

# Laclau with Freud, or the Path Towards Psychoanalysis as General Ontology

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Volume 9, 2016

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0009.002> [<http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0009.002>]

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## Introduction

Ernesto Laclau developed his theory of hegemony in response to his concerns about some basic tenets of classical Marxism. In his eagerness to move beyond the essentialist ontology that had already assumed what the objective laws governing historical development were (who its leading subject was, and what guaranteed fate was offered to us as societies), it was the centrality of psychoanalysis in both its Freudian and Lacanian registers that enabled the imagining of a post-Marxist configuration, and granted heuristic power to Laclau's work, none of which departed from the radical spirit that drove him in his search for emancipatory paths.

Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault, and Derrida had all served as precedents. However, although Laclau liked to say that he was neither a "Freudian" nor a "Lacanian", but a "Laclausian", the key to his theoretical development lies in its psychoanalytic dimension. In this paper we therefore propose to address the centrality of psychoanalysis in the work of Laclau, from the notion of the subject that is internal to Freud's developments. We know that throughout his work, from 1895-1939, Freud never explicitly addressed the question of the subject. If anything, he did so in a colloquial manner. However, an interpretation can be developed of what the notion of the subject entails in its relation to the development of his psychoanalytic theory. With respect to Laclau's work, we consider that there are essentially three key Freudian texts at stake: *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, "The Dream Work", and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. At times addressed directly by Laclau, and at times more surreptitiously, these texts show us Freud's fundamental assumptions regarding the concept of identity, which are essential when considering Laclau's way of thinking about politics. Here we will present a "Laclausian" reading of the three Freudian texts in question. Our interpretation is that they plot a course around the notion of the subject, which Laclau then carries to a radical proposition: locating psychoanalysis in the place where philosophy had traditionally placed ontology, that is, to propose psychoanalysis as a general ontology.

## The Individual is Impossible; Society is Impossible Too

Freud's notion of the subject undermines what had prevailed throughout modernity, the basic tenet of which derives from the Cartesian argument that man himself is the foundation of his own thoughts and functions as an undivided unit as the subject of knowledge and awareness. Freud questions whether from the start there might a sense of a totality coherently unified under an identity that is being taken for granted: namely, the individual. If ontology is the statement of the nature of being, for Freud it is not full and will never be so. In "Part III. On the *Mechanism of Paranoia*" from 1911, Freud made this clear when he proposed a change in the nosological denomination for schizophrenia, since for Freud not only schizophrenic subjects are divided. The split affects everyone. [\[1\]\[#N1\]](#)

"On Narcissism", in turn, is considered to be a pivotal text in Freud's work because it is here that he abandons the duality of conflict between the drives of self-preservation and the sexual drives. [\[2\]\[#N2\]](#) This is because, as a result of his theory of the libido, Freud no longer conceives of drives as anything other than sexual. Thus, following this "libidization of the ego", he locates conflict in the opposition between ego libido and object libido. Another noteworthy aspect of this text is that it introduces the concepts of ego ideal and "conscience", predecessors of the superego, which will be conceptualized years later in 1923, in *The Ego and the Id*. But for

the purposes of our work we want to emphasize that in “On Narcissism” the idea is clear that subject and ego are not synonymous. The subject is not assimilable to the ego, but exceeds it. In addition, the ego for Freud is one of those psychic instances that are not present from the beginning in the life of the speaking being, but will have to be developed, will have to become:

As regards the first question, I may point out that we are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed. The auto-erotic instincts, however, are there from the very first; so there must be something added to auto-erotism – a new psychical action – in order to bring about narcissism. (Freud, “Narcissism” 76-77).

That is to say, there is no such unity as an ego, understood as an individual with consciousness of its own self or of its own body. On the contrary, everything is pure fragmentation, that is, partial drives chasing partial objects in anarchic fashion. Only through a new psychic act is narcissism constituted. Thus, the anarchy of the drives finds a certain order; a certain unification. In this way narcissism creates organization from chaos, and through this psychic act there emerges an object capable of attracting all drives to itself. That object is the ego, which is constituted as an object of love. Years later in his seminar on identification (*Book IX*), Lacan would interpret this new psychic action as an imaginary identification. For Lacan the subject is imaginarily alienated in the ego thanks to the symbolic support provided by significant others. This symbolic support is what Freud called the ego ideal. We will return to this aspect shortly.

Therefore while for Freud the individual is impossible, for Laclau society is equally impossible: “There is no sutured space peculiar to “society”, since the social itself has no essence” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, 96). When Laclau deconstructs Marxism’s essentialist “material base–superstructure” topology, he carries us into the realm of dispersion. There is no longer a core that works as a founding principle of the whole. It is about a dispersion that for Laclau occurs on the discursive level. In Freud’s thought, we do not have a given order from the onset but the pure anarchy of divergent elements. In order to conjure up anything like a whole something else is needed, which for Laclau is a question of articulation: “We must, therefore, consider the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or “negative essence” of the existing, and the diverse “social orders” as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, 95).

We have in Laclau, then, as a first step, the anarchy of the play of differences and in a second step articulation as a practice, thereby establishing a relation between distinct elements: first dispersion and then the subsequent attempt to unify. However, for Laclau this second moment is no more than an ever-precarious attempt at totalization, meaning that for him the domestication of the field of differences will always be unsuccessful.

Let us return to “On Narcissism”. In Freud’s text we can also distinguish between the first moment in the autoerotic anarchism of partial drives and, in a second moment, the object of love. In the first moment there is, if anything, not *the* object, but partial objects of partial drives. With the introduction of narcissism in the second stage we see the attempt to unify partial drives in the ego, to which the partial drives surrender as the sole object of love. At this point the ego emerges as a unified object:

Thus we form the idea of there being an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to the object-cathexes much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out. (“Narcissism” 75)

For Freud the ego is constituted as one object of love among others, but only after it has been constituted as such can the libido invest in other objects (although this is never guaranteed). It is worth noting that, as Laclau would pose years later, Freud believed that any attempt at totalization would always be failed and precarious at best. This is evidenced when Freud argues that both autoerotism and the constitution of the ego are not phases to be overcome and left behind. The partiality of the drives does not end in narcissism or object choice;

the partiality of the drive persists and the partial object of the drive will appear as a trait in the choice of love object. Moreover, at the level of object choice there is a certain reversibility of the libido that passes from the ego to its objects, and vice versa. The ego shares its place as an object of love with other objects. By loving, the ego diminishes and by being loved the ego is fortified. Thus, it is not only failed and precarious, but also unstable. "A person who loves has, so to speak, forfeited a part of his narcissism, and it can only be replaced by his being loved" ("Narcissism", 98). As a model of reference, Freud introduces the concept of ego ideal as a fundamental element in the constitution of the ego. [3]. Its origin is mainly narcissistic: "What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal" ("Narcissism", 94). Originally the child was his own ideal. Freud exemplifies this with the behavior of loving parents who attribute all kinds of perfections and cover up all kinds of flaws. There is also a tendency not to oppose restrictions on the child. Freud will say that the laws of nature and society cease before him. This overestimation is an unmistakable mark of narcissism, the lost narcissism of the parents now transformed into object love in the bond with the child. Parental love, so touching and so basically childish, is nothing but a resurrection of the parent's narcissism, which evidently reveals its old nature through its transformation into object love. Thus, we can think of the ego ideal as the heir of parental narcissism. As Freud puts it, *His Majesty the Baby* will have to achieve the desires and unfulfilled dreams of his parents. [4]. The introduction of this concept is key, because it emphasizes that the function of the ego ideal—as a transfer of ideals from significant others—is an integral part of the constitution of the ego. There is a kind of generational transmission of ideals that is ideal for the constitution of the ego, and which is essential for compliance with the expectation of significant others. If originally the child was his own ideal, he then renounces his "infantile omnipotence" (through repression) due to criticism issued by parents and significant others (teachers, peers, public opinion etc.). This submission to prohibitions coming from parental figures gradually shapes the ego ideal. Therefore, the ego ideal is simultaneously a substitute for the lost narcissism of childhood and a product of the identification with parental figures and their social replacements. Meanwhile criticism, internalized as an instance of censorship and self-observation, is what Freud called "conscience" and lays the background for the conceptualizing of what he would later call the superego.

It would not surprise us if we were to find a special psychical agency which performs the task of seeing that narcissistic satisfaction from the ego ideal is ensured and which, with this end in view, constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by that ideal. ...what we call our 'conscience' has the required characteristics. ("Narcissism" 95)

The concept of ego ideal is revealed to us as an agency, as a link of the subject in the generational chain by means of the ideal. But above all, it shows us that for Freud the closest thing to an identity is what Lacan posits as identification. The subject needs somebody else so that the ego can establish itself as a love object. Hence, narcissist investment implies a perpetual seeking of oneself and the failure of the fullness of all identity. Thus, all "identity" is relational and in debt with somebody else. This is expressed in Laclau's work in the sense that if all there is is a play of differences, then it follows that besides placing us at the level of radical contingency, each element is what the other is not, each identity is relational and lacking in full presence, and each one relies on an external other that threatens it to the same extent that it constitutes it. However, to move forward in light of the idea of "identity", in Laclau we must work with his concept of hegemony, in which the category of articulation provides us with a point of departure.

## Dream Work and Hegemony Work

We have already seen how the original field is located in Freud in the fragmentation provided by the lawless satisfaction of partial drives. We have also seen how that "new psychic act" launches the constitution of the ego that supposes a certain, though an always incomplete, unification. In Laclau the primary field of dispersion is discourse, and this is where Laclau and Mouffe take their first steps in their theoretical construction, aiming at the understanding of the social field as a discursive space in which the notion of discourse refers not only to linguistic aspects in the sense of speech or written word, but also to any signifying relationship.

If there is only a play of differences, then this incessant play requires a certain fixing (or unification) in order to make sense, since if we were to remain in the constant slippage between elements, there would be such a dispersion of meaning that signification itself would be impossible (psychotic thinking). This is where Laclau and Mouffe introduce the concept of the 'empty signifier', which, in Lacan's terminology, is the *point de capiton* or nodal point. This is the particular signifier or element that assumes a structurally "universal" function within a discursive field. That is, it is the element that allows a certain suture, an always-partial fixation of the play of differences, in such a way that the signifying chain can achieve meaning. [5]. [N5] At this point we can more fully understand the concept of articulation: "The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 113). The precarious detention of the slippage of the signifier enabled by the nodal point occurs precisely because that empty signifier is so inasmuch as it is overdetermined. This is where Laclau and Mouffe turn to Freud and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. [6]. [N6]

Freud introduces the concept of overdetermination in his famous text *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Once again it is the notion of the modern subject that is deconstructed because this is where he reverses the wakefulness-dream binary that Descartes had prioritized. Freud proposes a hermeneutics without an ultimate foundation, which is based on a topology composed of two levels: the manifest content (the text that the dreamer recalls when he wakes up, the main characteristic of which is brief, laconic and poor); and the latent content (sleep thinking or dream thinking, the main characteristic of which is rich, varied and extensive). The dream work thus consists in transferring the latent content to the manifest content, that is to say, to transfer items from one text to another (from the dream text to the conscious text). What happens when a rich, varied and extensive text is transposed onto a short, poor and laconic text? What happens is precisely sleep work—the unconscious—that translates one text into another through the mechanisms of condensation and displacement. Strictly speaking, this does not mean that something has been lost in the translation operated by the unconscious. We could only think as much if we considered a point-by-point type of translation. Rather, what Freud is showing is that the unconscious works in such a way that some elements are condensed into one, and others are displaced. In Freud's words: "The fact upon which this explanation is based may be expressed in another form: Every element of the dream-content proves to be *over-determined* –that is, it appears several times over in the dream-thoughts" ("Dream Work" 283). Laclau and Mouffe account for the Freudian discovery of the unconscious and the radical importance it holds for politics, since here is a logic that is not governed by the principle of non-contradiction, which is articulatory logic. Nodal points emerge at the point at which most points in the overdetermined associative chains converge and are articulated; in other words, they are the elements that condense the largest amount of dreamlike contents by mere association. Thus, empty signifiers are overdetermined elements, in the sense that they condense elements from various associative chains and anchor, though always precariously, a certain sense.

We are thus at the gates of the concept of hegemony, for Laclau and Mouffe take the notion of overdetermination to think identities that will always have a hegemonic structure. A hegemonic articulation occurs when, at a certain point, a particular element assumes the representation of a whole, which is completely incommensurable in respect to itself. This element assumes such a representation because it became overdetermined as it condensed the largest number of associative chains. But not only do we have a certain fixing of meaning, but also, through the mediation of this particularity, which appropriates to itself the representation of universality, we also have access to a certain notion of totality. That is, hegemonic articulations presuppose suturing effects. A hegemonic relation articulates differences after one element (which has become a nodal point, an empty signifier) has imposed itself as the representation of a whole, thereby embodying a certain configuration that is no more than a sutured order because, let us not forget, the suture indicates to us the impossibility of fixing the order as a coherent unified whole.

This is essentially the same as in Freud's thinking; with no possibility of setting an order as a coherently unified whole, the field of differences or divisions in constant motion will always be excessive or, and this is essentially the same, order can never incorporate all differences or divisions. Thus we can say that the opening of the social is constitutive because social excess prevents the closure of order as a unified whole. The social, as such, cannot be more than an always-failed attempt to tame the field of differences. Moreover, a hegemonic articulation is the only possible way to create a precarious order where there is none. Hence the famous

phrase: “The social is articulation insofar as “society” is impossible” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 114). But Laclau and Mouffe go even further and propose two mechanisms that are analogous to those of the dream-work, both of which relate to the work of hegemony. We are referring to the logics of equivalence and difference. [7]. [N7] Elements articulate and form a chain of equivalence not because their particularities have something in common, for the elements involved are negatively defined as differences, but simply because these become equivalent to each other in respect to an exclusion. The logic of equivalence is interrupted by the logic of difference. As a chain of equivalence “unifies” through a signifier that hegemonizes it, this as such functions as an empty signifier, the overdetermined element.

Once Laclau and Mouffe established their notion of hegemony in these terms, they immediately questioned the assumption that there might be *a priori* identities with social tasks and destinies set in advance. Clearly, the criticism is aimed at Marxism. This is not only about social classes as full identities that emerge from an objective position in a particular place in the social architecture (the material basis) in order to exercise their historical role: for example, the bourgeoisie carries forward bourgeois democratic tasks against the old regime; the proletariat carries forward the final emancipatory task of capitalism and, in the end, the arrival of a fully reconciled society. In Laclau and Mouffe there are no primary identities, and the best we can have are secondary identities. Since the shape of every identity is hegemonic it is not given in advance; it must be constituted. Therein lies the political task of building hegemony: to establish equivalences, mark differences, and achieve border effects (an ‘us’ and a ‘them’).

As such, if the shape of all identity is hegemonic then Laclau and Mouffe perform the same operation as the one set out by Freud, i.e., by stating that the ego and the subject do not coincide, the latter exceeds the former. But if hegemony is an analogous formation to Freud’s ego, in the sense of an ever-failed construction of a unit based on heterogeneous dispersion, where is the subject according to Laclau? To answer the question with greater precision, we must refer to Laclau’s solo text *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), in which he introduced the concept of dislocation as a way of specifying the notion of antagonism. If antagonism was defined in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as “the limit of all objectivity”, dislocation will be presented as the failure of a structure to achieve closure. [8]. [N8] One of the central issues addressed in such a way as to specify the concept of dislocation is to think of it as a source of freedom. In this regard, Laclau points out that: “Dislocation is the source of freedom. But this is not the freedom of a subject having a positive *identity*—for then it would be only a structural position—but freedom derived from structural failure, so that the subject can only build an identity through acts of identification” (Laclau 1990, 76). Structure is already dislocated, and that structural gap is considered to be a source of freedom since there are no determinations of a structural nature for the subject therein.

Therefore, this is where Laclau locates the place of the subject at the moment of decision beyond structure. The subject is beyond identity, and since there will be no positive identity for the subject the latter can only access something similar to identity via identification. [9]. [N9] Dislocation is therefore the place of the subject, the place of an absence, and as such will be “the pure form of the structure of dislocation, of its ineradicable distance from itself” (1990 76). What is, then, the difference between antagonism and dislocation? The author's response is as follows:

The idea of building, of living, an experience of dislocation as antagonistic based on the construction of an enemy already presupposes a moment of discursive construction of the dislocation that, in a certain way, allows somehow dominating it in a conceptual system that does so on the basis of a certain experience . . . It was in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* that I tried to develop the notion of negativity based on deepening the moment of dislocation prior to all forms of discursive organization, discursive overcoming, or discursive suturing of such dislocation. (Laclau 2002, 126)

If in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe explain how identities are constructed, and in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* the notion of the subject is specified, it is in *On Populist Reason* (2005) that Laclau approaches the concept of the ‘popular subject’.

# The Group and the People

In *On Populist Reason* Ernesto Laclau faces a double challenge: on one hand, incorporating the dimension of affect into political analysis and, on the other, finding a logic, a reason, for what until then had been regarded as a senseless political aberration: populism.

Laclau begins this text with a review of the literature on the study of group psychology and points out that the assumptions underlying these works were structured according to the domination of binary logic; namely, rational/irrational, normal/pathological, and the pairs of opposites derived from these such as social differentiation/homogeneity, individual/group etc. He then shows that the intellectual history of the psychology of crowds is crisscrossed by the progressive abandonment of these dualisms. But it is not until the decisive intervention of Freud that such dichotomies are set aside entirely. For Laclau, the step taken by Freud supposes a transformation that he refers to as a "reversal of paradigms" (30), a "crossing of the Rubicon" (40), or "the most radical breakthrough which had so far been accomplished in mass psychology" (52). The fading of binary oppositions in the thinking of collective phenomena can be seen, on one hand, in the mutual contamination of the normal/pathological poles (where for Freud the key to understanding normal psychology lies in psychopathology) and, on the other, in the dissolution of dualisms that emerges on the first page of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in the indifferentiation between individual and social psychology:

The contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely. ... In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent, and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well. (1)

Freud's arguments open the possibility of observing that for psychoanalysis there is no clear separation between individual and social psychology because, from the beginning, the other is constitutive of the psychic apparatus. Hence, there would be no such individual-society opposition. It is more a question of a complex relation that binds both dimensions, to the extent that the social is part of the constitution of subjectivity. Therefore, Freud's proposal is effective for Laclau as a deconstruction of the dichotomous logic that dominated ideas on collective phenomena. But it also proves attractive to the extent that he extracts from Freud's text its "constructive" or creative potency, as he finds elements for the understanding of what was considered to be abnormal, illogical or aberrant. For Freud it was the question of the crowd; for Laclau it was the question of populism.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud holds that the social psychology of his predecessors was more interested in analyzing the changes experienced by the individual when integrating into a group than in unraveling the nature of the social bond itself. Driven by the conviction of finding what the key to that bond is, he is guided by the question of what it is that holds the members of the crowd together: "If the individuals in the group are combined into a unity, there must surely be something to unite them, and this bond might be precisely the thing that is characteristic of a group" (7). In his appraisal of the critical literature, Freud finds that all the texts have a blind spot in common: the notion of suggestion. They all resort to the idea that suggestion presents itself as the name of a phenomenon that has no explanation: "But there has been no explanation of the nature of suggestion, that is, of the conditions under which influence without adequate logical foundation takes place" (37). Freud's proposal to find a way out of this trap is to abandon the notion of suggestion and instead address the concept of libido for the elucidation of the psychology of groups. Laclau accompanies Freud's decision to set aside suggestion as a means of explaining the unity of the group, and affords affect or the libidinal bond a central role in understanding the nature of the social bond. As a result, in Laclau the social bond "would be a libidinal bond; as such, it relates to everything that concerns 'love'" (2005 53). Freud goes on to describe various types of groups by their morphology, and selects one in particular—the highly organized, durable, artificial group with a leader—considering that it shows more clearly the properties

of the libidinal bond in collective phenomena. From the examples used in the analysis—of Church and army—two fundamental questions emerge: 1) each individual has a double libidinous bond; on the one hand with the leader, and on the other with the other members of the group; and 2) the libidinal bond is the essence of the group that is revealed when the framework decomposes in the absence of the bond with the leader. Both issues account for Freud's initial statement regarding the centrality of affect in the constitution of the group: "Love relationships (or, to use a more neutral expression, emotional ties) also constitute the essence of the group mind" (40). Both directions of the libidinal bond (with the leader and with the other members of the group) are a result of love drives that have been diverted away from direct sexual satisfaction. On one side Freud presents the link between group members in terms of identification: he describes three different forms of identification: the first with the father, the second with the chosen love-object, and the third as a type of bond born as a result of sharing a quality with a person who is not the object of sexual drives. The latter, Laclau says, is the bond we encounter in the relation between group members. The more significant the emotional bond with the other person is, the more successful the identification will be (2005 54). On the other side, Laclau presents the bond with the leader in Freudian terms as an infatuation phenomenon, in which sensual love and tender love converge. The sensual current is the bond established by investing in an object in order to achieve the direct sexual satisfaction of the drive. The link to that object survives long enough to reach sexual satisfaction, after which it dies. In falling in love, tenderness is responsible for the persistence of the feeling of love, as an affective feeling towards an object toward which there are no direct sexual-satisfaction aspirations. This pulsional tender current has its origin in the subject's childhood, when, due to repression, the child was forced to abandon its infantile sexual goals with its parental love objects. The bond with parents is thus modified. However the subject remains linked to them with drives that Freud will call "aim-inhibited". Successive links with others will follow this model dominated by the duality of sensual and tender love.

It is worth pointing out that, as mentioned above in relation to the reversibility of the libido, in the phenomenon of falling in love a substantial portion of the narcissistic libido is transferred to the loved object, to the extent that it is located in the position of the ego-ideal. In this way the object is loved as a result of the perfections we aspire for in our own ego: "This can take various forms or show various degrees, their common denominator being the idealization of the object, which thus becomes immune to criticism" (Laclau 2005, 55). Now, in his reading of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* Laclau argues that Freud, after analyzing various ways of differentiating between idealization and identification, considers another option when he maintains that "another alternative embraces the real essence of the matter, namely, whether the object is put in the place of the ego or of the ego ideal" (Freud *Group*, 76).

At this point in his Freudian development, Laclau encounters the formula that allows him to present the definition of the social bond within a framework that consists of a group with a leader: "A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego" (Freud *Group*, 80). Once Freud has established what he considers to be "the formula for the libidinal constitution of groups"—which is to say that the key to understanding what keeps members of the group together is that each and every one in the group has identified with each other in their ego, because they have put the same object in the place of their ego ideal—Laclau draws two conclusions that will serve as a ground for thinking populism:

a) On the one hand, he finds in Freud an alternative model of social grouping that has been able to acquire secondarily, that is, through organization, the properties of an individual. Based on these different forms of grouping (the "organization" and the leader) Laclau hypothesizes that these two models do not apply to different types of groups, but, rather, are social logics that intervene in the constitution of all social groups: "In my view", he says, "the fully organized group and the *purely* narcissistic leader are simply the *reductio ad absurdum*—that is, impossible—extremes of a continuum in which the two social logics are articulated in various ways" (Laclau 2005, 58).

b) On the other, Laclau takes the idea that Freud develops in "A Differentiating Grade in the Ego" (78-84) and the "Postscript" (85-97), namely, that the bond between the members of the

group and the leader consists not only of love but identification. The identifying link established with the leader means that the led must be considered in *pari materia* with the leader, or, and this is the same thing, that the leader is the *primus inter pares*. For Laclau, the double bond with the leader—falling in love and identification—lends a fundamental dimension to politics because it erases the possibility of a purely narcissistic leader. The leader cannot merely be the narcissistic despotic father—as in the primitive horde of *Totem and Taboo*—since his right to lead will always be founded on a common ground with the group members who recognize themselves in him in a particularly pronounced way. That is the reason why the leader is largely responsible to the community.

Based on Freud's study, the novelty of Laclau's proposal for thinking the leader-people relation in populism is that such a link will be much more democratic than the one implied in the notion of the narcissistic despot. In addition, we should also consider that the logic of the constitution of the group with a leader is not the only logic operating in the social framework, but that the logic of organization is also involved. The important thing to highlight here, however, is that, although there is no direct transfer of the Freudian group schematic to the concept of 'the people' in Laclau's populism, there is indeed an analogical relation between the structure of the group and the structure of the people. This is the case first because the two orientations of affect involved in the overall framework of a group—identification and falling in love—are understood by Laclau as articulatory logics: equivalence and difference. Secondly, this is also the case because the elements linked according to these two dimensions are different from each other. In Freud's model, it is the ego and the ego ideal that are linked elements that belong to a particular theme anticipated in the group scheme, which is the second Freudian issue: ego, Id, superego. Meanwhile, in Laclau's conception of 'the people', demands emerge as a result of articulatory logics. Demands suppose a different topology than in Freud, for whom other issues are involved concerning not only questions of need and desire, but also all those elements and relationships that subsequently led Lacan to deploy the graph of desire. With all of Freud's arguments at hand, Laclau is finally able to assert that: "An approach to populism in terms of abnormality, deviance or manipulation is strictly incompatible with our theoretical strategy" (Laclau 2005, 13). The analogy between group and people allows him to take distance from the definitions of populism that are usually made asserting its attributes, or rather, its lack of attributes: vagueness, inaccuracy, ideological void, lack of rationality, anti-intellectuality, transitoriness, demagoguery, or the morbid intentionality of the leader, etc. This distancing allows Laclau to focus on the reasons for the leader-people relationship.

Laclau's theoretical elaboration of populism continues and coincides once again with Freud's work, to the extent that he claims that populism is a form of hegemonic articulation the specificity of which is that the figure of the people begins to play, dichotomizing the social space and locating the figure of the leader in the place of the ideal. [10][#N10]. In short, the people of populism come to point out the absent fullness of the community, since it accounts for "the impossibility of society". Since the people of populism occurs on account of the impossibility of all forms of objectivity, identity, etc., it appears as the always unattainable search for the fullness of community. This implies a radical border since its very presence is an effect of the constitutive antagonism of the social. Thus, "without this initial break-down 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, 85).

## Not to Conclude: Towards Psychoanalysis as General Ontology

We have carried out a review of the work of Laclau in conjunction with Freud. We have explored the way in which Laclau approaches certain aspects of three Freudian texts, which allow him to build his own theoretical framework in such a way as to state finally in *On Populist Reason* that his theory of hegemony breaks decisively with essentialist thinking in the social field. Why is he able to sustain such a statement? This is basically because Laclau proposes that no populism is possible without an effective investment in a partial object. And it is this statement regarding partiality that opens the door to support his most radical proposal: namely, to posit psychoanalysis as general ontology.



Laclau asserts that psychoanalytic categories are not regional but belong to the field of general ontology, since “the theory of the drives occupies the space of classical ontology” (2005 237). Now, in order to sustain this thesis Laclau has necessarily had to abandon a certain Kantian analogy—even though somewhat weakly—which he had drawn upon previously at various conferences and public appearances. Indeed, exemplifying hegemonic logic with an analogy to the Kantian *noumenon* is incompatible with the radical assertion of thinking psychoanalysis as a general ontology, which he maintains under the formula of “the logic of hegemony and the logic of the Lacanian object *a* are identical”. On numerous occasions Laclau has upheld considerations such as the following:

If the logics of difference and equivalence are equally necessary but incompatible with each other, then that moment of systematicity of the system is something that is necessary yet impossible, and these two dimensions, necessity and impossibility, will create the possibility of an empty signifier and, as we shall see, of a theory of hegemony. Do you think there is something in the philosophical tradition, certain objects presenting this dual characteristic of being necessary and impossible? I think so, for example, in the Kantian scheme it happens exactly like that, it happens that an object shown through the impossibility of its adequate representation, is a necessary object that performs its task within the entire Kantian system, but that it totally escapes the field of representation. The real in Lacanian theory also fulfils this function: the real is something that always returns but does not have its own form of representation. (Laclau 2002, 75-6)

The totality of the system would be an object that is impossible because this relation between equivalences and differences cannot be overturned, and at the same time it is necessary given that somehow or other, it has to enter in the field of representation and signification in the first place. It is in this regard that we can say that the systematic totality is a bit like the Kantian *noumenon*, that means, an object that shows itself through the impossibility of its adequate representation. (Laclau 2009)

But in *On Populist Reason* he abandons any hint of an analogy with Kant, and undoubtedly turns towards the idea of universality as partial object investment: “The whole is always going to be embodied by a part. In terms of our analysis: there is no universality which is not a hegemonic one” (Laclau 2005, 115). What is the argument that pushed Laclau to make such a radical move, and to launch his claim of psychoanalysis as general ontology? It is his reading of Joan Copjec (2002) that enables him to think the postulates of Freud and Lacan, and therefore his own, as radically opposed to Kantian philosophy, and thereby to abandon any analogy with this philosophical scheme.

In “The Tomb of Perseverance: On *Antigone*” (2002 12-47), Copjec observes that Freud’s proposal involves an intervention that is opposed to Kantian philosophy since it replaces Kant’s transcendental forms with non-objectifiable empty objects, that is, with the objects of the drive. To support her arguments, Copjec relies on the theory of judgment that Freud posed in his early days on the *Nebenmensch*, which can be translated as the counterpart complex. [11][#N11]. She then presents the radicalization involved in the introduction of the Freudian notion of drive, which led Lacan to point out its ontological status:

It is something that Freud considers in his psychology of the drive, for the *Trieb* can in no way be limited to a psychological notion. It is an absolutely fundamental ontological notion, which is a response to a crisis of consciousness that we are not necessarily obliged to identify, since we are living it. (Lacan 1992, 127)

What would Copjec’s argumentative path be, from Freud’s theory of judgment to the specification of the ontological status of the drive in Lacan? To begin with, she warns us that Freud’s proposition that “life aims only at death” should not be interpreted in the manner of a teleological system—like Schopenhauer’s, for

instance, for whom death is the actual result, and therefore the purpose, of life—but as the drives operating against that system itself. The drive arises as an explanatory concept of death, as the purpose of life. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud argues that the purpose of the drive is death, and this refers to the restoration of a previous state of affairs, that is, to a state of in-animation or inertia. Thus Freud, as in Plato's *Timaeus*, conceives of a mythical state (the primordial mother/child dyad) that contains all things and all the happiness to which the subject longs to return, but, to the extent that it is a mythical state, the drive only fails. Thus, the drive addresses an earlier time, not biological death, because it finds there necessary forms of thinking that are "timeless", that is, they have no temporal ordering:

As a result of certain psycho-analytic discoveries, we are today in a position to embark on a discussion of the Kantian theorem that time and space are 'necessary forms of thought'. We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless'. This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them. (Freud *Beyond*, 28)

Thus Freud stands in sharp contrast to the ways of thinking of Kant. In psychoanalysis there is no linear development of time, absolute beginning or manifest directionality because every discourse is always overdetermined and therefore never linear, one-dimensional or continuous. There is no teleological historical process. Regarding the temporality of the subject, Lacan will say: "What would have I been for what I'm becoming" (quoted in Alemán 2013).

However, when Freud analyses these "ways of thinking" in the context of the *Nebenmensch*, he introduces two components that can be misleading, since they could be interpreted as analogous to the Kantian binary *noumenon / phenomenon*. These components are: 1) of a constant structure, which remains united, assembled as one thing; and 2) can be understood by the activity of memory, and traced as information of the body. The first, the Thing –*das Ding*–is experienced as alien and avoids judgment. The second refers to ideas or representations of cognitive activity—*Vorstellungen*—. At this point there are two valid questions: Can we actually draw an analogy between the Kantian pair *noumenon/phenomenon* and the Freudian pair *das Ding/Vorstellungen*? Is the maternal Thing lost due to lack of a signifier?

The answer is no. Again, the key is provided by Copjec's text when she points to Lacan's radicalization of the Freudian proposition. In the text *Die Verdrängung [Repression]*, Freud introduces a term that modifies his understanding of the counterpart complex (*Nebenmensch*). This is what Lacan translates as "representative of the representation of the drive"—*Vorstellungrepräsentanz*—thus eliminating the *das Ding / Vorstellungen* dialectic that we had previously considered. The "representative of the representation of the drive" is, in Freud's words, "a delegate of the body in the psyche". As such, *das Ding* cannot be interpreted as a *noumenon*, but apprehended as a partial object. The delegate and the partial object would not be evidence of a Thing existing beyond. It testifies, rather, to a split in the being: "The partial object is not a *part of a whole* but a *part which is the whole* (Copjec, quoted in Laclau 2005, 113). This partial object is nothing other than Lacan's object *a*, which for Laclau in *On Populist Reason* will be constituted as the key element of all social ontology:

No social fullness is achievable except through hegemony; and hegemony is nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us because it is purely mythical (in our terms: it is merely the positive reverse of a situation experienced as 'deficient being'). The logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical. (Laclau 2005, 116)

We agree with Laclau that this is the same discovery for the very structure of objectivity from two different angles— psychoanalysis and politics—. In the same way the object *a* is the main ontological category for psychoanalysis Laclau arrives at the same discovery for his political theory, and not at the level of a mere analogy. However, after raising this radical proposition, far from closing with it a conclusive statement Laclau opens up a field for research that has been virtually unexplored thus far. In that sense, he presents us with

many more questions than answers and challenges us to carry on working around the idea of a non-essentialist ontology.

## Notes

1. Later, in his first topography Freud expresses this division or split as two systems: conscious-preconscious, and unconscious; in his second topography, he will present it as three psychic instances: ego, id, and superego. ♣ [#N1-pt1]
2. Freud works on the concept of drive (or impulse), thus translated from the German word *Trieb*, from the verb *Trieben*, which means to push. As explained by Assoun, Nietzsche's conception of impulse comes primarily from German Romanticism, while Freud's conception is, rather, linked to physiology. This raises some important differences such as the fact that in Freud the energy of the drive aims to be discharged in order to maintain as low a state of tension as possible (homeostasis), while in Nietzsche the idea is that the impulse seeks its own difference, aiming above all to be exercised. ♣ [#N2-pt1]
3. Freud establishes a certain difference in this text between the ego ideal and the ideal ego. Although this is a vague distinction, we can relate the ego ideal to the reference model of the ego, heir of parental narcissism, and the ideal ego with what Freud called a sense of self. It is Lacan who establishes this distinction in a clear way, as symbolic and imaginary instances respectively. ♣ [#N3-pt1]
4. Freud notes this in reference to a known painting thus titled, showing two London policemen stopping traffic for a nanny to cross the street pushing a baby stroller. ♣ [#N4-pt1]
5. The notion of *suture* is taken from Jacques-Alain Miller (1966) and is used to describe the production of the subject based on the chain of his speech; that is, on the mismatch between the subject and the symbolic, which prevents the closure of the latter in full presence. ♣ [#N5-pt1]
6. Although Laclau and Mouffe take the concept from Althusser, they do so to exemplify how the latter, in defending the idea of overdetermination in the last instance, unintentionally reintroduces in the last analysis an essentialism that he was trying to displace. ♣ [#N6-pt1]
7. Lacan calls these two logics metaphor and metonymy; from a linguistic perspective they are called paradigm and syntagm, and in music harmony and melody ♣ [#N7-pt1]
8. For a detailed discussion of the notions of antagonism, dislocation and heterogeneity, see Biglieri and Perelló (2012). ♣ [#N8-pt1]
9. The notion of the subject in Laclau achieves greater specificity at this point in his work. This is because he abandons the Foucaultian notion of subject positions that is present in *Hegemony and Strategy* and reaches a more precise distinction between the notions of subject, identity, and identification. ♣ [#N9-pt1]
10. Laclau presents the people of populism as the *plebs* who claim to be the only legitimate *populus* (2005 111). This is a partiality (the *plebs*, the underprivileged) that wants to function as the whole community (the *populus*, the people as the community). Thus, we have populism when a part identifies with the whole and a radical exclusion occurs within the community. In other words, we are in the sphere of hegemony because in order to have a populist articulation, there must be a relation of equivalence between a plurality of social demands, which brings into play the figure of the people regarding a leader and sets an antagonistic frontier between a "we, the people" and a "them", the enemies of the people. ♣ [#N10-pt1]
11. For *Nebenmensch*, see Sigmund Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology", 1895, In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *Pre-Psycho-Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 1, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1971: 279-388. "Counterpart complex" refers to the assistance that the human being requires from another person for being born in the most radical helplessness. This first mythical experience of satisfaction is understood by Freud as divided into two components: one, steadily united as Thing, which is presented as foreign, inassimilable, alien; and the other, which refers to that which is in the order of quality and can be understood as memory, information from the body, experience of the subject. That is, some aspects of "the primordial mother" will be captured by representation, but there is something about that experience that cannot be translated into representations. This *Ding* component, the un-representable, the alien part, is the first outside. ♣ [#N11-pt1]

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