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Ernesto Laclau: Pluralism and Radicalism

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With the rise of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, the name of Ernesto Laclau was highlighted as an influence on the ideological line of these movements. This paper aims to analyze this post-Marxist author's thought, with a special focus on how his political theory reconciles pluralism and radicalism.Central to Laclau's project seems to be a sharp rejection of what we could call "essentialism," that is, the belief that social subjects, their interests, and their struggles are predetermined. In his work with Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), this rejection takes the form of a radical break with orthodox Marxism: The Left, they argue, should abandon Marxism's essentialism and attempts to abolish democracy through a revolution. The Left, they contend, should accept pluralism in order to articulate a hegemonic bloc against Neoliberalism and foster the struggle for equality. In a second part, this paper will attempt to describe Laclau's position on populism. In On Populist Reason (2005), Laclau argued that populism emerged from the articulation of a number of demands that are not met by the political establishment. These demands, in their efforts of articulation, would then use a "populist" rhetoric, vague in nature: they would proclaim themselves as "the legitimate people," unite against an "enemy" ("the oligarchy," for instance), and attempt to retrieve a perceived "lost harmony" of society. In a third part, this paper will argue that, by replacing the "bourgeoisie" of the Marxist narrative by "essentialism," Laclau is able to create a skillful political theory combining radicalism, pluralism, and pragmatism. On the other hand, it will also be argued that Laclau's political thought seems to come in tension with pluralism: Laclau's sharp rejection of essentialism leads him to posit a political thought where no compromise is possible with any form of essentialism.

Keywords: Marxism, Pluralism, Political theory, Populism, Radicalism.

Introduction

With the rise of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, the name of Ernesto Laclau, one of the founders of post-Marxism, was highlighted as an influence on the ideological line of these movements. One of the factors that were frequently pointed out for the success of these movements was their respective "political narratives." These narratives presented the opposition of "the people" against "the oligarchy," decried the evils of capitalism, and emphasized a lack of democracy. Fascinated by the resurgence of political radicalism and its relationship with political narratives, this paper examines Laclau's work as an assumed radical and the political narrative he draws.

The paper proceeds in three parts. In the first and second part, it looks at two of Laclau's works that are more relevant for his political theory: his 1985 book with Chantal Mouffe *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and his 2005 book *On Populist Reason*, respectively. Thirdly, some reflections on Laclau's assumed radicalism are discussed and related to his political narrative.

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In the end, it will be clear that Laclau's radicalism, because of its pluralism and pragmatism, is well adapted to nowadays' style of democratic politics. Laclau's genius seems to be grounded in his ability to deconstruct the classical Marxist's narrative of emancipation. Indeed, a political narrative where an element of society (the bourgeoisie) has to be removed from reality in order to attain a good society usually comes in tension with pluralism. Laclau's deconstruction of this narrative enables him to maintain both a radical and pluralist political theory. However, this paper also argues that Laclau, in his attempt to deconstruct the classical Marxist project of emancipation, winds up with an emancipatory narrative of his own: his fight against essentialism leads him to posit a political theory where essentialism is absent in order to attain a good political order. Although not of the same kind, such narrative of emancipation creates some tensions with the pluralism that Laclau attempts to instill within the Marxist tradition.

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985)

One of the most relevant works to first approach Laclau's political theory is his book with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, published in 1985. Although both authors will subsequently go on related but separated paths (Wenman 2003, Townshend 2004, Laclau will continue his post-Marxist project, Mouffe will develop her conception of radical democracy), this work ultimately shaped the direction of their respective path. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, this hallmark of post-Marxism, has two distinct movements: the first movement directed within Marxism, and the second directed outside of it.

This first movement within Marxism is directed against Marxist essentialism (and more specifically "Orthodox Marxism"). Laclau and Mouffe believe that Marxism, as it was initially formulated, was able to strive within its limited context of nineteenth century Europe. They argue that Marx's success was partly due to his use of the Jacobin imaginary and supplying it with the ideas of proletariat, revolution, classes, etc. The problem is that, in doing so, Marx created a time-bomb that, at some point, would necessarily be problematic: how can we reconcile the thick theory offered by Marx with new contexts, such as the fact that capitalism was becoming increasingly more fragmented and not homogeneous as Marx predicted? And what about the interests of the classes, how to isolate this crucial interest that would then lead to the final revolution? What Laclau and Mouffe tell us in the beginning of *Socialist Strategy* is the story of how Marxism, from a state of original innocence where theory and political struggle coincided, began to realize that theory was increasingly less adequate.

> "(…) Marxism finally lost its innocence at that time. In so far as the paradigmatic sequence of its categories was subjected to the 'structural pressure' of increasingly atypical situations, it became ever more difficult to reduce social relations to structural moments internal to those categories. A proliferation of caesurae and discontinuities start to break down the unity of a discourse that considered itself profoundly monist." (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 14-19, 18)

But they also tell the story of how Marxism, instead of solving the more contingent aspects of its theory, decided to remain locked within its original narrative. It is here that orthodox Marxism emerges. For Laclau and Mouffe, when the crisis of Marxism became evident and the Second International occurred, it was decided within Marxism to maintain theory as much as possible within its own essentialist parameters. Orthodox Marxism, for instance, argued that the fragmentation of capitalism was transitory or merely apparent. It maintained that there were necessary laws of history. Orthodox Marxism was also keen in creating theories that would endlessly capture what was the "true" interest and identity of a "class."

> "Marxist orthodoxy, as it is constituted in Kautsky and Plekhanov, is not a simple continuation of classical Marxism. It involves a very particular inflection, characterized by the new role assigned to theory. Instead of serving to systematize observable historical tendencies (…) theory sets itself up as a guarantee that these tendencies will eventually coincide with the type of social articulation proposed by the Marxist paradigm. (…) It is the laws of motion of the infrastructure, guaranteed by Marxist 'science', which provide the terrain for the overcoming of this disjuncture and assure both the transitory character of the existing tendencies and the future revolutionary reconstitution of the working class." (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 19)

Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe see the outcome of the first crisis of Marxism as a stubborn attachment to the original narrative of essentialist classes and interests. Now, of course, some concepts had to be offered in order to fill the hiatus between Marxist theory and political practice. Laclau and Mouffe believe that "hegemony" came precisely to fill this void. This concept, they argue, was at first a way for the proletariat to seize the power of the state in countries where the bourgeoisie was too weak to perform its historical task (paradigmatically, it was the case of Russia). The working class could, therefore, articulate its struggle with other classes while simultaneously maintaining its own class identity. For Laclau and Mouffe, the moment when "hegemony" first began to be applied under Lenin was also the first opportunity for Marxism to be more democratic than ever: the class struggle became increasingly coincident with the struggle of the masses; there was therefore the opportunity for the struggle to be more diverse, pluralist, and inclusive.

> "(…) it is important to note the ambiguity and the contradictory effects that stem from the centrality of hegemony in Leninist discourse. On the one hand, the concept is undoubtedly associated with the more authoritarian and negative tendencies of the Leninist tradition for it postulate a clear separation within the masses between the leading sectors and those which are led. (…) But, on the other hand, the hegemonic relation entails a conception of politics which is *potentially* more democratic than anything found within the tradition of the Second International. Tasks and demands which, in classist economism, would have corresponded to different stages are now seen to coexist in the same historical conjuncture. This results in the acceptance of current political validity for a plurality of antagonisms and points of rupture, so that revolutionary legitimacy is no longer exclusively concentrated in the working class. A structural dislocation thus emerges between 'masses' and 'classes', given that the

> line separating the former from the dominant sectors is not juxtaposed with class exploitation. Combined and uneven development becomes the terrain which for the first time allows Marxism to render more complex its conception of the nature of social struggles." (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 55-56)

However, Laclau and Mouffe believe that what ultimately occurred under Lenin was, not the potential "democratic" practice of hegemony, but an "authoritarian" practice of hegemony: in order for the struggle to remain within a classist framework, a leader with a tremendous epistemological vantage had to be present. Indeed, only a leader could establish the distinction between the "true struggle" and the "contingent" one. And it is in this intertwining of epistemology and politics that Laclau and Mouffe identify the increasing authoritarian trend of Leninism: the more the struggle was democratic and plural, the more an authoritarian practice of hegemony was necessary in order to impose the "true" interest of the "working class" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 47-71).

It is therefore interesting to see that, for Laclau and Mouffe, Marxism's theoretical inadequacy is not only a burden when it comes to political practice: it actually gives way to an authoritarian style of politics. Hence, it is not surprising that Laclau and Mouffe see Gramsci as their main intellectual influence: Gramsci was, for them, the author that answered the crisis of Marxism by embracing the contingency of the struggle and confining its essentialism to a minimum. For Gramsci, hegemonic blocs should not necessarily be understood in terms of "classes," but rather as complex and organic collective wills. Although, for Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci did not entirely abandon some essentialist premises, he did embrace the fact that the identity of the agents, their interests, their struggle, and their historical direction was not necessarily written.

Therefore, what I described as the "first movement" of Laclau's and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* finishes with a description of what Marxism should do, what is the alternative to Marxism's essentialism. For Laclau and Mouffe, Marxism should fully embrace the contingency of the concept of hegemony. It should stop thinking that the identity of the agents, their struggles, and their direction is somewhat aprioristically written. In other words, it should radically break with the logic of necessity within Marxism and fully embrace the logic of hegemonic contingency.

Now, the second "movement" of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (essentially present in the last chapter) is an argument directed outside of Marxism. It consists in arguing that the Left should fully embrace this hegemonic contingency in order to fight a worrying hegemonic bloc that has recently emerged: the "new right." This new right, for Laclau and Mouffe, essentially consists in neoliberals and conservatives fighting for the dismantlement of the welfare state. In order to face this powerful adversary, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the Left should enter the political arena without essentialism and apriorisms. The Left should form its own hegemonic bloc, and that without aprioristically knowing what kind of alliances it will find there and what kind of direction the struggle will take. In order to articulate the struggle in such a non-aprioristical way, the Left should fully embrace democracy, pluralism, while abandoning the idea of a final revolution. For the post-Marxist authors, democracy should be a kind of "discursive

compass": although one cannot aprioristically know what the political struggle of the Left will be, democracy should be the source of antagonism, the disrupter of social change that leads to increasing struggles for equality in all areas of society.

In the end, and as we can see, these two movements I described, one directed within Marxism and one directed outside of it, always comes down to what, for Laclau and Mouffe, is the crucial crossroad of the Left today. The Left must choose between the old essentialist illusions of Marxism and a Marxism that abandons these illusions. Only then will the Left be able to fight back against the hegemonic new right. The Left should be radical in the sense that it should entirely abandon a priory essentialism when entering the political arena.

Now, the crossroad which Laclau and Mouffe present between essentialism and left postmodernism is really interesting at the level of the political narrative they draw. Indeed, a political narrative usually attempts to demonstrate that, in order to fulfill its purpose and defeat its enemy, the political movement in question must first defeat its internal barriers in order to unleash its full potential. It is, for instance, what Marx did when he said that the workers had to unite in order to vanquish the bourgeoisie. We can see in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: Laclau and Mouffe's political narrative suggests that Marxism should first vanquish the enemy within in order to fight the enemy without. But before addressing some conclusions on Laclau's work (that, as we will see, have implications for its radicalism), it is necessary first to briefly describe another of Laclau's work, written twenty years after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, his work *On Populist Reason*.

On Populist Reason (2005)

Twenty years after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the panorama could not have been more different, both for the world and for Laclau himself. On the one hand, Laclau and Mouffe were very quickly projected at the forefront of the contemporary scene. Although both were very well received by the general public, there is a notable difference in the way numerous scholars reviewed the works of each: Mouffe's project of a radical democracy and her conception of agonistic politics was widely praised, but Laclau's continuation of post-Marxism and hegemony received mixed, sometimes strongly negative, reactions (see also Wenman 2003, Townshend 2004: 275-279). In *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* edited by Mouffe), Richard Rorty saw in Laclau the kind of political jargon that he thought was detrimental to the Left ["an unfortunate over-philosophication of leftist political debate" (Rorty 1996: 71)]. In a strained exchange with Judith Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Butler decided to no longer answer Laclau's arguments because "much of what [Laclau] produces by way of argument is more war tactic than clear argument" (Butler et al. 2000: 271). In this very work, we also saw the first salvo of harsh criticisms between Laclau and Zizek that would lead to their break.

This conflict with Zizek was symbolic of the greater rupture that was more evident at the time, against a Left that was increasingly considered (by authors like

Zizek or Badiou) to be very "negative" in its critique of objectivism, essentialism, and the Enlightenment and not offering anything "positive" in return (El-Ojeili 2015, McLennan 1996, 1999). In the last book he published with Butler and Zizek, Laclau would explicitly enunciate the problem:

> "A (…) criticism (…) which could legitimately be directed at my work is that in the passage from classical Marxism to 'hegemony', and from the latter to 'radical democracy', an enlargement of the addressees of the descriptive/normative project takes place, and that, as a result, a corresponding enlargement of the area of normative argumentation should have followed - while, in my work, this latter enlargement has not sufficiently advanced. In other words, in formulating a political project which addresses the new situation, the descriptive dimension has advanced more rapidly than the normative. I think this is a valid criticism, and I intend to restore the correct balance between the two dimensions in future works." (Butler et al. 2000: 295)

It is in this context that we can better understand the emergence of *On Populist Reason*. This work was published by Laclau in 2005 and attempts to thoroughly reestablish populism as a legitimate theoretical and political tool. Indeed, says Laclau, populism seems to capture something very important about the political, but no one so far has been able to define it very well due to some theoretical inadequacies. For Laclau, attempts to either define populism with a previous definition of populism, or through a previous typology of populist movements, always fail to correctly define populism. In the literature on populism, there is always the attempt to fill populism with a previously existing content (an ideology or a social basis), which in turn reduces what populism actually consists of and creates a myriad of exceptions (Laclau 2005: 3-20).

Laclau, at some point of his work, proposes the following example to better encapsulate what populism is (Laclau 2005: 73-74). Imagine a large mass of agrarian migrants who settles in the shantytowns on the periphery of a developing industrial city. The migrants at some point will begin to have *requests* for the political establishment (problems of health or housing for instance). If the political establishment does not meet those requests, they will accumulate and each unfulfilled request will start being identified with each other on the sole basis of this unfulfillment: the claimants will begin to see each other as linked on the sole basis of an unfulfillment. Now, this lack will be directed against something very concrete, the political establishment. And these demands, at some point, will attempt to give a name to this constitutive unfulfillment. This is where the rhetoric of populism emerges: those with unfulfilled demands will call each other "the people"; they will call the political establishment "the oligarchy" or, well, "the establishment"; and they will fight in the name of what Laclau calls "empty signifiers", that is, concepts such as "justice" or "equality" that mean nothing but the opposite of the situation of unfulfillment in which "the people" finds itself. And this is what, for Laclau, populism is all about: it is this radical antagonistic discourse between a "people" and an "establishment" in the name of concepts that, in fact, are empty. This is why Laclau was so critical of theories of populism that attempted to give it a previously existing content: Laclau believes that populism is

a discourse, a way of articulating the political that is eminently antagonistic. Populism is all about a part of the actual people thinking that they *represent* the *true* people, the fulfilled ones.

> "Here we have, in embryo, a populist configuration. We already have two clear preconditions of populism: (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power; and (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible. There is a third precondition which does not really arise until the political mobilization has reached a higher level: the unification of these various demands - whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of vague solidarity - into a stable system of signification." (Laclau 2005: 74)

Now, of course, I am considerably simplifying Laclau's theory of populism (and, to be sure, this is a simplification he also makes in chapter 5 of *Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005) and also in Butler et al. 2000: 301-305). For instance, this example from Laclau is only illustrative: "the people" or "the oligarchy" will have a variety of different names according to the circumstances. The empty signifiers Laclau addresses are, of course, much more complex. For instance, "equality" is a signifier to which the political establishment will already have ascribed a meaning. There will be, therefore, a struggle between "the people" and "the establishment" in order to attract as many demands as possible on its own side.

Before concluding this second section, I want to argue why Laclau's theory is not simply a political analysis of populism: it actually implies a political program. Indeed, Laclau is very clear when he says that democracy and politics are "at their maximum," so to say, when a populist outbreak emerges. Indeed, for Laclau, to build the political within the establishment, and not in a radical and antagonistic manner, is a way of maintaining social underdogs at the margins of society. However, when a populist outbreak emerges, there is the possibility of radically integrating some of these underdogs. It is a way for these underdogs to be heard.

There is therefore something fundamentally democratic in populism: it intensifies antagonism, which intensifies politics, which in turn intensifies the egalitarian and inclusive potential of democracy. This is why Laclau is so critical simultaneously of "revolutionism" or "reformism": both contribute to attenuate or really kill the political, which in turn reduce its democratic energies. Here, hegemony and populism seem almost to be two faces of the same coin: both are deeply (if not quintessentially) political because, while the former articulates particularities in order to form a hegemonic bloc, the latter has the additional character of dividing society in two camps and further intensifying antagonisms (Arditi 2010).

This explains why Laclau is so strangely uncritical of his own notion of populism. Laclau is quite clear with the notion that "populism is politics," and then leaves the commentators puzzled as to why; in that case, do we still need the term "populism" (cf. Stavrakakis' puzzlement in Stavrakakis 2004: 262-264, Ariditi's potential solution to this problem in Arditi 2010: 492-493). The reason is that, as we saw and will see in the next section, Laclau presents an anti-essentialist narrative of emancipation: more than reaching for the

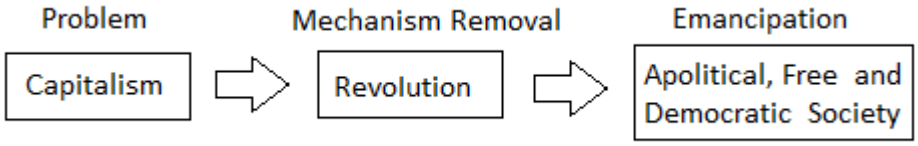
usefulness of the concept of populism, Laclau wishes to offer a new narrative for a new epoch, a contender to replace the now-revoked Marxist metanarrative.

Laclau's Emancipatory Project

I see a narrative of emancipation in opposition to a narrative of accommodation: while the first seek to remove some part of society in order to achieve emancipation, the second attempts to find mechanisms of accommodation with the existing parts. This is one of the essential tensions between a radical and a pragmatic type of politics: while, for the former, no type of compromise is possible with the element separating society from emancipation, the latter sees compromise as desirable and/or a factor of progress.

Laclau's work skillfully plays with these narratives and is able to create the conditions for pluralism by modifying the classical Marxist narrative of emancipation. This classical narrative can be schematized in this way:

Figure 1. *Classical Narrative of Emancipation*



By undermining each of the elements of the classical narrative of emancipation, Laclau is able to gain some distance from it: "capitalism" or "bourgeoisie" are elusive categories that cannot be defined aprioristically; "revolution" is a mean to kill the political and is therefore not desirable; and an apolitical, fully free, and fully democratic society is impossible. What is possible and desirable, however, is the cyclical reintegration of underdogs within society, and this cycle can only be enabled if one presupposes some form of pluralism and political pragmatism: only in this way can a hegemonic operation begins and political antagonism against the establishment intensify.

Now, this is critical to understand what worries Laclau. For the Argentinian philosopher, the times of sweeping revolutions and heavenly utopias have passed: the innocent ages where one could hope for a fully emancipated state of things are no longer present. Nevertheless, and on the other hand, Laclau does not believe that we should fall back on some kind of social-democratic reformism, or any "centrist" form of politics. This, to him, seems to be a way to "play politics as usual," to perform a kind of politics where favors can be exchanged while maintaining the status-quo. If the very definition of a society implies some parts that *are not* part of society (the underdogs), then some mechanism must be found to, if not fully emancipate, at least cyclically reintegrate and generate awareness for these underdogs (this is of course more complex, more details in Laclau 2005: 69-71, Laclau 2007b: 36-46). This is why essentialism is so problematic for Laclau. Fixation and theoretical apriorism be it in the attempt to attain a fulfilled

society or in the preservation of a status-quo, are ways to keep the underdogs at bay, to prevent further emancipatory acts to be played.

Laclau's political theory is therefore very interesting and adapted to today's democratic politics because, on the one hand, it rejects Marxist essentialism by being pluralistic and pragmatic: a full-blown revolution attempting to reconcile society with itself would mean the death of the crucial antagonism necessary for the reintegration of underdogs. However, and on the other hand, Laclau's thought is yet a radicalism because it also rejects another form of essentialism: reformism and the idea that society can be handled in a piecemeal and partial way. This, for Laclau, is just another way to kill the political and stop the cycle of integration of the underdogs. Populism, for Laclau, is a third way between these two forms of essentialism.

> "(…) populist reason — which amounts, as we have seen, to *political* reason *tout court* — breaks with two forms of rationality which herald the end of politics: a total revolutionary event that, bringing about the full reconciliation of society with itself, would make the political moment superfluous, or a mere gradualist practice that reduces politics to administration. Not for nothing was the gradualist motto of Saint-Simon - 'from the government of men to the administration of things' — adopted by Marxism to describe the future condition of a classless society." (Laclau 2005: 225)

As we can see, the Argentinian philosopher is highly successful at keeping pluralism, pragmatism, and radicalism within a same political theory. Now, I would like to see what tensions might emerge from this delicate equilibrium. And a way to do it is by identifying what could be an emancipatory narrative within Laclau: essentialism, be it in the way of a revolution or under the guises of reformism, is the problem for Laclau. Both are ways of killing antagonism, the political, and the integration of underdogs. In other words, what is interesting about Laclau is the way his work can be read as a narrative of emancipation against essentialism.

There are several brief mentions within Laclau's work that brings him closer to such narrative. Toward the end of *Populist Reason*, for instance, he leaves us with this very suggestive idea:

> "Perhaps what is dawning as a possibility in our political experience is something radically different from what postmodern prophets of the 'end of politics' are announcing: the arrival at a *fully political era*, because the dissolution of the marks of certainty does not give the political game any aprioristic necessary terrain but, rather, the possibility of constantly redefining the terrain itself." (Laclau 2005, p. 222; for more on Laclau's idea of an increasingly fragmented world in need of a new political theory: Laclau 2005: 150, Butler et al. 2000: 201-204, 300-301, Laclau 2014a)

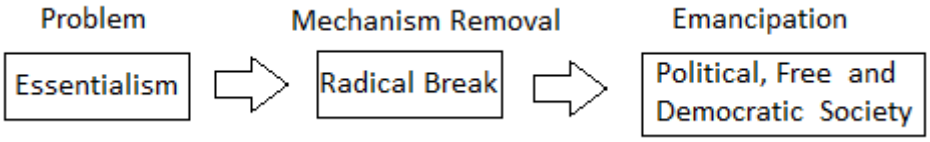
Such interpretation of Laclau becomes stronger when we see his brief references to the concept of freedom: freedom exists in the moments where hegemony is attempted, in the moments of displacement where an impossible object is placed as the fullness of society. This is the "source of whatever freedom can exist in society" (Butler et al. 2000: 79). Another enlightening passage, this time the last paragraph of "Beyond Emancipation":

> "We are today coming to terms with our own finitude and with the political possibilities that it opens. This is the point from which the potentially liberatory discourses of our postmodern age have to start. We can perhaps say that today we are at the end of emancipation and at the beginning of freedom." (cf. also the lengthy explanation of this provocative sentence in the footnote right after it, Laclau 2007a: 18)

Laclau's view on democracy is suggestive. He is quite clear when he says that democracy is *only* present at its purest in moments of profound antagonism, when politics is intensified and underdogs can be reintegrated: "(…) the construction of a 'people' is the *sine qua non* of democratic functioning. Without production of emptiness there is no 'people', no populism, but no democracy either" (Laclau 2005: 169) As Laclau states elsewhere: "The only democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations (…)." (Butler et al. 2000: 86)

Nonetheless, this is not because Laclau's work should be read as an attempt to "create a world" where essentialism would be "abolished" and where "freedom and democracy" would finally reign. This sounds too much like the adversary he is trying to fight. In fact, throughout his work, Laclau carefully avoids following the path of orthodox Marxism. For instance, "freedom" here has little to do with its classical Marxist sense; the increasing of spaces of freedom for Laclau is not a wholly positive experience because it also opens the possibility to the radical renunciation of freedom (totalitarian experiences, for instance). Freedom, in this sense, is "ambiguous." In the same vein, the intensification of antagonism, of politics and, therefore, of democracy, is not a wholly positive experience either. Despite these suggestive quotes, Laclau's political theory cannot be read as an attempt to "abolish" essentialism and as a mere replication of the Marxist classical narrative, but with other categories: "essentialism" instead of "bourgeoisie," a "fully political" instead of a "fully apolitical era," and so on.

Figure 2. *Laclau's Revision of the Classical Narrative of Emancipation*



Freedom and democracy, for Laclau, are the spaces separating one's attempt toward an impossible fullness: their very existence depends on this separation. If both were to be fully realized, they would then cease to exist. (The same also happens with the ethical act that, for Laclau, is *only* present in such moments of striving toward the impossible object: Butler et al. 2000: 81). What is more, there is not for Laclau an "ever-approaching" state toward an object that cannot be ultimately obtained: that would be to presuppose that one has the ultimate concepts identifying what the "best" society would be.

> (…) "at some point, the symbols of *Solidarność* Poland became the symbols of the absent fullness of society. Since society as fullness has no proper meaning beyond the ontic contents that embody it, those contents are, for the subjects attached to them, *all there is*. They are thus not an empirically achievable second best *vis-a-vis* an unattainable ultimate fullness for which we wait in vain. (…) History cannot be conceived therefore as an infinite advance towards an ultimate aim. History is rather a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations that cannot be ordered by a script transcending their contingent historicity." (Laclau 2005: 226; this creates problems noted by Arditi 2010: 496)

There is, however, the possibility of constantly envisioning new forms of democracy and emancipation, an ever-receding totality that never comes (see Butler's description, Butler et al. 2000: 268-271). Populism is precisely one of the privileged terrains where this recession occurs, and this terrain of recession is for Laclau "the very essence of the political," (Laclau 2005: 222) the moment of delay between a politics of full reconciliation and a politics of the status-quo.

Nonetheless, and as Derrida would say, the deconstructor borrows the lexicon of the deconstructed, even if only partially (cf. Derrida 1993: 56). With associating "democracy" and "freedom" to the intensification of politics and the wholesale rejection of essentialism, Laclau does offer a narrative of emancipation where essentialism is the blocking element preventing democracy, freedom, and the integration of the underdogs. What is politically desirable, for Laclau, is present only when essentialism is not. The *ontological purification* of Marxism here emerges: what is politically desirable depends on the lack of an element of society. And this is where, I think, Laclau's pluralism comes in tension with his radicalism.

To be sure, the problem pointed out here is not so much Laclau's rejection of essentialism *per se*: the criticism of the idea that there is a kind of "underlying essence" of society is salutary. The problem is rather the wholesale rejection of it *and everything in between*: Laclau's political solution is allergic to essentialism and any other form of identity-fixation. This kind of pluralism is, to be sure, a better alternative than revolutionism, but it is still problematic because it contains an exclusive rather than inclusive character: an *exclusive* rather than an *inclusive* pluralism; a pluralism that rejects the ideas of its adversaries at the onset. This is problematic because the very idea of pluralism seems to imply that we are open, not only to ideas and solutions from our own sensibilities, but also to anything that might come from elsewhere.

The virtues and vices of Laclau's theory come from his very epistemology. Laclau's use of postmodernism was providential because it was able to free Marxism from its cage of the classical narrative of emancipation. Now, it is this very epistemology that gives to Laclau's political theory an ethnocentric aspect: what is politically desirable for Laclau is possible within his very postmodern framework, but not outside of it (cf. Charles Taylor's remarks on Rorty's ethnocentrism that apply here, Taylor 1994: 221, and cf. a rebuttal in Curtis 2015).

In this closing off within postmodernism, one recalls Richard Rorty when he quoted Heidegger: "A regard to metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics. Therefore our task is to cease all; overcoming and leaving metaphysics to itself" (Rorty 1989: 97, footnote 1). Rorty is well-known for

advocating a strategy of *conceptual starvation*: because the very attempt to overcome essentialism entails some form of essentialism, the solution is to leave essentialism to itself. This strategy, however, ends up generating two problems that we can see in Laclau.

On the one hand, Laclau was very critical of orthodox Marxism and its perpetual attempts to define elusive concepts. However, "essentialism," as much as "class" or "bourgeoisie," is also an elusive concept. There is always some way to see a given theoretical creed as having some form of "essentialism" because, indeed, there is no theory without some form of theoretical apriorism, fixation, rigidity, and so on. To be sure, what I am arguing here is not that essentialism is a *necessary condition* for theorization but, rather, that an "anti-essentialist" can keep on identifying the existence of some "essentialism" in any discourse because, indeed, any discourse does presuppose some form of theoretical rigidity and apriorism. This problem is exemplified in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, where Butler, Laclau, and Zizek accuse each other of different forms of "apriorism" or "Kantianism," while each makes his case for his own form of non-essentialist theory.

On the other hand, the attempt to conceptually *starve* essentialism and, in the case of Laclau, to create forms of politics where essentialism is rejected seems to close off an important debate instead of solving it. As Alasdair MacIntyre soberly noticed: "(…) to follow Rorty and Derrida into entirely new kinds of writing would be to abandon the debate from which the abandonment of debate would derive its point. So there is a constant return to the debate by those who still aspire to discover an idiom, at once apt for negative philosophical purposes in refuting metaphysical opponents, but itself finally disentangled from all and any metaphysical implications" (MacIntyre 1990: 55).

It is also interesting to notice that this breaking away from essentialism takes, above all, the character of a *reversal*. Indeed, classical Marxism was seen as dogmatic when it claimed to have the key to understand what the essence of society was. Now, Laclau *reverses* this position when he argues that there is no essence of the social. In this way, he radically departs from any attempt to theoretically create bridges that could undertake an inclusive pluralism. Of course, arguing that one detains the key to fully understand society is a good way to crush the undesirable parts of society. But should pluralism be taken for granted at the moment one claims that there is no such key?

Concluding, and as Derrida would say, "(…) ce qui reste aussi irréductible à toute déconstruction, ce qui demeure aussi indéconstructible que la possibilité même de la déconstruction, c'est peut-être une certaine expérience de la promesse émancipatoire (…)" (Derrida 1993: 102). In Derridean terms, one could conversely say that, as long as the experience of emancipation remains, it relies on a certain experience of accommodation: a side of the debate that keeps on appealing to more and more inclusive forms of pluralism and of conversation. This, we could say, is the cat-and-rat game between narratives of emancipation and narratives of accommodation: while the first attempts to create new forms of emancipation escaping its older and "naïve" counterparts, the latter strives to catch up and asks for more from this new form of emancipation. In an "Age of

Pluralism," (Tully 1994) an era where the idea of revolution seems to be out of fashion, pluralism becomes more demanding: it asks to be more inclusive than ever.

Conclusions

Since the first time this article began to be penned (2016) until the moment of its publication (2019), the relevance of Laclau for the contemporary scene has only increased. There are no doubts that Laclau's notion of populism had a profound impact in the study of populism (Katsambekis 2016: 391, Stavrakaki 2004: 257-258) and gave rise to an enlightening framework for analysis (such as the analysis of Syriza in Katsambekis 2016) and even real world applications (cf. the case of Podemos: Kioupkiolis 2016, Errejón and Mouffe 2016). The application of Laclau's ideas to the recent American situation and Trump's articulation of the "underdogs" of globalization within his populist chain of equivalence will also be a fruitful ground of analysis. Mouffe already noticed this problem of France's far-right "articulating" the votes of the workers (Mouffe 2014), something Laclau related to his own theory of populism many years before in *Populist Reason*.

Also very relevant is the increasing critiques within the Left against an allegedly "socially weightless" (McNay 2014) and "negative" (El-Ojeili 2015) way of thinking society that is often ascribed to Laclau and Mouffe. Rorty's critique of the "postmodern Left" as a "spectatorial left" that forgot to think capitalism and its traditional themes runs high today [a criticism implicit in Zizek's and Badiou's attempts to "relaunch" communism (Douzinas and Žižek 2010)].

Independently of the outcome of these struggles, it is quite clear that Laclau is one of the main representatives of this anti-essentialist Left. If the Marxist metanarrative is indeed deceased and no longer inspire, the Left might have to resign itself to think politics through the lenses of Laclau and the postmodern Left. Maybe this was what Laclau meant when he said that the Left needed a new social imaginary that would replace the old Marxist one (Butler et al. 2000: 306): not simply that the Left needed to build a new social imaginary, but that it should accept Laclau's anti-essentialist metanarrative as this new social imaginary. More than seeing the Left, proliferating the creation of particular struggles with new antagonistic frontiers, maybe Laclau wanted the Left to adopt the anti-essentialism frontier as the frontier above all the others. More than seeing the victory of this or that particular struggle, Laclau might have projected in the future the possible victory of his anti-essentialist philosophy. This would explain why he mysteriously said in his last interview that "[m]y work is for all eternity" (Laclau 2014b).

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