

(Post)hegemony and the Promise of Populism: Reflections on the Politics of Our Times

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Hegemony is a term both elusive and recurrent. It provides a theory of the social for a world in which all universalizing truth narratives have lost their fantasmatic hold over our lives and, in their withdrawal, we are forced to confront the fictions that they in fact always represented. In a certain sense, hegemony theory is the fiction of social fiction; a fiction designed to account for the groundlessness of the social imaginaries with which we construct our respective worlds. It is a term with particular currency in the field of Cultural Studies, where the emergence of the concept as part of a new methodological practice in the study of politics at the University of Essex (among scholars such as the young Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), and its reception in the Birmingham Contemporary Centre of Cultural Studies (particularly in the writings of Stuart Hall), makes it a fundamental part of what Fredric Jameson once called, not without a hint of irony, the “desire” of Cultural Studies (1993, 17). Indeed, Jon Beasley-Murray has gone as far as to say that hegemony theory should today be considered the “master trope of cultural studies” (2010, 39).

It is perhaps this diffuse circulation that makes pinpointing any precise definition of the term *hegemony* a nearly impossible task. Scholars often take recourse in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* as an authority for such a definition, where Gramsci is commonly considered to be the person who coined the term in its modern academic usage. While such a genealogical approach is useful, it is perhaps limited by the plasticity of the term itself. Even in those cases where scholars make direct reference to Gramsci’s work, such as is the case of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s well-known and influential interpretation of the Sardinian’s work in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), the central theorization of hegemony is transformed in such a way as to make it difficult to reconcile with Gramsci’s original usage.

In this essay, I propose to tease out the possible significance of this term in the context of the contemporary crisis of political and nomic categories that we often refer to under the name of globalization. I will focus on a critical engagement with the term hegemony. My argument will reside in the idea that the theory of hegemony presents itself as a particular mode of understanding and acting in a world in which the nature of political conflict has radically changed and requires an entirely new set of tools adequate to what Giacomo Marramao has called the “multipolarity of contemporary conflict” (Marramao 2012, 94). Framing my argument in such a way clearly assumes a certain methodological approach to the connection between theory and practice, a connection that is perhaps still best captured by the term *praxis*. What I aim to show is that the question of praxis is at the heart of the theory of hegemony. In this respect, hegemony theory could be considered as a certain critical relation to the practice of theory and to the theory of practice; one suited to the contemporary conditions of the political. This approach assumes a practical dimension to the theory of hegemony that I will explore in more detail by analyzing how the concept has been used to interpret the rise of the so-called “new left” in Latin America, and to translate the lessons learned from the Latin American “experience” to the formation of the recent Spanish political party Podemos. Exploring the limits of the term hegemony in this context, I will then suggest how the term “posthegemony” might operate as an unworking of the political principality which informs all current practices of hegemony.

Hegemony and the Contemporary Question of Praxis

We must therefore understand how the concept of hegemony was formed and continuously re-formed through an engagement with a number of perceived impasses on the contemporary left. Such impasses became

increasingly clear in the decades that immediately followed Gramsci's death. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a new geopolitical ordering of the world as part of a process that we commonly call "globalization." This transformation in the nature of the political included the deterioration of the nation-state as the undisputed locus of political modernity, the disintegration of traditional class boundaries (the so-called "disappearance" of the working class), and the penetration of a global capitalism into even the most intimate areas of life, leading to an almost absolute collapse between the categories of "public" and "private." Hegemony theory increasingly emerged not only as a theory of how ideas overdetermined social reality and the realm of human action, but it also became a question which concerned itself with what kind of action was possible in the current historical conjuncture. In a depoliticized world where the rule of capitalism and "business as usual" appeared to require neither legitimacy nor consensus to continue to function unchallenged, our current historical moment has been increasingly interpreted as a moment of crisis taking place at the heart of the political, even as a vacation of the political, where political life has been replaced by the scientific techno-rationalization of all domains of life ("biopolitics"). The problem for hegemony theory was therefore not only about the kind of politics required to combat this theoretical and practical impasse on the left. Scholars saw it as being necessary to take a step back and ask how these transformations in the nature of capitalism and global relations had reconfigured the possibility for contemporary praxis, as well as the relationship between ideas and social organization and the production of political subjects. In other words, it was necessary to ask what form political struggle could take today.

These contemporary concerns find a particular intensity and diffusion in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the two theorists who have undoubtedly proposed the most concrete and influential definition of hegemony since Antonio Gramsci. In their collective publication which launched them to fame *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (published originally in 1985), the term provided a theory for political action that sought to reconcile Marxist theory with the insights provided by poststructuralist philosophy. As the authors themselves elaborate in detail in the first half of their now canonical book, Laclau and Mouffe found in the Gramscian concept of hegemony a theoretical outline for going beyond the class reductionism of classical Marxist theory and the doctrine of economic determinism in the last instance. At the same time, Gramsci's writings also provided a theoretical basis for reconciling Marxism with poststructuralist theory, whereby Laclau and Mouffe significantly adjusted the concept of hegemony, understanding the latter as the product of a series of articulatory practices based on a multiplicity of unsatisfied demands. Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony was directed at "cleansing" the Gramscian concept from any remaining essentialism ("onto-theology") by conceptualizing social relations as discursive articulations agglutinated together in a chain of equivalences that were never able to entirely totalize the social field of differences. In this respect, an important element of Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony theory as they present it in their 1985 work is to renounce the concept of "society" given that the latter, according to the authors, assumes some kind of underlying totality at the base of all particular moments of social expression. In other words, the term "society" assumes that the identity of the social is prior to the political articulations that take place among social actors. Laclau and Mouffe contest this assumption, developing upon Gramsci's concept of hegemony in order to elaborate a theory of the social that regards political identities and social reality as productions of what the authors call "articulatory practices." Laclau and Mouffe argue that the social order is always contingent, the product of articulatory practices that give the illusion of totality. But these practices are nothing other than failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences that underlie social relations. Every articulatory practice is only ever partial, thwarted by its own impossibility, meaning that the social space is never closed in upon itself and always open to the possibility that there emerge other potentially antagonistic articulatory practices. It is an *impossible metaphorization* (the notion of society as a totalizing metaphor comes up repeatedly in the work of Ernesto Laclau) which attempts to articulate some kind of social unity — a point to which we will later return.

I shall not present in any serious detail the theory of hegemony that Laclau and Mouffe outline in their publication, on which there is already an ample bibliography to which the reader may refer. What it interests me to outline here is a certain transformation that the term *hegemony* undergoes in the work of Ernesto Laclau. We shall see how, for Laclau, the importance of his theory of hegemony will be increasingly connected to the possibility of a renewed political practice for the left, for which he will invest in what he calls "popular" or "populist" struggles over those that he otherwise describes elsewhere as belonging to a "democratic" type.

This is not a new observation: this shift has of course been noted by many commentators of the Argentine's work. However, what I wish to demonstrate in this essay is the way in which this shift in Laclau's work can be regarded as corresponding to the Argentine's own engagement with the contemporary problem of "depoliticization," of the apparent vacuation of the political which has been regarded by many on the left as characteristic of today's neoliberal governance. In other words, hegemony theory in Laclau's work is formulated as a tool whose aim is to respond to a specific political problem of the present. This is further confirmed by the fact that, as we will see, this slippage between hegemony and populism that is most strikingly introduced by the later work of Ernesto Laclau serves as a practice of translation, whereby the lessons of the Latin American left are imported to the Spanish context in the formation of the political party Podemos. The question is therefore to explore what kind of politics is proposed in this connection between hegemony and populism and what alternative perspectives might be offered by the term "posthegemony."

The Sliding Chain of Equivalents: Hegemony and/as Populism in the Work of Ernesto Laclau

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the relationship between what Laclau and Mouffe propose under the term of "hegemonic politics" and the political field as a whole remains somewhat ambiguous. Hegemony is described in that book as one *possible type* of the political, one which emerged with modern representative democracy (2001, 138-9). The authors never make clear, however, what other possible types of the political might exist. Laclau and Mouffe do, nevertheless, outline two possible strategies or directions for what they call a hegemonic politics. They call the first type "democratic" and the second "popular," associating the first of these with the industrialized world and the second with the Third World. This distinction makes only a brief appearance:

It would appear that an important differential characteristic may be established between advanced industrial societies and the periphery of the capitalist world: in the former, the proliferation of points of antagonism permits the multiplication of democratic struggles, but these struggles, given their diversity, do not tend to constitute a 'people', that is, to enter into equivalence with one another and to divide the political space into two antagonistic fields. On the contrary, in the countries of the Third World, imperialist exploitation and the predominance of brutal and centralized forms of domination tend from the beginning to endow the popular struggle with a centre, with a single and clearly defined enemy. (131)

It must be remembered that one of the principles of hegemonic struggle, as both Laclau and Mouffe make clear on a number of occasions, is that the social order is never entirely sutured by any single articulation; in other words, the concept of hegemony was always envisaged as a democratically plural politics, consistent with the post-Marxist turn which moved away from questions of class to include those members of society who had traditionally been excluded from the conventional discourse of the left: feminisms, LGBTQ liberation movements, ethnic minorities, and others besides. It is no surprise, then, that Laclau and Mouffe in their study of hegemony give preference to what they call "democratic" kinds of struggle over "popular" ones, regarding the latter as the product of temporary alliances which, presumably, should eventually give way to a plural politics of democratic hegemony. In their own words:

We will therefore speak of democratic struggles where these imply a plurality of political spaces, and of popular struggles where certain discourses tendentially construct the division of a single political space in two opposed fields. But it is clear that the fundamental concept is that of 'democratic struggle,' and that popular struggles are merely specific conjunctures resulting from the multiplication of equivalence effects among the democratic struggles. (137)

It is clear that Ernesto Laclau's 2005 book *On Populist Reason* marks an important departure from this viewpoint. This is the case not only insofar as there is increasingly a preference in the Argentine's work

towards what Laclau and Mouffe had once called “popular” struggles over “democratic” ones, but also because the very understanding of the relationship of hegemony theory to populism appears to undergo a distortion of a quite complex character, whereby the two terms appear to become “almost synonymous,” as Italian philosopher Davide Tarizzo has also noted elsewhere (2015, 26). What I wish to show here, however, is that this shift that can be detected in the work of Ernesto Laclau is no chance turn, but is part of the kind of praxis that hegemony theory advocates (or at least one of its possible avenues). This praxis can only be explained by properly understanding the theoretical and practical problems for which it is put to work.

It would be impossible to cover in this short essay the full trajectory of this shift in Ernesto Laclau’s work, which emerges as a result of a number of discussions and impasses among the contemporary left. This could be traced in Laclau’s various engagements with other key Marxist theorists throughout the 1990s — particularly the work of Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, Antonio Negri, Jacques Derrida and, of course, Chantal Mouffe. It would also be possible to trace this change through the various critiques of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony and the responses that Laclau has published on the latter (all of these debates, for the interested reader, find an interesting intensity in Laclau’s edited book with Butler and Žižek: *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* [2000]). What is important to note about this change, however, is that increasingly the problem of a leftist theory and practice did not come to center so much on the question of how to guarantee a plural and democratic politics, but rather on how to guarantee *any* kind of politics, where the neoliberal technocratic governments of the industrialized world had created a dispossessed class and a leftist movement so fragmented that any possible challenge to the system appeared nigh on impossible, and the techno-scientific rationalization of society had produced an economicist logic in which there was an increasing disparity between those that governed and those that they were supposed to represent.

This problem, that we will call “depoliticization,” where people appeared to accept the inevitability of their own subordination to an unjust and exploitative political economy without that subordination requiring even their own consent, is recurrently thematized as a central concern in Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* (2005) — the book where the Argentine political thinker most clearly advocates populism as a contemporary praxis. It is worth briefly summarizing Laclau’s main thesis here in order to better situate my argument. What Laclau argues in this work is that previous studies on populism have failed to provide convincing analyses of the latter, identifying it usually with some kind of excess with respect to “politics as usual.” For Laclau, these scholars misrecognize the way in which populism actually represents a particular form of politics. Indeed, populism is not just *any* form of politics: the populist moment is perhaps the moment of politics par excellence, as the moment of the “construction of a people” — a formula Laclau will repeat at various moments throughout the book. This “people” has no fixed identity a priori: it is the result of articulatory practices which suture social meaning in a chain of equivalences structured by a fundamental antagonism. It is what Laclau elsewhere identifies as the “empty signifier,” that placeholder for a series of equivalences which articulate what would otherwise be isolated demands. It is the function of the empty signifier, in Laclau’s theory of hegemony, to attempt to domesticate the field of differences underlying social relations by partially suturing (“hegemonizing”) social meaning. What is particular about the “people” as a special kind of empty signifier is that it presupposes the division of the social space into two irreducibly antagonistic camps (“friends” and “enemies”). It should be clear that Laclau’s exploration of populism draws heavily from the basic tools of hegemony theory, and in many respects can be claimed to be indissociable from what he and Mouffe had earlier called “popular” hegemonic struggles.

With this basic grasp of Laclau’s general proposal, it is possible to analyze in greater detail how this relationship between hegemony and populism is articulated in *On Populist Reason* as a question of praxis. In the first chapter of the book, Laclau sets up his argument by analyzing the various uses that other scholars have made of the term *populism*. He shows that the term has invariably been associated in contemporary scholarship with a “dangerous excess, which puts the clear-cut mould of a rational community into question” (x). Laclau identifies that his task, therefore, is to “bring to light the specific logics inherent in that excess, and to argue that, far from corresponding to marginal phenomena, they are inscribed in the actual working of *any* communitarian space” (x). This is the logic that makes populism the political form whose task is the “construction of a people.” We cannot understand the stakes of Laclau’s argument if we do not first of all appreciate that this point of departure implies a critique of liberal democratic theory. One of the assumptions

of liberal democratic theory resides in the idea that any social space whatsoever is an already given and totalizing plane in which “rational actors” or “individuals” interact with one another on the basis of competing demands and interests. However, for Laclau, this form of conceptualizing the social space is restricted to an “ontic” level of discourse, presenting as social reality what is in fact nothing other than pre-established and institutionalized articulatory practices formed by the articulation of a chain of equivalences.

What it is important to understand here is that this criticism of liberal democratic theory cannot be removed from the contemporary problem of what we have called societal depoliticization. It is logical to assert that, in Laclau’s view, in order for the ontic to have come into being in the first instance, a populist or hegemonic moment would have first of all been necessary, an “ontological” moment that sutures the social space and makes the “ontic” possible. What exists as “social reality” forms part of a number of accepted sedimented social practices. The acceptance of these sedimented practices always implies, at some level, the erasure of that social reality’s own foundational moment: the populist moment as the “construction of a people.” The problem of contemporary politics as it is presented in *On Populist Reason* is, therefore, a problem of the ontic: of the fact that contemporary liberal democracy forecloses the violent and irruptive moment of the “construction of a people” which is part and parcel of the possibility of modern democratic practice. I would argue that Laclau’s increasing emphasis on populism as a political practice finds its *raison d’être* in this perceived need to democratize the ontological dimension of politics that lies at the base of any established social identity.

In this sense my analysis departs from the otherwise excellent study carried out by José Luis Villacañas on the contemporary theory of populism and its limitations in his recent book *Populismo* (2015). For Villacañas, the fact that Ernesto Laclau’s entire hegemonic edifice is built upon the basic building blocks of “demands” implies that it is a logic that is actually subsumable to liberal theory, given that the latter also envisages society as being composed by a field of such competing demands. Villacañas’s example in this respect is drawn from the analysis of money, which he argues is analogous to Laclau’s concept of the “people” insofar as it is an empty signifier that articulates otherwise disparate elements into a chain of equivalences. Thus far we cannot fault his logic. However, the key difference from my perspective is that Laclau makes of this empty signifier the possible space of a complete renewal of those same equivalential articulations. The hegemonic, “populist” moment represents the introduction of a “part of the no part” into societal institutions, a part that otherwise finds no space within this articulated totality. In this respect, it is possible to inscribe Laclau’s thought within a larger debate on the nature of the political itself whereby, as Jacques Rancière has shown (e.g. *Disagreement* 1999), both Plato and Aristotle distinguished the language of politics from the arithmetical logic of exchange (i.e. the economy), placing it instead within a geometrical logic. It is only from the geometrical logic of politics that one becomes able to challenge the “ontic” level of political institutionality and revitalize the social field and its coordinates — ones that a liberal theory of democracy would otherwise accept as given. This difference is expressed in Laclau’s thought as a difference between the ontic and the ontological. Later in *On Populist Reason*, we see Laclau thematize this difference as one that is explicitly concerned with the problem of depoliticization:

In any event, the important thing is that we are not dealing with two different types of politics: only the second type [the “ontological”] is political; the other [the “ontic”] simply involves the death of politics and its reabsorption by the sedimented forms of the social. This distinction coincides, to a large extent, with the one proposed by Rancière between *la police* and *le peuple*.
(155)

Laclau immediately admits that this definition of populism appears to empty it of any specific content: “My attempt has not been to find the *true* referent of populism,” he writes, “but to do the opposite: to show that populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena. Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political” (xi). Populism is, in a certain respect, the master-signifier that reigns above all other empty signifiers, the logical reference point to which all other master-signifiers that suture the social and political space must refer, their categorical imperative. It is the “hegemonic fantasm,” to use Reiner Schürmann’s term (2003, 6-16): that sovereign concept which has no referent other than itself, a point to which we will be forced to return.

Meanwhile, although Laclau identifies at the beginning of *On Populist Reason* that populism would be but one mode of constructing the political — in the same way as, we should not forget it, hegemony was presented in 1985 as but one possible type of political action — by the end of his book it is not clear what other kinds of politics might be possible. Laclau writes that: “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such” (67). It is at this point of Laclau’s essay on populism that the slippage between the terms “populism,” “hegemony” and “politics” becomes apparently absolute. Firstly, the logic of populism becomes that of hegemony theory itself: the “operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification [which, we should recall, is also the definition of the logic of populism] is what I have called *hegemony*” (70). Secondly, in a later chapter, Laclau equates this logic of what is now populism/hegemony (now “nearly” indistinguishable, now “almost synonyms”) with the very possibility of *any* political practice, indeed, of *any* politics tout court: “Does this mean that the political becomes synonymous with populism? Yes, in the sense in which I conceive this last notion” (154).

In sum, Laclau gives a special symbolic function to his revised notion of hegemony/populism, one that adopts a double role. On the one hand, it suggests a form of “reactivating” the political against the “death of politics” whose mode would be the “construction of a people.” It responds, therefore, to a very contemporary problem which is the fragmentation of the left in a depoliticized social terrain governed by a capitalist machine of exploitation without limits. On the other hand, it provides a theory of the political which is totalizing, and I mean this in a double sense: firstly, it totalizes everything that we understand by the term “political” (there appears to be no other forms that political conflict might take, though Laclau sometimes ambiguously suggests otherwise); secondly, it totalizes all social relations, insofar as the “construction of the people” is the basis for the construction of any social identity and any social unity whatsoever. We must remember, in this respect, that every social relation is always understood as the product of articulatory practices based on the formation of chains of equivalence and the positing of fundamental antagonisms. There appears to be no space in Laclau’s theory for any social relations outside of the political field. When he writes that “*all* struggles are, by definition, *political*” (193, Laclau’s emphasis), this must be taken very seriously. Oliver Marchant arrives at the same conclusion in his book *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (2007), who defines the political ontology of Ernesto Laclau as being a “first philosophy” of the social: “the social has to be conceived of as a kind of ‘sleeping mode’ of the political ... [wherever] we look, we will find the political at the root of *all* social relations” (148, my emphasis).

The question of democracy does not altogether disappear from Laclau’s discourse in *On Populist Reason*, however; but it has now been subordinated to the logic of populism, in a seemingly inverse move to the one played in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Laclau writes, for example, that “the construction of a ‘people’ is the *sine qua non* of democratic functioning” (169). How can we explain this strange reversal? It is useful to recall here the special function that democratic articulations of hegemony had in Laclau and Mouffe’s earlier work, in order to better appreciate how the concept of populism here becomes problematic with respect to it. One of the most important arguments that Laclau and Mouffe presented as a justification for a theory of hegemony was the plurality and diversity of the different demands that became available in a situation of what they would have called a “democratic” type. It is important not to overlook this point. What Laclau suggests elsewhere is that the very conditions that make a practice of a hegemonic politics possible are grounded on the postmodern collapse of singular and totalizing (“grand”) narratives, opening the political terrain to a multi-polar social field where different competing hegemonic articulations are able to cohabit the same space (remember that only in the case of popular demands, considered secondary in 1985 to democratic ones, was the social space constituted strictly as a “people”). This is an observation about the contemporary political situation in which we live that he has elsewhere called the “revolution of our times” (see Laclau 1990). What this means is, for the Argentine philosopher, as long as there is no closure of the political field around a singular and totalizing identity or suturing, there is democratic hegemonic practice. See, for example, this earlier reflection by Laclau on the possibility of hegemonic politics and democracy today:

Theoretical categories which in the past were considered as bearers of a univocal sense become deeply ambiguous once that sense is seen as the actualization of only *some* of the possibilities opened by their internal structure. Once this is realized, once the deconstruction of those

categories fully reveals the power games that govern their actual structuration, new and more complex hegemonico-political moves become possible within them. (1994, 2)

Guaranteeing the openness of the social field, the possibility of continuously being able to negotiate and renegotiate hegemonic articulations among various competing identities, is therefore fundamental to the possibility that a practice of hegemony would remain democratic. It might be possible to suggest on the basis of such an observation that hegemony theory presupposes an “impossible metaphorization”: it sutures the totality of social relations through an empty signifier that is regarded as both necessary and inherently incomplete.

One is forced to ask whether Laclau’s increasing emphasis on populism, with its fierce division of the social field into two antagonistic camps, does not pose a problem for this more “democratic” element of hegemony theory. The problem is that the practice of populism provides no guarantee for this democratic openness to the groundlessness of social (re)production that Laclau elsewhere identifies as hegemony’s very condition of possibility. Ultimately this is why, as Laclau is forced to admit, there is nothing about the form of populism (and also, therefore, of hegemony) that necessarily leads to a democratic practice of the left (see *On Populist Reason*, 87). Laclau’s theory of populism/hegemony has received many criticisms on the basis of this problem. We shall not go over too much old ground here. All I will point out in this respect is what has been excellently analyzed elsewhere by Antonio Rivera García: that Laclau’s populism, by treating the importance of the renewal and reactivation of the political and the ontological dimension of politics — indeed, in prioritizing this dimension of political struggle over that of “sedimented” social practices — is in reality concerned with what we might otherwise call “executive” over “legislative” power. Rivera García notes that, despite Laclau’s apparent anti-Schmittian perspective, there is nevertheless a Schmittian emphasis in this distinction which leads Laclau to privilege the decisive moment that Schmitt would have called “dictatorship”: in other words, the constitutive moment of any political order, the state of exception that suspends that decision over who is a friend and who is an enemy. In the words of Rivera García: “el populismo está más inclinado al momento de la reactivación, al instituyente-constituyente, al política, en suma” [populism is more inclined towards the moment of reactivation, to the institutive-constitutive; in sum, to the political] (43).

I do not mean to bring into question the democratizing character of Laclau’s theory of hegemony/populism. I would be even willing to go so far as to say that Laclau’s populist politics is *always* democratizing, from a certain perspective, even if we consider the case of right-wing populisms such as those that we are currently witnessing emerge in Europe and the United States (whether or not the *effects* of these articulatory practices are democratic does not upset this basic structural logic: the point is that unsatisfied demands manage to achieve a certain level of articulation in the public sphere and are thereby granted an institutional place where they previously held none). Italian philosopher Davide Tarizzo has argued a similar point, defining the concept of the “people” in Laclau as a “voluntad de *democratización*” [will to *democratization*] (25, Tarizzo’s emphasis). This does nothing however to solve the double bind at the heart of Laclau’s theory of hegemony/populism. This double bind is presented in the form of a double injunction, a double hegemonic fantasm, as two mutually exclusive supreme principles that, while they can refer to no other principle, ground the logic of hegemonic theory. Namely: 1) that the reactivation of the political in the form of populism is necessary, whatever its form, to combat the death of politics (associated with liberal democratic theory and especially with neoliberal governance); 2) that hegemony theory is only effectively democratic when it is plural (and perhaps, even, when the social space is not sutured as belonging to a single “people”); a state of affairs that populism *as* hegemony can never guarantee, given that it is only a will to *democratizing*, not a will to the endurance of democratic institutions.

We will temporarily leave to one side some of these problems we have detected in Laclau’s theory of hegemony/populism. To return to the core of my argument, we have seen that this tension between democracy and populism, which was always latent in Laclau and Mouffe’s hegemony theory, takes on a certain characteristic in Laclau’s work in which a preference for democratic hegemonic struggles was eventually replaced by one for populist struggles. I have argued that this was no accident: this tension between the popular and the democratic was born of the fact that hegemony theory was not only an explicative tool but a praxis, a response to a new political paradigm which was constantly re-adapted according to the specific set of

problems it faced. That same feature that was once the most celebrated feature of the “post-Marxist” concept of hegemony — the groundlessness of any social order and the idea of a political community as a failed attempt to domesticate social differences (the nature of plural and “democratic” struggles) — eventually became a problem for the theory of hegemony, insofar as it did not provide the necessary construction of a “people” without which there was no real practice of politics. The theory of hegemony attempts to guard itself from, but in doing so ultimately absorbs within itself, the same problems that it was designed to combat. Between the necessity for a new political force on the left capable of standing up to neoliberal hegemony, on the one hand, and the celebration of the collapse of universalizing discourses as the advent of a new plural and democratic politics, on the other, there is an enormous abyss which hegemony theory can only temporarily suture at best.

As José Luis Villacañas has noted, however: “El concepto de hegemonía nunca sobredetermina la totalidad de la realidad, como pretende. Pero esto no quiere decir que no tenga eficacia histórica” [The concept of hegemony never overdetermines the totality of social reality, as it claims. But this does not mean that it does not have historical efficacy] (2015, 146). This double bind that we have detected at the heart of a theory of hegemony/populism has not prevented it from becoming one of the dominant forms of social analysis existing today in the contemporary humanities and social sciences, as well as a relatively successful political practice across a number of different countries. This, of course, forms part of its very malleability and of its use as a tool for grasping with the contemporary conditions of global capitalism. Let us now turn to an example of how this theory of hegemony as populism has been utilized to develop political practices aimed at overcoming the impasses of a left paralyzed by the dominance of a technocratic neoliberal governance. To do so, we will explore the case of Íñigo Errejón Galván of the Spanish political party Podemos, whose interpretation of Latin American populisms as hegemonizing processes became a political praxis for constructing a new kind of populist-left in Spain.

Contemporary Practices of Hegemony/Populism: The Promise of Populism in Latin America and Spain

Retrospectively, the explosion of new left-wing political mobilizations that took hold across Latin America at the turn of the twenty-first century (the so-called “pink tide”) can be regarded as a practice of a Laclauian populist politics *avant la lettre*. Beginning as a motley array of more or less disarticulated social movements across various sectors of civil society, each with their own individual agendas, the movement was eventually articulated as a national and transnational anti-neoliberal bloc and became institutionalized throughout the continent in various ways. Hegemony theory provided theoretical tools for interpreting the crisis of neoliberalism in Latin America and the organic responses of the new left, as well as for developing strategies to exploit these successes and export them to other contexts.

One clear example of how the theory of hegemony in its populist vein has been employed as a tool for importing the successes of leftist movements in Latin America into the European context is demonstrated by the intellectual and political career of Íñigo Errejón Galván. Errejón carried out his doctoral thesis in Political Sciences at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, where he studied the hegemonic discursive construction of the left-wing party Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia during the first term of Evo Morales’s presidency. As we shall see, Laclau’s notion of hegemony and populism are determinant for Errejón’s way of understanding the contemporary situation of Bolivia.

The article “*Evo Pueblo. La hegemonía del MAS*” (*Evo People. The hegemony of the MAS*), published in Bolivia as part of a collection of essays he co-edited, summarizes some of the main arguments of Errejón’s doctoral research. The Spanish political scientist begins his analysis with a commentary regarding the MAS’s electoral success during its first term. Referring to the electoral figures, he suggests that, if the MAS’s landslide victory in 2005 had been unexpected, their even greater electoral achievements in 2009 demonstrated that they were now the uncontested hegemonic force of Bolivian politics. Errejón puts forward that:

En paralelo al cambio electoral, una transformación político-discursiva menos explícita pero más radical había modificado la política boliviana en esos años: no es sólo que el Movimiento Al

Socialismo fuese la fuerza más votada, es que su diagnóstico de la realidad, sus símbolos y propuestas, habían pasado a ser parte del imaginario colectivo de los bolivianos.

[Parallel to this electoral change, a less explicit but more radical political-discursive change had modified Bolivian politics in those years: it is not only that the Movement Towards Socialism had gained the most votes, but that its diagnostic of reality, its symbols and proposals, had already become part of the collective imaginary of Bolivians.] (2011, 112)

Errejón proposes to draw on discourse theory and hegemony in order to explain the MAS's capacity to "articulate" and "direct" the collective "will" of a majority in the country, where he proposes to pay special attention to the concept of "populism," saving it from its ordinary, "pejorative" acceptance (ibid.). He is speaking of course of none other than Laclau's theory of populism. His acceptance of Laclau's revised notion of populism, and its relationship to hegemony theory, must be contextualized as part of the same series of problems that had concerned Laclau: in other words, the question of how a politics of the left becomes possible under the rule of neoliberal governance and in a moment of generalized depoliticization. Errejón's recourse to the Laclauian notion of populism would appear to be based on the assumption that the current fragmentation of contemporary social identities, so typical of neoliberal societies, should be considered as a limitation with respect to the possibility of a leftist praxis. The question for Errejón, in other words, is how to create the possibility of a leftist movement in an age of depoliticization. Errejón writes that: "La política contemporánea esta (*sic*) profundamente marcada por la fragmentación, de tal manera que lograr la 'unidad' del sujeto priverligiado es la tarea primera y primordial de todos los movimientos que aspiran a reorganizar la vida social y a ejercer el poder político" [Contemporary politics is profoundly marked by fragmentation, in such a way so that achieving the 'unity' of the privileged subject is the primary and most primordial task of any movement that aspires to reorganize social life and exercise political power] (114). The formula is undoubtedly Machiavellian. Regarding the Laclauian notion of the construction of a people which he is soon to mobilize to support his analysis of hegemonizing processes in Bolivia, Errejón adds, in the same vein: "La desconfianza hacia el 'populismo' sería entonces, en realidad, desconfianza hacia la política misma y expresaría el deseo inconfesado de sustituirla por un conjunto de técnicas administrativas que diluyan el conflicto y por tanto 'naturalicen' el orden existente como neutral y bueno para todos" [In reality, this suspicion towards 'populism' is a suspicion towards politics itself, expressing the unconfessed desire of substituting it for a set of administrative practices that dilute conflict and therefore 'naturalize' the existing order as being neutral and good for all] (120). Fear of populism is a fear of politics: what we should understand to be underlying this assertion is the same notion that led Laclau to differentiate between the "ontic" level of sedimented social practices and the "ontological" level that constituted politics. Populism as a hegemonizing strategy is once again presented as the antidote to the problem of depoliticization. For Errejón, Bolivia appears to be a case in point where this depoliticization and institutional paralysis was overcome by the success of a left-wing hegemonizing force: the MAS.

This form of understanding populism as the possibility of reactivating the constitutive moment of politics that underlies social practices will therefore inform to a large extent Errejón's interpretation of historical events in Bolivia. Errejón proposes that Evo Morales and the MAS stand out for their ability to have articulated a collective sense of the Bolivian "people" in order to unite a series of unsatisfied social demands that were being expressed in Bolivia by a number of social movements from the year 2000 onwards. His wager is that the Movement Towards Socialism was able to position itself within this conjuncture in such a way so as to be capable of articulating and directing a "people" which emerged in the aftermath of the crisis of the neoliberal state. This neoliberal crisis is regarded by Errejón as indicating a lack of institutional will or ability on the part of the state to satisfy a proliferation of unsatisfied demands within civil society, that later became articulated in a chain of equivalences as the Bolivian "people." As a series of popular struggles at the turn of the twenty-first century gave a sense of collective articulation to these movements, finding particular intensity in the so-called October agenda following the 2003 Gas Wars, Errejón identifies the political party of the MAS as a catalyzer for a "new popular identity" (129).

The influence of the Latin American “experience” on the formation of Podemos’s political strategy has been noted by its own party members, as well as other scholars, on a number of separate occasions. As his essay makes clear, what Errejón saw in the Bolivian case was the potential of the populist promise to bring an end to the depoliticized times of neoliberal hegemony. We cannot help but speculate that Errejón was reading the success of the Bolivian left through the lenses of a young generation of Spanish intellectuals who were faced with a Europe in which neoliberal governance had become the logic of a new common sense, to the expense of viable options on the left and of the precariat classes. Such appears to be the suggestion by Pablo Iglesias — also a scholar of political sciences and Secretary General of Podemos — who, during a speech in the Vicepresidency of the Plurinational State of Bolivia in 2014, made this connection between the Latin American and Spanish situation explicit. For Iglesias, the success of social movements in Latin America and new political populisms were the promise of another possible future that appeared to be missing in Europe (see “Pensando el mundo desde Bolivia,” Iglesias 2014). In an earlier essay on social movements in Bolivia, Iglesias had earlier affirmed that: “Creemos que América Latina es a día de hoy el mejor laboratorio de transformación social tras en fin del breve siglo XX cerrado con el colapso soviético, y camina en dirección de una integración regional económica y política alternativa al neoliberalismo” [We believe that Latin America is today the greatest laboratory of social transformation after the short twentieth century which closed with the Soviet collapse and now moves towards a regional economic integration as an alternative politics to neoliberalism] (*Bolivia en Movimiento*, 2014, 27).

What is most important from the perspective of this essay is the way in which this theoretical perspective on the contemporary impasses of the left, as understood through a Laclauian lens of hegemony/populism, became the basis for a new kind of political party in Spain. Following the economic crisis in Europe in 2007 and the emergence of the 15-M movement, it became clear for the future members of Podemos that Europe was undergoing the organic crisis that was the opportunity that they had been waiting for. Íñigo Errejón, already with experience with the electoral campaign in his work in Venezuela, became the Secretary for Policy and Strategy Campaigning for Podemos and has organized Podemos’s electoral campaigns since the founding of the party. The results have been nothing short of impressive. Podemos officially made its entrance in the Spanish political scene in January 2014. In the elections to the European parliament in May 2014, only months after the official formation of the party, Podemos were elected to five of the seats with almost ten percent of the vote. In the recent general elections of December 2015, Podemos became the third party of Spain in what is a traditionally two-legged race, gaining approximately twenty percent of the vote. An explicit part of the strategy has been to interpellate the Spanish electorate as a dispossessed “people” against their antagonistic other, the *casta* or caste (see Iglesias Turrión “Pensando el mundo desde Bolivia,” where he discusses this strategy at length). The parallels between the electoral strategy of Podemos and that of the MAS in Bolivia, but also and especially with Laclau’s formulation of the task of politics par excellence as the “construction of a people,” are all too clear.

The nature of this electoral success cannot be understood in isolation of the role of the concept of hegemony and of the Latin American “experience” for the formation of Podemos as a political party. Salvador Schavelzon, who has studied in great detail the scholarship that many members of Podemos have carried out on Latin America, confirms the importance of this influence when he writes:

La hegemonía, sería un concepto clave alrededor del cual se construiría la Hipótesis Podemos, en un campo de discusiones ligadas al estudio de procesos políticos de cambio, pero también consideraciones sobre liderazgo, el papel de los medios de comunicación, y las campañas políticas a partir de asesoría política de las que futuros dirigentes de Podemos participaron.

[Hegemony would be a key concept around which the “Podemos Hypothesis” would be constructed, in a field of discussions linked to the study of political processes of change, but also considerations regarding leadership, the role of the media, and political campaigns based on political counsel in which the future leaders of Podemos participated.]

I do not wish to exaggerate the influence of the theory of hegemony or of the politics of Latin American new left governments in the current formation of Podemos. Figures like Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón are extremely original thinkers who have developed individual interpretations of the current situation in Latin America, one in which their general attitude is one of support but to which they are also able to take a critical distance on occasion, and have been extremely successful in moving from the university platform to the public platform of national politics in Spain where they have often been forced to adapt their strategy in an ongoing and improvised fashion (indeed, I will explore some of these possible differences with regards to Errejón in the conclusion of this essay). But my point here is not to highlight the discrepancies that may or may not exist between Laclau's understanding of hegemony and/or populism and that which is exploited by Errejón, or any other member of Podemos for that matter. What is important is simply that the language of hegemony, in its populist vein, provided the theoretical tools to pinpoint the impasses and opportunities for the left, and that this was always engaged with a question of how to renew the constitutive moments of political practice in the face of the neoliberal technocratic administration of government. The example of Íñigo Errejón's political and intellectual career shows how the concept of hegemony as it develops throughout time cannot be studied in isolation of the praxis that it presupposes.

This transference of ideas and practices from Latin America to Spain implies a certain point of translatability. If hegemony as a theory of populism is a framework adequate to understanding the emergence of the Latin American new left, and of intuiting the applicability of such new left strategies to the case of Spain, then we must assume that it provides a form of thinking about politics that in some way must transcend the specifics of each country's political history. Here is where it becomes important to understand how the theory of hegemony is engaged with a question of praxis specific to the contemporary political situation of the West. Laclau's theory of hegemony in its relationship to populism, the emergence of Latin American new left movements and the formation of Podemos all appear to respond to the same basic question: how to reactivate the social under the banner of the left, or how to re-politicize the question of administration and governance in a world which appears to be modeled on the technocratic rule of market logics dominated by global capitalist interests. The question continues to be for the left, although now in a much more sophisticated manner, perhaps, how to bring about in the "people" a reactivation of their social conscience, in order to awaken them from their deep slumber, from the "sedimented" practices of the social that is the "death of politics," and to a "reactivation" of the political and a "democratization" of institutions such that a leftist practice once again becomes viable. This is the crux of hegemony theory, which is perhaps always inseparable from a certain populist framing of the political.

Posthegemony: On the Tragic Condition of Populism

It is my hope that this analysis, though all too brief, will have sufficed to convince the reader that the theory of hegemony as it is employed in the humanities and social sciences, but also in its most directly political applications in Latin America and Spain today, cannot be comprehended in isolation from the question of how it developed as an issue of praxis adequate to the specific historical moment in which we are now living. Faced with a general vacuation of political life as we become more and more subject to the techno-scientific rationalization of society, everyday more and more animal- or machine-like under a form of rule that Michel Foucault had once called "biopolitics," hegemony theory tries to think through the ways in which it may be possible to re-politicize the field of the social to resist the total subsumption of all life to the machinic logic of capital.

Yet what of the double bind that we identified above in the work of Ernesto Laclau? We saw that, in Laclau's work, hegemony theory was subject to a double injunction: on the one hand, a repeated need to guard the social from its own political vacuation by constantly renewing its possibilities and keeping alive the populist moment; on the other hand, hegemony theory was grounded on the impossibility of closing the openness of the social, the groundless ground that conditioned any temporary articulation of social totality. The problem, as we have seen, was that one could never guarantee the other. The question thus becomes that of what happens the day after the night before, when the ecstatic moment of enjoyment has passed and, waking up next to those that we had shared our enjoyment with, we must learn how to cohabit in the new marital bed. The libidinal investment that a populist theory of hegemony presupposes cannot be maintained indefinitely;

constant identification with and love for the leader are impractical once this takes an institutional form. A reactivation of the political must always result in new sedimented forms of the social. Laclau himself indicates this problem in his analysis of Peronism, noting that what Perón had succeeded to do in his exile was to make his own persona an empty signifier to such an extent that his figure was able to give a unified articulation to entirely contradictory demands. But the Peronist dream fell apart when Perón finally returned to Argentina and took power — it was impossible to sustain this identification amongst such heterogeneous and contradictory demands.

This is what I will call the tragic condition of populism: each reactivation of the virtual potentialities of the social also inaugurates its own death, and the populist politics of hegemony becomes a constant effort to reanimate the people. The Laclauian “people” are like the walking dead: they are still born, and the moment of their inception also marks their inevitable death. It should not come as a surprise therefore that some of the most enduring displays of populist politics take place in the leader’s absence. If Laclau would have us believe that it is only the ontological moment which can reactivate what is sedimented at the ontic level of the social, then this ontological moment, assuming it ever really existed (and is not simply the reconstruction of a fantasy), or that it can ever be recognized as such, must be lived and relived, re-marking that original mark that brought into articulation the various elements of unsatisfied demands that underlie social relations. In this constant keeping alive of the memory of the leader in the people, a truly Machiavellian task, one is led to wonder whether there is anything left of the constitutive moment whose energy reinvigorated the sedimented potentialities of the social.

In fact, the problem runs deeper than this, for this double injunction brings into doubt an unquestioned distinction that lies at the core of Laclau’s elaboration of the theory of hegemony/populism: the distinction between the “ontic” death of politics and the “ontological,” that is, *hegemonizing*, moment. What I have identified as the tragic condition of populism touches in fact upon an essential *impasse* in the theory of hegemony, revealing an aporetic structure by which a certain undecidability makes itself felt in the oscillation that takes place between the “ontic” and the “ontological” moment of politics. On the one hand, we are forced to admit that the ontic’s own re-iteration must always already be a reactivation of a previous ontological moment: for what else could be sedimented in social practices, if not the traces of another, previous ontological moment? On the other hand, and as a consequence of this, Laclau’s ontological, hegemonizing moment becomes like the Aleph in Borges’s well-known story of the same name: we can never be sure that we have found the *true* ontological moment. What Laclau identifies as an ontological moment would actually be the most untimely of events, beyond all identification or calculative logic. The populist leader will have always been a marionette, embodying a principle which was supposed to have already captured the ontological, hegemonizing moment of politics — let us say, for example, 1946 or 1973 (the years that Perón was voted into power in Argentina). What that moment actually traces, however, will always have been the spectral history of all that escaped such iteration as the condition of all event-uality as such.

The hegemonic articulation that is foundational for the politics of populism and for populism *as* politics is thus both phantom and fantasy, its presence always differed and self-differentiated. The ontological moment of hegemonic strategy can only offer itself as the place marker for what has always already escaped it: the infinite irreducibility of the social space insofar as the latter is given as what is at hand or present, whose impossibility of closure makes itself felt in the fact that every attempt to identify which is the properly ontological moment of politics and which the ontic moment of the “death of politics” will have always already failed in advance. The further we push this interrogative gesture which seeks to unravel the aporetic structure of hegemonic articulation, the more we become able to appreciate that this undecidability reveals the praxis of hegemony theory in Laclau’s sense to still be founded on a problematic metaphysics of presence. On the one hand, in its pretense to be able to identify and bring about the properly political-ontological moment, the Laclauian theory of hegemony clearly presupposes a decisionism by which a popular will becomes able to take hold of and give shape to the social space, *as if* reality itself were reducible to a human voluntarism. Laclau’s thought here belies an anthropocentrism which belongs to a long metaphysical tradition, where the (human) subject is envisaged as giving shape to reality through sheer determinism. On the other hand, in a seemingly inverse fashion, this same logic also reduces that self-same subject (the “human” subject), in an ambiguous way, to be a marionette which is governed by those same sedimented “ontic” principles which had supposedly

emanated from her own mastery of the social environment in the first place. In other words, it becomes difficult to talk of a “decision” properly speaking that belongs to a hegemonizing act, when the field of action is already overdetermined by those social practices which are sedimented at the level of the “ontic.” The ontico-ontological difference that is posited and maintained by Laclau’s hegemony theory, and by which it succeeds in making sense of the present, can never be entirely sustained, held in front of itself as an object, or identified in advance. This question constantly brings us back to and suspends the *scission* between a genuinely ontological and ontic moment in the Laclauian sense. Like every decision, therefore, the decision over this scission would always and necessarily exceed the calculative logic by which any possible theory of such a scission might be made possible.

As far as we can consider hegemony as phantom and fantasy, therefore, Jon Beasley-Murray is right when he writes that “there is no hegemony and never has been” (2010, ix). Nevertheless, I would suggest that even if hegemony has never been anything other than a fiction, phantom and fantasy, this does not mean that it ceases to shape the social reality, and therefore to form part of the very conditions by which we make sense of our existence, by which our existence makes itself present and available to experience. No appeal to materialism or empiricism and, indeed, even the revelation that there is no hegemony and never has been, is sufficient to do away with the way in which hegemony as a praxis brings into presence and hands over to experience social reality as such. This is not intended as a criticism of Beasley-Murray’s important intervention that popularized the term posthegemony, which supplies a powerful critical approach to hegemony theory, and whose work would require a fuller discussion which would go beyond what this article seeks to outline. The question I want to consider here is the inescapability of political language, and whether therefore it is possible to envisage a political language that exceeds the representative logic of identification which a populist politics, left or right, requires; a political language which would also, therefore, suspend the kind of decisionism which would suppose itself to be able to maintain any absolute distinction such as that between the ontic and the ontological, and, indeed, even between the political and the non-political. This language would be a fundamentally *paradoxical* political language, therefore, and unlike the theory of hegemony whose concept posits itself as *foundational* of the political field, it would imply a *fundamental* political concept that would be capable of deconstructing the very grounding of the political itself (and therefore question even the very idea of the “fundament”). This would presuppose another, different way of re-politicizing our current global societies, a repoliticization which exceeded any antagonistic logic of historically sutured identities, even if it accepted that the latter are at times necessary; a re-politicization of the political that would be pre-disposed towards the infinite openness of the social and not attempt to domesticate in advance the final meaning of any collective articulation or even, to the extent that it is possible, to pre-determine what is recognizable as articulation *as such*.

This other kind of repoliticization is a task that I would like to identify with the term “posthegemony.” My task in this essay has not been to give this placeholder a definite form or program (indeed, it would be my suggestion that the posthegemonic task for thought could never take such a programmatic form), but rather suggest a possible horizon for future work in that vein that has already been underway for some time, and for which Beasley-Murray’s important contribution mentioned above would be one key example of this work. It would be an arduous task whose horizon may only emerge through a slow, differentiated deconstruction and suspension of the kind of political principality that is presupposed by Ernesto Laclau as foundational for the field of politics (and therefore of the entire social field). If we have identified the theory of hegemony/populism in Laclau as an impossible *metaphorization*, as the institution of a political principle which is never able to entirely suture the field of social differences, then a theory of posthegemony can be considered to be based on the practice of an impossible *de-metaphorization*, a constant deconstruction of political principality which can never overstep its own limit or incompleteness. However, if I have been at such pains to carry out a careful and critical (albeit all too brief) analysis of the notion of hegemony in Laclau, it is because my argument is that we cannot simply do away with hegemonic practices as one of the most important horizons of political action today. It is only possible to deconstruct what is at hand. Or, in more precise terms, deconstruction is only at work in what is always already (not) present, what always already escapes what is available to experience (in, for example, hegemonic articulation). This is why “posthegemony” is not simply a non-hegemony or an anti-hegemony, and certainly not a counter-hegemonic project. It must be envisaged as a much more subtle deconstructive play which seeks to suspend the principal logic of hegemony

and alter the very principle of hegemony in such a way so that it comes out entirely transfigured as a consequence of this critical enquiry, in each moment that a hegemonic articulation is (re-)deployed. The task can only be announced: a final form never anticipated. Indeed, any anticipation of a final political form would already be to fall back into a logic of hegemonic principality (marked by its beginning and its end as the temporal horizon in which it announces itself, its *arche* and its *telos*), and therefore would betray the a-principialed principle of a posthegemonic practice.

The question regarding the success of the institutionalization of current left-wing populisms in Latin America is of course one that to a certain extent remains to be determined, and some governments have been more successful in guaranteeing relative institutional stability in the short-term than others in this respect (compare the relative stability of the MAS in Bolivia, for example, with the cases of Venezuela or Ecuador). One must nevertheless ask whether the recent electoral turn back to neoliberal right-wing parties in Argentina and Venezuela, and the non-electoral out-maneuvering of the PT in Brazil by similar neoliberal parties – parties that we had once thought the new left had entirely discredited – does not speak partly to this problem of institutionalization. The problem that I wish to identify here is that Laclau's notion of the people offers a strategy for a change to the *content* of political articulation ("hegemony"), but not in the *form* of political articulation. One is forced to wonder – and this is a line of thought which can be traced through thinkers as diverse as Jacques Rancière, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Claude Lefort and of course the very same Derrida – whether Laclau's interpretation of the political task "par excellence" of our time (i.e. the construction of a people), a reading which is based on the contemporary institutionalized conditions of politics, does not actually miss something more essential about the political which remains to be thought, and that can only be opened up in this more radical interrogation of the contemporary conditions of the political that I have announced under the name of "posthegemony." A more traditional Marxism would be very quick to point out for example that liberal democratic institutions, supported by a mercantile capitalist structure, have always already determined the very way in which political negotiations are able to take place. These institutionally defined forms of political engagement which Althusser once called "ideological state apparatuses" cannot be as easily inverted as can the referent of an "empty signifier." With this observation, we come closer to Antonio Gramsci's original usage of hegemony, for whom a dictatorship of the proletariat (or a proletarian "hegemony") remained essential if one hoped to be able to meaningfully change the terms of political engagement. Without agreeing with the terms of Gramsci's historical-materialist argument, it nevertheless is worth speculating on whether by making hegemony theory principally a theory which concerns the institution of (modern) political subjectivity, it leaves unquestioned the mechanisms upon which such political-representative practices are grounded. Perhaps this can explain, in part, why a populist theory of hegemony has been extremely successful in mobilizing people against a neoliberal elite, but this mobilization is short lived and, in the aftermath of that populist moment, it is in the long term much more difficult to sustain as a practice. Rejecting both a *certain* materialism which would reduce the rules of political engagement to relations of production, as well as the positing of an ontico-ontological difference as the ground of our social reality which would be identifiable (and therefore reducible to the mastery of a subject) in advance, a posthegemonic practice announces the possibility of a slow, differentiated deconstruction of hegemonic principality, without anticipating the final aim or form that might become of such a possibility.

This critical distance to hegemony theory does not mean that a practice of posthegemony cannot support or coincide in various respects with those new left populisms in Latin America and the south of Europe that continue to offer hope that a different kind of politics may be possible. But it does not do so uncritically and unconditionally. It reserves for itself a space for thinking which resists all ideological capture; a space which would turn the rhetorical practice that is always presupposed by populism into a practice which was always in process, always becoming, never given a fixed form supposed to be "representative" of those who were drawn into its participation. This would imply a different kind of populist practice, perhaps a *marrano populism*, to use a phrase that was employed by Alberto Moreiras in the course of the seminar whose proceedings are published in this collection. José Luis Villacañas's recent article in the *Huffington Post* (2016) on Íñigo Errejón's participation in a summer school on populism and Republicanism in the Faculty of Philosophy in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid could suggest the possibility that Errejón's more recent proposals for Podemos may show the possibility of movement in this direction. In Villacañas's interpretation of Errejón's presentation, Podemos's number two asserted that "la capacidad de unir [a distintos sectores de la sociedad]

en una cultura política común todavía volcada hacia el futuro, no fijada ... implica lograr una dimension equivalencial, pero en modo alguno algo estable, cosificado” [the capacity to unite different sectors of society under one common political culture still leaning towards the future, not fixed ... implies obtaining an equivalential dimension, but in no way is this something stable or reified]. Yet even if Errejón continues to invoke Laclau’s name here in order to speak of hegemonic blocs or populisms, the possible transformation of a Laclauian theory of hegemony/populism announces itself in what we could interpret in a kind of wishful thinking as a slight change of focus, one that places emphasis not on the moment of instituting a particular political identity or subject (the “people”), but rather on the fostering of a common political language. Such a populism would no longer be the kind of populism that we have associated here with the work of Ernesto Laclau; it would no longer presuppose an identification with the leader, it would no longer have to sustain a previously identified, self-positing or self-thetic ontological moment which would have supposedly captured the infinite irreducibility of the event in advance. A post-hegemonic practice of populism, then, would require a constant thinking and re-thinking of the limits of the representative language that necessarily imposes itself in any populist discourse, presupposed as it is on hegemonic articulation.

Have we the ear for it? A posthegemonic practice is perhaps, before all else, the art of listening — not to my friend or to my enemy, not to anybody whom I have already been taught how to recognize in advance, but to that absolute other who conditions all possibilities of thinking another possible politics and upsets in advance the integrity of any political or philosophical principiality whatsoever. The critical distance to hegemony which is presupposed by a posthegemonic practice is therefore also marked by a more general distance with respect to this principiality, a distance whose murmur would require tracing and retracing in each and every re-iteration.

Esta distancia es para mí el residuo de lo que es aprincipial y resiste captura en el poder del *demos*, el rumor de ese ‘proceso sin principio ni fin’ que la práctica poshegemónica busca escuchar, contra toda reducción o violencia filosófica o política.

[This distance is for me the residual of what is aprincipial and resists capture in the power of the *demos*, the murmur of this ‘process without beginning or end’ that a posthegemonic practice seeks to listen to, against all philosophical or political reduction or violence.]

(Moreiras 2015, 137)

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