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Hegemony, populism and democracy: Laclau and Mouffe today

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Abstract

This review article takes the publication of four new volumes by, and on, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as an opportunity to revisit their work and consider its contemporary relevance. After introducing the four volumes, I explain how Laclau and Mouffe’s work has developed since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, highlighting three key developments: the incorporation of psychoanalysis, rhetoric and passions. Having done so, I turn to consider Laclau’s and Mouffe’s respective works on populism, connecting these to the emergence of left-wing populism in Europe today, with particular attention to the case of *Podemos*. Given the relevance of Laclau’s and Mouffe’s works for contemporary left populism, I show how the key elements from their theory on hegemony inform their argument that populist discourse is a fruitful strategy for the left today. It is because identities are contingent that a progressive collective will does not need to be articulated around class, but can be articulated around the figure of “the people”. Moreover, since rhetoric, antagonism and passions are

inherent to politics, populism is not necessarily opposed to democracy, but can be articulated in a way so as to reinvigorate democratic politics.

Keywords: agonistic democracy; antagonism; hegemony; Laclau; Mouffe; Podemos; populism; radical democracy

Hegemonía, populismo y democracia: Laclau y Mouffe hoy

Resumen

Esta reseña toma la publicación de cuatro nuevos volúmenes de, y sobre, Ernesto Laclau y Chantal Mouffe como una oportunidad para revisar su obra y sopesar su importancia actual. Tras presentar los cuatro volúmenes, explico cómo se ha desarrollado el trabajo de Laclau y Mouffe desde *Hegemonía y Estrategia Socialista*, destacando tres avances clave: la incorporación del psicoanálisis, la retórica y las pasiones. A continuación, paso a considerar los respectivos trabajos de Laclau y Mouffe sobre populismo, conectándolos con la emergencia del populismo de izquierdas de la Europa actual, con especial atención al caso de *Podemos*. Dada la relevancia de los trabajos de Laclau y Mouffe para el populismo de izquierdas contemporáneo, muestro cómo los elementos clave de su teoría sobre hegemonía conforman su argumento de que el discurso populista es, hoy en día, una estrategia fructífera para la izquierda. Es debido a que las identidades son contingentes que un deseo progresista colectivo no necesita articularse en torno a una clase, sino que puede articularse en torno a la figura de “el pueblo” o “la gente”. Además, dado que la retórica, el antagonismo y las pasiones son inherentes a la política, el populismo no es necesariamente opuesto a la democracia, sino que puede articularse de modo que revigore a las políticas democráticas.

Palabras clave: democracia agonística; antagonismo; hegemonía; Laclau; Mouffe; Podemos; populismo; democracia radical

David Howarth (ed.). *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique*. London: Routledge, 2015, 285 pp. ISBN 978-0415870870.

Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. London, Verso, 2014, 229 pp. ISBN 978-1781681701.

James Martin (ed.). *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*. London, Routledge, 2013, 241 pp. ISBN 978-0415825221.

Chantal Mouffe. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London, Verso, 2013, 149 pp. ISBN 978-1781681039.

Introduction

With left-wing populists in power in Latin America, and with the rise of *Syriza* in Greece and *Podemos* in Spain, there has been a surge in interest in the works of Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014) and Chantal Mouffe (1943-) and in their theories of hegemony, populism and democracy. Laclau and Mouffe made their name with the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* in 1985 (second edition published in 2001), although many thought, and still believe, that there was little in the book to merit the “socialist” and “radical” in the title (most famously Geras 1987; see also Martin, 2013, chapter 3 for Laclau and Mouffe’s reply). They and their concepts of hegemony, discourse and radical democracy became household names far beyond Marxist theory. Their position became a reference point in debates about Marxism, but also in debates about culture and identity politics, and Laclau and Mouffe came to represent the position of “post-Marxism”. They subsequently developed the argument of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Laclau did

so drawing on psychoanalysis and rhetoric, and a whole school – the so-called ‘Essex School’ – grew up around his work. Mouffe staked out her own position within democratic theory with her theory of agonistic democracy.

More recently, Laclau and Mouffe became increasingly preoccupied with populism, and it is this work that is so pertinent to contemporary politics in Europe and Latin America. Mouffe’s interest in populism was, at first, focused on far-right movements such as those headed by the *Le Pens* in France and *Jörg Haider* in Austria; but she is now working on left-wing populism (Mouffe 2014; Errejón and Mouffe 2015). Laclau’s interest in populism was always linked to the Latin American experience, including his native Argentina (1977; 2005). There is a double hermeneutics at play here where populist movements self-consciously appropriate Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas; *Podemos* is only the best example of this.

I will take the publication of the four books under review here as an occasion to revisit Laclau’s and Mouffe’s works and consider their contemporary relevance. I first introduce the four volumes. I then explain how Laclau and Mouffe’s work has developed since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, highlighting three key developments, reflected in the books reviewed here, namely: the incorporation of psychoanalysis, rhetoric and passions. . Having done so, I turn to consider Laclau’s and Mouffe’s respective works on populism. I will use the case of *Podemos* to illustrate how the key elements from their theory of hegemony inform their argument that populist discourse is a useful strategy for the left today. In fact, it may be argued that left populism is a natural implication of the whole argument about the nature and role of hegemony.

The books

Chantal Mouffe’s latest book, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (2013), attempts to think politics politically, to paraphrase the subtitle. For Mouffe, that means to think politics

agonistically. Agonistics here refers to what Mouffe believes to be the inherent elements of conflict and passion in politics. She applies this argument to contemporary European and world politics and engages with other thinkers, among them Jürgen Habermas, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. The book does not add anything to Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy as such, but it does give a good sense of her current position as she engages with new issues and thinkers through the lens of agonistic democracy.

The Rhetorical Foundations of Society (2014) is a collection of articles and book chapters originally published by Ernesto Laclau between 1996 and 2012, prefaced by a brief introduction which places the texts in the context of Laclau's theoretical project. Only one of these texts has not been published previously in English. The volume is most of all testimony to what might be called 'the rhetorical turn in Laclau's work'. Rhetoric was already present in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but only through the influence of linguistics and only as a secondary theoretical layer. In his work since the late 1990s, Laclau engaged explicitly with rhetoric and argued that the insights of the theory of hegemony could be expressed through rhetorical categories such as metaphor and metonymy. In this work, Laclau tried to connect politics/hegemony, psychoanalysis and rhetoric by formalising the categories of each of these fields and exploring the homologies between them. The aim was to show that all aspects of society – language, the psyche and politics – could be understood through a general theory of society. In addition to several pieces engaging with rhetoric (chapters 3 and 4; see also Laclau 1998), *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* also contains several chapters engaging with specific thinkers: Slavoj Žižek (chapter 7), Alain Badiou (chapter 8) and Giorgio Agamben (chapter 9). Together the chapters in the volume give a good sense of the way in which Laclau's thinking evolved over the last two decades of his life (see also Devenney forthcoming 2016).

The other two books under review here are part of the series “Routledge Innovators in Political Theory”. Each book in the series consists of a selection of articles and chapters by a thinker plus an interview and an introduction by the editor. The volume on Ernesto Laclau (Howarth, 2015) contains a very useful introduction by David Howarth, and the volume on Chantal Mouffe (Martin, 2013) contains a very useful interview with Mouffe conducted by James Martin. The volumes cover Laclau’s and Mouffe’s works from the late 1970s up to the present.

The Laclau volume is divided into three parts: the first part covers the key concepts of the theory of hegemony (hegemony, discourse and signification); the second part covers Laclau’s writings on populism from the late 1970s until today; and the third part consists of critical engagements with other authors: Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Giorgio Agamben. There is some overlap between this volume and *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*.

The Mouffe volume is divided into three parts covering, first, the theory of hegemony; second, writings on radical democracy from the 1980s and 1990s; and, third, writings from the late 1990s onwards where Mouffe develops her theory of agonistic democracy and engages with contemporary politics and other authors from that perspective.

Both volumes contain comprehensive and representative selections of texts. And nothing essential is missing from the volumes, which will be useful for students looking for a first, but comprehensive, introduction to Laclau and Mouffe. I only have a minor criticism to raise, and that is that, although the volumes include the original year of publication of the texts, no further details are included of their original publication.

Hegemony, rhetoric, passions

Laclau and Mouffe's early work from the 1970s and 1980s must be seen against the intellectual debates on the Left back then (see Sim 2000 for a good introduction). They were trying to break with Marxist class essentialism, which reduced different identities and struggles (gender, race, etc.) to a single underlying logic of class. Having rejected this view, Laclau and Mouffe then faced the challenge of explaining the formation of collective identities in a different way, and they did so through a revised conception of hegemony. This opened the way to seeing other collective identities as potentially progressive – for instance, the people.

In the “Introduction” to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 4) characterised their project as post-Marxist. It was *post*-Marxist because it broke with central tenets of Marxism, above all class essentialism, and it was *post-Marxist* because it emerged out of an engagement with the Marxist tradition, specifically the way in which the concept of hegemony had been treated within that tradition. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was at once a deconstruction of Marxist thought and grafted on to that thought. The label “post-Marxism” stuck, even though it was mainly a label used by others to characterise their position. Later they appropriated the label themselves to signify “the process of re-appropriation of an intellectual tradition [Marxism], as well as the process of going beyond it’, as they write in the “Preface to the Second Edition” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: ix). Laclau comments on this in the interview included in the collection of his work (Howarth 2015: 258), when he stresses that the “post-” of “post-Marxism” should not be understood as if they were abandoning or leaving behind Marxism. Rather, they characterised their position as “post-Marxist” because they intervened in places where Marxism was marked by aporias – blind spots, or inherent tensions – that could not be resolved within Marxism. Doing so, they sought to subvert Marxist categories – for instance, hegemony – rather than simply discarding them.

By now, Laclau and Mouffe's deconstruction of the category of hegemony is well-known (see, among others, Martin 2013: chapters 1-3; Howarth 2015: chapter 3). While in Marxist tradition hegemony was treated as a marginal and regional concept, Laclau and Mouffe argue that every level of society and of social change can be understood through the logic of hegemony. Hegemony consists in the articulation of relationships between social elements (which they also refer to as signifiers), and these relationships are contingent – this is why they are open to hegemonic articulation. Hegemonic articulation is thus not an operation at the margins of a core of society and history consisting of class and the forces of production; rather, hegemony is the way in which both politics and economy are constituted. Hegemony is no longer essentially tied to class, which is just one identity among others, and the task for the Left is to articulate identities together in a way so as to create a collective subject of change. Not only communists and socialists can engage in hegemony understood as a form of leadership through the creation of consensus; Reagan and Thatcher did hegemony too, and were rather good at it, and, according to Laclau and Mouffe, the Left must learn from those right-wing movements so successful in the art of hegemony. Later, in her writings on right-wing populism, Mouffe argues that the Left can learn something more from this kind of discourse: they can learn how to use passions and how to articulate a collective identity (see, e.g., Martin 2013: chapter 11).

In his later works, Laclau (1990; 1996; 2005) continued this generalisation of the category of hegemony by drawing on linguistics, psychoanalysis and rhetoric. This was already foreshadowed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but it is much later when Laclau developed this more fully in search of what he called “a more formal general ontology” of the social (Laclau, 2014: 1; see also Howarth 2015: 261). He found a homology between the fields of linguistics, rhetoric, psychoanalysis and the theory of hegemony – “a basic homology at all levels of analysis of human reality” (in Howarth 2015: 261). While “each

field has its own specificity” (Ibid), it is nonetheless possible to use linguistics, rhetoric and psychoanalysis to think through the basic categories of the theory of hegemony, thereby establishing hegemony as a more general logic of any aspect of the social.

To illustrate the theoretical developments in Laclau’s and Mouffe’s works over the last two decades I will focus on their appropriation of (1) psychoanalysis and (2) rhetoric. This will then lead me to (3) the concept of antagonism and the centrality of passions for Mouffe’s theory of democracy.

(1) Laclau and, to a lesser degree, Mouffe use Lacanian psychoanalysis to explain the construction of collective identities, and the key category here is identification. Following Jacques Lacan’s reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis, Laclau and Mouffe argue that identity is always marked by a lack. No identity, individual or collective, is complete and, as a result, identification – rather than identity – becomes the central category. Collective identities are constituted through a process of identification, which is an ongoing and always incomplete process.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe borrow the notion of a *point de capiton* from Lacan; these nodal points are the signifiers around which collective identities coalesce. They are the points of identification that unite otherwise disparate groups, for instance the flag in a nationalist discourse. Later, in *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau (1996, chapter 3; also in Howarth, 2015, chapter 3) introduces the notion of an empty signifier. Although the image is a different one, the idea is the same: an empty signifier is a signifier tendentially emptied of content and therefore capable of functioning as a point of identification for disparate groups. One of Laclau’s examples is the way in which Perón functioned as an empty signifier and as a point of identification for a variety of sectors within Argentinian society, sectors with otherwise very different identities and interests.

The empty signifier is connected to the Lacanian *objet petit a*. Given that the subject is marked by a lack, it seeks to fill that lack, as it were, through identification with an object. To give an example: I may identify with the life presented to me by a charismatic leader and the happy life that he promises for me. A negative version of this is found in racist and xenophobic discourses: if only we can get rid of the Jews or the foreigners, there will be enough resources to care for our elderly, and so on... What is noteworthy here is that identification involves investment in an object: I invest my identity with the promises of the charismatic leader or the xenophobic discourse. The particular object of investment is contingent, and so, for instance, there is nothing necessary about the identification with right-wing populism by the white working class. What is more, identification creates what Lacan calls *jouissance*, that is, a kind of enjoyment that comes not from consuming an object, but from the (unfulfilled) desire for it. This is important for Laclau and Mouffe, because it means that, in order to understand political phenomena, one must analyse how and why individuals and groups become invested in particular discourses. And it means that politics always involves passions and something that cannot be reduced to reason.

This is particularly evident in a case such as *Podemos*. When he first emerged into the Spanish media, Pablo Iglesias channelled the indignation that was circulating in Spanish society. People identified with the indignation that he represented, and they identified *Podemos* with him to the extent that *Podemos* used his image on the ballot papers for the May 2014 elections to the EU Parliament. Here we have a clear example of the role of the populist leader in a populist discourse – a leader that at once represents an already existing indignation and makes that indignation present (“re-presents” it) in the media and within the political institutions. One might add that, while *Podemos* was defined almost exclusively by the figure of Pablo Iglesias in the beginning, this is no longer the case. The discourse of *Podemos* is held together not by a single empty signifier (Iglesias), but by several more or

less empty signifiers: slogans, the *Podemos* logo, and so on. Laclau usually referred to the empty signifier as a single signifier within any given discourse, but it may be the case that it is better to think of a discourse as articulated around several more or less empty signifiers, or nodal points, thus providing a more complex picture of these discourses.

(2) Laclau's and, to a lesser extent, Mouffe's incorporation of rhetoric into their theories of hegemony and democracy implies that no politics can be purely rational. Rhetoric is here conceived beyond the mere ornamentation added to a literal content. For Laclau and Mouffe, all language is rhetorical; for instance, all political discourse – not just that of populists such as *Podemos* – is rhetorical, even when rejecting the language of one's opponents as merely rhetorical.

In his later work, Laclau (2014, chapters 3-4; also Laclau, 1998) introduces a number of rhetorical categories in order to make further sense of the hegemonic operation of the creation of chains of equivalences. Metaphors and metonymies are introduced to make sense of the operations of substitution and contiguity in the chain of equivalence. Each moment in the chain of equivalence can substitute for the others because they are all equally opposed to a common enemy; and meaning travels by contiguity from one moment to another in the chain so that the meaning of one moment contaminates the others. One of the moments, or signifiers, in the chain of equivalence comes to take up the position of empty signifier, representing the chain as a whole. This inherently metaphorical operation of substitution can also be understood as a synecdoche where one part of the whole comes to represent the whole. Not only that, but the operation is a catechetical one because it is performative: the collective identity does not pre-exist the representation of it by the empty signifier, rather it is constituted through the metaphorical/synecdochal operation.

This has two important implications. First, it means that representation has an inherent performative aspect to it and it does not simply reflect an already existing reality; it is the

creation of a chain of equivalence and the representation of the collective identity through the empty signifier that together constitute that identity. The chain of equivalence and the empty signifier do not reflect some already existing identity (Errejón & Mouffe, 2015: 97-106; Howarth, 2015: 160-164; Laclau, 2005: chapter 6). Second, given that politics is about the construction of collective identities, politics has an inherently ‘rhetorical’ aspect. The operations of substitution and contiguity cannot be reduced to any logic or rationality, whether underlying infrastructures or the forceless force of the better argument.

The introduction of rhetoric and rhetorical categories is an attempt by Laclau to generalise the logic of hegemony and to construct a general ontology of the social (Laclau, 2014: 1). Doing so opens the possibility of connecting different disciplines, but the danger is that not enough attention is paid to what happens in the translation of categories from one discipline, and from one kind of discourse, to another. After all, if the introduction of rhetorical categories does not add anything new to the theory of hegemony, but is merely a different way of expressing the same insights, then one might reasonably ask why one should bother with it at all. If the introduction of rhetoric does indeed add something new, then attention needs to be paid to the ways in which these categories are displaced in the process, and the ways in which rhetoric displaces the categories of the theory of hegemony.

(3) It is mainly Laclau who incorporated psychoanalysis and rhetoric into the theory of hegemony, but they also work their way into Mouffe’s theory of agonistic democracy (see, e.g., Martin, 2013: 233). In this context, antagonisms and passions are the key terms. The notion of antagonism has undergone some changes in Laclau and Mouffe’s work over the years (Thomassen, 2005), but it remains central to how they conceive of hegemony, democracy and populism. Constructing a chain of equivalence, represented by an empty signifier, is possible through the construction of an antagonistic frontier between the chain of equivalence and some other identity, such as “the establishment” or “*la casta*”. The moments

of the chain of equivalence are equivalent insofar as they are all equally opposed to a common enemy through the antagonistic frontier. There is, thus, no collective identity without antagonism, and, since collective identities are an integral part of politics, there is no politics without antagonism.

In Mouffe (and Laclau)'s view, antagonism also entails a non-rationalisable aspect of politics. Antagonisms cannot be overcome. Mouffe connects antagonisms to passions (Martin, 2013: chapter 11). Antagonism is, then, another way of conceiving of the way in which passions cannot be eradicated from politics. If politics is about collective identities, and if collective identities work by way of identification, then passions are part and parcel of politics. For instance, the so-called 15M movement put indignation on the political map of Spain, and *Podemos* channelled this indignation into an antagonistic frontier between us and them, the people and the establishment. The indignation and the antagonism linked to it served to motivate people to mobilise, first in the squares and later at elections. It is difficult to sustain the indignation over time, however. The antagonism, then, must represent both a threat and a hope: it is by articulating an antagonistic frontier that hope is instilled in the people, so that they will be able to live emancipated or happy lives once the antagonistic enemy is overcome. Laclau and Mouffe (2003) do not make much of this, but this may explain a change in the discourse by *Podemos*, from the initial anger to their call for people to approach voting in the 2015 general election with a smile.

Antagonism is an essential part of Mouffe's agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2000; 2013: chapter 1; Martin, 2013: chapter 12), which is the direction in which she has developed the idea of a "radical and plural democracy" from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: chapter 4). It is important to stress that Mouffe does not celebrate antagonism. Although she draws on Carl Schmitt and his friend/enemy distinction (Martin, 2013, chapter 10; Mouffe, 1999), the argument is not that friend-enemy relations are positive,

or that we should have more of them. The argument is that antagonism is an inherent part of politics, and therefore democratic theory must take it into account. Agonism is an attempt to do so: “the task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions and practices that will allow for those [antagonistic] conflicts to take an agonistic form in which the opponents are not treated as enemies to be eradicated but as adversaries” (Mouffe in Martin, 2013: 231). While antagonistic friend/enemy relations are an ever present possibility, agonistic democracy seeks to transform relations into agonistic relations among adversaries who share a commitment to liberty and equality for all. In such an agonistic political space, anything approaching a constitutional consensus *à la* Habermas or Rawls is impossible. Any consensus will be a conflictual one, and conflict – or agonism – is an inherent part of democratic politics. At the level of domestic politics, agonism is opposed to the procedural understanding of democracy that one finds in deliberative democrats such as Habermas and liberals such as Rawls. At a transnational level, agonistic democracy is opposed to both cosmopolitanism and Hardt and Negri’s democracy of the multitude because both envisage a possible future in which antagonisms have evaporated (Mouffe, 2013: chapter 2; Martin, 2013: chapter 14). In James Martin’s words, Mouffe has sought “to think democratic politics from the perspective of conflict, and not against it” (2013: 6).

Mouffe thus seeks to position herself between, on the one hand, those who believe that some form of consensual politics devoid of antagonism is possible and, on the other hand, those who would reduce politics to antagonism in a Schmittian fashion. It is to her credit that Mouffe has succeeded in bringing mainstream – deliberative, liberal and communitarian – democratic theory into conversation with other strands of thought, above all Schmitt and poststructuralism. However, it has opened her to critique from both sides. For both those who defend deliberative democracy (Knops 2007) and those who take a more radical stance vis-à-vis liberal democracy (Žižek in Butler *et al.*, 2000), it is unclear that

Mouffe's position is that different from a deliberative or liberal one that allows for pluralism and conflict.

Populism

From the previous section, we have the key theoretical components of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism: antagonism, chain of equivalence, empty signifier and the role of passions. If social relations, practices and identities were not contingent, there would be no space for hegemony understood as the re-articulation of existing relations, practices and identities into new discourses. Here lies a break with the way in which the Marxist tradition viewed populism. For Marxism, populism was at once marginal and a dangerous distraction. In order to explain the existence of populist movements, Marxists relegated these movements to the margins of history and of capitalist society as a contemporary oddity that would soon be overcome. But populism was also seen as a danger because it promised what, according to the Marxist logic, was an impossible form of emancipation. If the nature of society is capitalist, and if the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie is at the heart of capitalism, then only a movement addressing this dimension will be effective in emancipating society. In contrast, a movement organised around the people as opposed to the establishment is necessarily going to be reactionary because it blurs the line between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Only the proletariat or their leaders can emancipate society. Populism may get rid of the current political, economic and cultural elites, but it does not address the key dimension of class exploitation. Laclau's initial intervention on populism was an intervention into those debates among Marxists (Laclau, 1977; Howarth, 2015: chapter 6), and his most recent critical exchange with Žižek can be seen as a continuation of these debates (see Laclau, 2014: chapter 7; Howarth, 2015: chapter 8).

Laclau's main work on populism – *On Populist Reason* from 2005 – is an attempt to provide a formal theory of populism drawing on the theory of hegemony. Populism is a discourse that articulates a chain of equivalence around an empty signifier and defined by an antagonistic frontier. In the theory of hegemony, any collective identity was conceived in this way, and the question is then what defines a discourse as being specifically populist. Laclau's answer is that, while any collective identity will be articulated in these three ways – equivalence, empty signifier and antagonism – populist identities are so to a higher degree. While the populist logic is a dimension of 'all' politics, in non-populist forms of politics there is little division of the social into two camps. Strictly speaking, a purely populist and a purely institutionalist discourse are endpoints on a continuum where we always find ourselves somewhere between those endpoints. Howarth puts it well in his introduction to the collection of Laclau's work: "To put it in quantitative terms, the greater the number of *demands* articulated into an equivalential chain across a greater number of *social spaces*, the greater the degree of populism" (2015: 15). Populism, then, is a matter of degree.

Laclau's formal definition of populism does not refer to any particular content of the populist discourse (for instance, an agrarian basis or a particular institutional structure). In Laclau's definition, each side of the antagonistic frontier can be occupied by any identity (e.g., "the underdog", "the people", "the little man"; "the system", "the establishment", "the elites"). What defines a discourse as populist is the degree of equivalence, emptiness and antagonism, and this definition can be used to account for different populisms, for instance right- and left-wing populisms. This formal definition of populism is also the background for some of the criticisms of Laclau. Given this definition of populism, it becomes one of degree, and here lurks the danger of degree-ism, where the concept of populism is unable to do the normal job of concepts, namely distinguishing different phenomena. What is more, it is not

clear how hegemony, politics and populism can be distinguished, as they are all characterised by the same logics of equivalence and difference.

Traditionally populism is seen as the anti-thesis of democracy, particularly liberal democracy. For Laclau, as is also the case for Mouffe, populism is seen as a particular discursive logic of the chain of equivalence, the empty signifier and antagonism. Because of this, populism is not automatically opposed to democracy. Indeed, the two can be articulated together, and populist discourses can have an important role in invigorating (liberal) democracies that have become stale and closed systems. This argument is possible for Laclau and Mouffe because they have a non-essentialist view of populism and democracy, and, for them, populism, democracy and liberalism are the results of contingent historical articulations.

This is important in order to understand the way Mouffe approaches the phenomenon of populism in Europe. In her writings on the right-wing populism of the likes of *Jörg Haider* and the *Le Pens*, Mouffe (2013: 140-141; Martin, 2013: chapter 11) has insisted on rejecting the substance of these populist movements while urging the left to learn from them. These right-wing populist movements have understood what the left and, above all, the centre-left did not understand in the 1990s and still seem unable to understand: that politics is about collective identities and, as a result, politics is about passions and antagonisms. The task for the left is to use passions and to articulate antagonisms and collective identities in a different way from the right-wing populists, but in a populist way nonetheless. One of Mouffe's examples is the contrast between the *Le Pens*' right-wing xenophobic and exclusive populism and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing and inclusive populism. Both discourses are articulated around 'the people', but the *Front National* discourse takes the people to be the nation understood in an ethnic or racial way, whereas the *Front de Gauche* discourse articulates the people as the underdog, including immigrant communities (Mouffe, 2013: 121-123).

Another way of looking at the relationships between populism and democracy and between right- and left- wing populism is to ask about the subject we are dealing with. When Marxists criticise Laclau's and Mouffe's arguments for a left populism, it is, among other things, because they believe that only the working class can be a progressive emancipatory subject. When Hardt and Negri and others criticise Laclau and Mouffe, it is because they reject the unity of the people in favour of the singularity of the multitude. And when liberals criticise populism, it is because they take democracy to be liberal democracy, where the people is made up of individual citizens protected by individual rights. Thus liberals see populism as external to, and as a threat to, democracy, because it places the people as a homogenous whole against the pluralism of individual citizens. It is important to remember, though, that Laclau and, especially, Mouffe insist on pluralism as an essential part of her conception of democracy (whether radical, agonistic or populist).

Left-wing populism today

It is appropriate to take left populism as the (provisional) political and theoretical conclusion of a review of Laclau's and Mouffe's works, and here theory and politics become inseparable. For many years, Laclau was involved in debates about populism in Latin America, and his work became hugely influential in new populist movements on the left, above all in Argentina. Mouffe's work has focused on left populism in France, Greece and, in particular, Spain (Mouffe, 2014; Errejón & Mouffe, 2015), and I shall mainly focus on her writings here given their relevance for Spain and Europe.

It is because contingency is a general trait of society and history that it is possible to conceive of populism as a relevant strategy for the left. Because identities are contingent, hegemony is not necessarily tied to class, and Laclau and Mouffe have thus opened the field to other articulations of a progressive collective subject of change. One such subject may be

“the people”. It is important to note from the beginning that, in itself, there is nothing progressive about populism or the category of the people. The populist road does not lead automatically to a more inclusive and just society; since it may lead in all sorts of directions, the task is to articulate it in a specifically leftist way: “What we urgently need today is the development of left-wing populist parties able to give an institutional expression to the democratic demands of the numerous groups aspiring to an alternative to the current hegemony of neo-liberalism”. (Mouffe in Martin, 2013: 236)

Mouffe’s recently published book with Íñigo Errejón is aptly entitled *Construir pueblo: Hegemonía y radicalización de la democracia (Constructing the people: Hegemony and the radicalisation of democracy)*. Aptly because Mouffe’s -as well as *Podemos*’- argument is precisely the need to construct the people as a collective subject represented in this case by *Podemos*; because the key concept is hegemony (this is how one should understand politics); and because the populist discourse is introduced in an attempt to radicalise existing liberal democracy by drawing a new antagonistic frontier between the people and the political and economic establishment (*la casta*). I would like to highlight three points in the context of Mouffe’s engagement with *Podemos*: (1) *Podemos* and the Left; (2) the relationship between horizontality and verticality; and (3) the question of institutions.

(1) *Podemos* continuously stresses that they are neither left nor right. They are not struggling from a position of the Left, but from the position of the people. Given the inspiration from Laclau and Mouffe, it is easy to see why they take this position: it is only by rearticulating the terms of politics in Spain in a “transversal” fashion that *Podemos* would be able to put together a new majority. The dislocatory effects of the economic and social crisis of the last years and of 15M meant that identities had become disarticulated from the old map of the political space. It is interesting to note that Mouffe disagrees precisely on this point: “in order to construct a collective will that will bring about a progressive politics, it is not

enough to construct a frontier between the people and the caste ... today, a project that seeks to radicalise democracy requires the development of a ‘populism of the left’” (Mouffe in Errejón & Mouffe, 2015: 111-112, my own translation).¹ Although hegemony and populism are not necessarily linked to the Left, she believes that they must be put to use in an explicitly leftist way.

The point is interesting for anyone interested in the situation on the Spanish Left and the division between *Podemos* and *Izquierda Unida* (IU). *Podemos* have eschewed any association with the Left in order to appeal to voters who would not identify themselves as on the left, while IU have retained a specifically leftist identity while trying to open up the party and present themselves in a different way to the wider public. *Podemos* is often likened to *Syriza* in Greece, but, their success aside, *Syriza* is closer to IU, both historically and in their insistence on their radical left credentials. The leftist character of populism is also important for the debate between, on the one hand, Laclau and Mouffe and, on the other hand, Žižek. The latter has questioned how left and how radical Laclau and Mouffe’s left populism and radical democracy really are (e.g., Žižek in Butler *et al.*, 2000: 321-326). These questions may remain, but it should be clear that, for Mouffe, populism is not a worthwhile strategy if it is not connected to leftist or progressive demands.

(2) The second point I would like to highlight concerns the relationship between horizontalist and vertical politics. There is a whole body of literature criticising hegemony on just this point: Richard Day’s (2005) (post-)anarchist critique, Jon Beasley-Murray’s (2010) critique of hegemony from the side of what he calls post-hegemony, Hardt & Negri’s (2009: 165-78; see also Negri & Sánchez Cedillo, 2015) critique of hegemony and populism from the perspective of the multitude, and several others (see Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis 2014).

¹ “para construir una voluntad colectiva que lleve a cabo una política progresista no basta con construir una frontera pueblo/casta ... hoy en día un proyecto de radicalización de la democracia requiere el desarrollo de un ‘populismo de izquierda’”

The critique comes in different shapes, but one way of summing it up is that hegemony involves a vertical relationship. This is so because of the role of leadership in hegemony, and because Laclau and Mouffe propose engaging with, rather than shunning, existing, vertical institutions.

The debate is highly relevant to 15M and *Podemos*. Errejón and Mouffe (2015: 41-44; see also Martin, 2013: chapter 13; Mouffe, 2013: chapters 4 and 6; Howarth, 2015: chapter 10) believe that only through some element of political leadership – here provided by a party that has turned out to be organised in a fairly hierarchical and centralist fashion – and only by engaging with existing political institutions – as opposed to an exodus from these institutions *à la* Hardt and Negri –, only then is progressive change possible. One might ask if they have got the balance between horizontality and verticality right, however. Mouffe writes that “my critique of “horizontalism” does not imply that these practices do not have a role to play in an agonistic democracy. I am convinced that the variety of extra-parliamentary struggles and the multiple forms of activism outside traditional institutions are valuable for enriching democracy” (2013: 126). Be that as it may, the danger is that the institutional politics of the party becomes detached from the social movements out of which it grew, and thereby loses important sources of energy. There are then both pragmatic and normative reasons for keeping vertical structures (party) rooted in horizontalist practices (protests, social movements), and the case of *Podemos* would seem to be a good example of this.

(3) This takes me to the final point: the institutional dimension of left populism. It would be wrong to blame Laclau and Mouffe for failing to provide an account of what would be just the sort of institutions befitting a left populist state. That is not what they are trying to do, but one can nonetheless find in Mouffe’s theory of agonistic democracy some ideas for how to think about this question of left populist institutions. Agonism is a way to think about the political and social space of democracy, including democratic institutions.

However, this raises a new question, namely the relationship between agonistic democracy and populism. If agonistic democracy counts on the ever-present possibility of antagonisms, but also aims to transform these antagonisms into adversarial agonistic relationships, how can agonism be squared with the populist antagonistic frontier between the people and the establishment? The problem here is that the antagonistic division of society into two camps seems to preclude the development of agonistic, adversarial relations. In the interview with James Martin (2013: 230-232), Mouffe provides the clearest statement of the relationship, or tension, between agonism and antagonism to date. The tension remains though, and the theoretical problem of the relationship between antagonism and agonism is also a political problem. Take the case of *Podemos*: here we have a populist movement that relies on a division of the social and political space between the people and the establishment. At the same time, *Podemos* engages in both friendly and agonistic relations with other groups within Spanish society. This is most clear in the case of PSOE which is treated as an enemy (because part of *la casta*), an agonistic adversary and a potential coalition partner. The fact that *Podemos* engages in all three forms of relations – enemy, adversary and friend – at one and the same time may help explain some of the strategic dilemmas they are facing; at the same time, this ambiguity may be an unavoidable feature of politics.

Conclusion

Laclau's and Mouffe's works on hegemony, populism and democracy are living bodies of work. From the beginning they have engaged with different traditions and thinkers, while also opened themselves to be engaged with. James Martin puts it well when he writes about Mouffe: "Conflict, then, is not simply a condition of democratic politics for her; it is an integral dimension of her understanding of society and a characteristic of her own style as a critic" (2013: 1). Several unresolved tensions remain in their work, among them the

relationships between hegemony, politics and populism; between horizontality and verticality; and between antagonism and agonism. I have tried to indicate with the example of *Podemos* how those are not just theoretical tensions, but also very political ones. The tensions may indeed be constitutive of politics, rather than tensions that could be eliminated through social and political engineering.

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