

## “POST-MARXIST POPULISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY”

Alejandra M. Salinas<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* This essay presents an outline of the basic ideas put forward by the Marxist theoretical family in the last decades, and it analyzes the case of philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1935-2013). It points out the main resemblances and divergences between his work and the other Marxist formulations: the desire for political hegemony and the elimination of capitalism reveals its *Marxist* nature. The rejection of economic essentialism and historical determinism shows its *Post-Marxist* traits. Laclau’s work is ultimately a variety of Marxism in that it advances an anti-capitalist, anti-liberal theory, methodological collectivism, and unlimited State power. His apology of the “subversion and dislocation” of social life, the defense of unbridled political antagonism, and a hegemonic government confront the core of classical liberal theory: the protection of free cooperative individual exchanges, the rule of law, and the design of a minimal government.

Since the mid-1980s, the demise of the Soviet-bloc regimes accelerated a number of diverse intellectual reactions which had been in the works during the precedent decades, in an attempt to offer a revision of the shortcomings and/or to explain the discrepancies between historical practices and theoretical Marxism. The latter can be grouped into four main perspectives: the classical, rooted in a strict defense of Marxist economics; the Neo-Marxist approach to cultural analysis; the Analytical, which emphasizes normative considerations, and the Post-Marxist, anchored in the political construction of social antagonism. Although they differ in their evaluative and normative premises, all groups share an ultimate goal: the examination of possible avenues to advance the main ideal of Marxism, a society where capitalism disappears or is subject to stringent political controls.

With this intellectual scheme in mind, we present an outline of the basic ideas put forward by these groups; secondly, we analyze the particular case of philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1935-2013), pointing out the main resemblances and divergences between his theory and the other Marxist formulations. Last, we offer a reading of his work, arguing that his proposition that political action be considered as the “subversion and dislocation”<sup>2</sup> of social life and the architect of a permanent antagonism confronts the core of classical liberal theory: the defense of free cooperative individual exchanges, the culture of legality, and the design of a limited government. Looking at his subversive political philosophy might help explain the global growth of violent protests, aggressive public discourses, growing civic disorder, and a growing sensation of uncertainty about the future of liberal democracy.

### **The Marxist theoretical family**

Classical or orthodox Marxism was built upon a set of basic premises tied to philosophical materialism, economic determinism, history as the unfolding of class struggles, the case

---

<sup>1</sup> Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, UCA. Email: salinas22000@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Dislocation and capitalism, social imaginary and democratic revolution,” in David Howarth ed., *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, populism and critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 46.

for revolution, and the faith in the possibility of the advent of a communist society. Such were the views originally advanced, to use Kolakowski terms, by the “Founders” and their followers of the “Golden Era” (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky *et al.*).<sup>3</sup> In the case of Marx, his “Theses on Feuerbach” posits materialism as a “sensuous human activity,” social change as a “revolutionary practice,” human essence as “the ensemble of the social relations,” a “rational solution” to human practical problems, and the mandate for philosophers to change the world.<sup>4</sup> Concordantly, his economic outlook was based on the materialistic content of value as measured by the labor input, and a critique of social relations of exploitation, alienation, and subordination, that he associated with capitalism. In said system, he argued, laborers are exploited by property-owners, who obtain their profits from the difference between the labor paid for, and the sales of the product of that labor. Such profits are not only unjustifiable, so the argument goes, but the whole process would lead to widespread impoverishment, on the grounds that capital accumulation and technological innovation would cause growing unemployment and social revolts.<sup>5</sup> Despite the inevitability of its internal contradictions, the collapse of capitalism had to be “shortened, simplified and concentrated” by means of “revolutionary terror,”<sup>6</sup> after which the (finally) rational organization of society would ensue. The *Communist Manifesto* is a compendium of these ideas and a call to the working class to lead social struggles.<sup>7</sup> On Marx’s terms, it was a “law of all history” that the working class would get impoverished up until the advent of Communism. Once “the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly” in the future society, the distribution of wealth would be finally just: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”<sup>8</sup>

In this century, classical Marxism has remained loyal to the conviction that social demands have a materialistic basis (seen as a determinant of social life), that class struggle is a central notion, and that the inequality of wealth would disappear in the higher phase of the communist society.<sup>9</sup> After the failure of twentieth-century communist experiences, orthodox Marxists dropped the insistence on comprehensive state social control, but they retained its hope and its spirits: they call for an “anti-capitalist revolutionary movement” followed by the “social command over both the production and distribution of surpluses”, and they believe in the possibility of an economic organization where production and self-realization are best achieved “in service to others.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown*, 3 Vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978/1981).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), pp. 13-15. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

<sup>5</sup> David Prychitko, “Marxism,” *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics* (2010), accessed online at: <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/Marxism.html>

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, “The Victory of the Counter-Revolution in Vienna,” *Neue Rheinische Zeitung, No. 136* (1848), accessed online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/11/06.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 18, accessed online at:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1875), accessed online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review* 49 (2008). Étienne Balibar, “The Idea of Revolution: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” University of Columbia Law Blog (2016), accessed online at: <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/uprising1313/etienne-balibar-the-idea-of-revolution-yesterday-today-and-tomorrow/>

<sup>10</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 223-233.

Underlying these premises is, as Hayek puts it, the “scientific” conviction that social processes can be studied as objective “wholes” determined by intelligible laws, and that they can be directed by “conscious” human control and centralized planning: “Marxism more than any of the others has become the vehicle through which this result of scientism has gained so wide an influence.”<sup>11</sup> This rationalistic pretense to organize social institutions describes the classical Marxist mentality, but it also permeates the literature of Neo-Marxism, initially associated with the work of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse *et al*), and later extended to include thinkers such as Lukács, Sartre and Althusser, who remained committed to the communist project. Most Neo-Marxist authors employ methodological collectivism, but they discard the postulates about the materialistic and deterministic nature of social life. Consequently, they move away from economics and closer to philosophy, sociology, and psychology in order to explore the cultural traits of Western society and to uncover the alleged processes of oppression, alienation and false-consciousness underlying its dynamics.<sup>12</sup> What Neo-Marxism retains from classical Marxists is the disposition “to know the whole”, and a belief in “the essential unity of mankind” and its “common destiny;” therefore, they look at history as the unfolding of a structured “totality.”<sup>13</sup> However, Neo-Marxists replace the economic lens of totality with an outlook about the irrationality underlying social relations and cultural manifestations, in the face of which they promote a critical theory to bring these alleged dark aspects of modern Western life to light.<sup>14</sup> In Fromm’s vision, to take an example, individuals unconsciously demand social settings that may provide a sense of security and protection and, to that end, he believes that social and economic central planning would ensure more desirable results than under free social exchanges.<sup>15</sup>

There was a later revision of traditional Marxism, of its methodological collectivism and historical inevitability, as well as of its economics based on the labor theory of value and the falling rate of profit. The Analytical Marxists, as they are known, reject these orthodox premises and explore issues about freedom, justice, and equality.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, they were influenced by the “Rawlsian turn,”<sup>17</sup> which put normative considerations in the center of political philosophy. A quick comparison of Analytical Marxists with Rawls presents indeed some shared understanding of the nature and functioning of current economic arrangements. In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls agrees with them in that exploitation is a moral concept, and that “persons are exploited by market imperfections.” However, unlike many Analytical Marxists, in terms of institutional prescriptions Rawls accepts said imperfections on the basis that “what really counts is the workings of the whole system and whether these defects are compensated for

---

<sup>11</sup> F.A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), pp. 38, 53-56, 74, 87-88.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Levine, “A Future for Marxism?” in *Handbook of Political Theory*, eds. Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 47, 59, 61-63, 527.

<sup>14</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework: In Defense of Science and Rationality*, ed. M. A. Notturmo (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> For some of the pioneer works see Jon Elster, “Exploitation, Freedom and Justice,” *Nomos*, 26 (1983), pp. 277-304; G. A. Cohen, “Reconsidering Historical Materialism,” *Nomos*, 26 (1983), pp. 227-251; Robert van der Veen, “The Marxian Ideal of Freedom and the Problem of Justice,” *Philosophica*, 34, 2, (1984), pp. 103-126.

<sup>17</sup> Levine, “A Future for Marxism?,” p.78.

elsewhere.”<sup>18</sup> As is well known, the compensation he has in mind refers to a mechanism of redistribution within a restricted Welfare State. On this front Rawls’ vision contrasts, to take one example, with Van Parijs’ defense of communism to be achieved by means of a basic universal income financed with the redistribution of the “whole social product” (regardless of each person’s contribution).<sup>19</sup> Neither communism nor a universal income belong to the thought of Rawls, who seeks to combine free markets with a political structure inspired by social justice. Instead, Analytical Marxists deny that social justice is compatible with the operation of free markets.

David Gordon’s book on Analytical Marxists presents a good summary and analysis of the thought of Roemer, Elster, and Cohen in regard to the issues of exploitation, freedom and alienation under capitalism. Roemer holds that capitalist exploitation does not arise from the process of production in itself but from initial inequalities in ownership that originate class differences; in a class society, he argues, the better endowed will be parasitic on the work of others.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Cohen, his claim is that workers under capitalism are “collectively unfree” to leave the proletariat (due to lack of job alternatives, *inter alia*), so he calls for a “liberation from class” and the provision of “leisure” in a socialist economy (as opposed to a work-oriented society).<sup>21</sup> In turn, Elster shares the diagnosis about the ills of the market economy but differs about the possible solutions to the problem. Along the lines of the theory of alienation, which is an attempt to explain how capitalism distorts the worker’s consciousness, Elster embraces the ideal of worker cooperatives and participatory decision-making processes as the best arrangement to promote a more creative, self-fulfilling work.<sup>22</sup>

There are two interesting critiques to Analytical Marxism that I want to address here. The first one holds that, since Analytical Marxists take as incorrect the orthodox economic assumption of exploitation (for them, exploitation becomes only a normative concern about equality), the case for Marxism is weakened, if not “tacitly abandoned.”<sup>23</sup> In response to this observation, we could argue that Analytical Marxism does fall within Marxism, even if it differs from or contradicts orthodox assumptions. In other words, despite its unorthodox assumptions, Analytical Marxism is still Marxism. The desire for complete social equality and the elimination of capitalism reveals some kind of Marxist argument, even if it fails to substantiate its case, and even if it offers an incomplete or partial account of how their proposals would work in practice (as is the case with proposals for workers’ joint ownership, which for Nozick overlook important issues such as the entrepreneurial and innovative skills needed to succeed<sup>24</sup>).

The second objection to Analytical Marxism deals with the issue of the initial unequal distribution of endowments as exploitation. Such is Roemer’s view,

---

<sup>18</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice. Revised edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 272.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Van Parijs, *Marxism Recycled* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 3-4, 163.

<sup>20</sup> David Gordon, *Resurrecting Marx: the Analytical Marxists on Exploitation, Freedom, and Justice* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1990), pp. 71-72.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon, *Resurrecting Marx*, pp. 104, 111, 116.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon, *Resurrecting Marx*, pp. 123, 128. See also Erik Olin Wright, “Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias,” *American Sociological Review*, 78, (2013), pp. 6-8.

<sup>23</sup> Levine, “A Future for Marxism?” p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 255-256. For Nozick, workers cooperatives are one of many “patterned communities” and may only be accepted within a libertarian framework, alongside other economic arrangements that individuals may freely choose (p. 316).

reconstructed as follows: “if people start off with unequal amounts of property or skills, the better endowed will not have to work as hard as the worse-endowed to gain the same bundle of goods.”<sup>25</sup> According to Gordon, this argument does not show why this situation amounts to exploitation since it is only a description of a given state of affairs; nor does Roemer make the case for the moral undesirability of inequality.<sup>26</sup> The objections seem to be right about these two omissions, which weaken Roemer’s case for a revision of classical Marxists’ explanation of exploitation. To this, we would only add that it is this type of omission that ironically moves Roemer away from the Analytical pretense and closer to a Post-Marxist stance in which, as we will see below, terminology replaces argumentative logic.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \*

Post-Marxist thinkers find that it is not in the economic or the ethical field where social relations are anchored, but in the realm of language, culture and politics. Against the orthodox stance, Post-Marxism rejects all or most of the following items: the proletariat as the protagonist revolutionary subject; the assertion that social life has a materialistic essence, which leads to economic structural determinism; an eschatology tied to the inevitable realization of a communist order, and dialectics as a logic of “necessary transitions” towards such realization.<sup>28</sup> There are also substantive differences between Post-Marxist and Neo-Marxist stances: while the latter relates to knowing the whole, the essential unity of mankind, and history as a totality, the former relates to anti-foundationalism, social division and not unity, and history as the fragmented and contingent unfolding of diverse social divisions.

Some Post-Marxists focus on the sexual, racial, and ethnic configurations of modern Western societies, and they replace the terms of dictatorship and the bourgeoisie with those of “patriarchy,”<sup>29</sup> “subalternity,”<sup>30</sup> and “decoloniality,”<sup>31</sup> to anchor their vision on social relations based on the exploitation of women, of marginal populations, and of underdeveloped countries, respectively. Along these lines, for J. Butler capitalism is designed to regulate both the mode of production of merchandise and the mode of social reproduction; in such context, gender struggles belong to the cultural as much as to the political camp, since they relate to issues such as a revolt against unpaid work and the need for militant activism.<sup>32</sup>

Briefly put, Post-Marxists focus on the political and ideological tasks tied to the configuration of a new social order, and they regard orthodox Marxism as the “old singular

---

<sup>25</sup> Gordon, *Resurrecting Marx*, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon, *Resurrecting Marx*, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> I paraphrase here Popper’s indictment of Adorno and Habermas that he was a “positivist,” against who he writes: “Terminology does not matter, however. Only it should not be used as an *argument*” (*The Myth of the Framework*, p.76, italics in the original).

<sup>28</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 58-60.

<sup>29</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concept, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *New Left Review* I, 227 (1998).

unilinear model [whose] particular historical class at a particular stage of economic development has proven inadequate; there are many groups excluded from this class [women, the elderly, the young, etc.].”<sup>33</sup> Such is the claim, for instance, of Cultural Studies, an interdisciplinary perspective meant to produce new social meanings by dismantling or opposing the established ones. According to Marchart, the cultural paradigm is mostly concerned with what he calls the “micro-political forms of resistance” (he gives the example of the hippies) as opposed to the experience of “antagonization” associated with the “macro-political” level (e.g. as anti-systemic protest).<sup>34</sup> Following Marchart’s classification, among the macro-political readings Negri and Hardt defend a decentralized resistance against what they consider a globalization that is predatory of “the various forms of the common—ecological, social and biopolitical.” They believe there is potential for the configuration of social relations by means of a global movement united “by internal bonds of solidarity and intersection among struggles.”<sup>35</sup>

Macro-political Post-Marxism is also found in Rancière’s idea about political practices labelled as “dissensus.” The latter should not be understood as pre-existing interests or opinions that are put in a dialogue between opponents, but as a radical division between social groups. In this light, the call for consensus is considered to be the elimination of politics and the triumph of liberal institutions. Liberal contractualism is a fiction, he argues, since it reduces politics to the State, instead of acknowledging that it is rather an “opposition between logics,” a confrontation between those who are part of the community, and those who pass as the “unaccounted” (say, illegal immigrants today).<sup>36</sup>

Another form of macro-political Post-Marxism, but more oriented towards praxis, is the one put forward by Laclau and Mouffe, who have been recognized by their peers as the most influential thinkers in advocating a political Post-Marxist stance.<sup>37</sup> In their path-breaking book published in 1985, *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, the authors contest the model of proletarian struggle and revolution as the foundation of socialist thought. Against the “classic Jacobinism and its different socialist variants” – as they label orthodox Marxism- they defend a radical democracy on the grounds that liberalism is “not the enemy to be destroyed”; if anything, they see the need to extend “the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations.”<sup>38</sup> The radical politics they advocate wants “to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are at the root of numerous relations of subordination,” although the economy is just one area of dispute that joins other fights in the juridical, educational, and cultural spheres towards a comprehensive social reform. In this sense, socialism is only one of the components of their project.<sup>39</sup>

Laclau’s and Mouffe’s proposal takes inspiration in the writings of Gramsci, who believed that the basic socialist concern is not how to access and keep power by

---

<sup>33</sup> Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 301-305, 308-309.

<sup>34</sup> Oliver Marchart, “Elements of Protest: Politics and Culture in Laclau’s theory of populist reason”, *Cultural Studies*, 26, 2-3, (2012), pp. 225, 237-238.

<sup>35</sup> Antonio Negri and Tony Hardt, “Empire, Twenty Years on,” *New Left Review* 120, (2019), pp. 82-83.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 32-42, 79-85.

<sup>37</sup> Göran Therborn, *From Marxism to Post-Marxism* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 141.

<sup>38</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy. Towards a radical democratic politics* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2001), pp. 177, 184-185.

<sup>39</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 178, 185, 192.

revolution, but how to construct a consensus so that the political leader could be passively accepted and supported by the people. Gramsci used the concepts of “hegemony”, “historical block”, “war of position” and the “collective will” as the building blocks for an ideological unity to be achieved through a “moral and intellectual” leadership in charge of the articulation of diverse political, economic, social and cultural elements.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the most relevant concept of the radical project derived from the influence of Gramsci is the one of hegemonic articulation, which replaces the orthodox accent on the mode of production.<sup>41</sup> The hegemonic operation consists in the construction of social identities and actors at the institutional and ideological levels. Against economic essentialism and historical determinism, the Post-Marxist hegemonic logic is tied to an absolute contingency in regard to the choice of the historical and ideological avenues to achieve socialism and social reform. For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is a self-funded political decision, one that recognizes “a form of politics which is founded not upon dogmatic postulation of any ‘essence of the social’, but, on the contrary, on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every ‘essence’, and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism.”<sup>42</sup>

The attempt to put forward a strategy based primordially on contingent, non-essentialist premises was a frontal departure from other theories of Marxism. Against the Neo-Marxist notion of a ‘false consciousness’ permeating individual psychology, and the view of a “true consciousness” in which humanity is “reconciled with itself,” for Post-Marxists consciousness and ideology are the result of a political construction devoid of any appeal to the notion of truth. Besides, the concept of alienation or false consciousness presupposes an individual subject, which is alien to Post-Marxist thought.<sup>43</sup> The case for hegemony also presents a number of arguments against the classical Marxist view: the economy is not “a self-regulated space,” social classes are not “the necessary location of historical interests,” the language of objective interest is “arbitrary,” social actors “lack an ultimate rational identity,” and history follows no necessary movement nor eschatological conception.<sup>44</sup>

Some critics may think that post-Marxism is just another set of theories advocating greater social inclusion in the existing democratic system. In this sense, the articulation of different demands such as gender equality, racial and religious integration, economic regulation and environmental protection could be seen as an operation *within* liberal democracies. However, this is not the case, since Post-Marxists contest and seek to change current political and economic arrangements. Despite any claim to the contrary, their proposal is not an extension of liberal democracy, either in its limited (classical liberal) or in its unlimited (welfarist) versions. The defense of social antagonism and the logic of hegemony are outrightly incompatible with the idea of liberal democracy and the logic of republican institutions, which are the foundations of contemporary Western political systems. For this very reason, Post-Marxism is self-labeled as radical and can be adapted to any commitment driven by attempts to change those systems. One of those attempts is found in Laclau’s populist theory that we analyze below.

---

<sup>40</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in Ch. Mouffe, ed. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London, Boston & Henley: Routledge / Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 189-193.

<sup>41</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 65,175.

<sup>42</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 193.

<sup>43</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Ideology and post-Marxism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11, no. 2, (2006), pp. 106, 114.

<sup>44</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 83-85.

## Post-Marxist Populism

Laclau's writings caught ample attention inside and outside the academy, and both among his apologists and his detractors.<sup>45</sup> His work presents two major aspects to be analyzed in this section: a critique of classical Marxism, and an elaboration of a populist theory that pivots around the notions of discourse, antagonism and hegemonic leadership.

During the period when he published his main books, between 1977 and 2005,<sup>46</sup> the successive demise of communist regimes, the strengthening of capitalism and the reemergence of populist regimes (particularly in Latin America), required the development of a theory that could accompany these historical trends. Given that classical Marxism had failed to comprehensively explain them, Laclau's efforts were directed "to go beyond" while at the same time remain "within the horizon opened by Marxist theorization."<sup>47</sup> To that end, the basic tenets had to be challenged, arguing instead that: a) history follows no teleology, but "is rather a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations that cannot be ordered by a script transcending their contingent historicity,"<sup>48</sup> and b) social life is not an expression of underlying economic movements, it is in the political realm that the ideologies, interests, and affections are confronted and articulated. Against Marxist materialism, in "post-foundational thought"<sup>49</sup> there is no ultimate substance or principle that serves as a foundation of human existence; social relations and institutions are historically and culturally determined, and always subject to variability and contingency.

Along these lines, the notions of class struggle and dialectical materialism as the explanatory devices of history are discarded as "empty metaphysical propositions."<sup>50</sup> Likewise, social profiles and interactions are not defined by the modes of production or other economic activity but are introduced by politics. It is this centrality of politics that constitutes a radical turn in respect to Marxist economic determinism, a turn accompanied by the displacement of industrial workers in social struggles. It should be noted, however, that the Marxist preeminence of conflict and the holistic method, in which the individual

---

<sup>45</sup> For apologetic readings of Laclau applied to present-day politics see John Judis, "Rethinking Populism," *Dissent*, 2016. URL: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/rethinking-populism-laclau-mouffe-podemos>; Judson C. Abraham, "The 2016 Bernie Sanders Campaign: American Socialist Populism," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 29, N°10, (2020) pp. 79-88. URL: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol29/iss1/10>

Among the socialist detractors see Benjamin Arditì, "Post-hegemony: politics outside the usual post-Marxist paradigm," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 13, 3, (2007), 205-226; Pedro M. Rey-Araújo, "Ernesto Laclau's Oblivion of Political Economy: Capitalism and Institutions in Post-Marxist Discourse Theory," *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol.32, No. 2 (2020), pp. 187-206.

Among the non-Marxist detractors see Jan-Werner Mueller, "Getting a Grip on Populism," *Dissent*, 2011, accessed on line at: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/getting-a-grip-on-populism>; Tom Palmer, "The Terrifying Rise of Authoritarian Populism," *Reason Institute*, July 14th, 2019, accessed on line at: <https://reason.com/2019/07/14/the-terrifying-rise-of-authoritarian-populism/>

<sup>46</sup> See in particular E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: New Left Books, 1977); Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, and E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> "An interview with Ernesto Laclau: questions from David Howarth," in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, p. 258.

<sup>48</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 226.

<sup>49</sup> J. Martin, "Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau," *Contemp Polit Theory*, 8, (2009), pp. 111-113.

<sup>50</sup> Laclau, "Constructing Universality," p. 305.



is replaced as a unit of analysis by collective concepts (“class” for the Marxists, the “people” for the Post-Marxists) are left intact.<sup>51</sup>

In general lines, Laclau rejects two forms of rationality that characterize classical Marxists: “a total revolutionary event bringing about the full reconciliation of society with itself,” and “a mere gradualist practice that reduces politics to administration.”<sup>52</sup> The beliefs that the revolution and the post-revolutionary administration would be adequate means to resolve conflicts ignore the impossibility of eradicating the antagonism inherent to political life. In particular, Saint-Simon’s motto - “from the government of men to the administration of things”- adopted by Marxists to describe the future communist society,<sup>53</sup> is a naive understanding that must be left behind. Laclau uses euphemistic expressions such as “bureaucratic rule” and “bureaucratic elites” to highlight the administrative aspects of the major problems with communist regimes in Eastern Europe and in some decolonized African countries.<sup>54</sup> The association of communism with bureaucracy might seem to bear similarity with classical liberal readings of the phenomenon, like Mises’, who writes in this respect: “The Lenin or Russian pattern of socialism is purely bureaucratic. All economic enterprises are departments of the government, like the administration of the army or the postal system.” Hayek shares this diagnosis and upholds the thesis of the incompatibility between “the extension of the administrative technical direction of the economy,” the rule of law and personal freedom.<sup>55</sup> Yet despite this apparent similarity, Laclau is only criticizing the style of the Communist Party in power, rather than expressing his worries about the ungranted extension and inefficiency of State bureaucracy. In this subject, he also stands aside from current classical Marxist proposals that show no worries, or rather strategically overlook, the possibility of governments acquiring a stifling bureaucracy of their own in future communist experiments. Against this, Laclau’s Post-Marxism offers a distinctive way of thinking about the political. In what follows we will address three concepts in his populist theory: discourse, antagonism, and leadership.

### *Discourse theory*

In Laclau’s logic, social values, norms, and practices are introduced by means of discursive processes (which include narratives, myths, symbols, etc.). In discourse theory, the meaning of a term arises from its relation with other terms, and relations among terms are governed by combinations and substitutions that obey no underlying or permanent principle of structuration. When applying discourse to politics, the author affirms “the

---

<sup>51</sup> “Individuals are not coherent totalities but merely referential identities which have to be split up into a series of localised subject positions (...) the very notion of ‘individual’ does not make sense in our approach” (Laclau, “Populism, what’s in the name?” in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, p.152).

<sup>52</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 225.

<sup>53</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p.225. For the influence of Saint Simon on modern socialists, see Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, pp. 151-152, 163-167.

<sup>54</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 95, 130. In a similar fashion, Cohen does not believe that the Soviet experiment was actually socialist, since “it was not ruled by the associated producers, but by the leaders, and sometimes just the leader, of the Bolshevik Party” (G.A. Cohen, “Marxism after the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” *The Journal of Ethics*, 3, no. 2, 1999, p.101).

<sup>55</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Auburn: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1998), p. 713; F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 239-240.

radically relational character of all identity.”<sup>56</sup> More specifically, it is in regard to political differences that discourse takes place; political life is an arena where contenders compete for the attribution of different meanings to disputed political terms. The expression “empty signifier” refers to words such as freedom, rights, equality, etc. which are devoid of any a priori substantive meaning, and which refer to a variety of possible contents arising from opposing political visions. In all cases, whatever meaning is assigned to the word, it always represents an ideal, a horizon, a plenitude “which is constitutively absent.”<sup>57</sup>

Along these lines, the specific content of the word “justice” will be drawn from different discourses. For example, the proposal to socialize the means of production is regarded as a promise to bring about justice by putting an end to “the unfair distribution of income, inequality in access to the means of consumption, unequal opportunities for access to employment, social discrimination, etc.”<sup>58</sup> It seems relevant to highlight that this type of promise of justice does not invoke any principle offering reasons to justify why we should accept it as just. The sheer enunciation of a promise (or a plan, a program, etc.) is equivalent to assigning a particular desirable content to empty signifiers. In Laclau’s words: “This is the moment of ethical investment in the normative.”<sup>59</sup> This assertion about ethical “investment” (as opposed to a recognition of ethical norms) comes as no surprise, since it reflects the absence of specific and permanent normative views, that is, a denial of ultimate groundings for social interaction. This absence of principles applies both to the political and the ethical camps; to use Rasmussen and Den Uyl’s distinction, it applies both to the “meta-normative” level (that sets the proper political conditions for individuals to pursue their goals and interact without permanent conflict) and the “normative” level (which refers to norms that regulate individual moral conduct).<sup>60</sup> In this regard, Laclau’s post-foundationalism confronts with classical liberalism’s claim for the universal applicability of the principle of individual negative rights, on the one hand, and with the old Marxist universalist aspiration to impose a classless social organization around the globe, on the other.<sup>61</sup> Instead, it speaks about the possibility that any particular demand may be universalized temporarily with a political purpose: “We have here the emergence of the people as a more universal historical actor, whose aims will necessarily crystallize around empty signifiers as objects of political identification.”<sup>62</sup> To press the terminological distinction, in contrast to the liberal language of universal individual rights, and in contrast to the universalist communist pretension, Post-Marxist discourse carries no permanent or predetermined content, and no relation to a human essence or nature. Post-Marxism is ultimately a variety of Marxism

---

<sup>56</sup> Laclau, “Community and its paradoxes: Richard Rorty’s Liberal Utopia,” in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, p. 253.

<sup>57</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>58</sup> Laclau, “Ethics, Normativity and the Heteronomy of Law,” in Sinkwan Cheng (ed.), *Law, Justice and Power: Between Reason and Will* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 183.

<sup>59</sup> Laclau, “Ethics, Normativity,” p. 183.

<sup>60</sup> Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), pp. 35, 39, 78-79.

<sup>61</sup> The distinction between universal and universalist is taken from Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, “In Search of Universal Political Principles: Avoiding Some of Modernity’s Pitfalls and Discovering the Importance of Liberal Political Order,” *The Good Society*, Volume 19, Number 1, (2010), pp. 84-85.

<sup>62</sup> Laclau, “Why constructing a people is the main task of radical politics,” in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, pp. 172-173.

in that it defends an anti-capitalist, anti-liberal theory, and in the sense that its tenets are social antagonism, methodological collectivism, and unlimited State power. The prefix “Post” refers mainly to its anti-foundationalism, which is why it discards any essentialism, that is, universal and fixed contents, even a “political” one.

Laclau’s post-foundationalism is reflected also in the under-determination of political actors and processes. In this regard, some critics explain the absence of substantive views on justice among radical socialists as a result of a certain commitment not “to preempt the voice of the democratic community (...) The ideal of the just society as one with equality of power explains the common socialist enthusiasm for extending democratic decision-making throughout all social life.”<sup>63</sup> Two comments are in order about this interpretation. First, in Laclau’s post-foundationalism, there is not one pre-existing collective voice nor one single community that demands to be acknowledged and heard. On the contrary, any emerging voice can be considered legitimate and accepted in the political arena to lead a revolt or antagonize others. Second, democratic decision-making is not a regulative ideal to be found in Laclau. His take on democracy does not focus on the need to empower people to make decisions; it only looks at the purpose sought by a political speech. For him, democratic is any speech that seeks to incorporate the people into political life through a process of articulating their demands, but this articulation does not include the right of the people to participate in any decision-making processes.

### *Social antagonism*

What is distinctive in Laclau’s discourse theory is that it aims at fostering social antagonism, a feature that sets it apart from other appeals to discursive practices, such as deliberative theories. The latter show a commitment to improving the quality of politics by enhancing public deliberation. Deliberative authors are guided by the ideal of a rational consensus, whilst it is the contention of post-Marxism not only that the consensus is factually impossible, but that: a) the deliberative ideal is “self-refuting” given that the realization of a complete consensus would imply the end of pluralism;<sup>64</sup> and b) by privileging rationality, deliberation leaves aside the affective dimension, which is crucial in politics.<sup>65</sup>

Leaving aside pluralism and affections, the deliberative view conveys or assumes an epistemic concern absent in Laclau’s texts. In this regard, it has been argued that deliberation has an epistemic value in that it broadens one’s knowledge of the moral reasons behind collective decisions, and that it enhances impartial attention to the interests of others.<sup>66</sup> On the contrary, post-Marxist discourse is not presented as a vehicle for improving discussion and moral knowledge, nor is it designed to attend the interests of others; rather, it works as a device to engage in a struggle for the fixing of political meanings. Consequently, argumentative logic is dismissed and replaced with the use of persuasion to cover all aspects of social life. From this angle, to persuade is to make

---

<sup>63</sup> Cfr. Gerald F. Gaus, *Political Concepts and Political Theories* (Boulder: Westview Press, Year: 2000), pp. 219-220.

<sup>64</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. xvii- xviii.

<sup>65</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York, Verso, 2000), quoted in Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p.168.

<sup>66</sup> Carlos S. Nino, *The Constitution of Deliberative Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 119-121.

somebody “change her opinion without any ultimate rational foundation (...) to convert [her] to my belief.”<sup>67</sup>

Laclau calls for an all-encompassing discursive political articulation. In giving permanent priority to politics over economics and culture he may be accused of being inconsistent with his declared anti-foundationalism.<sup>68</sup> However, it is plausible to argue that considering politics as the dominant or “architectonic” factor (to use an Aristotelian tone) embracing all other areas of social life is a formal, not a substantive, claim. That is, politics is seen a pervasive phenomenon in society, but its particular contents vary with each social, historical and geographical context. This latter claim is consistent with anti-foundationalism.

In any case, the tools of persuasion are not based on logical skills but on the correspondence of sentiments between the speaker and those who constitute the people. This “libidinal constitution of groups” or “affective investment” is a crucial aspect in populism.<sup>69</sup> Populist affection would work at a double level: as the expression of solidarity and symbol of the love between the leader and the people, and as resentment or anger against their antagonists. This latter trait is common to other radical democrats, who call for an effective mobilization of “outrageous resistance” and criticize Laclau for not offering a concrete training program to that end.<sup>70</sup> However, as noted before, we should not expect to find this kind of agenda in Laclau’s texts, for he does not aim at developing the capacity of the people to become self-empowered political actors or to channel their anger through civic involvement; his theory of populist affection is limited to provide cement for the people to accept the discursive construction of antagonism towards an enemy.<sup>71</sup>

It is this inescapable antagonistic feature that distinguishes populism from other anti-systemic political positions. To take two historical cases, the demands of the suffragettes in the early twentieth century were anti-systemic in their critiques of the legal exclusion of women from suffrage, but they were not populist, because the premise was to achieve more inclusive electoral institutions, not to ignore or eliminate them altogether. To take another example, the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century in America was anti-systemic in that it questioned racial segregation and social exclusion, but it cannot be considered populist because its leader defended non-antagonism in the form of non-violent resistance against cultural and legal discrimination.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to being antagonistic, populist discourse contests Western institutions in their entirety (economic, political, cultural, educational, etc.), which makes it different from other anti-systemic claims. Applying this criterion to present-day European politics,

---

<sup>67</sup> Laclau, “Community and its paradoxes,” pp. 248, 251. Laclau invokes discursive persuasion because his theory addresses a post-communist world that left behind subjugation via violent revolutions. For this reason, he appeals to discursive and not physical antagonism. That said, he allows for violence if need be, but not as a default position.

<sup>68</sup> I thank the reviewer for calling my attention to this objection.

<sup>69</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 57, 116.

<sup>70</sup> Laura Grattan, *Populism’s Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 32.

<sup>71</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 92, 116, 162.

<sup>72</sup> Curiously, Laclau himself forgets this when he includes the US civil rights movement in the populist logic, on the grounds that it “made possible the incorporation of previously excluded underdogs into the public sphere.” (Laclau, “Why constructing a people,” in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, p. 191). As we know from his previous analysis, including the “underdogs” is not the only requisite to identify a populist speech, the latter also has to be antagonistic, and permanently so.

for example, right-wing parties in central and northern Europe criticize representative institutions, but they do not extend their critique to the economic organization of society, as populists do; conversely, the Green Parties ecologists are anti-systemic in their criticism to conventional energy sources and to economic institutions, but they currently support the liberal representative system.

As a last point of comparison, most non-populist anti-systemic groups and parties do not define their own identity by means of an antagonism introduced by the hegemonic representative, but on the basis of values and principles that guide and limit the outreach of the discourse of whoever occupies the position of leadership.

### *Populist Leadership*

The question that arises at this point is who will be the populist leader in charge of persuading others about the meaning of justice or other terms and about the political identity of the people. Laclau analyzes the relation between the leader and the people on the basis of philosophical, linguistic, and psychoanalytical theoretical contributions. In his view, populism emerges when a leader assumes the representative role of a series of social demands and unites them under the term “the people.”<sup>73</sup> The process followed by the leader consists in the hegemonic formation of an “equivalential chain” by which she unites diverse social demands and portrays them under a common antagonism with the establishment.<sup>74</sup> Just like the words freedom, equality, and justice, the “people” is taken to be an empty signifier, one with no specific preexisting content but whose singularity emerges by the union of heterogeneous elements.<sup>75</sup>

Since these unions depends upon the leader’s discourse, the quality of a good populist leadership is not related to exerting effective power over a body of citizens but to the capacity of creating a people, not in a sociological or cultural sense but in a political-rhetorical one. Given its creative capacity, the leader’s discourse is endowed with an “attributive-performative” nature.<sup>76</sup> Populist leadership for Laclau is also of a democratic nature, in that: a) it seeks to incorporate extensive groups into political life through a process of articulation of their demands,<sup>77</sup> and b) leaders can come from any sector: social movements, political parties, unions, the army, business groups, etc.<sup>78</sup> The leader is simply the one who stands out and occupies the role of creating and sustaining a popular identity.

A second question arises at this point: is there any specific trait common to the people that the leader can invoke in his constructivist task<sup>79</sup>? In the case of America, Kazin calls into question the capacity of populism to “mobilize the dizzying plurality of class, gender, and ethnic identities.”<sup>80</sup> This suspicion focuses on the positive characteristics which are expected to be present in social groupings (social status, cultural

---

<sup>73</sup> Herein on we use “the people” in the political sense of a group distinguished from and opposed to the elites, not in the sense of nations or sovereign bodies. See Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Malden: Polity, 2005), p.2.

<sup>74</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 189, 202.

<sup>75</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>76</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 166, 97.

<sup>77</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 80-87, 161-162.

<sup>78</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 150.

<sup>79</sup> We use the term “constructivist” not in the Hayekian sense, as synonym of a rationalist pretense, but in a discursive sense as enunciating and defining a political actor previously undefined.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2017), p. xvi.

traditions, gender issues, etc.). However, what unites heterogeneous demands under Post-Marxist populism is not a shared “positivity” but rather a “negativity,” a concept drawn from Freud: “The leader or the leading idea might also, so to speak, be negative; hatred against a particular person or institution might operate in just the same unifying way, and might call up the same kind of emotional ties as positive attachment.”<sup>81</sup> This negativity is fueled by the leader when she mobilizes the people against the enemy. Thus we are presented with two political logics: “the logic of difference (which organizes the positivity of the social) and the logic of equivalence (which introduces negativity and social division).”<sup>82</sup>

The following concluding remarks summarize the core of Laclau’s populist vision: “I have presented a structural explanation of popular identity formation in which antagonistic frontiers are grounded in equivalential logics. Frontiers are the sine qua non of the emergence of the ‘people’: without them, the whole dialectic of partiality/universality would simply collapse. But the more extended the equivalential chain, the less ‘natural’ the articulation between its links, and the more unstable the identity of the enemy (located on the other side of the frontier).”<sup>83</sup> Since he belongs to the Marxist family, it is natural for the author to find the most stable enemy in the global market economy.

### ***The Stable Enemy of Populism***

The centrality of capitalism as the main stable enemy of populism is justified not because the economy is the determining foundation of all social relations, as Classical Marxists argue, but because “the material reproduction of society has more repercussions on social processes than what happens in other spheres.”<sup>84</sup> Laclau affirms that the configuration of the global economy produces deleterious effects, and that ties must be extended and a common language used to articulate the different anti-capitalist demands.<sup>85</sup> This section analyzes his opinion on other Marxist accounts on the subject, and his description of the functioning of the global economy and its social effects.

Several central assumptions of classical Marxism about capitalism remain unchanged in Neo-Marxism: that it is based on the exploitation of labor, that it produces alienation, and that its transformation can only take place as a result of the development of the logic of the system itself.<sup>86</sup> Contra these assumptions, for Laclau in the economic relationship between the employer and the worker they both obtain what they seek, that is, to buy and to sell work respectively. This analysis is aligned with classical liberal views on the nature of free economic exchanges, although it differs on the evaluation of the effects of those exchanges. For classical liberals, free economic exchanges make it possible to improve the relative positions of the agents, and they benefit the whole of society. In this latter regard, as societies get richer the collective provision of certain goods such as social security and free public education also tends to increase.<sup>87</sup> On the contrary, populist theory posits the multiplication of groups that are increasingly excluded from the production processes, and of the related negative effects such as “ecological

---

<sup>81</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 60.

<sup>82</sup> Laclau, “On ‘real’ and ‘absolute’ enemies,” in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, p. 227.

<sup>83</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 231.

<sup>84</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 295.

<sup>85</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 285-287.

<sup>86</sup> Laclau, “Dislocation,” in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, p. 39.

<sup>87</sup> Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, pp. 257-258.

crises, imbalance between different sectors of the economy, massive unemployment, and so on.”<sup>88</sup>

In this light, capitalism is seen as “domination” in that it operates much like colonialism, forcing or imposing a deleterious situation upon those who are excluded from the dynamics of the world economy.<sup>89</sup> The lexicon is clearly Gramsci’s, for whom domination is synonym of coercion, power, and force, whilst hegemony is “equilibrium, persuasion, consent, and consolidation.”<sup>90</sup> As a consequence, this domination would always bring about the oppression of the excluded, and the criterion to decide who belongs to the group of the excluded will be dictated by the leader’s efforts at a populist articulation.

Despite disagreeing with the orthodox and Neo-Marxist takes on the nature of the processes of the market economy, Laclau accepts their portrait of its sociological consequences, a “commodification, bureaucratization and the increasing dominance of scientific and technological planning over the division of labour.”<sup>91</sup> However, contra accounts calling to resist and fight against those consequences due to their negative effects, he offers an instrumental perspective of these processes: “Any transformation of capitalism opens up a range of possibilities that are not just determined by the endogenous logic of capitalist forms, but also by the latter’s constitutive outside and by the whole historical situation in which those logics operate. The construction of an alternative project is based on the ground created by transformations, not on opposition to them.”<sup>92</sup> The alternative arrangements remain vaguely sketched since the specific aspects of each alternative will be open to the leader’s discretion. What is clear for him, though, is that the battle must be fought on political, not economic grounds; thus, for example, wage demands and the like should be introduced by political discourse.<sup>93</sup>

The populist idea that a social division must be created shows what has been a persistent Marxist thread: the opposition to capitalism on the basis of an antagonistic feeling independently of the working of those institutions. This feeling is frequently combined with some sort of utopian alternative (workers cooperatives, a society without classes, etc.) about which scant details are offered. Laclau escapes the romantic disposition of utopia proposers but he does share with them a suggestive silence about data refuting the alleged negatives effects of capitalism or showing its capacity for the creation of wealth, social inclusion and self-realization. This attitude confirms that, despite their self-proclaimed inclination to praxis, most members of the Marxist family show disregard for real data about economic performance.<sup>94</sup> Having said that, while the lack of said data in classical Marxists is without a doubt inadmissible given the preeminent place occupied by the economy in their texts, it should not be required from Post-Marxists to acknowledge said data, since their omission is consistent with the emphasis placed on a view that privileges political discourse over facts.

---

<sup>88</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 150.

<sup>89</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 236, 150.

<sup>90</sup> Gwyn Williams, “The Concept of ‘Egemonia’ in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci: Some Notes on Interpretation,” *JHI* 21, (1960), pp. 591,593, 594.

<sup>91</sup> Laclau, “Dislocation,” p. 42.

<sup>92</sup> Laclau, “Dislocation,” p. 42.

<sup>93</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 188, 288, 293.

<sup>94</sup> To take one set of recent data: global wealth grew 66% between 1995 and 2014, as did positive variations in per capita global wealth (with a net increase in per capita wealth of 31%). See Glenn-Marie Lange, Quentin Wodon and Kevin Carey, *The Changing Wealth of Nations 2018: Building a Sustainable Future* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018), pages, accessed on line at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/29001>

At the end of the day, despite his efforts to go beyond classical Marxism, Laclau is trapped in a similar straightjacket in regard to the functioning of an alternative to capitalism. Marx overestimated the proletarian capacity for organized rebellion and self-management, and he also assumed that under communism workers would find enough incentives to be productive and that the leaders would operate for the benefit of society. Consequently, he could not anticipate many of the “deviations” that emerged when his proposals were actually implemented by the Communist Parties. Likewise, Laclau assumes that the populist leader will find enough incentives in order to pursue actions that bring about only benefits to the people. Just like Marxists, the populist leader is expected to show enough capacities and goodwill to comply with the satisfaction of popular demands. If at a historical level the ruling Communist Parties always proved to operate in favor of their own privileges and in detriment of the general wellbeing of the population, why not assume that the populist leader might behave in a similar fashion? Thus, Laclau’s abandonment of the protagonist role of the Communist Party and of its corresponding bureaucratic functioning is not accompanied by a cautionary view about how those evils can or cannot be avoided in a populist regime. In this, he fails to engage in a successful “radical critique”, one in which the alternatives “must at least not face the same problems that face existing institutions” and in which the proposed structures should “prevent or preclude the recurrence of the social ills characteristic of the existing order.”<sup>95</sup> Of course, the absence of a thorough analysis describing the specifics of their alternatives is a frequent component of the radical mentality. Nozick summarizes well the effects of this trend in cognitive terms: “Communism’s ideal situation’ has very great appeal to many around the world, while how capitalism actually works out, flaws included, is greatly better. That is an unstable situation, one of great ‘cognitive dissonance,’ and the temptation to certain denials will be very great.”<sup>96</sup> We would only add that this dissonance is fueled by ignorance, or by hiding evidence about the positive results of the global economy.

### **Classical Liberalism vs. Post-Marxist Populism**

Classical Liberalism is a set of intellectual traditions that take individual freedom as the basis of the social order, and look at creating the political conditions to protect that freedom. Classical liberals defend ontological and methodological individualism;<sup>97</sup> a cautionary vision of rationality; individual rights, including private property and free economic exchanges; the respect for legality; stringent limits to collective decisions, and a strong distrust of the functioning of government.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> N. Scott Arnold, “Radical Social Criticism,” *Reason Papers* No. 14 (1989), pp. 30-31, accessed on line at [https://reasonpapers.com/pdf/14/rp\\_14\\_2.pdf](https://reasonpapers.com/pdf/14/rp_14_2.pdf)

<sup>96</sup> Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 283.

<sup>97</sup> In the ontological individualist model, persons have an individual identity and a plan of life that are self-chosen and self-directed. That is, individuals are not determined by social structures and forces; they exist as separate and different beings with the capacity to choose their own lifestyle. In turn, methodological individualism studies social processes and events as the result of individual actions and decisions. Ontological and methodological individualism do not necessarily imply each other: Analytical Marxists are methodological individualists, but they are not ontological individualists because they think that some types of social structures (for example, capitalism) determine the unfolding of individual identities and life plans.

<sup>98</sup> Mises, *Human Action*; F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*.



The Marxist theoretical family reviewed in these pages challenges most or all these premises. Neo-Marxists place few stringent limits to collective decisions, and show a strong distrust in the functioning of markets. Classical Marxists and Post-Marxists hold methodological holism; an unlimited range of political decisions; and unbounded confidence in the functioning of hegemonic governments. Despite these traits, Laclau aspires to make Post-Marxism compatible “with the whole field of democratic public spaces.”<sup>99</sup> However, the main aspects of his political model impair it from being compatible at all with the spirit of equality before the law, with limits to governmental administration, and with horizontal and vertical accountability that characterize democracy. Although he goes at great lengths to dissociate his logic from any implicit authoritarianism, sentences like the following make it explicit: “If the plurality of demands requires a constant process of legal transformation and revision, the state of emergency ceases to be exceptional and becomes an integral part of the political construction of the social bond.”<sup>100</sup> This apologetic Schmittian tone is inconsistent with his claim that populism is just one more “competitor,” since by endorsing a permanent state of emergency it threatens to end the pluralism proper of democratic political competition.

Perhaps it may not be inconsistent to say that populism might be compatible with some degree of pluralism insofar as it declares to respect social heterogeneity. But this is contradicted by the acknowledgment that “some populist movements can be totalitarian [but] the spectrum of possible articulations is far more diversified.”<sup>101</sup> The facile acceptance of the association between populism and totalitarianism could be explained by pointing out a “normative deficit”<sup>102</sup> which, as mentioned before, is made manifest in the idea that ethics and individual rights are deprived of any positive content and are subject to contingent political discourses. If totalitarianism is accepted as one possibility among many, albeit remote, hegemonic populism shows the tremendous danger that it represents for the liberal democratic order.

In this regard, it seems pertinent to reiterate the outreach of the word hegemony as antonym of liberalism. According to Hayek, the terms *herrschaftstaat* (ruling state) and *Hoheitsverwaltung* (Sovereign administration) were strange to the English language and culture, hence the word “hegemonic” had to be coined.<sup>103</sup> Hayek quotes from Mises, who distinguishes two forms of social cooperation: by “contract and coordination”, based on individual choices under the law, or by “subordination or hegemony”, based on “coercion and compulsion” and on “directives and regulations”. Mises asserts: “The state, the social apparatus of coercion and compulsion, is by necessity a hegemonic bond.”<sup>104</sup> As the quotes illustrate, both thinkers equate hegemony with the State. But the assertion that all political authority is hegemonic fails to distinguish between a State under the rule of law and one where the latter is absent. In the first case, there are political institutions, decisions and procedures established by law, and political life is carried out under legal principles and constitutional limitations. In the second case, the rule of law is weakened or abandoned for the sake of a particular political project. It is only in this latter situation that hegemony emerges, and that it can be defined as antonym of liberalism. In Laclau’s

---

<sup>99</sup> Laclau, “Community and its paradoxes,” pp. 254-255.

<sup>100</sup> Laclau, “Bare life or social indeterminacy?,” p. 236.

<sup>101</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 166.

<sup>102</sup> S. Critchley, “Is there a normative deficit in the theory of hegemony?” in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, eds. S. Critchley and O. Marchart (London and New York, Routledge, 2004), pp. 113-121.

<sup>103</sup> Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 262.

<sup>104</sup> Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 672n8, 196-197, 199, 281.

words, “Legitimacy can only proceed from the hegemonic practices of a group that organizes a certain social order in its opposition to a real enemy. Legality is part of that order and is, in that sense, an effect and not a cause.”<sup>105</sup>

At the end of the day, the contention that the leader creates “the people” by means of a permanent antagonistic discourse against other groups does not only reflect a conflictive vision of society, but it also carries legal implications in terms of possible discriminations and restrictions of individual rights. It undermines the normative claim of general and equal laws, in the absence of which the door is opened for the hegemonic leader’s discretionary policies to affect individual lives, properties and liberty. In this regard, Post-Marxist populism follows the spirit of classical Marxism that celebrates “the victory of socialism over any law.”<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

The precedent sections presented an outline of the Marxist theoretical family, pointing out some similarities and divergences between Laclau and the other Marxist formulations published since the 1980s. Our analysis offered a reading of Post-Marxist populism from a classical liberal angle. In what follows we sum up the main concerns underlying this work.

Political and economic claims will be of the Post-Marxist populist kind if accompanied by speeches and actions that replace the principles and institutions of liberal democracy, free markets and the rule of law with a socially divisive, hegemonic, discretionary and contingent political logic. According to the model of liberal political representation, governments must be limited by vertical and horizontal controls, so as to prevent any person or political force to exercise unlimited power over the rest. Post-Marxist populism subverts or distorts these objectives: instead of promoting deliberation and negotiation, it fuels confrontation; it replaces the predictability of norms with discretionary leadership, and its call for hegemony works against liberal pluralism and democratic competition.

We are, therefore, presented with two opposed political logics, the populist and the classical liberal. The first presupposes that there will always be an insurmountable division between the people and their antagonists. It does not expect or admit any possible dialogue or exchange between these two actors, and it implies that what a group gains in terms of claims or positions of power represents a loss for the contending force. On the contrary, for a classical liberal logic, any legitimate demand can be satisfied through the legitimately established procedures and channels. In this respect, political activity in a representative limited government is based on exchange and negotiation. By appealing to agreement and respect for institutional procedures, general benefits are expected to result from these exchanges. In contrast, the defense of hegemonic populism generates greater incentives for rent seeking, which is a direct function of the special benefits granted by discretionary governments,<sup>107</sup> populists included.

The populist approach overlooks crucial questions in political theory: how to organize and maintain an order that produces general stability and predictability? How to prevent abuses of power by the rulers? Laclau’s theoretical model leads to an unlimited regime prone to preserve its power regardless of overall costs (and he also seems to

---

<sup>105</sup> Laclau, “On real and absolute enemies,” p.230.

<sup>106</sup> Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, pp. 240, 243.

<sup>107</sup> James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*, The Collected Works of James M. Buchanan, vol. 3 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), pp. 23,286.

assume that these costs can be borne indefinitely). This logic allows the leader in power to make arbitrary modifications of laws and basic rights (mainly, property rights) to build the populist project. Taken to the extreme, such a system can never lead to the satisfaction of equivalent demands insofar it undermines the basic economic and legal conditions for an increase in social inclusion.

Moreover, just as Marxism inspired the implementation of communist regimes via revolutionary violence, Post-Marxist populism also aspires to operate by any means available: “The classical idea of revolution implies violence and a new basis for the social order. (...)I am very much in favor of reintroducing the dimension of violence into the reform.”<sup>108</sup> Laclau’s quote is useful to understand the ideological sources and the political construction of global protests that nowadays move in violent directions, and enables us to call into question certain views about populism that reduce it to an “elastic and promiscuous impulse,” or that associate it with a “rhetoric of optimism and hope” proclaimed on behalf of the people.<sup>109</sup> Such characterizations blur the profile of Post-Marxist populism in at least two ways. First, in describing it as a mere impulse, the potentiality of populism for establishing a long-term strategy to weaken the republican institutional network is underplayed. Despite Laclau’s invocation of a “civic republicanism,”<sup>110</sup> his division of society into two irreconcilable camps is not marked by republican civism but by an iconoclast Marxist attitude. Secondly, populism consists less in an optimistic and hopeful promise of a new social order, than in an invitation to a permanent revolt against liberal ideas and its related institutions.

The ideology of liberalism at the end of the last century had justifiable cause for celebration, given the growing global acceptance of pluralistic democracies and free markets, and the convergence of socialism towards egalitarian liberalism at the time.<sup>111</sup> Twenty years into the 21st century, the outlook appears to be much gloomier. Can the spirit and confidence of the classical liberal be raised amid this scenario? It is not implausible to think that if applied Marxism failed earlier, post-Marxism populism might also fail in its implementation. Be that as it may, it would be prudent to always keep Sun Tzu’s wise dictum in mind.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> Laclau, “Community and its paradoxes,” p. 249.

<sup>109</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2017), pp. 2-3, 6-7.

<sup>110</sup> Laclau, “Community and its paradoxes,” in Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, p. 254.

<sup>111</sup> Gerald F. Gaus, “Liberalism at the end of the century,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 5 (2000), p.180.

<sup>112</sup> “One who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements” (Sun Tzu), quoted in Derek M.C. Yuen, *Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read the Art of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 110.