the pressure of a ‘causal order’ in the sense that this is a ‘lost cause’, that is to say, that ‘causal order’ is a void one.

Therefore, to say that the ‘unconscious causality’ belongs to a ‘void order’ means that we are dealing with a non-entity which, at the same time, is not a non-entity. This ‘unconscious causality’ is defined as an interdiction, Lacan says cryptically ‘the prohibition that brings to being an existent’ (Lacan 1964/1998, p. 128).

Miller states that if we bring forth a negative entity into play (a nothing that is not nothing, that is, a calling of being) we introduce a rupture at the level of immanence (as interpreted by Deleuze). This rupture is decisive to the Lacanian subject, as it determines its emergence. Regarding immanence (let us say, real immanence, virtual immanence or merely given immanence), to bring forth a negative entity into play opens a transcendent distance, something beyond. This is what Miller proposed as the Lacanian structure *and its beyond*, there is something beyond everything given. This introduces what Miller has called, in a different paper, a trans-factual dimension, an absolutely essential dimension in Lacan (Miller 2006, p. 213).

Therefore, if what is implied in Hardt and Negri is the monstrosity of the flesh, and in Hobbes an artificial body with the king as head and vassals and a territory as the body, in Laclau it would be an *acephalous subject*.³ It would be an *acephalous subject* precisely because transcendence – as we have just observed through the Freudian formula and Lacan’s words – is not located in the place of the leader, but beyond, on a ground that is not a ground, foundation that is not a foundation.

We retain the image of an *acephalous subject* because from our point of view, the major finding of *On Populist Reason*, its byproduct, is that in its development, in its circuits, to analyze the problem areas within populism, Laclau specifies the concept of heterogeneity. He manages to circumscribe this concept by separating it from the idea of antagonism and by bringing it beyond the idea of dislocation, and defines it through and around the *people* and makes it the centre of its conception.

‘The break involved in this kind of exclusion is more radical than the one that is inherent in the antagonistic one: while antagonism still presupposes some sort of discursive inscription, the kind of outside that I am now discussing presupposes exteriority not just to something within a space of representation, but to the space of representation as such. I will call this type of exteriority *social heterogeneity*. Heterogeneity, conceived in this way, does not mean difference, two entities, in order to be different, need a space within which that difference is representable, while what I am now calling heterogeneity presupposes the absence of that common place’ (Laclau 2005, p. 140).

The antagonism that dwells in discourse supposes a form of inscription, as it is contingent and at the same time necessary for the constitution of the system. What is heterogeneous, however, is not inscribed, it is real, as a residue which falls as a leftover from the process of signifying. This means that what we call the real is not only so in the relationship with antagonism, but also and centrally with heterogeneity, or – in psychoanalytical terms – as *plus de jouir*. The heterogeneous is not placed within or without, inside or outside, but at the point of *extimacy*. Through this neologism, *extimacy*, Lacan understand the most intimate level to be found at the external level, and announces its presence as a foreign body, a parasite, which recognizes a constitutional rupture of intimacy (Miller 2008).

It is in this sense that we consider Laclau's *people* as a structure that has something beyond itself. Laclau's transcendence is not located in the place of the leader, it is beyond the structure, in a nothing that is not nothing, however. That is the reason why we assert that the figure that corresponds to Laclau's people is the *acephalous subject*, because it is anchored in a void transcendence. To say it in Laclau's own terms: the place of transcendence is the place of heterogeneity, not merely as radical difference; or more precisely, what in psychoanalysis would be called *plus de jouir*.

To conclude, let us go back to the question on emancipation. Does *the people* encompass the possibility of emancipating policies? The answer is paradoxical: the *people* implies, at the same time, the experience of the possibility and impossibility of emancipation. How is this possible? Let us go back the Lacanian notion of 'lost causality' – introduced earlier – and let us take into account its double assertion: on the one hand, a cause that you have to defend or a cause that you have to win and, on the other hand, a cause as ground, that is to say, as foundation. Then, we have for the first case – cause as something that you have to defend or achieve – that the cause is going to be always a failure because – even in the best of the cases – it will never be fully realized as such. And, for the second case – the cause as ground or foundation – we mean that it is a lost cause because, contrary to what is taught at the university 'if the cause is taken away, its effect will disappear' (*Ablata causa tollitur effectus*), here, in this case, we have that there are effects because there is no cause.

Lacan own words: 'Cause might be formulated on the basis of the classical formula of the *ablata causa tollitur effectus* – I would have only to stress the singular of the protasis, *ablata causa*, by putting the terms of the apodosis in the plural *tolluntur effectus* – which would mean that *the effects are successful only in the absence of cause*. All the effects are subjected to the pressure of a transfactual, causal order which demands to join in their dance, but, if they held their hands tightly, as in the song, they would prevent the cause intruding in their round' (Lacan 1964/1998, p. 128).

The double assertion of 'lost causality' means that neither starting points nor finishing lines are guaranteed, because there are no grounds from where to

start or take any ultimate signification and there are no final goals established a priori to be fully achieved. However, 'lost causality' – as function of the impossible – does not involve impotence, paralysis or renouncement, on the contrary, it involves 'an experience that tries to turn the absent ground into cause' (Alemán 2009, p. 14). In front of a 'lost causality', something will always be missing, something will always be in excess, in other words, there will always be the Real insisting, 'that which never stops not being written' (Lacan 1975, p. 82).

Finally, it is this lack of guarantees what evokes a call to become involved in political struggles. It evokes an ethical position, because as nothing is guaranteed before hand, as we do not know how things are going to turn up, as we are not able to establish in a clear and transparent manner the ways to a reconciled society – which, by the way, is impossible – as we do not know what that incessant irruption of the Real may generate in the Symbolic and Imaginary orders, as antagonism is inextricable, it is because of all these that we have a call to become militant. *The people* implies politics, a possibility to experience the impossibility–possibility of emancipation.

Corollary

Let us relate both proposals to their corresponding political connections. On the one hand, to think of the *multitude* as pure immanence has as its corollary spontaneous class struggles, which as such are necessary (and therefore do not require any kind of political subjectifying of contingent articulation). That is, as every political emancipatory action, we are only left with leaving, deserting or merely become imbued of the mystical joy of being to expect the spontaneous operation of the necessary forces: Antipolitics.

On the other, considering Laclau's theory, politics is defined from a radical contingency, from the articulation which responds to precise logical operations, (equivalence and difference) but never guarantee results. Moreover, what is stated is that these solutions will always fail. However, this must not be taken to mean a summons to resignation, from impotence, but quite contrarily, as a call from the impossible, to become involved in political fighting, to the subjective responsibility of building a *people*.

Notes

- 1 Imaginary, Symbolic and Real have different meanings depending on which stage of Lacan's teaching these concepts are referred to. However, we can make some reflections on the question. Imaginary is – *par excellence* – the place of the Ego, it involves the illusionary phenomenon ruled by the law of *gestalt*. The Imaginary order has to do with the image, it has to do with the

notion of representation (that is to say, what is presented again instead of an absence), it is an attempt of synthesis, it is an attempt of unification, it is an attempt of closing meaning. The Symbolic order, in a broad sense, can be understood as culture passed on through language. It is an organizer through the laws of language and gives form to the imaginary representations (we can say that the background to the Symbolic order – in the Lacanian sense – is: the Saussure linguistics, Levy-Strauss anthropology and symbolic logic). We cannot separate the Symbolic order from the Imaginary order or from the Real. Lacan is going to define the Real in many different ways: as mere leftovers, because it is what belongs neither to the Imaginary nor to the Symbolic order; it is what always comes back to the same place; it is the *impossible*, that is to say, it is what is impossible to represent, the logically impossible. None of these definitions cancel the others. All of them are valid. As we have said, Imaginary order, Symbolic order and Real are inseparable and during the last period of his teaching Lacan used topology to translate the trilogy Imaginary, Symbolic and Real into a Borromean knot.

- 2 For example, followers of Hardt and Negri as Diego Sztulwark, who belongs to the research group called Colectivo Situaciones.
- 3 We draw from Lacan (1954/1998, p. 170) the notion of an *acephalic subject*, which refers to the way in which a drive reveals itself. Drives articulate through tensions, outline borders, in a topology where the journey of the drive produces a circuit surrounding an absence.

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