Following Laclau's Theoretical Development: the Dissolution of Two Essentialist Remnants and the Populist Turn in Ernesto Laclau's Political Theory

Gabriel Garcia*

INTRODUCTION

This paper traces the theoretical development of the political theory of Ernesto Laclau. The guiding thread that will steer our analysis of the writings between the publication of "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy" (1985) and "On Populist Reason" (2005) is the author's process of correcting what we will identify as two essentialist remnants present in the first book[1]. These two remnants, concentrated on the author's considerations about advanced industrial societies and the democratic revolution as the necessary conditions for the constitution of a democratic formation, are undone in the shift towards populism. As a result, we propose interpreting the theoretical changes made in OPS and its formalist conceptualization of populism not as deviations from the author's thought or as deficiencies to be overcome, but rather as enhancements and deepening of the argumentative coherence within an intellectual project, with the resulting formalism being an inherent and constitutive element of that theoretical development. In this introduction, we will start by outlining some problems that have arisen in the contemporary literature about the author due to his populist shift. Then, we will introduce certain guiding aspects that show the form and path followed by our exposition.

Although there are valuable critiques of Laclau's perspectives on democracy and populism from various theoretical paradigms, our focus here is on perspectives originating from within or directly engaging with the Essex School of Discourse Analysis. Perspectives that form the current debate surrounding Laclau's shift towards populism as the primary political form assumed by social antagonisms and emancipatory struggles. Central to our discussion is that whether we are discussing the contemporary literature that embraces the populist approach as the primary means to expand and deepen the democratic character of societies, or the critiques that view this populist turn as having greater or lesser flaws in reasoning and/or as a partial or complete deviation from Laclau's original project of radical democracy, both seek to overcome the excessive formalism in Laclau's conceptualization in OPS. Despite entering into a very broad debate within which various topics intertwine, we want to highlight one of the

*PhD candidate in Political Science at the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciência Política (PPGCP) of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP). Campinas, SP. Brazil. Email: gabrielorgarcia@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3714-9875

main criticisms formulated regarding the conceptual apparatus present in OPS: that the excess of formalism in that work is one of the main obstacles hindering the mobilization or motivating the rejection of that conceptual apparatus as a tool for political practice and/or research purposes.

In an engaged dialogue, most authors argue—with variations and particularities in the argumentation of each individual author that cannot be fully addressed here—that the expansion of the populist logic falls into excessive formalism, making it difficult or impossible to distinguish the conceptual boundaries between populist phenomena, politics itself, hegemony, and other forms of emancipatory politics, as well as the identification, analysis, differentiation, and typology of the variants within the populist phenomenon itself (Stavrakakis, 2004, 2017; Arditi, 2022; Johnston, 2017; De Cleen, Glynos, Mondon, 2018; Borriello, Jäger, 2021; Fair, 2019; Thomassen, 2020; Melo, Aboy Carlés, 2014). The excess of formalism results in the theoretical system being incapable of significantly apprehending the historical settings, differences in political content, and material conditions of the political phenomena it pretends to study (Stavrakakis, 2004, 2017; Arditi, 2022; Borriello, Jäger, 2021; Fair, 2019; Thomassen, 2020; Melo, Aboy Carlés, 2014). A correlated and almost complementary critique would be the lack of development of aspects that would render his theory operationalizable for empirical research purposes. In different ways and to varying degrees, independently of whether they are motivated by positive adherence or critical reevaluation, most of these authors try to supplement, alter, or reject Laclau's populist conceptualization.

Since Laclau's theory of populism is strictly formal, focusing on the articulation of social elements rather than their specific contents, several difficulties emerge when the conceptual system is applied to concrete case studies. This deadlock between the excess of formalism and the application of the conceptual apparatus for research and political purposes, is accurately described by Borriello and Jäger (2021: 307-308, *our emphasis*):

> The endorsement of a strictly formal conception of populism [by laclausian scholars] creates an inability to account both for the similarities *and* differences between the left- and right populisms. This problem shows up in several registers: descriptive (what are the concrete features of populism in its various forms?), explanatory (how to account for the rise of the various forms of populism?) or normative (how ought one to assess the potential of populism?). *In each of these, a Laclauian perspective must resort to resources exogenous to the original theory, distinguishing for instance between an 'inclusionary' or 'exclusionary' variant of the people, a vertical or horizontal ordering of the antagonistic frontier, or discourses articulated around different nodal points.*

As put by Thomassen (2020: 735), “the formalism sits uneasily with scholars working in discourse theory”. Although Borriello and Jäger (2021) discuss authors who advocate for emancipatory populism as the main vehicle for radicalizing democracy, the same movement—resorting to exogenous resources with the intention to overcome the original formalist theory of populism—is carried out by those who, within the Laclausian paradigm or in direct dialogue with it, reject populism as the primary way to radicalize democracy. Here again, the excess of formalism is commonly cited as one of the central problems. The most widespread critique is that populism is a phenomenon that necessarily or predominantly simplifies, homogenizes, diminishes plurality, and limits the political space. Consequently, populism is seen as having low democratic potential and as being either impossible or, at the very least, undesirable as the primary means for radical emancipatory politics (Žižek, 2006; Arditi, 2022; Johnston, 2017; Pinto, 2017; Fair, 2019; Melo, Aboy Carlés, 2014).

Several of these critical authors, from different theoretical perspectives and to varying degrees, highlight the homogenizing effects, constitutive ambiguities, and authoritarian dangers that the populist path could potentially lead to, and which are not properly addressed by Laclau's formalist conceptualization. This issue is crucial for internal debate, given Laclau's (2005) assertion that populism and the radicalization of democracy are synonymous, advocating that the primary path to deepen democracy is through populism[2]. In this critical assessment aimed at reformulating through partial rejection, it is also understood that the extension of the populist logic, which renders it nearly conceptually indistinguishable from various other elements of Laclau's theory, is one of the central aspects that should be reformulated. Mainly, populism couldn’t be extended to almost completely coincide with what would be considered democratic or emancipatory in the theory of radical democracy. In this critical literature, OPS is largely interpreted as somewhat deviating from Laclau's earlier formulations regarding the project of radical democracy and the main concern becomes assessing what might have been added or altered that resulted in that deviation.

It is in this deadlock, between Laclau’s formulation of populism and the debate surrounding its operationalization for research and political purposes, that we aim to intervene. Borrowing the term from Borriello and Jäger (2021: 299), we seek to engage with endeavors that, in their attempt to overcome the formalism present in the original theory through the addition or removal of elements external to its original formulation—whether motivated by positive adherence or critical reevaluation—try to develop a “post-laclausian” approach to populism.

Our central argument is that what is perceived as an excess of formalism in OPS is not a flaw or accident that can easily be undone, but rather an intentional and constitutive element of the Laclausian intellectual project at that moment. Its presence is by design and not an accidental deficiency. We fully acknowledge that numerous problems are a direct consequence of this formalism, but our interest in conducting an internal reading of the changes throughout Laclau's *oeuvre* and his populist turn is to show the reasons and motives that caused it. Furthermore, attempts to overcome it should consider what that formalism is an effect of and the possible losses and theoretical regressions that its elimination can entail.

For the development of this investigation, it would be a mistake to mainly address the instances in which the issue of populism is discussed in his work, as if the thematic approach to the issue was equivalent to following the development of the concept. To describe Laclau's political theory as systematic is to understand that the meaning of each concept comes from the relationship that logically interconnects all the concepts in that system with each other. In light of that, rather than looking for the origins of an explanation about OPR in the essay "Towards a Theory of Populism" (1977), in this internal reading we will follow Laclau's theoretical evolution from the inception of his post-Marxist perspective to the publication of OPR. Through this approach, we will observe how populism gradually emerges linked and intertwined with internal tensions and shifts within his conceptual framework.

For Laclau (1994: 2), the distinction between political theory and political practice is seen "largely as an artificial operation". The exposition and exemplification of his post-foundational theory through political events isn't merely a stylistic choice; it reflects how the author's theoretical-political categories are conceptualized through the dynamics of politics and in relation to political action (Mendonça, 2014). Philosophy and politics address the same subjects but in different languages or registers. Consequently, nearly every aspect of Laclau's theory can be read politically, philosophically, and later in his *oeuvre*, psychoanalytically. Thus, we will focus on a political reading, examining the direct relationships of influence and friction between his conceptual framework and the political practices they entail[3].

The paper comprises of three sections, each corresponding to key moments where significant theoretical shifts occur in his post-Marxist thinking. In the first section, we delve into the main discussions in HSS and identify what could be seen as remnants of essentialism in Laclau's arguments about capitalist development and the democratic revolution. Moving to the second section, we analyze how the author's later theoretical changes in NRR impacted and reshaped these essentialist aspects of his thinking. How they were partly an attempt to address

this problems. Finally, in the last section, we explore Laclau's turn towards populism as a result of the elimination of those essentialist errors. Concluding that these changes lead to a more coherent argumentation and the continuation of his project for radical democracy. Lastly, we return to the theoretical impasse previously presented in the introduction.

The two objective conditions for the multiplication of antagonisms and democratic radicalization

In their investigation into the genealogy of the concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) scrutinize the various reactions that emerged in response to a crisis that was confronting Marxism. This crisis primarily concerns the fragmentation of the proletarian class, a phenomenon contradicting the conventional Marxist notion of a unique and homogeneous proletariat inherently defined by its relationship with capital. In society, the emancipatory struggle would be drawn by just one major point of antagonism, or a single subject position, embodied in a united working class that would necessarily be compelled to fulfill its historical mission. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) point out that, in the various attempts within Marxism to address the crisis resulting from the fragmentation of the working class and the proliferation of antagonistic points, the monolithic identity and nature of the working class is always invariably preserved. The purity of the proletarian identity, predicated *a priori* on its relation to the economic, remains steadfastly preserved, independently of the practical existence of, and hegemonic tasks undertaken by, the proletariat itself.

The explanatory void caused by the non-unification of the proletarian class is increasingly filled by responses or concepts that must expand as that dispersion itself increases. The gradual widening of the gap between the multiplication of points of antagonism and the desired existence of such a unified class not only intensifies tensions within Marxist explanations, which increasingly, in a disconnected manner from the rest of their own explanation need to resort to the economic in the last instance as a way to stabilize and suture[4] within Marxist categories such process of fragmentation, but also results in the emergence and autonomization of the concept of hegemony. The function or purpose of the concept of hegemony and the practices that it entails, would be “the attempt to suture” an “ensemble of fissures” (ibid: 48).

It is necessary to reconstruct the debate as Laclau and Mouffe understand it, not to present how they differ from the supposed errors committed by Marxist authors in the failed attempts to respond to the theoretical crisis. But to shed light to what they identify as the real cause that would have initiated such crisis. That the multiplication of subject positions that Marxism

would always be trying to subsume within the unitary subject position of the proletariat, is not only, caused by the very development of capitalism, but is a process, reserved for such advanced capitalist societies. The root of the crisis was caused by two moments: "the new awareness of the opacity of the social, of the complexities and resistances of an increased organized capitalism; and the fragmentation of the different positions of social agents" (ibid: 18). The new scenario didn't establish "a merely transitory crisis", but it would exert a permanent "structural pressure" which caused a "proliferation of caesurae and discontinuities" in marxist discourse that from then on, established the main problem of marxism as to "*think those discontinuities* and at the same time, to find *forms reconstituting* the unity of scattered and heterogeneous elements" (ibid: 18, *emphasis in original*).

By saying that "the very degree of maturity of bourgeois civilization reflected its structural order within the working class, subverting the latter's unity", the authors are describing the effects that the complexification of the social had on marxist discourse (ibid: 48). The same point is formulated by their own theoretical language as follows:

> We can thus talk of a growing complexity and fragmentation of advanced industrial societies, […] in the sense that they are constituted around a fundamental asymmetry. This is the asymmetry existing between a growing proliferation of differences – a surplus of meaning of 'the social' – and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure (ibid: 96).

The materialist umbilical cord that we point out, the causal relationship or main condition between the growing difficulty of fixing social identities and capitalist development, describe how contingency initially grows in a given society[5]. This process is transcribed in their own theoretical language when they establish the non-fixity of identities, or their necessary relational character, as a logical consequence of the renunciation of "society" as a founding totality responsible for a final suture that would permanently fix identities and stop the flow of differences. Delving into the inner workings of contingent advanced societies, where hegemonic articulatory practices are the main mechanism responsible for the continuous partial fixation of identities, the author's establish why we are necessarily talking about social orders, or discursive formations, in which negativity and antagonisms are inherently present.

The experience that demonstrates the precariousness and limits of every discursive formation is antagonism. If all identities are established in a differential manner, antagonism is the failure of that. When an object cant be subsumable as a positive differential moment in a signifying chain, he shows itself as the limit of objectivity itself. For a subject position located

within the discursive formation, the force that antagonizes is not seen as one more positive element with full presence, its presence is a symbol of the impossibility of closure or non-being, antagonism shows itself as "overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent its being fixed as a full positivity" (ibid: 125).

Any way of defining and apprehending antagonism within some discursive or linguistic system must necessarily fail, if any discursive system is a failed attempt to limit the field of discursivity, antagonism is the subversion of such an attempt. This subversion occurs, when the positivity of a differential position within a discursive formation is dissolved or negated. The complementary nature between a positive position and its possible subversion in its negative antagonistic other is established by the very openness arising from the dynamics between equivalence and its differential moments. The equivalential character of a hegemonic chain exists through the partial subversion of the differential moments in that chain. This complementary relationship is described by Laclau and Mouffe as (ibid: 129):

> Certain discursive forms […], annul all positivity of the object and give a real existence to negativity as such. This impossibility of the real – negativity – has attained a form of presence. As the social is penetrated by negativity – that is, by antagonism – it does not attain the status of transparency, of full presence, and the objectivity of its identities is permanently subverted. From here onward, the impossible relation between objectivity and negativity has become constitutive of social. Yet the impossibility of the relation remains: its is fro this reason that the coexistence of its terms must be conceived not as an objective relation of frontiers, but as a reciprocal subversion of their contents.

The assertion that "negativity and objectivity exist only through their reciprocal subversion" results in every antagonistic position being constituted only as the negation or subversion of some positive differential position. As stated by Laclau and Mouffe (ibid: 129), if we could differentiate the chain of negative positions in relation to something other than what it opposes, "its terms could not be exclusively defined in a negative manner. We could have adjudicated to it a specific position in a system of relations: that is, we would have endowed it with a new objectivity".

In the description of how the process of subversion of differential positions occurs, the division between industrial societies and peripheral capitalism assumes all its importance. The differences in how the political space is structured between simple and complex societies, delineate the manner in which the process of rupture unfolds and the shape assumed by the antagonistic formations:

> It would appear that an important differential characteristic may be established between advanced industrial societies and the periphery of the capitalist world: in the former, the proliferation of points of antagonism permits the multiplication of democratic struggles, but these struggles, given their diversity, do not tend to constitute a 'people', that is, to enter into equivalence with one another and to divide the political space into two antagonistic fields. On the contrary, in the countries of the Third World, imperialist exploitation and the predominance of brutal and centralized forms of domination tend from the beginning to endow the popular struggle with a center, with a single and clearly defined enemy. Here the division of the political space into two fields is present from the outset, but the diversity of democratic struggles is more reduced. We shall use the term popular subject position to refer to the position that is constituted on the basis of dividing the political space into two antagonistic camps; and democratic subject position to refer to the locus of a clearly delimited antagonism which does not divide society in that way (ibid: 131)[6].

This division establishes the quantity of differential positions, their contingency or partial unfix character, how the points of antagonism interact with the positions they negate and the articulations formed between the points of rupture. A process of antagonism formation in which contingency is expanded, meaning that the articulation between antagonistic points causes the identities that they are trying to subvert and the discursive formation in its inteirity to assume a less fixed character, is a process reserved for industrial societies. In advanced capitalism the articulation between the points of antagonist rupture result in a democratic front that is pure negativity, this formation that is not endowed with any positivity and represents the limits of objectivity itself, has the main effect to further increase the open and unfixed character of the differential positions of the hegemonic formation.

In less advanced societies, due to their lower complexity and less contingent identities, the articulation between points of antagonistic rupture always require an external referent to be articulated. They need a transcendental or underlying ground that would serve as the positive articulating principle. By forming an opposing pole to that of society, referred to as “the people”, new antagonistic points of rupture would only be subsumed within a new formation that would be fitting such points into a new objectivity, giving them positivity and fixing their identity. What we are describing here is an antagonistic articulation necessarily less emancipatory than a democratic one, the common referential in the form of “nation”, “people”, or “god”, establishes an articulating chain in which democratic struggles loses their contingent character. They are not pure negativity anymore, but limited as positive expressions of that common referential that serves as the new foundation.

Both articulatory practices alter the identity of the elements that they are articulating, but while in the democratic articulation the negative identity and autonomy of each position is preserved and no general equivalent emerges, in the populist articulation, each moment is inevitably assimilated and homogenized into the general equivalent, which serves as the new foundation for that articulation. If the established frontier between a democratic antagonistic formation complicates the social space and decontingentializes identities, making the limits of this very boundary and the elements that separate it diffuse, the popular formation only simplifies the social space by reducing differential positions and fixing identities, creating a division that is perceived as rigid and absolute between the sides. Each practice belongs to a specific society:

> In the countries of advanced capitalism since the middle of the nineteenth century, the multiplication and 'uneven development' of democratic positions have increasingly diluted their simple and automatic unity around a popular pole. Partly because of their very success, democratic struggles tend less and less to be unified as 'popular struggles'. The conditions of political struggle in mature capitalism are increasingly distant from the nineteenth-century model of a clear-cut 'politics of frontiers' […]. The production of 'frontier effects' – which are the condition of expansions of the negativity pertaining to antagonisms – ceases thus to be grounded upon an evident and given separation, in a referential framework acquired once and for all. The production of this framework, the constitution of the very identities which will have to confront one another antagonistically, becomes now the first of political problems. This widens immensely the field of articulatory practices, and transforms any frontier into something essentially ambiguous and unstable, subject to constant displacements. […] [In the countries of advanced capitalism], the constitution of a unified popular pole, far from becoming more simple, grew increasingly difficult as the growing complexity and institutionalization of capitalist society (ibid: 134; 150).

Only one social formation makes it possible for its level of contingency to be sufficient for identities to need a constant and unstable fixing by hegemonic practices. As explained by the author's: "The hegemonic dimension of politics only expands as the open, non-sutured character of the social increases" (ibid: 138). If the "two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them", these characteristics, as we saw previously, are only present in advanced industrial societies (ibid: 136). It is within these societies that we can find a vast field of discursivity or surplus of the social, in which floating and partially sutured elements can be articulated and disputed by hegemonic practices and antagonistic forces. In hegemonic formations "every antagonism, left free to itself, is a floating signifier, a 'wild' antagonism

which does not predetermine the form in which it can be articulated to other elements in a social formation" (ibid: 171).

One last aspect needs clarification: why in complex industrial societies, do the equivalences between points of rupture only remain as pure negativity within a democratic front and do not require a new foundation or a new ultimate suture to articulate them? We have already seen how they are only possible in complex societies where there is a sufficient range of indeterminacy for hegemonic fixation activity to be necessary, but not why they specifically take on such a democratic format.

Here the authors appeal to what they call the democratic revolution, which would be a profound transformation in the political imagination of the West that has its key moment in the French Revolution. The ideas of universal equality and justice would not only be ideals to be followed, but would be, "what Claude Lefort has shown to be, a new mode of institution of the social" (ibid: 155). A new foundation or ground for society that would be the absence of any foundation. The democratic revolution has a dual function; it not only provides the discursive conditions that allow various forms of inequality to be perceived as illegitimate and unnatural, but its egalitarian imaginary also enables a groundless democratic articulation between such points of rupture.

To better illustrate the development of this issue in later writings, we will describe the functioning of the democratic discourse in two instances. The first function is related to how the subjects entangled in the social begin to perceive and see themselves. The democratic revolution enables the transformation of relations of subordination, a stable differential moment where unequal power dynamics are not recognized or just locally resisted, into relations of oppression, a point of rupture where those power dynamics are recognized and contested. Relations of oppression cannot be acknowledged as such "without the presence of a discursive 'exterior' from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted" (ibid: 154). This discursive exterior allows the agents to, by denaturalizing their situation, question it. The democratic discourse provides the external substrate on which naturalized subordinations or localized resistances can be articulated into antagonisms, "it impedes the stabilization of subordination as difference" (ibid: 159). The democratic revolution's partial elimination or delegitimization of any ultimate foundations enables individuals, for the first time, to recognize the contingent and arbitrary nature of already established social relations without such questioning arising from a standpoint established by another fixed foundation.

Before the democratic revolution, every form of struggle would have already had its meaning and identity fixed in advance, either by the foundation of the hegemonic order within which it was embedded or by the new foundation of "the people" or "nation" on which it would rely as part of an antagonistic equivalence. In societies touched by the democratic revolution and where hegemony is the main social mechanism for fixing identities, for the first time, antagonisms can be articulated in ways that are not previously determined or established by any ultimate foundation:

> This permits us to establish the radical difference between the current social struggles and those which took place before the democratic revolution. The latter always took place in the context of the denial of given and relatively stable identities; as a result, the frontiers of the antagonism were plainly visible and did not require to be constructed – the hegemonic dimension of politics was consequently absent. But in the present industrial societies, the very proliferation of widely differing points of rupture, the precarious character of all social identity, lead also to a blurring of the frontiers (ibid: 171).

But why wouldn't such a common reference point, the democratic imaginary of "equality of men" not simply crystallize into yet another referent like that of "the people", which would subsume the points of antagonism? Now, moving on to the second function, because the democratic invention is precisely to remove any ultimate foundation that would stabilize identities within a discursive order.

Initiated in the French Revolution, the democratic ideal represents "the end of a society of a hierarchic and inegalitarian type [...] in which the individuals appeared fixed in differential positions" (ibid: 155). In this new social institution where any final foundation is absent, not only does power become an empty space open to contestation, but any transcendent reason or guarantor that could sustain a unitary representation of society, along with the supposed fixed character of the identities that compose that society, disappears. Following closely Lefort (1981), Laclau and Mouffe (ibid) define the democratic revolution as the awareness of the absence of a center, the realization that society cannot be apprehended in a controlled totality where the identity of its agents is definitively given.

In democratic societies, unlike less complex ones, these new identities are articulated among themselves without the need to invoke a new foundation. Every equivalential articulatory practice, whether hegemonic or third-worldist, represents discourses "which seek to dominate the social as a totality", in which totality "becomes a new ground" and the "social identities

are presented as already acquired and fixed" (ibid: 183). However, when we talk about the democratic equivalence:

> ...by definition, this ultimate moment [of suture] never arrives […], it is no longer a case of foundations of the social order, but of social logics, which intervene to different degrees in the constitution of every social identity, and which partially limit their mutual effects. From this we can deduce a basic precondition for a radically libertarian conception of politics: the refusal to dominate – intellectually or politically – every presumed 'ultimate foundation' of the social (ibid: 183).

If capitalist development is the primary cause for the initial partial dessuturing of identities, or in other words, if there is an increasing difficulty for all these points of rupture to be subsumed under a single main discourse, it is only with the democratic revolution that a discourse suited to this new configuration emerges. The democratic revolution creates a social imaginary that makes the characteristics present in the contingent political space structured by advanced capitalism the principle of its own formation and mobilization. It is as if complex societies suddenly developed a social institution consistent with their own historical situation. The discourse that allows agents to become aware that all foundations are socially constructed. At this moment in the authors theory, the beginning of the democratic revolution has a miraculous origin, it is "something truly new", a "true discontinuity", an "invention" (ibid: 185).

This detailed reading of HST, was needed to emphasize how the categories referred to as advanced capitalism, industrial society, or democratic nations, and their opposite counterparts referred to as peripheral capitalism, Third World countries, and developing nations, are structuring to the author's thinking. How this division between the distinct political spaces organized by capitalist development, and the presence or absence of the democratic revolution, establishes the possibility for hegemony and the political forms that antagonistic formations can possibly, or at least probably, take in each society[7].

We aimed to show the two moments in which the cohesive post-foundational theory composed by a series of interconnected logical statements, is suddenly interrupted, and external statements related to objectivity/history are needed to supplement the explanation. We identify these moments as the last two redoubts of essentialism in the authors' theory, the two objective conditions needed for the multiplication of democratic antagonisms. The first is the necessity of a minimal degree of capitalist development (Advanced industrial societies) to establish a basic level of social complexity and fluidity necessary for hegemonic articulations

to become the predominant mechanism of social organization[8]. The second is the democratic revolution (A creation that has its key moment the French Revolution) as the condition for the recognition of relations of subordination as oppression and the formation of a negative antagonistic front.

What we are calling essentialisms here are *a priori* truths that serve as partial foundations to the Laclausian theoretical edifice presented in HSS. It is not coincidental that the reasoning, composed of a sequence of logical statements, is abruptly interrupted and history needs to be invoked as a cause to provide coherence to the explanation. These two crucial moments of post-foundational theorization are presented as historical givens. The remainder of this article consists in analyzing how Laclau's theoretical evolution, and the gradual emergence of the populist logic in his work, corresponds to the dissolution of these two essentialist assumptions. The next section describes the relocation of what we described as the second essentialist moment.

Dissolving and relocating the democratic revolution

As established by the author himself in NRR, the theoretical changes presented in such a book are primarily the result of the author's dialogue with the criticisms made by Zizek (1990) and the subsequent closer alignment of his conception of hegemony with Lacanian thought. We do not ignore this relationship, but following our line of reasoning in making a political reading of the author, we will present how such changes impacted what the author formulated regarding antagonistic equivalences and the democratic revolution. How some elements of the second essentialism were relocated within his theoretical edifice.

What we refer to as the first function of democratic discourse, that it serves as an "extra" discursive plane that allows relationships of subordination to be recognized as oppression, is analogous to the leap from the "class in itself" to a "class for itself". For the first time in history, agents became aware not only of the arbitrariness of the social relations in which they were embedded, but also of the arbitrariness inherent in any social formation. The democratic revolution thus has an explanatory purpose analogous to what "class consciousness" would occupy within the Marxist discourse[9]. The dialectical slip is described by Laclau as (2002: 81):

> [In the argument of antagonism in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,] there was a dialectical remnant, which is what I tried to eliminate in New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time. The dialectical residue was the assumption that social dislocation was directly antagonistic, meaning that once there is social dislocation, it will be experienced by social agents as an antagonistic relationship, but this is not

> necessarily the case. In fact, one can experience dislocation in their lived experience and attribute it to the anger of God, attribute it to the punishment of sins, attribute it to the intervention of mysterious agents operating in that society, attribute it to the Jews or any other victimized group. The idea of constructing, of experiencing that dislocation as antagonistic, based on the construction of an enemy, already presupposes a moment of discursive construction of dislocation, which allows one to dominate it, in some way, within a conceptual system that underlies a certain experience. That is to say, in some way, it was assumed that dislocation necessarily led to antagonism – that is the dialectical remnant – and that is what cannot be accepted in any way as a given fact[10].

The second function, of serving as the only discourse capable of articulating localized resistances into antagonisms that form a completely negative equivalential chain, is also undone. The impossibility of an equivalence that is pure negativity gives way to something that has a minimum of positivity, a positivity that is gained when dislocations are inscribed, even if precariously, within a new discursive surface or formation. This realization is described by Laclau (cited in Stavrakakis 2003: 324):

> There was a certain ambiguity in the way the category of antagonism was formulated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy...* Today I believe that the constitution of the other as antagonistic already presupposes a certain discursive inscription—in other words conceiving the other as an enemy presupposes a prior identification of ourselves with a particular position within the framework of the Symbolic order [It also presupposes, in most cases, the imaginary-fantasmatic construction of both antagonistic poles]. That's why in my more recent work I moved my attention to the category of "dislocation" as a level prior to that of "antagonism".

The category of dislocation plays a central role in this reorganization of Laclau's conceptual system. Dislocations are events, experiences, and elements that, at least initially, cannot be domesticated, represented, symbolized, or integrated within a discursive order. The effects of an experience of dislocation on an identity are those of decentering and destabilization; such a traumatic event can open a moment of undecidability during which the structural determinations of a position are minimal or null. While dislocations "threaten identities", they are also "the foundation in which new identities are constituted" (Laclau, 1990: 39). However, since there is nothing in the dislocatory event that directs how the recomposition or reinscription of such an element will occur, the moment of decision of the dislocated subject gains total importance. If we can speak of a subject in the dislocation, it is not the subject of a positive identity but the subject of the failure or gap in the structure itself, whose moment of decision is at least partially beyond the structure. The subject becomes a "locus of a decision"

not determined by the structure, a decision that “has the character of a ground that is primary as the structure” (ibid: 30).

Now that the mere presence of the democratic revolution does not result in what we called the automatic “antagonistic class consciousness” and formation of a complete negative democratic equivalence, we can observe how the two functions of the democratic discourse are divided and condensed into other moments in the author's theory. The first is condensed within the political space organized by advanced capitalism itself, and the second is now something that the subjects of democratic antagonistic movements must deepen in order to be successful as a democratic discourse.

If experiences of dislocation allow the appearance subjects partially detached from structural determinations to appear, what are the conditions for the occurrence or multiplication of dislocations? Here we encounter once again complex societies resulting from advanced capitalist development and its dislocatory effects:

> Marx correctly observed capitalism only expands through permanent transformation of the means of production and the dislocation and progressive dissolution of traditional relations. Such dislocation effects are manifest, on the on hand, in the commodification, and on the other hand, in the set of phenomena linked to uneven and combined development. In these conditions, the radical instability and threat to social identities posed by capitalist expansions necessarily leads to new forms of collective imaginary which reconstruct those threatened identities in a fundamentally new way. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 104-105).

The previously position of “true discontinuity” held by the French Revolution is now relegated to a secondary role; it merely exhibits or manifests characteristics already caused and internal to capitalist development. Now, through the dislocation effects of capitalism itself, social agents can become at least partially aware of the contingency of their epoch and the non-fixity of identities. Through the dislocatory rhythm of capitalism, society appears increasingly less based on timeless pillars that are not the result of human constructions. Social agents become more adept at recognizing their own historicity and, as a consequence, the negativity and contingency in every identity (Laclau, 1990). As Laclau (1990: 39) puts it: “the rapid change in discursive sequences organizing and constituting objects leads to a clearer awareness of the constitutive contingency of those discourses. The historicity of being of objects is thus shown more clearly”. The world is increasingly less given and must be constructed by agents who, through their own participation in advanced capitalism, are increasingly capable of understanding their historicity and contingency. If previously only the

contact with the democratic revolution allowed subjects to denaturalize their position in a way that rejected any ultimate foundations, now the conscience of the weakening of identities is already partially provided by the advanced capitalist environment itself[11].

Now moving towards the reformulation of the second function of the democratic discourse, we need to look at how the subjects of dislocations, whose moment of decision needs to be grounded "in its own singularity" and "cannot be ultimately grounded in anything external to itself", form democratic antagonisms (Laclau, 1996a: 55). Subjects of dislocation are able to escape rapid reabsorption into the hegemonic structure by constituting themselves as myths. Laclau (1990: 61) defines myth as "a space of representation which bears no relation of continuity with the dominant 'structural objectivity'". Myths can have a hegemonic function, by articulating and suturing dispersed elements into a new space of representation alternative to that of the hegemonic order. They are discursive surfaces on which dislocated entities and social demands can be reinscribed and articulated.

Just as with the question of the multiplication of dislocations, the ability of such dislocations to assume a mythical character when reorganized by an alternative space of representation is directly related to the inherent characteristics of advanced capitalist societies:

> But it is not just that myth is not absent from the functioning of contemporary societies: it is also that the latter are required by their very dynamics to become increasingly mythical. This is linked to the proliferation of dislocations peculiar to advanced capitalism – the era, as we saw, of disorganized capitalism. The combined effects of commodification, of bureaucratic rationalization, and of increasingly complex forms of division of labor – all require constant creativity and the continuous construction of spaces of collective operation that can rest less and less on inherited objective, institutional forms. But this means that in contemporary societies the (mythical) space of the subject is widened at the expense of structural objectivity. We live today in societies that are in many ways less 'alienated' that in the past: that is to say societies in which there is greater indeterminacy of our position within them and in which we are more free to decide our movements and identity. They are also societies in which social reproduction depends less and less on repetitive practices and requires the constant production of social myths. (Laclau, 1990: 67-68).

What we refer to as the second function of the democratic revolution, that of composing the previously purely negative antagonistic fronts, is now described as the process in which a specific mythical space of a dislocated subject partially empties itself from its particular content and assumes the function of a universal by serving as the new ground in which multiple demands can be inscribed (Laclau, 1990)[12]. A space of representation related to a specific dislocation, can become a social imaginary or the horizon of a new social formation,

when it begins to be transformed and understood as the proposal of an alternative social order in which the incompleteness of the previous hegemonic order would be overcome (Laclau, 1990). The process in which a particular dislocated element is emptied and becomes a discursive surface capable of inscribing new entities and new demands is now how antagonistic equivalential chains are formed. Keeping in mind that the formation of an empty signifier does not describe or prescribe the success that such an equivalential chain will achieve in hegemonic disputes, it is important to highlight that the process of emptying a signifier is the process of its universalization, or in other words, its hegemonization.

The process of constructing empty signifiers, is inherent to any antagonistic discursive formation, democratic or authoritarian, and every hegemonic totality. The democratic front, which by definition was the absence of foundation, has been replaced by formations where a specific force must contingently embody a partial universality, and by that process serve as the foundation or ground of that new formation. What interests us in this new relationship between universals and particulars is how the essentialism of the democratic revolution endures in how democratic formations are distinguished from authoritarian and populist ones. In other words, the necessary condition so an antagonistic formation assumes a democratic character.

An authoritarian universalization is described by Laclau as follows (1990: 77):

> All depends on how the process of universalization is conceived. If communitarian universality establishes a relation of total equivalence with the social order advocated by a particular group, the incarnation will not be contingent in fact there will be no incarnation at all, since the 'idea' and the 'body' in which it is to be incarnated have a relation of indissoluble necessity between them. An objective process has guaranteed positions from which a knowledge of the social proves possible. The dictatorship of the proletariat bases its legitimacy on the same privileged access to knowledge as the Platonic philosopher-king […]. In this case, (1) the social imaginary is totally reduced to mythical space in the sense that myth loses its character as a limitless surface of inscription; and (2) myth denies its own character as such, since on presenting itself as a necessary social order, it establishes a relation of essential continuity with the social demands that it determines as legitimate from its own inside, thus annulling any distance between the dislocations of the structure and the mythical surface on which they are to be inscribed. [...] It is this closed nature of a space denying its mythical character that allows the indivisible unity between empirical actors and the universal 'function' or 'tasks' to be welded together. It is perfectly clear that this fusion between empiricity and universality/rationality is at the root of the totalitarian potentialities of the 'social management' advocated by socialism.

The democratic or authoritarian character of the antagonistic formation, depends on how the process of universalization unfolded. The extent to which the particular social force that was

universalized is emptied establishes the contingency and openness of that formation for the inscription of new dislocated entities and the character of the possible future hegemonic order. In a democratic formation, the contingent character of the particular force being universalized enables it to achieve the greatest emptiness of its identity, establishing an open equivalential chain in which more demands can be inscribed. The more the universal is emptied of any content, meaning the more contingent and negative the universalized particular force is, the more we are speaking of an unstable and fluid order in which more dislocated entities and demands can be inscribed. The greater the degree of emptiness of the particular and the equivalential chain around it, the more we are talking about subjects/identities that understand themselves as contingent and deny the existence of any ultimate foundation. In increasingly democratic formations there is a constant widening gap between the empty place of power and the substantive forces contingently occupying it.

The authoritarian formations, of which populist ones would be a subspecies, follow the description made by the author in the previous quote. We are talking about antagonistic formations in which the particular force occupying the universal space would attempt to deny any gap and embody the universal. About a particular that does not attempt to empty itself but seeks to fill the space of the universal with the content/positivity of its own identity, thus establishing a fixed social order in which the possible inscription of dislocations and equivalences is limited or reduced. An order in which the space of power is occupied by those who believe themselves to be the ultimate articulators of the equivalential chain.

There is only one objective criterion that separates universalized particulars and the articulatory chains created around such empty signifiers, or in other words, the democratic recomposition of dislocated subjects from the authoritarian ones. The awareness that such subjects have of the contingency and historicity of their own identity and of the social as a whole. The refusal to believe that there is an ultimate foundation or point from which any specific agent could establish a permanent and transparent social order allows agents conscious of their own contingencies and limitations to conceive and fight for more democratic formations. We are talking about the recognition and intention to deepen through political mobilization, the notion that dislocations, contingency, antagonisms and the absence of foundations, are inherent to the social.

This “historical agent”, the subject or equivalential formation that is more or less conscious of its own contingency and the only one capable of deepening democracy, is the objective condition, or essentialism, that we wanted to point out. How the second function of the

democratic revolution is reformulated in the arguments in NRR. Carefully, Laclau (1990: 83) asserts that if we were to formulate a "criteria for choice" to define the agents capable of advancing the emancipatory project, it would be one that accepts its own "contingency and historicity. We could even go so far as to say that is the acceptance of our 'humanity' as an entity to be constructed". In summary: "The recognition of our limitation and contingency [...] is the very *necessary condition* for a democratic society" (Laclau, 1990: 83, *our emphasis*). Democratic practices construct the agent that is simultaneously necessary for its realization and the ultimate goal of its process: "someone who is confronted with Auschwitz and has the moral strength to admit the contingency of her own [democratic] beliefs, instead of seeking refuge in religious or rationalistic myths" (Laclau, 1996b: 123).

Now, democratic and populist/authoritarian antagonistic formations are structurally or morphologically the same; both equivalences for their articulation require a partial ground or foundation that is some particular which, upon being universalized/hegemonized, becomes the general equivalent of that chain. The only aspect that sets them apart is the awareness of contingency and a mobilization that seeks to deepen it. Just like any authoritarian formation, in the populist formation, that particular which would be embodying "the people" would be convinced of the positive content of its own identity, filling a universal that should be at least partially empty and limiting the equivalences and dislocated entities that can enter into its discursive formation. Only the democratic formation and its subjects would escape the authoritarian temptation to assert themselves as those who hold the essence of humanity and the ability to realize it historically through a concrete and fixed social order.

The two essentialist moments, despite the transformation of the second, remain. Despite the democratic revolution still being sometimes mentioned, we observe the dissolution of its theoretical function, that is, how the role that such concept occupied within the author's conceptual system has been dissolved and reallocated. Now, the relevance of capitalist development not only creates social formations more conducive to democratic formations but also is where points of rupture and spaces of representation that can assume an antagonistic configuration are multiplied. Caused by the dislocatory rhythm of capitalism, social relations increasingly show themselves as socially constructed. For the subjects of dislocation, it would suffice to continue and deepen such values of historicity and contingency, to embody what is already provided by their own environment. We end up with a scenario where capitalist development directly affects the self-awareness of subjects, and we speak of the action of subjects who, through their own distancing, historicization, weakening and contextualization

of any fixed identities and values, are simultaneously the product and objective of democratic practices[13].

The Populist Watershed

While traditional readings of OPR often seek elements that, when added or altered, would point to the deviation that led Laclau to populism or/and that caused its excessive formal aspects, our intention is to highlight how the elimination of the two lingering essentialist remnants we have observed so far renders the populist turn not a flawed deviation but rather a deepening of the project of radical democracy. If until now we discussed the positive presence of the essentialist remnants, now we will describe the elements introduced to eliminate them.

Previously Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1987) and Laclau's (1989, 1990) main writings, began with a genealogy that sought to trace how the effects of modern capitalism create and shape distinct political spaces whose complexity, contingency, fragmentation and political limits are directly related to the advanced or peripheral position of such space within capitalism. Now this part of his rationale is almost completely absent. The lengthy descriptions of capitalist development as the historical conditions that caused our post-modern era are almost completely eliminated, they timidly appear only once under a new label:

> The question concerning historical conditions should therefore be: are we Living in societies that tend to increase social homogeneity through immanent infrastructural mechanisms or, on the contrary, do we inhabit a historical terrain where the proliferation of heterogeneous points of rupture and antagonisms require increasingly *political* forms of social reaggregarion – that is to say, that the latter depend less on *underlying* social logics and more on *acts,* in the sense that I have described. […] What requires some consideration, however, are the conditions causing the balance to tip increasingly towards heterogeneity. There are several interrelated conditions, but if I had to subsume them under one label, it would be: *globalized capitalism* (Laclau, 2005: 229-230, *emphasis in original*).

The author asserts that "globalized capitalism represents a qualitatively new stage in capitalist history" (2005: 231). We are no longer talking about a system that, despite being global, differentiates spaces by their relative position in its productive chain, but about a global process that creates equal new spaces and undifferentiated those already existing. What matters to us is that there is no longer an underlying rationale that theoretically establishes differences between different political spaces distributed around the globe. The category advanced capitalism/peripheral capitalism has been dissolved and no longer has an explanatory value.

The idea of globalized capitalism eliminated the first pillar of essentialism that we identified earlier, and with it, the aspects of the democratic revolution that where condensed into the advanced capitalist space also dissapears. Previously, every time Laclau spoke about populism in his post-Marxist paradigm (1980, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1990), he always referred to such discursive formations as confined to a period or condition experienced by peripheral capitalist societies. Now for the first time, we can talk about the "outburst of populist mobilizations which take place periodically at the heart of overdeveloped societies" (Laclau, 2005: 99). Populism is unleashed from its regional restraints. If we talk about global capitalism and structurally similar political spaces, it is impossible to attribute a regional or localized character to the populist phenomenon[14].

The operation of making populism a geographically global phenomenon goes hand in hand with the author's reformulation to portray it as a socially global concept. As it is an inherent way of organization of the political and the quintessential form that anti-hegemonic chains assume, the populist phenomenon intersects with all dimensions of collective life. This makes its pathologization and repression occur from the individual-psychic to the social-political levels.

But following our line of inquiry, what needs explanation is: how occurred the shift in which democratic formations, that were always juxtaposed against authoritarian formations of which populisms was only a subspecies, to the new configuration in which any alternative hegemonic discursive formation, democratic or authoritarian, takes on a populist format? We describe below how this change reflects the dissolution of the second essentialist moment.

With the addition of empty signifiers, we established how new discursive/antagonistic formations that can participate in hegemonic disputes, independent if those formations are democratic or authoritarian, are morphologically similar, and that the only criterion objectively separating them is the degree of awareness of the inherent contingency of the social and the willingness to deepen it. What we described as the new format assumed by the second essentialist moment. To better illustrate how the addition of the affective dimension in OPS reflects the elimination of the second essentialism, it is worth dwelling on the paradoxical relationship of how this Laclausian "historical agent", as presented in NRR, lives the political relation.

The conviction in the fixity or essentiality of a cause, identity, or social order always leads individuals, whether their intentions are emancipatory or not, to slide into traditional or populist authoritarianism. Any actor, whether engaged in the political realm or not, becomes

involved to the extent that, by living and believing in a certain fixed objectivity, they push for the maintenance or implementation of foundations that establish that objectivity. We speak of individuals and movements that, driven and convinced by the inevitability or "historical necessity" of their own causes, perform repressions and exclusions in the name of a certain organization of the social that needs to be eternally preserved or implemented. At the root of all political engagements assuming an authoritarian character, we find the passionate belief in the essence of an ultimate foundation.

Only the enlightened subject of democratic formation, what we called the Laclausian "historical agent", would be able to escape the authoritarian temptation. If, in every political engagement, the belief in a cause and the attempt to maintain a fixed positivity corresponding to that belief is the nucleus of all authoritarianism, the democratic agent is unique in being conscious of their own contingency and in their desire to expand the fluidity and openness of the social. We're talking about a "historical agent" qualitatively different from all the others. As stated by Laclau (1996b: 123), someone "who has still not been entirely created by our culture, but one whose creation is absolutely necessary if our time is going to live up to its most radical and exhilarating possibilities". We could say that the old "New Soviet Man" is substituted by the new "New Democratic Man".

We speak of someone who, after asserting that the deepening of democracy depends on awareness of the historicity, negativity, and contingency of any identity, sense, value, and element of social life, engages in fierce hegemonic disputes where everyone, except them, is vying for the establishment of a fixed objectivity and social horizon. As stated by Laclau (2001: 8): "one has to advance certain concrete, substantial aims in the course of democratic political competition, but at the same time one has to assert the contingency of those aims". The democratic "historical agent" is the unique entity that can advocate for various political forces that deepen democracy without falling into essentialisms.

Unlike any other dislocated subject, distancing oneself from any essentialism would establish the singular engagement of the democratic agent and the condition for democratic engagement itself. Given that the engagement of authoritarian subjects is fueled by their conviction in the essence of the organization of the social they want to defend, how can the engagement of the democratic subject, who refuses the existence of any essence be explained? The contradiction between the completely opposing principles in the engagements of democratic and authoritarian subjects once again requires an external element to supplement the internal explanation. We have already observed how, when speaking of his "historical agent" adjusted

to the exhilarating epoch of our time, Laclau needs to adopt a highly normative and utopian language.

If in HSS democratic formations would appear as a consequence of the democratic revolution, now the obligation to build the democratic front falls directly on the shoulders of the subjects whose practices deepen democracy. It's worth examining, after all, who this democratic subject resembles. We are talking about a subject who coincidentally not only thinks the same as post-structuralist philosophers in affirming the contingency and negativity of any social object, but also politically lives such cause. In Laclau's theory, the position of enunciation, or the hidden subject of the sentence, unintentionally closely resembles the post-structuralist scholar themselves. The normative principle at the core of this theory is that the subjects capable in their recomposition and political mobilization to follow the democratic path are identical to critical theorists. Or at least someone who, the more they delve into the democratic revolution, the more they resemble an anti-essentialist scholar. This latent entity, experiencing hegemony and capable of following and constructing the contingent democratic path, occupies the space in such theoretical construct where typically the empirical individual of the research would be. In the place of the living "actually existing" subject of political action, we find a mirror[15].

As we saw, the essentialism of the democratic revolution always established the objective condition that separates the democratic equivalent chain in a stabilized concept distinguished within the author's thought. It serves as the external element to the author's own logical internal explanations, the objective condition that initially shaped the pure negative format of the democratic front and, after its reformulation, only determined what attitudes/effects were necessary by the agents for the discursive formation to be democratic. The pressuposed cognitive subject that is necessary in the explanation so the recognition, formulation and deepening of democratic formations can be established as a discrete process. The first supplement was history with the "democratic imaginary of the west", and after its dislocation in NRR, it just reappeared as what we could call the "democratic attitude". An attitude that is the sublimated form of the post-structuralist philosopher own lived experiences, values and judgments.

The problem arises not from normative values *per se*, but rather when they must be brought into play to stabilize and provide cohesion to a post-structuralist theoretical framework. How in a theory claiming to be free from any deterministic thinking by excluding the dreaded empiricism from its explanatory process, that determinism is smuggled back or resurfaces as

the sublimated will of the intellectual itself. The ability to recognize and differentiate what would constitute the democratic recomposition of dislocated subjects from all others, ultimately depends on the judgment of a subject that has an unintentional empirical stable referent: the anti-essentialist scholar.

The impasse between the democratic engagement or investment and all others is resolved when Laclau introduces the affective dimension into his theory. It becomes central to the theorization that "the social bond is a libidinal one" (2004a: 326; 2005: X). The author is not merely adding something onto his theory of equivalences; rather, he asserts that the affective dimension is inherent to the very process of signification: "the complexes which we call 'discursive or hegemonic formations', which articulate differential and equivalential logics, would be unintelligible without the affective component" (Laclau, 2005: 111). The inseparable connection between signifying and the affective dimension is present in every hegemonic totality and antagonistic discursive formations, whether democratic or not.

The central point about the affective issue is the strength or intensity necessary for certain signification processes to emerge or reproduce themselves. For Laclau (2005: 115), "radical investment means: making an object the embodiment of a mythical fullness". While in routine activities localized differentially, the emotional dimension is reduced, and processes rely on established rationalities. On the other hand, the moment when a particular is emptied and begins to articulate an equivalential chain—that is, when the hegemonization of a particular elevates it to represent an absent wholeness of the community—that's the moment in which the affective dimension takes priority, and we see the formation of "the people":

> Our whole approach to populism turns, as we have seen, around the following theses: (1) the emergence of the 'people' requires the passage – via equivalences – from isolated, heterogeneous demands to a 'global' demand which involves the formation of political frontiers and the discursive construction of power as an antagonistic force; (2) since, however, this passage does not follow from a mere analysis of the heterogeneous demands themselves – there is no logical, dialectical or semiotic transition from one level to the other – something qualitatively new has to intervene. [...]. This qualitatively differentiated and irreducible moment is what I have called 'radical investment' (Laclau, 2005: 110).

What interests us is that the formation of an antagonistic equivalential chain necessarily requires radical investment. This investment, regardless of the democratic or authoritarian nature of the chain in formation, refers only to the intensity needed for a new equivalence to form. As stated in Laclau (2012), the political direction of the radical investment doesn't give a specific form or characteristic to the affects. The radical investment necessary for the

formation of new equivalences, the populist moment, is independent of the political content articulated by the emerging discursive formation. Investments aimed at democratic or authoritarian formations cannot be theoretically or conceptually differentiated.

This qualitatively differentiated and irreducible moment of investment, is radical because nothing in that specific particular which is hegemonized preannounces or predetermines that it had to become the body that would incarnate the whole, and no *a priori* conceptual or theoretical condition can be established for what would be a democratic radical investment. Or, putting it in political terms, for what would conceptually constitute a democratic populism. As stated by Laclau (2020: 106): "Populism is neither democratic nor anti-democratic in itself, and there is no conceptual purity either".

Given that the only factor differentiating democratic discursive formations from authoritarian/populist ones—the different way in which the democratic subject engaged with the social, what we called the "democratic attitude" —has been eliminated, and that such formations are also not distinguishable by their structure or form, as we previously discussed, we arrive at the stage that, regardless of the political content of the equivalential chain, it is theoretically impossible to distinguish differences between them. Any equivalential chain aiming for a hegemonic reformulation of the social, will always assume a populist format. In other words, the populist logic is extended to encompass formations that can no longer be theoretically classified, like before, as democratic or authoritarian, and consequently, formalism ensues.

When the creation of emptiness is no longer tied to a particular symbolic framework, and the individuals aligned with that framework cease to represent the essential condition for advancing radical democracy, Laclau (2005: 169) shifts from viewing the growth of social contingency as an objective consequence of a specific framework (Democratic Revolution in HSS) or, at the very least, correlated to objective specific practices (Democratic Subject in NRR), to seeing it as something internally generated through the experiences and disputes of subjects within hegemonic relations:

> ...we have to move from the formal structure of a politico-symbolic space to a wider 'way of living' where political subjectivity is constituted; and, on the other, that a vision of political subjectivity emerges in which a plurality of practices and passionate attachments enter into a picture where rationality […] is no longer the dominant component. But with this we reach a point at which this notion of democratic identity is practically indistinguishable from what I have called popular identity.

It was only by appealing to a third discourse or privileged vantage point, that of the democratic revolution or later the democratic subject, which, as we saw, was not itself coherently integrated into Laclau's theoretical system, that the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism could previously be conceptually maintained. Given that hegemonic discursive formations can no longer be easily classified through the democracy/authoritarianism binary—since, in OPS, such aspects are now entirely contingent and internal to the articulations and hegemonic disputes themselves—this binary, which governed all of Laclau's post-Marxist writings until now, is eliminated.

The engaged/disengaged contingent democratic "historical agent" that we described earlier loses its theoretical value. Now, the creation of this entity is completely internal to the hegemonic struggle itself. The intention to establish a more open and contingent social order no longer dictates or differentiates how subjects engage or invest themselves in the social. When we talk about the formation of an antagonistic equivalence, whether democratic or not, we are describing processes that equally demand intense and radical involvements. The construction of a democratic subject occurs in the same way as all others; it ceases to be a regulating principle and becomes the contingent result of experiences internal to the dynamics of both hegemonic and antagonistic discursive formations. The growth of social contingency is no longer experienced and executed as the almost rational awareness and affirmation of the inherent contingency of the social and the weakening of any identity, but rather as the radical investment in an empty signifier.

The elimination of such essentialism does not mean that the author turns against democratic values. Rather, it signifies that there is no longer a transcendental element or position beyond the hegemonic struggle itself that establishes how democratic discursive formations and hegemonic disputes unfold or should unfold. The hidden position of enunciation occupied by the intellectual is erased; there is no longer a stable referent whose judgment can identify and divide social formations in a discrete manner. We are talking about the abandonment of a regulatory idea, not a change in ideals. Democracy loses its conceptual strength as an *a priori* notion that theoretically establishes the objective condition separating democratic formations and attitudes from others and becomes something internal and contingent to political disputes themselves. The pure position of democratic enunciation is undone, or in other words, the last redoubt of essentialism—the implicit values and judgments of the post-structuralist intellectual—is finally dissolved.

It is through the acknowledgment of this new subject, which bears no resemblance to our previously described “historical agent”, that the writings on ethics by Laclau from the same period are produced (2004a: 286-295; 2004b; 2004c). Agreeing with Badiou, Laclau (2004c: 120) asserts that “ethics is constitutively linked to the fidelity to an event which is always concrete and situated”. The engagement of the distant democratic subject previously discussed is substituted by what could almost be called the ethics of a militant engagement. The two primary approaches to addressing the ethical-normative deficit in Laclau's theory merely reflect, in another register, two common strategies that try to overcome the excessive formalism in his populist formulation. The first, in which a universal “ethico-political injunction” derived logically from the inherent contingency of the social is introduced, would merely be something existing at a “secondary level which presupposes that an ethical [radical] investment has already been made” (Laclau, 2004: 290). The second approach, that attempts to establish a substantive minimum ethical content from the outset, that is, which asserts that “the ethical has from the beginning a content necessarily attached to it”, can easily in its wholesale rejection of other conceptions result in “authoritarian and ethnocentric consequences” (Laclau, 2004: 291).

The same issue can be understood within the register of the populist phenomenon. Attempting to attribute a minimal ethical/normative injunction that would delineate what constitutes a democratic or inclusionary populism, results that a radical investment has already previously occurred in any injunction that goes beyond a mere descriptive formalism. Conversely, attempting to attribute a minimal institutional arrangement or practical attributes that would correspond to what defines democratic populism, in its attempt to elevate a contingent historical arrangement of the social to the theoretical dimension, easily brings with it authoritarian consequences. In other words, attempting to logically derive a normative injunction from the contingency of the social (the impossibility of society) is to try to bring something ontological into the ontic realm without recognizing that such a transition cannot occur without profound transformations taking place. Alternatively, trying to elevate a specific social arrangement from the ontic to the ontological realm is the quickest way to fall into essentialisms.

The logical gap between the requirements for the implementation of democratic forms of politics, “the substantive values of democracy that are the object of a radical investment in a certain context and the radical contingency inherent in democratic politics”, previously resolved and mediated by what we called the democratic historical agent, now results in a

logical contradiction that cannot be “logically solved”, but only “politically negotiated” (Laclau, 2008a: 188). This problem is intentionally not conceptually or theoretically resolvable within the parameters of Laclau's post-foundationalism – at least, not without smuggling back *ersatz* foundations into the theoretical edifice – but only politically, through a phenomenon whose name reflects all the uncertainties, ambiguities, and contingencies of participating in and living the political moment. For the first time, undecidability goes all the way to the core of the theory, and consequently, the entry into the political becomes a risk that receives an equally risky and undecidable name, populism[16].

CONCLUSION

The paper's conclusions suggest that Laclau's theoretical development involves the gradual elimination of the two essentialist remnants from his thinking, which were centered on his arguments about advanced capitalist societies and the democratic revolution. It's only when these remnants are eliminated that the Laclausian project of radical democracy finally takes shape in a way that aligns with its own goals of abandoning any ultimate foundation. Consequently, we propose that the theoretical changes presented in OPR not as deviations from the author’s own previous thought or an incomplete formulation of populism, but rather as an improvement and deepening of the coherence of arguments within an intellectual project. And the resulting formalism, as a necessary and constitutive element of that theoretical development.

In OPR, Laclau abandons the belief in advanced industrial societies as the privileged locus for the construction of the project of radical democracy and eliminates the democratic revolution from his conceptual system, which in its last version was the position of enunciation of the intellectual itself. In other words, what we witnessed was the deconstruction of Ernesto Laclau by Ernesto Laclau. Reframing the debate, the question is not to what extent Laclau's populism is compatible with radical democracy, but to what extent Laclau’s previous considerations less formal and with their essentialist remnants are compatible with such project.

Through OPS, Laclau removed the privileged position of enunciation within his theoretical edifice that stood above hegemonic struggles, a position that had been indirectly held by the post-structuralist intellectual. The involuntary empirical informer that was smuggled in his theory. The radical inquiries announced by post-structuralism can encounter their limit in the associated interests and correlated censorships concerning their belonging to the very field of

philosophical production. As we saw, one of the dangers of excluding the dreaded deterministic empiricism from social analysis is how often it returns under a different cloak, much less clearly, and thus much more symbolically violent.

Returning to the debate from the introduction, we can revisit what the authors previously described as the muddy waters of hyperformalism. The internal critiques that contend that the theoretical changes in OPS led to excessive formalism, wherein, among other problems, it becomes impossible to identify variants among populisms and/or to differentiate populist from democratic entities. We argue that these critiques seek a privileged or transcendental standpoint within the theory from which this operation of classification would be possible—a pure position through which intellectuals could establish objective criteria for configuring democratic formations before engaging with the political. However, as we saw, this was precisely the element Laclau eliminated with his populist turn.

Obviously, we are not stating that the critiques are wrong, misinformed or unfounded. Instead, we are pointing out that these aspects, in the eyes of the author himself, are not flaws, antinomies, or blind spots—errors to overcome or that can post-foundationally be overcome—but rather a constitutive element of his intellectual project. The limits are not limitations but elements that provide coherence to the Laclausian project. What we are questioning is to what extent those who seek to overcome the formalism in OPS within the Discourse Analysis paradigm —whether motivated by positive adherence or critical reevaluation— are not unconsciously smuggling back *ersatz* foundations into the theoretical edifice. Evidently we agree that the populist formalism in OPS comes with a number of problems, but our intention here was to point out the reasons that caused it, what it is a solution to, and consequently, how those who seek to overcome it must bear in mind the possible consequences and theoretical regressions that its elimination can entail.

This theoretical deadlock can be reformulated in the following manner: to what extent are researchers who strive to develop a "post-laclausian" interpretation of populism not entering into a zero-sum game by just shifting the position of the "post" that should be in front of "post-foundationalism"?

To Laclau any answer to these critical interventions can only be a contingent answer obtained and formulated through the radical investment which is to engage in the political. Every answer can only be a political gamble. As Marchart (2005: 10) suggests, the Argentine author contributed "not only to the theorization of the political but also to the politicization of

theory". Since Carl Schmitt, it would be hard to find someone who did that in such an absolute manner.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the anonymous reviewers of *Dados*, whose careful reading and well-founded suggestions substantially improved the initial version of this paper. I also extend my gratitude to Prof. André Kaysel, whose insightful suggestions were essential to the formulation of the article.

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[1] Moving forward, “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy”, “New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time” and “On Populist Reason” will be abbreviated as HSS, NRR, and OPR, respectively.

[2] When asked in an interview about his equalization of populism and radical democracy, and to what degree these two entities coincide, Laclau (2008b: 88) answers, “I think they coincide entirely”.

[3] The scope of the paper doesn’t permit a theoretical introduction or a conceptual overview.

[4] For the original explanation of the relation between hegemonic practices and suture, nodal points and discursive formations see Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 88; 97-104).

[5] Bertram (1995: 83) attributes this characteristic to the author’s Marxist roots: “Laclau and Mouffe are unique in that their Marxist training still compels them to offer a historical explanation for the economic underpinnings of anti-essentialism and subjectivity”.

[6] This division between subject positions and popular positions is first outlined in Laclau (1980).

[7] When questioning whether new mobilizations in Latin America could break with the totalizing imaginary that has prevailed on the continent, Laclau (1985: 39) asserts that until then the political field has always been constructed “around two successive, basic, totalizing matrices: liberalism and populism”. The region only knew the rule dictated by extreme logics of difference or equivalence.

[8] The only time in which Laclau (1989: 78-79) reflects on such point, he states that his narrative has a “revealing” intention rather than an “explanatory” one. By creating a narrative in which the post-modern condition was generated by the capitalist development itself, he wouldn't be establishing “the causes of a certain process”, but would be “narrating the dissolution of a foundation, thus revealing the radical contingency of the categories linked to that foundation” (Laclau, 1989: 78-79).

[9] When we talk about the automatic “class consciousness” and the “historical agent” in Laclau’s theory, we don’t think that the author formulated the topic in those terms. By using the contrasting Marxist language we want to better illustrate how in Laclau’s contingent theory of the social certain deterministic and objective moments remain.

[10] All quotations were freely translated in this paper.

[11] Something to highlight is that although in NRR Laclau still prioritizes societies that would be formed by advanced capitalism as the privileged *locus* for democratic deepening, from NRR onward Laclau begins to recognize that there is a hegemonic dimension in Third World societies.

[12] This process, first delineated in NRR, is further formalized in the essay “Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” (Laclau, 1996b).

[13] This tautological aspect is noted by Acha (2020: 205) when he states that “the ‘radicalization’ of democracy consists in the contingent deployment of possibilities inherent to its very concept”.

[14] The same point is made by Arditi (2022: 59): "Laclau and Mouffe did not generalize the explanatory validity of these [populist] struggles because they associated the popular subject position with the Third World. Advanced capitalism was dominated by democratic subject positions that multiplied the points of antagonism and prevented the dichotomous division of the field of conflict", the conceptual expansion of populism would occur "partly because Laclau abandons the opposition between advanced and peripheral capitalism".

[15] For a comprehensive explanation of scholastic epistomecentrism, see Bourdieu (2000: 50-54). Interviewing Laclau (1990: 219), Peter Dews poses a question that follows a similar line of inquiry, albeit using Rorty as an example.

[16] The name populism reflects the constitutive undecidedness of the phenomenon itself and its extreme possible configurations.