

# On this Side of the Frontier: Hegemony, Populism and Pluralism<sup>1</sup>

## A este lado de la frontera: Hegemonía, Populismo y Pluralismo

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Recibido: 15-02-2023

Aceptado: 31-05-2023

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of the Research Project «La contemporaneidad clásica y su dislocación: de Weber a Foucault» (PID2020-113413RB-C31) of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. We are particularly grateful to the reviewers for their comments and observations, which helped to improve our text.

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## Abstract

This paper poses the following questions: What is pluralistic hegemony? Which are its defining features? Can populism be seen to possess them? We draw on Laclau's thought to examine whether antagonism and "the name of the leader" as an empty signifier are incompatible with pluralism. With reference to various different perspectives regarding the relationship between pluralism, hegemony and populism, we present our own particular understanding. Our conceptualization distances itself from the notion that pluralism involves an endless proliferation of difference and the agonistic view that seeks to sublimate antagonism, and also from Laclau's "the name of the leader" as an archetypal signifier of populism. Rather than the political frontier being the antithesis of pluralism, we see it as its precondition, with the empty signifier not representing a problem in itself, except when its name is pre-given. We perceive pluralism as being open to contingency, as a logic of the production and flow of differences.

**Keywords:** Pluralism, Populism, Hegemony, Political Frontier, Laclau.

## Resumen

Este artículo se pregunta qué es una hegemonía pluralista, cuáles son sus características y si el populismo puede cumplirlas o no. El texto parte de la reflexión de Laclau para analizar si el antagonismo y el Nombre del Líder como significante vacío chocan con el pluralismo. En diálogo con distintas posiciones sobre la relación entre pluralismo, hegemonía y populismo, el artículo va fijando una conceptualización propia sobre ese problema. Ésta se aleja de la asimilación del pluralismo a una proliferación infinita de diferencias; de la visión agonista, que busca sublimar el antagonismo; y también de la noción laclausiana del Nombre del Líder como significante arquetípico del populismo. Para nosotros, la frontera política es un requisito y no la negación del pluralismo, y el significante vacío no representa un problema en sí, salvo cuando puede anticiparse su nombre, pues entendemos el pluralismo como una lógica de producción y circulación de diferencias, abierta a la contingencia.

**Palabras-clave:** Pluralismo, Populismo, Hegemonía, Frontera Política, Laclau.

## Introduction

Historically, the debate around populism has taken place in two different terrains: the theoretical and that of everyday political struggle. This debate has become markedly more intense in recent years, ever since the publication

of Ernesto Laclau's 2005 book, *On Populist Reason*, at the height of the so-called third wave of populism, which began with Chávez in 1999 and continued in Ecuador with Correism, in Bolivia with the MAS and in Argentina with Kirchnerism.

The traditional mistrust of populism – as an anomaly for liberal democracy and institutionalism – has reappeared in both spheres. While on the theoretical level, various readings of Laclau have highlighted how a Jacobin turn took place between *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985; hereafter H&SS) and *On Populist Reason* (2005; hereafter OPR), in the political arena many accounts have described the trajectory of, and in particular the end of, Chavism and Correism, and also of Evo Morales' presidency in Bolivia, as *proof* that populism is no more than a form of illiberal democracy and, as such, is both anti-democratic and authoritarian.

This paper begins by acknowledging the problematic yet highly relevant distinction between theoretical discourse and the discursive aspect of the political game. In doing so, it positions itself within the former while at the same time recognizing that theoretical discourse has implications for and effects on political discourse, in particular when it comes to providing the conceptual tools with which to understand it. Hence, we ask the following questions: What is pluralistic hegemony? What are its conditions and its defining features, and can populism be seen to possess these or, rather, is it antithetical to them? To this end, the paper focuses on Laclau's post-structuralist and post-Marxist thought, paying particular attention to the journey this takes between *H&SS* and *OPR*. More specifically, we examine Laclau's theory of the empty signifier and its implications for the relationship between articulator and articulated, considering this to be where the problem with the relationship between hegemony, pluralism and populism largely lies.

Our reflections in this paper are also guided by the following questions: Is pluralism synonymous with the proliferation of difference or does it require a certain degree of homogeneity? Is exclusion incompatible with pluralism or, rather, is it its precondition? If hegemony implies that one part of society can represent the communitarian whole, can it be pluralistic? Does Laclau's concept of the name of the leader as an empty signifier suggest a reduction in pluralism? Is populism the only *threat* to pluralistic hegemony?

In seeking to answer these questions, we take as our starting point an analysis of the classic text by Portantiero and De Ípola (1981). Analysing their main concerns and challenging some of their key assumptions will enable us to set out our own arguments. Thereafter, we examine the course that the relationship between populism, hegemony and pluralism takes over the twenty years between *H&SS* and *OPR*. Based on our reading of this, we engage with a second text, by Sebastián Barros, which also examines the

relationship between pluralism and populism in Laclau's writing. Finally, we present our concluding remarks, highlighting our criticism on the potential avenues for the pursuit of a reconciled society (populist *or not*) and, hence, for the reduction of pluralism.

### Portantiero and De Ípola's critique

Portantiero and De Ípola's 1981 paper can be considered the first to have introduced the question of the tension between populism, hegemony, and pluralism. Within the wide-ranging and long-standing debate on populism and democracy (Germani 1962; Di Tella 1965; Murmis and Portantiero 1987; Laclau 1977; Ionescu and Gellner, 1969), the paper specifically locates itself in the terrain of Gramscian hegemony, with a view to discussing the theory of another of Gramsci's readers in Argentina, Ernesto Laclau.

Portantiero and De Ípola point out how "[t]he single contention contained in the[ir] observations", according to which "ideologically and politically there is rupture, not continuity, between populism and socialism" (1981: 8; authors' translation), is at odds with Laclau's own position (1977: 231), which is that for socialism to come about it has first to pass through populism. Ultimately, Portantiero and De Ípola's argument was about the relationship between Peronism and the left, within a context particularly marked by the convergence of the two in the 1970s. Although they saw classical Peronism as a forward step in terms of social justice, they did not consider it a forerunner of what was, for them, a form of socialism yet to be realized. Laclau, meanwhile, viewed populism and socialism as on a continuum.

Portantiero and De Ípola describe the discontinuity between socialism and populism in terms of the former challenging the principle of domination and the latter limiting its critique to the dominant historical bloc ("the oligarchy") without calling into question the principle of power itself. Moreover, populism for them reinforces the principle of domination because the transformation it fosters happens within the established order, resulting in the fetishization of the State in the form of a charismatic leader. This leader has "the decisive word" (Portantiero and De Ípola 1981: 14; authors' translation), subordinating the masses who follow him or her and quelling any demands coming "from below". For Portantiero and De Ípola, this organicist hegemony is not a pragmatic deviation from populism but rather the comprehensive implementation of its ideology<sup>4</sup>; therefore, they

<sup>4</sup> "Populism constitutes the people as a subject on the basis of organicist premises that reify them in the State and deny their pluralistic deployment, transforming the existing differences within them

consider it important to take as their starting point actual historical cases rather than an abstract concept<sup>5</sup>.

Relevant to the questions this paper sets out to answer are both Portantiero and De Ípola's concern with pluralistic hegemony and their emphasis on "actually existing populisms", albeit for reasons different to those they themselves give. The two issues are interrelated. While for these scholars organicist hegemony is inherent to populism and it is necessary to study "actually existing populisms" rather than focusing solely on the *concept*, we posit that populism is only part of the problem. Hence, in order to fully examine populism, it is important to differentiate between the ontological and ontic dimensions of the political<sup>6</sup>.

Following Laclau and Mouffe in *H&SS*, on the ontological level "pluralistic hegemony" is, for us, a pleonasm. Since all identity is relational, contingent and unstable, making totality is impossible (although necessary). What reigns is dislocation, in the sense both of a deficiency that hinders the suturing of the social fabric and of an occurrence that alters the precarious stability of the established order. However, on the ontic level, hegemony has not always been, nor is it necessarily, pluralistic. Since the political is reconstituted on the ontic level, where social perceptions determine what is and what is not significant, hegemony can present as non pluralistic and with *hegemonistic* pretensions, that is to say, as an essential content that pretends the community suture, and not as formal logic capable of producing diverse senses in an opposite relation to what denies herself (hegemony)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, for Laclau the political comes about through dislocation, but what it actually desires is fullness, that is, to achieve, or at least to promise, the closure of

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into frontal opposition, splitting the popular camp on the basis of the distinction between 'friend' and 'enemy'". (Portantiero and De Ípola 1981: 8; authors' translation).

<sup>5</sup> As will be seen later in this paper, Laclau takes the reverse route here, from the ontological to the ontic, from abstract concept to historical cases. Portantiero and De Ípola compared "actually existing" populisms with a socialism that was still a work-in-progress (1981: 16-17). In the same way, Germani (1962: 234-238, 251) contrasted the substitute of participation that is characteristic of totalitarianism – and Peronism – with genuine democratic participation, of the kind which at that time was in crisis, globally, due to bureaucratization, and had not actually existed in Argentina since 1930.

<sup>6</sup> Ontic here refers to the historical substance of social life (institutions, actors, struggles, imaginaries, actions), while the ontological is the formal logics of the political that produce this substance. This distinction between the two is not categorical or dichotomous; rather, they are both hybrids. Thus, the political produces the social, which, within the essentialism of the Western canon, is unlikely to reveal its political nature as constructed or contingent (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: chapter 3; Laclau 1990; Laclau 2005: chapter 4).

<sup>7</sup> "Hegemonism is, strictly, the pretension of an impossible. While the notion of hegemony refers us to the logic of constitution of any political solidarities space through de universalization of a particular that represents a wider space than himself, hegemonism is a particular type of hegemonic articulation that pretends the closure of any political differences space at the interior of the community. We say that this (hegemonism) is an infeasible pretension because the conformation of any identity is relational and requires de constitution (establishment, foundation) of limits (boundaries)" (Aboy Carlés 2005: 136; translated by the authors).

this constitutive rupture in every society. Ultimately, the political undertakes to produce order, not *a single* contingent, unstable, precarious order that is laid open to that which threatens it (1990: 60-61, 77-78). For this reason, Portantiero and de Ípola's reference to "the actually existing populism" is key here since it draws attention to the issue of the ontic reconstitution of the ontological logics of the political<sup>8</sup>.

While Portantiero and De Ípola were concerned with organicist hegemony as a *natural* derivation of populism, we are concerned more generally with *any* reconstitution of the political order that seeks to reconcile society, or a political identity, with itself around a single, self-evident, universal, indisputable meaning, one that is not open to interpretation and comes from an authority that has certain and conclusive knowledge<sup>9</sup>. This authority can transcend society (Nature, God, Reason, Universal History, Natural Rights) or be inherent in it (Institutions, the Vanguard, the Law, the Party, Humanity, Class, the Nation, the People, the Leader), and thus give rise to hegemonism, which is consistent with what we refer to as depoliticization, since they both aim to shut down the contingent metonymical logic of hegemony itself and bring an end to the struggle for meaning. In effect, deriving what-ought-to-be from that which is essential, eternal and immutable has historically been the trademark of the Western tradition, to the extent that the Gramscian notion of hegemony itself has, by necessity, been stripped of its (economic) base, a task successfully carried out by Laclau and Mouffe in *H&SS* (2001: viii, 101, 216-217).

## Pluralism and hegemony In *On Populist Reason*

A key difference between *H&SS* and *OPR* regarding their constitution of political identities is that in the former the (tendentially) empty signifier appears as the element that, thanks to a radical investment, carries out an equivalential articulation of heterogeneous demands that is crystallized in a

<sup>8</sup> In our analysis, "actually existing" does not mean an *awareness* of the *truly important dimensions* of the political order, such as deeds versus words, practice versus theory and public policy versus discourse. Furthermore, the "actually existing" is not self-evident but rather an object of study and, as such, a construction. Not because it is concrete or historically objectified, the ontic ceases to be an interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> Portantiero and De Ípola's view of organicism and leadership is anchored in a liberal perspective which sees abuse of power as that which threatens both the separation of powers between the executive and the legislative, and the distinction between civil society and the State. This view is also underpinned by the Gramscian notion of the autonomy of the working class, perceived as a set of objective interests. Both viewpoints are, of course, valid. Nevertheless, they tend to give rise to *ad hoc* questions about populism, as if this were the only thing capable of posing a threat to pluralism. In other words, Portantiero and De Ípola's view ponders those types of power that have traditionally been in conflict with liberal democracy, but not the "liberal" totalizing forms: private powers, counter-majoritarian devices and universalism, among others.

new popular identity. This concept was, in fact, introduced by Laclau in 1996, in “Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?” (hereafter WESMP), after first being alluded to in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990: 95; hereafter NR).

The empty signifier can be viewed as a logical development of the theory of hegemony found in *H&SS*: if everything that exists does so because of articulation and nomination, it must, in turn, have a name. In other words, it is not possible for something to exist and not have a name because the name retrospectively constitutes it. In *H&SS*, Laclau and Mouffe maintain that the identity of a discursive formation is expressed via any of the links in an equivalential chain, since their mutual links express that which places them in opposition to a constitutive outside. Nevertheless, the idea of “something identical underlying ... all [differences]” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 127) does not appear to be consistent with Laclau’s concept of signification, because it would make every demand an empty signifier, with a concomitant loss of plurality, since they would all be tendentially de-particularized. In addition, it would cancel out the particularizing effect of the nomination itself and, therefore, of the named formation, which is not simply another internal difference of the system of signification but rather the name of its boundary, that which all the internal differences have in common and which enables their very existence. Ultimately, the very appearance of the empty signifier – which in not corresponding to *one single* meaning subverts the sign – proclaims its function: to signify impossible totality, absent fullness, the limit of meaning.

The above elaborations on the empty signifier are explicitly formulated in WESMP. In this text, Laclau holds that if there is (impossible) totality then there is a name, and this does not negate its overdetermined nature. Furthermore, (impossible) totality does not exist *in spite* of the empty signifier; the latter is part of the former, originating with, and being produced alongside, it. What runs counter to overdetermination is the apriorism of any structural determination or determination “in the last instance”, which entails a self-regulated structure. In contrast, the guarantee of plurality lies in the fact that it tendentially “divests itself of its particularity”, in other words, it does not impose its difference on other differences. The existence of a single demand that represents the wider set cannot imply a problem for pluralism, because otherwise the notion of one part representing the whole would also be a problem. What happens is that the hybrid nature of the empty signifier (Barros 2018: 25, 27-28), as the expression of a plurality that cannot be other than particular, signals a certain way of thinking about pluralism that does not reduce it to an endless proliferation of difference. The empty signifier informs us that pluralism is, paradoxically, not *one* but many, depending on how it is constituted in each individual community<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> In addition – following Laclau and Mouffe (2001: chapter 3) – we perceive that negativity has

Following on from this, for us the issue with the relationship between hegemony and pluralism does not lie in the articulation of the empty signifier with regard to the articulated totality but in how this articulation comes about. This issue is analogous to that which Laclau and Mouffe outline in *H&SS* regarding dialectics: although dialectics entails movement, this can be controlled either by contingency or by necessity, in the form of teleology, depending on how it is conceived. To consider that the relation between opposites leaves the outcome open is not the same as presenting it in the form of the cunning of reason, as an internal moment of teleological realization of one of its elements. Laclau and Mouffe reject the latter notion. The logic of articulation framed by them in *H&SS*, according to which – as previously mentioned – any demand can express an equivalential chain, points to an open relationship between its constituent moments that is neither a priori nor necessary. For us, the problem with this notion lies elsewhere, in its *excessive* openness and lack of distinction, as if the struggle for hegemony took place in an absence of sedimentation.

In WESMP, Laclau develops the idea of the empty signifier, retaining its openness and contingency but reframing the indeterminacy it was given in *H&SS*. In this text, what determines what the hegemonic signifier *is* is not an a priori ontological trait but rather its sedimentation, which produces a differentiation between demands in terms of its historical ontic meaning (1996: 80-82).

In keeping with his previous line of thought, in *OPR* Laclau holds that the empty signifier can be an image, a name or a word (2005: 125) because there is nothing in the materiality of a demand that predetermines it to function as a totality (2005: 146). At the same time, however, and differently from in WESMP, he states that an identity is a singularity and that “the extreme form of singularity is an individuality”, leading him to assert: “the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality – and here I agree with Freud – is inherent to the formation of a ‘people’” (2005: 130).

Laclau establishes a similar tension by maintaining that the role of leadership derives from something in the equivalential link (2005: 129) and that it is often not the significant (populist) totality *per se* that produces the leader, but rather the fracture of the inherent institutional mechanisms of heterogeneous unity (2005: 130). In other words, it is the withdrawal of the institutionalist logic of difference that leads to an organic crisis, which in turn enables the name of the leader to be the empty signifier of a more extended equivalential chain (2005: 130).

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a tendency towards plurality, at least ontologically. Indeed, if what unites us is that which negates us, it can be surmised that both the articulated and its constitutive outside are diverse and heterogeneous. Negativity implies both diversity and frontier.



This conceptualization of the name of the leader itself creates two tensions, one between the social productivity of a name<sup>11</sup> (or of names/signifiers) and the name of the leader as an archetypal empty signifier, and another regarding the relationship between the logics of difference and equivalence and “individuality” as an inherent trait of the symbolic unification of the group. These two tensions encapsulate a number of issues.

Firstly, the name of the leader appears as a kind of privileged, archetypal empty signifier – the ultimate signifier – on account no longer of its sedimentation, as in WESMP, but rather of its ontology<sup>12</sup>, and therefore individuality emerges as the ultimate form of singularity. This, however, is inconsistent with Laclau’s notion that the empty signifier is neither literal nor descriptive-conceptual but performative<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, if it is not literal, there is no reason why “the individuality” of the leader would be the most appropriate (or most “extreme”) way in which to express the particularity of the group. Why not a different name (for example, “social justice” or “order”)? Furthermore why would the symbolic unity of the group around the leader be “inherent” to the formation of “a people”?

The ontological specificity of the name of the leader as a privileged empty signifier is not confined to populism as *a form* of hegemony; for Laclau, in *OPR*, populism equates to both politics and hegemony (2005: 33, 195; 2009: 69; Arditì 2010: 5; Melo and Aboy Carlés 2015: 412; Franzé 2021: 24). The corollary of this would, therefore, be that without the name of the leader there would be neither politics nor a people, or that they would exist in a reduced form in comparison with populism. The empty signifier of the title of WESMP – and also as mentioned in *H&SS*, albeit in undeveloped form – would, in fact, no longer matter *to politics*, but it would matter to populism, as a privileged

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<sup>11</sup> “The unity of the equivalential ensemble of the irreducibly new collective will in which particular equivalences crystallize, depends entirely on the social productivity of a name. That productivity derives exclusively from the operation of the name as a pure signifier – that is to say not expressing any conceptual unity that precedes it (as would be the case if we had adopted a descriptivist perspective)” (Laclau 2005: 139).

<sup>12</sup> For Laclau and Mouffe, the ontological dimension, understood as the political that produces the ontic dimension – the social – comprises a number of formal logics and traits: dislocation, perceived as a deficiency that hinders the suturing of the social and links it to its constitutive outside, that which negates it; logics of equivalence and difference; articulation; will to power, which, by means of articulation and disarticulation, produces meaning; identification and disidentification; decision; subject positions; and undecidability, lack of substance, radical contingency. Unlike Laclau, we believe that politics is not merely the subversion of sedimentation, since formal logics and mechanisms can equally serve reproduction. Furthermore, if that which is ontological is formal, it is incapable of producing an a priori meaning. Hence, it is dispersion rather than pluralism, because the latter is an order (ontic). What we have on the ontological level is the Real, comprising elements that, in any event, can be considered the raw material out of which Reality can be constructed, that is, for their (contingent) configuration as moments (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: chapter 3; Laclau 1990; Laclau 2005: chapter 4).

<sup>13</sup> This is aptly illustrated by Laclau’s example of the trade union’s ability to consolidate struggles that are not directly related to its organizational mandate (2005: 141).

form of politics *tout court*. For all that, the name of the leader as an empty signifier in *OPR*, with regard to the totality that it articulates, is pre-given, its effect being similar to that of dialectical closure in the classical Marxist tradition, which is critiqued by Laclau and Mouffe in *H&SS* with reference to “an a priori transition” (2001: 95).

It is worth emphasizing how the signifiers themselves are subject to overdetermination and co-constitution during the process of articulation. These are not given traits, not even through sedimentation, although the latter plays a key role. Fluidity and resignification target the signifiers *as well as the signified*. Both elements become moments and are overdetermined as such, not before but through the relation itself. Nothing precedes articulation, nor do facts exist without language. If something is pre-given, articulation not only is reduced, it loses its ontological status.

In addition, in asserting that the name of the leader ends up being the empty signifier of populism, Laclau privileges empirics in a way that does not coincide with the overall focus of his oeuvre, which is ontological in nature. In their founding text in this area, Laclau and Mouffe ruled out empirics as the primary terrain of the formation of identities and discourses in general: “A discursive formation is not unified either in the logical coherence of its elements, or in the a priori of a transcendental subject, or in a meaning-giving subject a la Husserl, *or in the unity of an experience*. The type of coherence we attribute to a discursive formation is – with the differences we will indicate later – close to that which characterizes the concept of ‘discursive formation’ formulated by Foucault: regularity in dispersion” (2001: 105; added emphasis).

In line with Foucault, and with other concepts as articulation and sedimentation (Husserl), Laclau and Mouffe asserted the radical contingency of this regularity, its constructed nature. Hence the question is: what theoretical relevance in the understanding of ontological logics can a trait drawn from empirics acquire or, in other words, how can the mere repetition of an experience give rise to a specific ontological function? Furthermore, why is it considered pertinent to analyse the historical repetition of a signifier *as if its meaning had always been the same*? Even if this leap from empirics to the ontological level were justified, the question would immediately arise as to why *only* the name of the leader is discussed in this content and not other equally repeated empty signifiers, especially those found in the history of populist processes (for example, “social justice”, “anti-imperialism” and “the people”). In any case, the very notion of “repetition” makes no sense to us, especially if it is included in the concept of the political. Hence, Laclau’s analysis deals with either the literal character of the signifier, or its essentialization.

This leads us to a further problem. In stating that “the social only exists as a partial effort for constructing society – that is, an objective and closed system

of differences – antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social” (2001: 125), Laclau and Mouffe draw attention to a key issue: how the ontological is likely to be reconstituted in the ontic.

On the ontic level, identities and antagonisms are generally reconstituted and self-understood alternately or simultaneously, in Western tradition, as one of two forms: real opposition, both objective and measurable, and logical contradiction between different concepts (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 122-123). In NR, as previously mentioned, Laclau goes further in stating that the form of this reconstitution is its desire for fullness. Hence, the ontological is negated on the ontic level. However, in *OPR* Laclau does not tackle this issue, thus leaving open –in our opinion– the possibility of accepting that populism, especially in its simple representation of political logic, does in fact adopt the ontological contingency of the political on the ontic level<sup>14</sup>.

In the case of the name of the leader as an “actually existing” empty signifier, this reconstitution negates the very feature of its logic that guarantees plurality: the tendency to empty itself of any particular meaning. Indeed, the name of the leader is perceived here as the fundamental nucleus of an Us, as the “conductor” with whom to relate vertically, on the basis of loyalty. This is not particular to populism: even when it professes to be pluralistic and democratic, politics in general has a tendency to present itself as an expression of the requirements of the established order rather than as a contingent outcome. The question here is whether the desire for fullness highlighted by Laclau in NR is an ontological trait of the logic of the political or the outcome of a tradition such as that of the West, whose dominant characteristic is the essentialist deduction of what-ought-to-be from what is, conceived as a unified totality endowed with inherent meaning. In contrast to Laclau, we believe it is the latter. We conceive of depoliticization as a historical trait, rather than as constituting the political.

In any case, it is paradoxical that Laclau links empirics and ontological thought in conceiving of the name of the leader as an empty signifier while at the same time neglecting the ontic reconstitution of the ontological dimension.

## Space, expression and the existence of difference: Sebastián Barros

Sebastián Barros’ 2018 paper, “Polarización y pluralismo en la teoría de la hegemonía de Ernesto Laclau” [Polarization and pluralism in Ernesto Laclau’s theory of hegemony], is relevant to our approach to the relationship between

<sup>14</sup> Be that as it may, we consider it important to give an account of the logic of the ontological constitution of the general concept of *political identity*, and also of how the latter is processed on the ontic level in reference to historical cases, to “actually existing” *particular identities*.

pluralism and populism regarding our focus on how articulation comes about rather than on how the articulated has a tendentially empty signifier. Barros does not perceive a Jacobin turn between *H&SS*' radical pluralistic democracy and *OPR*'s populism. He sees the reduction of "plurality" as unconnected with populism or the empty signifier and, instead, as being the result of polarization and representation. In fact, Barros holds that, on the one hand, the theory of hegemony has a tendency towards polarization and that populism is nothing other than the highest form of politics, while on the other, every representation partially subverts that which it represents. In addition, for Barros the logics of difference and of equivalence do not take pluralism into account, considering only the link between differences on the grounds of self-interest, which can give rise to "messianic or Jacobin" closure (2018: 27; authors' translation). In our view, there is no reason why "Jacobin" should be completely consistent with the "self-serving" nature of the articulated difference, since that which it articulates, in spite of its tendency towards de-particularization, is also of interest. Thus, "Jacobin closure" is for the benefit of not only the ensemble but also that which it articulates.

In contrast to his own thinking, Barros considers Laclau's critique of pluralism to be "normative"<sup>15</sup>. However, Barros himself differentiates between four degrees of heterogeneity in Laclau's theory, maintaining that "our focus as analysts must be the precision with which the dynamic between differences in an articulatory practice operates" (2018: 29; authors' translation).

For Barros, polarization is an intensification of the link between the articulator and the articulated, and not a reduction of differences. Not only does polarization not affect pluralism, the latter is a precondition for the former: "if there are no pluralistic differences, there will be nothing to unite, and, since unifying closure is never complete, differences will persist" (2018: 21; authors' translation). Furthermore, Barros asserts that the greater the extension, the greater the quantity of articulated differences. The equivalential chain becomes stronger rather than shorter. The differences do not disappear, they simply move around.

Barros considers it both pertinent and interesting "to pay attention to the tension produced within these [articulatory] practices ... because that is where the authority is at play that determines the type of unity the social bond acquires" (2018: 24; authors' translation). Furthermore, for Barros "the specific form of populist representation lies in the exercise of power" not by an absolute leader, "but through the operation of this tension between differences within an articulatory practice" (2018: 24; authors' translation), which can take many different forms.

We share Barros' concern with *how* the articulation between differences

<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Barros disagrees with both De Ípola (2009) and Melo and Aboy Carlés (2014).

and the empty signifier *within* the equivalential chain takes place, precisely because we see this as being *analytic* rather than normative, as facilitating an understanding of the relationship between (populist) hegemony and pluralism.

Even if, as Barros maintains, Laclau's work does not have as its focus, and does not even present a normative approach to, the logic of pluralism, it nevertheless provides pointers for its analytical understanding. Although Laclau analyses the dynamic of demands in terms of their position in a discursive formation, this position also has qualitative implications for the general, rather than the specific, content of a demand. In other words, not all positions produce the same results in the process of the construction of a sense of identity. For instance, regarding the difference between democratic and popular demands, the position of the former in a system of difference implies that their content is consistent with that of the discursive formation of a community, while the opposite is the case with popular demands. There is also a difference between the initial equivalential link of popular demands, that of vague solidarity, and their moment of articulation as a populist people by virtue of the empty signifier, when the demands become a relatively unified political identity. A democratic demand is differentially absorbed by the system, rendering it non-antagonistic to power, and the same could be said about the empty signifier, the position of which cannot be separated from its tendency towards de-particularization. It is also worth mentioning that any demand has both universal and particular components, the relative weights of which vary depending on whether the demand is articulated differentially or equivalentially. Finally, it must be noted that the only way to represent a totality is by being part of it: the metonymical logic of identity.

Something similar can be seen in Barros' analysis. In stating that "although it is possible to normatively critique the *space left open for the expression of difference*, we cannot argue that articulated differences cease to operate as such" (2018: 29; authors' translation and emphasis), Barros suggests that this distance, understood as space and as degree of separation between the articulated and the articulator –that is: the intensity of this link– is of importance to pluralism. Hence, the position that difference occupies is not merely an organizing node in an equivalential chain or a system of difference; it is essential to the existence of difference itself. It is not a normative representation, because it compromises the very existence of difference itself. If this is the case, the second part of Barros' claim, that every articulated difference continues existing and expressing itself as such, cannot be accurate. Furthermore, the notion that polarization has no effect on the multiplicity of differences can be critiqued: for considering differences to be essentialized, as if the only thing polarization changed were a position and not its content; as if a chain were a juxtaposition of pre-existing differences and/or a demand were articulated by a discourse and lacked the

ability to articulate a discourse by itself; and, finally, as if a demand *pre-existed* its articulation (intensively and extensively), a notion that is at variance with the definition of articulation in *H&SS*.

That said, Barros does not make explicit what he understands by “space” [espacio] between the articulator and the articulated, or by “expression of difference” [expresión de la diferencia]. In our view, the relationship between hegemony and pluralism is linked to the ontological and ontic contingency of the process of signification, that is, to the ever-present possibility of articulating with other demands, equivalentially and/or differentially, so as to co-produce meaning, concerning both Us and the Other, and also the self. Space and distance are related to autonomy, not in terms of the freedom to express something already constituted, but as the possibility of being through an open and endless process of articulation. What is a difference if it cannot be expressed except when articulated by a discourse? How then would it even have any meaning as a difference? Barros asserts that this level, that of heterogeneous equivalence, is “key to the analysis of any identification” (2018: 29; authors’ translation). This use of “analysis” rather than “evaluation” confirms what we suspected, that Barros is operating here on the descriptive rather than the normative level.

For us, the argument that an articulated demand does not cease to be a difference is valid on the ontological level, but not on the ontic. Key to examining on the ontic level whether a difference persists as such is how the process of articulation occurs and the conditions in which the difference develops. It is on the ontic level that differences, but not necessarily pluralism, can exist, since the latter consists of a logic of the *constitution* of identities through articulation, in a social bond, *a single* order. As such, the remaining difference, that which can always be found on the ontic level by virtue of the mere presence of a demand, even when this is repressed by institutions – in their widest sense, of order and of legitimized, ritualized practices – is not sufficient. The example of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics cited by Barros himself illustrates this point: the differences appear in the name itself, and although the secession of any of the republics was legally possible, this possibility was, in terms of Barros’ distance between the articulator and the articulated, practically non-existent. Secession was no more than a mere presence in the discourse of a monolithic centralist party installed in a totalitarian State, with which – for the purposes of its administration – it had to overlap *as an exclusive guarantee of those differences*. Another way in which non-pluralistic difference exists can be seen in the case of the discourse of the Montoneros within the Peronist movement in 1973-1974, as their voice gained legitimacy only at the expense of becoming the legitimate representative of another discourse, that of the leader, Perón. If a demand can exist only as part of another demand that incorporates and legitimizes it, Barros’ “space” is reduced, and pluralism along with it. In

this regard, when a difference or a demand is acknowledged and affects the construction of the collective – the signification of an Us in opposition to the Other – it can be seen to form part of a pluralistic logic, as defined by Barros. However, for Barros, this is normative because of the self-serving nature of logics.

Although we agree with Barros that every representation shapes that which it represents, it is important to add that – following Laclau – the reverse process is also true. In fact, the representative and the represented mutually shape each other from the very moment in which they are overdetermined by the process of representation itself.

### Concluding remarks

This paper aims to address the relationship between hegemony, populism and pluralism and, to that end, we have examined the works of Portantiero and De Ípola, Laclau and Mouffé, and Barros.

First and foremost, we see the problem not exclusively as organicism, or populism, but rather as any essentialist concept that pursues a fully reconciled society or identity, seeks to eliminate tension and sees pluralism as a simple ensemble of unproblematic differences in terms of their legitimate production and flow, ultimately reducible to *one single* objective meaning or principle. Such a notion can originate in any political tradition, populism included (if it is, in fact, a tradition). In a discursive reading of social relations, based on the notion that identity is differential, no worldview provides an *a priori* guarantee of essentialism, or of its opposite. If anything marks the Western canon, it is its ability to essentialize any element and, equally, how both objectivist and constructivist readings co-exist in all its modern political traditions (liberalism, socialism, Marxism, fascism, conservatism, populism).

Furthermore, the problem does not lie in whether or not the order is signified as a totality, but in how the latter is conceived. The notions of dislocation and identity as difference constitute a key starting point for pluralism, precisely because they make totality impossible and metonymical, and connect it to that which negates it. In contrast, there are discourses and traditions that do not explicitly name totality yet nevertheless conceive of it as a positive substance in which all *reasonable* differences can be accommodated. Thus, by ignoring its actual appearance, denying that it maps out a frontier, these discourses – in the words of thinkers as different from one another as Berlin and Schmitt – enter into an unconsidered, and hence more serious, conflict with pluralism because they do not appreciate how to handle the very difference they must exclude.

Secondly, like Weber (2007: 59-64), we do not consider politics possible

without domination, in which case the problem cannot be the “fetishization of the State” as a consequence of failing to question the “very principle of domination”, as posited by De Ípola and Portantiero (1981: 12)<sup>16</sup>. For us, social action cannot be conceived – following Foucault (2003a: 12-16; 2003b: 28-31) – as separate from power and, even less so, political power cannot be envisaged outside of a monopoly of legitimate violence. What can be forgone is the figure of the State, since there have been societies without a State but, nevertheless, with politics (Castoriadis 2002: 1). However, even a radical egalitarian transformation of the political community – such as that proposed by Portantiero and De Ípola – would be unable not only to forego power but to produce a definitive decoupling of hegemony and power.

Thirdly, and in further contrast to Portantiero and De Ípola, we believe that antagonism, the political frontier and the construction of a legitimate demos are not only consistent with pluralism – in contrast to that which is asserted by certain enlightened discourses – but are also its condition. Hence, our view on this matter stands in opposition, firstly, to liberal universalism, which takes pluralism to be the sheer – potentially endless – proliferation of difference; secondly, to classical Marxism, in which “the real history of humanity” begins with the end of the class system and, therefore, of politics itself; thirdly, to Mouffe’s agonism, which perceives antagonism as incompatible with democracy; and, lastly, to that which we have called hegemonism, according to which a single authority embodies the definitive principle or word, possessing, as it does, true knowledge of social life. These positions, with the exception of Mouffe’s, point to a reconciled society based on the erasure of antagonism, on behalf of the subject and of objective universal ends that are knowable and achievable without conflict. Thus, they negate the relationship between pluralism and exclusion. While liberalism negates the very need to exclude, hegemonism relies on the definitive word, which suppresses any dislocation. Agonism, in contrast, “finds” a way to sublimate exclusion. Below, we consider this in more detail.

While agonism upholds the notion of frontier, we see the concept as incompatible with antagonism; two opposing hegemonic projects cannot have shared rules of the game, because such rules are never neutral in terms of their value<sup>17</sup>. Although it is worth repeating that agonism does not eradicate

<sup>16</sup> This is a classic leftist critique of populism based on a mistrust of its real transformative radicalism, with constantly delayed “actions” clad in rhetorical bombast.

<sup>17</sup> Schmitt states: “in the extreme case conflicts with him [the enemy] are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party” (2007: 27). In the same conceptual vein, Laclau writes: “More generally, this is the limitation of all efforts to interpret social antagonisms in terms of game theory. The latter entails a system of rules which sets down the possible moves of the players and consequently establishes their identity; but with antagonism rules and identities are *violated*: the antagonist is not a player, but a cheat” (1990: 11; original emphasis).



but rather *sublimates* antagonism, this sublimated antagonism cannot account for *all* existing antagonisms; otherwise, it could be claimed that society can exist without a constitutive outside. Another way in which antagonism differs from agonism is that it is apt to present the figures of adversary and enemy as relatively fixed. For us, enmity is a relatively stable locus in terms of its meaning, but not regarding the discourse or the actor that embodies it. A democratic order draws a clear frontier between itself and what is unacceptable (authoritarian or anti-nationalist), but in the struggle for meaning that politics entails any actor may be alternately or simultaneously considered an adversary or enemy. An example of this is one political party accusing another, in parliament, of not working entirely for the benefit of democracy or the common good, or even of betraying these interests, but nevertheless continuing to debate with that party, thereby legitimizing it. This kind of back-and-forth debate might prove agonism, because, in the end, adversarial politics prevails. However, this would ignore the fact that it is also performed in relation to an enemy. For us, enmity is a product of its intrinsic relationship with amity; the two are loci that are brought into play through every utterance. They do not constitute a fixed, foreseeable *a priori*, but rather one that is performatively constructed. There is no pre-given meaning that can be classified as legitimate or not illegitimate. The question of how to interpret a rule in order to apply it (Wittgenstein, 1999: paragraphs 199 and 202) is what determines amity and enmity. Trying to make an individual case fit a general rule not only compromises any adaptation of a particular discourse to a general meaning (legitimate or illegitimate); it also affects the very substance of the legitimate and the illegitimate. There are two frontiers, one antagonistic and the other agonistic, but neither is fixed, spatially or temporally.

As we have indicated, pluralism entails a frontier, constituted in opposition to political communities and to identities in general and giving rise to political struggle. There is no pluralism without exclusion, nor identity without difference, amity without enmity. Pluralism exists when within amity and/or a particular discursive formation its elements are capable of exercising their ability to define political amity and enmity, as the actors are not predetermined but are the principal product of political struggle. Hence, we see pluralism not as autonomy, in the sense of an identity that exists prior to the struggle and seeks to be realized through it, but as vertical and horizontal tensions between frontier and legitimacy, production and flow, articulator and articulated.

As previously observed by Schmitt (2007: 35, 53-58,79), if we hold that pluralism can dispense with the political frontier – going so far as to use this as proof of pluralism – we exclude from humanity those who do not share the common trait of homogeneity that is characteristic of every order. The moralization of this difference, by placing the blame on the excluded as a

private individual rather than as a political subject, constitutes a politically unnecessary inferiorization of the other. Only by treating this difference as both existential and public can the internal and external pluralism of a community be guaranteed and, hence, its politicization morally acknowledged.

The development of plurality is not therefore limitless; it is subject to the constraints of the logic of the political itself. The play of articulation and disarticulation through which its elements acquire political meaning is possible within a contingently stable discursive formation, that is, one in which hegemony operates. Pluralism is a political order and, as such, is located on the ontic level. That said, if hegemony is the stabilization of a discursive formation by means of both exclusion and the dominance of a part that represents the whole, is De Ípola and Portantiero's mistrust of Laclau's notion of populism, and of the role of the leader within this, warranted? In *OPR* these notions are equated with politics *tout court*, and, if that were not enough, the latter locates its paradigmatic empty signifier in the name of the leader. Would the empty signifier, as such, not be confirmation that populism, with its leadership, privileges verticality? We do not believe so. For us, the problem is not articulation, the logic of which is consistent with that of the empty signifier, but rather *how* this articulation occurs on the ontic level. As we have set out regarding Barros' article, pluralism does not consist of the mere existence of articulated differences but of the logic of the process of articulation, which presupposes a contingent, open and precariously stable struggle. In this process, what is at play is not only the meaning of that which is articulated/disarticulated, but also the legitimacy of its existence and flow – in other words, the meaning of the discursive formation itself. In this sense, the empty signifier can be considered just another difference.

Hence, the name of the leader as an archetypal empty signifier – as it appears in *OPR* – is problematic for a pluralistic hegemony, not because of its supposed ability to establish itself as the definitive word but due to its a priori nature, which reduces the contingency of the process of articulation, not only for populism but also – for reasons we have already set out – for politics itself.

If the political is antagonism, frontier and the struggle for meaning, and hegemony always seeks to stem the flow of meanings that embodies “disorder”, then decision is at the heart of hegemony. Therefore, “the decisive word” is not *in itself* the issue. Nevertheless, although we approach it from a different angle, Portantiero and De Ípola's concern with “the actually existing” reveals a pertinent problem. For these scholars, the issue is the potential erasure of political struggle at the hands of an authority that establishes itself as the “*definitive* [as we refer to it] word”, while we see it as being the replacement of the ontological with the ontic.

In our view, the decisive or definitive word is a result of the multiplicity

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of forces that are at work: it cannot be known, nor can it even exist, prior to articulation. It is not a question of individual will, neither that of the leader – as the prototypical absolute “sender” – or of his/her followers, traditionally viewed through the lens of the reductive metaphorical “receiver”. Because even when an individual is prepared to take someone’s word as decisive, they still need to interpret it. Since meaning is processual, all “receiving” is by definition creative.

The fact that a signifier becomes decisive is not evidence of the existence of a single signified. A signifier can become more stabilized and persistent through the time, but not the signified that it organizes. There is no convergence between discourse, signification and signifier, no symbolic unity. This is exactly what the tendentially empty signifier entails.

That said, even if the closure of meaning is impossible, its pursuit is not. A single meaning – orthodoxy – can function as a political horizon. The same is at play between the decisive signified and one single meaning as between hegemony and hegemonism. The latter is ontologically impossible, but on the ontic level it behaves as a means of constructing order. Pluralism is thus inevitable, even if monism as a way of understanding the world is what characterizes the Western canon and, as such, comes into play to reduce this ineradicable pluralism.

In the early 1970s, the voice of those who were united by their Peronist identity was seen as legitimate only if it was presented as the vicarious word of the leader – or, rather, of the name of the leader. Nevertheless, this discourse was inevitably disparate and even contradictory, with the leader himself having to challenge it on their behalf. Not even what happened on 1st May 1974 could bring an end to this. The leader, by virtue of his non-participation in this internal dispute, had shortly before referred to himself as “the Pope”. This was an accurate description, given that not even the Pope’s own infallibility can prevent the proliferation of interpretations of the supposedly definitive word of the Bible.

Only one thing is decisive, and that is ontological indeterminacy and vagueness, in other words, the absence of decisive meaning.

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