Not a Ground but a Horizon: An Interview with Ernesto Laclau

Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland

BP/MS: Over the years your work has proposed a radical paradigm shift to thinkers on the Left. In particular, it has proposed that we think of political notions like unity and totality not in opposition to the lessons of deconstruction and différance, but through and in part because of them, as necessary but contingent formations. And yet, what seems to bother some more traditional, Marxist thinkers on the Left about your conception of hegemony is the prospect that any hegemonic formation might endure as a unified production of totality despite the sort of radical heterogeneity that ultimately renders it contingent in your account. We are wondering, then, whether the sort of difference that defines your conception of unity and totalization can be construed in temporal terms as well. How or at what point might the difference of differance—primarily a spatio-temporal conception of difference—play a role in your conception of totality and its contingency? Or rather, how or at what point does the ontological heterogeneity that defines the Lacanian elements of your account reconnect with the deconstructive heterogeneity that also attends it in a work like Emancipation(s)? How would an apparent totality, however contingent, manifest this sort of difference, and how might such a manifestation intervene in the way we construe the endurance of any given production of totality?

EL: I don't think that the notion of totality should be repudiated but, rather, that its theoretical status has to be redefined: totality is not for me a ground but a horizon; it is a type of closure which is not incompatible with the heterogeneity of its internal elements. In Emancipation(s) I asserted that the totalizing instance is an object that is at the same time necessary and impossible. It is necessary because identities, being strictly differential, can only become true identities if the system that embraces them all is a closed or saturated one—otherwise there would be an unlimited dispersion of meaning. But that necessary object is also impossible: the tension between equivalence and difference, which are the contradictory conditions of its constitution as an object, cannot be eliminated; there is no square circle that can provide the bases for the logical articulation of these two poles. It is this combination of necessity and impossibility that makes possible the transition from ground to horizon. If we had only the “necessity” side of the equation, the totality would be representable in a direct way and, as the underlying positive foundation of every partial differential arrangement, it would have the status of a ground. If we had only the dimension of “impossibility”, there would not be any signification whatsoever.

So the answer to this difficulty is to be found, in my view, in the notion of a particular object which, without ceasing to be particular, transforms its body through the process of representing (indeed, of constructing) that impossible object: the totality. The latter is, stricto sensu, incompatible with the particularity that incarnates it. This is the empty or hegemonic signifier. I have written that we are here in a situation comparable to that of the Kantian noumenon: an object that shows itself though the impossibility of its adequate representation. The obvious difference from Kant is that the noumenon has a precise identity, even if it is that of a Regulative Idea, and that the task that this Idea
prescribes, although it is infinite, has a direction established from the beginning. However, in the case of the empty signifier there is no such unidirectionality: everything depends on the contingent process through which a certain particularity claims to be the locus of the universal. This particularity, in its universal role of representing the totality, works as the limit of what is representable in a certain space. Actually, it constitutes the latter; it is in this sense that it is a horizon and not a ground.

As for your question concerning deconstruction and Lacanian theory, I can tell you the following. What deconstruction contributes to the theory of hegemony is, above all, the logic of undecidability (pharmakon, hymen, supplementarity, re-mark, etc., which are all, as you know, alternative names for difference). The hegemonic relation is, for the reasons that I have just mentioned, an undecidable relation between the particularity that assumes the universal function and that function itself. Derrida’s critique of the ideality of sense in Husserl’s work is highly relevant for a hegemonic conception of politics. By extending the areas of objectivity within which undecidability operates, deconstruction also expands the areas of hegemonic articulation—the theory of hegemony being one concerning the decisions taken in an undecidable terrain. But deconstruction stops here, at the moment of undecidability. A theory of hegemony needs a further step—a theory of the decision—and that is not provided by deconstruction. It is at this point that Lacanian theory becomes highly relevant, for through the notion of cathetic investment it addresses precisely the question of how a particularity is invested with the force that makes it the stand-in for the Thing. As you know, Lacan asserted that sublimation is the elevation of an object to the dignity of the Thing. In my work I have argued that the logic of the objet a in Lacan’s conception and the hegemonic logic show a profound homology, even if in one case that logic has been established through a psychoanalytic reflection and, in the other, through a politico-theoretical field.

BP/MS: A number of contemporary political figures with varying relations to the Left have mobilized a populist rhetoric to great effect since the 2005 On Populist Reason—perhaps most prominently, Barack Obama and Hugo Chavez. Have the remarkable differences between these apparent appropriations of populist reason contributed in any way to your more recent thinking on the aesthetic logics of radical political transformation? Or rather, how do you understand the very meaning or being of “radical political transformation” today, in the context of these contemporary populist interventions?

EL: Let me tell you, to start with, that a populist political logic is not derivable from the ideological content of a certain politics. As I have asserted in On Populist Reason, movements of the most diverse ideological orientations could be populist as far as they dichotomize the social space into two opposite camps and appeal to the “underdog” set against the established institutional order. Of course, a project of radical transformation is inconceivable without populism, without the attempt at constructing the “people” as a collective actor. But as you, Americans, know only too well, a right-wing populism is also perfectly possible. If, reductio ad absurdum, we put as two opposite poles an over-institutionalized society which would have entirely replaced politics by administration,
and a purely populist situation in which permanent mobilization would have entirely
dissolved the entire institutional framework of the social, we quickly realize that the
political is always constructed in various intermediate points of the continuum defined
by those two antipodic poles. If you compare Chavez's experience in Venezuela with that
of the Kirchners in Argentina, you see that although there are populist dimensions in
both, the obvious differences largely depend on the fact that the institutional element
weighs more heavily in the Argentinean case.

In the case of Obama, the objective situation was proto-populist because, as a result of
the frustration of countless social demands during the Bush years, equivalential chains
of popular demands were almost spontaneously constituted. But the discourse of Obama
was not particularly populist. It is true that it made an appeal to change, but there was
no dichotomization of the social space, no interpellation to the underdog against the
establishment. On the contrary, all the strength of Obama's discourse comes from the
fact that he addressed the nation as a whole, beyond all sectorial divisions. If you want
to think in a really populist discourse, obviously of the opposite sign, in the electoral
campaign, you have to think in Sarah Palin.

BP/MS: On the whole, theorists of the moving image have maintained a skeptical
position about the relationship between the visual and the popular, especially insofar as
that relationship might represent the broadest and deepest medium for the maintenance
of hegemony. Of course, in this case hegemony does not mean the constitutive lack that
produces the political, as you and Chantal Mouffe have conceived it, but instead a more
dusty and increasingly vulgar conception of hegemony as ideology—with all of the
Althusserian residue that term implies. In our view, this kind of skepticism involves a
nihilistic conception of representation tout court and is at odds with the very notion of
representational politics, which most thinkers on the Left otherwise take for granted as
a democratic necessity. It also fails to think at all of the specific ontological force that
images might hold for an understanding of the political like yours. So we wonder to
what extent, in your view, the image can be disassociated from the political? Are images
of the political only ever phantasmatic and spectacular?

EL: Your question touches on several issues that are central to my work. There is, in
the first place, the question of representation. I am rather critical of the mistrust that
many left-wing theoreticians show towards the category of representation. The
argument—classically formulated by Rousseau—is that a relation of representation
necessarily leads to an undue mediation, as a result of which the will of the
representative substitutes for that of the people that he is supposed to represent. The
drawback with this argument is that it presupposes that the represented have always a
fully-fledged identity organized around interests, so that a good representation would
consists in the transparent transmission of those interests by the representative. But
that is hardly ever the case. In many situations you are dealing with people whose
identity is incomplete or ambiguous, so that the constitution of interests requires
precisely the full operation of the representative process. I have in particular studied
this question in the field of political representation, but my argument can be equally
extended to "representation" as a more general theoretical category. Derrida, for
instance, has insisted that there is only representation, because there is never such a
thing as a pure or original "presentation." And Deleuze, using a theoretical language
that is apparently the opposite of Derrida’s, but which in fact it boils down to the same, says that representation (which he identifies with a good copy of a pure original, in the Platonic sense) never takes place because there are only simulacra.

As for ideology, it is a category of a decreasing use in contemporary theoretical literature because the two approaches with which the term was traditionally associated have progressively lost their coherent ground. We had, firstly, the notion of ideology as false or reified consciousness, whose epitome is Lukacs’ work. Few people would today accept the class essentialism to which this conception was originally attached. But the other approach, the one mostly associated to the Althusserian school to which you refer, and for which ideology was a level of the social formation grounded in the trichotomic division between the economic, the political and the ideological, is not fairing any better. Such a division only made sense within the notion of a mode of production conceived as a whole structured by categories such as “determination in the last instance by the economy,” “dominant role,” etc.—i.e. within the base/superstructure model. But few people would today defend this kind of approach. The result is that the very terrain that made possible the construction of “ideology” as a coherent theoretical object no longer obtains. This has led to the eclipse of the very notion of “ideology” and its replacement by other, comprehensive categories such as “discourse.”

This transition has required, however, the displacement of the meaning of key theoretical concepts. We would have advanced very little if we had only replaced the naturalistic vision of the economic process implicit in notions such as “determination in the last instance by the economy” by a “superstructuralist” notion of “discourse,” in which the term remained narrowly attached to speech and writing. But it is here that the increasing formalism in linguistic analysis led to the elimination of “substance,” which was still a stumbling block in Saussure’s theory. So we can say that linguistic relations have become the terrain of a general ontology, of the relations through which being qua being is articulated. However, we are now in the paradoxical situation whereby, at the moment in which linguistic relations overlap with the total realm of objectivity, they lose their specificity as the ground of a regional discipline. And this happens not only in the case of the poststructuralist critique of the sign, but also in parallel theoretical developments, as in Wittgenstein’s “language games,” which embrace both the use of words and the actions with which such use is associated. This is the point in which, I think, your interrogation concerning “images” should be located. Images are also part of a global semiosis through which a certain signifying configuration is structured. They don’t have a merely secondary role, but are at the same level as the verbal components of a discursive formation. And they are moreover omnipresent, at the political level as much as at any other level of the social.

Ernesto Laclau is the author of On Populist Reason (Verso, 2005), Emancipation(s) (Verso, 1996), Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (with Chantal Mouffe, Verso, 1985), and numerous other acclaimed essays and books of political philosophy. He is also Emeritus Professor of Political Theory at the University of Essex, Distinguished Professor of Humanities and Rhetorical Studies at Northwestern University, and Honorary Director of the Center for the Study of Discourse and of Socio-political Identities at the University of San Martin in Argentina.