

that Kristeva cannot escape the confusion that surrounds the entire French debate about citizenship and nationality. All too often, it is forgotten by politicians, journalists and cultural critics alike that in many cases the offensive ‘Muslim woman in a headscarf’ is, and has from birth been, a French citizen. Very few of the defenders of ‘Republican values’ point out or even remember that the Third Republic – which, between the 1880s and the final separation of church and state in 1905, made secularism the central national value and constructed a republic that recognizes equal citizens but not women, Jews, ethnic minorities, and subsumes

particularisms under an abstract universalism – was also a regime that assumed the right, or even the duty, to conquer and colonize the ‘inferior races’ of northern and sub-Saharan Africa in the name of its self-defined civilizing mission. The school textbooks published by the universal republic abounded in racist stereotypes. French republican discourse is now struggling, and apparently failing, to deal with a problem with the ‘other’ that was there from the beginning. Revolt culture does not seem to offer much of a solution.

David Macey

## Critique of pure politics

Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London and New York, 2005. xii + 276 pp., £26.00 hb., 1 85984 651 3 hb.

*On Populist Reason* reveals a fundamental fact about Ernesto Laclau’s research programme to which many, including the editors of the recently published *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (Routledge, 2004), remain blind: that populism, as both concept and historical experience, constitutes the centre of gravity of his work as a whole. Laclau’s contributions to the reconfiguration of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and his account of radical democracy (co-authored with Chantal Mouffe) are unthinkable without his historical experience of populism in Argentina and his subsequent attempts first to conceptualize it and then to generalize its logic to politics as a whole. Hegemony, or, better, what we might call a *performative principle of hegemonization*, is the mechanism of this generalization. Populism also underlies Laclau’s more recent philosophical meditations on ‘universality’ and his forays into post-Marxist critical thought. This is Laclau’s intellectual project: the translation of ‘populism’ into ‘politics’ via ‘hegemony’. *On Populist Reason* is a summary of this project so far.

*On Populist Reason* restages the critical account of populism Laclau first rehearsed almost thirty years ago in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977) – a stunning work in 1970s’ Althusserianism. Populism was characterized there as a ‘synthetic-antagonistic complex with respect to the dominant ideology’. Laclau’s theoretical language may have shifted, as has his view of the kind of object populism is (no longer a mere ideology, but a discursive practice, confusingly conceived as ‘material’ because constitutive), but it is clear that what is involved is a theoretical development rather than a complete change in perspective.

Antagonism remains fundamental. It is ‘the foundation of an internal frontier separating the “people” from power’, he writes in *On Populist Reason*. Synthesis, or the production of the ‘people’ – ‘an equivalential articulation of demands’ – is equally so. This is the ‘hegemony’ side of populism, which first emerged in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It is in thinking ‘articulation’ that the development in Laclau’s thought is most visible: from an original critical engagement within Marxism to its rapid abandonment.

In *Reading Capital* Althusser presents the notion of articulation as the theoretical means through which what ‘makes the whole a whole’ may be thought – synchronically and structurally, rather than dialectically. It accounts for the relations established between instances of the social that are defined by their relative autonomy, for which ‘regional theories’ might be devised to determine their specific logics. Laclau attempts such an account of the politico-ideological superstructures in *Politics and Ideology*, where he asks, ‘what does the form of an ideology consist of?’ Not in the class-‘belonging’ or literal contents of an ideological discourse, he maintains, but in ‘the principle of articulation of its constituent interpellations’. Nationalist ideology, or the popular interpellations Laclau analyses in his original accounts of fascism and populism (which are fundamental to any successful socialist movement), cannot be derived from class position or ‘the economic’ (that is, as an expression of the contradiction between forces and relations of production).

The traces of this early Althusserianism are still visible in *On Populist Reason*, especially in its stubborn anti-Hegelianism. In its account of populist

hegemonization, for example, it argues for a political dynamics of 'partial objects' (or particularities) that refuse dialectical subsumption (universality). Articulation remains fundamental here as a means for thinking totalities, although these are now understood to be purely contingent and always incomplete. It is from Althusser's attempts to escape the spectre of economic determinism and to develop the theoretical consequences of the idea of overdetermination for history that Laclau's own theoretical and political concerns emerge. These trace the parameters of what will become his later post-Marxism, and they generate problems about the prolongation of conjunctures into histories that are more than diachronic series, that involve change rather than a mere succession of states of affairs. In this respect, Laclau's deployment of the idea of articulation furnishes the theoretical content of his formalism.

To underline the relative character of the autonomy of superstructural instances (as well as his commitment at the time to a Marxist science of history), in *Politics and Ideology* Laclau resorted to the idea of a 'double articulation' in which the non-class or 'popular' aspect of a social formation's relations of domination is brought into a definite but overdetermined relation with class and the relations of production, without being derived from them. Here, class struggle is carried out on the terrain – and in the ideological medium – of the relations of domination, characterized by a 'state–people' opposition. On the one hand, the idea of a double articulation theoretically secured the presence of 'economic' determination in the understanding of politics and ideology, whilst, on the other, reconfiguring the modalities of its effects. This is what disappears in Laclau's subsequent analyses in which class becomes just one more element among a multiplicity of elements to be given form through political articulation. Relations of production are subordinated to relations of domination: class contradiction is subordinated to contingently produced political antagonisms.

The notion of articulation is thus Janus-faced. It is central to Laclau's formalist accounts of populism and fascism, as well as to the related theoretical attempt to overcome economic determination 'in the last instance' and so endow politico-ideological practices – particularly hegemony – with a substance of their own *qua* the production of subjects of social transformation. This ideologism was subsequently deployed by many on the Left in the UK to account for a Thatcherism misconceived as an example of 'authoritarian populism'. In *Politics and Ideology*, Laclau already suggested that the famous 'peculiarity

of the English' – that is, the power of the landowning aristocracy within British capitalism – reveals the *ideological power* of the bourgeoisie rather than its economic weakness. Similarly, from this perspective, the rise of fascism is symptomatic not only of a crisis of bourgeois hegemony in the transition to monopoly capitalism, but also of the capacity of the institutions of the working class to generate popular, democratic and national interpellations.

The inadequacies of the Communist movement's reductionist analysis of fascism, especially in its Third Period, stands in sharp contrast to Laclau's own experience of the articulatory power of Peronism in Argentina from the 1940s and 1970s – as described in both *Politics and Ideology* and *On Populist Reason* – and the emergence from within it of a powerful left-wing movement. In such cases, articulation (the synthesis or 'condensation' of interpellations), and not reduction, is the key to understanding the formation of new power blocs. Articulation is what comes to define political practice for Laclau, and it is because of the absence of such considerations that in *On Populist Reason* he charges Hardt and Negri's conceptualization of the 'multitude' as paradoxically lacking in politics. It is too religious. By way of a reply, however, Hardt and Negri would insist on 'exodus', arguing that the articulatory politics of hegemonization championed by Laclau is a sovereign and thus a statist one.

Thinking political 'exception' against the grain – that is, as normal – has been crucial to Laclau's reflections on fascism and Peronism, to his conception of politics, and to the questions he has posed to Marxist orthodoxy. These questions have their origins within the Marxist tradition, specifically in the political Marxism inaugurated by Gramsci's reflections on the politico-cultural significance of the Bolshevik Revolution (a revolution 'against *Capital*'), on the one hand, and the emergence of fascism in Italy (the 'national question'), on the other. What these historical processes have in common is the perceived effects of uneven development, one of which is crucial: the historical tasks conventionally attributed to the bourgeoisie in historicist Marxism (for example, nation-building and democratization) may be taken over by another class ('permanent revolution'). Once again this exemplifies the non-class belonging of particular ideologies. This experience is the crucible of Gramsci's concept of hegemony – as well as related notions such as the differences between 'war of position' and 'war of manoeuvre' – whose anti-reductionist genealogy Laclau and Mouffe traced in *Hegemony and Socialist Practice*. It is also the historical source of criticisms

of Laclau's appropriation of Gramsci: he privileges the production of political subjectivities over social institutions in his uses of 'hegemony'.

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is the text in which Laclau took his leave of Marxism – into 'post-Marxism' – through the door opened up by 'hegemony'. It is the work in which class loses its privileged articulatory power and the work of ideology is materialized as 'discourse' (that is, as a materialism of the subject). Finally, it is the place in which Laclau and Mouffe upend economic determination of the social to argue instead for its political – that is, hegemonic – institution. *On Populist Reason* continues in this vein. It poses important questions in its criticisms of Marxism: for example, concerning its Eurocentric and productivist positing of a privileged subject of emancipation and all that such conceptions exclude. Yet it fails to provide historical answers to these questions, answers that would move beyond the continuous present of a diachronic or serial conjuncturalism grounded, by and large, in linguistic structure: metaphor and metonymy.

Like the early essay 'Towards a Theory of Populism', in *Politics and Ideology*, *On Populist Reason* begins with an account of the inadequacies of existing theories. For most of these populism represents a form of political irrationalism or exception, whilst the term itself is generally considered fuzzy and inoperable because its field of reference is so wide as to defy clear definition. But not only is there reason and a logic to populism, according to Laclau (a 'logic of equivalence' grounded in antagonism), its very lack of determinate content is crucial to its identity. Laclau's approach is both rigorously formalist and performative: as it crystallizes into particular forms, populism is resistant to pre-given conceptual determinations. It is as such that it is understood as exemplary for a non-reductionist thinking of politics in general. Why is 'populism' so apparently indeterminate a concept? Laclau's answer is: because it describes a process of hegemonization in which particular 'claims' (demands which have been rejected by the state and thus reformulated via antagonism) are fused into an oppositional unity across social sectors ('totalized through equivalence') without losing their particularity. The populist subject is, therefore, not only always already dislocated – and thus also 'open', like all subjects for Laclau – it is also defined by multiplicity. But this means that it is always threatened from within by the particularities that are contained within its synthesis. 'Corporate' particularity remains untouched by the universalizing tendency of populist totalization.

It is the fusion of demands reproduced through antagonism and equivalence that constitutes the performative dimension of populism for Laclau, whilst his formalism is evident in the 'articulated' subject (or 'identity') that results, rather than in the literal or social contents of the claims. In other words, as long as they are antagonistic to the state (and thus 'democratic', suggests Laclau), producing a potential 'popular' subject in their fusion, these claims could in principle contain *any* demand whatsoever, including, of course, fascist ones. Laclau thus brings *On Populist Reason* to a close by insisting that 'we can only begin to understand Fascism if we see it as one of the possibilities inherent to contemporary societies.' This warning is yet another instalment of Laclau's polemic with the Communist movement's inability adequately to analyse – and thus to confront – both fascism and populist movements such as Peronism. He suggests that it is still in thrall to 'emotionally charged fetishes' which cloud its judgement, such as 'class struggle' and 'determination in the last instance by the economy'. Laclau's criticism in *On Populist Reason* of Žižek's Hegelian politics is devastating in this respect: in his dismissal of all "partial" struggles ... Žižek cannot provide any theory of the emancipatory subject... One is left wondering whether he is anticipating an invasion of beings from another planet.' In an otherwise uncharacteristic moment of enlightened self-fashioning, Laclau at this point evokes an ideal of 'obstinate rigour' in thought, which it is clear he thinks a 'fainthearted' Left has failed to live up to.

The performative dimension of populism is certainly a historically important one: the figure of Eva Perón in Argentina or the fascist aestheticization of the political come immediately to mind. Yet Laclau has very little sense of the importance of cultural form for political movements. Rather, in his view, performance ties populism directly to affect. This is where psychoanalysis enters into Laclau's account: no longer in the top-down form of interpellation but now through cathectic investment, binding subjects driven by 'demand' (political desire) to an '*objet petit a*' (Lacan's 'little other' or 'bit of the Real' located, as maternal principle, within the Symbolic Order). This 'surface of inscription' stands in here politically for a kind of reconciliation in common that looks beyond the multiple particularities gathered in equivalence – very much like little utopias (although, following Joan Copjec, Laclau himself refers to the 'breast value of the milk') – as well as for a popular identity, 'the people', that represents and totalizes the equivalential chain of demands as a whole. This is the work of what Laclau calls an

‘empty signifier’ (in contrast to ‘floating signifiers’, which emerge when the internal frontiers of social antagonisms shift, producing competing struggles for hegemony). Empty signifiers, Laclau insists, can never be conceptualized, or read off from pre-given political or historical contents, but are *embodied* and ‘named’ retrospectively.

This performative aspect of populism is an attempt to account for its Jacobin enthusiasms and its affective contents, which are the ontological ground of politics for Laclau – the result of a ‘democratizing’ appropriation of Freud’s various attempts to analyse the constitutive tie between leader and social group. In Laclau’s populist version, the former is no longer the authoritarian Father but just another brother, one among equals, and, as a model for thinking the hegemony of one equivalential claim among others, it is the means through which populist political identity is produced.

In Laclau’s new analysis, the ‘popular’ form is thus full of desire, a desire that defies reason. Yet surely such affect is always already mediated, either by cultural form – in the sense that, for example, Eva Perón makes of the Peronist state a melodramatic media event – or by the rationality that the formulation of particular claims – as rejected demands – requires for their totalization. Similarly, it is never made clear why the subject so produced is a ‘popular’ one – that is, a ‘people’. Why this ‘name’? *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* offered a ‘genealogy’ of the idea of hegemony; *On Populist Reason* is marked by the absence of a history of ‘the people’ – of the kind

hinted at by Agamben in *Homo Sacer* in which, over a couple of brief pages, he sketches the historical difference between a ‘sovereign people’ and a people biopolitically conceived.

At this psychoanalytic point, Laclau’s argument begins to wear a bit thin. It relies too heavily on a legitimating critique of economic reductionism. Having proclaimed (contra Žižek) the incompatibility of Hegel and Lacan, Laclau hails a moment of identity in the work of Gramsci and Lacan:

The logic of the I and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical. This is why, within the Marxist tradition, the Gramscian moment represents such a crucial epistemological break: while Marxism had traditionally had the dream of access to a systematically closed totality (determination in the last instance by the economy, etc.), the hegemonic approach breaks decisively with that essentialist social logic. The only possible totalizing horizon is given by a partiality (the hegemonic force) which assumes the representation of a mythical totality. In Lacanian terms: an object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing.

The formalist principle of articulation between autonomous domains breaks down here in performance, and an identity is posited between libidinal economy and political formation, in which Gramsci’s theoretical invention is reduced to Lacan’s proto-science. The rejection of an oversimplified reductionist ‘dream’ provides the cover for a new reductionism of Laclau’s own making.

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## Nowhere ahead?

Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870–1900*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2005. 214 pp., £39.72 hb., 90 04 14296 7.

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London, 2005. xvi + 431 pp., £20.00 hb., 1 84467 033 3.

‘So admirably had the revolution been organised that, by noon, London was entirely in the hands of the social democratic party.’ Matthew Beaumont quotes this sentence from *Looking Ahead!*, an anti-utopian novel of 1892, whose conservative author here conjures up a scene many on the Left have liked to imagine. The utopian idea of a moment of transition, at which a new era will be definitively inaugurated, seems central to the socialist political imaginary.

Whether or not socialism took over old utopian (and millenarian) dreams, some have argued that its

advent made them superfluous. Marx’s disapproval of speculations about post-capitalist society is well known: Beaumont quotes a letter of the 1870s in which Marx disparages German workers for ‘playing with fancy pictures of the future structure of society’. Fredric Jameson, drawing a Coleridgean distinction, claims that socialism’s advent ‘dramatically simplified’ the task of cultural imagination in projecting new worlds. Once capitalism was recognized as a systemic whole dominating the historical epoch, ‘its one great alternative – socialism – ... also emigrated from the