Review Essay

Populism is Hegemony is Politics?
On Ernesto Laclau’s On Populist Reason

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The work of many of us would have never been the same without the intellectual influence of Ernesto Laclau, one of the most gifted political thinkers of his generation. It is difficult not to be bowled over by the elegance and seductiveness of his writing – the turns of phrases, the conceptual wizardry, the frequent use of examples, the ease with which he weaves his ideas by drawing from the work of philosophers, linguists, psychoanalysts, historians, and so on. He also has a knack for luring critics into his conceptual territory by reading their work through the lens of his own terminology and, when this is not a viable option, for undermining or dismissing them with responses that seem to have the force of syllogisms. On both counts Laclau follows in the footsteps of Althusser, who embraced intertextuality and always strived to present his arguments clearly and persuasively, as if they were self-evident conclusions. Althusser is no stranger to him given that his theories framed his earlier essays in Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Laclau, of course, parted ways with the notion of the relative autonomy of the superstructures and the determination in the last instance by the economy in his writings leading up to the publication of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. What still resonates there, as well as in New Reflections and the more recent On Populist Reason, is Althusser’s talent for giving a semblance of seamlessness to his discourse. On Populist Reason (hereafter OPR) is a fascinating read. It is written in a way that renders the subject matter a continuation, enhancement and confirmation of his post-Gramscian theory of hegemony. Hegemony is the medium through which populism unfolds and, as we will see, it is often difficult to tell them apart. In the first seventy pages or so, Laclau provides an overview of the theories of Canovan, Minogue and various contributors to the Ionescu and Gellner volume on populism. He also discusses what Le Bon, Tarde, McDougall and Freud have to say about groups, crowds, and leaders. This prepares the reader for his own interpretation. Interesting as this discussion is, I concentrate on the subsequent parts of the book where he explicitly formulates his position. I avoid the temptation to write a Laclau 101 text by focusing on some conceptual knots in the arguments about populism, or politics-as-populism. In this review, I take my cue from Gaston Bachelard, for whom one truly honors a great thinker by polemicizing with his ideas, by bringing out the tensions in Laclau’s work.

Demands, Equivalence, Antagonism, the “People” and the Leader

Laclau develops his argument in two stages. He first uses a series of simplifying assumptions that will be abandoned gradually to deliver what he calls his “fully fledged” theory of populism. The passage from one to the other involves, among other things, the introduction of floating signifiers in a discourse that, until then, had relied on empty signifiers. While empty signifiers serve to explain the construction of popular identities when frontiers are stable, floating signifiers enable Laclau to contemplate the displacement of frontiers when
populist forces are engaged in wars of position. However, the impression one gets from reading OPR is that the two stages are different tonalities of the same conceptual core. This is because the ideas – and often the structure of sentences, as well as the theoretical summaries Laclau himself provides from time to time – are similar in both the simplified and the fully-fledged accounts.

Laclau structures his theory of populism around six steps that cut across the two stages or tonalities of the argument. (1) When a series of social demands cannot be absorbed differentially by institutional channels, they become (2) unsatisfied demands that enter into a relationship of solidarity or equivalence with one another and (3) crystallize around common symbols that (4) can be capitalized by leaders who interpellate the frustrated masses and thus begin to incarnate a process of popular identification that (5) constructs “the people” as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of (6) demanding regime change. This narrative is governed by the claim that politics-as-populism divides the social scene into two camps and produces a frontier or antagonistic relations among them. The narrative is also governed by recurrent references to empty and floating signifiers, the Lacanian constitutive lack, heterogeneity, the distinction between naming and concepts, and the primacy of representation.

The notion of “demand,” or more precisely, social demand, is presented as the minimal unit of analysis of populism. The term signifies both a request and a claim, and the passage from the first to the second provides one of the defining features of populism (OPR, 73). Laclau then distinguishes between intra- and anti-systemic demands, or those that can be accommodated within the existing order and those that challenge it. The former are called democratic demands and are fulfilled when absorbed and positioned as differences within the institutional ensemble, whereas the latter are popular demands or demands that remain unfulfilled. Popular demands are the embryo of populism, and it is from these demands that one can begin to constitute the “people” that will confront the status quo (74, 127). The key operation in this process is the convergence of multiple social demands into a chain of equivalence and the concomitant division of society into two antagonistic camps. The wider identity resulting from this operation does not annul the differential nature of the demands and identities that are linked together in the popular camp but constitutes instead their common denominator. This superordinate identity dovetails with Gramsci’s claim that, unlike a circumstantial alliance that leaves the identity of the intervening forces untouched, hegemony modifies them by virtue of the ensemble of shared values and ideas that bring them together in a historic bloc.

The construction of the popular camp is intimately connected with the way in which he understands the “people.” Laclau has only praise for Jacques Rancière and compares his notion of the “people” with the latter’s demos, which is not a pre-existing sociological category but the name of an outcast, “of those who are denied an identity in a given order.” The demos is an “in-between”: it designates those whose being appears in the interval between their de-classification from the non-place they are assigned in the existing order and their simultaneous identification with that which they are yet to become. The demos is at once the part of those who have no part in the community and the part that identifies its name with the name of the community. These ideas reverberate in Laclau’s account of the “people,” whether because its constitution is a political task and not a datum of the social structure (224), which echoes Rancière’s refusal to reduce the demos to a sociological group, or because like the demos, the “people” is internally split – between populus and plebs, whole and part – and the populist production of the “people” requires an operation that presents the plebs as the totality of the populus (81, 93 ff.).
Where they differ is on the question of legitimacy. For Rancière politics arises when “the people” appear as a supplement of all empirical counts of the parts of the community. Legitimacy does not play a part in the “noise” introduced by the _demos_ into the partition of the sensible, or rather, the legitimacy of this disruptive noise is either one of the stakes of a disagreement or is simply not relevant for the emergence of the “outline of a vanishing difference” he calls “politics.” For Laclau, however, “in order to have the ‘people’ of populism, we need... a _plebs_ who claims to be the only legitimate _populus_” (81). How are we to understand legitimacy and the role it plays in a populist challenge? It is difficult to tell. Laclau introduces this qualifier of the _plebs_ without offering further arguments. This is a shame because legitimacy could be a potentially fruitful angle to study populism. One indication of this is the classical distinction between the formal-juridical nation and the legitimate or real one: populists invariably side with the latter whenever this distinction is enacted in political controversies.

I will say more about the part that presents itself as the embodiment of community shortly. First, I want to focus on the role played by the leader in this theory of populism. Laclau construes it as a logical derivation of his discussion of naming and singularity. His starting point is situations in which the institutional system has been shaken and fails to fulfill the task of keeping society together. When this happens, “the name becomes the ground of the thing,” to which he adds that “an assemblage of heterogeneous elements kept equivalentially together only by a name is, however, necessarily a _singularity_” (100). This is the prelude for a conceptual sequence that takes us from equivalence to the name of the leader. To quote Laclau: “the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to the identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader” (100). He is not referring to actual persons but to the _name_ of the leader as a structural function, as an empty or pure signifier of unity. Yet he quickly shifts from the name and singularity to actual individuals. For this Laclau invokes two icons of the Western canon. First, he summons Hobbes, for whom only an individual can incarnate the indivisible nature of sovereignty, and then Freud, by stating that “the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality – and here I agree with Freud – is inherent in the formation of a ‘people’” (100). It is unclear whether the argument of authority proves the point, but the corollary is that without a leader there can be no “people” and therefore no politics either.

Readers familiar with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari will probably balk at this conclusion by recalling a provocative passage in _A Thousand Plateaus_ where they say that one does not always need a general for \( n \) individuals to fire in unison. Negri, Hardt, Virno and other advocates of the “multitude” would also object. The multitude is a collective subject whose unity falls outside the logic of equivalence; it opposes the \( n + 1 \) of superordinate identities because the latter undermine the singularities that make up the multitude. This refusal to submit to an overarching form of unity also makes them reject the very idea that singularity must be conceived on the basis of identification with a leader.

But the strong attachment to a leader – which is in fact an attachment to a strong leader–remains an issue even if one is not prepared to endorse the notion of the multitude. This is because the leader might be cast as an empty signifier, but s/he is also a person, so any talk about “the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality” must also address the potential underside of the argument. Laclau sidesteps the question by focusing on the way in which politics-as-populism fosters cohesion through individuality. This prevents him from engaging with those who maintain that following a leader morphs all too easily into a cult of personality, that is, who see in the populist mode of unification unedifying traits such as the infallibility of the leader, her being beyond good and evil, the role of the leader as

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Indisputable broker among factions, the perception of challenges to the leader as treason, the suppression of dissent in the name of the unity of the “people,” and so on. This undermines the presumed populist empowerment of the underdogs or produces a travesty of empowerment by subjecting the “people” to the dictates of a leader.

One might want to dismiss these reservations by saying that they apply to conservative or authoritarian incarnations of populism, but this is a facile way of exorcizing the shadow cast by a unity based on an individual. It is difficult to see how politics-as-populism could generate “forms of democracy outside the liberal symbolic framework” (167) if it demands such a pivotal role for the leader. In what way would these forms of democracy be preferable to the liberal one?

Hegemony is Populism is Politics

The references to politics-as-populism require further elaboration. The frontiers between hegemony, politics, and populism are fuzzy given that the subject matter of OPR is constructed with conceptual building blocks that are similar and often identical to those Laclau used to develop his post-Gramscian theory of hegemony – articulation, difference, equivalence, antagonism, and so on. One noticeable absence is “dislocation,” which in New Reflections functions as a central category and in OPR is not even worthy of an entry in the index. If in his joint book with Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (hereafter HSS), the tendency is to equate hegemony with politics, in OPR it is populism that blends with politics (or at least with radical politics) through the language and practice of hegemony. Populism becomes either the truth of the political or the golden road to understanding it. This reinforces the lingering suspicion that the intellectual itinerary that has taken Laclau from Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory of 1977 to the publication of OPR in 2005 could be read either as a rewriting of the theory of politics-as-hegemony or as an intellectual enterprise in which populism functions less as a specific subject matter than as the cognitive backdrop or even the unacknowledged instigator of his political thinking. I want to trace some of the arguments that support this convergence of politics-as-hegemony and politics-as-populism.

In HSS we are told that hegemony “is, quite simply, a political type of relation, a form, if one wishes, of politics.”5 This is another way of saying that the hegemonic form of politics has an ontic status. Yet in the closing lines of the book, the authors state that the political is the field of a game called hegemony,6 which suggests that the distance between one and the other closes and the semantic fields of politics and hegemony begin to overlap. This might explain why Laclau is critical of a politics of the multitude. As mentioned, the latter is an ensemble of singularities that subsist as singularities without the addition of an n + 1 of a common identity above those singularities. The multitude does not require – it actually rejects – the chains of equivalence and the superordinate identity these entail. Put differently, the multitude falls outside the theory of hegemony.7

In OPR there is a similar progression from a form of politics to politics proper, except that now the equivalence is between populism and politics rather than between politics and hegemony. Laclau initially says that “Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political” (xi). Later on, he adds that “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such” (68) and that “by ‘populism’ we do not understand a type of movement. . . but a political logic” (117). All three passages depict populism as one possibility of politics among others and therefore leave the door open for non-populist ways of constructing the political. It is an ontic conception of populism. The distance between them begins to shrink when one reads that “there is no political
intervention which is not populistic to some extent” (154), a claim Laclau reiterates almost verbatim when he approves of Meny and Surel’s assertion that there is no politics that does not have a populist streak. Populism is a component of all politics. Whatever distance exists between them disappears altogether when Laclau states that populist reason, insofar as it is the very logic of construction of the “people,” “amounts...to political reason tout court” (225). At this point populism is no longer a way of constructing the political; it has morphed into politics proper. (Laclau is aware of the distinction between politics and the political but often uses them interchangeably, and so do I).

It might seem unfair to draw this conclusion from a single remark, but Laclau states this elsewhere too. He says: “If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice in the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative.” Given this synonymy, one must ask why we need two names, populism and politics, to describe the same class of phenomena – primarily the construction of the “people” – or why Laclau chose to call his book *On Populist Reason* if the subject matter is political reason or at least the type of reason operating in radical variants of politics.

In *OPR*, there is a third possibility, one that construes the relation between hegemony and populism as one of genus to species through catachresis. As “a rhetorical displacement [occurring] whenever a literal term is substituted by a figural one” (71), catachresis is a way of naming an absent fullness – in this case, the absent fullness of community. This absence is not an empirical deficiency but a constitutive lack in the Lacanian sense of “a void in being” or “deficient being” (112, 116) experienced, for example, whenever a demand is not met (85). Lack and catachresis work together as two angles of the same argument. If catachresis refers to “a constitutive blockage in language which requires naming something that is essentially unnameable as a condition for language functioning” (71), then hegemony is essentially a catachresical operation because it consists of the “operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification” (70). The hegemonic identity resulting from this operation will be of the order of an empty signifier because the particularity in question seeks to embody a totality/universality that is ultimately an impossible object. Hence Laclau’s paradoxical formula: fullness is unachievable yet necessary (70–1). In the case of the lack he invokes Joan Copjec’s characterization of the Lacanian objet petit a as the elevation of the external object of the drive to the dignity of the Thing (115, 119–20).

Laclau draws a strong conclusion from this. He says: “[I]n political terms, that is exactly what I have called a hegemonic relation: a certain particularity which assumes the role of an impossible universality,” for “the logic of the objet petit a and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are identical” (115–6; also 226). This three-fold identity results in the formula: hegemony = catachresis = the logic of the objet petit a. All three elements are interchangeable; they are ways of dealing with a constitutive lack and producing the ultimately impossible yet necessary object, the fullness of community.

Populism replicates this scheme. Its construction of the “people” is catachresical because it attempts to give a name to the absent fullness of community (85). The plebs (a part) aspire to become the populus (the whole) and handle the question of deficient being by “introducing ‘ordering’ where there is basic dislocation” (122). Following Copjec’s psychoanalytical narrative, the populist construction of the “people” elevates a partial object to the dignity of the Thing/Whole. The specific difference that populism introduces vis-à-vis hegemony is the division of society into two camps to produce a relation of equivalence among demands and construct a frontier or antagonistic relation between them. This is why populism can be said to be a species of the genus hegemony, the species that calls into question the existing order
with the purpose of constructing another (122–3). This genus has at least one other species, institutionalist discourse, whose essence is to maintain the status quo.

These three possibilities give credibility to the suspicion that ever since Laclau began to develop his theory of politics-as-hegemony he was thinking of populism or, alternatively, that his more recent theory of politics-as-populism is an ad-hoc rewriting of the narrative of hegemony to adjust it to the subject matter of OPR. Either way, there is a continual slippage between both theoretical constructs and between these and politics.

Is a Crisis a Condition or an Effect of Politics/Populism?

Laclau portrays institutionalist discourse as “one that attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of community” (81). The institutional is the given that functions as the site and object of the interruptive drives of populist challenges. This is because in populism there is a part that seeks to identify itself with the whole: it is the plebs that present themselves as the sole legitimate populus and thereby destabilize the presumed coincidence between the community and a discursive formation characteristic of institutionalist discourse. This interruption would appear to confirm the constitutive role of the political, but is this really the case in his account of populism?

A contrast with Rancière can be instructive here. For Rancière, political agency or, more precisely, a political mode of subjectification, consists of naming a subject to reveal a wrong and create a community around a particular dispute. The part of the no-part seeks to demonstrate that the community does not exist because not everyone is counted as a part. Politics thus inscribes dissensus in the space of the given: the part of the no-part seeks to show the presence of two worlds in one and modify the existing order or partition of the sensible. Politics is a practice of dissensus and all that it requires is a mode of subjectification, that is, “the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience.”11 De- and re-structuration occur through political subjectification whether or not the given has been unsettled beforehand.

Laclau also claims that the political is constitutive by stating that “the political has a primary structuring role because social relations are ultimately contingent, and any prevailing articulation results from an antagonistic confrontation whose outcome is not decided beforehand.”13 But in OPR he appears to contradict this claim. He tells us that populism interrupts the given by presenting itself “both as subversive of the existing state of things and as the starting point for a more or less radical reconstruction of a new order wherever the previous one has been shaken” (177). The revealing passage is “wherever the previous one has been shaken,” as it indicates that a situation of disorganization is a prerequisite for a populist rupture. This is a recurrent trope. One can see it when Laclau differentiates the ontological function of producing order from its ontic fulfillment: “when people are confronted with radical anomie, the need for some kind of order becomes more important than the actual ontic order that brings it about” (88). The descriptive tone of this passage conceals an implicit normative assumption: like Carl Schmitt, Laclau takes for granted the goodness of order and the necessity of restoring-transforming it whenever it has been unsettled, yet unlike Schmitt he also welcomes crises, as these are conditions of possibility for the felicity of populist interventions. The absence of community or at least a situation in which the latter has been shaken provides the gap through which the populist promise of a future fullness might come into being. The argument resurfaces when Laclau states that “some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism” (177) and, contrario
sensu, by saying that “when we have a highly institutionalized society, equivalential logics have less terrain on which to operate; as a result, populist rhetoric becomes a commodity lacking any sort of hegemonic depth” (191). The upshot is that equivalential logics cannot flourish, and populism cannot rise above what he calls “petty demagoguery” (191) unless there is some kind of de-institutionalization that unsettles the old order. Critical junctures are windows of opportunity for developing a relation of equivalence among unsatisfied demands and thus for populism.

It is difficult to hold on to the argument that politics-as-populism has a constitutive force – that it has the capacity to subvert and reconstruct the given – and at the same time claim that populist interventions are dependent on the prior crisis in the existing order, for then the political would be subservient to those junctures, and, therefore, its status would be derivative rather than constitutive. Bear in mind that we are dealing with theoretical provisos and not with matters of practical politics where some conditions are indeed more or less propitious than others for the success of a populist endeavor. If the political has a primary structuring role, then it must also be able to trigger a de-institutionalization of the given system instead of depending on the presence of a crisis to generate its subversive and reconstructive effects.

This is what Rancière proposes when he speaks of political subjectification. It is also what people have done everywhere to bring forth regime change, from the Chileans who fought to get rid of Pinochet to the African National Congress’ efforts to dismantle apartheid. They looked for lucky breaks but did not wait to find cracks in the system to mount their challenges. If the political remains subservient to the opportunities opened up by de-institutionalization – whose coming into being is not explained but depicted as a something that happens – then it cannot have the primary structuring role that Laclau assigns to it. The paradox is that this exposes him to the same criticism he and Mouffe make of the Second International in HSS. There they tell us that by the time Marxism had become a dogmatic theory, the International’s belief in necessary laws of history led it to privilege the logic of necessity at the expense of the logic of contingency characteristic of politics. As a result, socialist politics languished by subordinating the opportunity for radical change to the objective conditions specified by the doctrine. Pegging the emergence and the chances of success of politics-as-populism to critical junctures may have a similar effect. One would have to wait for the conditions of anomie to be present before embarking in a politics of change.

Circularity, Stability, and Misrecognition

There are a few remaining points which I mention in passim. First, some commentators have questioned the self-serving or endogamous use of theoretical sources and historical cases in OPR. The argument is that these often function less as a means to illuminate complex arguments than as a way to corroborate the truth of Laclau’s claims. Beasley-Murray contends that the cases he cites are treated as anecdotes or parables “to confirm a system whose principles are developed endogenously.”14 Žižek describes this as a self-referential exercise because the logic of hegemony is used to bridge the opposition between populism and politics. As he put it, “For Laclau, in a nice case of self-reference, the very logic of hegemonic articulation applies also to the conceptual opposition between populism and politics: populism is the Lacanian objet a of politics, the particular figure which stands for the universal dimension of the political, which is why it is the royal road to understanding the political.”15

It is not uncommon to use examples in a discretionary manner to prove a point. Given the breath of Laclau’s research and the throngs of people who have been influenced by his work,
one may even contend that a self-referential streak comes with the territory of academic success. But it is difficult to dismiss this charge altogether. Consider his assessment of Surel and Schedler. Laclau is sympathetic to what they say about populism except on one point, namely, that the system of alternatives they propose is too narrow. He explains this in a brief discussion of General Boulanger’s failed populist project in nineteenth century France. For him, the four politico-ideological features of Boulangerism “reproduce, almost point by point, the defining dimensions of populism which we have established in the theoretical part of this book.” These are: the aggregation of heterogeneous forces and demands that exceed the institutional system, the equivalential link between these demands by virtue of sharing the same enemy, the crystallization of this chain around the empty signifier “Boulanger,” and the reduction of “Boulanger” to a name that grounds the unity of the object (180–1). We can see here an argumentative sequence in which the author introduces an example, draws theoretical consequences from it, and concludes that these match “almost point by point” what his theory had already predicted. The wider system of alternatives vis-à-vis Surel and Schedler is precisely the theory he has already proposed in previous sections of his book. I am reticent to affirm that this makes Laclau’s theorizing tautological, but examples like this – together with his rather hasty portrayal of Maoism-as-populism – provide ammunition for those who speak of a self-referential streak in his work.

Second, when discussing social demands Laclau mentions as one of the structural preconditions for populism “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” (74). He reiterates this by speaking of “the consolidation of the equivalential chain through the construction of a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links” (77).

Let us pause to consider what is meant by the passage from a feeling of vague solidarity to a stable system of signification, that is, to an identity that is qualitatively more than a sum of the intervening links. As in his theory of hegemony, this involves the creation of a superordinate identity shared by the demands that enter into the equivalential chain. We are reminded frequently that difference and equivalence intermingle and that no equivalence manages to efface the differential element of the participating demands. We also know from Laclau’s warning about a two-stage account of populism that the simplifying assumptions of the arguments revolving around empty signifiers must recede once his “fully-fledged” theory of populism is in place – e.g., when floating signifiers and something like Gramscian wars of position begin to destabilize the neatness of antagonistic frontiers. What we are not told is how to establish this if this structural condition has been achieved: how stable must a system of signification be in order to engender a proper popular identity? There is a similar silence about what does it mean to say that a popular identity must be “qualitatively more” than the sum of its links. Wherein does the quantified qualitative difference lie? When is it licit to say that the passage from vague solidarity to a qualitatively different stage has occurred? We might want to respond by invoking qualifiers like “more or less” (177) and “beyond a certain point” (162, 200), but this is at best an ad hoc solution and not a substantive response one would expect from a fully-fledged theory.

It would obviously be unfair to ask him for a criterion capable of exorcizing the ambiguity of these distinctions because Laclau, like many of us, thinks outside the parameters of a Cartesian universe. Yet he needs to say something about this, otherwise he runs a double risk. On the one hand, the reader might get the impression that the task of determining when an ephemeral equivalence becomes a stable system of signification is left to the theorist of populism. On the other hand, in the absence of a criterion to make such distinction, there is
a danger of blurring the line that demarcates the singularities that make up the multitude from the chains of equivalence required for the populist construction of the people.16 This of course undermines the force of Laclau’s critique of the theory and politics of the multitude.

The third and final point takes us back to the question of anomie and fullness discussed earlier: the fullness of community – another name for a reconciled society – might be an impossible object, but Laclau contends that when confronted with radical anomie, people will demand an order independent of its content. This presupposes an implicit split between the people, who welcome whatever is said to solve the situation of anomie and the populist politicians and intellectuals, whether organic or otherwise, who know that any presumptive restoration of the fullness of community can only be mythical. Put differently, if triggering a populist mobilization requires that the people misrecognize the truth of what is at stake in their actions, then one is drawn to the conclusion that a condition for the populist challenge of the status quo is that something fundamental escapes them and, therefore, that they literally know not what they do.

At first sight, this seems to be consistent with the constitution of the “I” in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The simultaneous operation of mechanisms of recognition and misrecognition is characteristic of the narcissistic identification, which occurs in what Lacan calls “Imaginary” register that differs from the Symbolic and the Real registers. This narcissistic identification will precipitate the formation of the “I,” and its effects will be repeated long after we have access to language and, therefore, to the Symbolic. It is important to keep in mind that recognition and misrecognition operate in tandem, like when we show pictures of a holiday trip and say, “Look, that’s me lying on a hammock,” a statement that can only work on condition that we ignore the fact that it is not “me lying on a hammock” but a representation of me lying on it. For the Lacanian argument to hold, there can be no outside to this double-bind: everyone is already immersed in it, whether it is the people or the leaders. But Laclau splits them apart in his account of populism. On the one hand, we have something that resembles what Lacan, and later Jacques-Alain Miller call a subject that is supposed to know, one whom we invest with presumptive knowledge. Whether it is the theorist or the leader, this is a subject perceived to misrecognize nothing because s/he is fully aware that there is no chance for a reconciled society actually materializing. On the other hand, we find the masses, who embark in a project of plenitude that is presented to them as a space of inscription for all social demands and as a scenario where those demands will actually be fulfilled.17

Let me underline that what is at stake here is not whether plenitude is truthful or not, for Laclau is quite right in describing it as a myth. It is, instead, the instrumentalism that seeps into the theory of politics-as-populism. The masses believe in the dream of plenitude and the leaders, who know better, do nothing to disturb this belief because it can be put to good use. This vision of politics as a process occurring in two different and asymmetric cognitive tiers, one of leaders and intellectuals who understand how the world works and another of the masses who believe in the promise of plenitude, gives some credence to critics who always saw populism as a vertical, top-down politics conducted by unscrupulous leaders and their entourage to advance their own agenda.

To conclude, OPR is indeed a fascinating book that gives us a vantage point to look at the trajectory of Laclau’s work over the past three decades. His followers will welcome it as a significant contribution to their ongoing conversations about how the conceptual apparatus he offers there – one that weaves hegemony, empty signifiers, objet petit a, affect, jouissance and the “people” in a narrative about populism – helps them understand radical politics and the making of Leftist alternatives. I am more guarded in my assessment of what the
book accomplishes given the difficulty to shake off the impression that Laclau’s theory of politics-as-populism is a variant of his theory of politics-as-hegemony.

NOTES

6. Ibid., 193.
7. This demonstrates that there are forms of collective action that fall outside the framework of hegemony, although as I have argued elsewhere, these need not be restricted to the multitude. See Arditi, “Post-hegemony: politics outside the post-Marxist paradigm,” Contemporary Politics 13, no. 3 (2007): 205–226.
12. Rancière, Disagreement, 35.
13. Laclau, “Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics.”
16. This last point was suggested to me by Guillermo Pereyra in a conversation about multitude and the “people” of populism.
17. Paul Bowman (Post-Marxism versus Cultural Studies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007: 108–1187)) raises a similar question with regard to Laclau’s claim that every identity/objectivity is necessarily incomplete. Given that the “closure” or fullness of any object is as a response to a call for decisive political intervention that will nonetheless remain forever short of its goal, it comes as a surprise to read that for Laclau the political and hegemony are “perfectly theorized in my work.” For Bowman this is inconsistent: you cannot speak of the structural incompleteness brought about by a constitutive lack and then shield your own theorization from the structural impossibility of achieving fullness.

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