

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON CONVERSATIONS OF OUR TIME

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The exchange that Ernesto Laclau and I conducted through e-mail last year at this time begins a conversation that I expect will continue. And I suppose I would like to use this “supplementary” reflection to think about what makes such a conversation possible, and what possibilities might emerge from such a conversation.

First of all, I think that I was drawn to the work of Laclau and Mouffe when I began to read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and realized that I had found a set of Marxist thinkers for whom discourse was not merely a representation of preexisting social and historical realities, but was also constitutive of the field of the social and of history. The second moment came when I realized that central to the notion of articulation, appropriated from Gramsci, was the notion of *rearticulation*. As a temporally dynamic and relatively unpredictable play of forces, hegemony had been cast by both Laclau and Mouffe as an alternative to forms of static structuralism that tend to construe contemporary social forms as timeless totalities. I read in Laclau and Mouffe the political transcription of Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play”: a structure gains its status as a structure, its *structurality*, only through its repeated reinstatement. The dependency of that structure on its reinstatement means that the very possibility of structure depends on a reiteration that is in no sense determined fully in advance, that for structure, and social structure as a result, to become possible, there must first be a contingent repetition at its basis. Moreover, for some social formation to appear as *structured* is for it to have covered over in some way the contingency of its own installation.

The theoretical rearticulation of structure as hegemony marked the work of Laclau and Mouffe as consequentially poststructuralist and offered perhaps the most important link between politics and poststructuralism in recent years (along with the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

It is, of course, impossible in this context to reconstruct the particular way in which Derrida’s work and Foucault’s work converge in the reconceptualization of hegemony that Laclau and Mouffe have offered. One of the points, however, that became most salient for me is the reintroduction of temporality and, indeed, of futurity into the thinking of social formations. Among many critical social theorists, the tendency has been to underscore how the systemic character of capital tends to incorporate any instance of opposition in the service of capital’s own self-augmentation. I would clearly agree that the incorporative and domesticating possibilities of capital are immense. But I would also

argue that any theory that fails to think the possibilities of transformation from within that “systemic” formation is itself complicit with the idea of the “eternal” character of capital that capital so readily produces. Hegemony also marks a limit to the totalizing terms within which social formations are to be thought. For what hegemony attends to are the moments of breakage, of rearticulation, convergence, and resistance that are not immediately coopted by social formations in their past and present forms. That no social formation can endure without becoming reinstated, and that every reinstatement puts the “structure” in question at risk, suggests that the possibility of its own undoing is at once the condition of possibility of structure itself.

Before I knew the work of Laclau and Mouffe very well, I came close to this kind of insight in my work on gender.¹ There I argued that gender is not an inner core or static essence, but a reiterated enactment of norms, ones which produce, retroactively, the appearance of gender as an abiding interior depth. My point as well was that although gender is constituted performatively, through a repetition of acts (which are themselves the encoded action of norms), it is not for that reason determined. Indeed, gender might be remade and restaged through the reiterative necessity by which it is constituted. Here I focused on the transposition of two Derridean insights into gender theory, mirroring what Laclau and Mouffe were doing within the theorization of hegemonic politics: (1) that the term that claims to represent a prior reality produces retroactively that priority as an effect of its own operation and (2) that every determined structure gains its determination by a repetition and, hence, a contingency that puts at risk the determined character of that structure. For feminism, that means that gender does not represent an interior depth, but produces that interiority and depth performatively as an effect of its own operation. And it means that “patriarchy” or “systems” of masculine domination are not systemic totalities bound to keep women in positions of oppression, but, rather, hegemonic forms of power that expose their own frailty in the very operation of their iterability. The strategic task for feminism is to exploit those occasions of frailty as they emerge.

But more recently, Laclau has offered another set of insights that converge in interesting ways with my own thinking. The first has to do with his enormously provocative claim that “the essentially performative character of naming is the precondition for all hegemony and politics” [xiv] (preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* by Slavoj Žižek). What is meant by “performative” here is of the utmost importance. For names do not merely bring into existence what they name, as divine names do. Names within the sphere of politics produce the possibility of identification, but also foil that possibility. To the extent that they are not descriptive (and, hence, for Laclau, not tied to established contents), they become the sites for a hegemonic rearticulation of subject positions. A name does not fully describe the subject that it nevertheless inaugurates into social space and time. But in what does its productive power consist, and what are the conditions of possibility for such power? Laclau refers to what remains undetermined in the subject through the power of the name, the referential limits of interpellation. What is it that constitutes the limitations of the performative power of naming? What is it, as it were, that holds the name open as a site of hegemonic articulation?

We might say that names function to the extent that they are used within language games in which their functions are already established. Or we might argue that names seek to capture a referent that always eludes the nomination by which that capture is sought. We might say that there is something “in” the psyche as that which resists interpellation, as Mladen Dolar has argued, and we might call this “the Real” according to Lacanian protocol. On the other hand, is there perhaps an abyss opened by the name that makes possible the contest over its “right” and “proper” function? And if so, how might we begin

1. *The work of Anna-Marie Smith helped me to understand more clearly the links between our positions.*

to approach the thinking of such an abyss? Is the Heideggerian notion of the “ontological difference” the primary way in which Laclau understands this persistent necessity of *indetermination*? Is the indetermination that renders all decision contingent (in the relative sense) the same as that which produces the name as an infinite site of contest (at the level of description)?

These seem to me to be one set of questions that I would hope to pursue as I think about further conversations with Laclau, conversations that we will surely continue. In the spirit of this exercise, then, I leave it open-ended.

WORKS CITED

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