Against Antagonism: 
On Ernesto Laclau’s Political Thought

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Those with a taste for etymology can already make out the main lines of Ernesto Laclau’s theory of hegemony in the Greek roots of hegemony, antagonism, and agent. The first derives from hegeisthai, to lead, while the second and third each derive from agon, struggle, gathering, contest, itself from agein, to lead. To be an agent, then, is to be successful in the agon and thereby assume a position of leadership. By way of contrast, to be a subject with an identity, as the Latin roots subicere and idem suggest, is to be brought under and equated with such authority. Political activity in particular entails a series of identifications in the course of which we shift back and forth interminably between passive subjection and creative agency, and in which this creative activity is never entirely free of this passivity. The politics of identity is a politics of movements rather than states, and, pace Kant, autonomous movement is only possible in the context of heteronomy.

The specific form all of this takes in Laclau’s work is largely a result of his marriage of poststructuralism and Marxism. This is a union most often attempted by those working within the former camp, one effect of which is that the political philosophy that results tends to be more philosophical than political. As Laclau’s work in contrast represents a turn to poststructuralist theory from within Marxism, it promises to speak more directly to political activity than to textual exegesis. Laclau turns to poststructuralism in search of a model of identity that will allow him to apply Gramsci’s theory of the hegemonic “war of position” in a political universe in which identity politics has for many replaced class struggle. The concept of antagonism is the lynchpin here and the central concept in Laclau’s political theory of hegemony: “The moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible constitutes the field of the ‘political.’” “Antagonism has a revelatory function, in that it shows the ultimately contingent nature of all identity,” thereby enacting the ontological critique of the subject associated with poststructuralism.

An evaluation of Laclau’s concept of antagonism will therefore afford us a gauge of both his work’s theoretical cogency and its practical implications.

The Ontology of Politics

What is antagonism? In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Laclau and Mouffe describe it as an experience and discursive form “in which what is manifested is...”
no longer the continuous deferment of the ‘transcendental signified,’ but the very
vanity of this deferring, the final impossibility of any stable difference, and thus,
of any ‘objectivity.’” To speak of the “‘experience’ of the limit of all objectivity,”
even with scare-quotes, might suggest some sort of mystical experience. However, when the concept is introduced we are referred only once to anything
that might be described as an experience, and the referent has nothing mystical
about it: “It is because a peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists
with the landowner expelling him from his land.” Here we find the impossibil-
ity of the subject paired with a vaguely Marxist- or Maoist-sounding situation of
class conflict – more or less what we expect from a book that reviews the history
of Marxism so as to argue for the necessity of a Derridean-cum-Lacanian reading
of the political subject. But it is worth pausing here and asking what precisely this
element shows. Why and in what way can the peasant not be a peasant? And what
does that have to do with the antagonism between the peasant and the landlord?

The references to the class of the participants and the peasant’s eviction might
remind one of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts: “So much does labour’s realization
appear as loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to
death. . . . Labour itself becomes an object which he can get hold of only with the
greatest effort and with the most irregular interruptions.” Does the inability of
Laclau and Mouffe’s peasant to be a peasant involve an impossibility of this sort?
It would seem so, as the antagonism is not said to exist between the peasant and
the landlord as such, but between the peasant and “the landowner expelling him
from his land.” But if this is right then the antagonism is not necessarily involved
in any assertion of the peasant’s identity or lack thereof. The peasant is a peasant,
and remains such until he is evicted, at which point he faces the threat of “not
being” in the same sense as the worker in the Marx passage above, viz., Hunger-
tod. But this can’t be right, as Laclau and Mouffe propose this example in the
course of arguing that antagonism differs from both logical contradiction and real
opposition in that it is not an objective relation. In the case of contradictions or
conflicts between conceptual or real objects “we are concerned with full identi-
ties. . . . But in the case of antagonism, we are confronted with a different situa-
tion: the presence of the Other prevents me from being myself. The relation arises
not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution.” Identifying the
Other with the symbolic order is not, however, compatible with Laclau’s under-
standing of the “experience of antagonism” as one that gives rise to a struggle with the Other: “The radical contingency of the social shows itself . . . in
the experience of antagonism. If the force that antagonizes me negates my identity,
the maintenance of that identity depends on the result of a struggle.” As “the
force that antagonizes [the peasant and] negates [his] identity” has the effect of
preventing him from “being himself,” we can infer that it is the landlord with whom the peasant struggles that is the Other here.

There are two ways this might be understood: the presence of the ‘Other’ could be (a) the relation with the landlord qua landlord or (b) the relation with any other party, who in this case happens to be a landlord who happens to be evicting the peasant. In support of the first we might argue in the following way: The hierarchical and exploitative relation with the landlord always contains the possibility of the peasant’s eviction. The peasant’s existence is dependent on the will of another, and hence not his own. Since he is not his own, he is not self-contained, but rather – in a very unpleasant way – ecstatic, beside himself. He is in a position similar to that of Aristotle’s natural slave, who “is a part of the master.” For Aristotle,

The term ‘article of property’ is used in the same way in which the term ‘part’ is also used. A part is not only a part of something other than itself; it also belongs entirely to that other thing. . . . Accordingly, while the master is merely the master of the slave, and does not belong to him, the slave is not only the slave of his master, but belongs entirely to him.

This is because the “compound” of which the slave and the master form parts is that of mastery, a relation which is a type of the exercise of reason.9 As the master is the truly (that is, actively) rational element in this relationship, he constitutes both a part of that relationship and the whole of which he is a part. This is not true of the slave, who disappears when in the relationship and in isolation from it is not able to be what he truly is. Note, however, that Aristotle makes this argument about the being of the slave as such, and he is explicit (1255a) that in discussing natural slaves he is not talking about slaves as they are found in the world. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe’s example is not specifically an example of the situation of the peasantry, but of antagonistic relations in general. What is true of the peasant is true of all identity as such (and hence all relations between identities): “Antagonism is the ‘constitutive outside’ that accompanies the affirmation of all identity.”10 But the claims entertained above are not generally true. While Aristotle’s slave is dependent upon his master, my being as such does not depend upon my wages from my present employer. The fact that I need a job does not mean that I need this job any more than the fact that I need to eat in order to live means that I need to eat this sandwich in order to live.11

We are left, then, with our last alternative. The peasant is prevented from being himself neither because he is a language-using being, nor because he is being evicted, nor because he has a particular landlord, but because he is dependent upon another person as Other in order to be himself. It is the landlord as the other party in a relationship that defines the peasant and thus serves as Laclau’s antagonistic “constitutive outside.” Any other party in any other relationship would do: wife, friend, daughter, passerby. The struggle with the landlord over the peasant’s eviction, which Laclau and Mouffe’s readers are likely to see as one over justice
and injustice, is in fact nothing of the sort. Because the peasant fails to be himself, he requires a struggle with another party; such a struggle will allow him to “performatively” assert himself, and thereby achieve the semblance of subjectivity/objectivity. But this implies that all of the specific details of the example, the details that make it intuitively appealing, are and must be irrelevant. Laclau and Mouffe could just as well have written: “It is because a peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists with his nephew daydreaming idly on the muddy front stoop.”

This is borne out by the fact that what is true of the peasant is also true of the landlord (“nor is the force that antagonizes me such a presence”) and by what follows close upon our example: “antagonism constitutes the limits of every objectivity, which is revealed as partial and precarious objectification. If language is a system of differences, antagonism is the failure of difference; in that sense, it situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it – that is, as metaphor.” The peasant is not an object, a totality whose identity is self-contained and stable. He is an objectification, a name in a linguistic system that defines names differentially. (Laclau usually marks this distinction as being one between a [sutured] subject and an instance of subjectification.) The difference between the names “landlord (who coincidentally is evicting me)” and “nephew” is strictly irrelevant here. That is why we can move from the particular relationship between the peasant and the landlord to a reflection upon relation as such, and hence upon identity as such: “Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown – in the sense in which Wittgenstein used to say that what cannot be said can be shown.”

As this sense was one in which “the proposition shows the logical form of reality,” a form that we cannot express or represent with propositions, we can conclude that for Laclau antagonism – or, more specifically, the example of the evicted peasant – shows “the logical form of reality.” But the logical form of reality is what it is regardless of whether the peasant is considered in relation to his landlord or his nephew. Nor will it help here to say that what is being proposed is a necessary but not sufficient determinant of political struggle (to emphasize, that is, the contingency of the latter); because the condition – the “split” nature of the peasant as subject, his “inability to be a peasant” – is one shared by all subjects, whether they are politically involved or not. As Wittgenstein reminds us, “A wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism.”

This conclusion is much the same as that reached by Slavoj Žižek in his review of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy – with the crucial difference that Žižek finds this evidently apolitical result intensely praiseworthy: “the most radical breakthrough in modern social theory” is the development of the idea of “social antagonism.” This development shows us that “The ideological illusion . . . lies precisely in the fact [sic] that it is the ‘capitalist,’ this external enemy, who is preventing me from achieving an identity with myself: the illusion is that after the
eventual annihilation of the antagonistic enemy, I will abolish the antagonism.”
This will never happen, as the true antagonism is not inter- but intra-personal:
“That is why we could say that it is precisely in the moment when we achieve
victory over the enemy in the antagonistic struggle in social reality that we expe-
rience the antagonism in its most radical dimension, as a self-hindrance.”

The implication that political struggle is a distraction that cannot address the real prob-
lem of the individual’s “auto-negativity” is so obvious that one can only wonder
when one reads Laclau first praise Žižek’s flattering recapitulation as “a remark-
able piece” and then announce in his more recent and contentious exchanges with
Žižek that he is brought “close to the conclusion – which was by no means
evident to me when we started this dialogue – that Žižek’s thought is not orga-
nized around a truly political reflection but is, rather, a psychoanalytic discourse
which draws its examples from the politico-ideological field.”

The real prob-
lem, however, is not consistency, but the fact that Laclau’s later criticism applies
squarely to his own work.

Linda Zerilli has perceived the danger here more quickly than Laclau himself.
She tries to defend his position by arguing that Žižek misunderstands Laclau’s
conception of antagonism and makes it less political than it is. Although “Laclau
himself seems to accept Žižek’s appropriation of his (and Mouffe’s) work,” she
argues that this acceptance is inconsistent with Laclau’s claims elsewhere that
“in our conception of antagonism . . . denial [of identity] does not originate from
the ‘inside’ of identity itself.” While this may well be inconsistent, the fact is
that Žižek is not projecting his own, more Lacanian notion of antagonism onto
Laclau. Laclau holds that antagonism as the experience of the “constitutive
outside” is – as the phrase implies – both internal and external to the subject. One
cannot simply drop one of these claims and retain any theoretical force to
Laclau’s arguments. In her own essay Zerilli tries to finesse this, arguing that “the
task of a critical analysis which takes account both of the heterogeneity of the
subject (psychic division) and the heterogeneity of subjects (social division) . . .
is to relate the complexity of unconscious processes to the repressiveness of
 cultural norms without reducing one to the other. The same goes for antagonism.”
But in the ensuing discussion of feminism as a concrete instance of Laclau’s
ideas, the former moment is simply dropped: Zerilli argues that feminism must
negotiate between respecting plurality and advancing universal claims, without
making any reference to the idea that individual people are “unable to be them-
selves.” Similarly, she argues that Laclau’s much-trumpeted “empty signifier”
(which he argues is the condition of the possibility of politics) is not really
empty. But this reduces Laclau’s discussion of the paradoxes of representation
to the bland claim that in order to assume a leadership role in politics one must
be seen as advancing the interests of other parties, and that the ability to do so is
contingent upon the interests that people happen to have.

This is not to say that Laclau’s ontological arguments lack all political force.
Yannis Stavrakakis argues that the politics that emerges from Lacanian theory
strives as its central “ethical” aim to remind us of the impossible nature of all identity, and thereby “create a thoroughly doubtful society” that will eschew totalitarian attempts to fix a secure and transparent identity. Laclau’s version of this comes out in his discussion of ideology critique. He begins by arguing that we can no longer use the notion of ideology as a way of explaining false consciousness because the idea of false consciousness relies upon an untenable assertion of the subject’s real identity. But, in a characteristically paradoxical gesture, he goes on to argue that we can retain the notion of ideology and of false consciousness, since the subject’s lack of identity is its real identity: “The ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture.” As a number of commentators have observed, this makes the role of political theory almost exclusively critical as opposed to strategic. Though Laclau emphasizes that the negative freedom of the critique of identity must be balanced by “a set of proposals for the positive organization of the social,” and though he insists that Hegemony and Socialist Strategy “was conceived, as the title itself suggests, as a reflection on strategy,” he has almost nothing concrete to say in this regard, nor any criteria by which we might distinguish between political and apolitical or legitimate and illegitimate attempts to negotiate our lack of identity. “Hegemony is, in the final instance, an inherent dimension to all social practice.”

Laclau does acknowledge that the antagonistic struggle for hegemony is not always evident, and that “many relations and identities in our world do not seem to entail any denial: the relationship of a postman delivering a letter, buying a ticket in the cinema, having lunch with a friend in a restaurant, going to a concert.” But such social relations are merely the sediment of antagonistic conflict: “The sedimented forms of ‘objectivity’ make up the field of what we will call the ‘social.’ The moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible constitutes the field of the ‘political.’” The sediment always bears the trace of political conflict, a conflict that can always be “reactivated” or “revealed”: the emergence of the identity of postman, friend, or concert-goer “is only possible through the repression of options that were equally open. . . . To reveal the original meaning of the act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency . . . by showing the terrain of the original violence, of the power relations through which the instituting act took place.” We will pass over for now the somewhat fantastic idea that a postman’s decision to go with a friend to dinner and a show is the result of an “original violence” that it itself, in its “sedimented” form, obscures. Here I want only to emphasize that all relationships and activities are for Laclau implicitly or explicitly antagonistic: “the moment of sedimentation . . . entails a concealment. If objectivity is based on exclusion, the traces of that exclusion will always be somehow present.” Antagonism in this sense therefore ceases having any political descriptive force whatsoever.
If our relations and identities and activities are antagonistic in any other, more substantive sense of the term, this will not be a function of the inability of the parties to be themselves. Indeed, this is borne out by Laclau himself when, in “Post-Marxism Without Apologies,” “New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time,” and his recent book with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, he characterizes antagonism in much more humble terms than those we have seen thus far: if there is going to be antagonism [between workers and capital], its source cannot be internal to the capitalist relations of production, but has to be sought in something that the worker is outside of those relations, something that is threatened by them: the fact that below a certain level of wages the worker cannot live a decent life, and so on. . . . The worker’s attitude vis-à-vis capitalism will depend entirely on how his or her identity is constituted.26

Here identity doesn’t refer to the logical structure of reality, or our inability to “suture” our identity, or indeed identity in any strong sense at all. Instead it just means: what gives rise to “the worker’s attitude” – in this case, the fact that he or she is too poorly paid to lead a decent life. It is no coincidence that this characterization of antagonism returns us to our initial comparison of Laclau and Mouffe’s evicted peasant with the 1844 Manuscripts’ unemployed worker – a comparison that many of their readers may well have thought quite dunderheaded. It would appear that, their allusions to the metaphysics of identity notwithstanding, what they suggested was really what they meant.

Unfortunately, what they meant is incompatible with the more dramatic claims they make for their conception of antagonism, a fact that is evident from the way Laclau vacillates on the question of the relationship between identity and antagonism. A yet more dramatic example of this can be seen in “Theory, Democracy and Socialism.” In an explanation of the logic of hegemony Laclau asserts that, “if identities are exclusively relational, then all relation must, by definition, be internal. The concept of an ‘external relation’ has always seemed inconsistent to me.” Fourteen pages later he writes:

At several points in this volume I have backed up the thesis that antagonism is not established within capitalist relations of production, but between the latter and the identity of the social agents – workers included – outside of them. Thus, if we are dealing with a relationship of exteriority, there are no grounds at all for the workers to be privileged a priori over that of other sectors in the anti-capitalist struggle.27

Here again we shift from antagonism (not) constituting the identity of the agent to antagonism acting upon a previously formed identity, with the corresponding contradiction that “external relations” are presented as “inconsistent” while “relationships of exteriority” are presented as obvious facts. Laclau makes a desperate bid to cross the divide this opens up when he rehearses this tale of the underpaid worker in “New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time.” Here he argues that antagonism can be both “the worker’s attitude” towards the poor payment that
oppresses an already formed identity and his “inability to be himself” because “A fall in a worker’s wage . . . denies his identity as a consumer. . . . But the denial of an identity means preventing its constitution as an objectivity.”28 Evidently, we have come a long way from Marx.

The Politics of Ontology

I take it that this disjunction between leftist politics and ontological speculation about the non-identity of the subject is what Judith Butler has in mind when she asks, “Can the ahistorical recourse to the Lacanian bar be reconciled with the strategic question that hegemony poses, or does it stand as a quasi-transcendental limitation on all possible subject-formation and, hence, as indifferent to politics?” As a “subsidiary” to this question she goes on, “What is the status of ‘logic’ in describing social and political process and in the description of subject-formation?”29 Laclau responds:

The ultimate point which makes an exchange between Lacanian theory and the hegemonic approach to politics possible and fruitful is that in both cases, any kind of unfixity, tropic displacement, and so on, is organized around an original lack which, while it imposes an extra duty on all processes of representation – they have to represent not just the determinate ontic content but equally the principle of representability as such – also, as this dual task cannot but ultimately fail in achieving the suture it attempts, opens the way to a series of indefinite substitutions which are the very ground of the radical historian.30

It is because our identity is never “sutured” – that is, never absolutely defined and established – that we constantly need to seek out new identifications. One thinks here of Sartre’s waiter in Being and Nothingness. Having failed to become a waiter by “performing” one, he is driven to take on some new identity – which will in turn inevitably collapse. In taking on an identity we assert not just that we have a particular identity, but that we have an identity at all. For Laclau this is not simply a logical entailment but instead two distinct moments of the process of identification. This is presented as a direct result of his commitment to the view that the subject is never able to be itself but rather *is* at its heart a lack of identity. The subject as lack is revealed in the antagonistic struggle with the other, a struggle that makes possible precisely what it denies: the assertion or representation of an identity. But because this assertion or representation is made by the subject as lack, it must first assert or represent itself as a subject that is *not* primordial lack. That is, on Laclau’s analysis, it must represent “representability” as such:

If representability is made possible/impossible by a primordial lack, no ontic content can ultimately monopolize the ontological function of representing representability as such (in the same way that, as I have tried to show, the function of *ordering*, in Hobbes, cannot be the privilege of any concrete social order – it is not
an attribute of a good society, as in Plato, but an ontological dimension whose connection with particular ontic arrangements is, of its own nature, contingent.\textsuperscript{31}

This radical contingency is the mark of freedom: “A free society is not one where a social order has been established that is better adapted to human nature, but one which is more aware of the contingency and historicity of any order.”\textsuperscript{32} In drawing our attention to it, Laclau is therefore expanding upon our freedom as well as attempting to clarify what this freedom is and is not. This attempt bears close analysis, as it is an extension as well as a defense of Laclau’s earlier use of antagonism as both an ontological and a political category. Here we should focus on his repeated claim that Hobbes is the best model for the political ontology of decision that he has in mind.\textsuperscript{33} The fact that Hobbes’ contract theory has two distinct moments – leaving the state of war and choosing the form of the sovereign – is clearly the ground for this claim. Examining the political implications of Hobbes’ distinction between these two moments will allow us to see if Laclau is looking in the right place for an ontology that will support his commitment to radical democracy.

In a discussion of decisionism after Hegel in the \textit{Ticklish Subject}, Slavoj Žižek takes up the example of Hobbes and the choice for order as such in terms very similar to those used by Laclau.\textsuperscript{34} Žižek argues that what is important and in fact definitively modern about the work of Carl Schmitt is the formalism of his decisionism: the decision of Schmitt’s sovereign “is not a decision for some concrete order, but primarily the decision for the formal principle of order as such. The concrete content of the imposed order is arbitrary, dependent on the Sovereign’s will.” Žižek traces this prioritizing of the principle of order over its concrete content back to Hobbes, and quite correctly argues that it is radically anti-traditional. The legitimacy of “the old ways” may be asserted, but on the authority of a sovereign that is radically distinct from them. In thereby severing legitimacy and authority, this mediation renders our relation with the substance of tradition arbitrary and uncertain – which goes some way towards explaining the violence and hysteria of modern conservatism’s assertion of its commitments. What is significant here is Žižek’s observation that “modern conservatism, even more than liberalism, assumes the lesson of the dissolution of the traditional set of values and/or authorities” – that is, the decisionist structure of law.\textsuperscript{35} This seems quite right. After all, it is conservatives who are calling out not just for a particular form of order but, in Richard Nixon’s phrase, “Law and Order” as such. Ralph Nader may only be deluding himself, but he does not \textit{think} that is his goal, hence he doesn’t talk much about it.

What accounts for the perspicaciousness of modern conservatism here? On Laclau’s account, the relationship between the “ontological” choice for order and the “ontic” choice for a particular form of order is contingent and wholly open. But this is not quite right. As we saw in our discussion above, this is true of liberals and left-leaning peasants: \textit{their} choices of which “ontic” struggles to engage
in are not in any way determined by their “ontological” decisions for order and identity as such. But conservatives are in a position to reason from analogy from the ontological to the ontic. And, as a lawyer will tell you, reasoning by analogy is better than not reasoning at all. If we accept the idea that order as such proceeds from an ungrounded decision that eschews the appeal to norms and standards, it is perfectly reasonable to conclude that any particular concrete order should mimic this structure. Moreover, there is not simply an analogy between the “ontic” and the “ontological” here. We can see this if we take seriously Laclau’s repeated use of Hobbes as the privileged example of the political version of the ontological distinction. Though Hobbes is often described as a liberal, and though he acknowledges that his political sovereign need not be a monarch but might even be a democratic assembly, the fact remains that his democratic assembly would rule as a sovereign. Jean Hampton has argued persuasively that Hobbes’ admission that the sovereign need not be a monarch is inconsistent with his argument from the state of nature for sovereignty as such: “If [the members of a sovereign democratic assembly] could not cooperate outside of government, how could we expect them to cooperate inside a government?”36 Hobbes’ defense (or assumption) is that the democratic assembly is no longer a “multitude” but a sovereign unity:

And if the Representative consist of many men, the voyce of the greater number, must be considered as the voyce of them all. For if the lesser number pronounce (for example) in the Affirmative, and the greater in the Negative, there will be Negatives more than enough to destroy the Affirmatives; and thereby the excesse of Negatives, standing uncontradicted, are the only voyce the Representative hath.37

This is no longer a clamor of different voices and perspectives, but the same “reckoning” of desire and aversion that individual people and animals perform: “When in the mind of man, Appetites, and Aversions, Hopes, and Feares, concerning one and the same thing, arise alternately . . . continued till the thing be either done, or thought impossible, is that we call DELIBERATION.”38 The crucial move here is the adoption of an arithmetic model (the binary scale) in which different positions are registered as plusses and minuses that correspond to one another and thus can perfectly cancel one another out, as opposed to articulated statements that need to be judged and interpreted. Hobbes has us deliberating like computers rather than citizens. Hobbes’ “democratic” sovereign, in other words, lacks the central feature of democracy, its celebration of plurality. Consider in this regard Aristotle’s defense of polity as a form of government: “when all meet together, the people may thus become something like a single person, who as he has many feet, many hands, and many senses, may also have many qualities of character and intelligence.”39 In a democracy, different people have different things to offer, and the paradigmatic political act is the deliberation of the assembly and not the legislation of the sovereign. Hobbes’ democratic sovereign, as the univocal source of law, will not reflect this. The initial decision
for order as such decisively structures the secondary decision for a particular kind of order. Hence, Laclau’s choice of Hobbes as the exemplar of the political ontological difference ill serves his own commitment to radical democracy.  

Given the problems we have already found in Laclau’s attempt to fuse his political and ontological commitments in the theory of antagonism, we might conclude that the turn to Hobbes and the attempt to develop a political version of the ontological difference are simply false steps on his part. Certainly, he sounds more Aristotelian than Hobbesian when he argues that “ethical decision-making principles must be based on open processes of constant debate.” The question, however, is whether his political theory is compatible with such commitments. In this regard it is significant that the companion to the logic of difference and antagonism that we have been discussing thus far is the logic of equivalence. On Laclau’s account, hegemonic politics involves the uniting of various factions around a common center in opposition to a reviled Other. The common center here is an “empty signifier,” as the above analysis requires: if it were not, the community identity forged in this antagonistic conflict would not (for Laclau) be a freely assumed one. The relevant feature here is that the members of the community qua members of the community are, Laclau says again and again, equivalent with one another: “the function of the differential signifiers is to renounce their differential identity in order to represent the purely equivalential [sic] identity of a communitarian space.” In contrast, the citizens of Aristotle’s polity are all citizens, but they are precisely not equivalent for this reason. The same point can be made in terms of the ontic/ontological distinction analyzed above, which in his most recent work Laclau describes as the distinction between the normative and the ethical. As an ungrounded decision, the ethical/ontological choice is made in “a moment of madness.” It can speak to, but by definition not respond to, the ontic norms of a given community. Laclau argues that the fact that any given ethical act is evaluated and either accepted or rejected by members of an ethical community distinguishes his position from decisionism. But note that (a) all of the ontic norms of a given community will themselves be the result or “sediment” of ethical/ontological “moments of madness”; and (b) the “dialogue” that this makes possible can only go in one direction: in the manner of Rousseau, norms are there only to acclaim or not acclaim the ethical decision.  

None of this is to suggest that Laclau is anything but sincere in his defense of radical democracy. What it does suggest is that the “logic” he is discussing runs away with him. We can see this in his use of National Socialism as an example of the distinction between the decision for order and the concrete order that emerges from that decision. Laclau’s focus here is on “the German economic crisis of the 1920s . . . and its devastating effects on the middle classes.” According to him, in this situation “all routine expectations – even the sense of self-identity – had been entirely shattered,” and it was this general collapse that made possible the rise of National Socialism:
Nazi discourse was the only one in the circumstances that addressed the problems experienced by the middle classes as a whole and offered a principle of their interpretation. . . . No other discourse presented itself as a real hegemonic alternative. . . . The mere fact that it [presented] itself as the embodiment of a fullness [was] enough to ensure its acceptance. The discourse of a ‘new order’ is often accepted by several sectors, not because they particularly like its content but because it is the discourse of an order.\textsuperscript{45}

Laclau’s claims here are at the very least exaggerated. As Alan Bullock points out, “Hitler came to office in 1933 as the result, not of any irresistible revolutionary or national movement sweeping him into power, nor even of a popular victory at the polls, but as part of a shoddy political deal with the ‘Old Gang.’”\textsuperscript{46} On the one hand, Hitler was able to capitalize upon this deal and use his position to rally many Germans behind him by developing power structures that made them dependent upon him, by compromising and enriching them by his policies, and by succeeding as brilliantly as he did in his early aggressive foreign policy maneuvers.\textsuperscript{47} On the other, what popularity Hitler did enjoy was hardly limited to those whose identities might be “sutured” if he assumed power, as the examples of Getrude Stein and other non-German supporters of Hitler make plain. More basically, National Socialism was obviously not the only ideology offered at the time “that addressed the problems experienced by the middle classes as a whole and offered a principle of their interpretation.” Why, then, does Laclau describe National Socialism in this way? One reason might be an interpretation of “addressing the problems” faced by a class “as a whole” that, as argued above, silently determines what sorts of concrete order will truly represent order. The democratic elements in Weimar can’t be seen as offering an (ontological) order because their (ontic) order represented a Hobbesian multitude rather than a sovereign.

This example also highlights a potential drawback of Laclau’s use of identity as a prism through which to understand all political action: the focus on identity will be undermined if political problems cannot be understood primarily in terms of the loss, constitution, and negotiation of identity. But is it really true that “the sense of self-identity [of the German middle class] had been entirely shattered” in the Weimar years?\textsuperscript{48} Siegfried Kracauer’s subtle analyses of and conversations with the “salaried masses” of the time make plain how strong the sense of class identity was among members of the middle class whose changing workplace structures left them with almost nothing to justify it:

Even if the capitalist intermediate strata today already share the destiny of the proletariat, the majority have nonetheless not yet abandoned their bourgeois ideology. . . . They would like to defend differences, the acknowledgment of which obscures their situation; they devote themselves to an individualism that would be justified if only they could still shape their fate as individuals.\textsuperscript{49}

No doubt, Kracauer’s work also addresses the question of identity, as can be seen in the discussion of the middle-class desire for \textit{völkisch} culture in “The Revolt of
the Middle Classes.” But it does so in the context of a broader critique of *Ratio*
as an instrumental form of reason.⁵⁰ In contrast, Laclau argues that we are not
justified in “describing the decision [as described above] as irrational [since] the
whole distinction between rational and irrational is of little use.” “Rational” is just
a name for moves made according to the rules of any particular “language-game”
– rules which themselves are neither rational nor irrational.⁵¹ This is directly rele-
vant to his use of National Socialism as an example. Laclau goes on from the
passage cited immediately above to note that not “any discourse putting itself
forward as the embodiment of a fullness will be accepted. The acceptance of a
discourse depends on its credibility, and this will not be granted if its proposals
clash with the basic proposals informing the group.” So presumably the anti-
Semitism of the Nazis added to their “credibility,” as it didn’t clash with the
“proposals informing the group” of middle-class Germans.⁵²

Would one be wrong to think here of C.L. Stevenson?

When ethical disagreement is not rooted in disagreement in belief [concerning
facts], is there any method by which it may be settled? If one means by ‘method’ a
rational method, then there is no way. [But one] may build up, by the contagion of
[one’s] feelings, an influence which will modify [the other’s] temperament. . . . It is
persuasive, not empirical or rational.⁵³

Certainly Laclau’s understanding of persuasion resembles Stevenson’s. In
“Community and its Paradoxes” he argues that, except in extreme cases such as
rape, “it is simply not possible to oppose force and persuasion given that persua-
sion is one form of force.” And he goes so far as to identify his central concept of
hegemony with “this peculiar operation called persuasion which is only consti-
tuted through its inclusion, within itself, of its violent opposite.” In the end any
attempt at persuasion that goes beyond the recognition of self-evident truths (“the
Pythagorean theorem . . . is simply shown, without any need for persuasion”) or
algorithms is a move in “a war of position.”⁵⁴ We have evidently come a long way
from a rhetoric such as Aristotle’s, with its careful distinctions between *ethos*,
*logos*, and *pathos* appeals and its celebration of “rational speech” and argument
as a way to achieve impartial judgment: “We must be able to employ persuasion,
just as strict reasoning can be employed, on opposite sides of a question, not in
order that we may in practice employ it both ways . . . but in order that we may
see what the facts are [and draw] conclusions impartially.”⁵⁵ Consequently we are
also far indeed from the Aristotle who celebrates *phronesis* (the name of Laclau
and Mouffe’s edited series with Verso) and who begins the *Nicomachean Ethics*
by reminding his students that “Our discussion will be adequate if its degree of
clarity fits the subject-matter; for we should not seek the same degree of exact-
ness in all sorts of arguments alike, any more than in the products of different
crafts.”⁵⁶

In this context, one must ask to which of Laclau’s camps – force, the recogni-
tion of self-evident truths, and algorithms – ought we to assign education? The
most promising candidate would surely be persuasion. But Laclau describes the process of persuading someone to change his opinion as one in which I want not “to develop his belief but to cancel it out of existence.” If I succeed, “all I will have done is to convince [the other person] that he becomes my ally in killing his belief.” 57 Is this what we do when we teach our students that their intuitions about, say, justice and equality are not self-evidently true, but need to be refined and justified through a process of exposure to the historical record and to alternative political and philosophical arguments? Without suggesting that politics is nothing more than a form of education, I would argue that similar questions are raised by Laclau’s account of the nature of political debate. Consider in this regard his characterization, in the same essay, of “recent debates in America concerning pornography.” Laclau argues that it is naive to think that there is a rational way to arbitrate between the claim that pornography “offends women” (where that presumably is more than a statement of fact) and the claim that it is a form of “artistic expression.” “Obviously,” he writes,

a balance has to be established between antagonistic demands. But it is important to stress that the balance is not going to be the result of having found a point at which both demands harmonize with each other. . . . No, the antagonism of the two demands is, in that context, ineradicable, and the balance consists of limiting the effects of both so that a sort of social equilibrium – something very different from a rational harmonization – can be reached. 58

This quite Hobbesian account of the determination of the ontic, concrete political order seems fair enough if all we are talking about is striking a balance between one person being “offended” and another expressing himself. But while this might describe the obscenity trial and public outcry over Ulysses well enough, it passes over many of the significant features of “recent debates in America concerning pornography.” Here pornography is not just said to be offensive, but to be offensive for good reasons, among which are that the climate it creates encourages violence against women and degrades and marginalizes them. For someone who accepts this, it seems absurd to be told that such a position must accept having its “effects” “limited” in the same way that a patently bad position (e.g., that the contents of Hustler are a form of artistic expression) should. 59 Not only does this misrepresent the situation, but the general acceptance of this characterization of political debate allows the far right to distort the “balance” by exaggerating their own position, thereby dragging the “center” to the right – as in fact the right in America does. In an equilibrium extremes cancel one another out, and Rush Limbaugh and Ollie North will cancel out a lot.

The most obvious way to resist such manipulation would be to argue that we are seeking more than an equilibrium that lacks substantive content or rational criteria. In this regard one is as struck by what Laclau’s article on “Discourse” in the Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy omits as by what it contains. 60 In a discussion of the transcendental move from asking after
facts to inquiring after their conditions of possibility as made by Kant and Wittgenstein, there is no mention of knowledge or skepticism. In a review of Foucault’s analyses of discourse and power, there is no mention of his “return to knowledge,” power/knowledge, or the role of truth in disciplinary practices. Indeed, throughout the article the word “truth” does not appear, nor do names such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Apel, or Habermas. All of this suggests an approach to political discourse that is concerned with the production of meaningful statements at the expense of a consideration of their reception and evaluation as warranted or unwarranted, justified or unjustified, true or false. This is all the more significant as the article is a review not just of his own account of the “war of position,” but of what Laclau presents as the major alternatives to it in discourse theory. But even Machiavelli, who arguably begins the equation of politics and war, insists that “it cannot be wrong to defend one’s arguments founded upon reason, without employing force or authority.” Is he really wrong to make such a distinction? Is politics really a sphere that should be or even could be free of the distinction between good and bad reasons? And if not, are we wise to treat what makes reasons for a particular political position good or bad as some sort of empirical dross that falls outside the purview of political theory or discourse theory? If, his evident left-liberal commitments notwithstanding, Laclau answers these questions in the affirmative, he does so on the basis of his political/ontological theory of antagonism. It is both a victory and a loss for him, then, that this theory is as problematic and inconsistent as it is.

NOTES

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1. While most of Laclau’s works cited here were not written in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe, he acknowledges them as extensions of the common project announced in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985). The fact that I will, for purposes of convenience, write of Laclau as the author of these ideas is not meant to deny this fact, or the fact that Mouffe has developed these ideas in her own way.


3. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 122. Compare Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony,” in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 72: “As we have repeatedly argued, antagonisms are not objective relations but the point where the limit of all objectivity is shown.”


7. For a lucid account of the argument to be made here, see Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).


It is true that according to Marx the worker’s need for a job and his need for a particular job collapse to the extent that his ability to make minimal and constricted choices about his employer does not make his “choice” to work for wages a free one. But this is so because of historical circumstances that can change, not because of the metaphysical structure of identity.


All three of these quotations are from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 125.


Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3e, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 1, section 271. It is ironic that Laclau and Mouffe refer in the context of their peasant example (123–4) with qualified approval to Karl Popper’s “What is Dialectic?,” as the central argument of that piece is that if one accepts Hegelian dialectical logic one must abandon the principle of non-contradiction; and “if two contradictory statements are admitted, any statement whatever must be admitted” and seen as following from them (Conjectures and Refutations: *The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 317). Similarly, any (antagonistic) state of affairs is compatible with and follows from the inability of the peasant to be himself: “It is because the peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner,” the nephew, and so on. See in this regard Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 35 and 170ff. on the difficulties of “applying” Lacanian ideas to particular examples.


Ibid., 12 and 13 and Laclau, “Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?”, *Emancipation(s)*, 44.

Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), 112 and 96ff. This approach to the political can be traced back at least as far as Sartre’s essay on Anti-Semitism. I discuss its strengths and weaknesses in “Jean-Luc Nancy and the Myth of the Common,” *Constellations* 7, no. 2 (June 2000): 272–95. It is also criticized by Žižek – ironically, in his most Laclauian work: on Žižek’s account, the “belief in the liberating, anti-totalitarian force of laughter, of ironic distance” is “almost the exact opposite” of what we need, as repressive political regimes today rest upon a cynicism that ironic laughter only confirms. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 28.

“Beyond Emancipation” Laclau argues that “to be oppressed is part of my identity as someone who has given up and (rightfully) accepted second-class citizenship” (*Emancipation(s)*, 17). Compare Nicos Mouzelis, “Marxism or Post-Marxism,” *New Left Review* 167 (January/February 1988): 115 and Allen Hunter, “Post-Marxism and the New Social Movements,” *Theory and Society* 17 (1988). One reason that Laclau and Mouffe may not initially have noted this problem is that, as Michele Barrett observantly remarks, they reintroduce the notion of the “anti-natural” when it serves their purposes (Barrett, 1998, 569).
“Ideology, Politics, Hegemony: From Gramsci to Laclau and Mouffe,” in Mapping Ideology, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 253–54). This may in part account for Anna Marie Smith’s glossing over of the problem. It is not “inauthentic” for minorities to be conservative, she writes: “Instead of charging them with false consciousness, we would prefer to say that radical democratic pluralists have the better moral positions and arguments” (Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary (London: Routledge, 1998), 91). Which arguments these might be is not clarified by Laclau, who speaks instead of our “preferences” (“Structure, History and the Political,” 204–5).


24. Rogers Smith has pointed out to me that this idea is not as fantastic as it might seem: the United States has the postal system it does in part because it needed to establish a reliable system of communication between its institutional center and the West it was very violently conquering. Similarly, the food eaten in the US and the way it is eaten reflect an often violent political history – and present. But the key words here are in part and often. There is no reason these empirical historical facts should be seen as more metaphysically significant than less dramatic ones, like the desire to promote commerce or romance. And it is simply misleading to suggest that one’s decision to attend this concert with this person is necessarily a violent repression of the alternatives. It might be, if, say, one is repressing an almost overwhelming desire to cheat on one’s wife by attending another show with another person. But even here one hesitates to compare this “violence” to the ethnic cleansing of North America. As we shall see in the sequel, if Laclau is to defend his claim concerning “the terrain of the original violence” of all identity, he will have to do so on the level of the ontological choice of identity as such.


29. Judith Butler, “Questions,” Contingency, Hegemony, Universality, 5 and 6. Laclau’s repeated references to logic involve him in some difficulties. He says he uses the term in the sense of “the logic of the market.” But the extreme formalism of his argumentation belies this reference to general rules of thumb that are followed with some regularity in a given field of endeavor. Moreover, Laclau’s more detailed explanations of his understanding of logic are difficult to follow. In his most recent work he dismisses “the very idea of a general logic” and goes on to identify “social logic” with both “a ‘grammar’ or cluster of rules” and with what he and Mouffe “have called ‘discourse’” (“Identity and Hegemony,” Contingency, Hegemony, Universality, 76). Later in the same volume he cites Wittgenstein’s argument that “the question ‘What is a word really?’ can be analogous to ‘What is a piece in chess?’” and claims that “the rules of the game in chess are what I call the logic of chess-playing. They are purely internal to that particular game. . . . In political terms, [this] means that any hegemonic formation has its own internal logic, which is nothing more than the ensemble of language games which it is possible to play within it” (“Constructing Universality,” 283). A logic is thus “purely internal” to a “particular game” and at the same time identified with the ability to play “an ensemble of language games.” This apparent contradiction is further complicated when on the same page Laclau “makes more precise” the distinction between grammar and logic (which as noted he had earlier identified) by identifying the former but not the latter with “the set of rules governing a particular ‘language game’.”


35. Žižek, The Ticklish Subject, 114.
38. Ibid., 127.
39. Aristotle, Politics, 1281a. Compare Arendt’s argument that “no man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth” (The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 234). Ironically, Zerilli cites Arendt’s insistence on this point (7 and 12) without recognizing that Laclau’s pluralism does not, as it were, go all the way down. Compare “Minding the Gap,” 36.
40. As Laclau repeatedly uses the language of Heidegger’s ontological distinction in this regard, it might be helpful here to recall Heidegger’s admission and claim: “But does not a definite ontic interpretation of authentic existence, a factual ideal of Da-sein, underlie our ontological interpretation of the existence of Da-sein? Indeed” (Being and Time, tr. J. Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), section 310; compare section 266 and see Žižek’s brilliant observation that Heidegger can attribute an “inner truth and greatness” to the National Socialist movement because, as flawed as it was, National Socialism has both an ontic and an ontological form: “the fact remains that Heidegger never speaks of the ‘inner greatness’ of, say, liberal democracy – as if liberal democracy is just that, a superficial world-view with no underlying dimension of assuming one’s epochal Destiny” (The Ticklish Subject, 13). To assume one’s epochal Destiny just is to realize the ontic in the ontic. 
42. Laclau, “What do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” 41.
43. Laclau’s commitment to the usefulness of Kierkegaard’s description of the moment of decision as one of madness is strong enough that he cites it as well in “Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony” (Deconstruction and Pragmatism, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 52) and was still citing it in his presentation at the Castoriadis conference at Columbia University in the winter of 2000.
44. Laclau, Identity and Hegemony,” 79–86.
46. Bullock, Hitler: A Study in Tyranny, Abridged Edition (New York: Harper, 1971), 137. This is not to say that his rise was simply fortuitous. See in this regard Joachim C. Fest’s comments on Germany’s political culture of the time in The Face of the Third Reich, tr. M. Bullock (New York: Penguin, 1979), 455ff.
47. Ian Kershaw’s “The Nazi State: an Exceptional State?“ New Left Review 173 (January/February 1989), is particularly helpful here, as its focus, like Laclau’s, is on National Socialism as a “political religion.”
48. Indeed, we might ask if this is really Laclau’s considered opinion, given that more than twenty years ago he criticized interpretive approaches that try “to explain fascism in terms of the isolated individual [who] has broken his ties of social belonging and appears as an undifferentiated mass in the face of the action of demagogues” (Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology,” 85–86).
49. Kracauer, The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany, tr. Q. Hoare (London: Verso, 1998), 81. In the first of these sentences Kracauer is quoting Emil Lederer and Jakob Marschak, whom he credits with first directing attention to the problem of the “salaried employees.”
51. Laclau, “Community and Its Paradoxes,” Emancipation(s), 112. Laclau here as throughout his work relies uncritically upon Rorty’s interpretation of Wittgenstein. For a discussion of this interpretation’s shortcomings, see Hilary Putnam, “Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?” in Putnam, Pragmatism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), particularly 53, note 8: “Suppose a terrestrial rock were transported to the moon and released. Aristotle’s physics clearly implies that it would fall to the earth, while Newton’s physics gives the correct prediction (that it would stay on the moon, or fall to the surface of the moon if lifted and released). There is a certain magnificent indifference to detail in saying grandly that Aristotle’s physics and Newton’s are ‘incommensurable.’”

52. “New Reflections on the Revolution in Our Time,” 66. Compare “Letter to Aletta,” 171–73 in the same volume. Laclau’s blithe disregard for the reasons for the conditions of such acceptance is indicated when, in “The Uses of Equality” (10), he lists the advantages of his understanding of a given political limit as representing an unstable assumption by a particular “ontic” content of the “ontological” task of defining the possible and the impossible. One of these advantages is that “you have certain rules to decide what will count as a valid inclusion or exclusion; it will depend on the actual hegemonic configuration of a certain community.” Contrary to Laclau’s celebration of the politics of resistance, this suggests that the rule determining validity is that one should accept the dictates of the group in power.


54. Laclau, “Community and Its Paradoxes,” 113, 117, and 115. Laclau does not explain on what grounds an exception is made for extreme cases such as rape; and it is not clear how he would distinguish between date-rape and seduction. It would seem that the distinction commonly made between force and persuasion will simply have to be made again, but this time between different kinds of force.

55. Aristotle, Rhetoric, tr. W. Rhys (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 1355a. Compare Kracauer on the necessity of restoring “the dignity of reason” as opposed to Ratio in “Revolt of the Middle Classes,” 127 and Kenneth Burke’s reminder that “Persuasion involves choice, will; it is directed to a man only insofar as he is free” (A Rhetoric of Motives (New York: Prentice Hall, 1952), 50). Given Laclau’s fondness for citing Wittgenstein in support of his claims, one should also consider in this regard Wittgenstein, On Certainty, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe and D. Paul (New York: Harper, 1969), 608–612, where Wittgenstein speaks of “combating” a foreign language game by attempting to “persuade” those who play it to play our game instead. While this appears to resemble Laclau’s analysis, it is crucial to note that (a) the dispute in question is a quite extraordinary one; (b) Wittgenstein asks himself if he would be “right or wrong” to engage in such combat, implying that an impartial stand is possible; and (c) the word he uses is Überredung rather than Überzeugung, the former carrying a negative, coercive connotation that the latter does not. Not all persuasion will leave reasons behind. Contrast in this regard On Certainty, 262, where Wittgenstein writes that “trying to give [someone] a picture of our world [is] a kind of Überredung” with 379–80, where he says he might say that nothing in the world will “convince [überzeugen]” him that his foot is not a foot.

56. Nicomachean Ethics, tr. T.H. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1094b. Laclau does suggest in passing that he sees politics as involving the exercise of a “weakened rationality” such as Aristotle’s phronesis (“Building a New Left,” 194). But aside from another passing distinction between the reasonable and the rational in the same volume (31), the suggestion is not developed, and the main lines of Laclau’s discussion are, as the citations above indicate, wholly at odds with it.


58. Ibid., 115, emphasis added.

59. Examples can be multiplied indefinitely here: should proponents of gun control in America “have their effects limited” by the paranoid views of a militia member who believes he needs to be heavily armed to defend himself against a Zionist Occupation Government that is hounding him with black helicopters? The point is not that there will be conclusive arguments in every case, but that in every case we need to make a distinction between better and worse reasons, something that
is considerably different from the arithmetic reckoning involved in achieving an equilibrium; and that such a distinction is perfectly possible, as the above evaluation of Laclau’s analysis of Hitler’s rise to power makes plain.


