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RADICALLY INVESTED: LACLAU'S DISCURSIVE ONTOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF HEGEMONY

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This paper attempts to provide a concise but systematic presentation of the discursive ontology of the social that underpins the thought of the Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau. First articulated by Laclau and his collaborator Chantal Mouffe at the historical conjuncture of the late twentieth century that witnessed the disintegration of established leftist political visions and the rise of a plurality of new social movements, the post-structuralist discursive ontology on which Laclau bases his theorization of hegemony *as the paradigm of politics is one that continues to exert a powerful influence on contemporary post-foundational political thought, discourse analysis, and "left populist" political movements. This paper traces the fundamental claims of that ontology, paying special attention to Laclau's theses apropos the limits of universality and impossibility of "fullness." In the final third of this paper, the French philosopher Alain Badiou's approach to the conceptualization of social change is employed as a foil to draw some key implications of Laclau's elevation of "hegemony" as the universal form of the political for political thought and practice.*

Keywords: social ontology, Ernesto Laclau, empty signifier, radical investment

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to the revised edition of *The Retreat From Class* published in 1998, the Marxist scholar Ellen Meiksins Wood (1998, xi) declared that post-Marxism—the Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau and his long-time collaborator, the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, being its key exponents—is a "now-defunct intellectual tendency." However, in light of the practical and theoretical consequences that the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe have generated since, Wood appears to have been too hasty in her judgment. Writing two decades after Wood, Perry Anderson (2016, 80–81) recognizes, though not without reservations about the cogency of their theorization, Laclau and Mouffe as "augurs of the reaction against neo-liberalism" who can boast the considerable feat of having their vision

adopted by political forces with mass support, notably by Spain's Podemos, which "based its strategy expressly on their prescriptions for a hegemonic populism." At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, Mouffe's (2018) call for a "left populism"—which presupposes the post-Marxist framework of her collaborative work with Laclau—continues to garner the attention of political scientists and politicians alike (Fassin 2019). Nor has Laclau's death in 2014 stopped the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe from being developed further, with the contribution by Oliver Marchart (2018)—Laclau's former student at the University of Essex—towards an "ontology of the political" standing out for pushing their key notion of *antagonism* to its logical limit. The influence of Laclau and Mouffe, moreover, extends beyond European and Latin American politics, as evidenced, to give just one example, by the growing interest in their ideas over the past decade in Indonesia (Sunardi 2012; Madung 2018).

However, if Anderson (2016, 81) is right in conceding the political efficacy of the theoretical approach defended by Laclau and Mouffe, he is probably also right in recognizing its "forbidding technicality." The difficulty owes in large part to the fact that there is no shortage of ambition in their works, as suggested by Laclau's (Howarth and Laclau 2014, 261) remark that the theory of hegemony he and Mouffe developed is designed to be a comprehensive theoretical system that reflects the "basic homology at all levels of analysis of human reality" attested by linguistics, psychoanalysis, and politics. On what this homology Laclau and Mouffe find is, the following is perhaps serviceable as a succinct approximation: social practices are signifying or articulatory processes, the being of objects is discursive in that they are produced through such processes, and the contingency of every objectivity is revealed in the breakdown of the process of signification whose possibility, as the limits of symbolization that interrupts but is paradoxically constitutive of every system of meaning, is ineradicable. According to this discursive ontology of the social, which accepts as its basic principle the conceptual equivalence of *relations* and *objectivity*, a social order, as well as all the elements embraced within it, are constituted through the various relations that hold between them. Consequently, social change is to be understood essentially in terms of the transformations of those relations and the effects thereof.

While Laclau and Mouffe's purported move beyond Marxism irritated the more traditional Marxists affiliated with the *Socialist Register*, such as Wood and Norman Geras, who fired the first shot in a heated debate with the self-proclaimed post-Marxists over the meaning of materialism and Marxism (Townshend 2017), post-Marxism also found an ally of great intellectual prowess in Slavoj Žižek. In Žižek's (1989, 163) first book in English (which included a preface written by Laclau), one finds Laclau and Mouffe credited as "the first to develop [the Lacanian] logic of the Real in its relevance for the socio-ideological field in their concept of *antagonism*," who thereby paved a path toward the approach to ideology critique based on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan that Žižek himself sought to develop. The highly divisive reception of Laclau and Mouffe's thought owed in no small part to the fact that the publication in 1985 of their seminal text, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, coincided with a critical period in radical political thought marked by the disintegration of previously dominant ideologies and the contestation, which may fittingly be called a "hegemonic" struggle, over what a socially transformative politics to come must be.

With the aim of offering a concise but sufficiently detailed introduction to a theoretical system whose difficulty has often discouraged newer readers from drawing its full implications, this paper presents a reconstruction of the discursive ontology of the social that underpins the post-Marxist vision of politics that was first proposed by Laclau and Mouffe at that historical conjuncture. The second part of this paper considers the limits of universality and impossibility of fullness, particularly in relation to the theory of what Laclau calls "radical investment," proposed in his important 2005 book *On Populist Reason* to account for the political desire toward the institution of a particular social order. These discussions prefigure the final third of this paper, wherein the French philosopher Alain Badiou's approach to the conceptualization of social change will be employed as a foil to draw some implications of the elevation, by Laclau and Mouffe, of hegemony as the universal form of the political for political thought and practice. Towards the end of this paper, a question that pertains to the role of the Lacanian notion of fantasy in hegemony theory shall be raised.

THE HEGEMONIC INSTITUTION OF A SOCIAL ORDER

In a short piece published a couple of years before *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau (1983, 22) asserts that a social order is an outcome of the "domestication" of the "infinitude of the social" into "the finitude of an order." Motivated by the unsustainability of conceptualizing society as a totality expressive of an essence that precedes its construction, Laclau's initial theoretical gesture bears great resemblance to that of Badiou (2005), who advances the proposition that any given structured totality or situation is an outcome of a unifying operation that "counts" a chaotic, inconsistent infinitude as one. However, in a divergence that eventually results in the different roles they assign to political processes, Badiou engages in an innovative reading of post-Cantorian set theory to account for the unicity of situations, whereas Laclau proceeds from a Hegelian premise with a distinctively post-structuralist twist, that to conceive a totality—such as society—is to conceive its limits qua a system of differences.

Limits of a differential system, Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 143) argues, "only exist insofar as a systematic ensemble of differences can be cut out as *totality* with regard to something *beyond* them, and it is only through this cutting out that the totality constitutes itself as formation." One could attempt to imagine this limit that must "cut out" a totality as being akin to a fence between the inside and the outside. However, there would still be only differences in this picture: the inside, the outside, and the fence itself. Under the conception of a limit as just another difference, the determination of the "beyond" that is needed to cut out a totality would be deferred, in which case it is impossible to determine the beginning and the end of the system thus of any particular social order. For a limit that is the ground of a system of differences cannot be just one more element or one more difference; Laclau (2005, 70) suggests that the beyond is to be understood not as another difference vis-à-vis the inside, but as something that the totality "expels from itself" in order to constitute itself, such that whatever lies beyond the limit is not simply one more, but an "*excluded* one." From this idea, Laclau (1996b, 38) derives an irreducible dialectic between *equivalential* and

differential relations that subverts the self-identity of the totality and its elements. Because "each element of the system has an identity only so far as it is different from the others," while they are simultaneously equivalent to each other in as much as all of them belong to the same side of "the frontier of exclusion," the identity of each element is constitutively "split" across the differential and equivalential relations. Equivalence, which is the subversion of difference, is as much a condition of the possibility of a differential system as difference. As a result, the totality becomes the locus of a tension between relations of equivalence and difference, a tension that is ineliminable in as much as there is "no square circle that can provide the basis for the logical articulation of these two poles" (Price and Sutherland 2008).

Having as the necessary condition of its constitution the contradictory relation of equivalence and difference, the *being* of a totality as thought within discursive ontology is that of "failed unicity," a oneness that constitutively fails to achieve the closure of self-identity (Laclau 2004b, 325). That a totality is never *finally* constituted—that its limits will remain essentially porous and renegotiable, and that for this reason, the relations between the elements, hence identities, cannot be fixed once and for all—does not eradicate the *need* to constitute it, on which the very possibility of order, objectivity, and signification depends. Practices that construct, reinforce, or modify those relations, called "articulation," constitute the primary process of social structuration, and indeed, the construction of any objectivity for Laclau. In short, a social order is a "structured totality resulting from … articulatory practices" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105). However, the ineliminability of a need does not imply its satisfiability: the constitutively non-constructable object of a self-identical totality can persist only as a "horizon" of articulatory processes. The "social," Laclau (1983, 24) pronounces, "only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society. Utopia is the essence of any communication and social practice."

While a fully constituted totality remains beyond reach, individuals are not thrown into a world that is entirely psychotic: they always-already belong as elements to some partially constituted systemic totalities. One and the same individual may belong to a plurality of articulated totalities that allow that individual to "be positioned as, 'black,' 'working-class,' 'Christian' and a 'woman' and so on" (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 13). If subject-positions with which an individual could identify are particularistic elements within a plurality of articulated totalities, attempts to institute society—or bring about social change—must consist in the articulation of a new totality from a potentially infinite plurality of elements and partial totalities. Indeed, if the being of society as a totality is to be thought without treating it as an unanalyzable given, what needs to be posited as possible in articulatory processes is the instance of *totalization*, at which those elements and various totalities in which they are constituted as objects (that is, discourses) come to be differences *within* a broader systematic totality.

The totalizing instance that must be posited to account for the constitution of a social order is precisely the instance of hegemony, at which "a certain identity is picked up from the whole field of differences, and made to embody this totalizing function" (Laclau 2005, 81). Or, alternatively phrased, when some particular element comes to acquire a significance beyond its own particularity as the representative of the totality

as a whole. In this instance, a particular element in the system further splits "between the particularity which it still is" and the dimension of the "universal" of which it also becomes the bearer (Laclau 2005, 70). That particularity, which acquires the universalistic dimension, is said to have become "something of the order of an *empty* signifier" (Laclau 2005, 71). Given the synonymity established by Laclau's discursive ontology between "relation" and "objectivity," as well as between "difference" and "identity," an empty signifier, despite its universalistic dimension, nonetheless has to be constituted in relation to something that it is not. However, since an empty signifier must be, rather than just another difference, a "signifier of the pure cancellation of all difference" in as much as its dimension of universality is that of representing a totality qua a totality, it must be defined not against an element within the system but against what the totality constitutively excludes (Laclau 1996b, 38–39). Hence, if an empty signifier must represent "something equally present" in the elements of a totality, that which is equally present can be neither a positive property nor an underlying essence (Laclau 1996b, 42). Instead, it is by the relation of exclusion that all of them share with respect to the outside that their belonging together on one side of the exclusionary limit is attested.

In the Laclauian text wherein it is maintained, *pace* Claude Lefort, that "emptiness is a type of identity, not a structural location" (Laclau 2005, 166), the particularity, in the order of the empty signifier, which embodies the universal dimension of a totality is also termed "hegemonic identity." Moreover, since the production of such an identity is the end of political practice for Laclau, his thought can be placed within the tradition of modern political thought inaugurated by Hobbes, in which the fundamental problem of political action is construed as the realization of *E Pluribus Unum* (or the virtually synonymous motto of the Republic of Indonesia, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*), under the premise that the condition of possibility of every polity is the construction of a unicity from a plurality, or a universality where there are differences. What Laclau's conceptualization of the instance of totalization would add to this basic premise is that the universality a social order realizes is never neutral with respect to plurality, in as much as the possibility of an order presupposes some beyond that the order excludes, where *of what* that beyond consists accounts for its identity as a particular order and therefore is constitutive of its identity. Both the "America" occulted by Donald Trump's campaign slogan of "Make America Great Again" and the "ninety-nine percent" that Occupy claimed to represent are structurally isomorphic (Kim 2018), in as much they are empty signifiers defined by what they exclude (immigrants in the former case and financial elite in the latter). For Laclau, any far-reaching attempt to institute or reconfigure a social order employs empty signifiers. A social order, therefore, is a hegemonic formation in which a *partial* universality is attained—and that, Laclau contends, is the only achievable kind of universality.

Never does Laclau dwell melancholically on particular excluded or underrepresented positions, nor does he promote radical inclusivity *as such* as a normative ideal. For the political theorist deeply suspicious of the ethical turn in all its guises, the impossibility of radical inclusivity is simply the corollary of the ineradicability of political futurity. The outside that must exist due to the impossibility of any order to extend its inclusivity to embrace all positions, in the end, is but the basis of a possibility of a socially transformative process that, as Judith Butler (2011, 144)

has summarized, begins when "those positions that have been excluded from representability" are established "in relation to the existing polity as what calls to be included within its terms, i.e., a set of *future* possibilities for inclusion." In as much as they are *positions*, the excluded elements are constructed through the same kind of discursive processes—articulation, chains of equivalence, and differences—operative on the inside. Qua, *excluded*; however, the positions belong to discourses representing "the not-yet-assimilable *horizon* of community" (Butler 2011, 144), on whose exclusion the *status quo* depends. The ultimate impossibility of totality—hence the impossibility of a complete closure of the inside—ensures the ontologically ineliminable possibility of subaltern discourses and positions with the potential to disrupt and transform the existing order. The actualization of this potential, in turn, is dependent on the construction of an alternative hegemonic identity through the articulation of a chain of equivalence between the excluded positions. It is this disruptive and socially transformative potential of (counter-)hegemonic politics that the notion of *antagonism* highlights.

The continuous exclusion of certain positions from the existing order, thus preventing their actualization within an order, indicates an antagonism between the outside and the inside through which the *limits* of that order are shown. Antagonism exists between identities when one is experienced by another as the subversive presence of an "other" that prevents it from achieving full self-identity, inducing thereby a "split between the actual and the potential in which the latter is sought hegemonized by the former as an actuality that is prevented from being what it is" (Dyrberg 2004, 247). In antagonism, there are identities towards which social agents aspire, yet whose actualization is denied under the prevailing social order—but in this case, antagonism is also the revelation of the failure of the order itself to attain self-identity. When an object is prevented from self-identity, this object is said to be *dislocated*. It can be said, therefore, that antagonism is an event of dislocation for both the social order and the individuals whose identities had been determined within it as positions included and represented therein. Though dislocation may be a traumatic crisis of identity for social agents in so far as the order that had constituted the subject-positions with which they had identified no longer accommodates them, it is simultaneously liberating, for it is in its instance that the contingency of their identities, and their ultimate non-identity with subject-positions, is shown. With a play on an existentialist trope, Laclau (1990, 44) writes that one is "*condemned* to be free" in dislocation, "simply thrown up in [one's] condition as a subject" because one has "not achieved constitution as an object." Freedom, in this view, emerges not because one has absolutely no structural or objective identity, but because one has a "*failed* structural identity" (Laclau 1990, 44).

The subject emerges as sundered from subject-positions when the link between the subject and identification becomes that of possibility than of necessity, that of real alternative than that of immanent development. That subjectivity is consequent to the dislocating event of antagonism implies that one is a subject precisely when the routinized practices have broken down, and it is no longer clear how one is to "go on" (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 129). In other words, what will come to be "cannot be read off from structure" (Dyrberg 2004, 247), nor can the actualization of the potential opened by dislocation be reduced to an effect of the dislocated structure. What

confronts the Laclauian subject, therefore, is an *undecidability* of the structure, or the distance between "the plurality of arrangements that are possible out of [a given structural point] and the actual arrangement that has finally prevailed" (Laclau 1996a, 54). It is this distance "between the undecidability of the structure and the decision" that Laclau (1996a, 54) identifies as the "moment of the subject," at which the one subjectivized is compelled to decide. This decision is in the form of an act of identification: qua subject, one asserts a new identity, the success of which amounts to the neutralization of dislocation, hence the restoration of order as a relatively self-enclosed totality. The decision is directed toward the actualization of one possibility over others, thus the repression of alternatives that had been available. In this respect, the "constitution of a social identity," as much as it is an exercise of freedom, is simultaneously and necessarily "an act of power"—or, in as much as the stability of a restored identity implies the continual repression of certain possibilities from actualizing in the order reconstituted through the act, "identity as such *is* power" (Laclau 1990, 31).

Dislocation, at which the immanent development of a systematic totality is interrupted, and identification, which results in its reconfiguration into a transformed totality, compose a process metaphorically describable as that of the "loosening" and "tightening" of its structure (Hudson 2006, 305). In addition to problematizing the idea of treating the other person as a subject (the best that one can do may be to treat the other as a *different* object), Laclau's account of this process of structural change implies an outcome that bears an unexpected similarity with the Sartrean idea of the becoming-inert of human praxis. If the "loosening" of the structure in dislocation is the source of freedom, possibility, and of the subject, then the subsequent "tightening" achieved by the subject's act results in its eclipse of the subject, the loss of freedom, and the closing down of possibilities. The Laclauian subject, in this respect, is a vanishing operator whose effect on the structure is inscribed in its own disappearance and the institution of a new order and subject-positions, which are, as "objective social [identities], the crystallization of an act of the subject" (Hudson 2006, 307). Laclau (1990, 44) unflinchingly affirms the logical outcome of his thought: "social action tends towards the constitution of that impossible object"—that of full objectivity or self-identity—and "thus towards the elimination of the conditions of liberty itself."

The said social action will begin from the transition from a multiplicity of dislocated subjects to a collective one, such that they come to live a common struggle toward the neutralization of dislocations, hence toward the institution of an order in which certain possibilities and identities that were beyond the limit of the preceding order will have been embraced. For identity as such is power, the "horizontal" articulation of a plurality of subjects toward asserting a common identity—a hegemonic identity—should be regarded as tantamount to the acquisition of power that enables such an assertion. However, an account of what a process of extensive social change *is* (or ought to be) does not yet satisfy the explanation of social change hegemony theory has sought to provide. As Mouffe had suggested, the neglect of the "predominant role of passions as moving forces of human conduct" displayed by certain rational choice and deliberative theories of democracy is a mistake that hegemony theory is designed to avoid (Mouffe 1993, 140). The construction of a hegemonic identity cannot be divorced from the account of the *force* with which a

particular project toward extensive social change—and the identities and possibilities it promises to render fulfillable—that comes to grip a plurality of subjects. The elaboration of the fundamental structure of political desires—or the "affective" dimension of hegemony—is at the core of *On Populist Reason*, wherein Laclau (2005, 116), based on somewhat idiosyncratic interpretations of the Lacanian theory of sublimation, declares that the "logic of *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical."

POLITICAL DESIRE AND THE LIMIT OF SOCIALLY ATTAINABLE UNIVERSALIZATION

The Laclauian subject is a subject in so far as it has a failed identity, the failure that evinces the inability of the structure to constitute itself as a closed totality in which identities will be entirely determined by the structure. This construal is the basis on which an affinity between hegemony theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis can be asserted and allows for the appropriation by the former the latter's idea of the desire for self-completion—a full identity—to recast it as the essence of political desire. In terms closer to Lacanian theory, it might be said that to have social existence is to be represented in the symbolic. However, despite the reservoir of signifiers available for symbolic representation, Lacan (1997a, 179) argues—in a manner reminiscent of one of Hegel's discussions in the sense-certainty section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*—that there is something "radically unassimilable to the signifier," namely the "subject's singular existence," its unique being. Something of the subject's singular being thus falls beneath symbolization, and any signifier—or socio-symbolic identity—by which the subject represents itself is experienced as inadequate. This *lack* in its socio-symbolic existence sets in motion the subject's search for a signifier that would fully represent its being, hence for the reconciliation of its singular being and identity. It is such a state of harmony that Laclau's term "fullness" denotes at a larger scale as the character of the entirely reconciled society, the "impossible object" of a fully constituted, self-identical totality towards the construction of which all articulatory processes are ultimately oriented.

Although what the subject experiences as lacking—or perceives as the fullness that is absent—in its socio-symbolic existence can, in the Lacanian vein, be said to be the real pre-symbolic *jouissance*, the reference to a state of harmony that precedes socialization should not carry the implication of a linear evolutionary conception of the emergence of the subject of lack. As indicated by the opening essay of *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau (1996b) rejects the thought of politics based on a transhistorical determination of a lost object whose recovery implies bringing forth an entirely "transparent," "reconciled," "rational" or "emancipated" society. Therefore, rather than conceiving fullness as something that pre-exists its loss, it must be conceived as the *lack of lack*: fullness is always experienced as absent because it is, in truth, the retroactive effect of "the potential yet-to-be-realized that is prompted by the blockage of this potential" (Dyrberg 2004, 247), that is, the limit of society experienced as the dislocation of identities. Characterized by Laclau himself as a "retrospective illusion" (Laclau 2006, 651), *that which the subject of lack perceives as something that*

must be attained is thus the general description of the role of fullness in his theorization of social change. However, *what* must be restored, redeemed, liberated, attained, or realized is not determinable prior to the particular social order that has been articulated under a given historical condition and unfulfilled aspirations therein that give shape to yet-to-be-realized potentials.

In establishing the capacity of absent fullness to sustain desires toward political objectives, Laclau relies on Lacan's reinterpretation of the Freudian Thing as the object of primordial *jouissance* that is experienced by the subject as always already lost. Desire is the search for this lost object, but as Lacan (1999, 111) proposes in the seventh seminar, "'that's not it' is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from *jouissance* expected." There is no actually obtainable thing that delivers full *jouissance*, in whose absence *objet petit a* is presented to the subject "as a marker of that which the subject 'has not got,' or *does not have*," sustaining thereby the metonymy of desire (Zupančič 2000, 18). The rationale behind Laclau's assertion of identity between the "logic of *objet petit a*" and the "logic of hegemony" begins to surface at this point. Even though "the fullness and universality of society is unachievable," what does not disappear is its *need*, which "will always show itself through the presence of its absence" (Laclau 1996b, 53). But because it lacks a consistency of its own, fullness is strictly unknowable and indescribable as such, and its presentation will always be as embodied or incarnated in some particular object—the only kind of objects that actually exists. If hegemony presupposes the ontological proposition that a particularity, without ceasing to be particular, can acquire a universal dimension that exceeds its particularity, the basic political strategy it issues is based on the thought that the connection between any given particularity and its embodiment of universality is a contingent outcome of articulatory processes. As such, any particular political project—any identity—can struggle to acquire this dimension, hence acquire the power to act on the social. But doing so must involve its self-presentation as the promise of a fullness that is absent in a dislocated social order. In short, an "empty signifier can only function as an *objet petit a*" (Stavrakakis 1999, 81).

According to the Lacanian premises accepted by Laclau, what "promises to agitate at least some people into striving toward the achievement of various alterations of their present circumstances" is a "certain libidinal 'restless'" due to the impossibility of "a total and complete satisfaction (qua full, absolute *jouissance*)"—conversely, if the latter were actually achieved, "there really would be an 'end of history' in a vulgar Hegelian sense" (Johnston 2009, 100–101). Consequently, Laclau's theorization of political desire supposes that an ultimately impossible fullness presenting itself as an object to be attained is able to sustain "an idealization of the future that motivates the expansion, linking, and perpetual production of political subject-positions and signifiers" (Butler 2011, 144). Nevertheless, whereas the impossibility of a self-identical totality could be appraised positively by Laclau as that which ensures an open future, the seemingly analogous thesis of the impossibility of fullness invites the question of whether his theory undermines the very probability of subjective endeavor toward an alternative future. For it might be argued that Laclau's theorization apropos fullness, by turning in advance any actual political project into an inadequate surrogate for the utopic *Thing*, establishes disappointment as the inevitable outcome of political

practice and exposes political subjectivity to an inescapable lure of resignation and cynicism.

The preceding sort of question—versions of which have been raised by Žižek (2000) and Martin Hägglund (2008a; 2008b)—is what Laclau's account of the subject's attachment to a particular project or hegemonic formation as that of "radical investment" is designed to deflect. Citing Lacan's (1997b, 112) formula of sublimation, whereby a partial object is "elevated to the dignity of the Thing," Laclau contends that in the construction of a hegemonic formation, there is a moment of transubstantiation at which a partial object becomes, not a part *of* a whole that is in principle unobtainable, but instead, a part that *is* the whole. Radical investment is in effect, an act of identification with some partial object—a particular hegemonic formation or a political project—through which it is made into "the embodiment of a fullness totally transcending it" (Laclau 2004b, 287). For a subject invested in the attainment of a particular objective, that objective comes to represent the "ultimate horizon of what is achievable"—not, Laclau (2005, 119) adds, because "there is an unachievable 'beyond,' but because that 'beyond,' having no entity of its own, can be present only as the phantasmatic excess of an object through which satisfaction is achievable." According to the theory of radical investment, then, attempts to reconstitute a social order through the pursuit of that project has, from the perspective of the invested subject, become identical to the attempt to realize the promise of fullness as such. For a particular object to have become the object-incarnate of fullness for a subject is to have become the only means by which the subject believes fullness can be accessed. Since fullness has no presence or meaning beyond the "ontic" content of a particular hegemonic project, the project, for the subject that has identified with it, becomes "the horizon of *all there is*," and is no longer "an empirically achievable second best *vis-à-vis* an unattainable ultimate fullness" (Laclau 2005, 226).

In addition to responding to the problem of resignation, the conjunction of the impossibility of fullness and the radical investment that underpins political processes is able, Laclau (2004b, 317–18) suggests, to account for a phenomenon that he claims to have "seen several times," namely how, "after the fall of an oppressive regime, the most disparate social and political movements entering a process of mobilization, living for a short period in the illusion that, because an oppressive regime had fallen, what had actually fallen was oppression as such". Because it is experienced as the elimination of the blockage to the attainment of fullness, the fall of a regime that had been regarded as the embodiment of oppression "always liberates forces larger than what the fall, as a concrete event, can master," as a consequence of which "all oppressed groups in society live for the moment in the illusion that all unfulfilled demands—in any domain—are going to be met" (Laclau 2000b, 142). Radical investment might also be seen as providing an explanation for what political theorist John Dunn (2014) had observed in the American context: the sublime and mesmerizing qualities that the referent of "democracy" assumes in political imagination, despite the fact that upon scrutiny, the ends for which democracy is adequate turn out to be far more modest than what the great expectations placed on it would lead one to believe. But if Dunn inclines toward the conclusion that having a more realistic expectation of what democracy is able to achieve will be conducive to the preservation of American democracy in the long run, Laclau, on the contrary,

insists that political aspirations, which ultimately refer to an absent fullness, will always continue to find means of expression, despite the fact that fullness as such can never be commensurate with any particular representation or incarnation.

At no point in history does *everything* become a live possibility. Every concrete project is thus partial, but this "partiality (the hegemonic force) which assumes the representation of a mythical totality" is the "only possible totalizing horizon" on which a plurality of struggles for social change at a certain epoch can rely for common orientation (Laclau 2005, 116). These horizons, which will always be organized around some empty signifiers, represent "the limit of socially attainable universalization" and constitutes, for Laclau (2000a, 210–11), the "social imaginary" of a particular epoch. Despite the fact that what any particular project is able to achieve invariably will fall short of an entirely reconciled society, the existence of empty signifiers operating as names of absent fullness, hence as the means by which all sorts of aspirations are represented, is "a dimension of society which cannot be suppressed" (Laclau 1997, 303). Politics, then, is a demonstration of the human capacity—noted by Jacques Rancière (2011, 248), whose thinking of politics is inseparable from the archives of working-class struggles—to "live and die for words that never entirely keep their promise," to "bear the disappointment and if needs be enjoy it."

THE OUTSIDE OF HEGEMONY

The thesis that fullness is unreachable is perhaps easier to accept than the constraint on the means by which whatever satisfaction that can be attained is attained, seemingly imposed by Laclau and Mouffe's thesis that "the field of the political is the field of a game called hegemony," which is, to their eyes, simply "the universal form of the political" (Arditi 2007, 208). Over the years, the idea that hegemony exhaustively captures what there is of politics has been challenged on the grounds that are practical as much as they are theoretical. Vladimir Safatle (Gandesha and Safatle 2020, 223), commenting on the political situation of Brazil, remarks that Laclau was unable to understand that the heterogeneity of the coalitions he so values is what leads to "the powerful inertia in populist governments." A government based on "compromise, pacts, and coalitions" between forces that may include not just progressive but also oligarchic forces, Safatle suggests, is prone to "paralysis" (Gandesha and Safatle 2020, 223–24). Elsewhere, Geoff Boucher (2009, 231–32) contends that if "all social formations are fundamentally constructed upon exclusion and marginalization" as hegemony theory teaches, then the "real question" of politics, in the end, cannot but be "one of how to swap the leading personnel, rather than whether to transform the social order." Lastly, Alberto Toscano's (2008) support for Badiou's approach over Laclau's can be read as a concise expression of what a number of critics of the latter believe would be unthinkable in the field of politics if it were indeed the field of the game of hegemony.

Badiou's account of change, most systematically presented in his magnum opus *Being and Event* (2005), is centered on the notion of what he terms a "truth" of a situation. For Badiou, a truth is the novelty that transforms a particular situation the "subject" of that truth incrementally produces—or realizes, as the subject itself—by

drawing from what is at the "void" of the situation, namely, elements that had been rendered radically unrepresentable within the situation as a result of a constitutive failure of the situation to count them as elements. While such elements are normally "indiscernible," or unrepresentable, within the situation, Badiou argues that an aleatory *event* is able to interrupt the situation's prevalent regime of representation (which Badiou terms the "state" of the situation) and inspire certain individuals into a "faithful" pursuit of hitherto foreclosed possibilities glimpsed therein—the realization of which, according to Badiou, is what composes a truth for that situation. Because a truth initially has no presence within the situation except as a representation of elements that are unrepresentable under the situation's prevalent regime of representation, or an "excrescence" (Badiou 2005, 342), the subject engaged in its construction is oriented by the hypothesis, or "fiction," of a completed truth whose referent, as Žižek (1999, 136) has aptly put, is "'empty' precisely in so far as it refers to the fullness yet to come." On the process by which a truth comes to be in social situations, Badiou's ascription of an egalitarian and universal property to truths means that any production of a truth must be based on a practice that is "indifferent to differences" (Badiou 2002, 27). The task of a theory of social change is thinking the universality that must come to be, as a cancellation of identitarian differences, which, for Badiou, is a reflection merely of how things *already* are.

Badiou's theorization of universality as emerging from the cancellation of differences and the subject as oriented by the representation of that which is presently absent in the situation exhibits affinities with aspects of Laclau's understanding of social change as based on "the articulation of different identities and subjectivities into a common project" (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 15). Moreover, like the Badiouian truth that effects changes in a situation by engaging elements that are unrepresentable within it, the socially transformative potential of a hegemonic project depends on its coming to represent a fullness whose attainment promises the actualization of possibilities and inclusion of positions denied under the extant order. However, Toscano (2008, 534) warns that "despite the deceptive resonance," the production of a universal and egalitarian truth is not to be confused with the hegemonic construction of an equivalential chain. For the latter involves "strategic rearrangement and occupation of discourse (what Badiou would call 'the language of the situation')," when the production of a truth "requires instead an organized subtraction or separation from its manner of structuring and stratifying our experience of the world" (Toscano 2008, 534). In contrast to the more positive kind of action enjoined by Badiou's philosophy as that of weaving truths out of the unrepresentable void of situations, hegemonic politics begins with the disruptive real of antagonism only to prioritize as its end the supersession of disruption through the institution of another order. Whereas Badiou's daring Platonic gesture ties universality, novelty, and good into a notion of truth, the only analogous "truth" that is thinkable within Laclau's approach is a universality that has been conflated with power, to the extent that the specific possibilities and positions a given partially achieved universality actualizes is, by definition, inextricable from a function of power. Hegemony thus implies that politics can never be purely liberatory or inclusive, and that if politics must not just be a *Realpolitik*, neither could it be a *Gesinnungsethik*, or solely a matter of remaining faithful to a cause, as Badiou's writings on politics have sometimes been understood—

not entirely without justification—as recommending (Bensaïd 2004; Marchart 2007). From the perspective of hegemony theory, aspects of political practice that might be deemed "Machiavellian" or "strategic" are not contaminants of which a politics must be purified, and the Badiouian determination, aided by an intricate conceptualization of the being of truth, of a "politics of truths" devoid of these aspects betrays the reduction of the political to the ethical. Furthermore, Badiou's delineation of politics as an "organized subtraction or separation" from the situation's regime of representation (its state) implicates a thesis that Laclau's discursive ontology of the social decisively rejects. As Žižek (2002, 182) has rightly suggested, the Badiouian separation of "true" political processes from the operations of the *statuo quo* requires presupposing "a strict frontier between the Political and the Social (the domain of State, of history)" that inadvertently "concedes too much: namely, that *society exists*."

The deconstruction of the said frontier within Badiou's approach—exposing it to the thesis of the impossibility of society, that "society doesn't exist" (Žižek 2002, 182)—has been attempted, in fact, by Laclau himself. Polemically taking up the Badiouian parlance, Laclau (2004a, 125) redescribes the Gramscian organic crisis as a situation wherein that which has become "uncountable in the situation is the principle of countability as such." Manifest in the proliferation of dislocations and a generalized crisis of social identities, the problem presented by an organic crisis, at the bottom, consists in "the fact that the very logic of representation has lost its structural abilities," hence in the very dissolution of "particular sites defining (delimiting) what is unrepresentable within a general field of representation" (Laclau 2004a, 125). In this case, what becomes impossible, Laclau (2004a, 124–25) argues, is the determination of the "evental site" as a specific point of unrepresentability within a situation, as is required for Badiou's theorization of an event as "an exception vis-à-vis a highly structured situation" from which the production of a truth may commence, subsequent to the intervention of a subject that recognizes and remains "faithful" to that event. Excluded from the Badiouian construal of politics as fundamentally a process that transforms a situation such that what had hitherto been unrepresentable will have become representable, therefore, is the consideration of the task that befalls a political process that is contemporaneous with the event—the kind that truly matters for radical politics, for it is when the possibility of far-reaching social change is opened—of widespread dislocation and structural failure. Because what is rendered inoperative by such an event precisely is the situation and its state, a political process in its aftermath can no longer consist solely of a fidelity to an exception to a situation but must also assume the task of "reconstructing the situation around a new core," or alternatively put, of building "a new state around a new core" (Laclau 2004a, 125, 131).

What the reconstruction of which Laclau speaks must involve is readily inferable: the assertion of a new order through the articulation of a new hegemonic identity, such that a different regime of representation will have emerged, resulting in the inclusion of some new elements or subject-positions. If this entails new forms of exclusion and repression, they are but inevitable outcomes of the fact that the task of hegemonic politics is not coterminous with *resistance* against an established order, but—in line with the Gramscian vision of the "becoming state" of a political force—in itself *becoming* a new order. For a political practice as envisioned by hegemony theory, negotiating the lines between inclusion and exclusion or between actualization

and repression are tasks that cannot be deferred to some "other"—bearing names such as "State" and "police" in the works of Badiou and Rancière, respectively—that could be expected to serve as the necessary backdrop of a politics purified of such things as compromise, power, and strategy. Laclau is able to recognize National Socialism (which he describes as having emerged during the German economic crisis as a "real hegemonic alternative" by addressing "the problems experienced by the middle class as a whole and [offering] a principle for their interpretation" [Laclau 1990, 65–66]) and the Long March (which "succeeded because it was not only the destruction of an old order but also the reconstruction of the nation around a new core" [Laclau 2004a, 131]) as processes that fulfilled a task that his theorization ascribes to politics, without endorsing the content of either project. A similar point may be made apropos the paralyzing populism noted by Safatle, the *Realpolitik* described by Boucher, and the "rearrangement" of discourses alluded by Toscano that does not really transform the existing order: they are, but trajectories that hegemony theory is obliged to recognize as possible outcomes of the processes theorized under its name if "hegemony" indeed names the universal form of the political.

Whether it is "emancipatory" or "totalitarian," "revolutionary" or "reactionary," in as much as it aspires to institute a new order, a political project must involve the processes elaborated by hegemony theory, which Laclau (1990, 208) regards as composing "the very logic of the construction of the social." Although the theory of hegemony may have succeeded in elaborating the mechanism by which any social order comes into existence, it does not address the question of the "content" of a social order. Notwithstanding Laclau and Mouffe's personal support for progressive ideals, hegemony theory itself does not validate any specific normative or moral reason to support any one political project over another. Their staunch resistance against moral theorizing has sometimes been perceived as leaving a lacuna, a "normative deficit," in their theory (Critchley 2004), which Laclau's tendency to drift into some version of moral relativism when pushed to respond to the question of normativity does not satisfyingly fill (Laclau 2014). While the merits and consequences of their far-reaching theorization thus remain open to debate, the fact that Laclau and Mouffe have elicited intense reactions within radical political thought and inspired some of the most noteworthy political movements over the past three decades perhaps constitutes the strongest evidence that their conceptualizations of universality, identity, subjectivity, and emancipation have illuminated a new path in political thinking and practice. However, if, as Laclau's stance on the normative question appears to entail, the task of justifying particular political projects is one that is, in the end, not the remit of the theorist but of the concrete historical political subjectivities (the *logic* of whose action Laclau believes he has accurately described), it is still possible to turn the table around, again. For it might be asked whether the path paved by hegemony theory, whose original elaborators rarely concerned themselves with the conditions of the possibility of their vision, is one that could continue to maintain its efficacy at all.

Although the Lacanian "distinction between the symbolic and imaginary is not present" in his approach (Laclau 2012, 401), Laclau does incorporate, without explicit acknowledgment, an aspect of a Lacanian concept inseparable from that distinction in accounting for the "cohesive power" of a hegemonic identity, which depends "on the illusion that a particular representation of the universal is adequate to it" (Cooke 2006,

102). For, in Lacanian terms, it is none other than a *fantasy* that supports such "illusive" transmutation of something inadequate to something adequate. In fantasy, what is ontologically impossible is transmuted from "the *impossible* into the *prohibited*," such that the "real-impossible changes into something *possible*, i.e., into something that cannot be reached, not because of its inherent impossibility but simply because access to it is hindered by the external barrier of a prohibition" (Žižek 1999, 116). It is only because some ontic object becomes the embodiment of an obstacle not merely to actualizing some particular set of possibilities but to the achievement of a self-identical society or attainment of ultimate fullness that a particular project towards the overcoming of that obstacle can present itself as a promise of fullness—as may be witnessed, for example, in a democratic struggle against an oppressive regime, where the former becomes an object of passionate attachment for a plurality of subjects and the latter is perceived to be the embodiment of oppression as such.

Marchart (2018, 146) acknowledges the role of fantasy straightforwardly when he writes that the Laclauian subject "can only act on the basis of the transcendental illusion that it does have foundational power." In other words, the Laclauian subject can sustain itself in such protracted and perilous projects of far-reaching social change as a democratic struggle against an oppressive regime only on the basis of a fantasy in which the self-identity of society, whose ontological impossibility generates the retrospective illusion of an absent fullness as the object-cause of all political desire, is made to appear, at least for a time, as something that is finally achievable. If Marchart is right that there would be no political activism but only passive nihilism without the fantasy that presents fullness as achievable, then the following must be one of the conditions of possibility of hegemony: the *persistence* of the fantasy that fullness can indeed be attained. However, it is precisely this condition, on which the continuing efficacy of hegemonic politics depends, that falls outside the scope of Laclau's thinking. Though Laclau (1990, 212) holds that "hegemony is, in the final instance, an inherent dimension to all social practice," nothing seems to preclude the threat to the possibility of hegemonic processes coming from outside the social as seen through the lens of hegemony theory, possibly in the shape of the weakening grip of the very fantasy that is stipulated to be the condition of possibility of politics and thus of the institution of new social orders.

CONCLUSION

With its thesis of the necessity of the "illusion" of fullness, Laclau's theory of hegemony turns a dimension of social practice that might easily be analyzed as a case of fetishism within some Marxist approaches into a necessary condition of any social order and social change. Accordingly, within the post-Marxist paradigm, a totally transparent society in which that illusion would no longer be needed is tantamount to the ideological dream of eliminating the need for politics. The rejection of eschatological teleology implied herein represents another point at which post-Marxism breaks from more traditional Marxist thinking, one that is no less significant than its thoroughgoing refusal of economic determinism or its embrace of post-

structuralist precepts, which Wood and Geras had censured as a turn toward "linguistic idealism."

Despite the remarkable breadth and systematicity that characterize Laclau's theorization—which this paper has attempted to present in a condensed manner—of social change beyond Marxism, there remains something that has never been explicitly thematized by Laclau and yet may prove to be crucial for the future of his post-Marxism: the conditions of possibility of hegemony themselves may be subjected to historical transformation. The weakening of the grip of the fantasy that presents fullness as attainable is but just one possibility whose outcome would be the diminishment of the efficacy of politics as envisioned by Laclau—one that could be further elaborated within the increasingly influential discourse of "post-hegemony" (Thomas 2021). While it would exceed the scope of the present paper to further engage with the question of politics outside or after hegemony, one conclusion that follows from Laclau's own stance on that question is perhaps worth noting. If hegemony truly is the universal form of the political, as Laclau contends, then the ebbing of its efficacy can only be a symptom of crisis, in the sense of the word found in Gramsci's (1971, 556) writings: a historical interregnum during which "the old is dying, and the new cannot be born."

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