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## Reading Emancipation Backwards: Laclau, Žižek and the Critique of Ideology in Emancipatory Politics<sup>1</sup>

Matthew Flisfeder - Ryerson University and York University  
in Toronto, Canada.

Radical politics today, the politics of emancipation (as opposed to revolution), is divided on the topic of the ethics of emancipation and the ‘character’ of the emancipatory *subject* – that is, the subject(s) who will organize the Left against the oppressive regime(s) of power. Contemporary debates on the topic of emancipatory politics propose that the emancipatory subject displaces the Marxist subject of historical materialism (the *proletariat*)<sup>2</sup> and, in the wake of post-politics – the shift from global ideological conflicts, i.e. the Cold War conflict between capitalism and communism, liberal democracy and utopia, to “the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists...) and liberal multiculturalists” (Žižek 1999: 198) – radical politics now avoids the utopian idealism of traditional leftist politics. Instead, radical politics centres on the mantra: “society does not exist”. Utopia is deemed impossible, but its necessity has not been completely dismissed.

The point emphasized in radical politics is that it is impossible to have a fully realized, totally enclosed society (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In other words, the idea

of 'society' is somewhat akin to the idea of utopia. Society as a fully closed system, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is impossible. 'Non-society', rather, is organized around a non-resolvable antagonism, however; the *appearance* of a fully closed society is produced by way of some kind of ideological fantasy, on the one hand, or by the temporary hegemonic content of mass mobilizations of political actors against oppressive regimes of power, on the other. Fantasy creates the illusion of completeness: the possibility of reconciliation between some mythical origin and a future utopian ideal; it is an ideal which is captured by the notion of 'emancipation'. Emancipatory politics, therefore, exposes the fantasy, makes it transparent, and restores antagonism as a central ordering principle: it represents the impossible completeness of society.<sup>3</sup> But the question remains: is it possible to transcend (or traverse) the fantasy? Is emancipation possible?

Debate continues to haunt the theoretical analysis of radical emancipatory politics against the dominant, oppressive regimes of power. In this debate, two contemporary theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, have formulated opposed positions on the character of the emancipatory subject and the ethics of emancipation. Within their debate on emancipatory politics, Laclau and Žižek have produced a highly advanced matrix for the critique of ideology, based on a critical *mélange* of post-Marxist theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The opposition between Laclau and Žižek can be seen as one of the central theoretical conflicts around which leftist politics are organized today. Laclau (with Chantal Mouffe), on the one hand, argues for a radical democratic politics sutured by his version of hegemony and populism. For him, the emancipatory subject can be represented by the populism of the *lumpenproletariat*, or the "absolute 'outsider'" (Laclau 2005: 144). According to Laclau, against Marx who conceived the "'inside' of history... as a history of production," the expulsion of the *lumpenproletariat* from the field of historicity "is the very condition of possibility of a pure interiority, of a history with coherent structure" (Ibid). He argues that "any kind of underdog, even in the extreme and purely hypothetical case in which it is exclusively a class defined by its location within the relations of production, has to have something of the nature of the *lumpenproletariat* if it is going to be an antagonistic subject" (Ibid: 152). For Žižek, on the other hand, class struggle remains the central overdetermining factor of political struggle, or political antagonism (to use Laclau's terms). In contrast to Laclau, the emancipatory subject *par excellence* for Žižek is, in fact, the *proletariat* – that is, a

nongroup within the “social edifice” itself (Žižek 2006a: 565).

The *proletariat* exists as a contradictory group, which is both included and excluded from society. It is included in the sense that it is required “in order for the dominant to reproduce themselves and their rule,” however; the *proletariat* is excluded in the sense that society “cannot find a proper place for them” (Žižek 2006a: 565). The *lumpenproletariat*, in contrast, is denied any historicity, in Marxist theory, in the relations of production. It is that group which is socially *and* economically marginalized by the capitalist relations of production. It is, as Žižek suggests, “a free-floating element that can be used by any strata or class” (Ibid).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, from his perspective, the *lumpenproletariat* is that group that can be appropriated by either the populism of the oppressive regime or by the populism of ‘the people’, which is the (interim) name Laclau (2005) associates with his emancipatory actors.

Nevertheless, Laclau points out that Žižek’s logic suffers from the same kind of flaws found in Marx’s reasoning. For Marx, the historical “actor” has to occupy a place within the relations of production. However, as Laclau points out, “this location is precisely what the *lumpenproletariat* does not have” (Laclau 2006: 667). According to Laclau, Marx concludes – and this, for Laclau, is one of the inherent flaws in Marx’s reasoning – that “the *lumpenproletariat* should be denied any historicity” (Ibid).

Rather than seeing Laclau and Žižek’s approaches as completely antagonistic, we can, instead, locate their points of convergence and commensurability. Despite their recent debates (see Butler, et al. 2000; Laclau 2006; Žižek 2006a, and; Žižek 2006b), it is possible to situate where they are consistent with each other in their theorizations of hegemony and ideology, respectively. This is considered in the following by reading each through the points of the other’s critique. In doing so, we will locate places where each approach is consistent, or may be subsidized, with the claims of the other.

The proceeding is an analysis of the debate between Laclau and Žižek on the topic of emancipation, but it is also a reading of their methodological approach to this study. By analyzing their readings of emancipation, I argue that a ‘happy encounter’ of Laclau and Žižek can be produced for the purpose of conducting ideological critique. Laclau and Žižek share a unique understanding of ideology and hegemony. It is only in the particular content of emancipation that they begin to diverge. In assessing their positions on the character of the emancipatory subject, the following considers the opposition between populism (which is Laclau’s ideal formation of emancipatory politics) and class struggle, Laclau and Žižek’s considerations on the universal and the particular

as they relate to the form and content of emancipatory struggles, and the use of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in the process of elaborating on political struggle/antagonism – something of which both Laclau and Žižek employ in order to make their respective cases. Although they come to different conclusions regarding the ethics of emancipation and the character of the emancipatory subject(s), the present analysis highlights the ways in which Laclau and Žižek have developed an appealing approach for the study of ideology. This will become evident as we move backwards from the point of their split towards their points of convergence. It will become clear that moving backwards is exactly the approach necessary for an ideological critique of emancipation.

### **Populism and Class Struggle**

In his book, *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau claims that the unity of a political group is “the result of an articulation of demands” (Laclau 2005: ix). However, according to him, the articulation of this unity does not necessarily correspond to some pre-established, positive entity. The multitude of groups with claims against the oppressive regime exists in a differential relationship to each other. They are divided by social, cultural, economic and political antagonisms.<sup>5</sup> Since demands are made against institutions, it is, rather, *a shared negativity* which unites the ‘the people’ – Laclau’s emancipatory subjects – against an oppressive regime. Despite their differences, what they share is a collective opposition to the dominant regime. Populism, for Laclau, is, thus, “a way of constructing the political” (Ibid: xi). It is a category of political unity that is structured around antagonism: the impossibility of a total, full or closed society (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 125). What Laclau’s theory of populism proposes, then, is that the ‘naming’ of the emancipatory subject or group is *not* something that precedes the emancipatory struggle. For him, emancipatory politics should not be organized around any particular group or conflict. Rather, the unity of the group is forged through a logic of articulation of equivalential demands (Laclau 2005: x). When the various political agents come together to articulate the same demands against the oppressive regime, a new political unity emerges. For Laclau, the ‘naming’ of the group occurs simultaneously with the articulation of demands and not before.

The ‘people’ is not something that pre-exists; it is that which is discursively

constructed in the process of emancipatory struggle. As Žižek puts it, for Laclau “the fact that some particular struggle is elevated into the ‘universal equivalent’ of all struggles is not a predetermined fact but itself the result of the contingent political struggle for hegemony” (Žižek 2006a: 554). Žižek, in contrast, sees the emancipatory subject or group as something that *does* pre-exist the struggle for emancipation, however; it is unknowable since, in the process of emancipatory struggle, it lacks symbolic integration. According to him,

the identity of an object in all counterfactual situations – through the change of all its descriptive features – is *the retroactive effect of naming itself*: it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object. That ‘surplus’ in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds is ‘something in it more than itself’, that is to say the Lacanian *objet petit a*: we search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency – because it is just an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier. (Žižek 1989: 94-95)<sup>6</sup>

As Laclau suggests, Žižek’s theory is that, if the object (or the signifier of the group) “remains the same beyond all its descriptive changes... the ‘X’ [the object resisting symbolic integration] is a retroactive effect of naming” (Laclau 2005: 102). The emancipatory subject is, thus, for Žižek, a product of its relation to an ‘indivisible remainder’: the *objet a* or master signifier. It is that which persists beyond all attempts at its diffusion through symbolic integration.

According to Žižek, this signifier which resists symbolic integration is represented by the Lacanian *objet a* – the master signifier, or the quilting point (*point de caption*, or, as it is theorized by Laclau and Mouffe, a ‘nodal point’). The name of this signifier, as Laclau points out, “brings about the unity of a discursive formation” but it “has no positive identity of its own” (Laclau 2005: 103). However, what Žižek, in fact, proposes is that this remainder, this signifier resisting symbolic integration, is the “overdetermining principle of articulation of the multitude of emancipatory struggles” (Žižek 2006b: 193). For him, the signifier for this overdetermining principle is class struggle.

The reason why Žižek proposes class struggle as the overdetermining principle of emancipatory struggle has to do with his understanding of exclusion. According to Žižek, the political philosophy of liberal democracy claims to be neutral and impartial. However, he argues that neutrality is impossible, “there is no way to avoid being partial” (Žižek 2006c: 178). Liberal democracy, as Žižek understands it, is a centrist political

philosophy which has been placed in between the right and the left, and that its proponents claim that both polar ends ultimately lead towards a “totalitarian threat to the rule of Law” (Ibid). In contrast to this, Žižek argues that, in fact, each of the two extremes follows a different logic.

On the one hand, Žižek suggests, “the right legitimizes its suspension of the Ethical by its *anti-universalist* [emphasis added] stance, by way of reference to its particular (religious, patriotic) identity which overrules any universal moral or legal standards” (Žižek 2006c: 178). On the other hand, “the Left legitimizes its suspension of the Ethical precisely by means of reference to *the true universality to come* [emphasis added]” (Ibid). As Žižek has it, the leftist perspective accepts the “antagonistic character of society,” the truth that there is no neutrality, and still maintains its universalist position. This, he claims, “can only be conceived if *the antagonism is inherent to universality itself*, that is, if universality itself is split into the ‘false’ concrete universality that legitimizes the existing division of the Whole into functional parts and the impossible/Real demand of ‘abstract’ universality” (Ibid). The leftist project, thus, according to Žižek is “to question the concrete existing universal order on behalf of its symptom, of the part that, *although inherent to the existing universal order* [emphasis added], has no ‘proper place’ within it” (Ibid). By way of ‘identifying with the symptom’, Žižek proposes that leftist struggle “asserts (and identifies with) *the point of inherent exception/exclusion, the ‘abject’, the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality*, as the point which belies the existing concrete universality” (Žižek 2006c: 178-179). Thus, the ‘concrete’ universality of leftist struggle – the abject subjects of the abstract universalism of the dominant order – comes about in relation to the point of exclusion of the abstract universality of the dominant – of that which is excluded from what is claimed to be universal. Read *retroactively*, as the remainder of symbolic integration, class struggle, for Žižek, is the signifier of this antagonism. It is the signifier that identifies with the symptom.

The opposition between Laclau and Žižek can, in part, be read as a dispute over the particular content of the exclusion to the claims of the dominant towards universal inclusion. Both Laclau and Žižek (ultimately) agree that the onslaught of the enemy “is the precondition of any popular identity” (Laclau 2006: 648). So a preliminary inquiry into both Laclau’s and Žižek’s approaches must ask: what is our point of departure? What/who is the enemy? Žižek claims that Laclau’s approach towards conceiving ‘the people’ as the emancipatory subject discursively constructs the enemy as a positive

ontological entity (Žižek 2006a: 556). Conceiving the place of the enemy is difficult since it is split between being a positive ontological entity (the state, multi-national corporations, the media) and the symbolic order as such: the big Other. People are, thus, made subjects in two ways: as subjects of the dominant social-political order, and as subjects of the symbolic order. However, both Laclau's and Žižek's approaches necessarily assume that there exists some group that requires emancipation. Thus, at its base, emancipatory politics assumes: 1) that there is an 'enemy' that claims to be inclusive but is, in fact, exclusive, and; 2) that there is some oppressed and/or exploited group that requires emancipation. To this we can add that, for emancipatory politics, rather than fight for inclusion, there is a desire to abolish the reigning order itself: *to maintain the antagonism central to radical politics.*<sup>7</sup> It is, thus, important to question the element of *antagonism* in emancipatory politics. Laclau's analysis of emancipation is a good place to begin considering an ideological critique of emancipatory struggle and the structuring role of antagonism. This is also a fine starting point for understanding the necessity of a 'backwards' reading of emancipation.

## **Emancipation**

According to Laclau, emancipation is organized around six 'dimensions': the dichotomic dimension; a holistic dimension; the transparency dimension; "the *pre-existence* of what has to be emancipated *vis-à-vis* the act of emancipation"; a dimension of ground, and; a rationalistic dimension (Laclau 1996: 1-2). The dichotomic dimension represents the discontinuity between the "emancipatory moment" and the social order that precedes this moment, while the holistic dimension is related to that which proceeds or follows the moment of emancipation; the holistic dimension represents the effect of emancipation on the rest of social life. Thus, both the dichotomic and the holistic dimensions relate to the sequential, before and after, aspects of emancipation, with the "emancipatory moment" representing the point of reference (the master-signifier) to each. However, the meaning of the "emancipatory moment" is relative to each dimension since social life is supposedly transformed following the "emancipatory moment." Therefore, the meaning of that which *preceded* the "emancipatory moment" – the *ancien regime* of social life – is transformed by that which follows. This is problematic since, if the "emancipatory moment" were truly successful, it would erase the circumstances out of which it was produced, thus transforming the grounds for

emancipation. As a result – and this is one of the basic claims of Laclau and Mouffe – *antagonism is impossible to resolve*.

Transparency, as it is discussed by Laclau, can be viewed as somewhat analogous to the Hegelian Absolute: it represents the eradication of alienation in all of its forms (religious, political, economic, etc.); it is that which occurs when there is “absolute coincidence of human essence with itself and there is no room for any relation of either power or representation” (Laclau 1996: 1). In a sense, the element of transparency represents *the utopian ideal of emancipation*. We can already see that the dimension of transparency stands in as a necessary fiction. This, for Laclau, represents that which, in Marxism, is the future communist utopia with the withering away of the state, as well as other theories regarding the ‘promise’ of humanist, or naturalist reconciliation. Emancipation, in this sense, would represent “the elimination of power, the abolition of the subject/object distinction, and the management – without any opaqueness or mediation – of communitarian affairs by social agents identified with the viewpoint of social totality” (Laclau 1996: 1). From Laclau’s position on the impossible completeness of society, we should consider the dimension of transparency as one that can never be realized. The dimension of transparency in emancipatory politics is, thus, impossible. This being the case, we arrive at a conundrum: *if transparency is impossible, what is the point of emancipatory politics?*

For Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, radical and plural democracy assumes a limit to objectivity, which is what they refer to as *antagonism* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 122). Antagonism represents the impossibility of a fully constituted society (Ibid: 125). However, they claim that “if society is not totally possible, neither is it totally impossible... if society is never transparent to itself because it is unable to constitute itself as an objective field, neither is antagonism entirely transparent” (Ibid: 129). Therefore, the dimension of transparency in Laclau’s analysis of emancipation represents the possibility *and* the impossibility of realizing the totality of society. (As we will see, the ‘promise’ of transparency is related to Žižek’s notion of ideological fantasy).

The fourth dimension of Laclau’s analysis is the pre-existence of what has to be emancipated. As he argues, “there is no emancipation without oppression, and there is no oppression without the presence of something which is impeded in its free development by oppressive forces” (Laclau 1996: 1). From this, we can understand the dimension of transparency as something that is related to that which is being impeded, oppressed or exploited. Transparency would allow for the free development of what was



previously inhibited by the oppressive forces. Emancipation, according to Laclau, is the liberation “of something which precedes the liberating act” (Ibid). Nevertheless, in his theorization of emancipation, this ‘something’ remains empty, without definition. This is a strategic move for Laclau since, when speaking of liberation it is important not to fall into the trap of messianic eschatology. If we follow the logic of the messianic we risk falling into the trap of oppressive abstract universalism. Therefore, the promise of transparency, as we will see, is both a progressive and a retroactive conception. It is progressive in the sense that its promise represents a goal towards which emancipation aims. However, it is retroactive in the sense that the pre-existence of that which is to be liberated follows from the existence of the oppressive forces. In other words, *the oppressive force is the precondition of that which is to be liberated*. We can only locate exclusion and inhibition in relation to the abstract universalism of the dominant order. Furthermore, the subject-identity of those who require emancipation is interpellated by the dominant order. Thus, we are not talking about liberating and reuniting the subject/object relation; we are not talking about returning humanity to its primal species being, or some kind of humanist reconciliation of humanity with its primal state of existence. In assessing the opposition between oppressor and oppressed we come to understand that that which requires liberation and that which impedes liberation exist in an antagonistic, although contingent relationship.

From a strictly humanist perspective, that which is to be emancipated, or liberated, pre-exists the oppressive force. The humanist position holds that the oppressed group is the precondition of emancipation. In other words, this position conceives of some primal state of existence as the precondition for emancipation, as if, before the presence of the oppressive force, people were truly free in nature. In contrast to this, we should avoid the temptation to perceive some kind of human nature that is being inhibited by the oppressive forces. Rather, we should discursively construct the identity of those who are excluded by the oppressive force. However, against liberal centrism, which aims at a politics of inclusion, thus avoiding the inherent exclusion of the oppressive regime and masking the antagonism at its core, the radical solution is to completely eradicate the forces of oppression. The discursive construction of the excluded is, therefore, constructed retroactively. What older theories perceive as the primal state of nature is, in fact, *the symptom of the present conditions of oppression*.

The dimension of ground follows logically from the assertion that the past is the symptom of the present conditions of oppression. Therefore, it is also related to the first

two dimensions, the dichotomic and the holistic. The dimension of ground represents the level of the social on which the emancipatory moment, 'demand' or 'act', occurs. According to Laclau, a truly radical moment of emancipation *can leave no traces behind of that which it followed*. Therefore, the act of emancipation has to transform the entire ground on which it is structured (Laclau 1996: 2). Thus, *every emancipatory moment, every emancipatory act, transforms the very co-ordinates of the antagonism*. In doing so, *it retroactively recreates and renews the promise of transparency*. We can deduce from this that, *with every act of liberation a new antagonism is produced*, which equally produces a new ground for emancipation.

Laclau's final dimension, the rationalistic dimension, invokes a relation to the Lacanian concept of the Real – the kernel around which the symbolic order is organized. According to Laclau, "full emancipation is simply the moment in which the real ceases to be an opaque positivity confronting us, and in which the latter's distance from the rational is finally cancelled" (Laclau 1996: 2). The problem with rational, secular eschatology, for Laclau, is that it "has to show the possibility of a universal actor who is beyond contradictions between particularity and universality" (Ibid: 11). However, this political actor cannot exist without the pre-existence of some identity that represses her from fully developing, making the idea of emancipation meaningless (Ibid: 3). This is one reason why, in Lacanian terms, the subject is always split; it is the subject of a lack (see, for example, Lacan 1977: 203-215). Thus, according to Laclau, "true emancipation requires a *real* 'other'" (Laclau 1996: 3).

If the identity seeking emancipation, the emancipatory subject, precedes, then the Other is discursively constructed and is not a *real* Other. If, instead, the oppressive Other precedes the emancipatory subject, the identity of the subject itself must be discursively constructed in opposition to the Other. Essentially, we must come to recognize that there is a lack in both the subject *and* the Other, and that neither is complete or universal. Rather, each is split between both positive and negative contents: that which it has and that which it lacks. According to Laclau, "this constitutive split shows the emergence of the universal within the particular" (Laclau 1996: 14).

Laclau's dimensions of emancipation are useful in pointing towards and assessing some particularity from which the universal arises. In the case of each dimension of emancipation, its meaning ultimately relates back to the moment emancipation itself. It is this particularity which informs, retroactively, the meaning of the ground. Laclau and Žižek break ways when it comes to the particular content and ethics

of emancipation, yet their approaches to the study of the particular overlap. They both conceive the particular content of emancipation in relation to notions of hegemony and ideological struggle.

### **Universal and Particular, or the Relation between Master Signifier and Empty Signifier: Ideology and Hegemony**

Laclau emphasizes that, because of the split between the positive and negative contents of the subject and the Other,

(1) the universal has no content of its own, but is an absent fullness or, rather, the signifier of fullness as such, of the very idea of fullness; (2) the universal can only emerge out of the particular, because it is only the negation of a *particular* content that transforms that content in the symbol of a universality transcending it; (3) since, however, the universal – taken by itself – is an empty signifier, *what* particular content is going to symbolize the latter is something which cannot be determined either by an analysis of the particular in itself or of the universal. (Laclau 1996: 15)

For Laclau, then, the universal is empty, it can only emerge through the negation of various other particulars, and the content of this particular standing in for the universal cannot be detected by an analysis of the particular itself. In Marxism, however, there is a name for this effect of a particular content standing in for the emptiness of the universal: ideology; and, it is the relation of ideology to hegemony that accounts for its pervasiveness – it accounts for its standing in as the master-signifier of the universal and for the interpellation of subjectivity.

According to Žižek, “in the predominant Marxist perspective the ideological gaze is a *partial* gaze overlooking the *totality* of social relations, whereas in the Lacanian perspective ideology rather designates a *totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility*” (Žižek 1989: 49). In Marxism, ideology represents the universalization of a particular content, the particular standpoint of the bourgeoisie. The primary ideological gesture, from a Marxist perspective, is, thus, to frame reality according to the particular perspective of the ruling class. However, by invoking a Lacanian reading of ideology, Žižek argues that we should no longer speak of ideology simply as false-consciousness.

The difference between the Marxist and Lacanian perspectives on ideology,

according to Žižek, corresponds to the difference between the Marxist and Freudian notions of fetish: “in Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack (‘castration’) around which the symbolic network is articulated” (Žižek 1989: 49). In Marxism, false-consciousness designates the veiling of the actually knowable relations of exploitation. Here, the particular content of bourgeois ideology – the ideology of the ruling class – universalizes the claim against the oppressed (proletariat) class. Marxist false-consciousness is therefore akin to the Marxist concept of fetishism. The commodity, the object, reifies the positive social relations of production, concealing the processes of exploitation. A fetish for Freud, however, stands in for something that, in a sense, never was: the impossible ‘Thing’.

In the Lacanian sense, then, the phallus signifies the symbolic network that conceals the lack of the real. It is in this sense that Žižek argues that ideology is “a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (1989: 45). Here, Žižek credits Laclau and Mouffe for conceiving the real as an antagonism – that is, “a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized” (Ibid). So, in contrast to the division between ideology (illusion; false-consciousness) and reality, Žižek argues that ideology is, in fact, the support of reality. The ideological field is, therefore, structured around the lack of the real. It is here that we begin to understand the affinity between ideology and the Lacanian notions of fantasy and *objet a* in Žižek’s argument.

The Lacanian *objet a* – the object cause of desire – represents both the impossible real object of desire (phallus) and that which temporarily stands in to hide this impossibility. It is both that which stands in to mask the lack, and the empty signifier that *is* the lack itself. It is, in fact, with the status and content of the Lacanian *objet a* that we begin to see the split between Laclau and Žižek. For Laclau, the logic of hegemony and the logic of the Lacanian *objet a* overlap: they both “refer to a fundamental ontological relation in which fullness can only be touched through a radical investment in a partial object – which is not a partiality *within* the totality but a partiality which *is* the totality” (Laclau 2006: 651).

As Žižek explains, the ‘ideological field’ is sustained, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, by ‘nodal points’ (the Lacanian *points de captation*, or quilting points), which structure the multitude of ‘floating signifiers’ into an apparently unified totality (Žižek 1989: 87). These nodal points fix the free-floating signifiers of meaning into a coherent

totalization, into an ideological network of understanding. Thus, according to Žižek, *ideological struggle is the process of battling over which nodal points will come to fix the field of meaning* (Ibid: 88). Once fixed (and to be clear, this is a temporary fixing), *the elements of the ideological field relate back to each other through the nodal point*. This nodal point, according to Žižek, is the Lacanian master-signifier: “the signifier *for which* all the others represent the subject” (Žižek 2002a: 21). The *objet a*, then, according to Žižek, is thus the “real-impossible correlative” of the nodal points (Žižek 1989: 95).

As we have seen, Laclau equates the *objet a* with hegemony (or at least, he suggests that their logic overlaps). For Žižek, the struggle for hegemony is related to the fixing of the master-signifier – “What is at stake in the ideological struggle is which of the ‘nodal points’, *points de caption*, will totalize, include in its series of equivalences, these free floating elements” (Žižek 1989: 88); however, according to Laclau, the struggle for hegemony is, rather, related to an empty signifier: “a signifier without signified” (Laclau 1996: 36). Thus, on the one hand, we are dealing with a particular signifier, which secretly overdetermines the field of signification (master-signifier), while; on the other hand, we have an empty, universal signifier which lacks particular content (empty signifier). Empty signifiers represent the limits to any signifying system and signify the impossible fullness of the system (Laclau 1996: 37).

In the relation between master and empty signifiers, it could be argued that the ideological field is never closed; it never achieves fullness or totality. Both Laclau and Žižek agree that fullness is unachievable and, as Laclau argues, “it is only a retrospective illusion that is substituted by partial objects embodying that impossible totality” (Laclau 2006: 651). Hegemony, according to Laclau, is the process by which “a certain particularity assumes the representation of an always receding universality” (Ibid). In the struggle for hegemony, then, a particular/partial object comes to occupy the place of the impossible, universal fullness. He suggests that the struggle for hegemony is the process by which “various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack” (Laclau 1996: 44). Nevertheless, Laclau contends “There is, certainly, an anchoring role played by certain privileged discursive elements – this is what the notion of *point de caption* or ‘Master-Signifier’ involves – but this anchoring function does not consist in an ultimate remainder of conceptual substance which would persist through all processes of discursive variation” (Laclau 2000: 70-71).

In other words, in contrast to Žižek, the emancipatory subject, the particular

struggle that represents the universal struggle against the oppressive regime is not, for Laclau, some indivisible remainder that pre-exists the emancipatory struggle. However, as we will argue presently, the remainder of which Žižek brings to the surface must be read *in relation to the 'promise'* of transparency that we have discussed as one of Laclau's dimensions of emancipation. *It is, in fact, the ideological fantasy of emancipation, as a form of reconciliation, which forms the basis of the promise of transparency.* The 'promise', however, is produced retroactively, as an anachronistic eschatology, which is part of the symptom of emancipatory struggle. In other words, if we begin with emancipation as central to antagonism, the chronology of cause and symptom must be reversed. The cause (the particular master-signifier – the emancipatory struggle) is in the present and the symptom is constructed retroactively to recreate the dichotomic dimension. The past is ontologically reconstructed with every new present. How and why the symptom is read in this way is central to the reading of emancipatory struggle in both the work of Laclau and Žižek. One begins with the desire for a particular object (emancipation) – an object which is central to hegemony – and, retroactively reconstructs the fantasy/illusion that structures her ideological reality.

### **Reading Time Backwards: An Anachronistic Eschatology**

The project of emancipatory struggle has as its aim the production of transparency by radically transforming the ground. However, as we have seen, this becomes problematic since, by transforming the ground, the dichotomic and holistic dimensions are, thereafter, also transformed, thus rendering the promise of transparency irrational. In any emancipatory struggle, the pre-existence of the group that requires emancipation authenticates and authorizes the struggle itself. As such, the enemy is constructed as something that alienates subjects from their 'true' nature. If radical emancipatory politics are to maintain the central antagonism, and evade the problems of messianic readings of emancipation, it is necessary to abandon a forward-looking eschatology of the 'promise'. However, the 'promise' of emancipation is still a central structuring feature of emancipatory struggle.

Against the classical Marxist understanding of ideology, as Žižek argues, we are no longer dealing with a distinction between reality and false-consciousness. Rather, we are dealing with ideology as the very foundation of our reality. Ideology, he argues, "is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic

dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself" (Žižek 1989: 45). As a support of our reality, then, the 'promise' of future emancipation must logically correspond to the 'fantasy-construction', which is a support of reality, or 'ground'. Thus, not only does the 'emancipatory moment' alter the ground, it also retroactively transforms the very fantasy-construction that supports reality. In other words, as a symptom of emancipation, we do not arrive at transparency, instead a new fantasy is constructed: *a new fantasy of origins and emancipation*.<sup>8</sup>

In his reading of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), Laclau asserts that "full reconciliation" (of subject/object; self/Other; species being, etc.) is impossible (Laclau 1996: 69). The promise of reconciliation, in other words, the promise of transparency, of society ever being complete, is not achievable. What we are left with, then, is the 'structure of promise' (Ibid: 74). The point, according to Laclau, is to imagine emancipation without the messianic, without "a pre-given promised land, without determinate content" (Ibid).

In traditional Hegelian-Marxism, history is read as a dialectical process leading towards some promised end point: the Absolute Idea or proletarian socialism, which will signal the 'end of ideology' or the 'end of history', or as Žižek points out, what Walter Benjamin referred to as the "Messianic moment", which he defined as "dialectics at a standstill" (Žižek 2002b: 7). What Laclau proposes, in a sense, is to maintain the 'structure of promise' without the actual content of the promise. Therefore, the realization of emancipation is simply the re-construction of the messianic. *The promise of messianic time is the symptom of emancipation, read backwards*.

Žižek explains that, for Lacan, the meaning of the symptom is constructed retroactively. It is constructed in the process of analysis, which produces its truth; the analysis is "the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning" (Žižek 1989: 56). Every moment of emancipation thus produces a new master-signifier and "changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way" (Ibid). It is only through the intervention of the emancipatory struggle that the past gains its meaning. This is the reason why the *objet a* is both true and false: it is true in the sense that the promise is the necessary object driving emancipatory struggle; it is false in the sense that it was always an impossible object. The promise is the fantasy-construction that supports the reality of the struggle. This is why Žižek relates ideology to the Lacanian formula for fantasy:  $\$ \langle \rangle a$ . The split subject produces its identity by way of the fantasy, as the

ideological support for reality, which is retroactively constructed in relation to the particular content of the *objet a*, which, for Laclau, overlaps with the logic of hegemony.

Although Laclau and Žižek appear to share the logic of messianic time, as a retroactive reading of the promise – of the messianic – which ultimately maintains antagonism, they differ on the character of the emancipatory subject – the subject(s) who is(are) responsible for emancipation – and on the ethics of emancipation. This is because they differ on the content of the particular political hegemony of the Left, the particular content of emancipation and antagonism, on the master-signifier, and therefore, on the grounds for emancipation. Therefore, *each conceives of a different ethics of emancipation*. Because they differ on the particular content of emancipation they read emancipation backwards in different ways and find different symptoms of emancipation. The problem, then, is not with the structure of the narrative of emancipation, but with the characters and their modes of reconciliation.

### **Martians and Martian Value: Act Vs. Demand**

For Laclau, “the minimal unit in our social analysis is the category of demand” (Laclau 2006: 654). Social analysis, according to Laclau, “presupposes that the social group... should be conceived as an articulation of heterogeneous demands” (Ibid). All demands, according to Laclau, start as *requests* and, when demands are not met by those in power, they become *claims*. Thus,

the frustration of an *individual* demand transforms the request into a claim as far as people see themselves as bearers of rights that are not recognized... But if the equivalence between claims is extended... it becomes far more difficult to determine which is the instance to which the claims are addressed. *One has to discursively construct the enemy* [emphasis added]... and, for the same reason, the identity of the claimers is transformed in this process of universalization of both the aims and the enemy... Once we move beyond a certain point, what were requests *within* institutions become claims addressed *to* institutions, and at some stage they become claims *against* the institutional order. When this process has overflowed the institutional apparatuses beyond a certain limit, we start having the people of populism. (Laclau 2006: 655)

Thus, for Laclau, demand – or ‘social demand’ – is that which produces hegemony amongst the various groups with claims against the institutional order. ‘Demand’ constructs a ‘logic of equivalences’, which are measured against a master-signifier that



has never existed before. It is, ultimately, something new that fills in the lack of the empty signifier. 'Demand', thus, re-orders the coordinates of emancipation and constructs a new master-signifier for the promise of emancipation. By conceiving 'demand' as the minimal unit of social analysis, Laclau is also asserting that the emancipatory subject is not some specific group that pre-exists the emancipatory struggle, such as the *proletariat*. 'Demand', instead, produces a populist coordination of those who are the 'part of the no-part': the *lumpenproletariat*, or the absolute 'outsider' (Laclau 2005: 144).

Žižek, on the other hand, conceives of the ethics of emancipation through the 'act'. This concept is somewhat problematic since an 'act' is never perceived by the subject or by the big Other (the symbolic order). It remains outside the field of acceptable actions and its meaning is only retroactively constructed. As Žižek asserts, "one should assume that the revolutionary *act* is not covered by the big Other" (Žižek 2006c: 189). This is one reason why Laclau accuses Žižek of "waiting for the Martians" (Laclau 2005: 232). According to Laclau, it is impossible for Žižek's ideal political actor – the proletariat – to effectively produce the universality to come that it promises since, like the Martians, we are never sure if it truly exists.

However, one reason why Žižek prefers 'act' to 'demand' has to do with his understanding of the Leninist notion of *Augenblick*: "the unique chance of a revolution" (Žižek 2006c: 188). He equates Laclau's approach with what Lenin referred to as 'opportunism'. Essentially, his argument is that "those who wait for the objective conditions of revolution to arrive will wait forever" (Ibid: 189). According to Žižek, then, Laclau's thesis is "that since Martians are impossible but necessary, in the process of hegemony an empirical social element is invested with Martian value." Therefore, Žižek asserts, "the difference between us must be that I (supposedly) believe in real Martians, while he knows that the place of Martians is forever empty" (Ibid: 191). The element of hegemony in Laclau's populism is always vacant, waiting to be occupied by some lacking value. For Žižek, the value is already present in class struggle.

Class struggle, for Žižek,

functions as a device that enables us (1) to account for the very changes in focus of emancipatory struggle (in my [Žižek's] view, the very shift from the central role of the classic working-class economic struggle to an identity politics of recognition should be explained through the dynamics of class struggle) and (2) to analyze and judge the concrete political content and stakes of different struggles. (Žižek 2006b: 193-194)

As the master-signifier of emancipatory struggle, class struggle is, thus, the overdetermining principle and not the actual content (Žižek 2006b: 193) against which the various other struggles are measured, recognized and evaluated: the 'indivisible remainder' against which identity is discursively constructed.

In contrast to Laclau's 'demand, an 'act', according to Žižek, "redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be 'impossible', yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility)" (Žižek 2000: 121). An act changes "the very terrain that made it unacceptable" (Žižek 2000: 122) and "transforms the very coordinates of the disavowed phantasmatic foundation of our being" (Žižek 2000: 124). Žižek's assertion that class struggle is the principle overdetermining element of emancipatory struggle thus serves a strategic function of legitimizing the 'act'. An 'act' is given legitimacy – it is transformed into the master signifier – by repositioning the ground on which it is authorized.

On the one hand, an 'act' is problematic since we can never know ahead of time what it will look like. However, on the other hand, the problem with Laclau's account of 'demand' is that, if it starts off as a claim that individuals are "bearers of *rights* [emphasis added] that are not recognized" (Laclau 2006: 655), we move from a politics of exclusion to a politics of inclusion, which ultimately legitimizes the ideological fantasy of the dominant symbolic order. 'Demand' assumes that the dominant institutional order is capable of satisfying the claims of the 'people' by including them in its matrix of recognition. If the 'rights' that are being sought are already assumed by the big Other, the symbolic order, then 'demand' does not preserve the element of antagonism. What should be aimed towards is, not the elimination of exclusion by way of inclusion, but a transformation of the ground that maintains the antagonism. So, in the end, we are faced with a dilemma: is it more effective to work towards emancipation within the symbolic network or must we rely on individual 'acts' that are always outside the symbolic network? If we follow the logic of the former there is the difficulty of evading the dominant order while simultaneously working within its very matrix, however; the latter solution leaves us without any concrete, knowable resolution.

## Conclusion

Although the opposition between Laclau and Žižek on the topic of emancipatory politics still leaves us without a concrete answer to the question of popular mobilization on the Left, their approach still provides us with a renewed methodology for undertaking ideological critique. While Laclau presents us with the social elements requiring transformation – essentially, the meaning and implications of emancipation – Žižek, with reference to Laclau and Mouffe, provides us with a Lacanian reading of ideology that avoids the messianic promise of Hegelian-Marxism. What we can discern from this model is that appeals to naturalism – or a mythical primacy of alienation (either as the divide between subject and object, in the Hegelian-Marxist sense, or as the split between subject and the Other, in the Lacanian sense) – are the necessary, although illusory, requirements of any ideological field. Ideology, and not ‘demand,’ however, is still our “minimal unit of social analysis”, the study of which has been renewed by the coordinates of Laclau and Žižek’s investigation of emancipatory politics. Laclau’s concept of ‘demand’, conversely, cannot be our minimal unit of analysis since it is still accounted for by the ideological field, by the symbolic order. In other words, the dominant order already conditions the grounds upon which appeals against it are made. It sets the stage for what it is said to inhibit.

Any reading of emancipatory politics must therefore be conducted against the context of the symbolic order structuring reality and the fantasy-construction on which it is based. Claims against the dominant order must be viewed as relative to the hegemony of the dominant order, which secretly accounts for these claims. If anything, the relation of master-signifier to the *objet a*, and the fantasy-construction ( $\$ \langle \rangle a$ ), highlights the function of ideology in emancipatory politics. For example, with regards to Marx’s conception of species being – that it is human nature to create and be productive – we see the same ‘natural’ appeal to freedom present in the utopian ideal of communism as that which is present in liberal capitalism: the withering away of the state (and here we are faced with the opposition between state of nature/state of culture – the dichotomic and holistic dimensions of emancipation as they are perceived by the dominant order).

As Žižek argues, ideology only really takes hold “when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour” (Žižek 1989: 49). Appeals to any state of nature that is inhibited by the oppressive regime, therefore, runs

the risk of essentializing, the grounds of exclusion and inclusion. The point of the 'act', and emancipatory politics in general, is, thus, not to essentialize that which is being inhibited, but *to recreate utopia as something that is impossible but necessary*.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Prof. Colin Mooers for his time and assistance in preparing this manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> On this subject, Ernesto Laclau asserts that, in Marxism "the condition for the proletariat to be the agent of a global emancipation was that it had no particular interests to defend, because it had become the expression of pure human essence... Today, on the contrary, we tend to speak of emancipations (in the plural), which start from a diversity of social demands, and to identify democratic practice with the negotiated consensus among a plurality of social actors" (Butler et al. 2000: 7-8). Chantal Mouffe, likewise, argues, "we have to break with rationalism, individualism, and universalism [of either liberal democracy or class struggle]. Only on that condition will it be possible to apprehend the multiplicity of forms of subordination that exist in social relations and to provide a framework for the articulation of the different democratic struggles – around gender, race, class, sexuality, environment and others" (Mouffe 1993: 7).

<sup>3</sup> While radical politics avoids claims towards origins (such as Marx's species being) and utopian eschatology (such as the Hegelian Absolute or proletarian socialism), antagonism still seems to support an unsupportable essence: *différence* for Derrida, or the split/barred subject for Lacan.

<sup>4</sup> This is, in fact, how Marx perceived the *lumpenproletariat*: In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, he discusses how the bourgeoisie had on its side "the finance aristocracy, the industrial bourgeoisie, the middle class, the petty bourgeois, the army, the *lumpenproletariat* [emphasis added] organised as the Mobile Guard, the intellectuals, the clergy and the rural population" against the *June insurrection*. "On the side of the Paris proletariat," Marx points out, "stood none but itself" (Marx 1994: 194).

<sup>5</sup> In accordance with this, as Chantal Mouffe notes, "far from having produced a smooth transition to pluralist democracy, the collapse of Communism seems, in many places, to have opened the way to a resurgence of nationalism and the emergence of new antagonisms." Rather than producing a chain of equivalences between various particular cultures and nationalisms, "we are witnessing an explosion of particularisms and an increasing challenge to Western [liberal democratic] universalism" (Mouffe 1993: 1). The point emphasized by Laclau and Mouffe is that society is impossible because the various positive aspects of particular identities exist in an antagonistic, differential relationship to each other.

<sup>6</sup> To explain what this means for political struggle, Žižek provides the example of the Romanian overthrow of Ceausescu, in 1989, where the image of "the rebels waving the national flag with the red star, the Communist symbol, cut out, so that instead of the symbol standing for the organizing principle of national life, there was nothing but a hole

in its centre” represents a transitional phase, where the old master-signifier was losing hegemonic power, having not yet been replaced by a new one (Žižek 1993: 1).

<sup>7</sup> According to Žižek, “When we are dealing with the today’s Left, we should always bear in mind the Leftist narcissism for the lost Cause, best characterized as the inversion of Talleyrand’s well known cynicism: when, while at dinner, he overheard the sounds of a street battle, he commented to his companions at the table: ‘You see, our side is winning!’ Asked ‘Which side?’, he answered: ‘We’ll know tomorrow, when we find out who won!’ The Leftist nostalgic’s attitude is: ‘You see, our side is losing!’ ‘Which side?’ ‘We’ll know tomorrow, when we find out who lost!’” (Žižek 2002b: 53n).

<sup>8</sup> To use one of Žižek’s examples from film, in *The Matrix* (1999), once Neo is pulled out of his ‘illusory’ reality, once he is emancipated, the fantasy-construction of his origins are radically altered, however; he is presented with a new emancipatory struggle, a new antagonism, against which his identity, his subjectivity is measured (see *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006)). The fantasy is not eradicated; its coordinates are simply re-plotted. He does not emerge from fantasy into reality. Instead, he emerges from one fantasy-construction of reality into another.

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