

The Deconstructivist Laclau

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Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) became famous within the academic field when he published, together with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* in 1985. This text brought fresh air into the field of radical politics not only because it challenged the overwhelming number of conservatives who were currently delighted in celebrating the failure of the socialist project, and thus the unsuccessfulness of Marxist theory, but also because this theoretical intervention made a difference: it reoriented the political leftist debates that, up until then, had been at an impasse.

This theoretical intervention was later designated as the starting point of post-Marxism. Laclau was therefore characterized as a post-Marxist thinker, or as the creator of a new kind of theory of hegemony. However, he was never introduced as a “deconstructivist” author. This is quite peculiar if we consider that in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, in an enormous gesture—which could be interpreted as a work about their Marxist heritage—the authors deconstructed Marxist theory in such a vast way that they ended up disintegrating its foundations. Once they recognized that antagonism inhabits the heart of the subject and any objectivity, the assertion that there could be a final, coherent resolution without any remainder proved absurd. Thus they affirmed that enigmatic phrase “society is impossible”—a metaphor to say that society lacks the ultimate foundations from which the totality of a partial process could be established. The inevitable conclusion was that it is no longer possible to hold on to a view that the subject of history could be determined *a priori* (the proletariat) and that it has a preestablished destiny (the

reconciled society of communism).

Yet the authors persisted with the idea of social change and antagonism, but this time without any possibility of reaching a dialectical resolution. Moreover, they insisted on the idea of emancipation, which would become a plural term—emancipations—leaving aside any possibility of an eschatological ending. From then onward, and taking into account these elements of perseverance, Laclau's theoretical and political target became to make politics thinkable again. Politics—or, better said, hegemony—as the form of the political, antagonism, dislocation, and his last response to think of politics, that is, populism, became a key concept of his theoretical development. We could say that Laclau had a “political thought,” in order to contrast with the idea that his work was a “political philosophy,” in the sense that Laclau would have never accepted that politics was a mere subsystem of philosophy, that is to say, that politics would just refer to the institutionalized forms of interchange. For Laclau, politics went far beyond that; there was also “the political,” which had an entirely decisive dimension. In this sense, Laclau's perspective is close to Derridean deconstruction inasmuch as Derrida always questioned the limits established by political philosophy and political theory regarding what has to be examined and what not as politics. As Ana Penchaszadeh and Emmanuel Biset have written: “Deconstruction questions the disciplinary boundaries that make political philosophy a defined area within philosophy, with a clear object to be examined and also a clear and distinct concept of politics” (2013, 10).

In any case, the deconstructivist Laclau did not finish his task once he had deconstructed Marxist theory. We can say, in a way, that he continued with a deconstructivist gesture over his entire work, even when he presented his notion of populism. It is worth mentioning that in Laclau's work the deconstructive face is characterized by a critical or destructive aspect, while

when constructing his theoretical and political proposal the deconstructive face is supplemented by psychoanalysis (in its Freudian-Lacanian version). In this article we will only focus on his deconstructivist gesture, which can be divided into two key moments: first, the deconstruction of classical Marxist theory and the radicalization of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony; and second, the deconstruction of the idea of populism and its radicalization.

The Deconstruction of Classical Marxism

Deconstruction, at least as developed by Derrida, is closely linked to the work of revisiting the Western philosophical tradition. Deconstruction can be understood as a strategy of undoing or dismantling a dominant system of thought, but without ever destroying it. This is why inheritance turns out to be a key element for deconstruction. Derrida understood inheritance in a very peculiar way; for him, the best mode to be faithful to an inheritance is being unfaithful, let us say: faithful by unfaithfulness.

In *Specters of Marx* (1993) Derrida addressed more explicitly than in any other text his notion of inheritance, and he did so precisely in relation to the Marxist tradition. According to Derrida, "this inheritance must be reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary"; such a statement is necessary because "inheritance is never a given, it is always a task" (1994, 67). To inherit is a task that compels us to choose, to select, to criticize. To be able to receive that which comes before us, we need to reinterpret it. To reaffirm an inheritance and to give account of it does not mean to accept it passively, but to reactivate it in a different way in order to keep it alive. This is a double gesture, apparently contradictory, between the "passivity" of the reception and the "activity" of making the decision to reaffirm by choosing.

The affinity between Derrida and Laclau is clear. For Laclau, there is no theoretical

construction capable of proclaiming that it has come to terms with the past. And to think of post-Marxism as a "movement that goes beyond Marxism" does not mean, for Laclau, either a "rejection" or an "abandonment" of Marxism, because "intellectual history is a recurring movement which from time to time reinvents the past, thus giving birth to a continuous process of renewal and rediscovery." In other words, "to transcend is at the same time to recover" (1990, 203). Thus, to keep the Marxist inheritance of emancipation(s) alive meant to deconstruct three foundational aspects: first, that there are set of structural laws that commands the development of history (hence, there was a tendency in capitalist society to the simplification of the social structure); second, that any kind of subject or political subject is a class subject; and third, that there are specific tasks attached to each social class.

Laclau and Mouffe began their deconstructivist project of Marxism with the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985—ten years earlier than the release of Derrida's book on Marx. However, it is in their preface to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (this is almost ten years *after* the publication of *Specters of Marx*) that we can appreciate how Laclau and Mouffe described their own work on the reappropriation of the Marxist tradition as a deconstructivist gesture and as a conception close to Derridean inheritance.¹ Thus, when writing up a summary of how they dealt with the Marxist tradition, they appealed to the notion of "reactivation." According to Husserl, from whom they took this term, theoretically sedimented categories veil the original acts of institution. "Reactivation" is what makes those original acts evident: "For us—as opposed to Husserl—that reactivation had to show the original contingency of the synthesis that the Marxian categories attempted to establish" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, viii). This statement would imply a question concerning the continuity or discontinuity of those categories in contemporary conditions. Laclau and Mouffe

concluded that "reread[ing] Marxist theory in the light of contemporary problems necessarily involves deconstructing the central categories of that theory" (2001, ix).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the crisis of Marxism brought two fundamental aspects into the center of the picture: "the new awareness of the opacity of the social" and "the fragmentation of the different positions of social agents which, according to the classical [Marxist] paradigm, should have been united" (2001, 18). This statement took the authors beyond the classical paradigm and pushed them to approach problems that "belong to fields of discursivity which are *external* to Marxism, and cannot be reconceptualized in terms of Marxist categories—given, especially, that their very presence is what puts Marxism as a closed theoretical system into question" (2001, x). Consequently, it also brought a rupture with any "epistemological prerogative based upon the ontologically privileged position of a 'universal class'" (2001, 4) and a questioning regarding the validity of Marxist categories.

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy can be presented as a critique of essentialism within Marxist theory. Derrida affirmed that essentialism is tightly linked to the idea of "a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude a game with foundations" (1978, 352). Given this immutable and indubitable certainty, any possible repetition, substitution, or transformation in a given structure will always be inscribed in a history of *meaning* capable of remembering its origins and anticipating its conclusion. In other words, the notions of essentialism, closed structure, and teleology intertwine in the complex network of Western metaphysics.

According to the teleology of the Marxist vulgate, the development of history involved an increasing simplification of social antagonisms under capitalism, that is, a collapse of all

meaningful differences into two social positions: that of the small and powerful bourgeoisie and that of the vast proletarian mass. However, because history moved in a different way, Laclau and Mouffe analyzed all the attempts to resolve this problem within the Second International. In this way, they affirmed that the history of Marxism can be understood as a sustained effort to escape from the teleology implied in the rigid determinist logic: "What our book seeks to show is that this history of contemporary thought [as a critique to essentialism] is *also* a history internal to Marxism," because within Marxist thought "there has also been a persistent effort to adapt the reality of the contemporary world and progressively to distance itself from essentialism" (1990, 119).

This essentialism was incarnated in an exemplary way by the Marxist orthodoxy and the dialectical materialism of the Second International. Laclau and Mouffe affirmed that history, society, and social agents had, for the Marxist orthodoxy, "an essence which operates as their principle of unification" (2001, 22). This principle of unification was situated in the economic sphere and operated as a kernel of intelligibility that could explain it all. The determinism of Marxist orthodoxy understood history as a necessary movement, dominated by the contradiction between productive forces and productive relations that established the inexorable course of all facts. One of the consequences of this argument, said Laclau, was that the unity of the working class—as a revolutionary political subject—would be secured by the development of inexorable laws and that it would be a necessary *effect* of a process verified at the level of infrastructure. In other words, the constitution of a political subject derived from the unfolding of an essence located at the economic level of the material relations of production.

From the fact that, for Marxism, the revolutionary political subject—the proletariat, the working class—is a class identity constituted at the infrastructural level, Laclau derived another

decisive aspect: the political moment can only be conceived at the superstructural level, and it functions as the representation of interests that were established *a priori* in another level.

Therefore, every political struggle that does not reflect the interests of the working class as the privileged political subject of history must be ignored or discarded as a deviation from the true objective interests of the revolution.

To give an account of the movement of internal dislocation of Marxism (to which Laclau belongs), of the deconstruction he undertook, Laclau appealed to a genealogy of the concept of hegemony in which he tried to identify the traces of essentialism in the discourse of the different Marxist authors that he analyzed. These traces restricted the transforming effects that the category of hegemony could have produced within the theory.²

Laclau's conclusion regarding this genealogy was that, in the Marxist authors analyzed, "hegemony" referred only to a contingent intervention required by the emergence an "anomaly" within the "normal" development of the objective laws of history. The typical case of "anomaly" was the one produced by the mismatch between class subject and the historical tasks attached to it. It was a different social class—the proletariat—that had to take over the tasks that would have "normally" been a responsibility of the bourgeoisie (the cases of Germany and Russia were paradigmatic in the debates among socialists: the proletariat was dealing with the democratic revolution against absolutism and the remainders of feudalism that was supposed to be led by the bourgeoisie).³ In any case, the hegemonic link between social classes was considered a pure exterior bond that was allowed to politically *supplement*—in an absolutely contingent way—an internal gap that did not affect either the essential identity of the class or the nature of the historically assigned task.

In this way, following the tradition of Western metaphysics, Marxist theory considered this supplement as a mere "add-on" element, that is to say, as an appendix attached to a purely exterior full presence that was never altered by the intervention of the odd element to the system. In other words, neither the socialist nature of the task of the working class nor the representative democratic nature of the task of the bourgeoisie was ever put into question. Nevertheless, Derrida in many of his works (1978, 1997) deconstructed this negative conception of the *supplement*. He showed that the supplement is something exterior that is added to fulfill an original lack or deficiency; but at the same time, it is the condition of possibility of the existence of what it supplements (what ultimately makes the supplement inseparable from the supplemented element). In this sense, for Laclau the history of Marxism can be read as a progressive recognition of the constitutive character of hegemony as a supplement, as something that can only be appreciated through the inflection of Gramsci's intervention.

Laclau and Mouffe read Gramsci through the logic of the supplement and posed a set of problems: To what extent did the working class modify its own nature by the fact of taking up a democratic task? To what extent did the democratic task change its nature by the fact that it was carried out by the working class instead of the bourgeoisie; that is to say, to what extent was there a mutual contamination between the social agent and the task they were supposed to carry out? If the democratic task was the supplement of the working class and had fixed its type of intervention, was not the supplement as important as the core of the class? At this point, Gramsci had destabilized the Marxist architecture.

Gramsci questioned whether the economic base had a privileged place in the Marxist building and stated that it was crossed by hegemonic struggles. He affirmed that economy, state, and civil society were articulated spheres within a relational totality that did not have a center *a*

priori established. Therefore, different and changing relations of domination could be settled between them. According to Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci's conception of the contingent articulation of the different social spheres was what he called the "historical bloc." In this way the unity of a social formation would not be founded on an abstract logic (teleological determinism) but on a principle of articulation historically configured by the hegemonic struggle.

Within this matrix, Laclau and Mouffe focused on Gramsci's specific displacement, his rupture with the class-driven reductionism:

For Gramsci, political subjects are not—strictly speaking—classes, but complex "collective wills"; similarly, the ideological elements articulated by a hegemonic class do not have a necessary class belonging. Concerning the first point, Gramsci's position is clear: the collective will is a result of the politico-ideological articulation of dispersed and fragmented historical forces. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 67)

Thus, for Gramsci, social subjects were not social classes in the strict Marxist sense, but "collective wills." And any "collective will" was the result of a process through which any social subject had been able to articulate diverse elements that did not have a definite class belonging. The process of aggregating diverse elements was what he called "hegemony." Therefore, there was also no task *a priori* attached to a particular social class.

However, Laclau and Mouffe detected that Gramsci's theoretical position kept an inconsistency that put a limit to his rupture with essentialism. Because there was still a unifying principle for any hegemonic formation, namely, the fundamental class, "thus two principles of the social order—the unicity of the unifying principle, and its necessary class character—are not the contingent result of hegemonic struggle, but the necessary structural framework within which every struggle occurs. Class hegemony is not a wholly practical result of struggle, but has an ultimate ontological foundation" (2001, 69). Gramsci's position remained locked in a contradictory movement: on the one hand, the hegemonic construction of the working class

depended on "going outside itself" and being able to transform its own identity when traversed by claims and struggles of diverse social and political subjects; on the other hand, he also maintained—through the idea of a unifying principle—that the identity of the working class "is constituted in a terrain different from that in which the hegemonic practices operate" (2001, 76). Laclau and Mouffe affirmed that in this oscillation lay the last essentialistic reduction in Gramsci's thought.⁴

In a typical deconstructive gesture, they took the notion of hegemony where Gramsci had left it and radicalized it. They displaced it from the Marxist topology (base/superstructure) to a new terrain, the discursive field, and also reversed its subordinated position, from being a secondary element to becoming the key concept, not only to think politics but also "the political," that is, the constitution of reality as such. Once standing on the new terrain, they proposed to start from the basic assumption of understanding the social as a discursive space. Thus, the conception of social structuring responded to a rhetorical model, since "synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted" (2001, 110).

One way to understand Laclau and Mouffe's conception of discourse is through the notion of the deconstruction of the idea of a totalizing structure. They defined it as a system of differences in which "the absence of a transcendental meaning infinitely extends the field and the play of significance." Given the lack of a center to stop and to found the endless play of substitutions, the discursive field excludes any possibility of totalization. Therefore, discourse was understood as a decentered structure in which any meaning is constantly constructed and always negotiated. And the only way to construct meaning is through the practice of hegemony.

Then, hegemony came to put in relation or to articulate diverse elements in order to create meaning where there is none. A hegemonic articulation occurs when a particular element assumes, at a certain time, the representation of a totality that is completely immeasurable in itself.

The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 113)

The nodal point is the signifier or particular element that assumes the structural, "universal" function within a discursive field. That is, it is the element that allows a certain suture, an always partial fixation of the game of differences, so that the signifying chain may acquire some meaning. This always precarious fixation produced by the nodal point takes place precisely because the nodal point is a privileged signifier as long as it is overdetermined. And this term is used in the way in which Freud (1900) understood it: every nodal point or empty signifier is overdetermined as it condenses the largest number of associative chains.

To hegemonize is to practice articulation and the construction of nodal points, and it is also a practice that transforms the identity of the articulated elements. Once an element has been articulated, the same practice transforms what is being articulated. From these arguments, Laclau and Mouffe deduced two conclusions: there is no identity external to a practice, or even better, all identity is a result of an articulatory practice; and every element that is articulated will always remain available for future articulations in different signifying chains. The consequence is that any hegemonic articulation is always open to dispute, because there is no hegemonic articulation capable of completely exhausting an element (as it will always be overdetermined). To put it in a Derridean way: No context exhausts the sign completely. A context (or a sign) is never absolutely determinable, or rather its determination is never certain or saturated (Derrida 1982,

310); this structural nonsaturation is ineradicable.⁵ And above all, because there is also antagonism, far from being an objective relation, it is "the experience of the limit of all objectivity" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 122). This is what Žižek celebrated as the great achievement of Laclau and Mouffe's reformulation of the Lacanian notion of the Real as a logical impossible. In other words, antagonism is a traumatic core around which the order of the socio-symbolic field is structured.

In any case, what we have here with Laclau and Mouffe is the idea that every meaning, identity, objectivity, or order is always overdetermined, since it is the result of the practice of hegemony. Moreover, universality itself has a hegemonic structure. "The social is articulation insofar as "society" is impossible" (114) became their paradigmatic phrase to metaphorize the lack of ultimate foundations or essences and the impossibility of any order to become fully constituted as a coherently unified totality.

To conclude this point, let us say that once we have accepted that every (social) order is always hegemonically constituted, we have also accepted that the social is always political as a result of a process of articulation. This radicalization of the notion of hegemony puts "the political" at a decisive site, let us say, as a way out of metaphysics, because hegemonically constituted meant, for these authors, politically built. The aim of making politics thinkable again appears to have been achieved.

The Deconstruction of Populism

Laclau undertook a political and theoretical task: to dispute the meaning of "populism." His aim was to make of this ignominious term a valuable word for a political struggle as a way to disarm the detractors of popular formations. Let us say, he initiated a movement analogous to the one

performed with the word "queer" or, going much further back in time, to the one performed with the (Christian) cross. And he also attempted to give the term the dignity of a theoretical value. Therefore, Laclau's endeavor was to rescue populism from the marginal and contemptible position to which it had been confined by the dominant discourses of philosophy and social science from Plato to present days.

What is involved in such a disdainful rejection is, I think, the dismissal of politics *tout court*, and the assertion that the management of community is the concern of an administrative power whose source of legitimacy is a proper knowledge of what a "good" community is. This has been, throughout the centuries, the discourse of "political philosophy," first instituted by Plato. "Populism" was always linked to a dangerous excess, which puts the clear-cut moulds of a rational community into question. So my task, as I conceived it, was to bring to light the specific logics inherent in that excess, and to argue that, far from corresponding to marginal phenomena, they are inscribed in the actual working of *any* communitarian space. (Laclau 2005a, i)

Its disrepute was based on the idea that populism was a phenomenon opposed to the purely rational political forms, and it was overwhelmingly associated with the aesthetically ugly, with what is morally wrong, with the lack of civic culture or respect for institutions, to demagoguery, to irrational masses, and lately it has been linked to the idea of post-truth. Against this extended position Laclau's strategy was to reverse the perspective of analysis: instead of approaching populism from a pre-settled model of rationality, he expanded the rationality model to find the logics that constitute populist configurations:

instead of starting with a model of political rationality which sees populism in terms of what it lacks—its vagueness, its ideological emptiness, its anti-intellectualism, its transitory character—to enlarge the model of rationality in terms of a generalized rhetoric (what, as we shall see, can be called "hegemony") so that populism appears as a distinctive and always present possibility of structuration of political life. An approach to populism in terms of abnormality, deviance or manipulation is strictly incompatible with our theoretical strategy. (Laclau 2005a, 13)

To his new model of enlarged rationality, the one of the populist reason, Laclau incorporated the *affective* dimension as a decisive aspect. Deconstructively speaking, we could say that the *affective* dimension works as a supplement, that is, as a dangerous excess that

threatens and subverts the traditional configuration of modern rationality. Laclau also made a displacement when he proposed to think about populism as a political logic and not in terms of its ideological or social contents. If this perspective is correct, Laclau said, "a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual *contents* identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents—whatever those contents are" (Laclau 2005b, 33).

Laclau started his deconstruction of the traditional way of conceiving populism by reviewing the classical bibliography about the topic, which was mainly based on a perspective of mass psychology. One remarkable conclusion of his review was that populism was usually approached with binary oppositions: rational/irrational, normal/pathological, and the opposed pairs derived from them: social differentiation/homogeneity and individuals/mass. Within this matrix, populism was easily put in the negative side, as it did not fit in the established parameters of rationality. It was not until Freud's intervention that these binary oppositions could be deconstructed.

Laclau leaned on Freud's arguments to figure out the nature of the social link. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) Freud posed the question about the power that keeps group members united, in his conviction that in this way he could find the groups' essence: "If the individuals in the group are combined into a unity, there must surely be something that unites them, and this bond might be precisely what it's characteristic of a group" (1921, 7). Freud's answer came with the notion of *libido*. Laclau followed Freud to put *affection*, or "libidinal link," as a key dimension to understanding the nature of social bonds. Social bonds "would be a libidinal bond; as such, it relates to everything that concerns 'love'" (Laclau 2005a,

53).

In this way, the libidinal link became a key dimension to understanding the people, one of the constitutive elements of populism. However, Laclau did not simply follow Freud and equate the people of populism with the mass. This is because, first, Laclau articulated demands while Freud articulated psychic "instances." And second, populism does not merely imply the formation of the people through the imaginary identification among the members of a mass by putting the same leader in the place of the ideal (i.e., the people is not the same as the Freudian's mass), because the people, for Laclau, also implies organization. These two dimensions—the organization and the leader—intertwine. The dimension of the leader is conceptualized in relation to the equivalent articulation of demands.

Thence it is worth mentioning the way in which Laclau worked on the category of demand. He discarded the group as a unity of analysis for studying populism. The group as something already given should not be the unit of analysis (for studying populism), because populism is a logic of constituting groups. So, a fundamental aspect was to study that logic under the figure of the people, that is, the specific form for the constitution of a populist identity. To determine how this specific form takes place, Laclau proposed to identify the demands as unities of analysis of the group. Demands were classified into democratic and popular. To establish the difference between them, Laclau appealed to the logics of equivalence and difference.

Democratic demands are those which—satisfied or not—will remain isolated from equivalential articulation, whereas popular demands are those that participate in the logic of equivalence and in this articulation start constituting a broader social subjectivity.

Laclau's displacement toward another level of analysis—that goes from the group to the

demand—supposed a complex field of articulation. We find a first aspect of complexity, as for the demand to be registered at least two places are required: the one who demands, and the other to whom the demand is addressed. In this sense, the formulation of a demand must be signified in the terms imposed by the other. It is not something that is already there as a given evident item, but something that is registered in a relational way. If there is a demand, as such, it is always directed toward someone or something. Thus, it is not about considering the demand as closed and given by and for itself, but about relational elements that, from the beginning, are crossed or *contaminated by otherness*. A second aspect of complexity is related to the fact that this binary opposition in which popular and democratic demands were classified should not be understood as a categorical separation in a Cartesian sense. It is not about establishing a completely clear and precise separation between a democratic demand and a popular one. This distinction did not follow the principle of mutual exclusion, which would be indicating to us that when analyzing the experience we should take into account that it is not about conceptual purities but that we can find marks or traces “in reserve” that could be activated. This means that, when analyzing demands, we should bear in mind the marks of otherness: in democratic demands we may find the marks of equivalential articulations, whereas in popular demands we may find the marks of difference. Therefore, we should understand that a demand that was absorbed in a differential way and registered in the institutional order could be reactivated as such and could even be constituted as a popular demand if—once reactivated—it came into equivalence with others, and vice versa.

Regarding democratic demands, Laclau clarified that their isolation should not be interpreted as a monadic one. This is because, to be constituted as such, democratic demands have to be inscribed within social space; even though they do not bind together in a chain of

equivalence, they are always in relation to another element. Even more, there is always the chance for democratic demands to be absorbed by the institutions (once satisfied, they are institutionalized). The differentiated absorption of democratic demands is what Laclau calls the logic of difference, a way of constructing the social. Regarding popular demands, Laclau stated that they are the ones that in an incipient way begin to construct the people. But the people arise as such once the various demands in equivalence have gone beyond a feeling of vague solidarity and have reached a stable system of signification (Laclau 2005a, 74). This second way of constructing the social—this time through the logic of equivalence—implies the formation of an antagonistic frontier, because the difference between a populist totalization (based on the logic of equivalence) and an institutionalist totalization (based on the logic of difference) is that the latter "is one that attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community. . . . The opposite takes place in the case of populism: a frontier of exclusion divides society into two camps" (2005a, 81). Here we arrive at another constitutive element of populism: the dichotomization of the social space into two places of enunciation (us, the people, and them, the enemies of the people).

Hence, for Laclau the people is a way of conceiving the construction of social identities. He thought the people as "a *plebs* that claims to be the only legitimist *populous*. That is a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community" (81). In other words, in order to have a populist articulation we need the prevalence of the relation of equivalence among a plurality of social demands, which brings out the figure of the people and by doing so establishes an antagonistic frontier between "us, the people" and "them, the enemies of the people." Therefore, there is the dichotomist division of society through two places of enunciation;

but it is important to remark that populist identities are never preexistent. The people of populism emerges as a consequence of certain antagonism and always in relation to some otherness (named the enemy). We could say that antagonism is the precondition of any popular identity. The people of populism takes place because of antagonism, the cause of the impossibility of any order (objectivity, identity, etc.) to close itself as a fully coherent and unified selfness. This is why the people of populism appears there, in the search always unreachable for the fullness of community. It implies a radical frontier, given that its own presence is the effect of the antagonism that is constitutive of the social. Then we could say that we have the people precisely because "society is impossible," or to be more accurate, we have the people because what there is, is "the impossibility of the object 'society' as a rationally unified totality" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 99).

The people is a contingent effect of the discursive space. That is why naming it is absolutely central for Laclau: the empty signifier that hegemonizes the people of populism is just a pure name—the name of the leader. Laclau refers to the singularity that the name of the leader prints in the people as "the assemblage of heterogeneous elements kept equivalentially together only by the name of the leader" (2005a, 100). The leader's name becomes the ground of the chain of equivalence. It expresses the singularity of the people, and the singularity of that political formation has to do with a unique context of historical legacies and common inheritances; that is, it is linked to a singular experience.

Here we need to emphasize how the moment of "us, the people" works from this theoretical perspective, because the people never gets to be "the-people-as-one." The notion of "constitutive outside" helps to clarify this aspect:

Henry Staten uses this term to refer to a number of themes developed by Jacques Derrida with notions such as *supplement, trace and différance*. The term "constitutive outside" is meant to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, one which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy: for example between form and matter, black and white, man and woman. Once we have understood that every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference—that is, the perception of something “other” that constitutes an “exterior”—is a precondition for the existence of any identity . . . we can envisage how social relations can become the breeding ground of antagonism. (Mouffe 2013, 184)

Every identity—and in this case of social or political identities which are collective ones—needs an 'outside' to constitute itself. In order to have an “us” we need a “them,” or we could say that any created “us” only exists by distinguishing itself from a “them.” That is why the “constitutive outside,” at the same time that it threatens any identity, is its only possible condition of being so. The paradoxical status of the “constitutive outside” dislocates any identity. In the case of the people, the enemy functions as its principle of suture.

If we go back for a moment to the demands, we find that Laclau also made a distinction between request and claim. Every demand starts as a request. If institutions absorb that demand in the request mode, we have a kind of concession of those who are in control over institutions. Those who are in power respond to an individual request. Institutions to which a request is addressed are clearly identifiable. Nevertheless, when a demand transforms itself into a claim it is because it has gone far beyond. It has gone through the process of a chain of equivalence. Popular demands always involve claims, "insofar as people see themselves as bearers of rights that are not recognized" (Laclau 2014, 149). And as long as the chain of equivalence gets extended, the institutions or persons to whom the claims are addressed grow more and more blurred. This is why the enemy (as well as the people) is always a contingent and precarious construction; it is always the product of a discursive elaboration, and this is also why the process of constructing the people modifies the identity of all those particularities that are engaged in the chain of equivalence:

Once we move beyond a certain point, what were requests within institutions became claims addressed *to* institutions and at some stage they become claims *against* the institutional order. When this process has overflowed the institutional apparatuses beyond a certain limit, we start having the "people" of populism (Laclau 2014, 149)

To conclude this point, we have the people as such when the chain of equivalence prevails over particularities. Although the trace of each particularity is never completely erased, the popular identity starts operating over them and becomes its sutured foundation. The relation between particular demands and the chain of equivalence is reversed and the people acts over its own constitutive elements, modifying them. The crystallization of a popular identity takes place through a hegemonic operation when one of the particular demands of the chain of equivalence empties itself in order to become the incarnation of the people's universality. Laclau asserted that the more extended the chain of equivalence is, the emptier the articulating signifier becomes. In other words, the more extended the number of elements that are associated in the chain of equivalence, the more detached from its original meanings the empty signifier that hegemonizes them turns out to be. Then the so-called imprecision and vagueness of populisms is the expression of their political efficacy. And this takes us back to the affective dimension, because the strength that works and makes the signifying operations possible is a radical investment. In this way, the hegemonic—discursive—formations “which articulate differential and equivalential logics, would be unintelligible without the affective component,” which shows “the inanity of dismissing emotional populist attachments in the name of an uncontaminable rationality” (Laclau 2005a, 111).⁶

Once we have presented Laclau's deconstruction of populism, our final step is to consider the link between populism and politics. As we have already mentioned, one of Laclau's fundamental displacements is to understand populism as a logic of political articulation, but the remarkable aspect is that this logic of political articulation is the logic of hegemony itself. Every

populist articulation implies a hegemonic articulation. This apparent coincidence between populism and politics, sometimes even supported by Laclau himself, pushed some authors to affirm that Laclau's theory had three semantically overlapped terms: hegemony, politics, and populism.⁷ However, this would have only brought more confusion to the concept of populism.

On the contrary, from our perspective, we do not understand that there is a semantic overlap between politics and populism, but rather a contamination. Once the notion of contamination is introduced, the possibility to delimitate conceptual areas (or of any kind of sphere) as absolutely pure and pristine is excluded.⁸ In any case, every selfhood, from the beginning, is always contaminated, *altered* by otherness. At this point the Derridean figure of the specter can be helpful to approach populism. For Derrida the specter is what haunts; it is what bursts into the safety of one's own home, destabilizing the settled order. The specter is what at the same time cannot be captured or comprehended or completely explained by the traditional scholar, according to the parameters of pure rationality.

In this way, it is impossible to understand politics as sphere that is immune to the populist contamination. On the contrary, populism is what haunts and (spectrally) contaminates politics; that is why populism is an inextricable part of it. The possibility of populism is inscribed in politics itself and cannot be exorcised. As one day it was for Marx's communism, for Laclau populism is the specter that haunts the capitalistic powers.

A Few Final Words

In this text we have emphasized the deconstructivist dimension in the work of Laclau, focusing on the deconstruction of Marxism and populism. To conclude, there are two different aspects that relate to each other and should be briefly pointed out: one concerns Laclau's position about the

logic of deconstruction *in toto*, and the other regards emancipation(s).

First, according to Laclau, “deconstruction is a primarily *political* logic in the sense that, by showing the structural undecidability of increasingly larger areas of the social, it also expands the area of operation of the various moments of political institution” (1996b, 61). This is why he considered hegemony and deconstruction complementary dimensions, as two faces of the same single operation: “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” (1996a, 90). But complementarity did not mean easy assimilation between both “logics,” because Laclau considered that the theory of hegemony could “enrich” deconstruction as it presented some of the “political consequences” of deconstruction. This is why he was reticent to equate the logic of hegemony with the spectral logic of Derrida, affirming that “a hegemonic logic presupposes two further steps beyond spectrality that I am not sure Derrida is prepared to take” (1996a, 70). Besides, the differences the idea of “complementarity” can give account for the interrelation that can be established between both:

To summarize: deconstruction and hegemony are the two essential dimensions of a single theoretico-practical operation. Hegemony requires deconstruction: without the radical structural undecidability that the deconstructive intervention brings about, many strata of social relations would appear as essentially linked by necessary logics and there would be nothing to hegemonize. But deconstruction also requires hegemony, that is, a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain: without a theory of the decision, that distance between structural undecidability and actuality would remain untheorized. But that decision can *only* be a hegemonic one. (1996b, 62)

Second, the notion of emancipation(s) without any eschatological ending,⁹ which Laclau insisted on as a way of keeping the Marxist spirit, is directly linked to the idea of “complementarity” of the logic of hegemony with the spectral logic. The “two further steps beyond spectrality” that Laclau talked about had to do with “constructing” a political response.

For Laclau there is a risk to be taken, a bet, to build a “collective” political response, that is, to construct something in common where there is not. And this is the point when Laclau shifted to psychoanalysis; however, as we stated above, the psychoanalytic dimension exceeds the scope of the article.

As we have mentioned, Laclau understood politics as the practice of hegemony or, what is the same, as the practice of articulation; in *On Populist Reason* he stated that populism was a form of the practice of hegemony. Moreover, populism was his favorite form of politics. Although he never expressed it exactly in this way, we could say that his preference for populism was based on two reasons: first, it was based on the idea that populism is an ineradicable dimension of politics, and second, because he thought it was the way of radical politics today.

Populisms suppose an *anti-status quo* or anti-institutional impulse, but this is just one aspect. This *anti-status quo* or anti-institutional impulse is born from "the experience of a lack" (Laclau 2005a, 85) that is linked to demands that are not met. There is a power that has not met the demands. We can also say that this *anti-status quo* or anti-institutional impulse is born from a series of antagonisms, and that once they have provoked an extended frustration of demands, the requests addressed to institutions may become a generalized claim against the institutional order itself.

However, the experience of antagonism—which implies this idea of "the experience of a lack," or "*being deficient*," as Laclau affirmed, involves the idea that somebody is responsible for the absent plenitude of the community and therefore cannot be a legitimate part of the *populus*—is the key for the possibility to unleash an emancipatory process. And here we have to be very careful, because Laclau was clear and stated that there is nothing guaranteed with this *anti-*

status quo impulse; we can have left-wing or right-wing populism, but it will all depend on the correlation of forces of the given context where populism arises. For Laclau, only the first kind of populism can open an emancipatory process. But, in any case, populisms are completely linked to this *anti-status quo* impulse and the frontier effects that it establishes; if the frontier disappears, the populist articulation disappears too.

But this is just one aspect, because populisms also produce institutions. Let us remember that the people of populism means also organization. The people is full of organizations, let us say, a whole diversity of social movements, unions, organizations of small-scale producers or small traders and so on and so forth. And also, populisms incarnate a counterhegemonic will and, as such, try to construct new institutions. Therefore, the task of any populism is to build a new hegemonic bloc, to institutionalize the changes they attempt to produce. In a few words, Laclau's political bet is not only to deconstruct but also to construct with hegemony and populism.

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Notes

1. Highlighting the close relation between post-Marxism and Derridean deconstruction, Laclau and Mouffe state in their preface to the second edition that hegemony can be understood as "a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain" (2001, xi).
2. See chapters 1 and 2 of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
3. For instance, in the case of Germany the "anomaly" lay in the fact that the process of the

national state unification and the development of industry had been the result of the task of a substitutive group of the bourgeoisie: the Prussian Junkers with the semi-authoritarian regime of Bismarck. If the process in Germany had followed the typical model of correspondence of tasks, it should have been the Rhenish bourgeoisie—the social class in charge of the development of capitalism. In the socialist movement this was expressed in the confrontation between Marx and Lassalle: the first defended the alliance of the working class with the liberal bourgeoisie of western Germany, while the second maintained that the alliance had to be established with the Prussian Junkers.

4. "This is the inner essentialist core which continues to be present in Gramsci's thought, setting a limit to the deconstructive logic of hegemony. To assert, however, that hegemony must always correspond to a fundamental economic class is not merely to reaffirm determination in the last instance by the economy; it is also to predicate that, insofar as the economy constitutes an insurmountable limit to society's potential for hegemonic re-composition, the constitutive logic of the economic space is not itself hegemonic. Here the naturalist prejudice, which sees the economy as a homogeneous space unified by necessary laws, appears once again with all its force" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 69).
5. As Derrida says: "Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, . . . can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely non-saturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring" (1982, 320).
6. Laclau asserted that there is no signification without affection and that there is no affection constituted outside the signifying chain (2003, 283).
7. For instance, Laclau affirmed: "Does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative" (2005b, 47).
8. Having said this, we can even detect specific populist characteristics: the construction of the people that antagonistically dichotomizes the social space into two places of enunciation and the emergence of a leader.

9. According to Laclau, “The very condition of emancipation—its radical break from power—is what make emancipation impossible because it becomes indistinguishable from power. The consequence is not, however, the nihilistic result that emancipation is impossible and that only power remains, because what our conclusion asserts is that power is the very condition of emancipation. If all emancipation must constitute itself as a power, there will be a plurality of powers—and, as a result, a plurality of contingent and partial emancipations” (1996a, 101).

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