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On Populist Illusion

Impasses of Political Ontology, or How the Ordinary Matters

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ABSTRACT: Amplifying the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political', Ernesto Laclau crowns his examination of the blind spots of the Marxist tradition with an encomium of populism. His project to re-centre 'the political' does not postulate a beginning marked by a great event. Instead, Laclau celebrates ontological foundation as the abyss of all politicity. This chapter critically assesses how Laclau invests the body of the populist leader with an extra-quotidian character. I will also show how the assumption that the body of the leader animates political beginnings and primordially channels them restrains Laclau's previous 'deepening of the materialist project'.

KEYWORDS: the political; populism; extraordinary; ordinary; exceptionalism; political ontology; radical materialism; political beginnings; the many; Laclau, Ernesto

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The theoretical and political reasons that animate radical thought today are products of a past glory based, to a great extent, on the fascination with ‘the extraordinary’. Images of the break, of the act that disturbs regularity, are what mostly draw the attention of those who ascribe to a way of thinking politics that claims to be radical. At the crossroads of our time, however, we find the absence of such images of breaks and *new political beginnings*.

The generalization of this landscape within critical theory is concomitant with the replacement of *faith* in the great political act with *faith* in the power of ontology. The post-Marxist variants that pointed out the closed-mindedness of economism, determinism, and historical materialism in leftist tradition sought to overcome a *new* crisis in Marxism by appealing to the notion of ‘the political’. This extrapolation of ontological analysis onto the territory of politics has led to a new exaltation of ‘the extraordinary’. The issue is no longer to postulate a beginning as a great political act guided by historical materialist motifs, but, in a Heideggerian fashion, to establish ontological foundation as the abyssal dimension of politics as such. Despite the philosophico-political transformations that derive from this theoretical novelty, what really animates it is the condemnation of what is

conceived as 'ordinary'. In sum, 'the political' seems to reinvigorate radical thought after determinism has exhausted the leftist tradition — but at what cost?

This essay will consist of three sections in which I follow the conviction that Ernesto Laclau's discursive materialism and later interventions on 'populism' offer important insights into these topics but that they also catalyse blind spots on the ordinary matter of life in common. First, I show how Laclau's post-Marxist theory is based on the idea that social division is the *ground* of politics and therefore is inscribed within an ontology-oriented (post-)metaphysics. In this context, it makes sense that Laclau operates a Heideggerian re-articulation of the notion of 'the political'. Second, I examine how this philosophico-political move is exasperated by the Laclaudian understanding of populism. In particular, in the terms laid out by the later Laclau, all radical politics requires the figure of the populist leader who points towards the path of emancipation. However, while accepting the productivity of 'political difference' — that is, the binary distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' — under a populist inflection, I argue that Laclau both restrains his previous 'deepening of the materialist project'¹ and consecrates 'political exceptionalism'. Faced with the assumption that the body of the populist leader as the epitome of 'the political' primordially animates political beginnings, the last section of this essay offers, as an alternative, the contours of an ordinary politics of 'the many' as the territory *par excellence* of democratic foundations.

THE 'DISCREET' CHARM OF 'THE POLITICAL'

A number of works in contemporary thought have vindicated the contentious character of politics by pointing out the dangers of con-

1 Ernesto Laclau, 'Political Significance of the Concept of Negativity', *Vestnik*, 1, (1988), pp. 73–78 (p. 76). See also Ernesto Laclau, 'La Politique comme construction de l'impensable', in *Matérialités discursives*, ed. by Bernard Conein, and others (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981), pp. 65–74; 'The Controversy over Materialism', in *Rethinking Marx*, ed. by Sakari Hänninen and Leena Paldán (Berlin: Argument, 1984), pp. 39–43; 'Ideology and Post-Marxism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11.2 (June 2006), pp. 103–14 (p. 104); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', in Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 97–132 (pp. 105–12).

sensualism.² The focus on such notions as ‘conflict’ and ‘contingency’ was aimed at shedding light on the mutability of political acts while challenging the analytical stagnation of philosophies of progress and deterministic economism. In other words, the impugnation of a consensus-based theory and the concomitant vindication of social division as the *ground* of politics sought to respond to the barren summaries given by traditional perspectives that rested on invocations of metaphysical foundations and political essentialism. Remarkably, in the case of Laclau, his radical democratic critique of essentialism staged a controversy over materialism. In fact, he claims that ‘the only meaning of the term “materialism” which seems valid to me is that which opposes the reduction of the real to the concept; this implies that we must radically abandon the idea of a unifying *essence* of society.’³ The tone of Laclau’s dispute engendered high expectations for his radical democratic project and its extolment of ‘the political’. By seeking to supersede all essentialism, that project migrated to the territory of (post-)metaphysics.

One of the most sophisticated attempts to explain how social division is at the basis of politics will illustrate the kind of problems I refer to. In one of the prefaces to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue that they ‘conceive of the political not as a superstructure but as having the status of an *ontology of the social*. From this argument it follows that [...] social division is inherent [...] in the very possibility of a democratic politics.’⁴ There can be no radical politics, Laclau and Mouffe add, without the identification of an adversary. Their theory of politics is grounded on the assertion that antagonism is the realization of the indeterminacy of the social. Thus, they characterize radical democracy as a political form ‘which is founded [...] on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of

2 See, among others, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001); Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985); Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente. Politique et Philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995); Étienne Balibar, *La Crainte des masses. Politique et Philosophie avant et après Marx* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1997).

3 Laclau, ‘The Controversy over Materialism’, p. 43; emphasis in the original. See the important addition to Laclau’s rendition of ‘materialism’ by Frieder Otto Wolf, ‘Summary of Discussions’, in *Rethinking Marx*, ed. by Hänninen and Paldán, pp. 52–53.

4 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. xiv. Emphasis in the original.

every “essence”, and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism.⁵

This *sui generis* reinvigoration of the materialist repertoire transformed certain presuppositions of the Marxist debate — the ‘ontological’ supremacy of the working class, the conception of Revolution as a founding moment, and the prospect of collective will as unitary, to name a few. Such an undertaking demanded new theoretical postulates — among others, the idea that, hegemonically, ‘the political’ is constitutive of the social. The re-centring of ‘the political’ in Laclau’s work is not a merely disruptive operation, but instead leads him to embrace a singular intellectual perspective: post-structuralist thought. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, in fact, can be characterized as the epitome of the post-structuralist political turn developed by Laclau in his later work, which is crowned with two movements: an attachment to the lack and excess of ‘the ontological’ and its extrapolation onto the political realm.

‘Lack’ and ‘excess’ as two necessary moments of a unique ontological condition are essential to Laclau’s understanding of politics. Laclau himself asserts that ‘lack and excess enter into the determination of social ontology’, operating with respect to a ‘failed unicity’ or ‘absent fullness’. Insofar as, for him, ‘every identity is a threatened identity’, then ‘antagonism is ontologically primary’.⁶ The onto-political horizon described by Laclau is animated by the inevitable gap between ‘fullness of being’ and ‘actual being’. He views ‘lack’ and ‘excess’ as the *raison d’être* of hegemony, that is, the moment when a particular symbol or actor becomes representative of the universality of the community. Ultimately, ‘lack’ and ‘excess’ appear as originating principles of the merger of ontological postulates and socio-political relations.

This ambitious combination, however, necessitates a supplementary mechanism. Laclau’s post-structuralism requires constitutive foundations for the *abyssal ground* of politics, and because social relations are in the last instance contingent, ‘the political’ plays that structuring role. *Vis-à-vis* historical materialism, and understood as ‘radical

5 Ibid., 193. On antagonism vis-à-vis class struggle, see Ernesto Laclau, ‘Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics’, in his *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 101–25.

6 Ernesto Laclau, ‘The Future of Radical Democracy’, in *Radical Democracy: Politics between Abundance and Lack*, ed. by Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 256–62 (p. 257).

relationalism', Laclau's post-Marxist materialism proposes that ideas, including those related to political grounding, 'do not constitute a closed and self-generated world, but are rooted in the ensemble of material conditions of society'.⁷ His invocation of 'the political', then, is the backbone of a situation traversed by the impossibility of totalization. The resolution of this stalemate has a precise significance in Laclau's project: 'radical democracy is the first strictly political form of social organisation, because it is the first one in which the posing and the withdrawal of the social ground is entirely dependent on political interventions'.⁸ On the one hand, Laclau establishes the impossibility of an ultimate foundation of the social, and does so in a post-structuralist fashion that seeks to avoid the limitations inherent to the contraposition of classical idealism and materialism.⁹ On the other, this operation is consolidated by appealing to 'the political' as the moment of institution of the social.

Notably, Laclau's onto-political operations rely on a return to Martin Heidegger's thought. In particular, Heidegger's 'ontological difference' appears profusely in Laclau's work after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to conform what was called 'political difference': while 'politics' refers to the concrete realm of decision making, 'the political' would be the sphere from which politics originates. Laclau — sometimes defined as a 'leftist Heideggerian' — forges a post-foundational theory that seeks to comprehend the ontological 'un-grounding' of political principles.¹⁰ By vindicating the conflictual and contingent character of politics under the aegis of anti-essentialism, Laclau claims that 'since, for essential reasons [...] the fullness of society is unreachable, this split in the identity of political agents is an absolutely constitutive "ontological difference" — *in a sense not entirely unrelated*

7 Laclau and Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', p. 110.

8 Laclau, 'The Future of Radical Democracy', p. 261.

9 Neither related to the problem of the external existence of objects, nor to a contraposition of form and matter in which the latter is conceived as the 'individual existent', Laclau is more interested in suggesting that 'a world of fixed forms constituting the *ultimate* reality of the object (idealism) is challenged by the relational, historical and precarious character of the world of forms (materialism)' (Laclau and Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', p. 110; emphasis in the original).

10 See Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

to Heidegger's use of this expression'.¹¹ Laclau's radical-democratic approach relies on stressing the difference between *Sein* and *Seiende*. When 'ontological difference' is extrapolated onto the political realm it becomes a necessary moment of Laclau's 'ontology of the social'.¹²

It is remarkable how Laclau's invocation of democracy as a radical order that resists the imprisonment of essentialist foundations reproduces 'political difference' over and over again. Laclau's onto-political instances are recurrent: "Politics" is an ontological category: there is politics because there is subversion and dislocation of the social.¹³ Laclau's analysis, to be sure, not only extrapolates 'ontological difference' onto 'political difference' but also, in particular, elevates one of the structuring principles of the former, 'the ontological'. Concerning the allegation that his oeuvre focuses on the ontological dimension of social theory and not on ontic research, Laclau replies that 'this is a charge to which I plead happily guilty, except that I do not see it as a criticism at all. I have located my theoretical intervention at the theoretical and philosophical level and it is at that level that it has to be judged'.¹⁴ Laclau's celebration of ontologism reaches a climax in his later published works — to the extent that, in his own reckoning, they show the 'ontological centrality of the political'.¹⁵ His argument is simply supernumerary insofar as 'the ontological' plays the role of a ubiquitous *Deus ex machina*.

By pointing out these deficits in Laclau's work, I do not mean to minimize his influence over contemporary thought. Some of the interest that Laclau's intervention has aroused derives from his perception that hegemonic politics moves from the struggle against the

11 Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 60–61. Emphasis added.

12 See, among others, Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zac, 'Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics', in *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. by Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 11–39 (p. 30); Laclau, 'Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics', in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 44–89 (pp. 58, 71, and 84–85); Laclau, 'Glimpsing the Future', in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 279–328 (pp. 307–11 and 323); Laclau, 'Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics', pp. 112 and 115.

13 Ernesto Laclau, 'New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time', in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, pp. 3–85 (p. 61).

14 Laclau, 'Glimpsing the Future', p. 321.

15 Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, p. 8.

rigidities of historical materialism toward the reference to fundamental ontology. 'Like the Heideggerian *Abgrund*', Laclau claims, 'the hegemonic operation consists in a radical investment which, at the same time as it attempts to establish a bridge between the ontic and the ontological, reproduces their impossible convergence.'¹⁶ At this stage, we should note that the invocation of 'political difference' conflates two distinct strands in Laclau's oeuvre: on the one hand, his emphasis on the 'dissolution of the myth of foundations'¹⁷ as a radicalization of emancipatory thought attentive to a post-Marxist 'materialism', and, on the other, the inscription of that *abyssal nature* of political foundation on the altar of ontology. Laclau's theory thus leads to a specific impasse, in which a kind of post-structuralism conceived as post-metaphysical is actually erected upon the essentialist coordinates of fundamental ontology.

By examining Laclau's attribution of an ontological character to politics, I intend to note his 'forgetfulness' of the power and action of 'the many'. That 'forgetfulness' is remarkable, especially since, according to Laclau, his theorizations were in large measure derived from his youthful activism. As Laclau explains:

when today I read *Of Grammatology*, *S/Z*, or the *Écrits* of Lacan, the examples which always spring to mind are not from philosophical or literary texts; they are from a discussion in an Argentinian trade union, a clash of opposing slogans at a demonstration, or a debate during a party congress. Throughout his life Joyce returned to his native experience in Dublin; for me it is those years of political struggle in Argentina of the 1960s that come to mind as a point of reference and comparison.¹⁸

Rather than reading these recollections as manoeuvres concerning the exoticism of a native land and of youthful political practice, I would rather conceive of them as invectives with respect to a philosophico-political plexus in crisis. Laclau himself notes that 'the loss of collective

16 Laclau, 'Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics', p. 121.

17 Ernesto Laclau, 'Politics and the Limits of Modernity', in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, ed. by Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 63–82 (p. 81).

18 Ernesto Laclau, 'Theory, Democracy and Socialism', in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, pp. 197–245 (p. 200).

memory is not something to be overjoyed about. It is always an impoverishment and a traumatic fact. One only thinks *from* a tradition.¹⁹ In the next section, I show that Laclau's defence of the ontological embodiment of the populist leader constitutes a renewed stage of his *Auseinandersetzung* with the Marxist legacy — and that the tradition that Laclau never abandoned is that of 'political exceptionalism', one in which political beginnings are ontologically constituted and extraordinary in nature.

THE LEADER'S NEW ONTOLOGICAL CLOTHES: POPULISM AND THE POLITICAL EXCEPTION

In this section I examine how, in Laclau's theory, the radical-democratic 'praise of the political' takes a populist form. Laclau's considerations on populism are not restricted to his later work. In fact, such reflections began during his political activism in Argentina and coalesced with the publication of *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* in 1977. While there are exceptionalist constants in Laclau's work, his later encomium of 'the political' in a populist sense adds a fundamental ingredient to his theoretical position: the supposed radicalization offered by 'ontological difference' in its political inflection.

According to this later Laclau, populism, understood as a 'way of *constructing the political*'²⁰ that is clearly different from institutionalism and its emphasis on gradualist administration, remains 'an ontological and not an ontic category'.²¹ Étienne Balibar has incisively summarized the spectrum of Laclau's theoretical attempt in the following terms: 'populism, rethought and generalized according to a modality that is no longer normative but ontological, is not a marginal, still less a pathological, phenomenon. It is a presupposition of politics itself'.

19 Ernesto Laclau, 'Building a New Left', in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, pp. 177–96 (p. 179; emphasis in the original).

20 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p. xi; emphasis added.

21 Ernesto Laclau, 'Populism: What's in a Name?', in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. by Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 32–49 (p. 34).

Hence, Balibar concludes, 'its denial [...] appears as itself the effect of society's blindness to its own bases.'²²

For Laclau, undoing this blindness with respect to the constitution of the social involves moving toward a definition of populism as a 'political logic' and a 'performative act endowed with a rationality of its own.'²³ On the one hand, Laclau asserts that the 'dismissal [of populism] has been part of the discursive construction of a certain normality';²⁴ while, on the other hand, Laclau argues that confronting this situation endows the difference between 'the ontic' and 'the ontological' with a political significance, giving primacy to the second term.²⁵ In a world in which politics is conceived as mere administration, it is imperative to solve the theoretical impasse around 'the political' in a populist vein. The condition for this solution that is not asserted categorically, however, is that populism must be understood with reference to the command of the leader. According to Laclau, administrative politics, which is opposed to populism, embodies the myth of the 'totally reconciled society — which invariably presupposes *the absence of leadership, that is, the withering away of the political*'.²⁶ Inversely, for Laclau leadership is constitutive of 'the political' and expresses the nature of 'political difference' in the highest sense.

Both undertheorized and omnipresent, the populist leader offsets the dispersion of 'the people'. The notion of 'social demand' is essential in this regard, for, according to Laclau, it remains the smallest unit to analyse the constitution of 'the people'. Although 'demand' may equally refer to 'request' as it may to 'claim',²⁷ it should not be necessarily restricted to the domain of the antagonism of 'the people' against the power bloc. Rather, Laclau himself stresses that 'the people' necessitates a specific 'other' to catalyse *its* demands: the leader. Without the leader's acts, in fact, 'democratic demands', which are of an isolated

22 Étienne Balibar, *La Proposition de l'Égaliberté* (Paris: PUF, 2010), p. 232; *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, trans. by James Ingram (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 189–90.

23 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 117 and 18.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

25 See *ibid.*, pp. 4, 67–68, 71–72, 87–88, 94, 103, 111, 114–16, 127, 132, 160–61, 163, 222, 224–26, 229, and 245–46.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 63; emphasis in the original and added.

27 *Ibid.*, 73.

nature, could never become 'popular demands', which help 'to constitute the "people" as a potential historical actor'.²⁸

Laclau is cautious regarding the idea that the love of the leader might be the only libidinal tie of a group. Nonetheless, he also argues that the elimination of 'the need for a leader corresponds, almost point by point, to a society entirely governed by what I have called the logic of difference'. He then adds that 'such a society is an impossibility'.²⁹ The emergence of 'the people', according to Laclau, entails the intervention of something 'qualitatively new'. In this vein, he asserts that the constitution of popular identity, as a symbol, does not express in a passive way but actually constitutes what it expresses. Laclau's discursive materialism conveys, in his own words, 'the attempt of showing how the being of objects, far from being fixed and simply "given" to the contemplation of human beings, is socially constructed through their actions'.³⁰ And yet, the process that he describes cannot establish 'the many' as protagonists of democratic politics.

The obliteration of the role of 'the many' in populist politics is even clearer when Laclau decrees that 'an assemblage of heterogeneous elements kept equivalentially together only by a name is [...] necessarily a *singularity*'. Asserting that individuality is the most extreme form of singularity, Laclau arrives at a corollary that reveals the 'truth of populism': 'In this way, almost imperceptibly, the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader'.³¹ In sum, although Laclau's analysis is sparse on this point, we can infer that the figure of the leader animates the populist phenomenon — which is remarkable, since, for him, 'populist reason [...] amounts [...] to *political* reason *tout court*'.³² Populism, then, stages the subjection of 'the people' to the dictates of popular 'authority', forging a unity based on the power of the 'great man' which vanishes once this figure passes away.

The invocation of the extra-quotidian character of the leader within Laclau's construct deserves further scrutiny. It is possible to

28 Ibid., pp. 74 and 120.

29 Ibid., p. 82.

30 Laclau, 'Political Significance of the Concept of Negativity', p. 76.

31 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 100.

32 Ibid., p. 225; emphasis in the original.

address this issue by observing that, aside from the notions of ‘demands’ and ‘the name of the leader’, the concept of ‘representation’ is central to Laclau’s understanding of populism.³³ Laclau’s discussion of representation is primarily aimed at comprehending the leader as a symbol maker. His or her activity, Laclau argues, ‘no longer conceived as “acting for” his constituents, becomes identified with effective leadership’.³⁴ Laclau emphasizes that ‘identity’ does not precede the ‘process of representation’ but rather results from it. *Mutatis mutandis*, representation is the premise for the constitution of a ‘popular will’. In Laclau’s terms, the construction of a ‘people’ cannot but take place through representation.

Critics have pointed out the fallacy in the assumption that the representative articulation of demands necessarily leads to the emergence of a cohesive political entity. As Slavoj Žižek suggests, ‘there is nothing in the heterogeneity of demands that predisposes them to be unified in *people*’.³⁵ Certainly, Laclau understands representation as having a performative character. Populism, in this sense, becomes a discourse that brings into being what it claims to represent, namely ‘the people’. But even considering populism within the domain of political performativity is not a sufficient basis to conclude, as Laclau does, that every will is constituted as such *after* representation. And if representation is by and large equivalent with the expression of the leader’s will, then it is restricted to playing the role of a unifying force.

Be that as it may, Laclau’s defence of the role of the populist leader is even more questionable given the author’s familiarity with Ernst Kantorowicz’s theory of the King’s two bodies.³⁶ Though I cannot scrutinize the implications of this debate around political legitimacy and corporality here, I would like to return to Laclau’s last dictum: ‘the logic of the King’s two bodies has not disappeared in democratic society: it is simply not true that pure emptiness has replaced the

33 On ‘representation’ in his work, see, among others, Laclau, ‘Power and Representation’, in *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 84–104; *On Populist Reason*, pp. 157–71.

34 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 160.

35 Slavoj Žižek, ‘Against the Populist Temptation’, *Critical Inquiry*, 32.3 (Spring 2006), pp. 551–74 (p. 564); emphasis in the original.

36 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

immortal body of the King. This immortal body is revived by the hegemonic force'. Laclau adds:

What has changed in democracy, as compared with the *anciens régimes* [sic], is that in the latter that revival took place in only one body, while today it transmigrates through a variety of bodies. But the logic of embodiment continues to operate under democratic conditions and, under certain circumstances, it can acquire considerable stability.³⁷

It is surprising that Laclau, an author who is so prone to conceptual constructs, does not specify the nature of the democratic 'variety of bodies' to which he refers. Whisking this specification away, Laclau neglects a radical materialist consideration of 'the many' — an oversight that leads him to focus on the corporality of leaders. His thesis is that hegemonic force rekindles a sort of immortal 'energy'. Even if we accept this proposition, it seems difficult to see where the limits of that 'extraordinariness' might be — especially when Laclau himself assumes that democratic incarnations are always contingent and that there is no ultimate guarantee or transcendental source of legitimation that might structure life in common.

BETWEEN THE ORDINARY AND THE EXTRAORDINARY: THE COMBINED POWER OF 'THE MANY'

Beyond the equivalence between populism and politics and its hypostasis in the body of the leader, I want to argue that life in common does not have impregnable origins waiting to be disinterred. Political beginnings are nothing but a complex of intertwined ordinary and non-ordinary moments which evade all confinement in the binary edifice erected between 'politics' and 'the political'. The extolment of 'the political', and particularly the proverbial instantiation of exceptionalism in radical thought, cannot account exhaustively for the emergence of beginnings enacted by the politics of 'the many'.³⁸

37 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 170.

38 To avoid the idealization and aestheticization of 'lack', the phrase 'the ordinary' is used in this essay to refer to a realm of action and not to 'the many' themselves. At the same time, 'the many' indicate that democracy is evasive vis-à-vis the sanctification of *the* will of 'the people'. To put it differently, the appeal to 'the many' acknowledges the

In Laclau's later works, this neglect is embodied in his enthroning of the populist leader and is also apparently compensated for by the author's interest in the constitution of a political ontology. While in his early work Laclau focused on the multiplicity of struggles inscribed in the democratic revolution and then confronted the narrative of the great emancipatory act with a variety of emancipatory movements, in his later work he moved away from pluralized radical politics. In fact, for Laclau, the construction of a popular subjectivity 'reaches a point where the homogenising function is carried out by a pure name: *the name of the leader*'.³⁹ What remains to be understood here is why populist hegemony is the form of expression *par excellence* of an antagonistic excess with respect to the democratic institutions that normally regulate political conflict or why, as Laclau claims, '*radical democracy is always "populist"*'.⁴⁰

Laclau's populism implies de-substantializing 'the people' and then, in a (post-)metaphysical and discursive vein, re-substantializing this collective through the figure of the leader. In such theoretical gestures, we can still detect Laclau's *Auseinandersetzung* with materialism through his invocations of the 'materiality of the signifier' or the 'materiality of language'.⁴¹ However, Laclau's 'rhetorical materialism of the subject' might resemble 'a voluntarism of sorts'.⁴² More importantly, his operation of de-substantializing and re-substantializing 'the people' leads to a disdain for the autonomy of 'the many'. It is true that the view of 'the people' as irrational plebs has persisted even after the consolidation of modern and contemporary revolutions. Going against this tendency, Laclau's populist project invokes radical democracy to

centrality of political subjectivity without somehow acceding to the idea of 'a good people'.

39 Laclau, 'Populism: What's in a Name?', p. 40; emphasis added.

40 Laclau, 'The Future of Radical Democracy', p. 259; emphasis added.

41 See, among others, Laclau, 'Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?', in *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 36–46; *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*.

42 John Kraniauskas, 'Rhetorics of populism', *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, 186 (July/August 2014), pp. 29–37 (p. 33). On the relation between discourse and materialism in Laclau, see, among others, Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 59–64; Benjamin Glasson, 'Unspeakable Articulations: Steps Towards a Materialist Discourse Theory', in *Material Discourse-Materialist Analysis: Approaches in Discourse Studies*, ed. by Johannes Beetz and Veit Schwab (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 81–94.

revalue the politically marginalized: And yet, rather than considering the underdog as autonomous, he suggests that it is the extra-quotidian nature of the body of the leader which brings the marginalized into actual political existence.

It may be that these elaborations are aimed at extricating ‘the people’ of populism from the danger of ‘homogeneity’. But after the foregoing analysis, we may discern an additional motif of the ‘political exceptionalism’ that consecrates the disdain for the autonomy of ‘the many’ in the work of Laclau and other theorists of populism. ‘The people’, or rather *their* ‘people’, is not only subordinated to the figure of the leader; *it* is also an intellectual construct. ‘A first theoretical decision’, Laclau declares, ‘is to conceive of the “people” as a *political* category, not as a *datum* of the social structure.’⁴³ In this way, ‘the people’ is not just born from the political will of the populist leader. More fundamentally, this collective originates from the analytical design of the populist intellectual who places his or her principles beyond the immediate historical context and ‘mere’ empirical reality. Vis-à-vis this triple imprisonment — by the figure of ‘the people’, the decisions of the populist leader, and the judgments of the populist intellectual — ‘the many’ must return to the central scene of democratic politics.

Thus far, we have seen how Laclau, by adopting ‘political difference’, endowed the body of the populist leader with an ontological status. But he also goes further than that. His use of ontological jargon to define politics is not merely descriptive but symbolizes his intention to lay out a ‘political ontology’ and to elaborate a general theory of ‘the political’. Laclau’s endeavour to address ‘the political’ is characterized by a polarity: Marx (deconstructed) with Heidegger. Within that dichotomy, Laclau seems to privilege Heidegger, which affects his radical materialist project.⁴⁴ In his last published work, he asserts that his aim is ‘the construction of a *political ontology* which can respond

43 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 224; emphasis in the original.

44 By embracing Heideggerian ‘ontological difference’, Laclau avoids a thematization of Heidegger’s derogatory rendition of materialism. See, among others, Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, 102 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1975–) VIII, pp. 27, 160, and 208; IX, pp. 268, 340, and 365; X, pp. 131 and 179–80; XV, pp. 352–53 and 387–89, XVI, p. 703; XXXVI/XXXVII, p. 211; XL, p. 50; L, p. 154; LXV, pp. 54 and 148; LXXXVIII, pp. 12–14 and 190; LXXIX, pp. 88 and 94–95; LXXXIII, pp. 179, 209, and 508; LXXXIX,

to the challenges presented by the post-Marxist and post-structuralist situation within which we are operating.⁴⁵ For Laclau, returning to the Marxist legacy requires appreciating its inherent plurality. But the trajectory he delineates, from the vindication of ‘post-Marxism’ — understood by Laclau himself as the reformulation of ‘the materialist programme in a much more radical way than was possible for Marx’⁴⁶ — to his final encomium of populism, proves to be an attempt to think beyond the ‘relationalist’ universe.

Having left class struggle far behind, the plot of Laclau’s political drama is neither based on the plural struggles of social movements nor on so-called materialist ‘democratic radicalization’. Instead, radical thought is enacted on the stage of a ruptured metaphysics. The establishment of a ground as abyss, together with the understanding of representation as a process of de-grounding, are made legitimate through Laclau’s recourse to the notion of ‘post-foundationalism’. But due to the abyssal conditions being constitutive, this lack requires an excess. Previously, we have examined how, in Laclau’s later works, populist leadership necessitates a supernumerary recourse to ontology. We are now ready to assess a crucial addendum: the *essential* contingency of political foundation requires a particular stabilization that, for Laclau, must come from the political ontology that he has forged — a political ontology that claims to univocally identify ‘the *political* (in the ontological sense of the term, which has little to do with political organizations and structures)’⁴⁷ and might re-stage a *faith* in a totalizing moment with idealist effects.⁴⁸

The transition from Marx (deconstructed) to Heidegger is not restricted to Laclau’s work. This is why the present examination of his theoretical edifice has a broader scope. As we problematize the

pp. 461–62 and 527; xciv, pp. 143, 424, and 428; xcv, pp. 40, 129, 149, and 360; xcvi, p. 150; xcvi, pp. 28 and 127; xcvi, pp. 382 and 398–99.

45 Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, p. 1; emphasis added.

46 Laclau and Mouffe, ‘Post-Marxism without Apologies’, p. 112.

47 Laclau, ‘Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics’, p. 123; emphasis in the original.

48 This result is at odds with Laclau’s previous insistence on moving away from idealist instances, which would consist ‘in showing the historical, contingent and constructed character of the *being* of objects; and in showing that this depends on the reinsertion of that being in the ensemble of relational conditions which constitute the life of a society as a whole’ (Laclau and Mouffe, ‘Post-Marxism without Apologies’, p. 111; emphasis in the original).

fascination with ‘the extraordinary’ inherent in ‘political difference’, the point is to set out the bases for a renewed reflection on the ordinary irruption of ‘the many’ in democratic politics.⁴⁹ As a propaedeutic for this task, in the preceding pages I have established how Laclau’s ‘populist illusion’ — not meant in terms of a deception but instead as a high aspiration and unreachable dream — is an outstanding example of ‘political exceptionalism.’ The bases for that exceptionalism are the conception of division and contingency as the ground of politics, the equation of political reason with populist reason, the figuration of the leader as the guarantor of populism vis-à-vis the postulated ‘people’ as a counterpart with demands, and the invocation of a Heideggerian ‘ontological difference’ for the elaboration of a political ontology. When we challenge exceptionalism and understand the distinction between the politically normal and exceptional as a matter that is up for debate, we can hardly take the onto-political stabilization offered by Laclau for granted. Beyond this operation, the leader seems to lose his/her ‘extraordinariness’ and his/her body becomes the very manifestation of human frailty. In turn, ‘the many’ — those who are presumably *subjected* to authority — no longer merely express demands and gain an ‘ordinariness’ to shape common beginnings. All in all, this non-exceptionalist reconfiguration shows that the tasks of the materialist programme that Laclau initiated and, unfortunately, interrupted, can and should move forward.

Throughout this essay, it has become clear that Laclau’s narration of populism contains an ambivalent gesture. On the one hand, he repudiates all determinism, and especially the dogma of normality in both the liberal and Marxist traditions. On the other hand, he praises the forces of ‘the extraordinary’ and forges an ontological essentialism which, reversing his previous ‘radical materialism’, reinvigorates the idea of having control of the totality of reality and its historical

49 That irruption does not necessarily amount to political empowerment. Although the jargon of ‘the ordinary’, and ‘the many’ can hardly be mobilized to promote the order of rank, the praise of ‘the common man’ has not always constituted a call to emancipation. From the *Fronte dell’Uomo Qualunque* in Italy to recent populist movements, including the notion that ‘everyone’ is an entrepreneur of his/her/their own life, the ‘common man’ may well be the subject invoked by regressive political currents. See, among others, Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 3.

development. A critical analysis of Laclau's account yields a valuable lesson for contemporary approaches to grounding politics in a way that is animated by 'the extraordinary'.

Let us now return to the question posed at the beginning of this essay regarding which principle can govern radical democratic politics when its old foundations seem to have vanished. Our examination of Laclau's exceptionalism has offered clues that allow us to avoid the impasse that ensues when we totalize 'the political'. One way to eschew this philosophico-political dilemma is to accept that 'the ordinary' is not the negation but the *matter* of the politically extraordinary. In this light, we may understand not only that "emancipation" is a performance to which we always arrive late and which forces us to guess, painfully, about its mythical or impossible origins,⁵⁰ but, especially, that the unfolding of a *new beginning* also depends on the combined power of 'the many'.

50 Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 82.

Facundo Vega, 'On Populist Illusion: Impasses of Political Ontology, or How the Ordinary Matters', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, *Cultural Inquiry*, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 327–43 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_18>

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