

**Populism and hegemony in Ernesto Laclau.  
Theory and strategy in the Italian Communist Party  
and the Ecuadorean Citizens' Revolution.**

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To the late 'paunchy magician' ('il mago pancione')

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## Abstract

This thesis explores critically two central notions in the work of Ernesto Laclau: populism and hegemony. From analytical and strategic points of view, some incongruities stand out. For example, the conceptual proximity between the two often hinders their respective explanatory and political purchase. Moreover, Laclau's arguments in support of left-wing populism appear not to examine in sufficient depth some important issues, such as the non-necessary but also potentially problematic relationship between populism and democracy and the question of the leader. In this thesis I examine Laclau's work and interpretations of his work before offering a fresh interpretation that will both retain and enhance the distinctiveness and relevance of populism and hegemony for contemporary debates in socialist thought, and emancipatory theory more generally.

My argument is grounded on both empirical and theoretical sources, relying on a combination of concept- and case-based interpretive methods. The empirical aspect of the thesis, which consists of an in-depth study of the trajectory of the Italian Communist Party and the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution, is used to problematise the conceptualisation of populism and hegemony. From a theoretical point of view, I first conduct a genealogical analysis of the emergence of the two notions in Laclau. I argue that this prompts a kind of 'return to Antonio Gramsci', involving the mobilisation of some insights that were overlooked or progressively neglected in the reading that Laclau made of the Italian thinker. The strategic upshot of this is that, while it is paramount to think in both populist and hegemonic terms, the former does not necessarily imply or reduce to the latter, and vice versa. Finally, I put forward the case for an agonistic, radical-democratic and ethical left-wing populism, drawing from the contributions of Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Derrida, William Connolly and Jacques Lacan.

## Introduction

The work of Ernesto Laclau enjoys a good health. It could not be otherwise in an époque in which the category of populism is all the rage in both academic and non-academic debates, thanks to the diffusion on a global scale of projects that make political polarisation their hallmark. The fame of Laclau - especially that achieved in the last few years - is indeed correlated to the rescuing of a term that is often railed against in political science and employed as a sort of derogatory term in political practice, but today more than ever is central in identifying the political watershed in which traditional actors are under the pressure of a variety of subjects that are, at least at face value, adverse to the *status quo*. After all, Laclau's contribution, no matter its increasingly abstract language, has always maintained a foothold in concrete historical conditions and engaged, if only from the vantage point of political theory, with real political scenarios.

It would be difficult to negate that we live in an age, especially in the Western world, that is ripe for populism. The traumatic events that shatter previous certainties and overturn old social regularities create the perfect conditions for the weakening of traditional political forces and the emergence of outsiders that take issue with the current system and draw anew the network of political allegiances. Several factors account for this populist moment. The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 has ignited and accelerated many developments that have made the lives of millions more insecure. Despite economic growth figures that have now by and large returned to positive territory, the long wave of the crisis has left in disarray many national economies that show signs of difficulty in recuperating the old standards. Heightened international competition, commercial wars, debt-ridden national accounts and the rise of new economic giants in the global scenario, rank high among the factors accounting for such

troubles. However, the long-term rise of economic inequalities both in wealth and income - as well demonstrated by the recent work of the economist Thomas Piketty - furnish a political explanation for the crumbling of economic certainties among the great majority of the population (Piketty, 2014). In Europe, the implementation of severe austerity cuts, the liberalisation of capital movements with the ensuing processes of de-industrialisation and financial speculation, the precarisation of the work-force and the rolling back of the welfare state have, among other things, strongly impacted upon the productive activities and living standards of much of the European peoples, especially in the south of the continent. In more general terms, the ordoliberal model and debt culture propelled by Germany have clashed with the need of many countries to revitalise their aggregate demands. The July 2015 Greek government-debt crisis has dramatically shown the merciless approach of the economic and political establishment against a moderately Keynesian course that simply conditioned debt repayment to the reactivation of the economy.

However, it is not only the economy to be affecting the broad perception that something is no longer working. The current social malaise is certainly connected but cannot be entirely conflated with the economic question. The categories of post-politics and post-democracy have thus made their appearance in order to make sense of the growing distance of the political establishment from social demands and the lack of responsiveness of the institutions both at national and supranational level (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2005). It is impossible not to note that the hiatus between governors and governed is widening rapidly and that meaningful ideologies are progressively disappearing from the political arena. The economic and social policies offered by different traditional political forces are now almost indistinguishable: behind the old political labels we no longer find different *weltanschauung*, different societal projects, but a brisk convergence towards the political centre. Moreover, democratic

deliberation seems to be ever more manipulated by economic actors, with the progressive replacement of the figure of the citizen - one endowed with rights and conceptualised as an active participant of the political, social and economic life of a nation - with that of the consumer - a mere passive recipient of market forces with little impact or interest in political processes. At the same time, despite liberal-democratic institutions maintaining a facade of regular functioning, the capacity of the elites to influence policy-making has considerably increased. This is ever truer for the European institutions whose decisions are for the most part beyond any type of popular accountability. It is not surprising then that as a result, 'citizens experience the governmental norms that rule contemporary society as externally binding but not internally compelling' (Critchley, 2007: 7). Other types of dislocatory experiences have also hit Western populations. Among these, it is worth mentioning the Islamic terrorist attacks and the migrant crisis that have affected Europe over the last few years. These phenomena have attracted much attention and sparked bitter polemics in the old continent, fuelling feelings of insecurity and heightening social tensions.

The answer to all these social, political and economic transformations has been, as we have seen, populism. However, a great deal of the populist expressions that have so far made their emergence are oriented to the right. As well captured by Laclau, 'when people are confronted with radical *anomie*, the need for *some kind* of order becomes more important than the actual ontic order that brings it about' (OPR: 88). It is to be admitted that it has mostly been reactionary forces that have furnished the horizon of a potential new order in replacement of the old one, with the left lagging much behind. The election of Donald Trump in the United States, the rise of Marine Le Pen's *Front National* in France and of Matteo Salvini's League in Italy, the undisputed rule of Viktor Orban in Hungary along with the other right-populists of the Visegrád group in Central Europe and the recent success of the Austrian People's Party,

testify that much of the contemporary malcontent has taken the form of a reactionary and often xenophobic contestation to the *status quo*. The Brexit vote in the United Kingdom could also be read through a similar lens.

Yet, in the theory of Laclau, populism is not necessarily a right-wing phenomenon or a 'degraded form of democracy' (Müller, 2016: 6), as much of the conventional narrative has it. More importantly, populism takes up a double status that it is vital to clarify from the very outset: following the transformation that Antonio Gramsci operated with the notion of hegemony, populism is at the same time an analytical instrument which puts at our disposal a privileged interpretive prism to understand certain political phenomena, if not politics as such, as well as a strategic proposal for the political part in which Laclau identified himself. In other words, Laclau saw populism as a logic towards which the left had to tend to. However, if up to recently left-wing populism had been a 'natural' occurrence which Laclau welcomed and which his privileged theoretical framework was able to comprehend in a systematic manner, things soon started to evolve. In the so called Latin American 'pink tide' of progressive populist governments, where national-popular movements conquered power by putting together unmet demands and adopting a polarising rhetoric, Laclau's theory played an explicative and, to an extent, celebratory role. Elsewhere though, Laclau's books later turned into some sort of strategic manuals. As one of Laclau's disciples aptly notes: 'in South America, Laclau's theory was a tool to explain what was happening. In Europe too, although in a different way: it seemed to contribute to the very constitution of the political movements that can make it to the state' (Schulhauser, 2016).

In this sense, the explicit reference of the Spanish political force *Podemos* to the work of the Argentinian political theorist in the forging of its own political discourse (Iglesias, 2015;



Errejón and Mouffe, 2016) is key to highlighting the strategic nature of Laclau's thought and contributes to projecting his figure beyond the graduate classrooms to which it had hitherto largely been confined. The upsurge of *Podemos* has also occurred in parallel with the emergence of other relatively successful European left-wing experiences where Laclau's footprint or interpretation seems to have some bearing: Alexis Tsipras' Syriza in Greece (at least until the 'political normalisation' that took place following the already mentioned 2015 crisis) (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Howarth, 2015), Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* (Marlière, 2017; Besse Desmoulières, 2017) and even the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn (Mouffe, 2018). The campaign launched by Bernie Sanders for the 2016 Democratic nomination in the United States can also be legitimately included in this group (Fraser, 2017; Fraser 2017b).

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for left-wing populism is not unanimous. Much of the left remains sceptical towards the populist route. For some, the left should not 'take the masks of others to try to break through with the oxymoron of a red populism' (Prospero, 2018); according to others, populism is a form of 'passive revolution' as described by Gramsci, 'a process controlled from above; a process where the modification of the domination system does not translate into a change in the composition of the dominant block' (Modonesi, 2017: 135). The bulk of the left may well have surpassed some of the limits envisaged by Laclau and Mouffe in the 1980s, such as the ontological privilege attributed to the traditional working class and the fixation with the Revolution as the 'founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another' (HSS: 2), but populism remains something perceived as too distant from its own political culture; at most, as a recent article published by the Marxist editorial revelation of the last few years, *The Jacobin*, reads, 'it might be possible to embrace some of Mouffe and Laclau's philosophical insights — the conflictual nature of democracy, the role of

hegemonic formations in politics — without embracing populism and all its oversights' (Hamburger, 2018).

Yet, where the left has preferred to stay away from populism, it seems to be hopelessly grappling with its own identity and remains far from showing any political efficacy. *Prima facie*, what seems to be making a difference is the willingness of the left populist actors to articulate demands, symbols and grievances of current purchase rather than asking for adhesion to a defunct identity. In Italy, possibly the most paradigmatic example in this sense, the foregrounding of the leftist pride and all its correlated liturgies at the expense of any connection with the contemporary common sense has taken its toll. The recent collapse of the traditional leftist forces at the 2018 general elections is only the final manifestation of the idea that collective identities cannot be simply taken for granted but are constantly recreated by reference to the contingent 'material' that society offers. Laclau had already understood this and put it straightforwardly in a 1988 interview published in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (NR):

The left-right distinction [...] was a clear political frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century and was, in one way or another, reconstituted on new grounds throughout the whole of the following century. But [...] its political usefulness has done nothing but decline since the period of anti-fascist struggle and Cold War. The reason for this decline is clear. The usefulness of political categories can only be maintained if they manage to constitute polar political imaginaries, and that depends on whether they are seen as the natural surface on which *every* new social and political demand can be inscribed. Their erosion begins when this agglutinative capacity declines and when a range of inscription surfaces emerge that contradict each other (NR: 227).

Less well-known among the public at large however are Laclau's take on hegemony and, more generally, the overall theoretical edifice that he has given birth to. As a result, while populism is surely the Laclauian term that exerts more attraction in contemporary debates and can be said, in the latest version Laclau offers, to be the synthesis - and to some extent the

formalisation - of his intellectual path, this emphasis may represent a limit insofar as it represents a dangerous screen that obliterates the rest of the story. Before becoming 'the theorist of left-wing populism' (Brading, 2014; Islam, 2015), Laclau has created a complex theoretical system - known as the 'Essex School of discourse theory', through which he has advanced a de-essentialisation of socialist thought and produced a theory of signification, taking his cues, while concomitantly taking a distance, from the Gramscian intuitions on the concept of hegemony. It is not by chance that others prefer to remember Laclau as the 'theorist of hegemony' (Errejón, 2014; Kioupkiolis, 2014: 254). It is precisely the radicalisation of this category that permits him to overcome the Pillars of Hercules of Marxism or, in his own words, to hold on to one of the best fragments amid its deflagration (NR: 201). Differently from other authors who reject being straight-forwardly labelled then, Laclau proudly proclaims himself as post-Marxist, and it is the novel and original re-elaboration of populism and hegemony at the forefront of his political ontology - and, as we shall see, political strategy - that is offered in the place of Marxist social ontology.

My first, if only transient contacts with Laclau's work happened as I was a BA student at SOAS in London and then a MPhil candidate in Latin American Studies at the University of Oxford. Little did I understand at first, through the complex jargon in which his concepts were phrased. Yet the sensation was that in Laclau the two different 'political worlds' in which I had been active merged in one. In my teenage years spent in Italy, I had been involved in politics as a militant of one of the parties that emerged following the deflagration of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The late 1990s and early 2000s were a period in which the old theoretical debates were still ongoing and talk of hegemony remained pervasive. It was in that environment that I received my first political christening: the figure of Gramsci fared high in the discussions and the memories of the PCI, as exerting a diffuse 'cultural hegemony' in the

country, were still extremely vivid. Political struggle was first and foremost a pedagogical struggle, a way to educate the citizenry, a battle for social justice that had to be fought at all levels. However, by the time I was politically active what was missing was the stunning electoral results of the past, the big and well-respected community that the party had managed to construe, the well-attended summer parties that the PCI previously organised. What I was witnessing was the fading of a tradition that had intersected so deeply with Italian recent history and that had strongly impacted upon national politics; the tradition of the biggest communist party of the West. Over the following years, my brief returns to Italy confirmed that that world had no longer the strength to become once again what it used to be. Melancholy of the past splendour had taken the place of politics proper.

If defeat became the word that characterised the Italian left in the years of my upbringing, victory was the one that distinguished the other 'political world' that, thanks to the vicissitudes of life, I encountered later: South America. In Ecuador, where I spent a number of years and got involved with the government of the Citizens' Revolution led by Rafael Correa, the picture I found myself immersed in was completely different. Along with Hugo Chávez' Venezuela, Evo Morales' Bolivia, Nestor and Cristina Kirchner's Argentina, Ecuador was part of a series of progressively-minded and national-popular governments that put an end to neoliberal policies and gave life to a heterodox course. Instead of hegemony, it was populism which here occupied the centrality of the discussions. More specifically, it was the puzzling situation of a left that managed to win and arouse the passion of the masses as opposed to a gloomy, unconvincing and ever more marginal left in Europe that induced me to go back to Laclau and look for answers there. My formal entry to Laclau's theory has thus been primarily political and dictated by the necessity to account for such differences and find ways to

integrate the hegemony approach that I had, if only in its declining stage, learnt about in Italy, with the populist one which I lived through in Ecuador.

As time went by, the Latin American populist governments experienced serious difficulties and showed severe limitations. Their rule not only presented some problematic aspects, insofar as the democratic question is concerned, but displayed a scarce capacity to institutionalise their electoral successes and irradiate a different political culture in their countries at large. In Ecuador, the Citizens' Revolution showed a blatant reluctance to take its initially bold progressive moves much further. Even more importantly, the victory of Correa's designated successor in 2016 was followed by the immediate distancing of the latter from the former, thus evidencing a stark discontinuity that put under discussion the whole rule of Correa. But, as hinted, such problems do not pertain only to Ecuador. In this sense, the widespread difficulty displayed by left populisms to engender sustainable projects and to think beyond the electoral dimension begs a detailed study. This study is all the more necessary if one considers that in Laclau we find a conceptual proximity between the two notions that runs the risk of limiting the analysis of concrete situations and hampering the elaboration of sounder emancipatory strategies. While both have to do with the construction and stabilisation of meaning, is it not the case that populism and hegemony designate two entirely different things? Is it not the case that emancipation should be thought both populistically and hegemonically, maintaining them as two different and yet indispensable horizons in order to guide our action? Is it not the case that left populism has in certain instances given rise to a lessening of democratic deliberation and fallen victim to the cult of the personality of the leader? Possibly, the work of Laclau on this last question has been too lenient.

With this in mind, this work sets itself the task to analyse the ways in which populism and hegemony are thought in Laclau throughout his corpus and pinpoint some of the limitations that emerge through both a theoretical and empirical reading. As for the empirical dimension, the cases used are the trajectory of the PCI from 1944 to 1984 and the Citizens' Revolution under Correa and its aftermath from 2006 to 2018. The work is thusly divided: in chapter 1, I will provide a literature review of some of the most renown interpretations of populism and hegemony, along with a presentation of the approach and methodologies used for the analysis in the rest of the work. Subsequently, I will also include a preliminary introduction to the empirical cases. Chapter 2 will feature a genealogical reading of how the notions of populism and hegemony have evolved in Laclau's work. In chapters 3 and 4, I will explore the PCI and Citizens' Revolution cases respectively. Chapter 5 will attempt to provide an answer to all the theoretical puzzles raised in chapter 2, reinforced by the empirical cases. By way of a return to the work of Antonio Gramsci, I will furnish a re-elaboration of the notions of populism and hegemony whilst maintaining intact the philosophical thrust of Laclau's theoretical edifice. And finally, through the foregrounding of the contribution of Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Derrida, William Connolly and Jacques Lacan, I will argue for the adoption of an agonistic, radical-democratic and ethical left-wing populism. My conclusion will then summarise the most significant theses put forward in this work.

## **Chapter 1: Literature review, research methods and approach**

This chapter lays out the contours of the research more clearly. Specifically, it presents the strands of literature concerned with the notions at stake here - namely populism and hegemony -, sets out the research strategy and methods that will be employed, and introduces the basic historical facts concerning the PCI and the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution. The following pages are then aimed at clarifying for the reader the terrain of intervention of this work, situating it among the different - and often incommunicado - strands of literature that it takes issue with. Finally, the chapter lays the cards on the table insofar as the intellectual and methodological approaches are concerned - approaches that are not intended here as a straightjacket, but as a starting point that enables the opening up of new theoretical horizons.

The chapter is divided in two broad parts, organised in turn into different sections. The first part consists in two sections, each of which consisting of a survey of what different authors have said on the questions of populism and hegemony respectively, with a critical evaluation of such takes. As for populism, some space is dedicated to the thorny question of its relationship with democracy. These conceptual literature reviews are not to be considered as comprehensive, but rather as an attempt to present a broad overview of how the two notions have been defined, treated and operationalised in different accounts, including in the work of Laclau, which will be the focus of a more in-depth analysis - both theoretical and empirical - in the following chapters.

The second part is concerned with the research strategy. Here, the first section 'Populism and hegemony combined' specifies the reasons why populism and hegemony ought to be

analysed in tandem. The second section 'Foucault and Skinner to unravel the theoretical tangle' introduces the theoretical methodological orientation derived from the contribution of Michel Foucault and Quentin Skinner, which will be used in order to re- and de-construct the development of the notions of populism and hegemony in Laclau's corpus. Thirdly, in 'The case for a case-based strategy: retrodution at play', it is advanced how the case studies are to be used in the general economy of this work. In applying the notion of retrodution to the social sciences, it is claimed that empirical investigations should be understood as integral to the development of an ontology, rather than as findings meant to fit a pre-established ontology. Borrowing from the repertoire of the Essex school of Discourse Theory, the fourth section 'A note on empirical methods and corpus' introduces how exactly the empirical work will be conducted, while throwing light in parallel on the questions of normativity and ethics in relation to the empirical research. The fifth section 'Why these cases' establishes the reasons for picking precisely the cases of the PCI and the Citizen's Revolution, explains how they relate to the notion of populism and hegemony and furnishes a few contextualising elements by reference to some relevant interpretative works.

### **A conceptual literature review: populism**

The term populism has become increasingly widespread as commentators and intellectuals alike have either employed it in the attempt to make sense of specific political phenomena or engaged in discussions over its nature. To the layman however, the term remains elusive and porous as different practitioners attribute different features and meanings to it, with the tendency among journalists and politicians to employ it as a derogatory word to discredit certain political forces or leaders. Despite certain definitional agreements having been



reached, contention among populism scholars has persisted and intensified in the relevant literature with no hint as to the possibility of this coming to an end in the near future. Of course, such controversies do not limit themselves to what populism is about, but crucially involve theoretical presuppositions (often sidelined, if not utterly overlooked by some) and methodological repercussions for the conduct of empirical research.

Far from conducting an in-depth survey on the subject, this brief section intends to introduce the main contemporary positions in the literature. Four main strands that define populism as ideology, strategy, style and political logic can be devised, with the latter two sharing particularly strong affinities to the point of being sometimes conflated into the same category, often under the name of discourse (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013: 17). As it will be made clearer below, it is also important to note that the first three strands are not uniform 'schools' of thought on populism but constitute categories in which only loosely correlated accounts are clustered together.

The ideological approach centres around the work of Cas Mudde, who defines populism as a:

thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde, 2004: 543).

This move permits Mudde to break away from many past accounts that attributed fixed normative features or particular policies to populism, and to conceptualise it as a phenomenon that can occur across the political spectrum, across continents and across time. In this sense, populism is seen as necessarily parasitic upon some more structured ideology, thus freeing it from any static connotation - often the upshot of a regional bias in a specific period - and making comparisons between different contexts possible (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 383). Nevertheless, one cannot but remain unconvinced by the underlying theoretical

operation that accompanies Mudde's definition. The notion of ideology that Mudde employs is explicitly borrowed from the morphological approach set out by Michael Freeden, whereby ideology is treated as a bundle of loosely interrelated ideas. More specifically:

A thin ideology is one that, like mainstream ideologies, has an identifiable morphology but, unlike mainstream ideologies, a restricted one. It severs itself from wider ideational contexts by deliberately removing or replacing many concepts we would expect an ideology to include. It does not embrace the full range of questions that the macro-ideologies do, and is limited in its ambitions and scope (Freeden, 2003: 98).

But, as also noted by Moffitt and Tormey, populism cannot fall under this rubric as it lacks any sort of 'ideational density' of its own, unlike other thin ideologies such as feminism and ecologism, which are still endowed with a distinguishable conceptual core (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 383). Populism blatantly lacks even the smallest normative coordinate and any attempt to find one is typically overwhelmed, as Laclau would put it, by an avalanche of exceptions (OPR: 117). This way of conceptualising populism has repercussions not only in terms of a deficient definition, but extends, as hinted above, to theory and method. Insofar as the former is concerned, if populism is treated as an ideology, it follows that a political subject is or is not populist, giving way to a rigid dichotomy that does not admit any other in-between possibility. Populism is thus treated as a property inherent to a particular subject, thereby making it difficult to account for potential variation. The subject is then endowed or not with a populist essence, making diachronic changes and synchronic nuances difficult to grasp. The impact upon the way to go about empirical research is no less equivocal: defining populism in ideational terms means focusing primarily on programmatic statements and party literature (Gidron and Bonikoski, 2014: 7), be it through traditional qualitative content analysis (Mudde, 2007; Arter, 2011) or, more recently, through computational text analysis (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011). Such a restriction of the object of inquiry however, leaves out much of the

rich phenomenology that is intuitively associated with populism and seems to be too narrow to say anything significant about the populist character of a political subject. Official party literature is often too arid and sometimes even at odds with other meaningful aspects of a political practice. This single-minded focus thus seems to lead astray both an understanding of populism itself and an ability to make comparisons across different cases.

Another approach tries to come up with a minimal definition, so as to encompass populist phenomena occurring in different regions and permit comparison, is that which defines populism as a strategy. It is Kurt Weyland's work on Latin American politics which has set the pace here. In distancing himself from radial and cumulative conceptualisations of populism that take into consideration many factors and provide 'gradations' of populism, for the sake of clarity he prefers to concentrate on a single domain, that of politics (Weyland, 2001: 10-11). In particular:

populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. This direct, quasi-personal relationship bypasses established intermediary organizations or deinstitutionalizes and subordinates them to the leader's personal will (Weyland, 2001: 14).

The chief characteristic then is only one aspect pertaining to the political domain, i.e. the relationship existing between a leader and their constituents, thereby conflating the meaning of populism to that of leaderism, caesarism and the elimination of the intermediate social bodies. It should be noted that the utility of a concept in casting light upon a political phenomenon is strongly reduced when other, older terms already occupy the same notional territory. The reluctance to allow for a non-binary conception of populism is also clear here: in the search for clarity, excessive simplification is just around the corner. As Roberts notes, '[t]he organization of populist constituencies can be durable or fleeting, formal or informal,

with variation both across cases and over time within the same case' (Roberts, 2006: 130). While subscribing to the thesis that populism should be located within the realm of strategy and organisation, to overcome such difficulties Roberts suggests disaggregating the concept into different organisational manifestations (Roberts, 2006: 128). By devising two major areas of inquiry - civil society and party system's organisation -, he introduces a taxonomy of populism with four distinct subtypes: organic, labour, partisan and electoral. As succinctly summarised by Gidron and Bonikowski:

High partisan and civil society organization leads to organic populism; high partisan organization and low civil society organizations gives rise to partisan populism; high civil society organization and weak partisan structures is associated with labor populism; and low levels of organization in both dimensions is linked with electoral populism (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2014: 12).

While this seems to be a more promising path that avoids treating populism as a monolith by way of differentiating a number of varieties, the definition is still somewhat wanting. In an assessment of the 2000s populist wave in Latin America, populism is defined as 'the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge elite groups on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo, or 'the people.'" (Roberts, 2010: 5). The admittedly mass character of mobilisation however does not quite accord with the insistence on the top-down approach. What is utterly missed here is the relational character between a populist actor and its followers. If we admit that all politics is always already an exercise of representation and that the will of the people is not just there ready to be implemented, then all political actors are to an extent characterised by a top-down approach. As Laclau clarifies in developing a Freudian argument:

whenever the need for a strong leader meets the individual only halfway, the leader will be accepted only if he presents, in a particularly marked fashion, features that he shares with those he is supposed to lead. In other words: the led are, to a considerable extent, in *pari materia* with the leader — that is to say, the latter becomes *primus inter pares* (OPR: 59).

Three more elements need to be considered. Firstly, an excessive focus on the strong leader betrays the Latin etymology of the word *populi*, which means people. Alan Knight is certainly right here in reminding us that 'the etymology is sufficiently clear, recent and compelling for us to take it seriously' (Knight, 1998: 226). In fact, populism needs not to be necessarily accompanied by the presence of a strong leader, but can accommodate different organisational features, as Roberts himself admits in his text. Whether the leader is a strong one, or there exist more leaders, or the populist subject remains substantially leaderless is entirely contingent.<sup>1</sup> Despite being a recurrent feature of the Latin American populist experiences, the prominence of strong leaders may be better explained by reference to other features relating to the local political culture, such as *caudillismo*, on which more will be said in the Ecuadorian case study. Secondly, the people is not necessarily ill-defined in a populist discourse, but can on the contrary be extremely well-defined by reference to specific social sectors that are appealed in the call against a political adversary. While the people is in it and of itself vague, and can in theory apply to anybody, such a confusion is dispelled in singular populist instantiations where the contours between those who are deemed to be part of the people and those who are not are particularly stark. As we shall see in the empirical cases, the definition of who is in and who is out acquires a certain precision when a particular populist discourse is deployed. Thirdly and most importantly, resorting to a populist taxonomy is as problematic as an exclusively binary classification from the point of view adopted here. The attempt to treat political and social phenomena by forcefully inscribing them into rigid categories can at best be a descriptive exercise that approximates some of their coordinates, but hardly explains them. This formalism of box-like categories, let alone its single-minded

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Knight bluntly points out that: '[a]ll political movements of any scale or duration have involved some kind of functional network, if not hierarchy, which necessarily transcends a simple leader/mass dichotomy' (Knight, 1998: 228).

focus on political organisation that leaves out many other spheres that concur to create the populist phenomenology, runs the risk of missing the nuances of the concrete cases and of failing to account for their fluidity.

Another strand is that which proposes to identify populism with style, or alternatively, with rhetoric or discursive frames (for the latter see Aslanidis, 2015). Advocates of such a definition are Alan Knight (1998), Pierre-André Taguieff (1995), Michael Kazin (1998), Margaret Canovan (1981; 1999) and Carlos de la Torre (2000). As put by de la Torre:

I see populism as a style of political mobilization based on strong rhetorical appeals to the people and crowd action on behalf of a leader. [...] It is a rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between el pueblo [the people] and the oligarchy. Populist discourse transmutes politics into a struggle for moral values without accepting compromise or dialogue with the opponent. Populist politics is based on crowd action (de la Torre, 2000: 4).

The style to which adherents of this strand refer to has to do with the simplicity and directness of the appeals of the populists, as well as the policy solutions that are offered (Canovan, 1999: 5). What is particularly remarkable about this approach is the introduction of degreeism, that is the recognition that political subjects can display different levels of populism. As aptly put by Canovan: '[s]ince the advent of mass political mobilisation, virtually any modern regime, however repressive, needs to have some populist elements, even if these do not go beyond rhetoric' (Canovan, 1981: 148). This has particularly positive theoretical and methodological repercussions: 'considering populism as a discursive style lends itself to its operationalisation as a gradational property of specific instances of political expression rather than an essential attribute of political parties or political leaders' (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2014: 8). Other issues, however, remain. One of them is the persistence of the focus on the leader, still treated as a necessary ingredient of populism. Another is the association of populism with mobilisation, which seems to be unwarranted. Indeed, it is often the case that

'[t]he people emerge as the source of legitimacy for the populist movement without the necessity of political action' (Westlind 1996: 104). Although frequent, these attributes are not strictly inherent to populism and their presence impedes reaching a minimal definition, thus exposing it to a number of exceptions. Francisco Panizza does well in highlighting that populism can contingently articulate with other logics, thereby making it necessary to evaluate such features on a case-by-case basis (Panizza, 2008: 92). The attempt to minimise the definition of populism to an us-them differentiation is thus undermined by the attachment of likely but not strictly necessary features of populism. Another example in this sense is the rigorous correspondence drawn between the 'them' and the elites. Even though it is arguable that the elites do represent the adversary of the people in the majority of populist discourses, some of them, typically the exclusionary types of populism, identify the 'them' as some sort of external intruder, typically immigrants (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 160).

While the majority of scholars pertaining to this approach maintain a rather classic focus on rhetorical and communicative features, others have introduced more innovative tools. Moffitt and Tormey, for example, speak of populism in terms of political style by bringing in interesting insights on the performative and relational elements inherent to populism. For them, 'populism is a style that is performed and enacted' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 388), with the performance of the populists being one that does not simply 'capture' an 'already existing people', but rather one with perlocutionary effects that 'produce what they [the populists] claim to represent by covering up the aesthetic gap and claiming to have direct, immediate contact with 'the people'' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 389). In this way, the authors stress the structuring character of representation. This aspect is further reinforced through their attention to the relational features of populism, whereby claim-making is analysed in rapport with the receivers' reaction of such claims (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 388). As a

result of this, they import conceptual tools from dramaturgical approaches to politics, which consistently enrich the methodology employed to make sense of populism (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 389-390). The refinements do not end here but extend to the recognition that populists are not always against the elites, as the target may sometimes be other groups in society (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391). Other novelties are of more dubious validity instead. Their emphasis on the stylised character of contemporary politics goes along with the recognition of the diminished legitimacy of ideological and class politics, and the declining reputation of mainstream political parties (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 387-388). Such remarks lead the authors to affirm that 'the political style approach is not rooted in a set ahistorical ontological framework as such, but instead is sensitive to the contours of the contemporary political landscape' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 390). In principle, this move rules out the possibility of applying the category of populism to political subjects of the past: the Russian Narodniks, the People's Party in the United States and Argentinean Peronism - examples of which there is a broad consensus across the various approaches that can be defined as populist - all of a sudden find themselves outside the applicability of this category.

But how exactly do we draw a line between periods in which populism can be deployed and periods in which it cannot be deployed as a valid instrument of analysis? What is the amount of 'stylisation' that permits us to employ the notion of populism? While the march of time certainly imposes an enlargement of the analytical tools to make sense of concrete situations, some categories are more fundamental than others as they pertain to the dimension of the political, that is the underlying premises inherent to social life and more specifically to the 'ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy groupings, regardless of the aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics and economics' (Schmitt, 2007: 35). Thus, the position of Moffitt and Torney - and that of Canovan whereby populism is associated with



mass mobilisation, for that matter - unwarrantedly discards the intuition that populism could tell us not only something about the actual confrontations between political subjects, but, regardless of space and time, about the ontological characteristics of the political. Methodologically, rejecting their restriction of populism to contemporaneity also means maintaining the possibility - explored in this work - of comparing and contrasting, with due precautions, political subjects that have made their appearance in very different epochs.

The fourth strand treats populism as a political logic and refers exclusively to the approach of Ernesto Laclau. Although the notion of populism as intended by Laclau is treated at greater length in the next chapter, a few general remarks will be introduced here. It is worth stressing once more that the boundaries between populism as style and populism as a political logic are taken by some to be quite loose, to the point that the two approaches are at times taken as one under the rubric of style, or that of discourse (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2014: 10, 17). Most especially, this is the case when discourse is treated in the narrow sense of linguistic discourse. In the account provided by Ernesto Laclau however, the meaning of discourse is much wider. To begin with, for Laclau discourse is 'a meaningful totality which transcends the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic' (Laclau, 1993: 545). As put elsewhere, '[t]he notion of discourse could, if you prefer, be replaced by that of practice' (Laclau, 1998: 9). This entails that, methodologically, all manifestations of a political actor, be them linguistic or not, are deemed relevant and worth to be analysed when characterising the actor itself. In terms of definition then,

we only have populism if there is a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject, and the precondition of the emergence of such a subject is [...] the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps. But the logic of that division is dictated [...] by the creation of an equivalential chain between a series of social demands in which the equivalential moment prevails over the differential nature of the demands. Finally, the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a

purely fortuitous coincidence, but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called empty signifier (Laclau, 2005b: 43-44).

Although some of the intricacies inherent to such a complex definition will be dispelled only in the next chapter, let us unpack some of the main coordinates. Along with the other approaches, populism is about the advancement of an us-them differentiation. Accordingly, such a differentiation is obtained by articulating, i.e. linking together, a number of unsatisfied social demands on the basis of their common rejection of an adversary. In other words, this unification is made possible by the power holders or some other adversary systematically frustrating such demands. Of all these elements, one of them, which Laclau calls the empty signifier, plays a structuring role that confers homogeneity to the new camp, that is to the new people that is thereby formed by the coalescing of these demands. More fundamentally, Laclau sees populism as a political logic by picturing it as a form of institution of the social, counterposed by its opposite, that is institutionalism (OPR: 117). Drawing from rhetoric, populism is about the intensification of the equivalential moment by which a plurality of demands is rendered analogous with respect to a common adversary. Oppositely, institutionalism entails the foregrounding of difference, by which demands are kept apart from each other and where 'the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community' (OPR: 81) - the very antithesis of the Manichean antagonism predicated by populism. However, populism and institutionalism are only to be seen as two unreachable *reductio ad absurdum*, two extreme poles that draw a *continuum* along which actual political practices find a dialectic and unstable compromise (Laclau, 2005b: 45-46).

Let us now bring to the fore the points of friction between the account of Laclau and the other approaches. Unlike the ideological approach defended by Mudde, for Laclau the contents of a populist practice are irrelevant, making it clear that populism is rather a political logic that

tells us about the form and not about the ideology, no matters how thinly defined, of the political actor under scrutiny. In a far-reaching conclusion, Laclau goes as far as to claim that:

If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative (Laclau, 2005b: 47).

This sentence reaffirms the distance from any attempt to pin down an ideological core of populism, collocating the notion at the ontological level. This puts us in a position to discern yet another difference that Laclau maintains, both with the ideological and the strategic approaches this time. Unlike Mudde, Weyland and Roberts, Laclau indeed conceptualises populism as a gradational property. Along with the proponents of the style approach, it is held that populism is not about a binary choice. In other words, the level of populism displayed by a particular political subject can vary across time; not a taxonomy then, but 'an area of variations within which a plurality of phenomena could be inscribed' thus making comparisons possible (OPR: 175). Despite being often clustered together, conspicuous differences also exist with respect to the style approach. This is mostly evident with the theses of Moffitt and Tormey, and to an extent with that of Canovan: for Laclau populism is not a strictly contemporary phenomenon but an ontological category as it aims at pinpointing the formal characteristics of the political game as such, which are independent of the ontic, that is the actual, empirical contents of a particular practice or actor. This formalism also targets the definition of populism provided by de la Torre, for whom the political opponent of populists is defined in terms of the oligarchy (de la Torre, 2000: 4). While this may often be the case, Laclau prefers to speak of the 'them' in abstract terms, recognising that in principle it can take up different faces, as it becomes evident in the cases of exclusionary types of populism that, as seen before, make immigrants the chief adversary of the 'people'. Finally, populism as a political logic refrains from necessarily attributing a prominent role to the leader. In this

sense, unlike all other approaches, the coherence of a populist discourse is not given by a leader, but by an empty signifier that may or may not be a leader.

As we can see, Laclau divests populism from unnecessary features and, as a result, achieves a minimal definition of populism much better than others. This renders populism a cornerstone in the general theory of politics that he advances. As it will be further detailed in the next chapter, he even ties populism to a political project, where the focus on the leader resurfaces, although with a shift in emphasis. In this regard, certain kinds of problems emerge. But there is another related and more general aspect of Laclau's theory of populism which is susceptible to criticism. The relationship that populism maintains with democracy remains in fact undertheorised in his account. This will also be a theme to be dealt with under a critical light. For now, it is time to turn to a brief survey on the matter.

The existing accounts span from conceptualisations that see populism as intrinsically inimical to democracy to those that rescue some of its aspects and provide a more balanced account. On the former side of the spectrum, Stefano Bartolini treats populism in Europe as a 'virus' infecting the party system and spreading its 'epidemic effects' (Bartolini in Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013: 17-18). In criticising Laclau, Slavoj Žižek is equally pessimistic on the prospects of populism: 'insofar as, in its very notion, it displaces the immanent social antagonism into the antagonism between the unified people and its external enemy, it harbors in the last instance a long-term protofascist tendency' (Žižek, 2006: 557). In a rather unhelpful characterisation of populism, Nadia Urbinati adds her voice to the chorus by claiming that populism in Europe has only been about the creation of new oligarchies who take advantage of popular dissatisfaction (Urbinati, 1998: 113). In particular, she sees populism as having a positive impact only in those societies that are not yet democratic;

otherwise, its unmediated approach to politics and its allergy towards institutions are conducive to a despotic attitude with negative repercussions for democracy (Urbinati, 1998: 116-117).

As anticipated, other authors prefer a more nuanced stance. Kaltwasser and Mudde hold that the implications of populism for democracy vary consistently (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). Populism is not necessarily anti-democratic: '[w]hile it is true that the solutions offered by populist forces to those democratic dilemmas are controversial, the question about the impact of populism on democracy should be answered first and foremost empirically rather than based on normative and/or theoretical arguments' (Kaltwasser, 2013: 483). Even recognising the oft problematic relationship with the liberal component of liberal-democracy; the representation and mobilisation of marginalised groups, increased accountability and revitalisation of public opinion and social movements, are listed among the positive effects that populism may engender (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012: 21). In this view, populism becomes 'both a corrective and a threat to democracy' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012: 16). Within the realm of political theory, a similar position is expressed through particularly well elaborated lines of reasoning by Margaret Canovan and Benjamin Arditi. Drawing on the work of Michael Oakeshott who distinguished between a politics of faith and a politics of scepticism, Canovan claims that democracy presents two different and yet interdependent faces: one redemptive - amounting to the ideal of popular power and sovereignty - the other, pragmatic - consisting in the necessity of maintaining peace and stability through institutions (Canovan, 1999: 9-10). It is when a too wider gap opens up between the two, i.e. when democracy excessively slides towards its pragmatic side at the expense of the redemptive one, that an opportunity arises for populism to appear. In this sense, Canovan argues that populism follows democracy like a shadow (Canovan, 1999: 10). Arditi complements

Canovan's take by suggesting that populism is better understood in terms of a spectre rather than a shadow. Accordingly, the notion of spectre upheld by Jacques Derrida suggests both visitation and something that can haunt us (Arditi, 2004: 141). The spectral logic, in other words, allows for the latent possibility of populism that, while accompanying democracy, may also threaten it. But there is another inbuilt connotation to which Arditì only hints in his article, but that he does not quite develop when mentioning the notion of spectre. As he puts it:

if the gap is a structural feature, there is no reason to think that it will father only populist offspring. Many other movements could arise there too, so instead of being the condition of possibility of populism it turns out to be the space of appearance of the impulse of political reform in general (Arditi, 2004: 139).

As opposed to a shadow, the spectre may or may not appear, even when conditions are ripe. Arditì certainly has in mind all those social movements that, while severely questioning the *status quo*, have - often purposefully - avoided undertaking a populist path. This insight carries important consequences when analysing Laclau's ontology. While I share the insight that all politics is to an extent populist, the *continuum* along which political practices operate drawn by the two extreme poles of populism and institutionalism as posited by Laclau is more dubious (Laclau, 2005b: 45).

In a similar vein, Panizza also proposes a balanced picture of the relationship between populism and democracy. In his view, 'populism is neither the highest form of democracy nor its enemy, but a mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself, warts and all, and find out what it is about and what it is lacking' (Panizza, 2005: 30). Elsewhere, he also clarifies that the compatibility between populism and democracy is given by the relations that the former contextually establishes with other logics that are also constitutive of democracy (Panizza, 2008: 92).

Both analytically and strategically then, much is to be gained from those approaches that, while acknowledging that populism is a phenomenon inherent to democratic life, it can sometimes turn against democracy itself. However, these approaches are recalcitrant to tie the notion of populism to a strategic perspective, even when some of its authors do display normative preoccupations in their writings (as in the case of Arditì). In particular, what is entirely missing is a connection between populism and hegemony, which is instead present in Laclau. For now, let us turn to a review of the different takes on the category of hegemony.

### **A conceptual literature review: hegemony**

According to Giuseppe Cospito, the noun 'hegemony' was firstly employed in the texts of a number of ancient Greek historians, where its meaning alludes to the predominance of a *polis* (city) within the context of a military alliance. However such supremacy is not limited to military considerations, but can also involve considerations of a political and ideological sort (Cospito, 2016: 49). The term, which did not find an equivalent in Latin, disappeared until it was rediscovered in modern languages with reference to its initial meaning in ancient Greek documents. However, it soon found a new and privileged application in German and Italian, in order to describe the leading role of Prussia and Piedmont in the processes of national unification of their countries (Cospito, 2016: 50).

It is in the Marxist debates of the late 19th century in which the notion of hegemony started to take up new meanings and nuances. Friedrich Engels first mentioned hegemony to exhort the German Social Democrats into gaining the sympathy of the agricultural labourers, while Antonio Labriola, who did not speak openly of hegemony, reflected on the nexus between consent and domination, thus anticipating a central theme of Antonio Gramsci's reflection on

hegemony (Cospito, 2016: 51-52). The term gained particular currency within the Russian Social Democracy, with Georgi Plekhanov credited as the first to introduce it as a way to refer to the necessity for the working class to launch not just an economic struggle, but also and most importantly a political one against Tsarism (Anderson, 1976: 15). Such an intuition was predicated upon the recognition that the Russian bourgeoisie was too weak to carry out by itself the bourgeois-democratic revolution that the stagist conception of history envisaged by Marxism attributed to this class. Uneven development of the economic world system was deemed to be responsible for the alteration of the historical path predicted by the schemata put forward by historical materialism, thus allowing for some deviations from the norm. A national approach was thus justified in the name of the need to garner the support of all the exploited groups in society. It was Pavel Axelrod who took the idea further by suggesting that, in the struggle against absolutism, the working class would even have to play the primary role (Anderson, 1976: 15) and thus become the leading force in a task that was not its own.

In Lenin, the notion of hegemony reached a more structured development, even though it never became part of his customary political lexicon (Di Biagio, 2008: 381). For the Russian revolutionary, hegemony alluded to the imperative to leave economism behind - a theme developed in his 1902 *What is to be done?* (Lenin, 1969) although the term hegemony was not employed here. This meant that a bigger social bloc was to be built by transcending the immediate, corporative attitude of the working class. As aptly put by Laclau and Mouffe: 'for Leninism, hegemony involves political leadership within a class alliance' (HSS: 55). Nevertheless, talk of hegemony faded in the light of the Bolsheviks' restructuring of their priorities, as they opted for a direct transition to socialism, thereby sidestepping the bourgeois-democratic stage in the name of the extreme deviation of the Russian course from the 'normal' development of capitalism in advanced countries and the insurmountable



weakness of their incipient bourgeoisie. Accordingly, there was no longer a task for the working class to hegemonise and take upon itself. Trotsky himself severed the question of hegemony in the democratic revolution from the dictatorship of the proletariat, which his permanent revolution thesis made the central goal in the Bolsheviks' quest for power (Trotsky in Anderson, 1976: 17). The term was still upheld by the Communist International (Comintern) in the following years however, where it alluded to the necessity for the working class to gather other exploited groups under its leadership, with the further conceptual extension by which, as contained in the final theses of its 4<sup>th</sup> Congress held in 1922, hegemony was employed to refer to the domination of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, insofar as the former managed to separate the economic struggles from the wider political aims of the latter (Anderson, 1976: 18).

Influenced by these debates, Gramsci made hegemony the distinctive hallmark of his theoretical contribution. It is commonly recognised that the first explicit elaboration of hegemony, after he had used the term somewhat contradictorily in his previous writings, came in 1924 with the obituary that Gramsci published in the newspaper *Ordine Nuovo* which paid tribute to Lenin (Cospito, 2016: 57). Here, hegemony is conceptualised as the alliance between urban workers and rural peasants; a key passage in the project of overthrowing capitalism. Gramsci was keen to highlight that it is the urban worker who has the upper hand within this alliance, as:

politically he is stronger and more capable than the peasant: he lives in the city, is concentrated in great masses in the factories, is capable not only to overthrow capitalism, but also to impede, by socialising industry, the return of capitalism (Gramsci, 1971: 16).

However, it is with his prison writings that a much richer conception of hegemony emerges within a vast theoretical apparatus. Because of this, the notion of hegemony is tied to a series

of adjacent categories and interpretations that Gramsci came up with in parallel and that, as a consequence, also deserve a brief mention here in order to comprehend the full extent of his theorisation on hegemony. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that the term hegemony, partly as a reflection of the fragmented nature of the writings themselves, is often used in different ways throughout his corpus. Yet this lack of coherence should not deter us from extracting some 'organic' lessons and general orientations from Gramsci's prison writings.

As hinted above, the core of Gramsci's notion is dependent upon questions of consent and force in the exercise of power. In particular, Gramsci advances the idea that for a class to be dominant, a combination of both is needed. The author wanders on whether hegemony should be intended as simple consent or consent *and* domination (Cospito, 2016: 62). As opposed to more traditional Marxist accounts however, the point here is the recognition of the importance of politics - or, to put it more broadly, of the superstructures - in the shaping of social relations. This aspect also reveals that, in line with the 1922 theses of the Comintern, Gramsci makes of hegemony not only a strategic category, but also an analytical one that helps to better understand the function of power in society. Hegemony then refers to the relationship that a social group establishes with other classes and forces. As he emphatically puts it:

A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to "lead" as well (Gramsci, 1971: 57-58).

Gramsci does not rule out the need to resort to force, but 'without force standing above consent too much, on the contrary appearing as supported by the consent of the majority' (Gramsci, 1975: 59). How is this leadership obtained then? Gramsci contends that a system of alliances needs to be established with other social groups. However, as opposed to the

Leninist conception that entails a much more external relationship with the other sectors involved,<sup>2</sup> for Gramsci this move presupposes that the leading group accommodates the interests of such sectors through the creation of an ideological synthesis. This is possible only if a class transcends its economic-corporative phase and leaves behind the pursuit of its sectional and most immediate interests. Thus, such a synthesis - in the strategic perspective of Gramsci - is successful insofar as it manages to transform the consciousness both of the working class and the other sectors involved through an intellectual and moral reform. It is important to dwell on the far-reaching character of this type of reform. For Gramsci, the question does not merely end with the interception of the interests of the subordinate groups, but also, and most crucially, involves the modification of their ideological orientations, whereby the term ideology does not simply convey mere ideas, but encompasses a material aspect, made up of the communal modes of living and acting (Simon, 1982: 25). This type of struggle, which attempts to articulate a historic bloc of social actors around a class that plays a fundamental role in the sphere of production, falls under the name of war of position and mainly takes place in the field of civil society. Specifically, the war of position needs to be understood in opposition to the war of movement, a term used to indicate a *blitzkrieg* type of seizure of power. Although Gramsci did not exclude the possibility of a war of movement altogether, he thought that in Western society a long struggle was firstly needed in order to disentangle the allegiances that the bourgeoisie has constructed in the terrain of civil society:

in Russia the State was everything; civil society was primordial and gelatinous. In the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks (Gramsci, 1971: 238).

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<sup>2</sup> This is well captured by Laclau and Mouffe (HSS: 65-68).

It is in the diffuse web of social relations established by private entities such as the Church, political parties, trade unions, mass media, and voluntary associations that a particular hegemony is sanctioned and where the struggle to build a different hegemony is to be undertaken. From these intuitions, Gramsci started to conceptualise the state in enlarged terms: the state is not to be intended as the simple collection of state institutions that exercise force, but rather as the sum of political *and* civil society. The notion of integral state thus refers to the links existing between the two spheres, shedding light on the nature of power, summed up in the expression of 'hegemony armoured by coercion' (Simon, 1981: 27).

Both from an analytic and strategic point of view, the nuances that the notion of hegemony takes up in the theorisation offered by Gramsci no doubt represent a leap forward compared to the still tentative formulations of the Russian debates. His contribution permits to fully supersede the two obstacles posed by the economistic stance of many Marxist accounts, namely epiphenomenalism, that is the causal link postulated to exist between base and superstructure, and reductionism, i.e. the attribution of a class belonging to each and every ideological element (Mouffe, 1979: 169). Nevertheless, the recasting of the base-superstructure relationship that Gramsci advances is still susceptible to criticism. In particular, Laclau and Mouffe identify in the necessary class character of the unifying hegemonic principle the last traces of essentialism in Gramsci (HSS: 69). It is the dogmatic ontological privilege ultimately attributed to class that the two authors question. From here, Laclau builds a novel conception of hegemony, which owes much to Gramsci, but which also transcends him. As for populism, the next chapter is dedicated to the careful discernment of how hegemony developed throughout his corpus, though a few preliminary remarks are advanced here. The starting point is that, already weakened by Gramsci, the base-superstructure dichotomy is entirely abandoned. More specifically, Laclau suggests that no particular space of

the social occupies the moment of universality. In other words, there exists no foundational ground that orders society and assigns fixed identities to the subject. As he puts it:

Against this essentialist vision we tend nowadays to accept the infinitude of the social, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility (Laclau, 1983: 22; also in NR: 90).

However, the 'impossibility of society' does not mean that any kind of fixation is impossible, for that would be a psychotic world. Rather, the social is the attempt to 'domesticate infinitude' and bring some form of stability within an otherwise infinite play of differences (Laclau, 1983: 22; also in NR: 90). Laclau calls this 'game' of providing a partial limiting to disorder hegemony and goes as far as equating it with the political as such (HSS: 193). What is more, he claims that 'people need an order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. "Order" as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized' (Laclau, 1994: 176; also in E: 44). It is precisely the capacity of temporarily filling order with a particular content that is captured by the term hegemony. To put it differently, hegemony consists of representing the totality through the articulation of various elements under the aegis of one of those very elements, which he calls the empty signifier. Here, Laclau argues with Gramsci that such a process entails a synthesis that modifies the identities of the elements that are involved. However, *contra* Gramsci, he contends that the empty signifier, the element that is able to cement around itself other elements by playing the function of the universal, is not the emanation of a structure, but the contingent and unpredictable product of the unevenness of the social (Laclau, 1994: 175; also in E: 43).

Another original elaboration of the concept of hegemony starting from the thought of Gramsci is that advanced by Raymond Williams. The attempt of the Welsh academic and

novelist is rather different from that of Laclau. By providing a materialist conception of culture, Williams tries to eschew the pitfalls of reductionism to be found in many strands of Marxism. Yet he does not, as opposed to Laclau, entirely abandon the notion of determination, but attenuates its scope. Determination then is not to be intended as a cause that enables prediction and prefiguration, thereby entailing total control. Rather, determination is to be taken as a notion that suggests the setting of limits and pressures (Williams, 1973: 4). This insight is paralleled by an unconventional move insofar as the base/superstructure dichotomy is concerned. Williams broadens the notion of the base so as to encompass not simply the relations ordering the primary work of materials, but 'the primary production of life itself, and of men themselves, the material production and reproduction of real life' (Williams, 1973: 6). What Williams conveys here is that the role of what has been called the superstructure is in actual fact primary and basic in the sustenance of a particular social reality. At the same time, he is careful to avoid the claim that the superseding of the crudest version of the base/superstructure topology ends up in the endorsement of a concept of social totality devoid of determination. For Williams, the coexistence of different social practices - and the due recognition of their roles and complex interrelations - should not lead to the removal of the notion of social intention from the picture; it is only by clinging to such a notion that the class character of a particular society can still be appreciated (Williams, 1973: 7). It is at this point in which Williams revives the Gramscian notion of hegemony. Its relevance is given precisely by its bivalent nature: on one side, it evokes a totality 'which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway'; on the other, it sheds light on class rule (Williams, 1973: 8). In other words, hegemony is so pervasive that it constitutes a sense of reality and a

sense of absoluteness insofar as it is made of a body of practices and expectations that impregnate the whole of living, thereby making explanations in terms of simple 'manipulation', 'corruption' and 'betrayal' obsolete and misplaced (Williams, 1977: 110); yet this does not obscure the processes of domination and subordination. However, hegemony cannot be properly understood unless one recognises its dynamic character. As Williams puts it:

hegemony is not singular; indeed [...] its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token [...] they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified. That is why instead of speaking simply of 'the hegemony', 'a hegemony', I would propose a model which allows for this kind of variation and contradiction, its sets of alternatives and its processes of change (Williams, 1973: 8).

Such a variation takes the form of a continuous process of incorporation, by which other experiences and practices are accommodated prior their reinterpretation and dilution, thus permitting the dominant culture a continual making and remaking of itself (Williams, 1973: 9). It is in this sense that the notion of hegemony comprises and goes beyond those of culture and ideology: with respect to the former, hegemony accounts for the inequalities in power and influence; with respect to the latter - which Williams intends as a formal and conscious set of ideas and beliefs - hegemony recognises that practical consciousness does not take the form of an articulated and formal system (Williams, 1977: 108-110). Finally, Williams specifies that hegemony is better suited at accounting for epochal, rather than historical questions, '[t]hat is to say it is usually very much better at distinguishing the large features of different epochs of society, as between feudal and bourgeois, or what might be, than at distinguishing between different phases of bourgeois society' (Williams, 1973: 8). In other words, hegemony defines the broad periods in which a central system of practices, meanings and values are dominant and effective.

All in all, the route chosen by Williams in order to escape economicism is innovative and powerfully convincing insofar as it casts light on hegemony, culture and ideology as a material necessity for the reproduction of the conditions of a particular social formation. Nevertheless, Williams is wavering on the question of whether the base-superstructure division should be retained or not; at times, he seems to dismiss it altogether, at others he shows himself reluctant to do so. What lies at the heart of this ambiguity is the insistence to put at the same level - that of the base - practices which are still ranked in terms of importance by upholding the notion of determination. In this way, base and superstructure are surreptitiously reintroduced. *In nuce*, this amounts to the same defect that Laclau spots in Gramsci, that is the apodictic proposition of a point of hegemonic irradiation. Moreover, while Williams, following Gramsci, is certainly right in affirming that hegemony defines epochal as opposed to historical periods - a theme that will be of utmost importance in the fifth chapter where a critical reappraisal of Laclau is advanced - epochal and historical remain ill-defined and too tied to the notion of mode of production. Hegemony's import should, in other words, be put to good use so as to cast light also on variations within itself (for otherwise the claim that it is not singular remains empty), but also, and most importantly, so as to deliver an assemblage of meanings, values, and practices that is not a simple synonym of a production mode.

On this point another author working in the Gramscian tradition, and co-founder along with Williams of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, holds a different view. Indeed, Stuart Hall analyses hegemony in shorter temporal terms, as he specifically applies the notion in order to critically appraise the advent of Thatcherism in Great Britain. In this sense, Hall's work situates itself at a slightly lower level of theoretical abstraction, without making it necessarily less interesting or fruitful. His reference to Gramsci is avowedly heterodox as he refuses to transfer the teachings of the Sardinian mechanically from one context to another,



but rather - following the recommendation of Gramsci himself - he insists on the necessity to 'translate' them to the specific conjuncture (Hall, 1987: 16). In particular, hegemony is employed by Hall in order to make sense of the construction of a conservative historic bloc in Great Britain that managed to appropriate a number of slogans and signifiers that had been part of the popular patrimony of the left (Filippini, 2011: 76). That Hall does not make hegemony coincide with a mode of production is clear in the way he treated Thatcherism as a hegemonic enterprise:

Thatcherism was a project to engage, to contest that project [that of the Keynesian welfare state], and, wherever possible, to dismantle it and to put something new in place. It entered the political field in a historic contest, not just for power, but for popular authority, for hegemony (Hall, 1987: 17).

Hall is also emphatic that the struggle for hegemony is constructed on different fronts. This is to be intended in two different and yet interrelated ways. On one side, hegemony is fought on a variety of planes; as Hall puts it: '[t]he nature of power in the modern world is that it is also constructed in relation to political, moral, intellectual, cultural, ideological and sexual questions. The question of hegemony is always the question of a new cultural order' (Hall, 1988: 21). Here, Hall is apt to recognise the plurality of spheres evoked by the Gramscian expression 'fortresses and earthworks' mentioned above. On the other side, Hall also sees in such a diversity the necessity to articulate the different antagonisms and subjectivities. On the latter point and on who is to lead a hegemonic project, Hall demonstrates to be on the same page with Laclau: for the cultural theorist, there is no unitary subject of history and the points from which hegemonies can be constructed are cashed out in terms of political projects as opposed to fundamental classes (Hall, 1988: 17). As opposed to Williams' insistence on determination then, identities and ideological complexes are more provisional and cannot be determined in advance:

I don't think the ideological field is divided into elements of ideological discourses that have a necessary class connotation. In societies like ours, ideological contestation does not take place between fully formed, competing worldviews - theirs and ours. The field of ideology is not divided in that way. It's a field in which there are many different discourses and social forces in play at the same time (Hall, 1988b: 58).

Nevertheless, as opposed to Laclau, Hall still recognises with Gramsci that hegemony is unachievable 'without the decisive nucleus of economic activity' (Hall, 1988: 156). Unlike Laclau then, there is the important recognition that not only the proliferation of the sites of antagonism should be heeded, but also the variety of spheres of the social in which hegemony should be fought and conquered, *including* the economic. This is an important point that will be stressed again when analysing the empirical cases and critically engaging with the notion of hegemony in Laclau more concretely. Finally, Hall has the merit to forge his concept of hegemony with explicit reference to the tasks for the left, thereby foregrounding the strategic nature of his contribution. For him, the left 'does not see that it is possible to connect with the ordinary feelings and experiences which people have in their everyday lives, and yet to articulate them progressively to a more advanced, modern form of social consciousness' (Hall, 1988: 21). In conclusion, Hall is to be praised for an original and convincing application of the notion of hegemony to the British context as it illuminates many aspects of the Thatcherist era (and even beyond that). However, he remains elusive on a number of theoretical questions that do not seem to be properly elaborated throughout his corpus. As he advances also the notion of authoritarian populism to define Thatcherism, one aspect that is undertheorised is precisely the nexus between populism and hegemony - one of the central themes of the present work.

A radically different approach to the question of hegemony is that of negating its validity and usefulness. This strand, which comprises a number of authors, falls under the name of post-

hegemony and takes issues especially, though not exclusively, with the theorisations on hegemony formulated by Laclau. I shall mention here the most recurrent arguments. A light version of post-hegemony is that propounded by Richard Day, as it situates itself purely at the strategic level. By questioning that 'effective social change can only be achieved simultaneously and *en masse*', Day praises the politics of what he terms the Newest Social Movements, which prefer to operate *non*-hegemonically rather than *counter*-hegemonically (Day, 2005: 8).<sup>3</sup> The dissatisfaction that Day expresses towards Laclau points to the fact that the construction of hegemonic blocs implies 'a logic of representation of interests within a state-regulated system of hegemonic struggles' (Day, 2005: 75) - thereby remaining within the logic of neoliberalism (Day, 2005: 8). In particular, Day thinks that a politics based on the advancement and articulation of demands, as that of Laclau,

is rather like pursuing the latest in automobiles, clothing or refrigerator styles. [...] Just as no product can ever provide satisfaction in the consumption of goods and services, no state-based system of representation can be an adequate substitute for the autonomous creation of a just life lived in community with human and non-human others (Day, 2005: 83).

Of a more analytic import is the contribution of Scott Lash, who suggests that hegemony 'has had great truth-value for a particular epoch', but 'power now, instead, is largely post-hegemonic' (Lash, 2007: 55). The gist of the argument is that 'power enters into us and

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the stance of Day openly aims at postulating the validity of a path for emancipatory action over another, it is possible to concur with the fact that a plurality of paths does exist and that the populist/hegemonic logic does not exhaust the panoply of avenues at disposal for those who wish to challenge the *status quo* from an egalitarian position. Just as in the case of Arditì a few pages above, the Laclauian scheme fails to accommodate, from an analytical point of view, the possibility of a protest that maintains itself at a horizontal level, without any sort of verticalisation. What is at stake here is not the desirability of such a politics, but the very possibility of conceiving it through the instruments offered by Laclau. In this sense, the multitudinous solution put forward by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2004) constitutes a plausible alternative that has been practiced by a variety of movements. For some, a hybridisation is also possible. As put by Alexandros Kioupkiolis: 'Laclau's 'uneven power', 'logic of equivalence', 'representation' and the dialectic of 'particularity/universality' are alive and kicking amidst the constituent politics of the multitude' (Kioupkiolis, 2014: 162). Similarly, Katsambekis states: '[m]y hypothesis is that we might not even have to choose between the two categories, since collective subjects do not crystallize into stable concrete entities but are rather mercurial in form and in action and can manifest themselves in diverging ways' (Katsambekis, 2014: 177).

constitutes us from the inside' (Lash, 2007: 61) as it is endowed with a far-reaching generative force (Lash, 2007: 66). What is confuted is the representational and mediated character encapsulated in the notion of consent: rather, power is ontological and bypasses cognitive judgements (Lash, 2007: 56). Jon Beasley-Murray is more categorical instead, as he avoids the temporal characterisation put forward by Lash: '[m]y aim is a more comprehensive critique of the idea of hegemony' (Beasley-Murray, 2010: xi). Accordingly, 'we have always lived in posthegemonic times: social order was never in fact secured through ideology. [...] consent was never really an issue. Social order is secured through habit and affect' (Beasley-Murray, 2010: ix). For Beasley-Murray, habit and affect are immanent processes that 'incarnate a logic from below that requires neither representation nor direction from above' (Beasley-Murray, 2010: xi).

Some of the intuitions contained in these accounts are valuable, but they are by and large too *a priori* dismissive of the notion of hegemony, however intended. Day is certainly right in stressing the role of the movements from below and putting emphasis on the question of horizontalism. Nevertheless, since his intervention is mainly pitched at the empirical level, it would be fair to respond with the counter-empirical claim that it is only when heterogeneous struggles have united and launched a vertical assault on the *status quo* that some consistent strides towards the undoing of injustice have been taken. The examples of the Italian Communist Party and the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution that will be treated in this work are, despite many limitations, quite revealing in this respect. Equally, it seems little plausible to reduce social demands to the neoliberal logic underlying the unlimited and insatiable demand for goods and services. As for the positions of Lash and Beasley-Murray, it is paramount to highlight that the dichotomies that they introduce between, for example, representation and real, discourse and affect, meaning and being, 'fail to realize that dimensions, which can - and

should - be conceptually distinguished, can simultaneously function within a historical dialectics of mutual engagement and co-constitution' (Stavrakakis, 2014: 122). The focus on the biopolitical character of politics, on the fact that domination is inscribed in bodies through affect and habit, is of utmost importance, and yet:

such regulation of bodies [...] can establish itself as an unspoken 'second nature' only to the extent that it becomes associated with a dominant representation of what is considered 'civilized' and what is not, only to the extent, in other words, that it becomes associated with a hegemonic social valorization (Stavrakakis, 2014: 125).

Stavrakakis also notes that the incorporation of the affective dimension, the dimension of the Real in the Lacanian vocabulary, not only in its negative connotation as dislocation and impossibility of a universal, but also in its positive meaning, has been taken up and incorporated by Laclau (Stavrakakis, 2014: 127-129). Although Laclau has effectively made some advancements in that direction, I shall later demonstrate that such an incorporation remains incomplete insofar as it fails to recognise the persistence of the hegemony enshrined in affect and habit and the difficulty of its dislodgement.

### **Populism and hegemony combined**

Much has been said on how populism and hegemony are characterised and put to use by a variety of authors. Yet populism and hegemony are categories hardly analysed in tandem. While the former is nowadays employed, although with different accents, by a variety of accounts that cut across the academic spectrum - both normatively and subject-wise - hegemony is by and large still confined to accounts of critical import in spite of its ever bigger analytical role, which would make it in principle also importable by schools that bear no normative relationship with Marxism. Be that as it may, both categories imply a sense of

construction of the social, of construction of political meaning and social relations in the face of an ineffable contingency, be it within a limited sector or in society at large. Intuitively then, they seem to indicate something about the political, intended here in the broadest possible manner as the very way in which society is instituted (Mouffe, 2005: 8-9). In other words, they both seem to bear a particularly powerful import when thinking about ontological questions in relation to the political domain. The impression is that their adequate theoretical combination could shed light on different aspects and dimensions pertaining to the political. This of course does not mean that they need to be confined to the ontological terrain and be an exclusive property of political theorists. That would simply negate the retroductive approach endorsed later in the chapter, which invokes a more dynamic connection between the theoretical and the empirical. In other words, such concepts also need, Heideggerianly, to display a ready-to-hand-ness for the empirical research.

The only author who blends the two categories in a rigorous fashion is, as we have seen already, Ernesto Laclau. Both notions play a key role within his account and are closely intertwined. However, if the definitions of each of these categories are in themselves contested in academic debates, their combination cannot but raise an equal amount of questions and interrogations. However, this remark is not advanced in order to dispute the validity of their pairing but is rather aimed at contributing to the betterment of the terms of such an engagement. Moreover, such a debate cannot leave aside other related issues that throughout the text will resurface as of paramount importance. As we have seen in the case of populism, the question of the relationship between populism and democracy has more often than not sprung up as a problematic aspect, especially when populism is not simply advocated as an analytical category, but also as a strategic one, which is what Laclau does. Equally, the strictly related theme of the leadership deserves a nuanced treatment, which will

be carefully pondered. What is in need of assessment here is the triple relationship between populism, leadership and democracy and its weight on strategic considerations. As for hegemony, I have mentioned that the most contentious issue has to do with the kind of time-frame that it defines. However, questions of space also arise - where is it exactly that a particular hegemony is sanctioned? As we shall see, all these conundrums haunt Laclau's attempt to combine the two categories and the present work should be seen as an attempt to dissipate some of the difficulties that his nonetheless praiseworthy enterprise has given birth to. It is to the different pathways that my questioning will undertake that I now turn.

### **Foucault and Skinner to unravel the theoretical tangle**

The focus on Laclau's political ontology stems from both the recognition of its merits and the intuition of its limits from an analytic and strategic viewpoint. Setting out the latter is a process that, as suggested by the retroductive method presented below, requires an overall movement from side to side, straddling inquiries at both theoretical and the empirical levels. Nevertheless, each of the two poles necessitates a work of its own, for the tensions do not simply derive from the juxtaposition of the theoretical with the real world in order to assess the plausibility of its claims, but can also be inferred from theory itself and thereby making the to-and-fro shift more fruitful. This is why the development of Laclau's thought, insofar as the notions of populism and hegemony are concerned, needs a careful discernment of its own. However, since the enterprise conducted here is a critical one, the work cannot be confined to a simply descriptive history of how concepts have evolved throughout his corpus. This is why the problematisation method espoused by Michael Foucault and the methodological insights

on the history of political thought of Quentin Skinner are brought in here as valuable instruments to assist the theoretical research.

The former method condenses the two approaches Foucault has developed, namely archaeology and genealogy. While archaeology provides a description of practices, the second 'diagnoses and offers cures for the problems of contemporary societies by examining their historical emergence and formation' (Howarth, 2000: 72). Even though what is at stake here is of a more restricted and less far-reaching character, the gist is still valid, for problematisation is first and foremost a type of inquiry that focuses on the terms of reference within which an issue is cast (Bacchi, 2012: 1). In other words, 'the practice of problematization focuses on the question of problem-definition in a particular field or domain, the various problematizations of this problematization, and the efforts of an analyst to problematize these problematizations' (Howarth, 2009: 324-325). This type of analysis, which involves 'demonstrat[ing] how things which appear most evident are in fact fragile and that they rest upon particular circumstances' (Foucault in Mort and Peters, 2005: 19), necessarily involves making reference to a plurality of aspects, thereby giving rise to a multi-level approach. The scope clearly differs from classical historiographical questions, as it is mostly concerned with the uncovering of the oft forgotten origins of practices and the disclosure of alternative paths and possibilities (Howarth, 2009: 326). If we think of Laclau's thought as a discourse, as a meaningful and open-ended totality, problematisation helps us to examine the complex relations and effects of its operations, allowing us to trace connections, encounters, supports, blockages, play of forces and so on (Bacchi, 2012: 2). It can thus shed light on the ways in which Laclau appropriates the works of other authors while expunging or neglecting some of their key insights. It facilitates the understanding of how his framework fits within the broader political theory environment of critical import and even beyond. It situates the theoretical



work of Laclau within the network of pressures, stimuli and inducements arising from real-world developments. It permits access to a number of nuances and subtleties that only a study of the situated character of Laclau's intervention can disentangle. Finally, it puts us in the position to re-activate possibilities that were excluded or ignored by Laclau. The re-mobilisation of theoretical paths that went overlooked by the Argentine theorist does not necessarily mean questioning his whole framework, but rather to initiate the exploration of potentially rewarding avenues insofar as the comprehension of political phenomena and the design of effective emancipatory strategies are concerned.

The Cambridge School of the history of political thought offers a complementary apparatus. In order to elude the pitfall of inferring eternal and unhistorical truths from specific texts, Skinner usefully distinguishes between three types of meaning. One is related to the mere understanding of what words and sentences mean. The second assesses the type of impact a particular text has had on the reader; a kind of phenomenological approach, in other words. The third points instead to what the writer may have meant through allusions, rhetorical figures and puns of various sorts (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 70). From the point of view of the purposes of this research, it seems that the third meaning is what we are after, notwithstanding the first one that will have to assist its pursuit. By following John Langshaw Austin's classical analysis, Skinner states that any serious utterance will carry a certain illocutionary force, that is a force that indicates what the agent was doing in saying (or writing) something, and not simply as a consequence of what is said (or written) (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 83). According to Skinner then, 'an understanding of the illocutionary act being performed by an agent in issuing a given utterance will be equivalent to an understanding of that agent's primary *intentions* in issuing that particular utterance' (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 74), which in turn means comprehending 'the work as an attack on or a defence of, as a criticism

of or contribution to, some particular attitude or line of argument' (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 76).<sup>4</sup> As already introduced above, the situatedness of Laclau's contribution is essential in order to comprehend the motives behind his different theoretical moves and a valuable ally for devising new possibilities that were left out of the picture. A few helpful rules are suggested by Skinner. In the first place, we need to gain knowledge of the prevailing conventions underpinning the treatment of the themes under discussion. In other words, it is only by framing the intentions against their background that it becomes possible to grasp the particular position an author is taking (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 77). However, Skinner warns us that the prevailing conventions of discourse should not be intended as a limit to utterances, for the aim of the agent may be that of extending, subverting or altering such conventions (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 105). This is to say that we should be wary of straightforwardly pigeonholing a given author according to the vocabulary he employs and the tradition he may appear to be connected to. However, the contextual language is not all we should focus on. Skinner's second recommendation invokes the necessity to look at the 'writer's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs' (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 78). The beliefs held by a particular agent provide a particularly solid ground in order to retrieve his intentions, and in this sense some biographical and contextual information will be often needed to grasp what was the point of a specific utterance (or action).

Skinner is thus very keen to highlight the connections between political thought and action, which - it needs to be emphasised - for him run both ways, although here we are principally concerned with understanding how Laclau's ontological reflections were affected by both the

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<sup>4</sup> It should also be noted that, in line with the Wittgensteinian premises of discourse theory, Skinner (again via Austin) concedes that the study of the illocutionary force should not be strictly confined to the verbal or the linguistic, but should also encompass non-linguistic actions, such as rituals and ceremonial acts (Skinner in Tully, 1988: 84-85).

personal and wider context. As for how the real world should give us a hand in thinking about ontological problems instead, I need to turn to the retroductive method applied to the social sciences.

### **The case for a case-based strategy: retroduction at play**

In his response to David Howarth's contribution contained in the volume *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, Laclau points out:

The first and main criticism is that I have concentrated on the ontological dimension of social theory rather than on ontical research. Now, this is a charge to which I plead happily guilty, except that I do not see it as a criticism at all. I have located my theoretical intervention at the theoretical and philosophical level and it is at that level that it has to be judged (Laclau, 2004: 321).

Implicit in this answer is a certain disconnection between the two registers or, rather, the non-necessity of looking at the ontic when developing an ontology or treating issues of political philosophy. This attitude seems unwarranted, especially in light of the way in which the post-Marxist paradigm that Laclau gave life to was developed. The urgency to articulate a new ontology of the political derived precisely by the empirical inconsistencies that Marxism encountered. It was the 'surprising' phenomena that did not fit the Marxist framework that spurred Laclau to abandon that camp and direct his thought elsewhere. As he states along with Mouffe at the very beginning of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS):

Left-wing thought today stands at a crossroads. The 'evident truths' of the past - the classical forms of analysis and political calculation, the nature of the forces in conflict, the very meaning of the Left's struggles and objectives - have been seriously challenged by an avalanche of historical mutations which have riven the ground on which those truths were constituted. [...] What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution (HSS: 1-2).

Such an attitude was later reinforced:

Any substantial change in the ontic content of a field of research leads also to a new ontological paradigm. [...] To put the argument in a transcendental fashion: the strictly ontological question asks how entities have to be, so that the objectivity of a particular field is possible. There is a process of mutual feedback between the incorporation of new fields of objects and the general ontological categories governing, at a certain time, what is thinkable within the general field of objectivity (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: x).

Yet, despite taking cues from a number of empirical problems, Laclau seems not to have heeded this dimension with sufficient care anymore. As a result, it is not surprising that his references to concrete historical situations have often been *ad hoc* illustrations that, despite illuminating certain aspects, lack a sustained and refined engagement with the subtleties and intricacies of each case. In relation to the historical instances brought up in *On Populist Reason* (OPR), Beasley-Murray can hardly be proven wrong when he affirms that 'each [historical case] is treated simply as an example, almost an anecdote or parable, to confirm a system whose principles are developed endogenously rather than through empirical investigation' (Beasley-Murray, 2006: 305). As the chapter on the PCI will show, the engagement of Laclau with this political actor (Laclau, 1973; PIM; Laclau, 1980b; Laclau, 1980c; Laclau, 1981; Laclau and Mouffe, 1981; OPR; Laclau, 2014) is also marked by a number of generalisations that smoothed out the historical terrain.

However, the claim raised here is not just that the empirical deserves a more nuanced treatment. After all, Laclau may well be right when he says that it is a task that others could take up (Laclau, 2004: 321). What is questioned much more fundamentally is the neglect of the empirical when dealing with theory. In order to argue against this approach, I appeal to the notion of retroduction as operationalised in the social sciences by Glynos and Howarth (2007). Their intervention is aimed at devising a methodology for research in the social

sciences that transcends the now dominant causal law paradigm. Specifically, a great deal of their efforts is devoted to the debunking of the mistaken attempt to import into the social sciences the sharp division drawn between the 'context of discovery' and the 'context of justification' typical of the natural sciences. The former 'involves all those activities that result in the positing of a hypothesis H [...] and which therefore contribute to the development of theoretical tools with which to explain a phenomenon X'. The latter instead 'draws a boundary around those activities that result in the acceptance of hypothesis H, which usually takes the form of theorems or empirical predictions that are deductively inferred, tested, and then used to explain X' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 31). However, in the realm of social sciences, the forms of reasoning involved in positing a hypothesis and accepting it cannot be differentiated (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 27). In particular what is contested is the possibility of reducing testing and explanation to prediction, at the expense of contextual factors (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 19). The authors invoke a minimal hermeneutical requirement, which involves taking seriously the self-interpretations of the actors at stake and incorporating them into the explanation, without reducing the former to the latter (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 36). It is at this point they introduce:

the logic of retroductive explanation and theory construction, which involves a to-and-fro movement between the phenomena investigated and the various explanations that are proffered. In this way, an initially chaotic set of concepts, logics, empirical data, self-interpretations, and so on, at varying levels of abstraction, are welded together, so as to produce an account which, if it removes our initial confusion, can constitute a legitimate candidate for truth or falsity (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 34).

While retroduction is primarily aimed at permitting a fruitful transition from a positivist to a truly post-positivist methodology in the social sciences, insofar as the objectives of this work are concerned it also highlights that:

there is a danger of paying short shrift to the necessary and complex connection between the empirical and ontological levels of analysis, that is, the realm of lived experience and action, on the one hand, and the underlying structures and modes of being, on the other hand, that make the former possible (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 30).

Accordingly then, 'the problem, the theory and its ontological presuppositions, as well as the positing and accepting of proto-explanations, all find themselves articulated in an ongoing dialectic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 40). The cases employed in this work are thus intended to work in tandem with some intuitions about certain deficiencies in the work of Laclau and the urge to work on them. It is precisely the appearance of a number of 'stumbling blocks' - to use Laclau's felicitous expression - in the Ecuadorian left-wing populist experience and in the practice of PCI that have led me to question some of the theoretical tenets informing Laclau's ontology. It is this back-and-forth movement between empirical analysis and theoretical reflection enshrined in the retroductive approach that is at the base of this work and, more specifically, of the choice to enlarge the scope for empirical analysis towards the refinement of Laclau's ontology. However, before looking at the cases themselves, we need to define a few more coordinates regarding the methodology employed to make sense of the empirical.

### **A note on empirical methods and corpus**

The cases of the PCI and the Citizen's Revolution shall be analysed in the light of Laclau's theorisation on hegemony and populism in order to assess its validity and limits. The bulk of the analysis thus rests on the application of Laclau's categories to the two empirical contexts at hand in order to evaluate how far they conduce an understanding of these political phenomena and how promising they turn out to be from an emancipatory perspective. However, since this enterprise intends to problematise some of the coordinates of Laclau's

theoretical scaffolding, the application of such categories will not be devoid of a critical edge. It is not a question of testing the validity of a hypothesis as in a positivist framework, where different conjectures are falsified against the background of hard reality that either proves or disproves. In this sense, no conclusive answer of that sort is advanced here. Rather, the aim is that of throwing light on the potentialities and limits of Laclau's framework, with the special task of devising areas where his theorisations explain less than what they could have if some different theoretical choices had been made; risking leading us down some dead-ends insofar as the strategic dimension is concerned. By applying his framework to concrete cases, one can capture whether this particular ontology - whose final aim is after all that of permitting a better and more explicative analysis of reality - is actually able to account for its different nuances.

Having clarified this aspect, the themes of normativity and ethics still need to be addressed. In order to tackle these issues, it will be necessary to resort to the four dimensions of socio-political reality that the Essex School of discourse analysis offers. Two axes draw the four dimensions: an ethical-ideological one and a political-social one. The former has to do with the ways in which radical contingency is tarried with by the subject. In short, an ethical response entails attentiveness and sensitivity towards the dislocated character of social relations. By contrast, an ideological response means denying an acknowledgement of radical contingency, even when this is laid bare by dislocatory events (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 110-111). The latter axis instead revolves around the concept of public contestation, that is the contestation of norms which constitute an existing social practice in the name of a value or a principle (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 111). The political dimension in this case corresponds to making visible the instituting moment of a social practice, either through public contestation or its active absorption. Oppositely, the social dimension here captures

the lack of public contestation, thereby alluding to those aspects of a practice that are sedimented and forgetful of their political origins (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 111). If this is so, 'practices can be understood in terms of the way different dimensions of social relations - comprising the social, political, ideological, and ethical dimensions - are foregrounded or backgrounded, how they articulated, and so on' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 120).

What concerns us here however is the singling out of the perspectives from which the critique is levelled. Discourse theory is not after the simple description or explanation of facts but is also concerned with inserting a critical edge that permits an understanding of how things could be (or could have been) otherwise - a stance that in this occasion is even pitted against the theoretical framework itself. This posture is predicated in the name of the intimate intertwinement between facts and values, as well as between analysis and critique (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 7; Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 196). A discourse analyst, as is any other social or political researcher no matter how objective she professes to be, is thus always enmeshed in a particular historical and political context and, by the same token, in a hegemonic battle that attempts to stabilise meaning (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 7; Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 194). The critical apparatus of discourse theory is thus twofold, consisting of the ethical and the normative dimensions.

The ethical critique, which appeals to the ontological foundations of discourse theory and thus has lexical priority over the normative that is instead intrinsically contestable and revisable, is concerned with a detailed analysis of the kind of fantasies underpinning social and political practices (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 198).<sup>5</sup> The particular commitment informing the ethical

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<sup>5</sup> What does fantasy mean in this context? As the the two authors clarify at the outset of their text, the logic of fantasy is borrowed from the Lacanian repertoire and 'shows how subjects are rendered complicit in concealing or covering over the radical contingency of social relations' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 15).



critique has to do with a 'an alternative ethos which signals a commitment to recognizing and exploring the possibilities of the new in contingent encounters' (Glynos, 2008: 291). It is the politics of 'traversing the fantasy', which predicates a libidinal investment more faithful to the positive/negative dialectics (Stavrakakis, 2007: 282) or, put differently, a *jouissance feminine* whereby the subject is taken to recognise contingency and pursue a type of enjoyment that does not follow the impulse to 'complete' or 'totalise' (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2008: 265).

As for the normative critique, the position adopted by discourse theory springs from the principles of radical democracy (HSS; Mouffe, 1992, 1993, 2000). These alternative values are openly projected into the object of study in order to produce a fuller critical explanation (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2007: 193). In this regard however, it is paramount to note that the normative options informing the social logics through which a practice is described are not pure projections, but typically exist in incipient form and are thus opened up and supported by the analyst (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 196).

A last methodological disclaimer is needed in the light of the ethical and normative 'guidelines' that have just been expounded. Against the positivist, naturalist and rationalist conceptions of knowledge and method which conceive research in terms of determinative judgements, a reflective type of judgement is herein advanced (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 182-183). This entails adopting an approach based on intuition, theoretical expertise and the practice of articulation. In other words, 'having immersed oneself in a given discursive field consisting of texts, documents, interviews, and social practices, the researcher draws on her or his theoretical expertise to make particular judgements as to whether something counts as an 'x' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 184).

In this regard, both primary and secondary sources have been consulted in relation to the empirical cases. As for the PCI, a good part of the work on primary sources has been conducted at the archives of the *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci*, where all the available party documentation, chiefly consisting of meeting minutes, newsletters, pamphlets, speeches, public statements, videos, recordings, personal diaries, PCI newspapers and journals, is stored. As the emphasis of the analysis falls on the initial structuring of the PCI which was to determine much of its subsequent politics, documents of this sort have been consulted especially in relation to the first few years of the post-war PCI. Many of the political autobiographies of the PCI's leaders have also been looked at, in this case with reference to the whole period under consideration. The same applies to the secondary bibliography, which is very voluminous and that has provided the greatest wherewithal for the analysis of the period from the early 1950s onwards. The most renown explicative and interpretative works of different political persuasions and with diverging attitudes toward the PCI have been taken into consideration. Other less known works have been considered insofar as they cast light on aspects of interest. In the case of the Citizens' Revolution instead, the availability of first-hand documents - mainly speeches, state and party documents, newspapers - has been much greater and easier given the advent of the internet and my personal involvement in it. No particular time differentiation applies here, also thanks to the much shorter period under review. The secondary bibliography on the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution is instead pretty scant. It is also worth emphasising that most of it, especially that available in English, is notably adverse to Correa and the political process as a whole.

In order to reinforce the hermeneutical passage which is considered here to be vital in retrieving the political grammar of a practice (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 134), four extended interviews with former political leaders have been carried out for the PCI case, namely with

Luciana Castellina, Maria Lisa Cinciari Rodano, Alfredo Reichlin and Aldo Tortorella. In Appendix A, further information about the interviews is provided. Such phenomenological accounts, that are hard to find in party materials, have been very important in order to characterise many aspects of the discourse of the PCI. Although only a few references are present in the text, they have been precious in reconstructing the historical parabola of the party. The interviews with political leaders have been crucial in order to infer certain pieces of contextual information that enabled me to situate their own interventions and that of other political figures. In other words, they have been particularly helpful to reconstruct internal divisions and battles. They have also been important in directing my research toward determined factual aspects, bibliographies or materials. The interviews have all initially been fairly open in the periods under discussion, and then narrowed down the focus on specific questions that were of particular interest for the research. As a relatively well-situated agent in the Italian public debate, my position may have had a certain weight in determining the answers of some of the interviewees. I have tried to neutralise this as much as possible by maintaining an agnostic stance on the questions under scrutiny. As for the Ecuadorian case, no interview has been realised. The reason for this is that during the time of the research, my exposure in the Ecuadorian context as a political columnist of a widely circulated national newspaper made interviews with political leaders unwise. Nevertheless, the fact of having worked in different occasions for the government of Correa in the past has provided, though only informally, insights of utmost interest and value insofar as the hermeneutical exercise is concerned.

### **Why these cases?**

The cases chosen for the empirical analysis offer interesting material in order to reflect critically upon the notions of populism and hegemony. The two cases have in fact sparked talk of both populism and hegemony. The Italian Communist Party has been mostly treated as an exemplar of a counter-hegemonic force. This is in part due to the avowed goal of its leader Palmiro Togliatti to make Gramsci's notion of hegemony the cornerstone of the PCI's strategy. Togliatti and Gramsci were not just friends and colleagues during the years of the editorial experience of *Ordine Nuovo* in the 1910s in Turin and co-founders and leaders of the Italian Communist Party from the 1920s onwards. Following the end of WW2, Togliatti adopted the old friend, who died in 1937, as the founding father, greatest theoretician and leading historical figure of the Italian communist movement. This move was accompanied by the progressive publication of Gramsci's prison diaries, Notebooks and early writings in the late 1940s, coordinated by Togliatti himself. Through a seemingly endless number of writings and speeches, Togliatti was also the main interpreter of Gramsci's legacy in a context in which different views animated a rich debate on the Sardinian thinker. Togliatti's politics became then known as the embodiment of Gramsci's intellectual heritage and its political continuation. As put by Sassoon:

In 1944 Gramsci was for Italian communists little more than a name, the name of their most famous martyr. The notes he wrote in jail had not yet been published or circulated, but Togliatti had been acquainted with them and had tried to assimilate them, putting himself in the position to present them to his party as a new and rational theoretical position in order to develop a national strategy (Sassoon, 1980: 27).

Yet hegemony was not simply a strategic goal. To the extent that it permitted the PCI to exercise a wider degree of influence, it also speaks of the party's actual capacity to take root within civil society and have a bearing on political outcomes. Following WW2, the Italian Communist Party experienced a rapid increase in its popularity. The elections held in 1946 for

the Constituent Assembly testify a profound mutation of the electoral allegiances once the experience of Fascism came to an end. The PCI gained a stunning 18.93% share of the national vote, corresponding to more than 4 million votes. That was certainly a considerable leap forward if compared to the last available result before Mussolini banned elections: in 1924 the PCI got 3.74%, less than 300,000 votes. In the following decades, the PCI managed to turn itself into one of the key political actors in the country, becoming the largest communist party in the western world, both in terms of members and votes. It peaked at 36.4% of the vote in the general elections of 1976 and from 1963 until its dissolution in 1991 it never went below 25%. Despite it never reached power at a national level, it governed many local councils and regions, and has been treated as one of the most exemplary communist parties in a liberal-democratic context in terms of political influence, theoretical elaboration and good governance (Sassoon, 1980: xi-xii and Putnam et al, 1993: 119). The degree of penetration of the PCI into different spheres of the social by way of an institutional and cultural 'craftsmanship' is indicative of the relative success of this strategy and thus talk of hegemony also takes up an analytical connotation here. Although it could not be said that the PCI became hegemonic *tout court*, it certainly created a mass party that was able to exert its sway among many different social classes, attract many prestigious intellectuals, turn its newspaper into one of the most widely read and mobilise a huge number of citizens even beyond its traditional electorate (Sassoon, 1980: xii).

However, the PCI has also been associated with the notion of populism, although less decidedly and in fewer instances. Ernesto Laclau hints at this in an explicit engagement with the PCI, by referring to Togliatti's conception as one 'which sees in the socialist political struggle an effort to articulate these democratic antagonisms around a popular hegemonic pole' (Laclau, 1980b: 252). Here we have a reference to both the notion of hegemony and that

of populism. In a later iteration, Laclau suggests that Togliatti attempted to constitute 'a people' by incorporating a plurality of sectors around the centrality of the working class, but that this did not become fully fledged populism because of a number of structural limitations (OPR: 182-186). Yet the recognition of a populist tendency is evident. Workerists and post-workerists have also labelled the politics of the PCI as populist, although this was given a negative inflection. In his polemics against the cultural expressions of the Resistance and post-Resistance period, Asor Rosa defines them as carrying populist characteristics in a way that is indicative of a political discomfort with the whole Togliattian enterprise. In particular, the participation of various social strata clearly tells the PCI apart from proper class struggle (Asor Rosa, 1988: 129-130). The PCI also taps well into the question of leadership and democracy. Associated as it was with international communism, the PCI was often accused of hiding its real intentions, portrayed as authoritarian in character. The preponderant role of Togliatti within the party also begs an in-depth scrutiny of its role and entailments. However, over time it became clear that the 'Italian road to socialism' which put emphasis on democracy and parliamentary bargaining was more genuine than some of its critics thought, even though the question is far from settled; some stressing the anti-democratic world-view of much the PCI's grassroots and the fundamental incompatibility between Marxism and democracy (Pellicani, 1990: 134, 163-164).

As for the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution, there is a broad consensus in the relevant literature to define it as a populist political practice, although with different accents. Why populist? The personalistic and unmediated leadership of Rafael Correa has been taken by many as the defining character of his populist politics. A fairly distinguished heterodox-leaning economics professor in the national scene, Correa was appointed as Finance Minister in 2006 by the then interim President Alfredo Palacio. While in the post, he took a number of

controversial redistributive measures that brought about turmoil in the country and after which he was ousted. As a result, he gained much visibility and media coverage, and decided to found a political movement, which gathered different pre-existing political groups and urban intellectuals, and discursively put together a number of unmet demands, thereby appealing to different social segments. Initially considered as the underdog, Correa managed to win the following electoral round and became President in January 2007 giving birth to what he emphatically termed the Citizens' Revolution. He then pushed for the institution of a Constituent Assembly, resulting in the 'Montecristi Constitution' - approved in 2008 - which, in the project of Correa, was meant to pave the way out of neoliberalism. Since then, Correa was then re-elected other two times, in 2009 and 2013. In 2017, Lenin Moreno, his designated successor, replaced him in power following a tight electoral race.

Carlos de la Torre points out that 'Correa positions himself as a left-of-center politician with a special concern for the poor and marginalized, though his is a populism with a curiously elitist and technocratic bent' (de la Torre, 2013: 33). The former aspect has to do with his policies. Correa's executive consistently delivered in terms of poverty alleviation (CEPAL, 2014; SENPLADES, 2013: 113-114) and reduction of inequalities (SENPLADES, 2013: 114-115), especially thanks to an extended welfare provision in the areas of education and health-care, and also promoted the construction of major infrastructures in the country (with special emphasis on connectivity and electrical power production). A heterodox economic policy with anti-cyclical macromanagement was also adopted, including the set-up of a debt-audit commission that finally resulted in a huge relief of its burden (SENPLADES, 2013: 15, 53-58, 428). As for the technocratic qualification, it owes to Correa's extensive reliance on many collaborators coming from the academic world. The reliance on highly qualified personnel has not spared Correa from accusations concerning his scant regard for democracy. In a recent

paper, de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos argue, following the thesis of Guillermo O'Donnell, that the weakening of liberal institutions in Ecuador could lead to 'the slow death of democracy' (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016: 221). In particular, they focus their attention on how Correa's government related to social and indigenous movements and the media, as well as on the shaping of state institutions under his rule. As for the latter, the authors highlight that despite the fairness of all electoral processes, 'Correa skewed the playing field' (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016: 227) thanks to the hold on all the relevant institutions of control, a favourable electoral re-engineering and the pursuit of redistributive economic policies. As for the relationship with social and indigenous movements, these were tamed on the one hand by co-opting their mid-level leaders and some of the bases, and on the other by repressing the most critical voices (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016: 228).

Other scholars lay emphasis on the beneficial ruptures that the Citizens' Revolution was able to operate, with stress on the socio-economic policies that improved the conditions of the most vulnerable sectors of society in a context of marked inequalities. In particular, Franklin Ramírez stresses the importance of the dismantling of the neoliberal agenda through the reappearance of the state (Ramírez Gallegos, F. 2012: 85). Errejón and Guijarro advance a more positive appraisal of populism in their assessment of the political changes occurred in Ecuador and Bolivia:

It is no coincidence that political change struck in both countries through a movement that broke with the political system, granting new positions to political actors and substantially changing the distribution of power. The means of building political power in the midst of a severe organic crisis was populism, the discursive production of a dichotomous order that opposed the "people" to the incompetent, corrupt, and selfish elites. Charismatic leadership played a key role in consolidating a developing political identity characterized by a rejection of the previous elitist order (Errejón and Guijarro, 2015: 3).



The two authors go on to introduce the notion of hegemony in relation to both cases, in terms of the degree of institutionalisation of the leadership and political supremacy of the two respective governing parties. Despite acknowledging the more comprehensive character of the hegemony obtained by the Bolivian MAS, they are still willing to consider PAIS, the governing movement of the Citizens' Revolution, as hegemonic (Errejón and Guijarro, 2015: 17). Writing from a Laclauian perspective, they seem to conflate populism and hegemony, reinforcing the suspicion of their conceptual overlapping. In order to dissipate this and other doubts, let us now proceed to analyse the corpus of the Argentine thinker insofar as the two notions are concerned.

## **Chapter 2: Populism and hegemony in Laclau: a genealogy**

The terrain of the analysis has now been set. The first task is that of plunging into Laclau's corpus and scrutinising the precise evolution of the notions of populism and hegemony throughout his work. This exercise poses a dilemma: what is to be reviewed and taken into consideration for this type of exercise? Despite not being boundless, as is the case with many other authors, Laclau's production is certainly considerable in terms of extension. Equally, much has been written about his political theory by a variety of authors, some of whom have contributed to extend, improve and review some of the nuances of Laclau's theory while maintaining intact the overall philosophical orientation - an approach that, as made clear from the very introduction, also inspires the present work.

As for Laclau's texts, the choice adopted here is that of following his beginnings step by step, that is considering (almost) every piece of work for the first few years of his trajectory, until a certain sedimentation of his thought took place. In fact, from the point of view of the notions of populism and hegemony, it is possible to claim that a more oscillating and exploratory attitude was maintained until the mid-1980s. Despite some considerable revisions taking place after this time, the necessity to track every single piece of work is considerably diminished in this regard. After that period then, the analysis provided here is mostly concerned with his most notable and well-known pieces of work. Insofar as the choice of which authors concerned with Laclau to include in the discussion, the approach has been that of dedicating more although not exclusive attention to those internal to the Essex school. Precisely because their polemical thrust is similar to that pursued here, their interventions provide the best available material. They also display an unrivalled degree of knowledge of the subject at hand. In this sense, it is also to be admitted that much of the literature that

maintains a polemical attitude towards Laclau, though by no means all of it, is often recalcitrant to engage with the nitty-gritty and the intricacies of his thought. Many authors indeed limit themselves to cursory interventions that take issues only with the general post-Marxist theoretical architecture of the Argentine and only take into account some of his most visible works, while failing to engage with the evolution of his thought and with its internal subtleties.

The chapter is divided in four sections. The first section 'Laclau, strategy and political ontology' is a brief reflection on why the thought of Laclau ought to be considered as strategic. This is an important aspect, as I seek to justify the particular reading that I make of Laclau. The increasingly abstract character of his writings has induced many to suspect an ever-greater detachment from partisan politics. This section is thus aimed at explaining why the political ontology that he develops is instead chiefly aimed at catering emancipatory theory and practice; not simply a theory of the political then, but a theory of the political with a project behind. In particular, what is claimed is that it is the post-foundational thrust of Laclau's ontology captured by the Heideggerian 'difference as difference' to provide a way out of metaphysics and make it possible to think of emancipations strategically. The remaining three sections correspond to the long work of inquiry into Laclau's thought by way of a genealogical reading. Informed by the Skinnerian and Foucauldian instruments introduced in the previous chapter, the section traces the genesis, evolution, changes of mind, deviations and afterthoughts regarding populism and hegemony in his corpus. By teasing out both the merits and the impasses that his conceptions engender, the section also looks at the interlocking between the two notions and other fundamental categories that Laclau makes use of. The second section 'Hegemony and populism: thinking out of the box' looks at the early Laclau and how the emergence of the two notions was conducive to a heterodox

thought within the Marxism paradigm. The third section 'Hegemony: the only game left in town' analyses the post-Marxist Laclau where the radicalisation of the notion of hegemony from the early 1980s onwards went hand in hand with the almost complete disappearance of the notion of populism. Finally, the fourth section 'Populism and hegemony reloaded' deals with the latest Laclau who, from the publication of OPR, rescues populism once again and conjugates it with hegemony, while further developing some of the insights developed in the previous decades.

### **Laclau, strategy and political ontology**

Even though Laclau cannot be considered a philosopher *strictu senso* - argues Oliver Marchart in a brief but incisive compendium - his work maintains a philosophical kernel that Marchart terms 'the strictly philosophical', whose presence is nevertheless inextricable from the articulation and mutual contamination established with science (intended as linguistics and discourse analysis) and the political practice/theory dyad (Marchart, 2004: 54-56). It is particularly important to note at this point that, for Laclau, the separation between political theory and political practice 'is largely an artificial operation' as 'theoretico-political categories do not only exist in books but are also part of discourses actually informing institutions and social operations' (Laclau, 1994b: 2). It is undoubtedly through the encounter with the work of Gramsci that the operation of framing his militant experience into a coherent theoretical and analytical framework is made possible (Marchart, 2004: 55). All of this unequivocally defines the overall thrust of Laclau's intervention: '[d]espite its crystal-clear and 'logical' argumentative procedures, [...] the very nature of his thought is decisively strategic' (Marchart, 2004: 55). Here, of course, the strategic refers to the roads that Laclau envisages

for emancipatory action, an interest already evidently manifest from the title of the 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS), co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, in which the three fields are brought to the fore.<sup>6</sup>

Yet what Marchart calls the 'strictly philosophical' in Laclau is precisely what prevents the political practice/theory complex from descending 'into a manifesto for blind activism' (Marchart, 2004: 69). Be that as it may, Laclau returns to where he departed from. Or did he ever distance himself from it? As he explains in an interview about his initial political engagement and its constant influence thereafter:

That's the reason why I didn't have to wait to read post-structuralist texts to understand what a 'hinge', 'hymen', 'floating signifier' or the 'metaphysics of presence' were: I'd already learnt this through my practical experience as a political activist in Buenos Aires. [...] Throughout his life Joyce returned to his native experience in Dublin; for me it is those years of political struggle in the Argentina of the 1960s that come to mind as a point of reference and comparison (NR: 200).

Although no longer a political activist, Laclau purposefully avoided engaging in pure, abstract philosophy exempt of political reverberations and tried to carve his insights so as to stimulate the renovation of the emancipatory/socialist repertoire and to further the analysis of concrete political and social phenomena. This could not have been clearer in the purchase and influence that his last monograph on populism (OPR) exercised amid the Latin American pink-tide of progressive projects of the 2000s and 2010s, not to mention the proximity that he has openly maintained with these governments, with special emphasis on his native Argentina (see Garcia Sigman, 2013).<sup>7</sup> Yet, it is also true that the reflections of Laclau are ever more markedly ontological and oriented towards the definition of a general theory of politics - with

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<sup>6</sup> Laclau's previous interventions are also clearly oriented towards the political/strategic but lack the fusion of the above mentioned fields. Even more importantly, Laclau had not yet moved beyond the Marxist paradigm.

<sup>7</sup> However, this connection should not be exaggerated as various Argentinean media have done. As confirmed to me by Chantal Mouffe and Paula Biglieri, Laclau met Néstor Kirchner only once, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner two or three times.

the result giving birth to a theoretical system that Perry Anderson has not hesitated to define in a recent article as 'of often forbidding technicality' (Anderson, 2016: 81) - while neglecting the normative aspect that continues instead to be central in the work of his wife and intellectual partner Chantal Mouffe. More generally, the reference to 'partisan politics' becomes rarer, though never entirely absent in the individual books, while emerging more clearly in 'minor' interventions, such as journal articles and interviews, and in the collective books (see Laclau, 2000; Laclau 2000b).

Of course, it is not the presence of a normative project that makes a difference here. Normativity and ethics as traditionally understood<sup>8</sup> do not entail in and of themselves a strategic approach. To be even blunter, ethics utterly excludes strategy. The moral universalism which ethics is imbued with 'privileges a particular version of the good on the basis of a theoretical claim about the nature of all life, that is an ontology of the social; it cannot admit any other good and ignores its own contingency in linking a theory of knowledge to a theory of morality' (Devenney 2004: 169). Under pure universalism, the room for strategy is eliminated, as universalism comes necessarily with a more or less robust teleological account of the human and the world. It follows that if the place of the universal is a given, we are faced with a deterministic account that leaves little space for discrepancy from the alleged linear development of things or from how things ought to look like. At best, it can make sense to speak of tactics as a way to facilitate the natural course of History or to steer events within the little area left up to indeterminateness. The unfolding of events is by and large already traced: thinking strategically does not pertain to this field. If it is not a specifically normative project then, it is legitimate to wonder what it is that makes Laclau's corpus as particularly

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<sup>8</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapter, a different use of the term 'ethics' and its derivative 'ethical' is made within the Essex school of discourse theory.

useful for thinking the strategic. The answer is precisely the 'strictly philosophical' kernel to which Marchart alludes, which confers a strategic character to Laclau's thought. What is this kernel, then? For Marchart, this needs to be framed in the ontological difference, that is in the 'difference as difference' as understood by Heidegger (Marchart, 2004: 56).

In the article *The Impossibility of Society*, originally published in 1983, Laclau points to the 'crisis of the concept of social totality' which 'operated as an underlying principle of intelligibility of the social order' (Laclau, 1983: 25; also in NR: 90). In other words, what is banned from Laclau is the concept of an immutable essence, a positive object whose knowledge can tell us what is really behind 'the empirical variations expressed at the surface of social life' (Laclau, 1983: 25; also in NR: 90). Laclau contrasts to this grounding totality 'the infinitude of the social', that is, an uncontrollable 'excess of meaning' that points to the limitation of each structure, and hence the impossibility of society as a unitary and intelligible object. Society therefore cannot fix its meaning once and for all, as it is constantly overwhelmed by the 'infinite play of differences'. If the argument were exhausted here, we would have to add Laclau to the likes of postmodern or anti-foundationalist thinkers, à la Lyotard or Feyerabend. However, this is not the case. The impossibility of a universal is coupled with its necessity, paving the way to the productive aspect of Laclau's political theory, and making it post- rather than anti-foundationalist. A fixed universal is thus impossible, but at the same time always and necessarily sought, thereby becoming, in Derridean fashion, undecidable; impossible to determine *a priori*. For Laclau, in fact, a universe devoid of any fixation of meaning would be a psychotic universe. 'The social is not only the infinite play of differences. It is also the attempt to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order' (Laclau, 1983: 25; also in NR: 90). What Laclau calls 'suture', which stands for the definitive closure of social, is therefore impossible, but the tension to

reach it serves as a condition of possibility for partial and relative fixations by virtue of the establishment of nodal points, which cannot, however, be fixed *a priori*. Therefore, instead of being completely swept away, universalism is maintained through the attention to the contingent foundations and the constituent processes of these nodal points (Laclau, 1994b: 2).

The further steps that add complexity to this line of reasoning will be clarified along the course of the discussion on the notions of hegemony and populism. What we need to cast light upon at this stage is the three pairs of differences that derive from the post-foundationalist argument of Laclau.<sup>9</sup> The first has to do with the distinction between the social and the political, which Laclau borrows from Husserl's couplet sedimentation vs. reactivation, to which I hinted in the previous chapter. The social is the terrain of what is presented as objective, as natural: in other words, sedimented, routinised discursive practices, which have an interest in concealing and forgetting their origins, their moment of institution and contingency so as to avert the emergence of alternatives (NR: 34). To use Laclau's language and at the same time introduce his notion of space, these are hegemonic fixations of meaning in topographies. His notion of time, on the other hand, involves the so-called dislocation of these topographies in what he considers as a process of reactivation, through which the acquired meanings are dissolved (NR: 41-42). It is the moment of the political that, through antagonism, is manifested by the questioning of existing social relationships and by the possibility of establishing new hegemonic configurations. There emerges, by Laclau's very admission, the ontological significance of his own apparatus: 'The distinction between the social and the political is thus ontologically constitutive of social relations' (NR: 35).

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<sup>9</sup> See Marchart, 2007: 138-149.



The second pair of differences reflects the first, as the term 'the political' is maintained, as well as the underlying idea concerning the impossibility of closure, but this time is opposed to politics. The distinction is more resonant in the writings of the theorists close to Laclau, remaining almost sketched in his texts (Marchart, 2007: 142). It is Mouffe, who firstly and most convincingly approached the thought of Carl Schmitt from which this pair is borrowed, to provide the most complete description:

By 'the political', I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. 'Politics', on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of the 'political' (Mouffe, 2000: 101).

While 'the political' defines a horizon, a logic that provides the quasi-transcendental coordinates through which sedimentation and desedimentation of meaning take place, politics represents the order of the real institutions, of concrete practices that are affected by the previous logic. In this way, the political and politics never come to coincide, remaining necessarily confined to different planes. Doing otherwise would mean resuscitating the notion of a universal foundation.

It is the same difference which exists in the third pair between the ontological and the ontic levels, the former concerning the impossibility of a definitive reconciliation, the latter equivalent to the empirical register. To be sure, this pair generalises the line of reasoning of the previous pair, projecting it out of the regional character in which the political/politics difference is proposed. In this way, it vividly comes to the fore that Laclau's discourse theory cannot be reduced to a theory of political meaning, since it is rather a theory of meaning *tout court*. The political logic of signification is not limited to the subset of politics, but it also indicates the political character of systems of non-political significance (Marchart, 2007: 146-

147). Ultimately, there is an insurmountable hiatus between the two levels, which makes them nonetheless dependent on one another: the ontic register cannot be enclosed in itself, while the ontological can only show itself through the ontic (Laclau and Zac, 1994: 30).

However, this distance remains fundamental:

If we had a dialogical situation in which we reached, at least as a regulative idea, a point in which between the ontic and the ontological dimensions there would be no difference, in which there would be a complete overlapping, then in that case there would be nothing to hegemonize because this absent fullness of the community could be given by one and only one political content (Laclau, 1999: 135).

Therefore, no specific and determinable content can hegemonise representation indefinitely.

This is also captured by the relationship between contingency and necessity. In fact, for Laclau it 'is not one of exteriority between two domains, but one of mutual subversion: contingency exists *within* necessity, preventing the consolidation of the latter but, precisely because of that, contingency is also absolutely necessary' (Laclau 2004: 309).

Returning to the motive that led to the opening of this digression, why does the strictly philosophical discourse allow us to think strategically? As Laclau tells us emphatically:

Once undecidability has reached the ground itself, once the organization of a certain camp is governed by a hegemonic decision - hegemonic because it is not objectively determined, because different decisions were also possible - the realm of philosophy comes to an end and the realm of politics begins (Laclau, 1991: 98; also in E: 123).

The statement reaffirms the sense of the ontological difference as mentioned above and, in assimilating the hegemonic character of society, opens up unexplored potentialities for political action. In fact, Laclau defines the theory of hegemony as the precondition for strategic thinking. It is the unfinished and non-finite nature of social relations which forces us to think of the construction (always radically contingent and therefore not absorbable by a higher order process (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 109)) of the universal in terms of political

articulation and the forging of ever-new political identities. As we know, it is hegemony and populism that Laclau invokes in order to give substance to the strategic nature of his ontology. It is to a detailed study of their development in Laclau's corpus that I now turn.

### **Hegemony and populism: thinking out of the box**

We have seen that Ernesto Laclau owes much of his fame to the re-elaboration of the concepts of hegemony and populism. Even though the two concepts owe their final status to the 'strictly philosophical', this should not induce us to think that they descend directly from it. In other words, it is not the case that the 'strictly philosophical' was firstly and autonomously developed, only to be then somehow instrumentally fitted to the concepts at stake. In reality Laclau had already concentrated on populism and hegemony in the 1970s when, in what is traditionally referred to as his 'Althusserian phase', he had not fully developed his post-foundational reflections. What is the connection then? It was the 'encounter' with the analytical and the political limitations imposed by economic determinism and class reductionism, and the intuition that populism and hegemony conveyed something that helped to overcome those obstacles, that facilitated the very process of leaving the perimeter of Marxism and the embracement of some key post-structuralist insights. It would thus be more appropriate to say that the development of the 'strictly philosophical' and the notions of populism and hegemony have moved *pari passu*. However, this is a curious type of *pari passu*: while Laclau devotes most of his initial energies to scrutinise the conception of populism (see the essays *Fascism and Ideology* and *Towards a Theory of Populism* in PIM), it is hegemony which pervades much of his subsequent work from HSS onwards, with populism

finding a place again, after a long omission of the concept<sup>10</sup>, in his last monograph *On Populist Reason* (OPR) and his subsequent works. But let us proceed with order and be more precise as to the steps of Laclau's intellectual trajectory.

In the early Laclau - and by early it is meant anything that appeared before HSS (1985) - it is possible to identify three cumulative breaking points. The first few writings of Laclau did not yet delineate a clear theoretical orientation other than a broad allegiance to Marxism, a bent for historic mentalities and political economy, the fondness to elucidate the distinction between feudalism and capitalism, as well as the application of the latter preoccupation to the South American context and the Argentinean one in particular (Laclau, 1963; Laclau, 1969). Though certainly very erudite and original in their own right, *prima facie* these writings do not seem to anticipate anything of his later works, as populism and hegemony are nowhere to be found and the questions that he deals with seem to have little to do with the purely theoretical themes that have subsequently become the hallmark of his academic production. However, it is important to note his sophisticated awareness of the uneven and combined development of Latin Americas economies, although understood in terms that differ from those of dependency theory. This differentiation is made explicit in the 1971 polemic with Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein *Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America* (Laclau, 1971; also in PIM). In reality, these original insights on political economy can be legitimately considered the 'forgotten origins' of Laclau's thought as, upon closer examination, they prove fundamental in the comprehension of his theoretical development. Such writings anticipate his impatience towards the most deterministic versions of Marxism and his allergy for the political options influenced by such reflections. As Laclau

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<sup>10</sup>In this period, there exist only a couple of very minor exceptions in which Laclau made explicit reference to populism (Laclau, 1987; NR: 201).

himself later affirms, it is in the phenomena connected to unequal and combined development that one finds the avenue to deconstruct the rationality, positivity and transparency inherent to Marxist categories (Laclau, 1986: 332; also in NR: 95).

But before looking at these insights, where do such inclinations come from? A look at the political christening of Laclau in the 1950s and 1960s is thoroughly helpful in framing his intellectual evolution. Here, the biographical inspection suggested by Skinner is key. As Laclau himself reveals in a 1988 interview, he joined the *Partido Socialista Argentino* (Argentinean Socialist Party) in 1958 and became deeply involved in student struggles. As the party split, in 1963 Laclau joined the *Partido Socialista de la Izquierda Nacional* (Socialist Party of the National Left), led by the Trotskyist Jorge Abelardo Ramos, and became the editor of *Lucha Obrera* (Workers' Struggle), the party's weekly journal (NR: 197-198). Abelardo Ramos is a crucial figure here, as he was the ideologue of the so-called *Izquierda Nacional* (National Left), an anti-imperialist and democratic current that attempted to update the concept of the 'permanent revolution' (NR: 198) and which gained currency also in Uruguay, Chile and Bolivia. In a context where the Left was predominantly opposed to Peronism, the critically supportive stance of Abelardo Ramos and his party was to deeply influence Laclau's understanding of the phenomenon: for them, Peronism 'had started [the anti-imperialist revolution] under bourgeois banners [...] but it was only through a socialist hegemonization of the democratic banners that it could achieve stability and make up for lost ground' (NR: 198). In this sense, the task of the socialists was that of consolidating and, by siding with workers and offering a socialist perspective, advancing on the path that Perón had undertaken but was reluctant to carry forward because of his bourgeois leanings. Laclau would later reflect critically on this experience, as it was still vitiated by class reductionism and an interpretation of politics in terms of the mere representation of interests (NR: 199). Besides this aspect,

Peronism was seen as representing the possibility of linking the democratic-bourgeois and the socialist revolutions, in a swift transition from feudalism to socialism, which substantially differs from Laclau's later thesis, according to which an agrarian type of capitalism had already firmly taken hold in the country (Laclau, 1969: 391-400; Laclau, 1973: 122-125). Yet we cannot but trace in the choice of this type of militancy, and in a fairly generous evaluation of Peronism, the genesis of Laclau's propensity to think in national-popular terms as well as beyond the rigid boundaries imposed by the crudest versions of Marxism and to see emancipation as something exceeding the proposition of too narrow identities.

It is not a coincidence that Abelardo Ramos, along with Raul Scalabrini Ortiz, Arturo Jauretche and the whole FORJA group, a political subject of populist-nationalist orientation coming from the Argentinean radicalism who likewise supported Perón in opposition to Argentinean liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s, appear in the text that is taken here as marking the first discontinuity in Laclau's thinking. In *Argentina - Imperialist Strategy and the May Crisis* (Laclau, 1970), he decidedly puts forward for the first time an endorsement of the populist road:

The populism of the working-class and the jacobinism of the petty bourgeoisie will then be combined and surpassed in a form adequate to the tasks of the revolution: the destruction of the capitalist state and the elimination of imperialism (Laclau, 1970: 20).

How does Laclau come to this first rescue of populism and associate it with the working-class? What is the nexus? It is here where the connection with his previous reflections on political economy becomes most evident. For Laclau, the Argentinean Liberal state had differed from other Latin American export-led growth experiences between 1860 and 1930. The differential rent yielded by the fertility of pampa's soil, the monopoly of land and the scarcity of work force enabled the early development of capitalist relations of production and a generation of wealth unheard of in neighbouring countries. This surplus made for a marked distributive

capacity of the Argentinean oligarchy, the development of artisan industries designed to cater oligarchic consumption, a certain stratification of the social order with a nascent middle class, as well as a rapid process of urbanisation. Politically, this translated into the fact that even those who challenged the oligarchy and pushed for a more radical redistribution of the surplus, tended towards an internal reform of the system rather than the questioning of the socio-economic model as a whole (Laclau, 1969: 291-300; Laclau, 1970: 10). But with the Great Depression the model was in tatters: the dependent character of Argentinean capitalism had become evident, with liberalism increasingly becoming 'an ideological cover for the penetration of British capital into the country' and with the 'affirmation of the necessity for autonomous industrial growth based on expropriation of the wealth of the oligarchy' (Laclau, 1970: 11-12). Here, the cleavage within the Argentinean left comes neatly to the fore. On one side, the main nuclei of the Argentinean Left, chiefly comprising the Socialist and Communist Parties, welcomed imperialism as a civilising event, sided with the liberal forces in the attempt to re-establish and democratise the Liberal state that was shattered in 1930 through a military coup, and later conceptualised Peronism as a sort of Fascist movement. On the other, the national and third-worldist Left that saw Peronism as containing promising anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist traits, somehow recognised that 'all those social groups linked to internal domestic production, which had developed since the 1930s as a result of import-substitution policies' (Laclau, 1970: 12) experienced their first direct mass involvement under Peronism. However, not only the working-class of recent formation, but also that which emerged out of the older artisanal workshops - as well testified by the classical sociological work of Murmis and Portantiero (1971) - were part of the social bases of Peronism. Thus, while no precise definition of populism is given at this point, what Laclau conveys is the peculiarly distinct type of political mobilisation of the working class, which remained distant

from the classical 'political outlets' of the Left and found expression in a charismatic leadership, with clear nationalist tendencies. It comes as no surprise that in the following text dedicated to exploring the connections between Peronism and revolution, Laclau defines nationalism 'as the highest level of working class revolutionary consciousness' (Laclau, 1973: 128).<sup>11</sup> At this stage, Laclau is still very much influenced by his Trotskyist experience. This is explicit in his appraisal of Trotsky's exhortation to focus on national peculiarities and the intolerance towards the subordination towards the interests of the Soviet Union imposed by Stalin on communist parties (Laclau, 1973: 118, 128). It is also to be noted that, although no longer persuaded by the thesis of the democratic-bourgeois step, Laclau's perspective remains decidedly revolutionary as the above quotation well testifies.

Still revolutionary, but much more nuanced is the take of Laclau in the second breaking point identified here with the two 1977 essays published for the first time in PIM, *Fascism and Ideology* and *Towards a Theory of Populism*. The two essays display the emergence of the first traits that will define Laclau's contribution: categories such as ideology, dislocation and empty signifier make their initial debut; but most importantly for our purposes hegemony and populism appear here in a considerably refined theoretical configuration. A minor detail reveals the shift: an extensive quote of Trotsky is reported, but this time the primary intention of Laclau is that of revealing his class reductionism, his incapacity to think beyond the conception of a mere proletarian revolution (PIM: 130-131). Rather, the two essays sanction the broadening of Laclau's horizon and his preoccupation for the articulation of the middle classes, which happens at a political and ideological level. As he puts it:

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<sup>11</sup>Although such an explicit appraisal of nationalism will no longer find space in the *oeuvre* of Laclau, it is possible to claim that the possibilities for emancipation remain decidedly tied to the horizons of the nation and of the state. This is so despite some later mild and not particularly well-argued openings toward the necessity 'to open up new spaces for popular struggles' in supranational communities (NR: 59).



The struggle for the articulation of popular-democratic ideology in class ideological discourses is the basic ideological struggle in capitalist social formations. [...] This means that the middle classes are the natural arena for democratic struggle, and at the same time, as we have seen, the arena par excellence of political class struggle (PIM: 114).

But let us look more specifically at how the two concepts that we are concerned with figure in the two essays. The treatment of hegemony is still at a very embryonic level. As he puts in a footnote of the penultimate text *Fascism and Ideology*: '[t]he concept of hegemony, such as it was defined by Gramsci, is a key concept in Marxist political analysis and one which needs to be developed in all its implications' (PIM: 141). He then goes on to mention a number of remarks developed in a (by then) unpublished work by Chantal Mouffe, which would come to light only a little later (Mouffe, 1979). It is important to stress the importance of Mouffe in this respect, because it is precisely her early interest in the work of Gramsci that will then spark Laclau's attention towards the insights of the Italian Marxist.

It is in the following essay *Towards a Theory of Populism* that a somewhat vague notion of hegemony is initially put forward, along with an extensive elaboration of the concept of populism. In a nutshell, the hegemony of a dominant class rests on its capacity to articulate non-class interpellations and contradictions as well as some elements of the discourses of the dominated classes. This move is predicated on the key recognitions that there is no such thing as a causal link between base and superstructure as postulated in the vulgar versions of Marxism and that not all existing ideological elements have a class belonging, as some of them have a popular-democratic character (PIM: 158). However, it is paramount to highlight that hegemony here does not presuppose the imposition of a uniform conception of the world, but rather an articulation of different visions in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralised (PIM: 161-162). On this point, it could be observed that there exists a certain tension with the position of Gramsci, for whom, as noted in the previous chapter, hegemony

does entail a moral and intellectual reform that brings about a general modification of the ideological orientation.

As for populism, it is defined in terms of 'the presentation of popular-democratic interpellations as a synthetic-antagonistic complex with respect to the dominant ideology' (PIM: 172-173). Let us note that it is not simply the predominance of popular-democratic interpellations that constitute a populist discourse. As stated above, these are also present in the hegemonic discourse of a dominant class, but they do not make such a discourse populist. While in the discourse of the dominant class these ideological elements are absorbed and blunted, and in such a way rendered as simple differential particularities, their potential antagonism is instead fully developed in a populist discourse as such interpellations are directly pitted against the state (PIM: 172-173). It can thus be said that populism is characterised by Laclau in terms of the prevalence of non-class, popular-democratic interpellations and antagonism against the current political framework.

Another proviso is needed. This prevalence needs indeed to be characterised in a more nuanced manner, as it is only quantitative, but not qualitative. Laclau upholds at this point that only certain classes can meaningfully lead the articulation of non-class ideological elements. Laclau indeed retains the notion that the antagonism at the level of the relations of production determines in the last instance the historical processes (PIM: 159-160). Such classes are defined as those that perform a basic role in the relations of production - thereby restricting the scope to the bourgeoisie (or fractions thereof) and the working class. What exists between them is a fundamental and irreducible antagonism, whose actual confrontation, however, can only be played out at the political and ideological level, where non-class elements intermingle, thereby ruling out as reductionist any attempt to present

classes in uncontaminated terms (PIM: 160). Laclau thus refers to such classes as the articulating principles of ideological discourses: while the principles do not determine *a priori* the actual and precise contents of a given discourse, they do have a bearing on the form and, by the same token, on the direction of the discourse as a whole. Clearly, the influence of Gramsci and Althusser are decisive here, as well as the concomitant political orientation directed at putting forward a more refined version of socialism (Howarth, 2004: 272 - footnote 4).

Laclau also draws a distinction between two general kinds of populism: on one side, a reactionary populism when it is led by a new fraction of the dominant bloc that wants to assert its dominion; on the other an emancipatory one when it is launched by the working class (PIM: 173-174). Summarising the above then, populism can be captured as the attempt of each fundamental class to present itself in antagonistic fashion as the true incarnation of the 'people' or of the 'national interests' (PIM: 161). Straddling between the two is instead Peronism, on which Laclau's take seems to appear more critical if compared to a few years before. He qualifies Peronism as a Bonapartist regime, whereby populism becomes the articulation of different -isms, a move which concretely entailed the state becoming the mediator between different groups in their antagonism against liberalism. This in turn resulted in the proverbial ideological vacuity of Peronism (PIM: 197-198).

But how do hegemony and populism exactly relate though? Let us quote this revealing passage:

classes cannot assert their hegemony without articulating the people in their discourse; and the specific form of this articulation in the case of a class which seeks to confront the power bloc as a whole, in order to assert its hegemony, will be populism (PIM: 196).

The two terms are linked in such a way that populism becomes the road to hegemony of those subjects that, as of yet, do not hold it. What changes once hegemony is attained? It can be inferred from Laclau's text that once a class and its allies transform into the hegemonic power bloc, the antagonistic dimension fades. In any case, and to sum up somewhat schematically, populism amounts to the only realistic bid for power for a fundamental social subject that intends to alter the existing political framework by way of a different and antagonistic articulation of the existing elements.

However, as we have seen, the subject is still a social subject. In this sense, we are still of course very much within a conception by which 'the anatomy of civil society is Political Economy' (Marx, 1970: 20), that is a view of history as history of production. A view that, as we know, Laclau would later condemn with explicit reference to this phrase (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 91; also in NR: 111; OPR: 144) and with a noticeable disengagement from political economy, which starts to make itself visible already at this stage. Thus, ideological elements may not have a specific class belonging, but 'the level of production relations always maintains the role of determination in the last instance in any social formation' (PIM: 108) and '[p]opular-democratic struggle is subordinate to class struggle and democratic ideology only exists articulated as an abstract moment in a class discourse' (PIM: 170-171). However, it is to be admitted that the take expressed in the two essays is a fairly original one, allowing for variations of the 'deeper movement' of history and thus anticipating further moves in the development of his thought.

Such moves would not take long before they made their emergence. The sociological inflection and the emphasis on class and predetermined actors more generally are entirely demolished in what is identified here as the third breaking point. Commonly, it is *Hegemony*

*and Socialist Strategy* (HSS) to be taken as the watershed between the Marxist Laclau and the post-Marxist Laclau. However, a look at his writings between 1977 and 1985 reveals that Laclau had already undertaken this shift at the beginning of the 1980s, with *Populist rupture and discourse* (Laclau, 1980) introducing a number of significant novelties. The notion of discourse and its correlate discursivity are officially introduced into the Laclauian perspective:

By 'discursive' I do not mean that which refers to 'text' narrowly defined, but to the ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble which constitutes a society as such. The discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social as such (Laclau, 1980: 87).

Such an elucidation is functional to a new way of conceptualising antagonism. For Laclau, antagonism is neither an empirical real opposition à la Kant nor a dialectal contradiction à la Hegel, but a relation of contradiction which emerges within discourse, that is through a contextual positing of an ensemble of positions as opposed to another pole. In other words, neither the positivity of every object is guaranteed nor can the logical opposition between different objects be assumed. Antagonism arises as a meaningful creation through a series of discursive operations. It follows that subordination does not naturally engender its resistance.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is only to the extent that a series of equivalences between diverse elements is antagonistically created in relation to a dominant force that a subject is born and a populist rupture is carried out (Laclau, 1980: 88-90). However, while populism is about the exacerbation of antagonism, bourgeois hegemony is about the re-absorption of antagonism through systems of co-optation. In other terms, populism works towards the construction of a new hegemony by way of constructing a chain of equivalences between positionalities that

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<sup>12</sup>This is well conveyed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* where Laclau and Mouffe clearly differentiate subordination from oppression. While the former merely conveys an actual hierarchy, whereby 'an agent is subject to the decisions of another', the latter designates the moment when 'those relations of subordination [...] transformed themselves into sites of antagonism' (HSS: 153-154).

thereby become popular through their insertion into a dichotomous division of society. On the contrary, a hegemony based on transformistic moves tries to maintain such positionalities as merely democratic - i.e. they are differentially satisfied so as to impede their coagulation in a broader popular identity (Laclau, 1980: 92-93). The argument is further extended in *Socialist Strategy. Where Next?* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981), an explicit introduction to HSS in which Laclau and Mouffe directly confront Marxism and make explicit that the centrality of the working class in a hegemonic project cannot be a given (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 22).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, in the aforementioned text *The Impossibility of Society*, the open-endedness of any social formation is explicitly formulated and the remaining traces of a topography of the social are eliminated. Here, society has no ground, no law of motion, and yet it is characterised by continuous and partial attempts 'to act over that social, to *hegemonize* it' (Laclau, 1983: 22; also in NR: 91). It means that that different discourses will attempt to fix the identities of a system and will prevail only contingently.

### **Hegemony, the only game left in town**

In the following years, other writings set up the ground for the appearance of HSS. Before I plunge into scrutinising its contents, it is important to register two major novelties that, in the early 1980s, constitute the background of stimuli and inducements which influence Laclau. The first is the deepening of Laclau's engagement with the work of Gramsci, the debates around his legacy taking place in Italy and their impact on the politics of the PCI. One of his works is entirely dedicated to the figure of Togliatti (Laclau, 1980b), and most of them actively and positively engage with the Gramscian notions of war of position, integral state and

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<sup>13</sup>However, the book was published four years after the article.

historic bloc (Laclau, 1980b: 257; Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 20; Laclau, 1981: 53-54). Tellingly, Laclau quotes some passages of Gramsci that were already available in the English translation but does so by translating them himself from the Italian edition (Laclau, 1980c: 134). The question of hegemony here becomes increasingly central and overshadows the theme of populism. Hegemony is cashed out not in terms of mere political leadership, but as a progressive modification of common sense and the attainment of a general rearticulation of society (Laclau, 1981: 54), in a way that maintains a similarity with the Gramscian interpretation provided by Williams. For Laclau however, hegemony emerges as a rejection of the revolution/reform dichotomy and the recognition that socialism can be achieved only as a result of partial ruptures (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 20; Laclau, 1981: 54). The second novelty is Laclau's increasing attention to the proliferation of new antagonisms and, as we have seen, the concomitant suspension of the apodictic privilege previously granted to class (Laclau 1980b: 258; Laclau, 1980c: 102, 125; Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 21-22; Laclau, 1981: 57). Here, Laclau is attracted by the opening of new sites of confrontation with capitalism that from the late 1960s onwards sprang up - feminism, environmentalism, pacifism, anti-imperialist struggles, minority groups' claims - and the necessity to find a synthesis between them under a clearly emancipatory perspective. Moreover, '[t]hird World societies have never been comprehensible in terms of a strict class analysis' (Laclau, 1985: 30). At the same time, there emerges a particular sensibility for the autonomy of these emerging demands. As he states with Mouffe:

this unity can in no way proceed via the imposition from above of a unifying principle that seeks to obliterate the differences and homogenise the social field in authoritarian style [...] It cannot be simply a question of adding women's demands to the existing list of those demands considered as socialist; the articulation between socialism and feminism must involve a radical transformation in the way socialism is customarily viewed (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 22).

It is also worthwhile noting the connection between the distancing from populism and the question of autonomy of the new social movements. In relation to their recent emergence in Latin America, Laclau notes how the totalising moment inherent to populism, one of the two most relevant political matrices in the continent up to that point, is called into question.<sup>14</sup> This, he claims, puts an end to the crystallisation of mobilisation in terms of equivalence, and rather opens up a number of new and unexplored political spaces (Laclau, 1985: 41). Yet he affirms in relation to the Brazilian political scenario that '[t]he task of the opposition [...] is to try and construct a broader system of equivalences, i.e. where democratic positionalities are not assimilated separately, but where they can unite around new *popular* subjects' (Laclau, 1985b: 87-88).<sup>15</sup>

Be that as it may, the terrain is set for HSS. Let us recapitulate the main moves undertaken by Laclau and Mouffe in this fundamental theoretical cornerstone of post-Marxism. The book sets itself the purpose of tracing a genealogy of the notion of hegemony with the aim of further radicalising it. Hegemony, the authors maintain, initially creeps into Marxist debates as a result of the reflections of 'the broken mirror of 'historical necessity'' (HSS: 8). In particular, it is two empirical stumbling blocks that made their appearance towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century that spurred the development of the notion: on one side, the need to overcome the fragmentation between different struggles and subject positions that impeded the working class' transformation from a 'class in itself' into a 'class for itself', on the other the 'uneven and combined development' of the Russian context, which

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<sup>14</sup>In another coeval text, such a distancing takes a more nuanced form by specifying that his perplexity is addressed to the military developmental politics that obliterated difference (Laclau, 1985b: 84-85).

<sup>15</sup>Similarly, a couple of years later he warns against the danger of 'a world of *purely* autonomous movements' as 'it will not be a democratic place at all' (Laclau, 1987b: 32). Such an ambiguity is further reinforced by another 1987 text where it is claimed that contemporary forms of resistance in Latin America have politicised social relations, while not going towards a 'popular dichotomous unification'. This is deemed by Laclau as a fragmentary and plural enhancement, but at least 'can give more political stability to the regimes that build themselves on the ruins of the anti-popular dictatorships' (Laclau, 1987: 38).



posed to the local working class the 'need' to take upon itself – to hegemonise - a task that was not meant to be its own in the Marxist schemata, namely the democratic-bourgeois revolution (HSS: 8-10, 48-49).

Let us now consider the two moves that the authors put forward and which qualify their re-elaboration of the concept. The first one corresponds to the complete abandonment of the base/superstructure distinction. Accordingly, there are no mechanical or causal relations between different planes of the social, or to cash it out in Marxist jargon, what goes on in the political and ideological realms cannot be traced back to the economy. The privilege granted to the relations of production is then withdrawn and consequently the hierarchical and topographical differentiation between different spheres of the social is suspended. The latter point shows how radical this move is, as it projects the contribution of Laclau and Mouffe well beyond those formulations which allow for a larger space of indeterminateness and limit the efficacy of the inherent laws of the ground, while ultimately maintaining a topographical structuration of the social and postulating the determination in the last instance of the economy (as in the case of Althusser and Williams). As put by Laclau and Mouffe in order to distinguish their account:

the debate between economist and anti-economist tendencies within Marxism was necessarily reduced to the secondary problem of the weight that should be attached to the superstructures in the determination of historical processes. Yet the most 'superstructuralist' of conceptions retained a naturalist vision of the economy - even when it attempted to limit the area of its effects (HSS: 76).

As a corollary of this, and as anticipated above, the centrality of the working class is discarded in the name of the impossibility to attribute objective interests to it: 'fundamental interests in socialism cannot be logically deduced from determinate positions in the economic process' (HSS: 84). While in PIM non-class elements acquire a certain political direction only insofar as they are articulated to a fundamental class (whose interests are treated as a given), what

emerges in this seminal text is that no element has a secured identity. This is precisely so because there is no ontologically privileged point of irradiation, or a pervading essence, which determines, neither strictly nor in tendential fashion, the movements of the other planes. Hence, not only is teleology debunked, but also the very possibility of fixing a necessary identity of a given agent is severely questioned. In this sense, identity becomes purely relational and contingent, as it finds its origin in the articulation that is established with other elements (HSS: 86). Clearly then, Laclau is also implicitly criticising his own previous account, where the working class and the bourgeoisie represented necessary points of anchorage. In parallel, the authors recognise the multiplication of positions of which a subject can be a bearer. The entailment for emancipatory action is clear:

a variety of other points of rupture and democratic antagonisms can be articulated to a socialist 'collective will' *on an equal footing* with workers' demands. The era of 'privileged subjects' - in the ontological, not practical sense - of the anti-capitalist struggle has been definitively superseded (HSS: 87).

And yet none of these subject positions are inherently progressively oriented, as in the case of the working class. As mentioned, the push exerted on the authors by the concomitant proliferation of the new social movements and its respective burgeoning literature can be clearly appreciated in this text and is later openly admitted by Laclau (Laclau, 1988: 12; also in NR: 180). This influence is clear not only in the final chapter of the text where their normative proposal comes across as somewhat tailored to the new social movements, but also and most importantly in the setting out of a new political ontology. Clearly, it was not only the social movements to have had a bearing in this re-orientation. The parallel decline of working class influence in post-industrial countries, the initial fading of the Fordist system, the penetrating effects of capitalist relations of production into new spheres of social life, the bureaucratisation inherent to the welfare state model, the appearance of mass protests in

Third World countries that owed little to traditional class struggle, the clear signs of exhaustion of the Soviet model and other 'actually existing socialism' experiences have also had an admitted impact on the shaping of HSS (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 80; also in NR: 97). However, we should not forget to take into account the strong influence exerted by a series of theoretical breakthroughs taking place in those years, such as Derrida's deconstruction and Foucault's genealogical method (Howarth, 2004: 272 - footnote 4).<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, HSS occupies a central role as it confirms the will of Laclau and Mouffe to demolish any foundational ground. Where does this formulation take us? Given that no positive essence exists, we are faced with an openness of the social - intended as the expansion of meaning through the proliferation of differences - making it possible to speak of a 'negative essence'. In such a framework, various social orders attempt - but ultimately fail - to domesticate the field of differences (HSS: 96). As hinted above, these attempts are conducted by way of an articulating practice that establishes a relation among elements, which are in turn modified as a result of their joining. Here, we are given an additional definition of discourse: it is the totality resulting from such an articulation (HSS: 105). A discourse is not a given and delimited positivity though, as the relation established between differences 'will be incomplete and pierced by contingency' (HSS: 110). Only partial fixations will be possible thanks to the intervention of privileged discursive points - the so called nodal points - which fix the meaning of a signifying chain (HSS: 112). Such points, however, cannot be defined *a priori* but emerge only contextually. Further to this, Laclau and Mouffe formalise the political logics of equivalence and difference; *in nuce*, such logics account for the

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<sup>16</sup>In *Teorías marxistas del Estado: Debates y Perspectivas* (Marxist Theories of the State: Debates and Perspectives), Laclau anticipates his interest in Foucault's theory of power and the necessity to include psychoanalysis and linguistics into the field of political theory (Laclau, 1981: 57-58). In HSS, there is an incipient engagement with Lacan that, as we shall see, will become more sustained in the 1990s and 2000s.

processes of collective mobilisation that give birth to, defend and naturalise new political frontiers, as well as the opposite process, that is the attempt to interrupt or break up the drawing of frontiers (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 141). In short, Laclau and Mouffe devise the logic of equivalence when the political space is simplified through the substitutability of the elements of a system, and the logic of difference when it becomes increasingly complex through the expansion of the elements of the system (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 130). I shall return to this when approaching Laclau's renewed notion of populism.

Only here can Laclau and Mouffe fully unravel the upshot of their line of reasoning insofar as the notion of hegemony is concerned:

The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the 'elements' have not crystallized into 'moments' [...] It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices (HSS: 134).

It would seem at this point that the notion of hegemony retains the same core meaning of Laclau's previous attempt to define it. This is true, but only up to a point: while the deep (and continuing) sense of the notion lies in the practice of articulating disparate elements, other two conditions are introduced here by Laclau and Mouffe. Firstly, hegemony clearly designates the instability of any system as it lays bare its contingency. Secondly, 'in order to speak of hegemony, the articulatory moment is not sufficient. It is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices' (HSS: 135). The contrast with the previous account by Laclau is sharp:

The ideology of the dominant class, precisely because it is dominant, interpellates not only the members of that class but also members of the dominated classes. The concrete form in which the interpellation of the latter takes place is a partial absorption and neutralisation of those ideological contents through which resistance to the domination of the former is expressed. The characteristic method of securing this objective is to eliminate antagonism and transform it into a simple difference (PIM: 161).

In PIM antagonism is, so to speak, withheld, retired. In HSS instead, hegemony becomes a synonym of articulation *cum* antagonism, that is the creation of sharp (and yet always susceptible to variation) frontiers with other discourses. While before hegemony represented the apex of a successful articulation which then suspends (or at least assuages) antagonism, now antagonism is seen as playing a crucial role in the sustenance of hegemony.<sup>17</sup> This is because antagonism becomes the very index of the limit of objectivity, of its susceptibility of being undermined and reconstructed. Moreover, antagonisms are conceptualised as occurring because social agents are prevented from achieving their identities (HSS: 125). It may seem a minor matter, but deep repercussions follow from this. In fact, under this new theorisation, it becomes difficult to conceptualise those social orders that while abiding to the Lefortian empty space of power (without falling, that is, to the temptation to 're-establish the unity which democracy has shattered between the loci of power, law and knowledge' (HSS: 187)), still manage to some extent to 'naturalise' social relations. Postulating that the limits of objectivity are given by the antagonism established with what lies outside, is defied by the plausible circumstance of having an exteriority which is presented as non-antagonistic. As a result, conceptualising hegemony as strictly tied to antagonism obscures the possibility of the institutionalist discourse, precisely because it fails to consider that power blocs tend to neutralise differences in a non-antagonistic fashion, while remaining ultimately hegemonic (that is, articulatory and unstable in nature). In other terms, what is obscured in making hegemony necessarily antagonistic is that any system will attempt to conceal its contingency to some degree, and this will be done by way of assuaging the antagonistic thrust inherent to its initial irruption. The welfare state is a neat example: while it is perfectly possible to tell

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<sup>17</sup>On this point, a certain ambivalence is still present though. In another 1985 text, Laclau states that '[h]egemony can present itself in two forms: by way of transformism, or by way of popular rupture. The first one is based on transforming antagonisms into differences' (Laclau 1985b: 75). This clearly implies a softening of antagonism.

apart those 'inside' from those 'outside', the constitution of the limit is not necessarily antagonistic (Stäheli, 2004: 226).

The theoretical move just described is tied to the further historico-theoretical step which they name democratic revolution. 'This decisive mutation took place two hundred years ago and can be defined in these terms: the logic of equivalence was transformed into the fundamental instrument of production of the social' (HSS: 155), where by equivalence the authors intend a process of constituting a signifying system through the dissolution of the internal differences, which can become enchained and establish a commonality posited on their shared opposition to a negative object external to them (HSS: 127). Accordingly, articulation becomes possible only in modern times with the end of closed societies, which, regulated as they were by a theological-political logic, determined in transcendental fashion fixed differential positions for individuals. Politics in that context could not be anything but a continuous repetition of hierarchical relations in a clearly delimited space. As he puts in a coeval text: 'a medieval peasant community reproduced itself on the basis of a very rigid articulation of positionalities, which precluded any reshaping or rearticulations. The hegemonic form of the political was absent' (Laclau, 1985b: 73). Only the introduction of the democratic horizon made it possible to think of articulating different forms of resistance to subordination, thereby ushering the possibility of a continuous play of differences. As this play now cannot be frozen, it necessarily implies the drawing and redrawing of boundaries - transforming the antagonism in the very factor presiding over both the possibility and instability of any system of differences. This is why hegemony now defines the modern form of politics, rather than being synonymous with the articulatory supremacy of a power bloc - even though this meaning is subtly retained too (HSS: 138, 154-155). As put some time later: '[a] society is democratic [...] insofar as it refuses

to give its own organization and its own values the status of a *fundamentum inconcussum*' (Laclau, 1988: 19; also in NR: 187).

However, the line of reasoning pursued by Laclau and Mouffe that makes this transformation possible needs to be problematised: if the lack of ground is an ontological property and not an ephemeral historical condition, it must also underlie the periods governed by transcendental politics. In other words, contingency must be necessary and trans-historical in order to be truly ontological, otherwise it falls back into the ontical registry. The high degree of closure displayed by past societies was not the reflection of an objectively pre-determined script, whereby a positive essence really existed back then, whereas now it does not: what the democratic revolution sweeps away is the coercive sedimentation of social relations, that is, a particularly resistant positivity only passed off as immovable. But, if the democratic revolution was possible in the first place, contingency must be upheld through and through. As convincingly put by Critchley, all societies are tacitly hegemonic, but only some of them make it explicit (Critchley, 2004: 115). To put it differently, it is not that the logic of contingency is made possible/necessary by the equality imaginary unleashed by the French Revolution, but rather that the logic of contingency is institutionalised. In these two senses then, HSS represents a step back as compared to PIM.

The first of these two antinomies is only partly dispelled some time later, starting with *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (NR). Let us begin from the end of the book. In NR, an intervention by Slavoj Žižek is published as the closing chapter. In it, the Slovene issues a warning to Laclau: if we hold that social subjects are threatened by the antagonism of 'others' and that their identity is so destabilised, the risk of essentialism is still around the corner, for

this conception 'implies that that antagonistic relations could ultimately be transcended in the name of a final emancipation' (Howarth, 2004: 260). As aptly put by Žižek:

it is not the external enemy who is preventing me from achieving identity with myself, but every identity is already blocked, marked by an impossibility, and the external enemy is simply the small piece, the rest of reality upon which we 'project' or 'externalize' this intrinsic, immanent impossibility (Žižek, 1990: 251-252).

Rather, the lack is ontological and lies at the heart of subjectivity, a failure which cannot be redeemed and which extends to social structures too. There is no need for antagonism in order for us to conclude that a system is intrinsically unstable. However, the warning is only partially taken onboard by Laclau. On one side, he recognises that 'every identity is dislocated insofar as it depends on an outside which both denies that identity and provides its conditions of possibility at the same time' (NR: 39), thus suggesting that the introduction of dislocation now replaces the function previously attributed to antagonism. Dislocation is defined by Laclau in three ways: as the very form of temporality, that is the exact opposite of space, where space is intended as a structural law of necessary successions; as possibility, in the sense that a dislocated structure opens up a panoply of equally accessible avenues, and yet the one chosen is undecidable *a priori*; and as the very form of freedom, understood as the absence of determination, making the subject the bearer of a failed structural identity which propels her to continuous acts of identification (NR: 41-44). Put otherwise, dislocation is that primary ontological terrain which reveals that there is no structural identity as any subject is the bearer of an always already failed structural identity, and that understanding society does not amount to understanding it for what it is, but for what prevents it from being (NR: 44).

However, the replacement of antagonism by dislocation as the index of the limit of objectivity is not fully accomplished, for at other junctures of the text Laclau clearly states otherwise. For example: '[t]he crucial point is that antagonism is the *limit of all objectivity*' (NR: 17) and, a



few pages later, the antagonising force 'blocks the full constitution of the identity' while also being 'part of the conditions of existence of that identity' (NR: 21). Years later, Laclau would bluntly recognise the errors committed in HSS and allegedly emended in NR:

antagonism is already a form of discursive inscription - i.e. of mastery - of something more primary which, from *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* onwards, I started calling 'dislocation'. Not all dislocation needs to be constructed in an antagonistic way' (Laclau, 2004: 319).

As we have seen however, this is not so. In this sense, Urs Stäheli is perfectly right in affirming that 'Laclau cannot escape from a circular construction of the relation between antagonism and dislocation'. Consequently, the proposition to decouple the two notions such that it becomes possible to think of the impossibility of a system prior of its antagonistic symbolisation seems a convincing way to step out of this impasse (Stäheli, 2004: 234).<sup>18</sup> Otherness should instead be substituted by the Derridean 'constitutive outside', which merely conveys, as put by Norval in a text inserted in NR, that:

If any identity is necessarily contaminated by otherness and, as Lacan clearly shows, becomes what it is only by reference to this otherness, it means that any discursive formation, in order to signify itself as such, has to refer to something which is exteriorized in its formation (Norval, 1990: 137).

How about the location of hegemony as the form of political modernity? According to Frosini, dislocation:

now extends the contingent structure to any social system which in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy emerged instead as peculiarly liked to the modern age. [...] If dislocation has always been there, there has always been myth, there has always been a process of reconstitution of social objectivity starting from its "constitutive outside", there has always been "hegemony"; as a consequence, the transition to modernity does not mark a radical discontinuity, it does not introduce a new form (Frosini, 2009: 154).

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<sup>18</sup>A similar argument is also developed by Aletta Norval, who claims that the general logic of individuation should be sundered from the notion antagonism: 'the general logic of individuation tells us nothing about where and how political antagonisms may arise' (Norval, 1997: 70).

This is not necessarily so and the fact that Laclau did not entirely solve the antagonism/dislocation conundrum is responsible for this. To be fair, parts of the text may in effect let us feel entitled to deduce what Frosini suggests, for example when Laclau states that 'a society from which the political has been completely eliminated is inconceivable - it would mean a closed universe merely reproducing itself through repetitive practices' (NR: 35).<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, if we scratch the surface a little, when it comes to radicalising this line of thought, Laclau recoils to the position expressed in HSS:

both the fragmentation and growing limitation of social actors, and the permanent dissociation between social imaginaries and the mythical spaces capable of embodying them, are a process that is deeply rooted in the democratic revolution of the last two centuries, as well as in the overall state of contemporary societies.<sup>20</sup> In relatively stable societies there is no distancing between inscription surfaces and what is inscribed in them. 'Order' is immanent in social relations (NR: 81).

How about the explicit treatment of hegemony? Although hegemony is not the central theme of the text, there emerges what Howarth calls the third (and final) model of hegemony of Laclau (Howarth, 2000: 110). What defines it in contrast to the previous model where only the contingency of the ideological elements was recognised, is the awareness that also the subjects of hegemonic projects and social structures as such are contingent (NR: 28-29). With this move, the connotation that Laclau had initially attributed to hegemony is once again foregrounded: '[e]verything depends [...] on who is in command. It is a question of hegemony in the strictest sense of the term' (NR: 29). The question of command - and of power, one of the most central notions in NR - is key here, as the coherence of neither the hegemonic

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<sup>19</sup>This passage is echoed in another 1988 passage: 'no social practice, not even the most humble acts of our everyday life, are entirely repetitive. 'Articulation', in that sense, is the primary ontological level of the constitution of the real' (Laclau, 1988: 16; also in NR: 184).

<sup>20</sup>Despite locating the genesis of hegemony in the French revolution, Laclau now highlights that under modern capitalism dislocatory relations inherent to processes of commodification, bureaucratisation and globalisation create 'an accelerated tempo of social transformation' which requires 'continual rearticulatory interventions', thus making the notion of hegemony ever more relevant (NR: 39).

project nor of society can be assumed, and thus 'the hegemonic act will not be the *realization* of a rationality preceding it, but an act of radical *construction*' (NR: 29). However, power of whom? There is in this sense an ever-greater detachment from the literality, from the contents, an irreconcilable split between the signifier and the signified. This comes emphatically to the fore in the proposition of the notions of myth and social imaginary. While the former consists in a 'space of representation' that sutures a dislocated system and thus recreates a new objectivity (NR: 61), the latter is 'a crystallized myth' that becomes the very form of fullness, 'an unlimited horizon of inscription of *any* social demand and *any* possible dislocation' (NR: 61, 64). Both are presented as hegemonic operations, but one is led to deduce that the latter is more radical, for its elasticity is greater, even though this happens, as hinted above, at the cost of having 'the literal content [...] deformed and transformed through the addition of an indefinite number of social demands' (NR: 67). Nevertheless, this formulation begs the question: hegemony of what? Hegemony here becomes simply the byword for the chronic instability of any system in modern times, not the predominance of a however flexible and malleable political project. If a particular project lends its name to a social imaginary but whose normative essence becomes unrecognisable if compared to what it used to be, then we should rather wonder whether it has suffered the hegemony of another project. Surely, it is important to assume that any political project that incarnates fullness will necessarily be contaminated and will not be able to impose itself in its purest form, but if an ultimate anchorage with some substantial contents is not maintained, then speaking of hegemony eludes the point. The bearing of Gramsci on Laclau here becomes ever more faded.

This paradox becomes visible in the proposition that, as a dislocated structure is constitutively decentred, then it also entails the existence of a plurality of power centres, 'each with different capacity to irradiate and structure' (NR: 40); not wrong at all as an

assertion, but it should be precisely the augmented capacity of irradiating and structuring of a particular project that constitutes the fulcrum of hegemony. Nevertheless, in the general economy of Laclau's text, this argument is subservient to the point that the contemporary world is ever more dislocated and thus offers a myriad of points of rupture. The 'accelerated tempo of social transformation' (NR: 39) makes the ground on which capitalism relies ever less stable, in turn making hegemonic constructions ever more central and opening a vaster range of alternative possibilities (NR: 56). Here of course we are very far from William's interpretation of the Gramscian temporality, by which hegemonies tend to be lasting and strictly associated with the mode of production. Maybe a more balanced view seems to be that of Hall, according to whom, contra *Williams*, the length of a hegemonic principle is not associated with the mode of production, but, *contra* Laclau, is not deemed to shift so abruptly. A more detailed and conclusive discussion on this question of primary importance is conducted in the fifth chapter.

Insofar as the broader context in which Laclau wrote this text is concerned, there seems to appear here an optimism which runs counter to the depressed mood that affected the left in those years after the fall of the Berlin wall, and amid the ongoing dissolution of the Soviet Union and the triumph of capitalism on a global scale. This confirms that Laclau has always been keen to shatter many of the prevailing conventions of the world he came from. Significantly, the above mentioned events vindicated some of the fundamental theses of Laclau - the rejection of the aprioristic privilege granted to the working class, the decline of the classical leftist repertoire as a surface of inscription of new demands, the collapse of a mechanistic understanding of the economy - and only in the sense of a possible reconstruction of socialism, on healthier bases, that Laclau's mildly hopeful tone can be understood. Yet the insistence on this plurality of spaces, of dislocations, of struggles, leads

him to question what he terms the myth (intended here as plain illusion) of the monopoly corporations' limitless capacity for decision-making (NR: 59). Almost thirty years later, it is possible to claim that it was such an emancipatory optimism based on the simple acknowledgement of the plurality of antagonistic sites to rely on a very frail ground rather than capitalism. Here, the point is that dislocations - whose increasing weight he rightly analysed - *per se* mean very little, as the possibility to turn them into antagonistic sites is offset by the growing transformistic abilities of the current system. As we know, this mechanism is well captured in the logic of difference which Laclau himself proposes, but which receives in this text only a scant treatment. Moreover, as we shall see in more detail in the fifth chapter, the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism seems well anchored to actual contents, to a rationality whose influence we may deem as truly hegemonic, often without being nominally particularly visible from the point of view of the signifier.

It is only later that Laclau comes to separate antagonism from dislocation slightly more visibly and takes some strides toward the resolution of the above mentioned impasse. As he puts it in his famous essay *Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics*: 'we are trying to signify the limits of signification – the Real, if you want, in a Lacanian sense – and there is no direct way of doing so except through the subversion of the process of signification itself' (Laclau, 1994: 170; also in E: 39). The Lacanian Real here amounts to the very disruption of any symbolic network, which manifests itself through kinks and inconsistencies of representation. Nevertheless, since a system in itself lacks a positive ground, the limits of a discourse cannot be adequately represented and come to the fore only by way of an antagonism which grounds a new system (Laclau, 1994: 169; also in E: 37-38). In other words, antagonism pertains to the imaginary-symbolic order of reality, whereas dislocation is located in the Real, signalling its

negative dimension as a limit of discourse (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004: 206). Or, as stated by Frosini, antagonism is the 'becoming-action' of dislocation (Frosini, 2012: 179).

Yet the question is still not entirely exempt of ambiguities. On the question of difference/equivalence, Laclau writes that: 'on the one hand, each difference expresses itself *as* a difference; on the other hand, each of them *cancels* itself as such by entering into a relation of equivalence with all other differences of the system' (Laclau, 1994: 169; also in E: 38). So far so good, but, in this inextricable tension, antagonism is invoked as necessary for objectivity to be in place: '[o]nly if the beyond becomes the signifier of pure threat, of pure negativity, of the simply excluded can there be limits and system (that is an objective order)' (Laclau, 1994: 170; also in E: 38). Or, to put it another way, it is precisely the prevalence of the equivalential dimension at the expense of the differential one that permits the representation of the system as a totality (Laclau, 1994: 173; also in E: 41). What when the differential moment prevails? What seems to be missing here is the recognition that a stable system does not need antagonism to signify itself. It is the project that intends to subvert a stable system that resorts to an antagonistic thrust by way of an equivalential enchainment of the excluded categories. But the excluded categories are not necessarily expelled by the stable system in antagonistic fashion, as the latter often tries to re-incorporate them or at least to assuage their potential antagonism. In other words, the struggle between the will of antagonism and the will to avoid antagonism is not well conveyed here. When Laclau states that '[i]f the exclusionary system dimension was eliminated, or even weakened [...] the system would be blurred' (Laclau, 1994: 170; also in E: 38), it is precisely that which a system wants in order to perpetuate itself.

There is a further step in Laclau's conceptualisation of hegemony at this stage, which has to do with the positive rendering of the Lacanian Real, for 'although the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence' (Laclau, 1994c: 14; E: 53). The bottom line here is that:

[I]n a situation of radical disorder 'order' is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function (Laclau, 1994: 176; also in E: 44).

Precisely because the fullness is not a given and does not lie in an infrastructural ground, 'it cannot have any form of representation of its own, and has to borrow the latter from some entity constituted within the equivalential space' (Laclau, 1994: 174; also in E: 42). In this sense, one of the elements of the equivalence is 'emptied' of its differential content, that is of its specific signified, and comes to incarnate the universal function of representation of the whole system. This empty signifier then is what in HSS Laclau and Mouffe term the nodal point. The peculiarity inherent to this new terminology lies not only in the formality that the linguistic tools he employs confer to his line of reasoning, rather it is the answer to the question: 'what [...] does determine that one signifier rather than another assumes in different circumstances that signifying function [that of the empty signifier]?' (Laclau, 1994: 171; also in E: 40). The answer is the unevenness of the social, which means that different struggles display different capacities to play the role of the empty signifier. In turn 'the result of processes in which logics of difference and logics of equivalence overdetermine each other' (Laclau, 1994: 175; also in E: 43), making the study of a particular conjuncture necessary in order to determine what the empty signifier is.

While this dynamic is persuasively described, other perplexities - some of which will be made explicit only in the fifth chapter - emerge when one observes that Laclau deems the relation

by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness as a hegemonic relationship (Laclau, 1994: 175; also in E: 43). This 'victory', Laclau holds, is a dangerous one, because the hegemonic operation tends to do away with the actual promoters and beneficiaries of the signifier that is emptied of its own differential content. What Laclau means here is that the banner under which a particular operation takes place often tends to be sacrificed. Nevertheless, two problems stand out for comment at this stage of the analysis. Firstly, this position is rather static, because by treating the empty signifier as something necessarily pertaining to a specific camp, the frontier is rendered as immobile. At this point of Laclau's trajectory, the theorisation of the floating signifiers is still not well developed. As Laclau later puts in OPR: '[a] situation where only the category of empty signifier was relevant, with total exclusion of the floating moment, would be one in which we would have an entirely immobile frontier - something that is hardly imaginable' (OPR: 133). This is not hard to understand: any demand, even the most prominent, if it is treated as a claim and not as an actually organised political project, can be disputed by rival groups. Secondly, we are once again faced with a totally ephemeral type of hegemony, whose difference with Gramsci's version makes itself particularly palpable. It is certainly true that for the Sardinian thinker the historic bloc is a hegemonic operation that entails that the promoter (in his case, infrastructurally inferred) divests itself from its corporate interests, but this does not mean that all those interests can be sacrificed, while in Laclau's rendering we are entitled to suppose that this is quite a concrete possibility. Rather, at least some of the crucial tenets put forward by a political project will need to be concretised in order to make talk of hegemony legitimate. Once again, we are faced with an excessive privilege granted to the signifier, while the signified becomes almost totally irrelevant. Curiously, we shall see that the PCI moved over time precisely in the direction of sacrificing much of its *raison d'être* in the



name of a debatable interpretation and application of the Gramscian legacy that entailed the introjection of the political arguments of its adversaries.

What needs to be stressed is that what Laclau does here is a doubling of the notion of hegemony, a move which - as we shall see - is not exempt of ambiguities. While the notion of hegemony marginally retains the meaning of a contingent predominant articulation with a particular normative orientation, the specificity of the empty signifier tells us about the hegemonic dynamics of a particular element both within a single discourse and in society at large. In fact, the empty signifier is nothing but the name of an absent fullness, a lacking state of plenitude which cuts across society as a whole. Hegemony thus is the hegemony of a discursive assemblage, but also the hegemony of a particular element within the community, whose association with a certain camp however should not be treated as a given.

### **Populism and hegemony reloaded**

Many of these themes are picked up and extended in *On Populist Reason*, where the author rescues the notion of populism and attempts to conjugate it with that of hegemony. In this sense, it is possible to say that the work represents the apex of formalisation of his own political theory and it is to this version that the later problematisation will mostly refer. The emphasis placed on populism throughout the text is no less unequivocal: 'populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such' (OPR: 67). In terms of the political logics spelled out above, populism is defined as the expansion of the equivalential logic at the expense of the differential one, an operation which involves the drawing of an antagonistic frontier (OPR: 78). Again, it would seem that the only game in town is antagonism. Yet, this is mediated by the recognition that, in stark contrast to

populism, 'an institutionalist discourse is one that attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community' (OPR: 81); conceding in this case the privilege to the differential logic. In other words, while populism attempts to articulate a number of elements in an equivalential chain on the basis of their shared opposition to an enemy, institutionalism tries to deal with all the elements distinctly in order to maintain the *status quo* and avoid the emergence of antagonism. In a sense, populism is presented as an antagonistic articulation, just as in PIM. However, we never have an entirely populist or entirely institutionalist discourse, to the extent that every identity is split between its differential nature and its equivalential incorporation (OPR: 78) and thus '[e]quivalences can weaken, but cannot domesticate differences' (OPR: 79). As a result, equivalence and difference are fundamentally incompatible but both are required - and constantly at play - in the constitution of the social, which in turn determines that any political intervention is by necessity always populist to an extent, no matters how little (OPR: 154).

This conclusion may seem in tension with the assertion that antagonism may indeed be altogether absent if dislocation does not in the first place intervene to generate those demands that will become the wherewithal of any populist experiment. As put by Laclau: '[w]ithout this initial breakdown of something in the social order - however minimal that something could initially be - there is no possibility of antagonism, frontier, or, ultimately, 'people'' (OPR: 85). The two takes may be accommodated by saying that antagonistic challenges from rival projects may always emerge - thus obliging those in power to counter-react - but that antagonism has no real condition to flourish and to constitute a new people unless some sort of dislocatory experience takes place. Moreover, it should be noted that the necessity of a breakdown in the social order for a truly (but by no means foregone) populist intervention to take place, indicates that antagonism has been finally replaced by dislocation

as the limit of objectivity and that the latter now functions as a *mere possibility* for antagonism to emerge.

What about hegemony? Let us make a short digression on the basic elements of articulation. In the text, Laclau refers to them simply as demands (OPR: 73)<sup>21</sup>. More specifically Laclau introduces a tripartite distinction: initially a demand may emerge as a simple request, often corresponding to a very punctual and narrow problem expressed by the population; if the request is satisfied by the institution, it is the end of the story. However, requests may turn into claims when they remain unsatisfied for a period and they are advanced more forcefully (OPR: 73). As he details in a coeval text, while in English both fall under the umbrella of 'demands', in other languages they are more easily distinguished, such as in Spanish where the word *reivindicación* takes up the meaning of imposing a request (Laclau, 2005b: 35). At this point, Laclau discriminates between different types of claims (or *reivindicaciones*): they can either be democratic demands, that is demands that tend to remain isolated, or popular demands, i.e. those which in an inchoate manner start to come together so as to form a new 'people', but without yet forming a stable system of signification (OPR: 74). The distinction between democratic and popular demands permits us to make a first inference as to what the relationship between populism and hegemony would be: 'the first [democratic demands] can be accommodated within an expanding hegemonic formation; the second [popular demands]

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<sup>21</sup>As a side note, it is possible to observe that Laclau restricts the scope of the basic constituents of his political ontology at the ontical level. In some of his previous accounts, signifiers of much more abstract import are also employed ('democracy', 'justice', narrower ideological categories such as 'militarism' and 'anti-Semitic racism', but also much more context-specific symbolic references such as - as we shall see - the Partisan resistance during WW2 and the Italian unification process (*Risorgimento*) in the case of the Italian Communist Party, or Bolivarianism and the Liberal Revolution of Eloy Alfaro in the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution). In a sense, this position seems to dispel a certain indeterminateness in this regard which is to be found throughout the corpus of Laclau before OPR (Howarth, 2000: 117; Howarth, 2004: 268), but rules out the legitimate possibility for a discourse to coalesce not only demands *strictu sensu*, but also symbolic references.

presents a challenge to the hegemonic formation as such' (OPR: 82). To an extent, there is a similarity with his early formulation: '[a] class is hegemonic [...] to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralised' (PIM: 161). In fact, if we let alone that the element to be articulated is - as I have just analysed - expressed differently (visions of the world vs. demands) and that discourse, following the post-foundational turn, now replaces the apodictic role attributed to class, we have a certain congruence between the two takes. Institutionalism then is a hegemonic formation which seeks to accommodate demands (which thereby stop to be such or are at least cushioned) and deter antagonism.

Is populism also hegemonic? Or is it only a road to hegemony? OPR presents a number of novel theoretical moves, which entail a deepening of Laclau's engagement with both linguistics and psychoanalysis, and suggest a way to conceptualise the relationship between populism and hegemony. To begin with, Laclau equates hegemony with the rhetorical trope of catachresis (OPR: 71-72). Catachresis is the 'naming [of] something which is *essentially* unnameable' (OPR: 71), i.e. the employment of a figural term when a literal one is lacking. As any political discourse is nothing but a contingent assemblage of elements which cannot be conceptually apprehended, the attribution of a name follows the same dynamic that the hegemonic logic is meant to embody: more precisely, 'the operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification' (OPR: 70). As further argued by Laclau, the catachrestic operation is at the basis of the political construction of the people (OPR: 72). At this point, if hegemony = catachresis and catachresis = populism, one is entitled to deduce by transitive relation that populism is already in it and for itself hegemonic. Yet, a margin for ambiguity remains. This is paralleled by the incertitude that I previously highlighted: is the empty signifier the nodal point of a discourse or is it what already

incarnates the absent fullness of society? In his distinction between the three models of hegemony present in Laclau's corpus (the first corresponding to the one set forth in PIM, the second one in HSS and the third from NR onwards), Howarth problematises the status of the empty signifier in a similar vein:

while the second model implies a plurality of nodal points linked together in a discursive formation or historical bloc by hegemonic practices, the third model suggests that the unity of a social formation is constituted by an empty signifier that establishes the meaning of the other signifiers, that is to say, it performs the totalizing function of linking together the elements of the system (Howarth, 2004: 268).

The answer to our previous question as to whether populism is in it and for itself hegemonic or not clearly depends on how we conceptualise the empty signifier: if it is something that keeps together the popular camp only, then we may talk of the hegemony of that signifier within a particular chain of equivalence but not necessarily in society at large. If it is instead the name of an absent fullness that the popular camp manages to incarnate and make its own by temporarily filling it with its own contents, then it is inexorably hegemonic in the whole social formation. The ambiguity remains as the empty signifier shifts from the leader (OPR: 100) (as the ultimate expression of a singularity that keeps together the people, while hardly embodying a fullness that pre-exists the formation of the popular camp itself) to nationalism - just to make an example - whereby '[i]t is not only that 'nationalism' can be substituted by other terms in its role as empty signifier, but also that its own meaning will vary depending on the chain of equivalences associated with it' (OPR: 227). The meaning of an alive leader - we shall return to this point below - will hardly shift, as he/she can actively resist being incorporated into different chains of equivalences. Moreover, the uncertainty is once again reinforced by two factors: on one side, as already mentioned, the empty signifier is considered simply as a privileged surface of inscription with no inherent normative vector. Against this background, it would make more sense to speak of a hegemonic operation when

a project with a substantive world view manages to fill that signifier with its own contents, rather than when a particular signifier occupies a privileged societal position, since the latter remains always susceptible of being appropriated by other projects, thus rendering talk of its hegemony as a symbol entirely spurious. On the other, the possibility for a singularity becoming the only point of anchorage, the only object conveying an absent fullness orienting a whole social formation amid the 'accelerated tempo of social transformations' of post-modernity, is particularly dubious.

Coming back to the employment of linguistics, Laclau operates a particularly important deepening of his line of reasoning. When a popular symbol becomes the site of inscription of a number of aspirations, its role cannot be strictly thought in terms of a passive expression of these signifiers. Rather, it has a much more active function: the symbol '*constitutes* what it expresses through the very process of its expression' (OPR: 99). In other words, it is not a transparent medium, but is endowed with a proper structuring strength - an actual social productivity that makes it possible for a number of unsatisfied demands to coalesce, revealing the retroactive effect of naming (OPR: 108). What is it that makes for such a productivity? Its force, Laclau argues, is given by affect, which entertains an intimate relationship with signification: 'affect is required if signification is going to be possible' (OPR: 111). Psychoanalytical categories are thus deemed by Laclau to go beyond their field of inception, as they are part of a more general ontological reflection (OPR: 114). In this sense, Laclau develops here a more sophisticated encounter with the positive dimension of the Lacanian Real, the lack of which had been previously signalled by some of the scholars that were formed under his supervision (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004: 209). This move is centred around the notion that the subject is the bearer of a lost *jouissance*, that is a primordial and irretrievable state of fullness associated with the mother/child dyad. This compels the subject

to search for partial objects - which Lacan terms *objects petit a*.<sup>22</sup> Laclau draws an interesting equivalence here: the logic of the *object petit a* is the same as the hegemonic principle we have seen so far. As he puts it: '[t]he partial object becomes itself a totality; it becomes the structuring principle of the whole scene' (OPR: 113). The comparison is congruent with his previous take that grants privilege to the signifier, as the fullness that is sought through a partial object is purely mythical and will always evade us: the object, by being elevated to the dignity of Thing, 'is simply the name that fullness receives within a certain historical horizon, which as partial object of a hegemonic investment it is not an *ersatz* but the rallying point of passionate attachments' (OPR: 116). In particular, as signalled above, the need to constitute a new people 'arises only when that fullness is not achieved' - that is when dislocation shows itself by way of a proliferation of demands - 'and partial objects within society (aims, figures, symbols) are so cathected that they become the name of its absence' (OPR: 116-117).

Another move that Laclau conducts here is the clear differentiation that was anticipated above between floating and empty signifiers. The floating signifier permits Laclau to account for the fluidity of discourses and the possibility of shifts of the antagonistic frontier. Let us briefly recapitulate what the notions consists in: a particular demand can receive the pressure of rival projects, which try to attribute it a different meaning by way of an incorporation to another chain of equivalences. The demand thus becomes indeterminate, and its meaning is suspended, i.e. floating (OPR: 131). The difference with the empty signifier is that the latter takes the frontier for granted and is concerned with the structuring of a popular identity, while the floating signifier accounts for the displacement of the frontier. However, Laclau

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<sup>22</sup>The partiality of the object is given precisely by its inability to delivering the mythical satisfaction that was inherent to the mother/child dyad. Once the loss of this original Plenum has materialised, the subject can enjoy satisfaction only through a partial object, or object of lack (Copjec, 2002: 59).

argues that the distance is not that great as they both constitute two partial dimensions of 'any process of hegemonic construction of the 'people" (OPR: 133).

Two more points are worth considering before turning to the empirical cases. In the first place, much space is dedicated to the question of the leader in flesh and blood throughout his initial discussion of Freud's contribution. Here, as we have seen in the first chapter, he suggests with Freud that the leader can be a *primus inter pares* (OPR: 59). This would suggest a democratic type of leadership, quite different from the despotic, narcissistic type of leadership often imputed to populist rulers. Further to this, in the most substantive part of the text, he argues that since the assemblage of disparate elements is necessarily maintained by a singularity, an extreme form of the latter can be an individuality, that is the name of the leader (OPR: 100). This definition is ambiguous for that would rule out actual persons, as Ardití also notes (Arditi, 2010: 490) and would in principle fit only extreme cases such as Peronism after Perón. However, immediately after, Laclau summons Hobbes and Freud, who clearly refer to real individuals (OPR: 100). Again, in other interventions he openly allows for the individuality to be represented by the leader, alive and kicking (Laclau, 2006: 119). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, this poses the problem of whether an individuality in flesh and blood could be treated simply as a name, as a signifier that can be emptied at will.

As for the second point, in other interventions published in the 2000s, Laclau has put forward his theory of populism as a medicine for the sorry state of the left nowadays. Populism (together with hegemony) would then not just be categories of a general theory of politics, but also the strategy for the left to follow, as epitomised by the title of his response *Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics* (Laclau, 2006b) to Žižek's provocative review of OPR (Žižek, 2006). Hints of this type can be found in *On Populist Reason* too



however, which echo some of the nuances found in Laclau's 1980s thought and testify his return to a more active commitment with real politics:

A globalized capitalism creates myriad points of rupture and antagonisms — ecological crises, imbalance between different sectors of the economy, massive unemployment, and so on — and only an overdetermination of this antagonistic plurality can create global anti-capitalist subjects capable of carrying out a struggle worth the name. And, as all historical experience shows, it is impossible to determine a priori who the hegemonic actors in this struggle will be. It is by no means clear that they will be the workers. All we know is that they will be the outsiders of the system, the underdogs — those we have called the heterogeneous — who are decisive in the establishment of an antagonistic frontier (OPR: 150).

But are Laclau's formulations ontologically and strategically cogent? And to what extent do they shed light on the analysis of political and social phenomena? It is now time to tease out some of the impasses through the empirical analyses of the following two chapters.

### Chapter 3: The Italian Communist Party between Togliatti and Berlinguer<sup>23</sup>

So far, I have reconstructed the development of the notions of populism and hegemony in the corpus of Ernesto Laclau, as well as illustrated some of the antinomies that emerge from his formulations. The empirical part of the thesis is meant to help us see these deficiencies more clearly, identify others and provide some hints in order to overcome the theoretical impasses. Let us start with the Italian case.

This chapter analyses the course of the PCI from 1944 until the early 1980s. However, it is not to be intended as a precise recounting or reconstruction of all the historical events of the post-war PCI. This empirical analysis is *in primis* meant to put into practice the theoretical tools furnished by Laclau and understand how far they go in accounting for the political phenomenon at stake. The latter task reveals that what is pursued here is not a simple application of the Essex discourse theory: rather, starting from it, a prepositive problematisation of the very instruments that it offers is put forward. It also needs to be noted that precisely because the chapter is not concerned with strict historiographical questions, the weight attributed to the different periods of the analysis is not even. In this sense, particular emphasis is given to the first founding period from 1944 to 1947, when the contours of the political practice that the PCI will by and large uphold for the following four decades, are set out.

A temporal division of the chapter is proposed. The first section ‘Togliatti: *partito nuovo* and progressive democracy’ deals with the remoulding of the party as set forth by Togliatti upon his return to Italy in 1944. It thus introduces the main tenets of his political line, the peculiar

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<sup>23</sup>A part of the work of this chapter draws from my MA dissertation (Mazzolini, 2014).

traits that the party took up and the different interpretations that such a political course engendered among academic and political commentators. Much attention is dedicated to the equivalential enchainment that was established between heterogeneous demands and signifiers and to the concrete ways in which this was achieved. Through an engagement with primary sources such as party documents and speeches, which implies a careful look at some of the most minute aspects of party life that constituted a peculiar political significance, this section sheds light on the aesthetic, cultural and political dimensions that underpinned the creation of a new people in the Italian post-war scenario around the PCI. Concomitantly, owing to the peculiar mix of antagonism and constant search for compromise with other political parties, a complex discussion on how the PCI is to be located along the populism/institutionalism axis is put forward. The second section, 'The 1950s and 1960s', presents some of the difficulties that the Cold War context posed to the Togliattian political line between the late 1940s and mid-1950s, with the assimilation of a more markedly Stalinist and antagonistic outlook that put under discussion the so called 'Italian road to socialism' and made the relationship with the intellectuals much more complicated. It is worth stating that from here onwards, the sources used are prevalently secondary, with the exception of the interviews that I realised. The section then accounts for the later return of a more specifically national line after Stalin's death. It also presents the political problematics of the 1960s, before and after the death of Togliatti, with a look at how the PCI approached the students and workers' protests of 1968-69 and at the first signs of the internal divisions that were to emerge more clearly in the following decade. The third section, titled 'The historic compromise', engages with the 1970s non-belligerence pact that the PCI Secretary General Enrico Berlinguer stipulated with the Christian Democrats. This historic compromise indicated that the PCI finally opted for the most moderate interpretation of the Gramscian and

Togliattian legacy, which induced the party to assimilate the motives of its political adversaries with the goal of overcoming the ostracism to which it had hitherto been subject at the hands of the rest of the political system. The final section 'Populism and hegemony in the PCI' advances a theoretical reflection in view of the analysis conducted, with particular emphasis on the particular status of the empty signifier of the PCI - communism itself - which was both embraced and disavowed. It also explains how its peculiar organisational and political features make it possible to call its practice counter-hegemonic but hardly populist, and goes on to treat the question of the leader at some length. The section also briefly encompasses the so called 'second Berlinguer' period between 1980 and 1984, i.e. the phase in which many of the political choices taken in the previous decade were inverted.

### **Togliatti: *partito nuovo* and progressive democracy**

The politics that characterised the new course of the party came to be known under the name of *partito nuovo* (new party). Officially introduced in April 1944 just after the return to Italy from exile of Palmiro Togliatti (Spriano, 1975: 386), this political line was upheld despite some stops and 'obfuscations' (Natta, 1971: 75). Much has been written and said on whether this line was a faithful translation of the Gramscian heritage, especially insofar as his Notebooks are concerned. We shall not deal at length with this question here, which is more of a philological preoccupation given the fragmentary nature of Gramsci's Notebooks. Nevertheless, it is worth noting in passing that the position of Liguori on the matter seems accurate: 'Togliatti largely conducted a politics of Gramscian inspiration within the limits set

by his realism in the post-Yalta conference world' (Liguori, 2012: 59).<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the distancing of Togliatti from Gramsci regarded three particular questions: the Gramscian war of position did not refer to the anti-Fascist struggle but to a broader anti-capitalist struggle; the party envisaged by Gramsci was not the mass party of Togliatti, but a party of cadres with a Leninist configuration; and finally the full acceptance of pluralism and political democracy of Togliatti clashed with the position of Gramsci, despite his openings towards the limits of force (Liguori, 2012: 59). As we shall see, it is the first issue of the three, although presented in a different guise, to have had a relevance in the internal debates a few decades later. More in general, it is possible to concur with Alfredo Reichlin, a former prominent member of the PCI, who states that the chief element that makes it possible to characterise Togliatti's politics as Gramscian is the acknowledgment of the necessity to resolve, to "take upon oneself", the historical Italian knots, such as the Southern, the peasant and the Vatican questions (Interview 3).

Concretely, Giuseppe Vacca, a historian that was a member of the party's central committee from the early 1970s until the party's dissolution in 1991, highlights that the politics inaugurated by Togliatti in 1944 had its origins in the anti-Fascist struggle of the partisans, which was composed by a vast range of political forces (Vacca, 1974: 263-264). The unity of such forces to which the PCI contributed, as decreed by the so-called Salerno turning point (from the name of the city where the first government of national unity was constituted with the presence of Togliatti), was the prerequisite for the inauguration of a regime of 'progressive democracy' (Vacca, 1974: 263-266). It was the very historical contingencies that made the struggle for a set of far-reaching socio-economic reforms to be bargained with the

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<sup>24</sup>Laclau and Mouffe share the same view: '[i]t is therefore profoundly wrong to oppose Gramsci (sic), as some do, to Togliatti. The latter's objective [...] was fundamentally Gramscian and fits perfectly into the theoretical problematic of absolute historicism elaborated by Gramsci' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 19).

other anti-Fascist allies as the best path to socialism, highlighting the role played by the 1948 Constitution that sanctioned a number of fundamental and progressive rights (Vacca, 1974: 278-282). The new strategy was to be broadly understood within the Gramscian framework of analysis adopted by the party. Accordingly, 'capitalism never offers a situation of final clash between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, rather it is the task of the proletarian «vanguard» to find allies among other classes and social strata such as peasants and middle classes' (Sassoon, 1980: 9). Compromise was thus part and parcel of such an understanding. This approach conceded that before a full conquest of state power, the communists had to build their hegemony in the terrain of civil society through a war of position (Sassoon, 1980: 12-13, 32). These were the general coordinates of the distinctive re-elaboration of socialist thought, often proudly termed as the 'Italian Road to Socialism'.

More specifically, the PCI was part of a succession of unstable coalition governments - initially extending even to the discredited monarchy - that transitioned the country out of the war and paved the way for the establishment of a democratic regime. Overall, a cautious line characterised the politics of the PCI as set out by its leadership. In the first public speech after the end of the conflict delivered in Sesto San Giovanni, a Milanese suburb by then already christened as the 'Italian Stalingrad' for its working-class base and the stoic fight put up against Fascism, Togliatti pointed out: "The Communist Party does not advance class claims but wants that the working class stretches out its hand to all those who are willing to collaborate in the reconstruction of Italy" (Togliatti in Bocca, 1973: 385). The internal party documents of those years confirm the same tendency. For instance, during a meeting of the National Directorate held in late June 1945, Togliatti exhorted not to include "too much socialism" in the programmes that the party was elaborating, otherwise the risk would have been the breaking of the alliance with the other political parties (PCI, 1945b). When the

government led by Ferruccio Parri was constituted – possibly the most left-wing leaning cabinet formed between 1944 and 1947 as it had even three communist Ministries (including Togliatti) – the leader of the PCI showed scepticism and the position of power was little exploited in order to implement the so called 'progressive measures' that he envisaged (Bocca, 1973: 438). Fearful of potential reactions in the centre and south of the country, entirely liberated by the Western Allies and thus alien to the Resistance movement, but also historically more conservative, Togliatti deemed it necessary to avoid scaring off the 'moderate' Italy and was rather more interested in the preparation for the general elections (Bocca, 1973: 438-442). More specifically, the PCI did not want to lose the trust of the Christian Democrats (DC): “We are available, as Communist Party, allied to the Socialist Party, to forge a pact of common action with the party of the Christian Democracy [...] for a common programme of economic, political and social regeneration” (Togliatti in Spriano, 1975: 393).

This new social bloc had to be created while abiding by the rules of the liberal-democratic game:

the acquisition of a leading role by a part of the working class [...] determines [...] a national social bloc of a new type, recomposing exploited masses [...] and this already indicates how a democratic revolution naturally begins to intertwine with a socialist transformation. But at this stage of the process the political form of its development cannot but be democratic (Vacca, 1974: 273).

Giorgio Amendola, one of the leading figures of the party later to be the chief character of the so called right-wing within the PCI, took this even further in an internal meeting shortly after the national liberation: “We need to highlight more the liberal function of the democracy of new type in our action. The participation of private initiative in the reconstruction process is a sign of liberality” (PCI, 1945b).

It can easily be discerned that the main division of the political space that the party operated during and in the first few years after WW2 was that between Fascism and anti-Fascism. Within the latter, the PCI played the card of presenting itself as the most anti-Fascist political subject of all (Spriano, 1975: 388). Along with the Fascists, the enemy was also identified with the plutocratic groups that supported Mussolini (Spriano, 1975: 389). Nevertheless, while outright Fascists needed to be isolated, the regular man that had adhered to Fascism in good faith could be given an opportunity for redemption (PCI, n.d.: 75). This should not induce us to think that tensions, differentiations and hostilities did not exist with other democratic parties with whom the PCI shared governmental responsibilities, with the partial exception of the Socialists to which the PCI was then organically allied. However, the main thrust of the PCI politics as approved by the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress in January 1946 was directed at maintaining the national unity of the anti-Fascist forces, especially by way of reciprocal collaboration within the Trade Unions (Cecchi, 1977: 72).

The PCI occupied cabinet positions until May 1947, when the Christian Democrats decided to oust it and their approach became growingly hostile towards the PCI. Initially, this did not change the general politics of 'national unity' advanced by the party: despite now nominally being an opposition party, Togliatti opted for curbing the hostilities, explaining the gesture in terms of the fear of being marginalised in the Constituent Assembly, but also more broadly, because it responded to the long-term strategy of not being isolated in the country at large (Bocca, 1973: 484). At the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress held in January 1948, Togliatti defended the Constitution as the "bond between all democrats" (Cecchi, 1977: 77). This meant establishing a double frontier, a strong one against Fascism and a weaker one against other parties, Socialist Party (PSI) excluded. As also recognised by Alessandro Natta, a leading member then



to become the penultimate PCI Secretary General in the 1980s, in relation to those years: '[t]he struggle actually involves and differentiates the very anti-Fascist front' (Natta, 1971: 77).

The line of progressive democracy installed by Togliatti has been indicted by many as excessively accommodating, if not utterly lenient towards the other political parties. For some authors, the *partito nuovo* course was merely inspired by the gradualist politics dictated by the Soviet Union, aimed at preserving international equilibrium (Galli, 1958: 165; Colarizi, 1984: 353; Flores and Gallerano, 1992: 70; Lehner, 1991: 190).<sup>25</sup> By the time he returned to Italy in March 1944, Togliatti had lived for 18 years in Soviet Russia where he had become one of the most visible men of the Comintern. He had actively contributed to the 'frontist' turn taken at the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Comintern celebrated in 1935 and further reinforced in the following years (Sassoon, 1980: 4).<sup>26</sup> According to this view, the abdication of any immediate revolutionary attempt suited the interests of the Soviet Union, which was then part of the Allied forces in the war against Hitler's Germany. 'The simple suspicion that the USSR fostered [...] movements against the dominant capitalist classes could constitute an obstacle to the tight collaboration of Moscow with London and Washington' (Galli, 1958: 218). Accordingly, such an orientation also suited the leaders of the PCI, as it gave them the possibility to exploit the myth of the Soviet Union, while being guaranteed economic stability and a prestigious career. In this view, the politics of *partito nuovo* struck a balance between Soviet interests and the need to accommodate the revolutionary propensities of the rank and file, whose

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<sup>25</sup>Curiously, and despite repeated expressions of his clear appreciation for the PCI in the following years, Laclau maintains a similar position in the first text in which he mentions the Italian Communist Party. With reference to the Stalinist concept of internationalism that, along with other communist parties, the PCI adopted, Laclau argues: '[t]his led to the subsequent attempts to hinder the transformation of resistance struggles into socialist revolutions [...] in a less crude form it formed the basis of the Italian Communist Party's policy after the 'svolta di Salerno'' (Laclau, 1973: 118).

<sup>26</sup>However, it is to be noted that the frontist strategy as applied by Togliatti in the Italian context carried pluralist features and thus 'differed sharply from the monistic national front envisaged by the Comintern' (Barth Urban, 1986: 168). See also Sassoon, 1981: 205.

disenchantment was offset by a 'well organised propagandistic illusionism' (Galli, 1958: 261-262). The author also emphasises the rather flexible attitude of the PCI towards the Christian Democrats and, as a result, the overall disappointing results that the party obtained (Galli, 1958: 262-278). Similarly, Asor Rosa characterises the PCI as intentionally limiting the most advanced political energies of the working class (Asor Rosa, 1988). Coming from the *operaista* quarters, this critique takes issue with the tendency towards accommodation that was supposedly inherent to the historicist project of the PCI. For Asor Rosa instead, the working class already enshrines in itself the creativity that would allow, through unmediated struggle, the overcoming of capitalism. However, such a vitality was contained by a surplus of pragmatism that favoured the embracement of the democratic culture, which diluted the genuine and most developed demands of the proletariat (Asor Rosa, 1988: 64).

To be sure, these authors undervalue the objective difficulties that the party was faced with in those years. The Greek scenario, where the communists launched an unsuccessful bid for power that ended in a bloody civil war, served as a warning towards a choice that Togliatti and other PCI leaders negatively termed as 'adventure'. Many within the party nurtured ambitions of that sort. 'Some of them proclaimed themselves in favour of a revolutionary political line that furthered the action undertaken during the Resistance' (Vittorina, 2006: 59). Togliatti, of course, did not share this view. Unlike many other figures of the leading group, he did not take part to the Resistance war and was stubbornly opposed to let its most enthusiastic thrust take hold (Bocca, 1973: 378-380). In particular, Togliatti was particularly wary of the impetus that could have led to an insurrectional mood, based on an excessively optimistic view of the circumstances, critically cashed out, in the phrasing of the time, as 'petite-bourgeois illusion'

(Pajetta, 1971: 95).<sup>27</sup> As bluntly put by Togliatti “We do not set ourselves the objective of conquering power, given the national and international conditions” (Togliatti in Spriano, 1975: 308).

From the point of view of the dyad populism/institutionalism, the situation is far from clear cut. In a sense, a dichotomic division of society existed, but the ‘them’, the Fascist enemy that had brought Italy to war and humiliation after almost two decades of dictatorship, had just been outlawed and was nominally ostracised by the rest of the political spectrum and would have remained so ever since, although dangers of a Fascist relapse existed back then and continued to do so, according to the view of the PCI, for decades. Towards the ‘legal’ political forces, the party maintained instead a politics of unity, of constant search for an agreement, often having to swallow bitter pills as a result. On this point, Magri forcefully propounds that in terms of economic policy, institutional reforms (including the missed opportunity of a more forceful purge of former Fascist officials) and foreign policy, the party gave up many struggles that could have been put forward and realistically won, without putting under discussion the parliamentary road to socialism and a realist approach (Magri, 2011: 53-56). In this sense, it needs to be reminded that the extremely cautious approach of Togliatti was not evenly shared within the leadership. According to Pietro Secchia, the then Organisation Secretary, what the PCI had achieved by 1948 (chiefly, the creation of a mass party that had to be reckoned with by all other political agents and the approval of a fairly progressive Constitution) was still an underachievement with respect to the immediate post-war propitious conditions (Secchia in Macaluso, 2013: 83). Just as a way of example, this passage from his personal diary emerges as particularly telling:

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<sup>27</sup>Despite his wariness, Togliatti did not disown the partisans' movement: in fact, he decided to candidate many young figures of the Resistance to the Constituent Assembly (Rodano in Bocca, 1973: 397).

I manage to include in the list of the undersecretaries Moscatelli [...] and Moranino. They are a bitter pill for De Gasperi to swallow.<sup>28</sup> Of course I need to insist, because faced with the resistance of De Gasperi, Togliatti was inclined to give up. [...] It is exactly because De Gasperi does not want them that we need to have them there. In the end I succeeded (Secchia in Albeltaro, 2014: 126-127).

The bent for reformism and moderation that has been analysed so far may suggest the prominence of the logic of difference and, as a corollary, of an institutional kind of politics (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 151). As we know however, populism and institutionalism are not to be found uncontaminated, but a coexistence of the two dimensions is always there. Moreover, the thesis of the PCI as unequivocally pending towards the institutionalist pole is belied by a number of different considerations. It may have well been the case that the official politics of the PCI embraced a cautious course, but that would amount to extrapolating the same error as those that measure populism exclusively on the basis of programmatic statements, as criticised in the literature review. After all, the institution of a political identity as a mass phenomenon that had up to that point been quite marginal in the country points toward a more nuanced perspective. Here, it is worth inquiring those organisational and cultural factors that permitted the PCI to forge a novel popular identity in the country. It should be reminded that, rather than conceptualising these aspects simply as form, the approach of Laclau sees them as co-producers of political significance.

To begin with, the *partito nuovo* politics provided for openness towards a number of social sectors that had been traditionally alien to the communist tradition. This found concrete application in the abolition of the requirement to profess the Marxist ideology in order to join the party. In a communication of the Secretariat to all the regional Federations, non-Marxists were said to be accepted and even eligible for leading positions, insofar as they accepted the programme of the PCI, and so long as their different ideological points of view were discussed

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<sup>28</sup> Alcide De Gasperi was the DC's Prime Minister of the time.

only internally (PCI, 1945c). As a result, mass militancy became a cornerstone of the PCI's politics and remained so throughout its history. To give a proportion of the phenomenon, suffice it to remind that in 1946, a 'Republic's recruitment' campaign was launched in order to raise the membership of the party to 7-8% of the electorate in all those areas in which the target had not been met yet (PCI, n.d.: 87). The non-homogeneous character of the PCI's rooting made that target unrealistic in many areas, but the figure still delivers a sense of the confidence that the party received from the mass recruitment it successfully promoted, with heights such as those of Reggio Emilia (14.4%) and Siena (18.2%) (PCI, n.d.: 86). Despite the mass-militancy, particular importance was dedicated to the formation of the cadres ('while maintaining [...] the character of a mass party, we need to acquire [...] the qualities of a «party of cadres»' (PCI, n.d.: 102)) and to the recruitment of the 'influential man'. This could be a highly valued worker, somebody who enjoyed the trust of the local population or the wise old man of a village (PCI, n.d.: 102). Equally, local leaders were encouraged to know and appreciate their militants one by one and to find a right task for each of them within the party (PCI, n.d.: 104). The PCI was also particularly concerned with the penetration of 'bad elements' into its ranks. The new militants had to be honest and irreproachable, possibly the best available men: 'honest workers do not like to sit next to the dishonest ones, to individuals of bad reputation', hence the conclusion was that 'we are not here to recruit randomly just for the sake of numbers' (PCI, n.d.: 88).

Much emphasis was in fact attributed to normality and common sense in order to appeal to the average, mild and well-mannered person. Togliatti was against the excessively revolutionary or slovenly manifestations and exhorted militants to care about their look (Bocca, 1973: 401). The propaganda needed to follow the same directives: not only the work

of the local branches had to be 'molecular' and 'disciplined', but it also needed to be distinguished by 'civic virtues' (PCI, n.d.: 48-50):

we need to condemn the widespread tendency to disturb the public meetings organised by other parties and their demonstrative abandonment, in mass and well planned-ahead, the laceration and dirtying of adversaries' placards, the abuse [...] of loudspeakers that deafen the population for whole days, [...] certain chants containing swearwords, [...] the mass employment of motor transports and their superfluous wandering while overloaded with comrades and red flags (PCI, n.d.: 46).

This passage neatly reveals the willingness to adopt behaviours and attitudes that could arouse identification beyond the borders of those who had already pledged allegiance to Marxist ideology. As Maria Lisa Cinciari Rodano, a leading member of the party, recalls:

I remember that when Togliatti returned to Italy, when I did not even know him yet, one of the first things he did was to start going to football matches. [...] He used to dress up, there was the attempt of presenting ourselves as normal people, who were part of the normal life of the country, not as shabby people (Interview 2).

With the *partito nuovo* politics, an entirely new anthropology of militancy was almost surreptitiously introduced into the party, which had until that point been mostly characterised by revolutionary Third-internationalism.

In effect, the elaboration of the programmes also indicated the priority to stay in touch with the common man. In order to obtain the 'highest possible number of the votes', the party encouraged the writing of more accessible programmes, not too lengthy, but not too vague either: 'simple and easily absorbable programmes, presented in a charming way and accompanied by incisive key words' (PCI, n.d.: 20-21). What did this all mean? The party portrayed itself as a party of the people, of all the subalterns, not just of the working class or, even worse, of its vanguard. This was also reflected in a change of the terminology employed. To further enhance the remarks of Laclau on the process of naming, in the analysed documents the term 'working class' is almost always forthwith accompanied by 'the people':

the effect is that of representing the former – the base of the communist project – as not just making its own corporative interests, but as serving the purposes of a wide array of social forces and responding to demands of various sorts. Words such as class struggle, proletariat (Bocca, 1973: 393) and bolshevism were ever less frequent instead, with the intention of doing away with the extremist, sectarian connotation.

If creating a people - the ultimate meaning of populism - entails being faithful to a 'politics of the synecdoche' by which a part aspires to represent the whole, the question of cultural and political centrality becomes prominent. In other words, by taking up connotations of widespread diffusion that can plausibly generate approval and identification among the population, a political practice enhances its credentials to represent the whole. As we have seen, the organisational opening of the party was aimed at facilitating this type of dynamics. However, beyond the question of moderation, in moving away from the classist conception of the party that characterised its pre-war mentality, the PCI also pursued a politics that attempted to create a people by expanding the limits of its traditional reach in terms of political articulation. In Togliatti's view, the working class was conceived as the epicentre of a broader movement that was meant to deal with the most pressing problems of the nation and thus embody the national will. By doing so, it extended its appeal to new, diverse elements, both of concrete and more abstract import. The PCI of course maintained the working class and its demands as its core constituency, a prime example being that 47.2% of the Central Committee members following the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress were workers (Sebastiani in Vittorina, 2006: 61).<sup>29</sup> But as put by Togliatti in his famous speech to the Neapolitan cadres of the party upon his arrival in 1944: "we must be [...] a mass party, which obtains its decisive forces from the

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<sup>29</sup>However, precisely as a result of this line, such a figure started to decline consistently over the following decades, reaching 23.5% following the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1962 (Sebastiani in Vittorina, 2006: 99).

working class [...] pulling together the best elements of the peasant classes” (Togliatti, 1985: 25).

In his first text dealing with the PCI titled *Togliatti and Politics*, Laclau identifies precisely this: the Italian communist leader attempted to go beyond class struggle by postulating the expansion of a field of democratic struggles, irreducible to the former (Laclau, 1980b). The articulation of such struggles brings about the constitution of a popular pole through a chain of equivalences, which is not 'a political confluence between *pre-constituted* social agencies', but rather a new type of unity emerging from a number of heterogeneous elements (Laclau, 1980b: 252, 254). Laclau conceptualises these elements as symbols, such as those that make up a national identity, that are associated with the hegemonic bloc of the dominant class, but which can nevertheless be disarticulated from that configuration. On the Italian case, he refers to the articulation between national, popular and democratic symbols emerging from the war of liberation and the Italian unification process on one side, and communism on the other (Laclau, 1980b: 254-256). Despite the antagonistic element being blunted, a process of equivalential articulation undoubtedly took place. At this point, it seems paramount to analyse which sectors were articulated and how.

Among the most significant social sectors that the PCI tried to connect with beyond the industrial proletariat of the North, the peasant masses stood out. In a work-document of the party's Secretariat written in February 1947, it is worthy to note the vice Secretary General Luigi Longo summarising some of the most important gains achieved in this respect and mentioning the important activity undertaken with the agricultural proletariat, the effective work realised among the *métayers* in Central Italy and the important role played by the party in leading the struggles of the landless peasants in Sicily, Calabria, Sardinia and Lazio (PCI,



1947). The party was particularly concerned with achieving the unity of the peasant masses irrespective of their position in the productive process by trying to converge the interests of diverse agricultural layers ranging from medium farmers to the poorest labourers.<sup>30</sup> Under the banner of agrarian reform, the PCI led a particularly harsh set of struggles between 1948 and 1950 in the Italian countryside, with good results in Central Italy and mixed ones in the South (Andreucci, 2014: 227).

At the same time, the party was keen to build a sense of unity between the claims of the workers and those of the peasants. It is worth quoting this insightful passage by Pietro Grifone contained in a party-document, no matters how propagandistic:

The city workers have been ever more frequently led to solidarise with peasants' struggles and viceversa. Never before has the city been so politically close to the countryside and viceversa. Industrial workers went to the countryside to bring their solidarity to peasants (Milan) through the offer of utensils and tractors; peasants have offered to the poor of the city the 'gratuities' that are no longer given to the lords and have hosted children of workers and white-collars in their houses (PCI, 1948: 3).

As for the relationship with the Catholics, we have here one of the most important cornerstones of Togliatti's politics. Reminiscent of Gramsci's insights on the Catholic question (Gramsci, 1994: 310), Togliatti was equally conscious of the deep roots of Catholicism in Italy (Bocca, 1973: 442). In this regard, the party was prevalently concerned with stifling the anticlerical tendencies of the base and manifesting its good intentions towards believers and their religiosity (PCI, n.d.: 46) notwithstanding the open hostility displayed by the Vatican (Vittoria, 2006: 63): a blatant proof of this attitude was the party's favourable vote for the ratification of the Lateran treaties in the Constituent Assembly.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the analysis of

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<sup>30</sup>It is worth emphasising that this aim was often achieved by putting pressure on the most combative groups in order to moderate their claims.

<sup>31</sup>The Lateran Treaties, signed by Mussolini's Italy and the Vatican in 1929, regulate the relationship between the two countries, providing for a number of financial and extraterritorial privileges to the Church.

the relevant speeches of the PCI's leaders and the internal party documents reveals that a relation of exteriority was maintained with the Catholics: despite calling for unity against Fascism, they were not *tout court* subsumed under the communist umbrella. In other words, the Catholic masses were still conceived as something other than the communist ones and there was no outright attempt to create a metaphorical relationship between catholicism and communism; at best, Catholic thought could be an input in the refinement of the peculiar communist path undertaken in Italy<sup>32</sup>. In this sense, Togliatti considered the grip of the Catholic Church on its followers too strong for a more frontal challenge and was thus more oriented to exploiting some of the contradictions within the Catholic world to the party's advantage (Bocca, 1973: 443). Nevertheless, the party conquered some important credentials once the small Party of the Christian Left was dissolved and joined the PCI in late 1945 (Vittorina, 2006: 61).<sup>33</sup>

Other important social categories that were articulated in the discourse of the PCI were women, young people and, to a lesser degree, war-survivors and the elderly. Very specific demands arising from these sectors were incorporated into the electoral programmes and speeches of the party leaders, while the PCI also tried to interpret and replicate their ways of life. In a discussion of the National Directorate on how to improve the political work among women, Eugenio Reale suggested to adopt the format of the popular female magazine *Mary Claire* for the party-controlled magazine *Noi Donne* (Us women), whereas Giancarlo Pajetta suggested that the mass women organisation should be more concerned with issues around children and Togliatti noted that the forms of propaganda addressed at women were not feminine enough (PCI, 1945a). As for young people, in a communication to the provincial

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<sup>32</sup>On this, see the speech of Togliatti delivered in Bergamo in 1963 (Togliatti, 2010: 905).

<sup>33</sup>Franco Rodano, the leader of that group, would become one of the most prominent collaborators of Togliatti and Berlinguer in pursuing a dialogue with the Church.

federations of the party issued in October 1946, Togliatti recommended analysing all of the problems affecting the Italian youth of the time: unemployment, malnutrition, illnesses, lack of participation in the democratic life, disillusionment with institutions, and so on. All the problems of the young are problems of the nation, he wrote. Moreover, he went into further details, specifying which measures to adopt (even in mutualistic fashion) in order to alleviate the conditions of poverty hitting the youth: state-sponsored canteens, shoes and winter clothes collection, cheaper transport fares, unemployment subsidies, etc. (PCI, 1946). It is possible to note here the micro-level engagement of the party, which surpassed the typically propagandistic attitude of the pre-war period, exclusively directed at working-class issues.

Other social demands unlinked to specific classes were mobilised, as in the case of the appeal to reconstruction (intended not only in material and economic, but also political, cultural and moral terms). Particular attention was dedicated to the most immediate needs of the population and other pressing socio-economic claims. In April 1947 for example, the National Secretariat issued a communication to the regional Secretariats, informing them that the main economic objective of the party was the increase of the means of subsistence (foodstuff, clothes, shoes, houses, etc.) for the working masses to be achieved through the regulation of foreign trade, fight against speculation, price reduction and differential rationing (PCI, 1947b).

In terms of political, cultural and moral reconstruction, Togliatti attributed utmost importance to the role of the intellectuals and the middle urban classes.<sup>34</sup> The relationship between the

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<sup>34</sup>Nevertheless, the rank and file were not always entirely happy about this. As noted in a 1946 internal party document: '[i]n several of our organisations, a hostile or diffident approach towards the middle urban classes, and especially towards the intellectuals, is still firm and this needs to disappear as soon as possible' (PCI, n.d.: 45). It is not difficult to grasp the contradictory character of this ambivalence: the capacity to reach out to new social sectors was initially faced with the open boycott of some sectors of the party, which were little keen to give up their workerist mentality. However, this type of approach started to fade over the course of the 1950s only to vanish entirely in the 1960s and 1970s.

PCI and the Italian intellectuals deserves special attention, as it played a key role in the penetration of the party into Italian society. To begin with, as Alfredo Reichlin reminds, “it was especially Gramsci’s thought to entice the intellectual world, the publication of the letters and the Notebooks of Gramsci was a great cultural and intellectual event, it changed the mind of many people” (Interview 3). The intellectuals were also instrumental in the forging of a new common sense, an entirely new communist folklore. In the leading cultural review that he established in 1944, *Rinascita*, Togliatti wrote:

The renewal of all the fields of our intellectual and cultural activity [...] obliges us to embrace fields of inquiry [...] that we never explored in the past. Secondly, it obliges to gather [...] new, diverse forces, not regularly organised in our movement, but which are resolute as we are to break away with a past, first of decay, then of collapse, and to explore the ways of a radical renewal both our political and cultural life (Togliatti, 1944: 2).

Intellectuals were conceptualised as a ‘multiplying coefficient of numbers: they form cadres, activists, militants; they occupy strategic positions such as cafe tables, university rooms, mass-media; they create and manage languages’ (Cafagna, 1991: 73). This sector was also important in order for the PCI to understand and study the country in which it was acting, especially thanks to the contribution of reportages published in the widely read party newspaper *L’Unità* and the ‘neorealist’ images of those film-makers keen to cast light on the conditions of the South of Italy (Andreucci, 2014: 222). Emphatically, Luciana Castellina, a leading intellectual of the PCI, claims that “culture had such a weight that the debate took place among philosophers, but these philosophers were all leading members of the party, people totally involved in politics” (Interview 1).

However, two types of language, two levels, coexisted in Togliatti: one was directed at those who could understand the high culture, and one more accessible, a ‘popular culture’ for those who could barely express themselves in Italian (Bocca, 1973: 410). To these aims contributed

the editing of very different journals, reviews, newspapers, but also the affiliation of 'organic intellectuals' into the party and the formation of the cadres in the party schools. The creation of a communist culture in the post-war Italian scenario, both at an elitist and a popular level, was such that 'all the cultural and artistic tendencies that emerged in Italy from 1945 [...] found echo in the PCI, both in a positive and a negative sense, as support or excommunication' (Ajello in Macaluso, 2013: 26).

The recruitment of intellectuals responded to another related aim of the party. The PCI leader wanted to 'make our own all the progressive traditions of the nation: from Garibaldi to Pisacane, from Gramsci to Gobetti' (Spriano: 1975: 40), that is, it aspired to retroactively construct a filiation between the communist cause and other Italian intellectual families, especially those within the broad historicist tradition of the Italian Hegelian Left of De Sanctis, Spaventa and Labriola, which had been the ideology of the democratic and popular movement of *Risorgimento* (the Italian unification process) and of which Italian communism aspired to be its development (Agosti, 1996: 331). The myth of *Risorgimento* occupied a quite significant role in the rhetoric of the PCI:

Garibaldinism becomes a symbol that transcends the historical, spatial and chronological reality of Garibaldi and his undertakings, a flag under which all the Italian combatants for freedom unite, whatever the people they are fighting for, whatever the generation to which they belong (Anonymous, 1945: 49).

The reference to the struggle conducted by the communist partisans in the civil war is obvious. As put by the journalist Vittorio Gorresio in summing up the strategy of the PCI:

In this strenuous attempt to hoard all the values of the Italian tradition there is the obscure wish or the unconscious need to insert into it, by overcoming all the obstacles that the communists find on their way: this is why they keep insisting on the question of the profound Italianity of communism, of its homogeneity with the spirit of the nation and of the race (Gorresio in Andreucci, 2014: 279-280).

In fact, the party was also keen to stress the national character of its activity, as made evident by the rather frequent reference to the fatherland. This patriotic rhetoric, along with constant talk of sovereignty, could be easily employed in a period in which the Fascists were depicted as siding with the 'foreign aggressor', as Hitler's Germany was often termed during the conflict. Nevertheless, the stress on the Italian character had two further connotations: the first entailed that the route to socialism had to be a national one, which meant that it would have to be adapted to the Italian context.<sup>35</sup> The second alluded to the task that Gramsci had conceived for the Italian working class: the true unification of the two 'Italies', i.e. the backward, agrarian South and the more developed, industrial North, which had until that point remained economically, culturally and socially divided (Gramsci, 1994: 313-337).

The openness towards new sectors, demands and signifiers other than a single-minded focus on the working class and its battles was pursued through the acquisition of new aspects by the communist horizon, which served as the empty signifier of the PCI discourse: in this way, communism underwent a change in its identity as a result of the relation established with other elements (HSS: 105). The communist cause was thus slowly being identified as embodying common traits of the population, and the latter could see in the communists not a bunch of child-eaters (as the Christian Democrats' propaganda maliciously had them), but rather a movement of regular men, with a clear programme. It was thus an idea - re-elaborated in the very specific terms falling under the name of the 'Italian Road to Socialism' - to occupy a centrality in the discourse of the party, and not the leader. This does not mean

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<sup>35</sup>The claim to the 'Italian Road to socialism' was often justified by recourse to the classics of Marx and Lenin, that is by reference to the need to historicise all the major strategic problems and make them dependent upon the particular situation (Sassoon, 1980: 219-220). Nevertheless, this by no means could be taken as a complete freedom of manoeuvre from Moscow, which tried to tightly control the actions of the PCI. Moreover, the *partito nuovo* politics had the blessing of Stalin himself. It is necessary to highlight however that Togliatti gradually paved the way for a more autonomous party. It was then Berlinguer to emancipate the party more decidedly from the sway of the Soviet Union.

that Togliatti did not occupy a place of utmost importance: in fact, he had the final word on most decisions, being invested with the authority deriving from having worked at the Comintern for almost two decades. However, this did not prevent the possibility for open discussion within the party. Even though the authority of Togliatti was not disputed, disagreements often arose within the leading bodies with the very Secretary General (Agosti, 1996: 297), and criticism was encouraged at all levels. As Secchia said at an internal meeting:

The local leaders of the party have a mentality such that before opening their mouth they expect something from above to happen, they need to get used to behave more independently; then we should get used that our party newspapers publish articles of comrades that do not think in the same way as we do. For example, on the problem of our participation to the government, if there were a comrade who does not agree, I would publish his article (PCI, 1945d).

Even more tellingly, as revealed to me by Aldo Tortorella, a prominent figure of the post-war PCI, in relation to Togliatti's return to Italy: "we the youngest knew he was called Ercoli [his nickname], but did not even know his real name" (Interview 4). It can thus be deduced that the structuration of the popular camp did not strictly rest on Togliatti's figure as a sort of initiator, or founder that created a new identity *ex nihilo*, even though his contribution in shaping the particular line that has been hitherto described was certainly decisive. Rather, it was a more profound attachment to the perspective of building a new society inspired by communist ideals - in good part spurred by the contribution of the Resistance movement and the role played by the Soviet Union in WW2 - that played the articulating role.

### **The 1950s and 1960s**

The onset of the Cold War created a new context for the Italian communists. On one side, the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union translated in Italy into a growing hostility

of the Christian Democrats towards the PCI, leading to the ousting of the party from cabinet positions in May 1947. On the other side, the communists, who had hoped to maintain their presence in what used to be termed the 'governmental area' as a key component of their hegemonic approach, kept the tones down until roughly 1948. However, a temporary change of the course of the PCI also occurred, one which was later to be reverted, but not without repercussions. The 'Zdanovian' turn that was dictated to the international communist movement with the creation of the Cominform in 1948 at the Szklarska Poreba conference, at which the supposedly shy attitude of the PCI was harshly criticised by the Bulgarian and Yugoslav delegations, contradicted many of the tenets of the Togliattian politics, even though this did not imply embarking upon any 'adventure' (Magri, 2011: 85).

Following the shift, the *partito nuovo* line underwent a number of alterations, even though talk of unity never disappeared entirely.<sup>36</sup> In the first place, the ideological question was once again foregrounded, as neatly exemplified by the reintroduction of the requirement to be a Marxist in order to join the party. The emphasis on the figure of the cadre at the expense of the mass element was also rescued and the question of discipline became of utmost importance. This development coincided with the increasing ascendancy of Secchia, who had a more workerist mentality and enjoyed a good relationship with Stalin himself. Secondly, the PCI did not spare harsh tones against the Christian Democrats. The confrontation between the PCI and the DC became particularly radical in those years. The DC was defined as 'clerico-fascist', and one of the most famous electoral posters of the time had three Christian Democrats rushing with a bib around their neck while carrying a fork, a spoon and a knife, in the attempt to highlight their voracious and corrupt appetite for public resources. In the

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<sup>36</sup>See for example Longo and Togliatti's interventions at the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1951 (Cecchi, 1977: 77, 104).



1950s, the interior minister Mario Scelba employed a particularly tough hand against demonstrations organised by the communists. Only as a result of the 1948-1950 clashes, 62 people had died, 3,126 were wounded, 92,169 arrested and 13,906 condemned for a total of 8,441 years of jail (Andreucci, 2014: 324). The PCI did not hesitate to denounce the Fascist tendencies lurking within the DC.

In a book dedicated to the symbolism of the PCI, David Kertzer (1996) offers an insightful perspective into the founding myths of the party and the ways in which they became institutionalised. Many of these characteristics distinguished the PCI throughout the whole period under analysis, but they reached their apex in the early 1950s. In particular, it is the Manichean attitudes that characterised the symbolic management operated by the party that became very pronounced. Significantly, the myth of the Soviet Union and the hagiolatry of Stalin and other leaders gave a religious touch to the discourse of the PCI (Kertzer, 1996: 46). Andreucci also stresses that a strong cult of personality for Togliatti was developed and fostered in line with the Soviet tradition, furnishing various telling examples, especially in the form of highly poetic interventions praising the PCI's leader published on the party press (Andreucci, 2014: 240-244).

The Russian Revolution occupied in the discourse of the party the 'embodiment of all that was good, struggling in a mighty battle against evil, namely, the forces of capitalism and imperialism epitomized by the United States' (Kertzer, 1996: 18). In particular, the author focuses on how party-sponsored rituals spread a particular view of history by which historical processes were identified with their ritualisation (Kertzer, 1996: 18). The party yearbook, symbolic linkages to the past in PCI gatherings, public commemoration of events: these were some of the various attempts in order to sanctify a determined understanding of history and

the world by way of rituals. Other symbolic manipulations which Kertzer brings to light have to do with the predilection for military metaphors, the continuity of communist symbols, the endowment of certain spaces with sacrality, the selection or transformation of history and the conspiratorial linking of dissent with betrayal (Kertzer, 1996: 24-36). At the same time, the *Resistenza* provided the possibility for the party to cast itself as the saviour of the nation, while painting the Allied forces as enemies of the Italian people and the United States in particular as reactionary imperialists aiming at world domination (Kertzer, 1996: 49-50, 56-57). Oppositely, the Soviet Union was portrayed as the protector of the world's workers and the guarantor of global peace.

This new climate of self-sufficiency and entrenchment impacted upon the relationship with the intellectuals, which had its ups and downs. Following the war, the party undoubtedly exerted a great attraction among young scholars, writers, painters and film-makers. The PCI was eager to welcome them in its ranks, but often attempted to impose its own criteria and make them entirely organic to the party project. The famous exchange on the politics-culture relationship between Togliatti and Elio Vittorini, a prominent writer who had fought the Resistance and joined the PCI, is quite explicative of such an approach. Vittorini had founded a literary and cultural magazine, called *Il Politecnico*, which gave space to a number of different leftist voices. Togliatti branded his enterprise as 'an abstract search for the new, the different and the astonishing' (Togliatti, 1974: 122). In response, Vittorini vindicated that the truly revolutionary writer is not the Pied Piper that merely supports the requirements of politics, but the one committed to the search of the truth (Vittorini, 1947: 2). The PCI intellectual Rossana Rossanda later recognised the unwillingness of the party to accept the openness of certain intellectuals towards new democratic philosophical and literary currents emerging in Europe and America (Agosti, 1996: 331). In fact, their journals were accused of 'antologism',

the tendency to review all possible theoretical developments, whereas Togliatti hoped they would opt for a more national cultural engagement, capable of establishing a fruitful dialogue with other Italian philosophical schools. This attitude created, even according to Vacca, a fracture with the most modern and urban sectors of the Italian intellectuality (Agosti, 1996: 331).

Equally, through his own editorials published on *Rinascita*, Togliatti, under the pseudonym Roderigo di Castiglia, did not hesitate to launch heavy and often offensive attacks on those disagreeing with the party. The Stalinist outlook that the PCI still displayed was thus often inimical to the demand for free discussion that intellectuals advanced. The difficulty of the relationship between party and intellectuals dramatically came to the fore once again amid the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, when the party unreservedly sided with the Russians. The reduction of the events of Budapest to a simple conspiracy of reactionary instigators provoked a tide of indignation that resulted in a distancing of many talented intellectuals.

How do we make sense of these developments from the point of view of populism and hegemony? In a sense, the antagonistic element was foregrounded, but this move did not entail an enhanced capacity to articulate. As put by Magri:

the hard years had turned the Party in on itself and fostered ideological rigidity, with the paradoxical result that it sought a way out in political manoeuvring at the top and in parliament, more than through an expansion of its social and cultural presence in society (Magri, 2011: 122).

By placing once again particular emphasis on ideological alignment, on the centrality of the working class and the privileged relationship with the Soviet Union, as opposed to a more independent search for an 'Italian Road to Socialism', the PCI made a step back in the construction of a people. While Stalin's regime, the epitome of communism, enjoyed a positive reputation among rank-and-file communists and the left more generally, the bulk of

the population did not necessarily look at that experience in favourable terms, and the hammering anti-communist propaganda of the DC, conducted under the good auspices of the Americans, certainly did not help. In this sense, it needs to be noted that in 1950s Italy, communism as such could not be considered as the empty signifier in the sense of a salvific horizon that orders all other meanings, but was exclusively the empty signifier of the PCI's discourse. A return to a narrower and more limited understanding of that perspective could not be taken, in Laclau's terms, neither as populist, despite its more decided antagonistic thrust, nor as hegemonic.

Following the death of Stalin in 1956, Togliatti adopted an evasive approach towards the Secret Speech delivered at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) by Nikita Khrushchev and, in a subsequent interview with *Nuovi Argomenti* released once the contents of the speech were already of public domain, he recognised some of the 'errors' of Stalin, while still minimising them in a framework that praised the Soviet process as a whole (Togliatti, 1974: 267). Nevertheless, by taking his cues from Khrushchev's acceptance of different national roads to socialism, in the same text Togliatti formulated the notion of 'polycentrism', indicating that the Soviet model was not mandatory and that there could not be a single guide (Togliatti, 1974: 268). The 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the PCI that took place a few months later indeed sanctioned the return to the politics that Togliatti had set forth after the war. 'For the Italian Road to Socialism' titled *L'Unità* newspaper where the full inaugural speech of Togliatti was transcribed. In it, Togliatti delineated a series of structural reforms that prefigured an advancement of the party towards the conquest of new fortresses in society (Togliatti, 1974: 290). More generally, the Congress brought a loosening of the tight discipline that had characterised the preceding years, a generational renovation at the top with the entrance of many young profiles that had fought during the Resistance and a more

relaxed climate within the Party that fostered discussion, yet without putting democratic centralism, and the system of co-optation of cadres in order to scale up the party ladder, in question (Magri, 2011: 135, 183-184).

It is in the period between the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress and the death of Togliatti in 1964 that the party started to display, if only *in nuce*, two diverging interpretations of the 'Italian Road to Socialism'. At first, these interpretations took the form of two different readings of the economic context and Italian capitalism more in general. The conference organised by the Gramsci Institute in 1962 was indicative of this initial divide. On one side, Amendola pointed to the disequilibria and the structural backwardness of Italian capitalism that, while not impeding an overall growth of the national economy, with GDP figures skyrocketing in the years of the so called 'economic miracle', made for an unbalanced type of development. Under this view, the Party had to urge the centre-left coalition that in those years was formed between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists to adopt measures against inequality, thereby sticking to the fight for immediate aims that could potentially entail the political involvement of the communists in Parliament (Magri, 2011: 174). It is not by chance that Amendola pushed in that period for a reunification with the Socialist Party that was not to find much support within the PCI (Magri, 2011: 179). On the other side, a reading of the Italian context in terms of neocapitalism was put forward, whereby entirely new aspects deriving from the process of industrialisation were foregrounded. The themes of consumerism, technology, mass communication and labour alienation found ample treatment here. These analyses led to a much harsher positioning towards the PSI and the centre-left experience, and in the following years the reflections took up the name of an 'alternative growth model'. According to Magri, these views were later maliciously portrayed as a utopian attempt to reinvigorate a too openly radical-democratic and anti-capitalist project, while in the mind of

their proponents they still envisaged a series of structural reforms as part of a long-term process (Magri, 2011: 177-178).

The clash between these two views, defended respectively by the right and left wings of the party, became more intense after Togliatti's death in 1964 and ended up in the internal ostracisation of the latter following the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress of the PCI in 1966. Pietro Ingrao, the most representative figure of the left, voiced his dissent during the plenary regarding the habit to hide the preliminary debates of the congresses, and in so doing he broke the taboo of showing disunity among the leading officials in public. This resulted in the downplay of his prominence and in the distancing of all the figures that were close to him from the key posts of the PCI. The left of the party was thus defeated, with the victory of the centrist faction, in alliance with the right (Liguori, 2014: 21).

These passages are important to bear in mind because they created a particular balance of power within the PCI and shaped a particular configuration of the party before the protest cycle of 1968-69. The massive students' and workers' mobilisations that erupted in those years rested on a reactivation of the social conflict led by the trade unions in the early 1960s. Contrary to the interpretation of Laclau (Laclau, 1981: 57), it was already at this time that the PCI showed an ultimate inability to get in touch with such sectors, and not later. This is not the place for an accurate assessment of such mobilisations; suffice it to highlight that they were largely characterised, especially those led by the students, by an unconciliatory approach that made spontaneism, permanent mobilisation and extra-parliamentary activity their distinguishing features. The most radicalised elements openly contested the politics of the PCI, which they considered as excessively top-down, moderate and institutionalist. Nevertheless, the PCI did not understand the extent of the movement - the analysis of

Boltansky and Chiapello on the later capacity of capitalism to absorb and re-orient in its own terms the creative dimension of the '68 protests (Boltansky and Chiapello, 2005) speaks of the far-reaching effects of those movements - and missed a historic opportunity not just to enhance its electoral performances, but to influence a fundamental 'fortified position', that is a key societal fortress, to put it in Gramscian terms (Magri, 2011: 233). To be sure though, the then Secretary General Luigi Longo attempted to open a dialogue with the students' movement by meeting its leaders. However, this was too little and, most importantly, his attitude did not go unchallenged internally. As reminded by Macaluso in his latest book on the PCI, the internal right-wing of the party held an entirely different view as it thought that it was time for the PCI to access the 'governmental area' and deemed the convergence with the movements as inopportune (Macaluso, 2013: 100). Even more vehemently, some leaders of the PCI scolded the students as the bearers of a rebellious ideology, with irrationalist traits (Magri, 2011: 232). The PCI fared better in its relationship with the workers' protests but resigned to make its presence within the firms more pronounced, delegating the bulk of the activity to the trade union (Magri, 2011: 231).

In terms of articulatory potential, it seems fair to summarise that while the PCI progressively made headway into constituencies that were 'democratically' oriented but not necessarily mobilised and certainly not ready nor prone for a radical and sudden break with the current order - whatever that may have meant - it had a hard time coming to terms with those that were interested in a more open contestation of the *status quo*. The PCI of the late 1950s and 1960s thus backtracked from the Cold War antagonism that recuperated a sterile pride for the communist identity, but acquired a series of traits that, while not immediately affecting the party in terms of electoral performances, which actually improved consistently in the 1960s, founded the pillars for an institutional turn. More in particular, it became evident that the

question of hegemony was ever more posed in terms of alliances with other political sectors rather than with social sectors. In the words of Liguori, the Party:

had not been able to interpret the Sixty-Eight and its 'long wave', with all the political and cultural unrest of which it was expression, and preferred the resumption of the dialogue with the traditional parties, shaken as they were by the sinking of the centre-left (Liguori, 2014: 64).

### **The historic compromise**

The strategy of the 'Italian Road to Socialism' can be rightfully described as 'a theoretical amalgamation of subversive Marxist ideas [...] and a practical application of reformist notions' and, in perspective, 'either aspect could be used by the future ruling party generations to forward radical or reformist strategies alternatively' (Fouskas, 1998: 25-26). While leaving the door open for considering the conservative effects brought about by the party's increasing penetration into local institutions (Amyot, 1981: 21-22), Amyot finds that the PCI underwent an ideological shift. However, this did not mean that the working class was ideologically hegemonised by the bourgeoisie, but rather a 'distinctively working-class ideology has kept the proletariat within the bounds of reformism [...] This Popular Front Ideology, also known as 'frontism', is an expression of the post-war strategy of the PCI' (Amyot, 1981: 25). Its impact was further compounded by the rules of democratic centralism, which prohibited factions and established the tradition of unanimous voting in the deliberative organs, and by the Michelian 'iron law of oligarchy' (Amyot, 1981: 28-29). Amyot also recognises the complexity of the Popular Front policy, which had a revolutionary potential that was not developed by the PCI. In fact, the Soviet directives mitigated the departure from the Leninist model of revolution by postulating a two-stage theory: a first democratic phase of anti-Fascist coalition government, and a second one, that of the socialist revolution proper (Amyot, 1981: 36-37). Over time



however, eurocommunism interpreted this strategy by emphasising the former aspect, while relegating the latter to an unspecified future time in order to reassure potential allies of the first phase: the petty bourgeoisie and the anti-monopolistic elements of the bourgeoisie proper (Amyot, 1981: 39-40). According to Amyot: '[t]hese two variants of Eurocommunism coexisted within the PCI; in the early 1960s Pietro Ingrao was to make the more radical interpretation of the concept of structural reform a major element of his platform' (Amyot, 1981: 44). As we have seen however, the internal defeat of Ingrao paved the way for the 1970s political season of the historic compromise.

Luigi Longo, the most prestigious figure pertaining to the old guard, replaced Togliatti in 1964. It was Longo himself to designate Enrico Berlinguer as his successor already in 1969, by appointing him as Vice Secretary General. Berlinguer then became Secretary General of the PCI in 1972 at the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress. As analysed by one of his biographers, Berlinguer was not a talented orator or a particularly brilliant character (Gorresio, 1976: 12, 22-23). Yet, he became a hugely popular and respected figure among the party followers: his sober, elegant and honest outlook attracted many even well beyond the traditional communist electorate. Differently from Togliatti however, Berlinguer, who was considered as a figure of compromise belonging to the so-called centre of the party, constantly had to mediate his decisions by taking into account the weight of the different components of the PCI.

In his report at the 13<sup>th</sup> congress, Berlinguer envisaged the constitution of a government that was to mark a democratic turning point which, by doing away with the anti-communist discrimination, would entail the collaboration of the three biggest political families: the catholic, the socialist and the communist. In particular, Berlinguer saw the possibility of a political shift of the catholic masses towards an understanding with the leftist forces

(Berlinguer, 1985: 305-307). In this, he enjoyed the full support of the right-wing of the party that was persuaded that there existed the willingness to collaborate among other political forces (Napolitano, 1976: 96). In this sense, according to a different view, the PCI kept on conceptualising the Christian Democrats as it did in the 1940s, that is without realising the fact that it had transformed into the party of 'strong interests' and ran the state in an entirely clientelist fashion. In particular, the PCI maintained an overly optimistic stance towards the left-wing of the DC led by Aldo Moro, failing to assess that, despite being less anti-communist, it was still strongly tied to the rest of its party (Liguori, 2014: 74).

The politics of rapprochement with the DC, which was only being theorised in the early 1970s, found particular resonance in an issue of the party-owned magazine *Il Contemporaneo* of 1973. According to Giuseppe Chiarante, the leading article of the issue was that of Gerardo Chiaromonte, which 'expressed not only the orientation of the magazine's leading board, but of the majority of the right-wing that prevailed in the leading bodies of the party' (Chiarante, 1996: 176). In this article, Chiaromonte stated that not even the 51% of votes for the Socialists and the Communists together would have been enough to guarantee a left-wing government and that a democratic turning point hinged around the renovation of the Christian Democrats (Chiaromonte, 1973). This was only the prologue of a more sustained effort to set out the politics of the historic compromise, enunciated by Berlinguer in three long articles published on *Rinascita* following the Chilean *coup d'etat* in 1973. As a whole, they constituted the most explicit formulation of what the role of the PCI in that particular historical conjunction ought to be. The reflection of Berlinguer invited a cautious assessment of the international situation, in which the US had directly intervened in the overthrow of Salvador Allende. In this sense, the communists had to play the card of consensus in order to avert any possibility of a reactionary backlash. There prevailed, in this view, a distinctively Togliattian pessimism

towards the always latent possibility of a Fascist comeback (see Berlinguer, 1971: 374-374; Liguori, 2014: 64). What was feared was the possibility of an alliance between the Christian Democrats and the extreme right, which could have given birth to a large 'clerico-fascist' front (Gorresio, 1976: 89). As a result, the PCI had to fight for the democratisation of the state and conquer new institutions by way of an agreement with the Christian Democrats (Liguori, 2014: 71). In parallel, Berlinguer developed the notion of eurocommunism, which was to unite, if only for a brief period, the Italian, Spanish and French communist parties in the distancing from the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union by emphasising the role played by individual freedoms, political pluralism and respect for the democratic process in the construction of socialism.

The historic compromise found concrete implementation in 1976 in the so called 'national solidarity' strategy, straight after the most successful electoral performance of the PCI ever to be achieved at general elections, at which it gained 34.4% of the votes for the lower house of parliament. However, it was not quite a compromise, because the DC had conducted an electoral campaign explicitly rejecting the possibility of a communist involvement. Nevertheless, given that parliamentary mathematics did not permit to compose a majority without the communists, the DC formed a minority government led by Giulio Andreotti, possibly one of the most distant figures among the Christian Democrats from the communists, and the PCI, along with the socialists, did not enter the government, but agreed to abstain in order to let the government legislate. For the PCI, the abstention was aimed at overcoming the *conventio ad excludendum*, that is the tacit agreement that had up to that point maintained the communists away from national power since 1947. In so doing however, the PCI lost entirely the character of an alternative force. In fact, policy-wise little was achieved in those years. The defenders of that strategy, which lasted until 1979, claim that, despite not

being well managed, the national solidarity supported democratic institutions in a critical juncture, characterised by a harsh economic crisis and both black and red terrorism, while also implementing a number of important measures (Magri, 2011: 277). However, the view according to which the left was offered nothing more than a symbolic role, and that the majority of the policies implemented in those years ran counter to the interests that the PCI had historically defended, seems much more apt to describe the situation (Magri, 2011: 272).

While it may be possible that the concrete instantiation of the historic compromise was ultimately different from how Berlinguer had envisaged it (Tortorella, 2004: 19), the particular reading of the economic situation put forward by the right wing of the party was to strongly influence Berlinguer and the behaviour of the PCI as a whole in those years (Chiarante, 2003: 30). In particular, in the words of Rossanda, there was a surplus of Gramscianism that led to a blurring of class analysis (Rossanda, 2003: 13). The view according to which hegemony consists first and foremost in the renouncement of the corporative interests of the working class (see for example Napolitano, 1976: 97) took up a particular twist. Talk of sacrifices became indeed pervasive. As put by Amendola: "Sacrifices are required by the state of things" (Amendola, in Paggi and D'Angelillo, 1986: 11). Berlinguer was equally blunt: "I don't see which government would have, without the participation of the PCI, enough political and moral authority to request these efforts" (Berlinguer in Gorresio, 1976: 101).

The line of reasoning behind the supposed need for sacrifices is well conveyed by Larry and Roberta Garner. In sum, a would-be hegemonic force must take up the destiny of the nation as a whole, and not simply that of its original constituency (Garner and Garner, 1981: 258). In so doing, it has to look at the short-term and provide solutions to the pressing problems of the day: a strategy that made the PCI susceptible of being accused of reformism and to which it

responded with the two related concepts of 'structural reform' and 'elements of socialism' (Garner and Garner, 1981: 261-262). So far, so good: this strategy seems to fit perfectly along the Gramscian/Togliattian project. However, the successful wage struggles conducted at the beginning of the 1960s along with the trade union dramatically increased the costs of production, leading to a crisis in the mid-1970s. As a result, faithful to the hegemonic approach adopted, the PCI had to restrain the fight for further increases in order to avoid a furthering of the crisis of Italian capitalism, which would have not only meant a deterioration of conditions for the very working class, but would have constituted a threat to the unity of the historic bloc hitherto constructed. In particular, a setback in regard to the relationship with the petit-bourgeois base was seen as particularly dangerous (Garner and Garner, 1981: 265-266). This is also why Berlinguer was more interested in making of the PCI a reliable and tranquil political force, particularly to the benefit of the middle classes (Liguori, 2014: 38). In a nutshell, if the overall efficiency of the economy was to be maintained, moderation and the backing off from certain structural reforms were of paramount importance (Garner and Garner, 1981: 269).

This stance is profoundly unconvincing. In an insightful volume that brings to a conclusion a long comparative research programme between Italian communism and other European social-democratic paths, Leonardo Paggi and Massimo D'Angelillo come to very different conclusions (Paggi and D'Angelillo, 1986). To begin with, they analyse that talk of austerity and sacrifices found no echo in the European social-democratic language of those years, and that the certainty that working class interests could enter into conflict with the interests of the generality, insofar as these were the culprit of a diminished competitiveness of the national economy, is rather to be interpreted as a sign of the 'cultural meeting' between liberalism and the working class (Paggi and D'Angelillo, 1986: x-xii). More specifically, the authors highlight

the strident clash between the political influence achieved by the post-war PCI on one side, and the incapacity to impact upon the orientation of the economic policies on the other (Paggi and D'Angelillo, 1986: 63). This point is corroborated by other authors, who date the lack of a refined economic knowledge and the subordination of the Italian left-wing economic culture to liberalism back to Togliatti's times (Bocca, 1973: 464-466; Agosti, 1996: 306-307). These factors impeded a more sustained engagement with economic issues and thus negatively impinged upon the capacity of the party to have a broader influence on economic policy-making (see Magri, 2011: 53-55).

There is a further issue however. The hyper-identity that derived from the PCI's affiliation to the Warsaw pact played a role of internal integration on one side, but on the other opened up a question of democratic legitimacy, as exemplified by the *conventio ad excludendum*. As a result, while the social-democratic trade-off in other European countries meant bargaining salary increases in exchange for the moderation of social conflict, in Italy the trade-off brought for the PCI simply a more extended recognition (Paggi and D'Angelillo, 1986: 102). In this sense, the transformist strategy of the Christian Democrats attempted to pursue a modernising path against the working class, by sabotaging the identity of the PCI from within and integrating it into the system in a subordinated position (Paggi and D'Angelillo, 1986: 67). In the end, the judgement of the two authors on the hegemonic approach adopted by the PCI is harsh but plausible:

Once translated into the political perspective of national unity, this theory of hegemony paradoxically ends up legitimising a political proposition which tends to interpret the governmental participation not so much in terms of alternative and rupture with the transformist model, but rather as a theoretical justification of its molecular modification from within, and thus also as an acceptance of some of its basic compatibilities (Paggi and D'Angelillo, 1986: 104-105).

## **Populism and hegemony in the PCI**

In an overall assessment of the PCI, Laclau stated that the party found obstacles in becoming a 'fully fledged populist movement' because:

'Communism' in its Italian guise could not move beyond a certain point in the direction of constituting itself as the empty signifier unifying a historical singularity; the ideological issue denied the PCI access to a plurality of sectors whose incorporation was nevertheless vital to the success of the Togliattian project (OPR: 185).

In this sense, the fullness of the symbolism that was so important for the party members was at the same time a sort of cap that impeded to take the populist reach even further. In other words, the too heavily charged ideological baggage of the PCI was not empty enough in order to make room for a wider equivalential chain and hegemonise - in the way Laclau employs the term - the whole discursive terrain. The short circuit between a heavy symbolism that had particular purchase within the party, but a much more modest one without, is thus a central issue that throws light on the potential contradictions between the inside (the militant world) and the outside (the electorate at large) of an emancipatory political practice.

To be sure though, Togliatti and Berlinguer were aware of the necessity to pursue a certain emptiness and to some extent went in that direction. Although the building of a socialist society and the Soviet model (with the latter starting to fade as a point of reference from the late 1960s onwards) remained at the very heart of the party's rhetoric, the 'victory' of communism was not in the short-term agenda - it needed to be thought as a long-term horizon, as something only looming ahead in a distant future. The realisation of the communist dream, this promise of harmony and fullness, was thus concomitantly embraced and disavowed. As put by Castellina: "With Catholic workers? No, we did not mention the Soviet Union with them. But it was still a symbolic reference to maintain alterity" (Interview

1). Soviet communism was a worldly heaven, yet a certain distance had to be maintained from it; communism was a historical necessity, yet socialism, in the 'Italian Road to Socialism', was in actual fact excluded from the final goals, as a destination never to be reached (Cafagna, 1991: 62-63). In this sense, the question of the passage from capitalism to socialism remained permanently elusive, and the 'whole pattern of "transitional thinking"', moreover, only begged the question: transition to what? and when?' (Barth Urban, 1986: 245). This move lightened the 'ideological issue' without removing it entirely. However, precisely because the party went some strides towards the emancipation of 'theory from too close a relationship to politics (and viceversa)' (Sassoon, 1981: 42) in the search of a discourse that could broaden its appeal, 'the crucial link between "principles" and the "concrete"' (Sassoon, 1981: 235) became scant, as well mirrored in the deficiencies of the party's economic thinking mentioned above. At this point, there lacked a detailed analysis on how exactly the normative could find concrete implementation in reality.

Although ambiguity is a distinguishing characteristic of a truly popular identity insofar as a historical singularity becomes the site of inscription of a variety of demands that find a precarious equilibrium (OPR: 108-109), the ambiguity here is of a different kind, as the PCI displayed a profound ambivalence at the very heart of its nodal point, in a peculiar mix of pride and dilution. The party encouraged the fantasy of communism to exist and thrive, provoking a strong emotional attachment among its followers, but at the same time such a horizon was indefinitely postponed.<sup>37</sup> Communism was heightened to the dignity of the Thing,

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<sup>37</sup>This is particularly well conveyed by the words of Tortorella: "there was no duplicity in Togliatti. He was sincerely convinced that here [in Italy] the Soviet way was not to be followed at all, and that there [in the Soviet Union] everything that had happened was an appalling tragedy. I knew Togliatti well. Nothing of what had been done there was to be replicated. But if you listen to his conversation with Bobbio in 1954, what is the point? There was a logical error, even a boy like me could understand it. According to Togliatti, we must start from a firm point: socialism is no longer a question of a discussion among intellectuals. It is a



it represented the desired object, the 'dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity' (Žižek, 2012: 685), but only partially, as it was held as a distant and almost unrealisable destination and the progress to it was to be achieved only by virtue of cultivating unity with its own political adversaries. The price for being communists was thus the constant need to legitimise such a position by way of providing reassurances to the enemy and to the people at large, which took the form of a substantial abdication to think of itself as a true alternative. It is not by chance that the PCI has often been characterised as ultimately schizophrenic in its overall behaviour.

In this sense, there is another related reason for claiming that the PCI fell short of transforming itself into a fully-fledged populist practice. As we have seen, besides the sharp political frontier established with Fascism, the antagonistic edge with respect to the rest of the political spectrum was particularly blunted in the 1944-47 and 1976-79 periods, but even in the remaining years considered here - with the exception of the 'Zdanovist phase' at the beginning of the Cold War when the tones became much harsher - the party always depicted the DC as its own nemesis while concomitantly harbouring the desire to re-establish a governmental relationship with it. Its Manichaeism was thus constantly belied by a strategy that made collaboration its cornerstone.

This did not mean that an articulatory process did not take place. Paradoxically, the capacity to join heterogeneous elements took place more easily when the antagonism was softened, in particular because the exacerbation of antagonism in the early 1950s was dictated by a more ideological embracing of Marxism-Leninism that made it difficult for the PCI to broaden its appeal. A 'people' was somehow constructed, as the PCI managed to create a metaphorical

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historical reality. He thought that even though this state was born amid a lot of deaths, appalling tragedies, etc., it is a historical reality and a new society had begun. Of this he was sincerely convinced" (Interview 4).

relationship between constituencies, social sectors, demands and symbols that did not naturally tend to converge.

The peculiar trait that emerges from the analysis of the PCI is that it possibly nurtured more a counter-hegemonic approach than a populist one. This assertion begs an explanation. Without becoming a majority in the country, the PCI managed to create a 'people' despite its political frontiers not being as sharp. Even more crucially, through a work of penetration of the party into the thousands of rivulets of civil society, it exerted a strong political and cultural influence, one inspired by ideals at odds with those of the *status quo*. In fact, the PCI was not the sectarian movement that some of his detractors have described, as in the case of Andreucci's latest book (Andreucci, 2014). The PCI was precisely what he negates it to have been: a national-popular party that incorporated democracy and socialism, stemming the most revolutionary impetuses and that overall represented a distinctive case in the 'firmament' of international communism (Andreucci, 2014: 286). Electoral results, mass-militancy, its deep presence in the country and its planned mix of radicalism and moderation are only among the most vivid proofs of such a characterisation. The party schools, for example, were not a simple method of indoctrination that sanctified a chain of command and a process of homologation (Andreucci, 2014: 235-6), but - along with all the party recreational spaces - they played a pedagogical function through which a particular world-view was cultivated and where the political alphabetisation, both of the masses and of the future leaders, was pursued. Moreover, the party schools played a pivotal role in the rooting of the PCI and in the fusion of Marxism with Italian history, which entailed a retroactive construction of myth by linking disparate historical events and customs into a single narrative (Andreucci, 2014: 285).

A similar line of reasoning has to be applied to the particularly remarkable influence on Italian culture. Dozens of philosophers, writers, artists and thinkers joined the ranks of the party and contributed to make the PCI one of the chief organisers of cultural activities in the country. The number of magazines, conferences and exhibitions that it engineered are tangible proof of its profound involvement in this field. This was also made possible, if somewhat paradoxically, by the battle for freedom of culture waged against the clerical and obscurantist politics of the Christian Democrats throughout the 1950s. The later distancing from Stalinism operated by Berlinguer was also conducive in creating a greater appeal for this sector. In the 1970s, the PCI managed to extend its influence to intellectual sectors that had up to that point been quite far from the reach of the party. University professors, architects, urban planners and judges were among the categories over which the party started to have a great deal of sway.

By the same token, democratic centralism and the cascade of structures, from the smallest territorial cell at the neighbourhood level leading up to the Secretariat, made for a hierarchical arrangement, but ample room was left for voluntarism and activism (Andreucci, 2014: 344). The PCI gave them constant impetus as a way to be in touch with a variety of social sectors. Movements such as the trade union CGIL, the women's movement UDI, the youth-related *Fronte della Gioventù* were associations in which militants pertaining to different political parties (but also non-militants) participated. The unity of such organisations was deemed to be of utmost importance, because it permitted the PCI to extend its appeal to a wider audience, 'controlled' by other parties. In addition, specific magazines were published, behind which stood the party, creating the capacity to ramify and penetrate into the most diverse environments (Andreucci, 2014: 344-345). All these activities - not to mention the

thousands of political assemblies, rallies, conferences, electoral campaigns at all levels and so on - required an army of party officials, which constituted the scaffolding of the PCI.

This pervasiveness of the party in the country at large was the result of the application of a war of position strategy. Nevertheless, the way in which the war of position was understood shifted considerably. Laclau was aware of the Gramscian debates of the 1960s and 1970s (Laclau, 1981: 56), yet he failed to connect the overly political version of Gramsci that became dominant in the party to the growing incapacity of the PCI to connect with those new struggles that in the 1980s Laclau deems as indispensable for any emancipatory project. At most, what we find in his writings is the acknowledgement of the limits of the Togliattian synthesis in the 1960s, while remaining largely elusive on what could have been done in order to overcome the difficulties encountered by the PCI, other than vaguely stating that the theoretical elements to face up the new situation were to be found in Gramsci (Laclau, 1980b: 258; Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 21). In actual fact however, Gramsci never intended that alliances had to be established at the level of what he termed political society, but rather at a purely social level. The working class was to become the epicentre of a practice that put together other classes and constituted a new historic bloc without the mediation of other parties. The way in which this was assimilated by the PCI was different from the very outset. Alliances at a social level were deemed to go through an understanding with other political forces. With the creation of a post-war state that was permeable to the inputs coming from the left - and thus differing from the liberal state of the past that was exclusively in the elites' hands - and the establishment of a political system in which parties had much more weight than in the Anglo-Saxon model, political society had become the terrain for the ideological struggle for hegemony (Vatalaro, 2011: 91). This did not impede the communists from ramifying their presence and having a real bearing on Italian society.

As we have seen however, the importance of political society at the expense of civil society became markedly visible in the 1970s. The PCI underwent a considerably deep cultural and organisational shift that was to usher in its final capitulation. The so called 'second Berlinguer' period of the early 1980s up to his death in 1984, in which he distanced himself from the perspective of the historic compromise and tried to reconstruct a relationship with the working class and the social movements, did not succeed. This was partly because a great part of the leadership did not follow him on that course (Liguori, 2014: 139), partly because the party at that point relied more on electors than on militants and the quality of participation had deteriorated, with the bulk of the membership unable to conduct a regular work among the masses, and partly because the larger societal environment played a homogenising role (Magri: 2011: 343-345). The fall of the Soviet Union was to do the rest, resulting in the dissolution of the PCI in 1991 and the transformation into a liberal-democratic party, rather than a social-democratic one, and with this death any type of emancipatory thrust. As a conclusion on populism and hegemony then, it seems that populism and hegemony occupy distinct conceptual terrains and a counter-hegemonic approach runs the risk of absorption if it does not maintain a clear frontier with the remaining political actors.

A final consideration on the role of the leader is needed. The role of Togliatti in the structuration of the popular camp is undeniable. Furthermore, the figure of Togliatti exemplifies the sense in which the notion of charisma is implicitly employed in Laclau. In fact, charisma does not lie so much in personal qualities, in the ability to deliver aesthetically attractive speeches, or in personal magnetism, but rather in the capacity to make sayable the transcript that a particular regime maintains hidden and foreclosed, making it an essentially reciprocal category: in other words, 'charisma means that one "has charisma" only to the extent that others confer it upon one' (Scott, 1990: 221), or, to put it in terms familiar with

our theoretical scheme, insofar as certain grievances are brought to the fore (Stavrakakis, 2015: 279). Almost every account on Togliatti agrees that he was not particularly pleasant or charismatic in the traditional sense; his professorial attitude and convoluted language do not seem to match the classical image of a populist leader, even though - it is worth emphasising - it is not that which is taken as a sign of populism here.<sup>38</sup> Equally, Berlinguer was no rabble-rouser either, despite the already mentioned non-indulgent and frank approach that gained him and the party the respect of many. Yet, their political prominence was able to intercept a series of unmet demands and inscribe them within the perspective of change propounded by the PCI. A proof of this, let alone the structural difficulties that the PCI faced in the 1980s, is the oft debated question of the lack of credible leaderships following Berlinguer's death that could have avoided the dissolution of the PCI and the political 'normalisation' of its heirs in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, we have an important qualitative difference in the communist leaders under scrutiny here with respect to other populist leaders. What comes out as particularly important for our purposes is that the type of leadership embodied by Italian communist leaders differed from the one of Rafael Correa presented in the next chapter. What are its peculiarities? In a sense the very fact of being the leader of the PCI had a bureaucratic component that made for a certain top-down approach; the choice of Togliatti who had been away from Italy for a long time, as well as the transitions from Togliatti to Longo and then to Berlinguer were somewhat 'precooked' internally. Yet the centrality of such figures was partially blunted by the fact of their being accompanied by a greater importance attributed to

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<sup>38</sup>As put by Castellina in reference to Togliatti: "What is hard to believe is how this man, who used to wear a blue double-breasted coat, spoke like a *liceo* [high school] professor, that is in a very erudite way, very cultured, because he knew and followed everything, was such a popular leader. And Berlinguer was very much the same" (Interview 1).

the realm of ideas. Leaders here are not totally empty, simple points of anchorage of heterogeneous aspirations that are drawn together by the negation of the current order, but they are the embodiment of a more concrete and delineated project. In a sense, it is possible to partially concur with Žižek in his attempt to distance communist movements from populism (Žižek, 2006: 557). In the case of the PCI, the salience of the ideological issue at the expense of the leader seems to have been able to preserve the centrality of the ideas and the capacity to play a truly pedagogical function in the country, with the cult of the leader serving as a sort of supplementary role. This is not to say that emancipatory movements cannot be generated by a leader, but that the continued prominence of a leader will tend to signal the incapacity to move beyond a situation of more cursory infatuation. It is to such a scenario that we now turn with the analysis of the Citizens' Revolution in Ecuador.

## Chapter 4: Correa's Citizens' Revolution<sup>39</sup>

In this chapter, the focus shifts to a rather different geographical and temporal context. Indeed, the attention is directed at making sense of the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution from 2006 to 2018 by analysing its emergence and the successive transformations that occurred throughout its trajectory. More precisely, the chapter intends to give an account of the birth of a political discourse capable of forging a novel popular identity that interpellated a wide range of social sectors, investigate its subsequent evolutions, its specificities and its material impacts in terms of tangible social, political, economic and cultural transformations. As a result of the empirical analysis, I will be in a position to provide a number of insights on the explanatory and strategic potential and limitation of the notions of populism and hegemony as set out by Laclau. As we know, his theory of populism has exercised a preponderant influence in the analysis of the Latin American populist phenomena, with special reference to the context that the academic literature has termed 'pink tide' or 'turn to the left', to which Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution clearly pertains. It will emerge that if to some extent Laclau's categories help us to clarify what happened in Ecuador and put in evidence the political merits of the populist approach, this is not without difficulties from both an analytical plane, as well as a strategic and normative point of view.

As with the PCI case, I propose a temporal division of the chapter with four stages of periodisation of the Citizens' Revolution. The first section 'The construction of a people' deals with the founding moment, and in particular with the initial anti-neoliberal gamble launched by Rafael Correa before the 2006 presidential elections that gave life to a new political

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<sup>39</sup>A part of this chapter draws from an earlier work on Ecuador (Mazzolini, 2016).



subject, and with his first steps as Ecuadorian President. It is the turbulent moment of the take-off of the project, when the old political class attempts to prevent the ascendancy of Correa as the new political star of the country, that the defining political and ideological features of the project acquire increasing clarity. During this period, a range of heterogeneous demands existing in Ecuadorian society are forged together so as to create a new collective will, a novel bloc composed of diverse social actors that find in the figure of Correa a unifying element. In the section, some references will also be made to the socio-political context that preceded and, in some ways, created the terrain for the advent of the Citizens' Revolution. The second section, 'Populism in transition', begins during the 2008 Constituent Assembly, and more specifically with the resignation of its President Alberto Acosta, a leading figure within the newly formed popular bloc, that took place in June. As his distancing from the Citizens' Revolution testifies, this period is distinguished by the appearance of some minor conflicts within the popular camp, which suggest a cooling of the relations between the government and organised social sectors. Yet almost paradoxically, it is the moment of consolidation of the project, in which the grip of the Citizens' Revolution in Ecuadorian society seems to be at its strongest. The period extends up to Correa's second re-election in 2013. The third stage, which coincides with the entire third mandate of Rafael Correa until May 2017, is named 'Towards a progressive degeneration of populism' and is characterised by the emergence of a number of problematic aspects. The slowly declining appeal of Correa's charisma goes hand in hand with a pronounced shift away from popular sectors, the exacerbation of antagonistic confrontations with an increasing number of political enemies and the deepening of top-down and caudillistic drifts which, in an embryonic form, already made their exordium in the previous stage. It is also marked by an economic crisis that spurs a number of changes in terms of normative orientation, thus contradicting some of the political

and economic tenets that Correa had previously stood for. The fourth stage, which falls here under the title 'A non-hegemonic end of a populism', functions as a sort of epilogue: the initial steps, as president, of Lenin Moreno, the successor designated by the Citizens' Revolution, have gone in the direction of ousting Correa from the political scene and doing away with much of the symbolism and the confrontational thrust that had theretofore distinguished the Citizens' Revolution. The period considered here finishes with the seven-part referendum and popular consultation organised by Moreno in February 2018, which sanctions the definitive parting from the political inheritance of his predecessor. In the fifth and final section, 'Theoretical outcomes', a series of theoretical considerations on the Ecuadorian context and Laclau's work as a result of the analysis are advanced.

### **The construction of a people**

In the wake of the deepening of the structural adjustment policies during the government of Sixto Durán Ballén (1992-1996), a phase of particular instability began in the Ecuador. Despite falling far from a rigorous implementation of the Washington Consensus policies that saw their apex in Chile and Argentina, the 'qualitative leap' of the neoliberal agenda created the conditions for an exponential increase of social protest that resulted in a condition of permanent political instability. Inflation, lack of growth, corruption, re-primarisation of the economy, unemployment, authoritarianism, migratory exodus: these were only the most visible factors that led thousands of citizens to tip over repeatedly onto the streets, contributing to the fall of three elected Presidents (Abdalá Bucaram in 1997, Jamil Mahuad in 2000 and Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005), and a proliferation of social demands systematically neglected by existing institutional channels. Not even the Constituent Assembly held in 1998 managed to put things in order and inject some of the much sought-after governability to the

Ecuadorian political system. Rather, it could be said that the Constitution of 1998 integrated various demands through a modest talk of rights and contributed to creating a climate that favoured participation at a local level. However, it failed to reform the state consistently and to give real access to those rights, as the core of the new Magna Carta hinged around a strengthened role for the market to the detriment of the state. In this way, demands kept expressing themselves through extra-institutional forms, with the indigenous organisation playing an increasingly central role (Ortiz Crespo, 2008: 14-15). Such a prominence occurred amid the loss of political weight of the trade unions and resulted in the capacity of the indigenous movement to enact protests that embodied the general interest, thus attracting a plurality of popular demands (León Trujillo, 2010: 16)

Nevertheless, despite accumulating, these claims did not lead automatically to the consolidation of an alternative proposal capable of launching an organised and effective assault to the supremacy of the national political actors who, with different nuances, defended the status quo. The demands, many of which had their distant origin in different relations of oppression dating back even to the colonial era, were exacerbated by policies that hit the most vulnerable sectors of society and by a profound crisis of the political system. If we follow the categorisation employed by Laclau, we can say that in the stage prior to the advent of the Citizens' Revolution, these demands had already ceased to be 'democratic' in order to become 'popular'. This means that they were no longer isolated demands, because among them there was no doubt a vague solidarity in recognising in the political and economic powers their common adversary. However, they had not yet transformed themselves into a stable system of signification (OPR: 74). In this sense, the creation of the *Coordinadora de Movimientos Sociales* (Social Movements Coordination Body) in 1995 testifies the convergence of some of the demands expressed by Ecuadorian civil society. Another example

is the 2005 *Forajido* (outlaw) movement that developed in Quito in opposition to the President Lucio Gutiérrez. Even though temporally limited and prevalently composed by the middle class, the movement managed to coalesce heterogeneous frustrations under the anti-parties motto *¡Qué se vayan todos!* (Let them all go!).

This traumatic situation of crisis and uncertainty that existed in Ecuador in the 1990s and 2000s - a lack of social fullness which was expressed precisely by means of demands (OPR: 114-115) - weakened the old political discourses which until then had conferred identity, opening up a window that made it possible for subjects to re-construct new structures and re-identify with new discursive objects. It was a time - the emblem of which was the 5-days long bank holiday of 1999 when all financial activities were suspended amid a ruinous banking crisis and following which the economy was dollarised - that, as we have seen, Laclau conceptualises under the name of dislocation, i.e. an experience that makes visible the contingency of social relations and identities, opening a new range of possibilities. But which were the demands that more forcefully began to spread among the Ecuadorian population? We need to keep in mind that not all of them were necessarily represented by a particular socio-political actor and that those expressing them not always belonged to an organised militant sector: in fact, some demands emerged simply as generic questionings of existing relationships of subordination, thereby becoming potential antagonistic sites (HSS: 153-154). While some of these claims overlapped in so far as subjects could well be bearers of more than one of them, from an analytical point of view we can discriminate them. Among them, we can distinguish claims for the recognition of ancestral peoples, for the cancellation of the external debt, for a more transparent politics in opposition to a political class growingly perceived as corrupt and self-absorbed, against the destruction of the Andean and Amazonian ecosystems, against the abysmal levels of poverty and inequality, against the continuous

interference of the United States in national political matters, for the recognition of care work and the denunciation of the sexual division of labour, and against labour outsourcing and flexibility.

However, it should be remembered that the appearance of such demands does not guarantee a social transformation in a progressive direction. The contingency imposed by the dislocation can be hidden thanks to its reabsorption by the dominant bloc, through a differential satisfaction of demands or, similarly, by means of a new discourse which transformistically carries out what Antonio Gramsci called passive revolution, i.e. a change so that nothing will change. What is required is a condensation of a range of demands to the extent that they become enchained one to the other. As Laclau clarifies:

All struggle is the struggle of concrete social actors for particular objectives, and nothing guarantees that these objectives will not clash with each other. Now I would agree that no overall historical transformation is possible unless the particularism of the struggles is superseded and a wider "collective will" is constituted. But this requires the implementation of what in our work we have called the logic of equivalence, which involves acts of political articulation (Laclau, 2001: 8).

How is a new collective will forged in Ecuador? Let us have a look at how the project came about specifically. Correa, a heterodox economist with no particularly strong ties to the militant Left, was nominated as Minister for the Economy by Alfredo Palacio, the President who had succeeded Lucio Gutiérrez once the latter was removed from power amid the popular unrest that shook the city of Quito in April 2005. Correa gained much visibility by expressing stark critiques against neoliberal economic policies and by altering the allocation of the reserve fund arising from the oil revenues exceeding the budgeted price: while up to that point 70% of that fund was addressed to covering the foreign debt with only 10% spent on health and education programs, Correa reduced the former to 50% and increased the latter to 30%, while also enhancing the amount allocated to other productive rubrics (El Universo

2005; Correa, 2005: 72). It was already clear that by the time he resigned as Minister following some bitter disagreements with Palacio, he had already acquired a consistent political capital and was the most popular member of the cabinet (El Universo, 2005b). From there, it was a short step to transforming his vocal rants into an electoral campaign.

A hasty process of electoral preparation followed, which, as we shall see below, was not exempt from repercussions in the medium-long run in the politics of the Citizens' Revolution. From an organisational point of view, the creation of Correa's movement was supported by the academic prestige of many of its original proponents (Rafael Correa himself, Alberto Acosta, Fander Falconí, Fernando Bustamante) and by the logistic and organisational networks provided by some political groups that came together in the movement.<sup>40</sup> But it was certainly the work of the political articulation of demands that made the difference. The creation of a 'people' was made possible precisely by the political gamble of Correa, who enchainned equivalentially these demands, i.e. he made their contiguity, their proximity as demands, transform into a fully-fledged analogy (OPR: 109). In other words, originally heterogeneous demands gained homogeneity and joined in one discourse by which each demand necessarily implied the other. This did not happen immediately however, as Correa - one of thirteen contenders in the 2006 elections - ended second in the first round and won only in the run-off against the banana tycoon Álvaro Noboa, in a vote that was possibly more against Noboa than pro Correa. It is also paramount to highlight that by the time Correa launched his electoral bid, popular mobilisations had already ebbed and the main character of the previous protests, the indigenous movement through its national organization CONAIE, had lost much of his political

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<sup>40</sup> Among these it is worth mentioning *Jubileo 2000*, *Iniciativa Ciudadana*, *Acción Democrática Nacional*, *Movimiento Alianza Bolivariana Alfarista*, *Ciudadanos Nuevo País* and *Alternativa Democrática*. The *Partido Socialista Frente Amplio* also supported Rafael Correa from the outset, even though it never joined *Alianza País*.

capital by allying with former President Lucio Gutiérrez, whose promises to do away with neoliberalism proved to be vacuous. It would thus be more correct to affirm that it was through the consolidation of Correa in power that the chain of equivalences fully established itself, thanks to a massive deployment of the state and the design of efficient public policies, as we shall analyse more at length below.

As well synthesised by Conaghan, two overarching themes stood out in the 2006 campaign: on one side, Correa insisted on the moral bankruptcy of the political class, which was deemed as responsible for the degradation of state institutions; on the other his fiery attacks went against the disintegration of the fatherland (*patria*) following the implementation of elite-engineered economic policies that furthered the interests of the few at the expense of the many (Conaghan, 2011: 265). The reference to the fatherland permitted Correa to construct a powerful narrative once in power. Accompanied by the promise of a radical rupture with a past made of *entreguismo* (the attitude of granting concessions to powerful interests, especially foreign ones), Correa adopted dramatic tones and a quasi-religious language in shaping his patriotic discourse (Burbano de Lara, 2015: 24). *Patria* became an all-pervading term, as well epitomised by the name of Correa's movement *Patria altiva i soberana* (Proud and sovereign fatherland), whose initials together formed the acronym PAIS (which in Spanish means country). As Correa put it in the inaugural speech of the Constituent Assembly election day:

We require the national spirit, the most honest and deep one, linked to the endearing deeds of the fatherland, to be present in this hour, which is the reaffirmation of the change of epoch, of the light at the end of the tunnel, of the hope for the poor of the fatherland (Correa, 2007).

Even more performative was the felicitous appropriation of the *Himno a la Patria* (Hymn to the Fatherland, not the official national anthem), a lively motif that started to be played any time Correa made his entrance at a public event. The first verse goes like this:

<i>Patria, tierra sagrada,</i>	Fatherland, sacred land,
<i>de honor y de hidalguía</i>	of honour and nobility
<i>que fecundó la sangre</i>	that fertilised the blood
<i>y engrandeció el dolor</i>	and magnified the pain
<i>como me enorgullece llamarte mía</i>	how I am proud to call you mine
<i>mía como mi madre con infinito amor</i>	mine like my mother with infinite love

The invocation of the fatherland was thus aimed at legitimising various metaphorical enchainments. Invoking the fatherland and its dignity was subservient to appealing to a variety of situations: fatherland meant showing interest for the downtrodden and forgotten sectors of society, it meant claiming for more social justice, it meant recuperating the sovereignty that the country had ceded to foreign interests, it meant displaying proximity towards the millions of Ecuadorians who had migrated abroad after the banking crisis a few years before. But most especially it meant creating a filiation with the most glorious political traditions of the country, just as we have seen in the case of the PCI (Burbano de Lara, 2015: 26-30). Eloy Alfaro, the leader of the so called Liberal Revolution of the 1890s-1910s and former president who was brutally assassinated and burnt by a conservative-led mob, was elevated as the ultimate source of political and symbolic inspiration. In his honour, the Constituent Assembly was set up in Montecristi, the city where he was born. As put by Correa



in a ceremony that marked the beginning of the Constituent Assembly during which the ashes of Alfaro were collocated in a newly-built mausoleum: "By following the footsteps and traces of Alfaro's sovereignty, independence and patriotism, they are irrefutable evidence of the permanence and validity of his ideology" (Correa, 2007b). A second historic reference was that of Manuela Sáenz, the Ecuadorian loving and political partner of Simón Bolívar, also known as *El Libertador* for his successful military undertakings in the struggle for South American liberation from Spanish colonial rule. In this sense, Bolivarianism - already deployed in the discourses of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia - was constitutive of a teleological rhetoric that made of the Citizens' Revolution the second and definitive independence (Burbano de Lara, 2015: 24).

What about in terms of the actual ideology of the Citizens' Revolution? As hinted, the discourse adopted by Correa was markedly anti-neoliberal and adverse to free-market policies. In the inaugural address of his first Presidency, he bluntly stated:

The neoliberal, inhuman and cruel globalisation, which wants to convert us into markets and not into nations, which wants to make us simple consumers and not citizens of the world, is very similar in conceptual terms to the savage capitalism of the Industrial Revolution (Correa, 2007c).

Correa defined the époque that preceded his election as the "sad and long neoliberal night", an expression that became famous as he insisted in repeating it in his presidential speeches. In the first few years, Correa adhered to the ill-defined horizon of the socialism of the XXI century, which at the time found much echo in Latin America. His socialism went hand in hand with his catholic credo, which he always displayed very openly, in an important metaphorical operation which, differently from the PCI, tried to conflate the two in a country that is deeply religious. "The politics of the Citizens' Revolution is a politics of solidarity, of true Christian

consecration in its love for the neighbour and adoption of the brotherly doctrine of the socialism of the XXI century" (Correa, 2007d).

In order to respond to the falling levels of solidarity and the mounting individualism fostered by neoliberal policies, Correa put the state at the centre of his politics (Burbano de Lara, 2015: 33). The reconstruction of an efficient and dynamic state apparatus ranked high among his priorities, especially in the light of the 'corporativisation' of the state, colonised according to Correa's view by private interests - especially in the oil sector (see Santos, 2008) - and other unions (Ospina Peralta, 2010: 3). Such an emphasis has led some commentators to speak about the curious emergence of a sort of technocratic populism, at odds with the much more precarious state management of other populist experiences (such as Venezuela) (de la Torre, 2013; de la Torre, 2013b).<sup>41</sup> This, however, has been described as an elitism of a new sort, whereby '[c]itizens are being turned into passive and grateful recipients of the leader's benevolent and technocratically engineered redistributive policies' (de la Torre, 2013b: 45). According to de la Torre, the National Secretary of Planning and Development (SENPLADES from its Spanish acronym) played a major role in this process of state reactivation and he is apt to observe that '[u]nlike neoliberal experts who believed in econometric models, they [SENPLADES' technocrats] are interdisciplinary and eclectic, citing postcolonial theorists, radical democrats, unorthodox economists, and political ecologists' (de la Torre, 2014: 460).<sup>42</sup>

The theorisation of Laclau on populism helps us here in capturing how this new collective identity came about. The project of Correa was based on a forceful simplification of the

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<sup>41</sup>As we know from the literature review, such a surprise before a populist practice that proves to be 'technically' prepared is only possible to the extent that populism is conceptualised in terms of simplicity and 'policy sloppiness'. Once again, this proves the untenability of any non-minimal definition of populism.

<sup>42</sup>This observation perfectly fits with my own experience as a consultant of the above mentioned institution. However, what is missed is that by the time de la Torre wrote these lines, the influence of SENPLADES within the government had already greatly diminished, a signal of the progressive shift to the centre of Correa on which more will be said in the following sections.

political space – a 'permanent antagonism' as Philip and Panizza put it (2011: 90) - which consists in the discursive creation of a radical frontier between two camps: on the one hand the 'people', i.e. the bearers of the articulated demands, and on the other the 'elites', identified by the discourse of the Citizens' Revolution in the big banks, the traditional political class, the mainstream media, the agro-exporting sectors and foreign actors such as the IMF, the World Bank as well as the the US and Colombian governments. It is worth recalling that among the demands there is no positivity that joins them. Rather, it is the political frontier erected against the same adversary that is constituent by serving as the minimum common denominator. In addition, the performative role played by naming deserves a mention. From the beginning, Correa devised particularly suggestive phrases to refer to the two camps. The 'people' were those with "lucid minds, clean hands and passionate hearts", while pejorative expressions such as a "partyocracy" and "*pelucones*" (bigwigs) were effectively employed to refer to the adversary.<sup>43</sup> It is also necessary to note that the unity of the popular subject was not only given by the amalgamation of pre-politicised individuals and organised sectors. This is possible only if, as noted above, the concept of demand does not necessarily match with a specific organised group. In this sense, Correa deployed different rhetorics; similar to the PCI, we can identify a sophisticated one aimed at a more cultivated and somehow militant public, and another 'plebeian' one and spiced up by phrases and gestures of popular character and thus capable of interpellating the common citizen generally indifferent to politics. This movement is not trivial, since it allowed the Citizens' Revolution to go beyond the small circle of the radical left.

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<sup>43</sup>In actual fact, the term *pelucón* was originally introduced by former president Abdalá Bucaram into the Ecuadorian political lexicon.

At this point, following the Laclauian scheme, it is essential to wonder what the nodal point of the equivalential system of the Citizens' Revolution was. In another text on the matter, I identified the empty signifier of the Citizens' Revolution in the *Buen Vivir* (Good Living, also known as *Sumak Kawsay* in the Kichwa indigenous language) (Mazzolini 2012). What is the *Buen Vivir*? The *Buen Vivir* imaginary derives from the indigenous repertoire and refers, in its particularist meaning, to the demand for recognition of ancestral peoples together with the vindication of a paradigm shift regarding the relationship between man and nature. Despite there existing a range of various definitions, some of which are stricter than others in conceding the possibility of admitting elements belonging to western modernity - for example the notion of economic growth is by some fully opposed while others allow for its usefulness (see Viola Recasens, 2011) - *Buen Vivir* is known for repudiating the conception of wealth understood in mercantilist or monetary terms. We are faced with an epistemological inversion of those philosophies whose *raison d'être* lies in accumulation or consumption, be them dictated by the reasons of capital or socialism. As a result, orthodox economic notions are treated as colonial and Eurocentric, giving to *Buen Vivir* the touch of a claim to an altogether different form of civilization (Lander, 2009: 37).

The notion of *Buen Vivir* appears as central from the very outset in the Citizens' Revolution.

The government plan adopted in 2006 presents it as:

a shared goal: a good living in harmony with nature. It is an inclusive proposal. This means that we think of popular sectors, the dispossessed, the marginalised, not only as passive subjects, but as protagonists in this process of change, so that from now on they can take over the present and above all their future (Movimiento PAIS, 2006: 4).

Such an understanding betrays a particularly elastic conception: *Buen Vivir* was gradually 'filled' with the other demands mentioned above. This had already happened before Correa

and the Citizens' Revolution took hold. During the popular demonstrations of the 1990s and 2000s, the role played by the indigenous movement made it possible for this signifier - which played a minor role even in the indigenous tradition (Viola Recasens, 2011: 272) - to be retrieved as an effective slogan amid the fusion of the indigenous and the mestizo-left symbols. The phenomenon is not new, as made clear by Laclau already in the late 1970s:

In the Andean countries popular resistance was increasingly expressed through indigenist symbols, which originally represented the resistance to the dissolution of peasant communities but which, reinterpreted by urban sectors, lost any necessary rural connotation and came to be symbols of popular resistance in general (PIM: 180).

As mentioned in the second chapter, according to Laclau - but also, as we shall see, according to the empirical evidence - occupying the place of the empty signifier is a dangerous victory for a demand: by becoming the surface of inscription of a series of demands, the emptying that allows the equivalential moment can be particularly pronounced, 'blur[ring] its connection with the actual content with which it was originally associated' and 'break[ing] its links with the force which was its original promoter and beneficiary' (Laclau, 1994: 177; also in E: 45).

Nevertheless, *Buen Vivir* has been an empty signifier able to symbolise the equivalential chain at a relatively 'high level', as it never achieved a representative role for large audiences and thus never constituted the homogenising cement able to keep together heterogeneous groups. What, then, has been the empty signifier of the Citizens' Revolution? Surely, the signifier able to amalgamate the various components of the popular field has been the leader himself, i.e. Rafael Correa. As we have seen, Laclau outlines this possibility by recognising that the effectiveness of a signifier in providing homogeneity to a heterogeneous reality derives from the reduction to a minimum of its particular contents, being the most extreme

expression of this dynamic when the role is played by the name of the leader (Laclau, 2005b: 40). Affect is part and parcel of this process. Indeed, any empirical analysis of the Citizens' Revolution needs to recognise the pre-eminence of the leader and the affect he unleashed, an affect which has effectively cemented and conferred a univocal meaning to the popular field. The leader works at this stage as what Jason Glynos calls an enigma that promises meaning: i.e. the 'site' in which a plurality of aspirations are struggling to inscribe themselves (Glynos, 2000: 99; Panizza 2005: 19). The ability to perform that role is certainly made plausible by the rich phenomenology which Correa gave life to. As analysed by Carlos de la Torre, Correa made himself known as a man of popular origins but at the same time able to excel in life, arising in such a way as the best suited to be the anti-oligarchic 'battering ram' and as the incarnation of the fatherland (de la Torre, 2008: 32; de la Torre, 2013: 31). His fired-up rhetoric, his omnipresence in the media, his defiant and confrontational attitude, his well-articulated rants on the disastrous situation in which the country lay before his political engagement are also decisive elements that turned him into the indispensable hinging point of the Citizens' Revolution: both his generator and his constant feeder.

Yet, notwithstanding his irrefutable centrality, it would be reductive to say that the whole process has only been about his persona. As analysed in the second chapter, there is an incongruence in Laclau's status of the empty signifier: it could be both a leader or a particularly widespread demand, but while the latter pre-exists the formation of a popular camp and can be 'filled' with the contents of a particular project, the former typically constitutes the popular camp, while not being yet majoritarian in society and thus not necessarily being perceived as a redeeming horizon. The 2006 electoral process tells us precisely this: Correa was not the name of a widely perceived redemption. What was the name of redemption, then? As stated above, the question of the fatherland played that kind

of role. Yet different nuances existed and, thanks to the policies enacted over time, the Citizens' Revolution managed to flirt with all of them. Fatherland meant an infrastructural modernisation of the country, it meant a recuperation of stolen popular and national sovereignty, it meant providing for the well-being of the most vulnerable, it meant taking revenge against the national *vendepatrias* (those who sell out their fatherland, a reference Correa dedicated to oligarchs and politicians alike). In the short-term, it meant living up to the promise of the refoundation of the country, which took the form of the promise of a new post-neoliberal Constitution, possibly the most central slogan of Correa's campaign. The process of calling for this was tortuous as Correa had not presented any candidate to the legislative in 2006, in the name of his repudiation of an institution that was highly discredited. Correa's intention to set up a Constituent Assembly thus unleashed a bitter confrontation between various state powers, which Correa managed to outmanoeuvre savvily. Finally, a referendum gave a green light to the Constituent Assembly with almost 82% of the vote, and in the subsequent election of the assembly-members Correa's movement secured a majority of 80 out of 130. The plebiscitary politics of Correa had just begun (Philip and Panizza, 2011: 110). It is thus to the second period starting with the Constituent Assembly that we now turn.

### **Populism in transition**

With the setting up of the Constituent Assembly and the first measures Correa adopted, the promise to undo much of the neoliberal framework was under way. However, during the Constituent phase, there occurred a number of transformations. Initially, a further expansion of the equivalential chain began: its empirical concretion consisted in the pilgrimage of thousands of groups, collectives or simple citizens to the small coastal town where the

Constituent Assembly was installed so that their voices could be heard and somehow crystallised into the new Magna Carta. This expansion, however, did not contemplate only demands oriented to the left, but a much wider range:

The truth is that maintaining unity and cohesion within the governmental block in Montecristi required an enormous effort from the staff of Alianza País. It was not, in any way, a homogeneous group of legislators. There coexisted very different political fractions, ranging from the center-right to a variety of expressions of the left, such as environmental positions, stances near the indigenous movement, assemblymen next to certain trade unions, assembly members related to women's organizations, or with the activism of NGOs, there were expressions of progressive churches (and others not so progressive), traditional partisanship of old and new left parties, until citizens that were "newcomers" to politics (Ramírez Gallegos, 2008).

We know from Laclau that some ideological ambiguity is an intrinsic characteristic of every populist practice and, as populism is a logic that permeates to varying degrees every political construction, of politics itself (OPR: 109, 118, 154). He also warns us that the empty signifier exerts an irresistible attraction on any unmet demand but does not have any ability to determine which demands can enter the equivalential chain (OPR: 108). While this seems appropriate in relation to the initial stage, the empty signifier Correa actually took up a much more active role, rather than being the passive recipient of societal demands. In fact, among the myriad of proposals, Correa functioned as the final arbiter of what entered and what did not into the new Constitution (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016: 225). On a related account however, Laclau is of better help. Although he does not provide many details about the entailments for a populist practice to pass from the opposition to the incumbency, his theory is not entirely static either, since it gives us important clues about the possibility of variations with respect to the antagonistic frontier and the demands articulated thanks to the notion of the floating signifier. The vagueness of populism is, as we have seen, performative, but a source of tension too. As Correa started to impose a firmer line, there was an increasingly



irreconcilable confrontation between environmentalist and redistributive drives. As a result, there was the attempt of a new political project to dispute the environmental demand in order to disentangle it from the equivalential chain instituted by the Citizens' Revolution.

The first clash began with the resignation of Alberto Acosta as President of the Constituent Assembly and a further distancing between Correa and CONAIE, the largest indigenous organisation in the country. Up to that point, the relationship between Correa and the indigenous constituencies had been erratic. CONAIE refused to enter into a ticket with Correa in 2006, only to endorse him in the second round. Nevertheless, Correa made much use of their symbolic repertoire, as well testified by the indigenous ceremony held in the indigenous village of Zumbahua along with leftist allies Venezuelan and Bolivian presidents Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. Dressed up in highland clothes, Correa received a sceptre from indigenous leaders, symbolising their acceptance of his rule. On various occasions, Correa even exhibited a modest knowledge of the Kichwa language. Nevertheless, relationships soon deteriorated, with Correa expressing contempt for indigenous leaders disagreeing with him, and a systematic co-optation of the most conciliatory leaders in a *divide et impera* strategy took place. Following a period of selective support, the rupture became more radical, with the indigenous constituencies organising nationwide or local protests on issues relating to open-pit mining, water property, interculturalism and positive discrimination (León Trujillo, 2010: 17-20).

This confrontation finally ushered in the creation of a radical left alternative, made of the urban environmentalists (predominantly of Quito), the indigenous party *Pachakutik* - the political wing of CONAIE - and the Democratic Popular Movement (MPD in its Spanish acronym), threatened by the educational policies of the government that undermined its

historic feuds among teachers and university students. The demands that these subjects intended to represent were therefore in a state that Laclau describes as floating, i.e. suspended between two rival projects competing to ascribe them a meaning (OPR: 131-132). However, this type of tension did not manage to seriously put the equivalential chain of the Citizens' Revolution under discussion, since the project of the radical left attempted an 'assault' on demands that lacked a majoritarian projection. Rather, this readjustment enabled Correa to widen the register of the enemies: no longer only the classical economic and political oligarchies, but also those who opposed change because of their "infantilism" - as Correa repeatedly described their behaviour - or because of the returns obtained through a mere logic of opposition. This development calls for a betterment of Laclau's theory of populism insofar as the treatment of demands is concerned. Demands are not all strictly equal, in the sense that the salience and intensity of each of them strongly varies, as suggested by Howarth (2008: 185). It would then be more plausible to say that a hierarchy of them is always at place and that any empirical analysis through the lens of the populist logic should foreground this aspect.<sup>44</sup>

In the light of this, how do we make sense of these conflicts? The dilemma can be summarised in the following way: in the equivalential chain of the Citizens' Revolution, demands with a socio-economic component were the majority and demanded the populist practice - now in power - to deal with them. Tied to a primary-exporting model, Ecuador could not afford to generate wealth without exerting further pressure on the environment, as the desired

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<sup>44</sup>Once again, we find in Laclau a certain awareness of some of the problems that his theory may present: '[t]he assertion that there is an essential unevenness of the elements entering the hegemonic struggle is something with which I can certainly concur' (OPR: 236), even though he may be simply referring to the fact that the empty signifier enjoys a privileged status *vis-à-vis* the remaining elements of a chain of equivalences. Be that as it may, the recognition that a much more complex hierarchy among the articulated elements always exist would require a much more nuanced and specific treatment of its theoretical entailments.

economic diversification was seen as a long-term goal that required, among the other things, conspicuous investments. The Citizens' Revolution, despite the pompous constitutional rhetoric that grants rights to nature, went for partially sacrificing environmental issues - especially in so far as mining is concerned - and then giving this move sense within a framework of compromises with other demands. The situation just described testifies the paradox signalled above: despite being a representative slogan of the Citizens' Revolution, *Buen Vivir* began to lose the connection with its original meaning, leading the defenders of its particularist meaning to speak about the turning of *Buen Vivir* into sheer marketing (Acosta in Fernández, B. S., Pardo, L., and Salamanca, K., 2014: 104). The logic of the governmental discourse - and by the same token of the priorities in terms of demands - is well described by this passage of René Ramírez, a radical economist who occupied various cabinet posts in the Correa administrations:

If an economy that seeks to be anti (or even post) capitalist does not improve the material conditions of production and reproduction of the social life of the population and does not overcome poverty, not only is it not politically viable but it is not ethically desirable either, no matters the «non-capitalist accumulation» it entails (Ramírez Gallegos, R., 2012: 141).

As also evidenced by the 2009-2013 development plan elaborated by SENPLADES, of which Ramírez was in charge at the time, leaving aside the primary exporting model was then considered unviable and a first stage of policies oriented at satisfying basic necessities was envisaged (SENPLADES, 2009: 57-58; Manosalvas, 2014: 108).

Coming back to the Constitution, it recognised an ample spectrum of rights, while emphasising special attention for priority groups (young people, indigenous, women, children, the elderly). It also provided for a variety of instruments enhancing popular participation by allowing for civil society organisations to have a say in the shaping of public policies and augmented the role of the state in the economy and society at large (Ortiz Crespo, 2008: 16).

Before and after the Constitution, sound accomplishments in terms of social policies in health care, education, infrastructure building and protection of the national industries reinforced the idea of a project hinging around a renewed role for the state. Spending for social programs climbed up from 4.8% of the GDP in 2006 to 9.3% in 2011, while in the same period poverty went down from 37.6% to 28.6%, and the Gini coefficient from 54 to 47. School enrolment rose consistently, especially in the pre-primary level. Thanks to a potent fiscal stimulus, the number of fully employed people rose from 39.3% in 2007 to 50.2% in 2012, while GDP figures remained positive even in 2009 when the majority of world economies sank, and skyrocketed to 7.2% and 7.8% in 2008 and 2011 respectively (Ray and Kozameh, 2012: 1, 3, 13-15). A number of other bold moves attracted world-wide attention and made crystal-clear that the reference to the fatherland was not a mere electoral smokescreen. In the first place, Correa announced a default on \$3.2 billion of the foreign public debt after a process of auditing aimed at determining its legitimacy, legality, transparency, quality, efficacy and efficiency. Later, 'Ecuador completed a buyback of 91 percent of the defaulted bonds, at about 35 cents on the dollar. The government thus retired about a third of its foreign debt [...] reducing its foreign public debt to 17 percent of GDP' (Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2009: 17). Secondly, the oil politics changed course with a renegotiation of all contracts with multinational companies on much better terms for Ecuador, increasing the state share from 13% to 87% of gross oil revenues, and thus conducing to a much greater fiscal revenue (Ghosh, 2012). Thirdly, the nationalist foreign policies of Correa included the non-renewal of the lease of the military base in Manta to the United States (Correa defiantly stated that he would have renewed the lease had the US permitted to establish an Ecuadorian military base in Miami) (Stewart, 2007), the expulsion from Ecuador of an US Ambassador, a World Bank

envoy and another US diplomatic secretary, and the political asylum granted to Wikileaks founder Julian Assange.

Yet, despite a revolutionary fervour that found ample resonance in the speeches of Correa and his aides, a certain reflux was palpable. On the account of participation, the constitutional text did not find a particularly convincing application and the state seemed to have entirely engulfed society. As bluntly put by Santiago Ortiz, a fairly sympathetic observer of the Citizens' Revolution and the 'pink tide' as whole: '[t]he government of Rafael Correa, differently from other "lefts" in Latin America, did not give signs of comprehending the importance of participation, nor of having a consistent politics on this field' (Ortiz Crespo, 2008: 17). In fact, the distancing of those sectors that advocated a more radical interpretation of the environmental and indigenous demands went along a cooling of relations between the government and a range of civil society actors that had supported the process as a whole. Some of them showed a growing discomfort towards the government and its policies, such as public employees, affected by a law that homogenised the rules of the game across civil and military bureaucracy (Ortiz Crespo, 2011: 27). Moreover, the process of listening and processing of the demands arising from the organised sectors became increasingly a facade. Examples include the critical position adopted by Fenocin (CLOC, 2010) and university students (Ortiz Crespo, 2011: 28), and the separation from the government of the political group *Ruptura de los 25* (El Universo, 2011). The tendency continued over time, involving organizations that had been very close to the government, such as the urban youth group *Diabluma* (Diabluma 2013). In this sense, it is worth highlighting that this distancing was regretfully acknowledged even by pro-government legislators (Hernández y Buendía, 2011: 135-136, 142). Speaking of the legislative, a frenetic pace imposed by the executive encroached upon its autonomy, and the bills that the government wanted to rapidly approve

in order to modernise the state took little account of the heterogeneity of Ecuadorian society (Ortiz Crespo, 2011: 28). Critical voices within the governing bloc were also treated with suspicion and internal debate soon waned amid the habit of Correa to rapidly alternate his ministers. Similarly, the passive mode of militancy of the supporters of Alianza País is to be emphasised. Indeed, the movement created by Correa had never great transcendence in what concerns the organisation of the bases and the politicisation of society, and even when activated, the dynamics usually responded to direct calls coming from the government - with the notable exception of the spontaneous mobilisation against the failed police coup on 30 September 2010.

Laclau proposes a rather effective scheme to capture this movement: if we think of politics in terms of two dimensions, one horizontal and the other vertical, where the former represents the autonomy of demands and the latter their condensation in a hegemonic project seeking a radical transformation of the state (Laclau, 2014: 9), we can say that between 2008 and 2013, the Citizens' Revolution began to favour the latter while gradually setting aside the former. This did not immediately affect the levels of support towards the executive led by Correa: the economic bonanza favoured by high oil prices enabled the carrying out of far-reaching programs of wealth redistribution, with particular emphasis, as we have seen, on the education and health sectors, as well as on infrastructural modernisation. These achievements ensured that the appeal to the people and the fatherland were still perfectly legitimate before the eyes of the population at large. There was thus no significant trace of these tensions in the presidential elections of February 2013, in which Correa was re-elected with 57% of the popular vote in the first round, a result which has no precedents in the republican history of the country.

### **Towards a progressive degeneration of populism**

Correa's 2013 re-election marks the third phase of the Citizens' Revolution. As put by Franklin Ramírez little after the election in relation to the profound changes brought about by this new stage of the Citizens' Revolution: 'in the modification of the political field are combined, perhaps paradoxically, the highest point of popular support to the project of change with a stagnation of the work of hegemonic construction on the part of the ruling force' (Ramírez Gallegos, 2014: 100). The most obvious symbolic manifestation of this rupture occurred with the change of vice-president running mate: while until then Correa had been accompanied by Lenin Moreno, a man in a wheelchair who gained much popularity through the enactment of public policies in favour of the disabled, for the new period Correa chose Jorge Glas. Glas clearly displayed much less charisma than his predecessor and exhibited a very friendly attitude towards the business world, having excelled as a skilful negotiator while he served as Minister of the Strategic Sectors in the previous legislature.

In fact, some substantial transformations in the political practice ensued from this moment onward, which can be broadly summarised as a turn to the centre. Correa adopted a mixture of measures that made it ever more difficult to characterise his government in a clear manner from a normative point of view. While some leftist proposals survived, such as the law to avoid land speculation and the attempt to introduce a tax on the inheritance of big patrimonies - then aborted amid street protests - (El Telégrafo, 2016), by and large most analysts have agreed on a certain 'normalisation' of the project. More specifically, it seems that a quite notable reconsideration on the thrust of the economic policies took place. According to some, the economic orientation of the Citizens' Revolution was clear from the beginning as the regime of Correa never questioned capitalism as such and this became

evident with the consolidation of the largest economic groups of the country, which benefitted from a number of concessions and saw their returns increase consistently during the whole period that Correa was in power, and a with an import-fed consumerist boom (Acosta and Cajas Guijarro, 2016: 9, 18-23). In this sense, they highlight that economic diversification - purportedly, one of the chief aims of the Citizens' Revolution - has been an utter failure, with industrial output stationary at roughly 12.5% of the GDP throughout the 2007-2015 period. Moreover, they point out that the percentage of primary export rose from 74 to 79 in the same period (Acosta and Cajas Guijarro, 2016: 24). While their critique is at times ungenerous, it is possible to concur with the fact that the Citizens' Revolution did not manage to substantially alter the economic system and come up with its own model. Their observation that suggests the consolidation of an oligopolistic structure in the Ecuadorian economy is also indisputable (Acosta and Cajas Guijarro, 2016: 24). Ospina suggests that the reasons for the failure to change the productive structure and overcome the historic economic lag lies in the power struggle that happened behind closed doors within the government. In particular, he signals that three groups fought for the internal predominance: the progressive technocratic group (which, it must be added, had no real rooting in society), the group representing agro-exporting interests and that representing national and foreign interests in connection to the extraction of natural resources (Ospina Peralta, 2013). While Ospina concludes that the skirmishes between the first two were then superseded by the clear hegemony of the last group, epitomised by the ascending power of Glas, the picture is possibly more complex, with more than simply three groups involved in the struggle and a much more nuanced internal power map. For example, the move towards the political centre is also observable by looking at the growing weight of officials associated with the coastal clientele networks (Ortiz Crespo, 2016) and the number of local leaders (*caciques*) whose



adhesion to the political project was all but ideological. The many concessions made to the financial sector in order to grant higher margins of utility also speak of the reluctance to touch powerful financial interests (El Universo, 2015). What is certain is that in this period the influence exerted by the sectors of the left within the executive waned, associated with their increasingly lower propensity to contend to Correa his more controversial decisions. For the purposes of this research, what is important to establish is that, faced with an economically difficult situation consisting of declining oil prices and the appreciation of the dollar, the heterodox model initially envisaged by Correa proved to be hardly sustainable, or to put it otherwise, it would have required a clash with powerful interests that Correa was unwilling to sustain and which would have needed a genuine mobilisation of popular forces that Correa never cultivated. In order to deal with the crisis then, Correa resorted to measures such as the signing of a trade agreement with the European Union (Andes, 2014) on terms very similar to those of Peru and Colombia (Isch, 2014), a possibility that had been peremptorily excluded in the past (El Comercio, 2012), and the return of the IMF into the country in order to obtain new credits (El Mostrador, 2016). Paradoxically, the state returned to servicing foreign debt at a higher rate than that Correa took issue with back in 2005 (Labarthe and Saint Upéry, 2017: 35). Finally, for Ibarra the new private-public alliances that opened the way for new privatisations and a more docile relationship with national entrepreneurs 'implies the retraction and the readjustment of state intervention, which entails a reconciliation with arguments typical of the neoliberal perspective, so reviled by the government' (Ibarra, 2016).

How do we account for this rather drastic political shift that does away with many of the emancipatory credentials previously exhibited by the Citizens' Revolution? As the project clearly revolved around the centrality of Correa, the changing inclinations of the leader had a preponderant influence upon the path of the political process as a whole. A rigorous analysis

of the role of Correa can thus account for these transformations. We can say that until 2013 Correa had fitted fairly well with the Freudian description retaken by Laclau, by which a strong leader is a *primus inter pares* (OPR: 59-60). However, the evidence indicates that the democratic leadership that Correa embodied in the first stage was gradually replaced by a despotic and apodictic leadership which found fertile ground in the political culture of *caudillismo*. In this regard, it should be noted that this culture does not work unilaterally: *caudillismo* is not exclusively attributable to the leader, but also to an environment that accepts and legitimates it, even when the leader is no longer a *primus inter pares*. This may seem at first sight contradictory, but it is not. Not only the accentuated presidential system, reinforced by the 2008 Constitution, but also the automatic creation of an army of self-interested loyalists, side-lined the processing of differences. It is not that dissent and the will to discuss do not exist altogether, but rather that they are dealt with by ostracising those in disagreement and replacing them with consenting people. This has its costs however. At a theoretical level, as we have seen in the second chapter, Arditi resolves the impasse by claiming that the leader cannot be simply considered as an empty signifier, because she/he is also a person and this paves the way for a possible unhinging of the symbolic unification that he managed to construct around his individuality (Arditi, 2010: 490). His critique fits very well with the Citizens' Revolution, where a bureaucratic direction that removes the possibility of a significant debate within the popular field started to prevail. As Ortiz clarifies: 'the so-called "political bureau" provided some shared direction with intellectuals, political leaders and technocrats up to 2011-12, but then it dissolved as the strong leadership of Rafael Correa gained impetus' (Ortiz Crespo, 2016).

In this context, the few episodes of internal dissent were dealt with quite brusquely. A couple of examples may convey a clearer picture. In the middle of the parliamentary discussions on

the new criminal code in October 2013, some assemblymen of the ruling party tried to promote the decriminalisation of abortion in case of rape. The reaction of Correa, who was deeply contrary to the measure, was swift: "If these betrayals and disloyalties follow [...] I will tender my resignation" (BBC Mundo, 2013). The proposed amendment of the text was therefore abandoned, and the involved assembly members were suspended by the Ethics Committee of the movement for a month, during which they were forbidden to attend the National Assembly sessions and make public appearances (El Universo, 2013). It is worth highlighting that, in an apparent case of self-censorship, several pro-government assembly members historically associated with feminism declined to join this attempt to modify the text proposed by the Executive.<sup>45</sup> Another case has been the suspension for six months and the subsequent membership disaffiliation from PAIS of Fernando Bustamante for having voted in the National Assembly against the package of constitutional amendments promoted by the government in 2015. Thanks to an overwhelming majority, Correa's party did not strictly necessitate his vote for the approval of the amendments. These internal rebellions intercepted much better the common sense that was developing in the country. Shortly after the failed attempt to introduce abortion legislation, a collective gave life to a campaign that, under the name of *Yo soy 65* (I am 65), showed the results of a survey according to which 65% of the Ecuadorian population would have been in favour of the decriminalisation of abortion in case of rape (El Mercurio, 2014). In the same way, the boldness of Bustamante revealed the wide dissatisfaction of the citizens with the way in which the issue of constitutional reform had been dealt (Rosero, 2015). What resulted, and was particularly stunning, was the difference with the management of another package of minor amendments in 2011: while on

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<sup>45</sup>Once again, it is clear how the demands enchain in the equivalence are not truly equal among themselves: those arising from the feminist camp found some space in the discourse of the Citizens' Revolution and a number of them were directly addressed. Yet many were relegated in terms of importance or, as we have just seen, openly repudiated despite much of the popular camp would have been in favour.

that occasion a referendum - eventually won - was promoted, in 2015 Correa preferred to take advantage of the 2/3 parliamentary majority to approve the amendments, even though one of them contained an issue of greater importance, such as the possibility for indefinite re-election of all public posts. According to the polls, the vast majority of the population would have preferred to be consulted directly on the matter (Cedatos, 2015).<sup>46</sup>

This self-sufficiency was matched by an equally problematic relationship with society as a whole. The Citizens' Revolution entered a phase of difficulty concerning those demands that had been initially articulated. If somehow many of them - such as the reduction of inequality and poverty - were still part of the symbolic heritage to which the executive clung, the fall of oil prices and the rise of the dollar put the government in an awkward situation by presenting dilemmas that the relative fiscal prosperity of the previous years had made less drastic. In the case of other demands, the claim of diversity with the practices of the past became more questionable instead. Although much more transparent than that of his predecessors, the governance was opaque in various aspects. Already in 2012, Sosa highlighted the existence of clientelistic practices and ongoing corruption (Sosa, 2012: 179). These phenomena, whose veracity is not our concern here but whose perception had certainly become widespread by 2016-2017, had much weight in determining a distancing of many social sectors from the political project. Another demand that was initially articulated was the struggle to depoliticise state institutions. Here, the record became particularly negative, if we consider that all the powers of the state – nominally independent - were occupied by figures close to Correa, as in the case, just to mention a couple, of the Judicial Council - whose President Gustavo Jahlk was Minister of the Interior and Personal Secretary of Rafael Correa - and the General State

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<sup>46</sup> Although the pollster in question has traditionally been averse to the Government of Correa, the overwhelming percentage suggests that this measurement did capture a rather diffuse feeling among the Ecuadorian population. The following political events also justify this interpretation.

Prosecutor's Office - chaired by Galo Chiriboga, former personal lawyer of Correa, former Minister of Hydrocarbons and former Ambassador to Spain of the Citizens' Revolution. The non-satisfaction of these demands made for the emergence of new potential sites of tension, as in the case of the environmental demand in the past. As aptly put by two commentators:

the technocratic component of the state autonomised itself from social and territorial expectations and demands by reproducing an antipolitical logic: that of managing and administering state capacities without giving rise to particular and concrete ways in which organised groups shape and experience social demands (Ortiz Crespo and Burbano de Lara, 2017).

A blunt example of this is the dropping of the Yasuní-ITT initiative and its aftermath. The proposal set forth the suspension of extraction of one of the greatest oil reserves in a sector of the Ecuadorian Amazon jungle, which is considered as harbouring one of the most biodiverse environments in the world, on condition that the international community compensated Ecuador for half of its foregone profits. Despite enormous efforts, the campaign did not go far very far in collecting the required amount, and in August 2013 Correa chose to opt for the so-called plan B, that is the scrapping of the initiative and the beginning of oil extraction. Soon after, there started a collection of signatures led by environmentalist groups in order to call for a referendum that stopped oil extraction in the area, regardless of the international compensation. Despite claims of having reached the required number of petitions, the referendum was halted by the National Electoral Committee (CNE) on grounds that the majority of the signatures were invalid. However, the decision sparked a number of doubts: on one side, de la Torre has highlighted that the CNE's head was a close ally of Correa (de la Torre, 2013: 38), on the other a technical analysis conducted by some independent Ecuadorian academics established that many more signatures should have been considered valid, an amount sufficient to permit the celebration of the referendum (El Comercio, 2014).

What this and the above mentioned episodes signal is the 'selective use of referenda and hence the manipulation of participatory mechanisms' (Balderacchi, 2016: 170).

Moreover, the society that the Citizens' Revolution contributed to shape in previous years began to generate new demands. Similar to what has happened in other countries of the 'pink tide', the empowerment of formerly needy classes and the consolidation of a middle segment led to the development of aspirations that place themselves outside of the national-popular discourses. The improvement of living conditions went hand in hand with the dissemination of habits, customs, and expectations that the discourse that was able to bring the Citizens' Revolution to power failed to intercept. This of course has much to do with the lack of any pedagogical approach to politics: the enactment of public policies did not proceed along a politicisation of society, the cultivation of the party bases, the promotion of a rich intellectual debate, the involvement in arts and culture. This is why the anti-neoliberal invectives and the rants against the "corrupt media" no longer seduced the electorate as well as they did in 2007. In fact, some measures of the government met rather lively resistance of some sectors that had paradoxically been direct beneficiaries of the policies of 'Correismo' since they clashed with the diffuse desire to expand consumption. Particularly emblematic in this respect was the first and only true popular protest that this government witnessed, i.e. the mobilisation against the law of inheritance in 2015. Even though this tax would have not even affected many sectors that rushed to the streets, the narrative that much of the public opinion assimilated was that of a bloodthirsty executive seeking to illegitimately put its hands into people's pockets. We should also note here the responsibility of an excessive leaderism in determining a certain immobility in the political discourse of the Citizens' Revolution, that is, the inability to innovate its terms and incorporate new demands in the chain of equivalences. From a condition of possibility of political rupture in the country, the centrality of Correa

became the condition of incrustation of the same political project. The scarce receptivity towards the floating signifiers and the common senses that were emerging in the country made the imaginary of the Citizens' Revolution static. The stifling of all discursive creativity was the result of an exaggerated cult of personality and the growing emergence of hierarchical and top-down processes. At the same time, the replacement of deliberation and genuine political mobilisation in favour of an incessant political marketing were exacerbated by an asphyxiated climate and a culture of self-sufficiency. In parallel, the presumption to represent a necessary and indispensable flux of history spread, as if the Citizens' Revolution unconditionally reflected popular interests. As Correa ardently put it during the May Day demonstration in 2015: "on 21 April 2005 my life changed forever when I was nominated Minister for the Economy. The rest is already history. I know well that I am no longer myself, I am a whole people" (Correa, 2015).

By 2014-2015 the project was clearly on the wane. Two further tangible proofs show the decreasing appeal of the discourse of the Citizens' Revolution. The first came with the telling defeat at the 2014 local elections. Correa's movement lost the major cities of the country that had previously been governed by a PAIS' mayor (Quito, Cuenca, Manta, Loja, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Ambato, Portoviejo), while failing to conquer Guayaquil, Ecuador's biggest city, which always remained in the hands of Jaime Nebot, a former presidential candidate and member of the otherwise hugely discredited *Partido Social Cristiano* (Pallares, n/d). The second proof was the opening of new fronts of dispute between the government and society. In 2015, the government was no longer just quarrelling with indigenous constituencies and environmentalist groups. Amid the fiscal crisis and the ensuing necessity to scrape together new resources coupled with the unwillingness to confront more powerful actors, Correa took issues with the armed forces, various state-sponsored universities, the oncological hospital in

Quito SOLCA and a variety of state contractors. 'In the end, the distributive conflicts brought about by the crisis, lead to cracks in the "consumer's pact" that united middle and popular sectors with business sectors, in the previous ten years of bonanza' (Ortiz Crespo, 2016). This difficulty went along with an accentuation of the antagonistic tones of Correa, which led to a steep decline of his popularity, as evidenced by a May 2016 poll that indicated that 65% of the population no longer believed in him (El Universo, 2016). As we know from Laclau, polarisation and the erection of frontiers can be performative and politically productive. However, as we already know from the PCI case, polarisation is not all that counts. It is indeed possible to claim that a bad management of polarisation took place, i.e. the inability to maintain the antagonism within a reasonable and acceptable course. As polarisation turned into a continuous contumely against political adversaries, while utterly lacking a pedagogical side, its deployment took up problematic traits. If there is no adaptive dimension, if the foundations to generate a different civilisational form are not laid, and especially if the political frontier is not elastic, there emerges the possibility that another dividing line displaces the existing one, as paradoxically as that could be between conciliators and non-conciliators. We shall see that this is precisely what happened later. Moreover, if polarisation is not progressively transcended to give life to some sort of normalisation, there is a risk that such an exacerbated division becomes the source of social discomfort, irreparably wearing out the discourse that continues to make use of it.

In this sense, the attitude towards political adversaries deployed by Correa has shown an allergy to pluralism and a plebiscitarian view of politics, which has led to a frequent trampling of the rule of law, while a strict adherence to it has been imposed on political opponents.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Among the most notable cases it is worth recalling the revocation of the visa to the foreign activists Manuela Picq and Oliver Utne (see Mazzolini, 2014b; Mazzolini, 2015).



While some liberal commentators already depicted Correa as being totally incomprehensive and intolerant towards political adversaries from the early days of his mandate (Burbano de Lara, 2007: 16), it is beyond doubt that such an attitude reached its apex in his last mandate. In this period, Correa did not spare deep criticism, media attacks and judicial prosecutions for his adversaries, even in occasions that entailed only sheer mockery, such as in the cases of the cartoons of the Guayaquil-based newspaper *El Universo* satirist Bonil (El Comercio, n/d), the sarcasm of the English comedian John Oliver in two of his programs 'Last Week Tonight John Oliver' (Viana, 2015) and the memes spread on social networks by a user known as 'Crudo Ecuador' (El Comercio, 2015). The intolerance shown towards satire and irreverence betrayed a susceptibility even to ironic criticism, in a politics of literality that does not admit the gap between fictional and hilarious representation on one side, and outright lying on the other.

### **A non-hegemonic end of a populism**

In the constitutional amendment regarding the indefinite re-election, Correa provided for the introduction of a transitory regulation, by which the new arrangement would apply only after the next elections. That meant excluding himself from the 2017 electoral race, in order to reassure the population that this was not an *ad hoc* reform tailored to perpetuate him in power. The idea behind this, most analysts speculated, was that of taking a period off, and then presenting himself again at the next elections in 2021. The search for the successor thus ensued. Correa pushed for Jorge Glas, his closest ally in the cabinet in a sort of Putin-Medvedev-Putin succession. However, it is not a coincidence that, after a series of polls, the candidacy of Correa's former vice-President Lenin Moreno, seen as a conciliatory option, resulted as the only one capable of guaranteeing the victory of the Citizens' Revolution in the

upcoming elections. Despite having been away from the country for a few years and having already manifested some scepticism towards the route undertaken by Correa in the last period, Moreno was the only figure with charisma and capable of reaching out to parts of the electorate that were not loyal to Correa (Ortiz Crespo, 2016b: 90). This is a very revealing aspect for a project that considered itself hegemonic and thought to have permanently changed the mentality of the country. After ten years in power, no other national leaders with chances to win the presidential election had emerged.

In the electoral campaign, once he had officially become the candidate of the Citizens' Revolution, Moreno gave signs of some distancing from the rhetoric of Correa, while not breaking entirely with him. This tactic did not manage to guarantee him victory in the first round, and he only narrowly made it in the April 2017 run-off. However, as soon he became President, it became clear that he was pursuing an entirely different political project. From the very start, he made dialogue with social sectors previously ignored by Correa his political cornerstone. These included indigenous and environmentalist groups, but also chambers of commerce and, importantly, the United States. In what represented a stark foreign policy U-turn, at the first press conference after his presidential inauguration, he said: "Our relationship [with the United States] will be fluid [...] We must refresh and increase that confidence that in one way or another could, to some extent, have been lost. We must strengthen our good relationship with this people that is our friend" (Moreno in Andes, 2017). Soon, he made very blunt statements that took a distance from the practices of his predecessor and former political godfather. He harshly criticised the economic management of Correa, saying that he had left behind a difficult situation (Ecuador Inmediato, 2017). As for the possibilities engendered by the national dialogue process he launched, and in relation to the oft-mocked subservient attitude displayed by Correa's followers, he said: "That's

wonderful, little by little, people will give up their sheep behaviour and start breathing once again this new freedom, which is how I feel comfortable, I feel comfortable when people get a chance to criticise" (Moreno in Labarthe and Saint Upéry, 2017: 31). Yet, as evidenced above, the presidential system and the political culture of the country, in spite of claims to having established a new hegemony, made it possible that even those who theretofore had wholeheartedly backed Correa started to depict the former period as pure ignominy (Ramírez Gallegos, 2018).

However, the real rupture came with two further moves. As suggested before, the lack of satisfaction of certain demands that the Citizens' Revolution had initially intercepted became a dominant factor. Along with the necessity of scaling down of the previous tone, which Moreno swiftly embodied by launching the process of national dialogue, we can say that the issue of corruption became prominent in society. It would even be possible to claim that the two questions represented in this period an absent fullness, that is the empty signifiers which, potentially 'fillable' with any normative content, constituted the type of order sought after by society at large. The perception that the management of the *res publica* had been opaque during the Citizens' Revolution was, at this point, indeed quite widespread. From the very start, Moreno made it clear that he would not stop any judicial inquiry against members of the governing party. And that is precisely what he did by permitting the inquiry, arrest, conviction and final destitution of Jorge Glas, who still occupied the position of Vice-President, having been imposed as Moreno's running mate by Correa. At this point, the party became split between 'Correistas' and 'Leninistas' and Correa and Moreno started to exchange bitter and irreconcilable messages with each other.<sup>48</sup> The last straw came with the referendum and

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<sup>48</sup>Just to give a picture of the polarisation between the two former allies, suffice it to recall the reciprocal accusations that they launched at each other at the beginning of October 2017. Correa accused Moreno of

popular consultation called by Moreno, following the process of dialogue. Among the various issues proposed, many of which were simply designed to bring people to vote Yes to all the questions, stood out the abolition of the constitutional amendment about the indefinite re-election of public posts, with retroactive effect; an *ad hominem* measure, to be sure. The final result of the referendum, held in February 2018, was 64-36 in favour of its elimination. The Citizens' Revolution, for what it had been known, had been fatally killed.

### **Theoretical outcomes**

How do we characterise the Ecuadorian populism in light of the above? We have seen that Laclau argues that political practices are never entirely populist or institutionalist, since they exhibit a mixture between the logic of equivalence and that of difference (Laclau, 2005b: 45-46). While populism coincides with an intensification of the logic of equivalence, i.e. the establishment of an enchainment between demands with the consequent simplification of the political space, institutionalism entails the predominance of the logic of the difference, by which demands are handled in an administrative way, under the perspective of *divide et impera* (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 145). According to this line of reasoning, it would be neither the presence nor the number of public policies that can make us infer the more or less institutional character of a practice in power then, but the discursive context in which those policies are framed. We can conclude that in our case the entanglement between populism and institutionalism - and therefore between the two logics - is peculiar. To an extent, this

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being a “wolf in sheep’s clothing”, further adding that “Moreno cheated me for ten years. He is a person that was with the opposition” (Telesur, 2017). The day after Moreno responded by declaring that Correa had left the “table served”, because the last minute heavy borrowing and consequent indebtedness of Correa’s government served the purpose of magnifying his figure while leaving a difficult situation to Moreno, so that the latter would prove to be a failure and facilitate the political comeback of the former (El Universo, 2017).

vindicates the 'technocratic populism' thesis of de la Torre, even though he erroneously treats the case as an exception because he assimilates populism with political chaos. In response to de la Torre, Cadahia rightly questions the attitude of determining a priori the lenses through which we are to look at a political phenomenon, and in particular what we are to find in a populist experience (Cadahia, 2016: 69). But let us see in detail how this entanglement between the two logics works. Of institutionalism, the Citizens' Revolution assimilated a certain ability to absorb demands in a transformist manner in a context of distancing from social antagonisms, which goes hand in hand with the adoption of a top-down approach. It is also important to recognise that, in an era of economic crisis, which coincides roughly with our third period, the scarcity of resources tends to break up the unity between heterogeneous sectors and leads to a case-by-case solution of the conflicts and demands that may arise. The conflict between redistributive and environmentalist drives only partially fits in this case, since it occurred during a period of relative prosperity and was mainly due to the historical bottlenecks of Ecuadorian economic development and to an anti-equivalential political anthropology of the bearers of the indigenous and environmental demands. Of populism, on the other hand, the Citizens' Revolution retained the proposition of an antagonistic frontier between the people and the elites, although this divide displayed a decreasing capacity for articulation, and the excessive centrality of the leader, even though it should be conceded that there are populist practices in which the role of the leadership is much less central. Laclau recognises the latter possibility but has emphasised the need for a strong leadership time and again, especially in the Latin American context, where the oligarchy has historically made the legislative one of its main trenches (Laclau, 2010; Laclau in Arellano, 2012).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Speculatively, it could be argued that Laclau's aversion for parliamentarianism does not have a mere historical derivation but also a theoretical one - which reinforces the scepticism he displays in his early

The left-populism of Correa has thus maintained some points of tension with the agonist model and radical-democratic model propounded by Mouffe. Though more will be said on this in the next chapter, suffice it for now to highlight that this had not gone unnoticed. The politics of Correa, indeed,

has been a politics closer to Laclau than to Mouffe, antagonist and not agonist, of enemies rather than of adversaries, of confrontation more than consensus [...] the possibility of transforming the enemy into an adversary, of moving from antagonism to agonism, requires a normative consensus around political pluralism, associated with a deepening of the institutions of representative democracy, where a common loyalty to the principles of freedom and equality for all crystallises. But the citizens' revolution has shown as its ideological mark a detachment from representative democracy, from liberal values, and from the normative principles of pluralism and separation of powers. A majoritarian democracy has prevailed, based on the idea of a monopoly on popular representation (Burbano de Lara, 2016: 18).

Does this justify the claim of de la Torre who, in a paper about Correa, goes as far as stating that 'Laclau's theory therefore opened the door for justifications of authoritarian fantasies of power as a possession' (de la Torres, 2016: 130)? This is far from being an acceptable conclusion. While it is possible to concur with him in that '[t]he challenge is how to combine the emancipatory promises of constituent power without disregarding all the institutions and norms of constituted power in a liberal democracy' (de la Torre, 2016: 135), it should be remembered that this is part and parcel of the project envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe in HSS, and that at no point does Laclau propose the endorsement of a competitive authoritarian regime, which is how de la Torre defines the administration of Correa (de la Torre, 2016: 135). In this sense, the simple invocation of the Lefortian emptiness at the space of power put forward by de la Torre (de la Torre, 2016: 133) is inattentive towards the process of the

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writings toward the bent for parliaments of the Argentine liberal elites of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Laclau, 1969; Laclau, 1970). Even though it has been Mouffe that has dealt more closely with the thought of Carl Schmitt, it is possible to claim that the conclusion of the latter by which the pre-eminence of the legislative over the executive is to be ascribed to liberalism was fully taken onboard by Laclau (see Mouffe, 1993: 118-120).

construction of that constituent power and the far-reaching democratising effects of the Citizens' Revolution. For Laclau:

the construction of a chain of equivalences out of a dispersion of fragmented demands, and their unification around popular positions operating as empty signifiers, is not totalitarian but the very condition for the construction of a collective will which, in many cases, can be profoundly democratic (OPR: 166).

Yet it is possible to claim that there is a further aspect in which both the theory and the practice of populism show their limits. Much has been said about a new hegemony produced by Latin American progressive populism, which would have dislodged neoliberal hegemony (Errejón and Guijarro, 2016). While it is not possible to deny a net shift in public policy, many of the factors highlighted in the phenomenological description of the Citizens' Revolution seem to indicate that a more nuanced view is necessary. Populism in of itself can produce new electoral hegemonies, but these can be fleeting and ephemeral, but most especially do not necessarily involve a transformation of the social formation that is nominally antagonised, since they do not address the adaptive-educational dimension which tailors the civilisation and morality of the broader popular masses to a political project (Gramsci, 1975: 1565-1566).

As we have seen, it took the collapse of the consumer's pact predicated upon high oil prices to provoke the progressive falling apart of the equivalential chain previously built. Certainly, dislocatory experiences are bound to undo any hegemony in any social formation, and economic crises are often the spark of wide social discontent. But in this case, we are faced with a populist experience that did not manage to consolidate its own model. This is true at a variety of levels. In the economic realm, after the radicalism of the first few years, much of the post-neoliberal repertoire was pulled back. The diversification of the economic apparatus remained a vague and distant project. All in all, the heterodox model initially envisioned

proved to be scarcely sustainable over time and its application presented remarkable pitfalls. In the cultural realm, the ascendance of Correa was not matched by literary or artistic movements worth the name. Politically, it seems that the project never posed itself the question of cultivating an organic movement that accompanied the government at a social level. The movement always remained an electoral machine, capable at best of brokering the support of local leaders, while remaining virtually non-existent in many areas of the country. What makes it especially difficult to speak of a new hegemony is also the fact that consumerism was skyrocketing to the detriment of the consolidation of a more critical type of consciousness. While elevating consumption for many segments of Ecuadorian society was certainly right and proper from an emancipatory point of view, the Citizens' Revolution has fostered a model that rendered consumption not as a means but as an end in itself. As put by Rohn Dávila in relation to Correa's Ecuador:

One of the most important transformations of today's society is that, in essence, it is consumerist. [...] This creates individuals thinking of a present to consume; they do not think about the future and, therefore, neither about a historical project of a national state. [...] The government focuses its discourse on stability and that is the only to make it possible for society to fulfil its dream: consume. [...] The person only thinks that tomorrow he can go to the mall and buy what he wants (Rohn Dávila in El Comercio, 2012b)

The high and protracted dependence on the role of the leader is also risky. As well highlighted by Ortiz in relation to the police coup which took place in 2010, if Correa had been killed that day, the whole process of the Citizens' Revolution would have fallen apart (Ortiz Crespo, 2011: 29). This remained true even seven years later, when the process unleashed by Correa did not manage to find a replacement that followed a similar political line. Correa had to resort to a figure of whom he was deeply suspicious and who, in the end, showed loyalty to a project of his own. A pedagogical work that allowed the transition from the centrality of the leader to the centrality of genuine political contents thus never took place. But this also confirms that a



different relationship between representatives and represented remained the same, perpetuating a fundamentally hierarchical scheme. As a result, beyond positioning a discourse of social and economic rights that will undoubtedly continue to be an important patrimony of popular identity to be referred from the left, the Citizens' Revolution failed to lay the foundations for a lasting hegemony.

## Chapter 5: Populism and hegemony unravelled<sup>50</sup>

In the light of the empirical research conducted so far, it is now time for a theoretical re-elaboration of Laclau's notions of populism and hegemony. The two cases have already prepared the terrain by indicating the voids, both ontological and normative, in Laclau's theory and suggested, if only very vaguely for now, what kind of reformulations are needed. Such reformulations, it is important to recall, are advanced by maintaining the double status occupied by these categories, insofar as they constitute useful tools for the analysis of political phenomena and for thinking about potential emancipatory courses.

Two broad critical avenues have thus emerged, which will be dealt with one at a time over the course of this chapter. The first section 'Lessons from the cases' makes reference to them by summarising the puzzles that arose during the empirical cases and anticipating their theoretical treatment. The first area of concern, namely the excessive proximity between populism and hegemony and the necessity to sunder the two notions more clearly, is dealt with in the three following sections of the chapter through a peculiar route: that of reformulating the notions of space and time. The second section 'Taking space seriously' is thus concerned with a revisitation of the conception of space, while the third section 'Taking time seriously' addresses a review of the notion of time. It will emerge that populism and hegemony tend to overlap in Laclau also thanks to the singular conception of time and space that he proposes throughout his corpus. Here, a plural conception of space and time is upheld instead. The fourth section 'What is hegemony then?' is aimed at providing a better definition of hegemony under this new configuration, with special attention dedicated to the distinction

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<sup>50</sup>Some of the concepts that are elaborated in this chapter are tentatively developed in Mazzolini and Borriello, 2017.

hegemony/counter-hegemony, the role of subjectivation and the non-normative status of hegemony.

The second critical avenue has to do with the issue of left-wing populism and is dealt with in the fifth and sixth sections of this chapter. The fifth one 'Unmediated leaderism and the question of the empty signifier' is concerned with the excessive privilege granted to the role of the leader and with the relationship between leader and led. Particular reference will be made here to the question of the empty signifier with a slight correction to the terms which Laclau presents. The sixth section 'For an agonistic, radical-democratic and ethical left-wing populism' provides evidence as to the contradictions between an unmediated left-wing populism with the project of radical democracy that Laclau set forward with Chantal Mouffe and the agonistic model proposed by the latter. As it is known, the works of Laclau and Mouffe have often been seen as complementary, although with diverging emphases. What is argued here is that the left-wing populism that we should stand for needs to be contaminated more by the insights provided by Mouffe. In this discussion, the ethical dimension proposed by the likes of William Connolly, Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan is also brought in and made compatible with a populist approach.

Finally, in line with the problematisation approach espoused here, it is worth emphasising that the chapter revisits some of the theoretical influences that had an incidence in the forging of Laclau's thought. In particular the chapter makes ample use of the insights of Antonio Gramsci.<sup>51</sup> This is done by way of both mobilising those aspects of his theory that were

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<sup>51</sup>As for the sources that have been used for this exercise, it is worth stressing that this Gramscian re-insertion has been conducted both by way of a direct engagement with the *oeuvre* of Gramsci and by reference to some of its existing interpretations. Some of the debates that have taken place in and around the International Gramsci Society, especially thanks to Italian scholars, are of particular use for the aims of this research. Though technically not related to the latter association, the work of Michele Filippini stands out as

overlooked altogether by Laclau and recuperating those that were somehow left behind over the course of his theoretical development. In a sense, this could be said to be a Gramscian reinterpretation of Laclau that, without losing the distinct post-structuralist ontology that Laclau has built, attempts to make of it a better analytical and strategic tool for emancipatory purposes.

### **Lessons from the cases**

The empirical cases presented have a number of features in common. Let us enumerate some of them: they were both practices located to the left of the political spectrum with a clear emancipatory thrust, they both counted with a broad popular appeal as they managed to coalesce a number of heterogeneous social sectors and demands, they were both led by leaders that elicited vast respect and consensus, and they were both accused of harbouring undemocratic pretensions. Of course, there are also some stark differences between them: their geographical setting, their temporal length, the historical time in which they took place, and the fact that one was openly communist and in one way or another linked to the Soviet Union, while the other was of a more moderate leaning. Even more crucially, one of them never occupied any governmental role at a national level, let alone a brief period of coalition government with other political forces in a post-war scenario, while the other was in power for a decade.

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particularly relevant here. Within the Essex school of discourse analysis, very few people seem to have specialised on Gramsci. Anna Marie Smith is a notable exception and her insights are extremely pertinent, especially because they share a spirit which is very similar to that adopted here. Despite not being formally a member the Essex school, the work of Stuart Hall is also very compatible with that of Laclau and he has also realised much work on Gramsci. His contribution is also highly regarded in this chapter.

Intuitively, some of these details may let us infer that the more moderate practice with institutional responsibility was more hegemonic and less populist than the communist one that was always excluded from power. After all, the Manichean approach that is typically imputed to communism seems *prima facie* to be more associable with a populist propensity, while it is easier to think of a practice that held power for a decade as more hegemonic than one that did not. Yet, as we have seen, this was not so. Or rather, this was not entirely so. The PCI did display some populist tendencies but mediated them by way of an attitude of institutional responsibility and a constant search for compromise with other forces. It construed a 'people', while softening polarisation. Despite not reaching power, it influenced policy-making, the national cultural debate and the socialisation of vast segments of the country. Over time however, the lack of a clear political frontier contributed to the assimilation of the reasons of its historic adversaries, and whose final consequences are most visible today. As put by Laclau: '[f]rontiers are the *sine qua non* of the emergence of the 'people': without them, the whole dialectic of partiality/universality would simply collapse' (OPR: 231). On the contrary, the Citizens' Revolution was in power and yet its leader maintained a flamboyant populist rhetoric during the whole period in power. Even more tellingly, while much was done in terms of a policy-shift, the Citizens' Revolution never impacted too significantly on other ambits of social relations and displayed a decreasing propensity to uphold its early radical tones, in a move which resembles the attitude of the PCI, although with a different timing. Moreover, the decline in popularity of its leader and his replacement by an alleged ally gave way to a quick and unexpected political U-turn, which may have been much more difficult if the predominance of Correa had been more than just electoral.

Theoretically, what emerges is a tension in Laclau. At a limit, populism means two things: the articulation of heterogeneous elements so as to form a new people and the dichotomisation of society. The former is predicated on the latter. Nevertheless, these two moments may not necessarily go together. An excessive dichotomisation may not create a people, as its articulatory role may well be nihil. The Ecuadorian case shows this very clearly: at some point, the maintenance of a stark dichotomic approach of the 'either with or against me' type functioned as a political boomerang for the Citizens' Revolution. This is also true for the 'Zdanovian' period of the PCI. By and large however, the party led by Togliatti and Berlinguer articulated pieces of society by mediating between a populist and institutional approach. Equally, hegemony also conveys a sense of construction of the social, but of a different kind. While populism entails a fleeting articulation of heterogeneous elements, the creation of a mere representational coalition, hegemony speaks of a sedimentation of meaning, of a particular set of social relations, of a certain way in which society ought to be organised. But do the two things go necessarily together? In purely quantitative terms, it may be said that the PCI was not as successful as the Citizens' Revolution in terms of uniting different pieces of society. In this sense, the latter enjoyed the electoral support of a larger chunk of society. Yet, it is possible to argue that the PCI was able to impact more strongly in society at large and over a longer period of time, thanks to an indirect influence on policy-making but also due to the capacity to impart and guarantee the assimilation of a truly alternative political ABC among ample social strata.

At this point, it is paramount to go back to the relationship between populism and hegemony in Laclau. As we saw in the first chapter, and as the empirical cases clearly show, a certain overlapping exists between the two in Laclau. In a paper in which he draws a connection

between the theory of hegemony and policy studies, Howarth sets out two fundamental aspects of hegemony. On one side, hegemony can:

be seen as a political practice that involves the linking together of disparate demands to forge projects or 'discourse coalitions' that can contest a particular form of rule, practice or policy. These practices presuppose the existence of antagonisms and the presence of 'floating signifiers' that can be articulated by rival political projects (Howarth, 2009: 318).

This amounts precisely to the notion of populism as provided by Laclau in OPR. As for the second aspect, Howarth asserts that any coalition needs installation and reproduction, as a way in which subjects accept and conform to a particular regime. Here, Howarth stresses in particular the necessity of any order to be reproduced without direct challenge, by way of a 'differential incorporation or even co-optation of claims and demands' (Howarth, 2009: 321). Howarth goes on to equate the logic of difference through which this dynamic is captured by post-structuralist discourse theory, with the Foucauldian notion of governmentality. If only roughly then, hegemony also corresponds to what Laclau calls the institutionalist discourse, which, by neutralising demands, is the opposite ideal pole of the *continuum* drawn together with populism on the other side (Laclau, 2005b: 45).

Arditi is even more blunt in devising a certain conflation of populism with hegemony. Specifically, he claims that:

The specific difference that populism introduces vis-à-vis hegemony is the division of society into two camps to produce a relation of equivalence among demands and construct a frontier or antagonistic relation between them. This is why populism can be said to be a species of the genus hegemony, the species that calls into question the existing order with the purpose of constructing another. This genus has at least one other species, institutionalist discourse, whose essence is to maintain the status quo (Arditi, 2010: 492-493).

Nevertheless, Arditi is quite critical of this operation, as he finds that Laclau first equated hegemony with politics as such in HSS and then did the same with populism, in 'an ad-hoc

rewriting of the narrative of hegemony to adjust it to the subject matter of *OPR*' (Arditi, 2010: 493). In effect, if 'hegemony is populism is politics', as Arditi provocatively puts, the status of each category loses theoretical efficacy and runs the risk of explaining very little, converting the triad in a mere tautology. More specifically, it is not unwarranted to wonder to what extent it is reasonable and productive to employ the linguistic and psychoanalytical tools enshrined in the latest notion of populism to analyse the depths of society and, by the same token, how far a populist project can in it and for itself naturalise its own self-proclaimed values and conceal its own tensions (Howarth, 2004: 266, 269).

In the Ecuadorian case, a populist subject managed to obtain power through a discursive assemblage that coalesced - and contingently fixed the meaning of - a number of existing floating signifiers against a determined political regime, and then consolidated itself by channelling a number of these demands and, for a while, neutralising potential ones. This situation is not enough to infer its intrinsic capability of instilling a new *modus vivendi* among the people that is consonant with its own self-proclaimed political ethos. This way of approaching politics risks overshadowing a whole array of political phenomena ranging from opportunism and transformism to clientelism. In other words, a political practice may well manage to put together a number of frustrated aspirations in society by arousing political passions among the people, while fundamentally foundering to take a leading position in the economy, in civil society, in intellectual and moral life, in culture. In this sense, the antagonistic articulation of existing demands does not necessarily exclude the possibility of coming to terms with the moral and ideological coordinates pertaining to different *milieus*. More particularly, what lies at the heart of the dissatisfaction with the excessive proximity between populism and hegemony in Laclau is that not all political projects that launch successful bids for power via the populist route manage to alter the conformism that lies at



the basis of the social formation that they allegedly attempt to outdo. To put it in a different way, the modification of overt political identities does not necessarily go hand in hand with the abandonment of the deep-seated dispositions which are consonant with the political regime that is nominally swept away.

Laclau is not entirely unaware of this. As he puts it in OPR: 'Even if Bush marginally loses the election, the successor will find his movements limited by the straightjacket of a hegemonic formation whose parameters remain substantially unchanged' (OPR: 138). Although the conditions are very different, is this not to an extent what happened in the Ecuadorian case? Equally, at some point hegemony is also recognised by Laclau as being more all-encompassing than simply meaning an electoral predominance. More fundamentally, hegemony involves turning the identity of the political adversary upside down. With Mouffe, Laclau states that:

Instead of a recasting of the socialist project, what we have witnessed in the last decade has been the triumph of neo-liberalism, whose hegemony has become so pervasive that it has had a profound effect on the very identity of the Left (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xiv).

The question of identity resurfaces. It is not by chance that the PCI's heirs are often said to have lost an identity that they once had. Yet we find in the very corpus of Laclau the elements that can help us to overcome some of his own contradictions. Let us take these last two claims seriously and attempt to provide a way out of the impasse.

### **Taking space seriously**

A privileged avenue in order to clarify the relationship between populism and hegemony is that of reformulating the notions of temporality and spatiality. It may seem a minor matter, but profound implications follow from the way in which the two are developed. We have already seen in chapter two that Laclau conceptualises the two in an antinomian scheme. To

sum up his take on the matter very briefly, suffice it to recall that 'any repetition that is governed by a structural law of successions is space' (NR: 41), thus becoming synonymous with stasis, the absence of politics, or an attempt at closure; a closure that necessarily fails thanks to the intervention of time, which, by means of dislocation, re-injects dynamism and interrupts the predefined causality, giving new lymph to politics and thus being equated with freedom.

In a critical review of his formulation of space and time, Doreen Massey - while sharing Laclau's general philosophical system - openly condemns this duality of the type A/non-A that establishes a priority that rewards temporality at the expense of spatiality and defines the latter on the basis of a definition of the former, or rather as a lack of the former (Massey, 1992: 71-72). By arguing that the social is also spatially constructed, Massey is committed to restoring a positive and dynamic description for space, thus becoming a potential source of dislocation. For Massey, the space encapsulates different social relationships whose interaction reveals unexpected potentialities that are certainly not ascribable to the concept of causality. This criticism, however, stems more from the concerns of Massey, a political geographer herself, than from the negative repercussions that these notions have on the rest of the Laclauian theoretical edifice. Massey sees the use of space and temporality by Laclau as merely metaphorical, although Laclau openly denies this possibility: 'note that when we refer to space, we do not do so in a metaphorical sense, out of analogy with physical space' (NR: 41). It is precisely this claim that makes these categories sterile in Laclauian thought and that requires a much more incisive intervention than the rehabilitation of space and the postulation of the necessary imbrication between the two dimensions (Massey, 1992: 77).

In this sense, it is here proposed the intrinsic plurality of both space and time. How do we intend this plurality for space? In a recent commemorative article following the death of Laclau, Massey insists again on the matter, by proposing a concept of spatiality in plural terms that redeems the importance of multipolarity. 'Contemporary geographic differences occur in a unique temporality. Speaking of multiple modernities can then serve to spatialise modernity, to open a differentiated geography of alternatives, and - potentially - to politicise it' (Massey, 2015: 11). Massey's concrete interest is here addressed to Latin America where, with reference to the populist experiences of the 'pink tide', a new and genuine alternative identity to neoliberalism is (was?) being created. However, space has a purely demonstrative value: multipolarity, different political experiences in distinct places show us that things can be otherwise, providing examples that break the cage of the *pensée unique*. But this plurality is thought only in terms of entities that are in turn conceptualised in a homogeneous way. There is, in fact, another way to conceive spatial plurality, not only in terms of nations as such, but also as a diversity of social sites. Stuart Hall helps us to frame the question in a better way. According to the scholar of Jamaican origin:

'Hegemony' implies: the struggle to contest and dis-organize an existing political formation; the taking of the 'leading position' (on however minority a basis) over a number of different spheres of society at once - economy, civil society, intellectual and moral life, culture; the conduct of a wide and differentiated type of struggle; the winning of a strategic measure of popular consent; and, thus, the securing of a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historic project (Hall, 1988: 7).

As already hinted in the first chapter, what Hall highlights is that hegemony goes much beyond the struggle to conquer nominal political power. In this view, a social formation is made of different sites that, while living in close relation and being mutually influenced, are not overlapping and can even show different dynamics. In this sense, it is worth remembering that, while Gramsci initially employs the term 'politics' to refer to the art of government,

which takes place in a determined space within the social formation, that is the institutions of 'political society' (Thomas, 2013: 203), he progressively uses the term in a much more enlarged sense to allude to a wider array of conflictive practices, in parallel with the development of the notion of 'integral state'. The latter is intended as a dialectical unity between political and civil society, whereby neither of the two has a privileged status; rather both 'constitute the specificity of the Gramscian theory of hegemony' (Thomas, 2013: 204). Spatiality in this case is not purely metaphorical but real: to each of these sites of civil society corresponds concrete places, which Gramsci terms 'trenches' and 'fortresses' and which altogether constitute a spatially diffuse apparatus through which a particular hegemony is constantly reproduced (Gramsci, 1971: 235-238; Gramsci, 1995: 272). Neither the state, strictly intended as political society, can be intended as a granitic block; rather, it seems more plausible to conceptualise it as a more dynamic, permeable and many-sided entity, which functions on equal footing with civil society as a *kampfplatz* between different political projects.<sup>52</sup> As put by Aronowitz in interpreting Gramsci's reflections on political organisation: 'under the best of circumstances where the party has sufficient resources, especially cadres, it contests bourgeois hegemony on all fronts, not merely in the sphere of electoral politics' (Aronowitz, 2009: 10).

The comprehension of this aspect is also to be found in Norberto Bobbio's famous intervention at the Gramsci conference held in Cagliari in 1967 and translated into English in the aforementioned collective volume edited by Chantal Mouffe (Bobbio, 1979: 39-40). Interestingly, Bobbio further argues that it matters little whether hegemony precedes the

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<sup>52</sup>Very valuable in this regard are the insights of Bob Jessop, who further elaborated the concept of the state as a social relation taking his cues from Gramsci and Nico Poulantzas. In a nutshell, according to Jessop, state structures 'offer unequal chances to different forces within and outside that state to act for different political purposes' (Jessop, 1990: 367).

conquest of power. In other words, what is essential in the concept of hegemony is not about 'more or less, before or after', but its extension, which implies 'both the moment of political leadership and the moment of cultural leadership', with emphasis on its ample diffusion in civil society (Bobbio, 1979: 40). As it will be clarified in the section devoted to a redefinition of hegemony, under particular conditions the moment of political leadership *strictu senso* may even be lacking in formal terms, although politics at large would still be guided by a particular hegemonic set of principles. In this context, hegemony therefore means elevating a peculiarity to the role of the universal, but such elevation needs to be replicated on several fronts.

As it clearly emerged from the empirical analysis, the post-war PCI fully grasped this aspect and did not confine its action to the electoral sphere but promoted a politics of 'penetration' both in civil society and in the political arena in the attempt to disseminate its world-views in a variety of environments and contexts. Oppositely, the case of the Citizens' Revolution speaks of a practice whose chief preoccupation was that of winning elections, while abdicating to undertake any meaningful political work in the rest of civil society. The incapacity of the Citizens' Revolution in this regard cannot just be explained in terms of the snap ascent to political power immediately after the creation of Correa's political force (thus making it objectively difficult to organise a party while having already the responsibility to govern a country), but also and most crucially in terms of the reluctance to devise a cultural plan - intended in the broad, Gramscian way - aimed at creating its correlative foundations in the realm of civil society. This explains why the qualification of counter-hegemonic can be attributed to the PCI, but hardly so to the Citizens' Revolution. Over time, however, the PCI started to privilege the political ambit, with the negative consequences that have been analysed from the point of view of emancipatory strategy.

The same inattention to civil society is, *mutatis mutandis*, also to be found in Laclau's late writings. His notion of space is singular because he tends to reduce a social formation to its political society (thereby restricting his notion of politics mostly to the art of government), but also because even there he does not heed its inherent plurality. In other words, Laclau overlooks civil society and conceives politics mostly as the fight among projects that challenge each other in the political arena. Civil society is only seen as the place from which demands emerge and are somewhat instrumentally made use of, and whose chronology is limited to times of crisis, not as the place in which consensus is created through a constant and long pedagogical work. Moreover, the analysis of the political arena is particularly impoverished, as who manages to 'play the catachresical game' better than others determines an objectivity that pervades political institutions and spills over civil society - and whose trace of contingency is only to be found in power (NR: 60).

It could be tentatively argued that the possibility of conceiving space (and hence also hegemony) in these terms is made difficult by a certain conceptualisation of discourse, such that it is transformed into a monolith, or confused with the discursive as such. In a passage where the differences with Hall are made explicit, Howarth and Stavrakakis highlight that:

Where Hall differs from our approach is in his retention of the ontological separation between different types of social practice, whether understood as ideological, sociological, economic or political. Discourse theorists, by contrast, affirm the discursive character of all social practices and objects, and reject the idea that ideological practices simply constitute one area or 'region' of social relations. Thus, for instance, the distinctions between political, economic and ideological practices are pragmatic and analytical, and strictly internal to the category of discourse (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 4).

Here the question is not about reintegrating discourse as a subordinate level to a privileged ambit nor to deny the meritorious incorporation of Wittgenstein's intuition, by which the discursive/extra-discursive distinction is overcome, but to emphasise the intrinsic multiformity

of the social, by applying the concept of articulation also to this context. In other words, the projection of a discourse, a project, or a practice - terms that Laclau uses as synonyms (Laclau, 1998: 9) - may only be limited to a domain, i.e. its 'projectuality' may exhaust itself within a well-defined site or, alternatively, it may have the capacity and, most importantly, the intention, to extend its influence to the entire social plane. Pluralising the inner space of the social can cast light on the actual hegemonic reach of a project and assist the elaboration of emancipatory strategies of greater incisiveness. Once again, the tools to obviate this are to be found in Laclau himself. As he puts it in a 1988 interview: 'any form of unity, articulation and hierarchization that may exist between various regions and levels will be the result of a contingent and pragmatic *construction*' (Laclau, 1988: 18; also in NR: 186), meaning that different levels exist within the discursive and that any possible connection between them is to be studied on a case by case basis.

### **Taking time seriously**

The temporal dimension adds a further layer of complexity that helps to understand the difference between populism and hegemony. A recent debate on the matter among Gramscian scholars provides a number of insights that can be fruitfully put to use (Thomas, 2013; Frosini, 2013; Filippini, 2016). Thomas' intervention is aimed at rediscovering Althusser's conception of temporality set forth in *Reading Capital*. Concomitantly however, Thomas rejects the Althusserian critical reading of Gramsci's take on time, suggesting that the two ultimately defend the same position (Thomas, 2013: 193). In particular, Thomas initially

foregrounds Althusser's critique of the Hegelian conception of the present, which, accordingly, had contaminated Marxism. As put by Althusser himself:

This means that the structure of the historical existence of the Hegelian social totality allows what I propose to call an 'essential section' (*coupe d'essence*), i.e., an intellectual operation in which a vertical break is made at any moment in historical time, a break in the present such that all the elements of the whole revealed by this section are in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence (Althusser in Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 94).

What Althusser criticises of this conception is its inherent teleology, which translates into 'a substantially aestheticised conception of history, as a succession of 'essential sections' of contemporaneity which are identical between themselves insofar as they all are mere manifestations of an essence always identical with itself' (Thomas, 2013: 195). We are before an eternalisation of the present which impedes thinking about change and which reduces the possibility to conceive of transformative political practices (Thomas, 2013: 196). While this conception is very far from Laclau's - who has always been at the forefront of the battle against Hegelianism and any reduction of politics to a clash between various subjects that claim for themselves a privileged knowledge of the object of the present (Thomas, 2013: 197) - we can still draw a hint from Althusser's criticism and put it to use in order to understand a limitation in Laclau's conception. Laclau's temporality is indeed devoid of essence but is also singular. This emerges not only from his take on temporality as such, but also from the way in which his discursive approach is modelled. If we operated a vertical break at any moment in historical time following Laclau's theory of populism, the relationship between all the elements of the whole would not be the expression of any internal essence that permeates history through and through, for their being together would be totally contingent, but would still be in an immediate relationship between each other, i.e. they would be all synchronic and somehow coordinated. In other words, the theory of populism presupposes an entirely



smooth plane whereby the successful intervention of a populist practice always and necessarily displaces the previous social formation and installs a new one entirely coherent with itself. As opposed to the Hegelian linear *continuum* by which the present moment is contained in the previous one while already containing in itself the next one, that of Laclau is a *dis-continuum*, marked by abrupt changes that make each present entirely unrelated to the previous and the next formations: in other words, a time series of discrete events.<sup>53</sup> Unlike Gramsci then, Laclau's theoretical tools tell us about a series of properties in a static whole; they are not abstractions that - as in the case of the Italian thinker - hold for a series of interrelated phenomena over a period of time, making Laclau's political theory a synchronic one (Morera, 1990: 83-84). According to Thomas:

For Gramsci, the present is necessarily non-identical with itself, composed by numerous 'times' which neither coincide nor are regulated by a common measure [...] the present for Gramsci is precisely an ensemble of these practices taken in their different temporality, each of them in fight with the others in order to assert its own specific temporality in relation to others, and without reference to [...] a single time baseline on which 'advancement' or 'regression' could be measured (Thomas, 2013: 202).

It is precisely the lack of recognition that each present contains different times which does not seem to be fully acknowledged by Laclau and which leads him to postulate an erroneous proximity between populism and hegemony. The intervention of Frosini (2013) takes issue directly with the Argentine in this regard. The Italian Gramscian scholar recalls the distinction operated by Laclau in NR. Here, as recalled above, temporality is conceived as dislocation, as event, as the impossibility of suturing the social, whereas space is precisely the closed organisation of signifieds (NR: 41-42). It follows, according to Frosini, that the plurality of times can only be conceived in terms of a spatialised diachrony of orders (Frosini, 2013: 226). This is clear in the way in which Laclau thinks of the instability of the system: in fact, this 'is

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<sup>53</sup>As put by Laclau himself: '[h]istory is rather a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations' (OPR: 226).

not due to the contingency of its constitution, but to its crisis [...] of which the reactivation of the contingent nature of that systematic unification is a result' (Frosini, 2013: 226).<sup>54</sup> The consequence of this Bergsonian/Heideggerian conception of time, as Frosini has it, is that 'the singularity of the situation falls entirely under the category of objectivity, whereby it becomes impossible to think in a concrete manner, in which political innovation erupts in the system of the signifieds' (Frosini, 2013: 227). Thus, the temporal uniqueness leads to 'a very poor concrete analysis, in which the distinctions between different cases and situations are reduced to superficial details' (Frosini, 2013: 227). This is because, as Frosini continues, by pitting contingency against necessity, the original meaning of the former, *cum-tangere*, that is the non-essential unity of at least two occurrences, is lost. In this way, the coming together of historicity - that is the contamination of a plurality that operates within every system - and decision is dynamited (Frosini, 2013: 227). In fact, by privileging the latter at the expense of the former from NR onwards, the arbitrariness of decision becomes the only game in town, a risk signalled also by Norval (2004: 148-149) and Howarth (2004: 264), who accepts that the problem was half-acknowledged by Laclau in *Emancipation(s)* through a reference to the

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<sup>54</sup>In a similar vein, Arditì notes the essential role attributed by Laclau to crisis: 'like Carl Schmitt, Laclau takes for granted the goodness of order and the necessity of restoring-transforming it whenever it has been unsettled, yet unlike Schmitt he also welcomes crises, as these are conditions of possibility for the felicity of populist interventions. [...] The upshot is that equivalential logics cannot flourish, and populism cannot rise above what he calls "petty demagoguery" unless there is some kind of de-institutionalization that unsettles the old order. [...] It is difficult to hold on to the argument that politics-as-populism has a constitutive force - that it has the capacity to subvert and reconstruct the given - and at the same time claim that populist interventions are dependent on the prior crisis in the existing order, for then the political would be subservient to those junctures, and, therefore, its status would be derivative rather than constitutive'. (Arditì, 2010: 493-494). This aspect has important repercussions from the perspective that is privileged in this work: strategy. Populism becomes a useful strategic tool only insofar as there is a crisis, but it cannot do anything to unsettle the current order. Until dislocation manifests itself by way of a traumatic event then, the struggle of different temporalities to impose themselves - be them dispersed or coalesced in a chain of equivalences - and the very notion of organisation of alternative political practices that trace new political horizons for society, are thus neglected and relegated in terms of importance.

availability and credibility of discourses; a problem, however, that comes dramatically to the fore again in OPR.<sup>55</sup>

How to conceive temporality then? Filippini provides the most convincing interpretation of Gramsci's position, one which can be of particular use for the purposes pursued here as he distinguishes between two forms of temporality. As he aptly puts it:

These two forms of temporality – plural temporality that is always struggling to prevail, and singular temporality represented by the hegemonic force at the time – are constantly at play at one and the same time in Gramsci's analysis. In the case of plural temporality, the outcome of the struggle is different each time, from one case to the next; within singular temporality, the upheaval occurs at the beginning of every new age, when the “temporal line” changes and points in another direction (Filippini, 2016: 106).

The singular temporality, also called hegemonic time, is thus that of the dominant bloc, which does not necessarily and/or perfectly overlap with those who hold nominal power. The case of Correa perfectly fits this situation: despite the President of Ecuador being the bearer of a different temporality, the hegemonic temporality remained by and large neoliberal. This type of temporality thus determines the uneven background in which the struggle among different projects takes place. In this way, we can distinguish between duration and epoch: '[t]he former is the stage for the imminent struggle between social forces within a system of hegemonic power. The latter is the unequal background in which this struggle is played out' (Filippini, 2016: 107). Significantly, duration does not entail substantial transformations in the overall social organisation, whereas epoch implies the establishment of a new civilisation and

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<sup>55</sup>To be fair to Laclau though, it must be added that this emphasis is at times mitigated even in NR: 'if the agent is not entirely internal to the structure, this is because the structure itself is undecidable and cannot be entirely repetitive, since the decisions based upon, but not determined by it, transform and subvert it constantly. This means that the agents themselves transform their own identity in so far as they actualize certain structural potentialities and reject others' (NR: 30). A few years later, Laclau calls the moment of the decision the moment of madness and compares the taking of a decision to the impersonification of God (Laclau, 1996b: 55, 57). Once again though, he mitigates his take: 'what counts as a valid decision will have the limits of a structure which, in its actuality, is only partially deconstructed. The madness of the decision is, if you want, as all madness, a regulated one' (Laclau, 1996b: 60-61).

the destruction of old automatisms (Filippini, 2016: 107). This does not mean that duration - or plural temporality - is always and necessarily characterised by petty fights, as these can occasionally rise and put under discussion the singular temporality of an epoch.

This is best captured if we consider the parallel distinction that Gramsci draws between the occasional and the permanent. As he puts it: '[t]he occasional gives rise to political criticism, the permanent gives rise to sociohistorical criticism; the occasional helps one assess political groups and personalities, the permanent helps one assess large social groupings' (Gramsci, 1996: 177). Gramsci thus postulates the existence of organic tendencies and conjunctures: the former tend to be long-term processes and are associated with the strategic, the latter are short-term phenomena, and linked to the tactical and the day-to-day (Gramsci, 1971: 177-178; Morera, 1990: 90). However, despite recognising their different lengths and reaches, neither of them is deemed to be definitive. It is when the battle that is launched in the occasional establishes a new *modus vivendi* in a variety of areas that the transition to a new permanent is carried out: at this point, it can be said that space and time find their ultimate point of connection. It must be stressed that it is not the gravity of a crisis *per se* that permits the transition - although, as we shall see in a moment, the degree of the crisis should be better heeded -, but rather the strength of the alternative political project that manages to obtain a far-reaching triumph (Filippini, 2016: 96). To come up with a recent and immediate example, one should not have difficulties at admitting that neoliberal capitalism operates at a temporal level which is simply not comparable with that of an elected government, or succession of like-minded governments. Again, the chapter on the Ecuadorian Citizen's Revolution is particularly telling in this respect: despite one of Correa's favourite slogans being that his government constituted "not an epoch of change, but a change of epoch", the empirical analysis reveals that, while several policy changes were in fact major progressive

reforms, such transformations have failed to be as far-reaching and durable as often proclaimed and to involve all areas of the social formation.

The oppositional couples that Gramsci proposes are thus entirely overlapping: singular/plural, epochal/durational, permanent/occasional are different ways to express that each present is pierced by temporalities that strive to impose themselves as political and social projects, but this always happens against the context of one particular temporality (or project) that defines the contours of the struggle. In this sense, while populism pertains to the register of the plural, the durational and the occasional, hegemony belongs to that of the singular, the epochal and the permanent. The point to assimilate here is that Gramsci's historicism postulates that proper theoretical concepts cannot simply attempt to capture any given moment while disregarding the totality of social phenomena (Morera, 2010: 83). While populism, concerned as it is with the immediate contestation of a regime or practice, seems to be preoccupied with the synchronic, the notion of hegemony emerges as intrinsically and necessarily diachronic. The collision between Laclau and Gramsci could not be clearer on this: while Laclau sees in populism a strategic device for the left that draws its wherewithal from a synchronic analysis of the social environment (demands), Gramsci proposes that the 'theoretical concepts must emerge out of the complex abstraction of evidence ranging over a suitably long period of time' (Morera, 1990: 84).

There is also a specular angle from which it is possible to treat the question of temporality, which has to do with the excessive rapidity through which a social formation is deemed to be transformable. The resilience of neoliberal social and institutional relations in the face of an explicit challenge such as the one posed by the Citizens' Revolution - or by the general discredit of neoliberal economic policies for that matter - speaks of a certain sluggishness in

the way in which deep dispositions undergo change, which seems to contradict the more volatile account offered by Laclau. This is why the search for a better definition of populism and hegemony, other than rescuing Gramsci, should also attempt to mediate the reading that Laclau makes of Jacques Lacan. In this regard, it is worth starting by recalling this formulation of the Lacanian-informed account of Stavrakakis as it does well to synthesise the disproportionate depth attributed to the moment of the political that, to be sure, is the moment of de-sedimentation which opens a window for a populist intervention (and which is therefore prior to it): '[it] amounts to the cut of dislocation threatening all symbolisations of the social, to the ultimate subversion of any sedimentation of political reality' (Stavrakakis, 1999: 75). Is the moment of the political always capable of putting under discussion all the existing symbolisations of the social? Is it not possible to measure the extent of a dislocation and by the same token its potential? Are all previous symbolisations equally at risk of evaporating? This aspect is reinforced by placing stress on the primacy of the signifier which goes hand in hand with the relegation of the signified. Here, 'the signified disappears because it is no longer associated with the concept [...] The signified disappears as such, that is to say as the epicentre of signification' (Stavrakakis, 1999: 26). These formulations, as we have seen, furnish the premise on which the latest iteration of populism by Laclau is sustained.

This move, however, amounts to postulating that everything is lost every time the moment of the political intervenes and new articulations are established by way of a populist intervention. Anna Marie Smith had problematised this trend in Laclauian thinking already in the 1990s (Smith, 1998), further developing some of the doubts expressed by Stuart Hall in the 1980s. Hall claims that historical formations, though malleable in principle, 'do establish lines of tendency and boundaries which give to the fields of politics and ideology the 'open structure' of a formation and not simply the slide into an infinite and neverending plurality'

(Hall, 1988: 10). Picking up on this, for Smith what is particularly problematic is that Laclau increasingly moves towards the adoption of a formal model that pays exclusive heed to the function of identification (and, it should be added, to its related opposite, de-identification) at the expense of its contents. In other words, the Laclauian-Lacanian position stresses the question of the subject of lack, who is constantly seeking an impossible completion and therefore taken to continuously identify in new (political) objects, but by doing so it removes from the scenario any attention to historical traces and normalised traditions that, from a Gramscian perspectives, impinge upon the chances of a particular discourse to resonate and hence become hegemonic (Smith, 1998: 76). While recognising its merits in terms of signalling the impossibility of identity, Aletta Norval equally envisages the risks of an unmediated adoption of this psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity, as it induces to do away with the historically specific networks of power relations in which social agents come into being (Norval, 1996: 64).

At this point, Smith pushes the argument further by depicting much more openly a contrast between the earlier synthesis between Gramsci and post-structuralism achieved by Laclau and Mouffe, and the later embracement of the Lacanian insights. The question, she argues, revolves around the 'structurality' of the openness of any structure: while the former stance holds that past articulations are weakened but never totally lost, as every signifier 'bears the traces of past articulations', the latter maintains that the Real sweeps away every structure, thus creating a sort of clean slate upon which entirely new articulations can be constructed (Smith, 1998: 78-79). To put it differently, the post-structuralist *cum* Gramsci position accepts the fallibility of any system, but also asserts that the conditions amid which such a failure takes place will partially structure, though in ways impossible to determine *a priori*, the conditions for the next failure, as opposed to the Lacanian-informed view of Laclau, whereby

scant consideration is paid to the possibility of particular signifieds being dragged over. Here, it may be possible to argue that Laclau misreads the Derridean category of undecidability by treating it as sheer indeterminacy:

undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities [...] These possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations [...] I say 'undecidability' rather than 'indeterminacy' because I am interested in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and speech) (Derrida, 1988: 148).

Derrida suggests that we have neither full freedom of choice, nor full determination, hence 'it is not the case that simply anything is possible' (Norval, 2004: 148). Similarly, the Laclauian bent for the 'clean slate' becomes particularly visible, according to Smith, in the loss of emphasis that Laclau attributes to the Derridean concept of 'iteration', a non-essentialist repetition principle that speaks of the 'non-determining traces of past articulations' (Smith, 1998: 80), and in the concomitant importance placed on the question of emptiness:

From a Lacanian perspective, those investments are made not because the signifiers have specific meanings that resonate organically within a given context, but because the "empty signifiers" promise to deliver jouissance, the primal unity and completion that was foreclosed at the entry into language. [...] Laclau's Lacanian shift is in this respect a departure not only from post-structuralist theory, but also from the Gramscian tradition, for Gramsci insists that a political discourse will only resonate with "the people" insofar as it organically resonates in some way with popular traditions (Smith, 1998: 81)

The thrust of Smith's intervention is thus entirely consonant with the attempt to (re)mobilise Gramsci (Smith, 1998: 82, 169), although this time in terms of a rediscovery of forgotten (but once fully present) insights rather than the discovery of insights that were never quite assimilated in Laclau's reading of Gramsci (which is what I have tried to do so far). In this sense, it could be said that Smith similarly adopts a problematisation approach that re-activates possibilities that have been progressively excluded by Gramsci. For example, Smith



contrasts a number of old Laclauian passages in which particular care is given to the sphere of content. This one is particularly revealing:

This does mean, of course, that any discourse putting itself forward as the embodiment of fullness will be accepted. The acceptance of a discourse depends on its credibility, and this will not be granted if its proposals clash with the basic principles informing the organization of a group (NR: 66)

Impossibility of fullness is fully active here, but historicity is not neglected as the complex conditions underlying the doing and undoing of social orders are too big a factor to be eliminated. This aspect, as it has been made clear so far, is important in order to comprehend not only that meaningful political interventions need, to some extent, to speak the language of common sense, but also that social formations exhibit traces that are slow to clear, and that they limit, although not mechanically, the range of available options. Here, the importance of the war of position is lost, yet in the early Laclau we find the acknowledgement that there is no single revolutionary rupture, but a series of ruptures that can finally culminate in a new hegemony (Laclau, 1981: 54). In this sense, a dislocation that provokes a genuine questioning of the existing order will not necessarily, and most importantly not immediately, result in another social order made of entirely new articulations. This is not only because of the always possible differential reabsorption of the order in difficulty, but also because the acceptance of a new prevailing discourse may not necessarily be able to undo, all of a sudden, the previous formation altogether, precisely as a result of the sluggishness and difficulty in avoiding the dragging on of past articulations.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should do away with Lacan altogether, not least because the Laclauian interpretation of Lacan is in itself questionable and may be philologically objected (for a different take that stays away from the 'clean slate' position of Laclau, see Žižek, 1989: 95-144). As Smith herself specifies 'I am attempting to give greater

emphasis to Gramscian contextualization without losing the psychoanalytic insights in Laclau's recent work' (Smith, 1998: 169). Moreover, as we shall see towards the end of the chapter, Lacan remains an indispensable ally in theorising an ethical type of hegemony that does away with the pretension of establishing an impossible harmony (Stavrakakis, 1999: 137).

### **What is hegemony then?**

What is hegemony, then? And even more crucially, how does a populist intervention displace a social formation and transitions from the occasional to the permanent? So far it has been established that talk of hegemony becomes legitimate only insofar as a particular set of social relations becomes predominant in a variety of sites and transcends the sphere of petty fights in order to establish itself as a more all-encompassing horizon with a strong impact on the epochal common sense.

Before I proceed to further elucidating the reach of the category, it is paramount to dispel the confusion that may have arisen in relation to the overstretching of the term and in particular to the double use hegemony/counter-hegemony. Counter-hegemony is clearly not an established hegemony and yet contains something inherent to the term. Counter-hegemony, in other words, does not delineate a matter-of-factly predominance of a composite social group and its world-view, but indicates the road to follow for those wishing to reach it. It is a political practice that is hegemonic *in potentia*, meaning that it displays the spatial and temporal attributes hitherto described. But there is another element that should be heeded. If populism is a synonym of ambiguity, of a search for a fit between disparate aims and ultimately of emptiness, (counter-)hegemony cannot but be substantial, i.e. it must be the bearer of an alternative sociality to the predominant one and must be imbued with a certain

fullness. Otherwise, the hegemony of a particular group would mean nothing, simply signalling the hegemony of a symbol which has no real bearing on social relations. In focusing on how the party ought to act in order to build its own hegemony, Gramsci holds that:

It requires an extremely minute, molecular process of exhaustive analysis in every detail, the documentation for which is made up of an endless quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral debates repeated countless times, and which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour which gives birth to a collective will with a certain degree of homogeneity - with the degree necessary and sufficient to achieve an action which is coordinated and simultaneous in the time and the geographical space in which the historical event takes place (Gramsci, 1971: 194).

The importance that Gramsci grants to the questions of time and space resurfaces again, but it is another element that I wish to foreground here. Gramsci stresses the necessity for an emancipatory force to construct a well-founded, informed and sound political intervention. The level of the analysis, the understanding of the conjuncture, the clarity on the type of alternative sociality that it intends to implant, as well as their adequate dissemination, are indispensable prerequisites. For Gramsci, the party is the bearer of an ideological fullness that needs to be adjusted to the context through a labour that gradually changes the moral and social coordinates of society. It is in this context that Gramsci's assertion that '[e]very relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship' (Gramsci, 1971: 350) should be read. In the next section, we shall analyse more in detail the type of pedagogical rapport that Gramsci envisioned. However, we already found a sample of this approach in the PCI, whose politics was guided by both the attempt to make sense of the society in which it intervened through an analytical approach with the creation of specific working groups, the dialogue with renown intellectuals and an incredibly ample editorial production, and the alphabetisation of vast segments of the population. Yet, its grasp of economic matters was far from being at the height that the situation required. Oppositely, the Citizens' Revolution

abdicated the latter role and its level analysis was, despite some noteworthy efforts of some intellectuals that were included in the government or maintained a close relationship with it, not only insufficient, but also hampered by the role of the leader, whose inimical attitude towards discussion did not create the most favourable environment.

Let us now proceed to define the contours of the notion of hegemony. A further level that needs to be investigated is that of the subject. What do the subject and the related processes of subjectivation tell us about the hegemonic reach of a particular discourse? To begin from an author internal to the Essex school, we find an interesting proposition in a recent intervention by Yannis Stavrakakis, although the point is only scantily developed. The argument is that while long-term hegemonic identifications start by deploying representational-symbolic complexes *cum* libidinal investments capable of mobilising *jouissance*, it is only to the extent that they precipitate into *habitus* that they manage to ensure their durability (Stavrakakis, 2014: 122-125). Here Stavrakakis summons, if only in passing, the studies of Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias on the matter. The invocation seems warranted and insightful. For Bourdieu, *habitus* is defined in terms of 'systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*', that structure practices and representations in a regulated way without this being perceived as dictated by explicit rules or by the conscious intervention of a single external agent that pursues determined aims (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Elias is equally blunt in recognising the primary status of personality structures in the sustenance of a particular order. According to the German sociologist, sociogenesis and psychogenesis need to be studied in conjunction, as the long-term transformations of society always entail the alteration of human behaviour and the control of human affects (Elias, 1978: xiii, vx, 221). In particular, where a monopoly of force is established and an area is pacified, a number of pressures that tend to model individual's behaviour kicks in, such that a type of self-control

becomes so ingrained to the extent of becoming a super-ego capable of automatically supervising the subject's drives (Elias, 1982: 235-236, 241). It is worth emphasising here that the focus of Elias' two-volume enterprise is limited to the process of civilisation in the post-medieval period and how this was in turn subservient to the sustenance of absolutist forms of rule (Elias, 1982: 4). This probably explains why Elias concentrates exclusively on the inculcation of restraining forms of control - with special attention dedicated to the instauration of good manners as well as feelings of shame and embarrassment - and does not seem to envisage the possibility of modelling the very desiring structure of the subject. Despite this deficit, the avenue opened by concentrating on the repercussions on the structuring of the subject seems promising.

Once again, turning to Gramsci provides a number of valuable keys in order to come up with a redefinition of hegemony that suits the overall orientation of Laclau's theoretical edifice. Making an improper borrowing from Gramsci, it is possible to tell apart two levels, which in turn indicate the pervasiveness of a particular discourse. In his excerpts on Americanism and Fordism Gramsci speaks of a 'hegemony' that 'is born in the factory and requires for its exercise only a minute quantity of professional political and ideological intermediaries', identified in 'high wages, various social benefits, extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda' (Gramsci, 1971: 285). In other words, a politics of concrete seduction, conducted by way of concessions that tackle or even avoid the arousal of potential grievances, and a modest work of cultural mediation, which defends and pushes for particular societal arrangements. It is hard not to see an analogy with the Ecuadorian case here. Gramsci refers to the peculiar ways in which capitalism's sway had taken hold in the United States up to the 1929 implementation of the New Deal. In particular, Gramsci is concerned with how the life

and the conduct of the new type of worker had been rationalised in the advanced capitalist regime developed in the US. Accordingly, rationalisation:

is still at the stage of psycho-physical adaptation to the new industrial structure, aimed for through high wages. Up to the present (until the 1929 crash) there has not been, except perhaps sporadically, any flowering of the "superstructure". In other words, the fundamental question of hegemony has not yet been posed (Gramsci, 1971: 286).

Contrary to Europe where the complexity of past histories made for the accumulation of passive sedimentations, 'America does not have "great historical and cultural traditions"' (Gramsci, 1971: 285). The take that Gramsci adopts towards Americanism is ambivalent: on one side, he recognises that these differences with the Old Continent permitted a 'superior living standard enjoyed by the popular classes compared with Europe' and the consolidation of a 'sound basis' for industry and commerce (Gramsci, 1971: 285); on the other, he recognises that the lack of 'literary forms' and of an 'epic' went hand in hand with repressive methods (Gramsci, 1971: 285; Gramsci, 1985: 113). Of further significance in this sense is the fact that:

Gramsci concludes that the American system cannot carry out [the creation of a new type of worker] in a definitive manner [...] because the necessary discipline for this complete interiorisation of the characteristics of the new type [...] can only derive from a power that is perceived by the worker as its own, that is it has to configure itself as self-discipline (Filippini, 2015: 152).

In other words, Gramsci sees Americanism as inherently politically underdeveloped, while it emerges implicitly that an authentic and interiorised self-discipline can only emerge in a new order, with reference to the Soviet model being built in those years (Filippini, 2015: 152-153, 167).

What can be rescued among these theses from the point of view of the aims pursued here?

Clearly, there are strong and unmistakable traces of a certain mechanicism that cannot be

embraced. Talk of structure/superstructure and the 'suturing' allusion to the exclusive possibility for socialism of creating a superior psycho-physical nexus that delivers a new discipline that is perceived as genuine freedom by the workers is far-removed from the post-structuralist tenets that characterise Laclau's work and which are upheld here. However, we have a clear distinction between discourses that manage only partially to grip the subject and revolutionise her habits, and discourses that are instead capable of performing a much more all-encompassing reform. While in Gramsci this distinction has something to do with the inherent contents of the discourses at stake, it still gives us a clue as to the differing degrees to which subjects' conduct can be modelled. Accordingly, the first level has to do with an explicit form of consensus, which takes the form of a more or less conscious acceptance of the ways in which a certain society is organised. Here, only a fairly superficial cultural work is conducted along with the adoption of repressive measures. The 'conformism' - a term that Gramsci employs in relation to the inculcation of a certain type of sociality by the means of Law and public opinion (Gramsci, 1971: 195-196; Gramsci, 1975: 773) - that is here achieved, is only very partial.

Oppositely - and this is the second level - a full hegemony entails 'the socio-political capacities of a leading class to construct a system of legitimation in which individuals' acts are framed within pre-ordered schemes of action that political power leaves available' (Filippini, 2015: 91). As a result, the terrain of hegemony does not merely involve the consensus of the subjects *sic et simpliciter*, but a transmission of cultural values, which is seen by Gramsci as the key component of power systems (Canfora, 1990; Filippini, 2015: 91). Other Gramscian categories are also of help in order to further comprehend the reach of hegemony. In particular, the notion of common-man:

presupposes the attainment of a "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world, both general and particular, operating in transitory bursts (in emotional ways) or permanently (where the intellectual base is so well rooted, assimilated and experienced that it becomes passion) (Gramsci, 1971: 349).

According to Gramsci, the construction of a common-man is a long-term process, one which involves a number of 'molecular' changes, that is processes of transformation that shape the outlook of personality and make for the construction of collective will and consensus, as well as the production of subjectivities (Forenza, 2009: 551). The second level thus indicates the sedimentation of certain social logics, by which the subject has largely - even though always contradictorily - internalised the rationality of the dominant ideology. The distinction is well captured by Anne Marie Smith when she claims that '[u]nlike Bourdieu's "habitus", subject positions [by which she means the ensemble of beliefs to make sense of one's own structural position] may or may not be durable; their relative fixity depends upon the contingencies of political struggles' (Smith, 1998: 58, 63). For Gramsci, the transition from non-durability to durability occurs when the:

Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives (Gramsci, 1971: 367).

The reason for distinguishing the two levels is thus not simply analytical, as in practice they may not coincide. In the case of the PCI, the politics inaugurated by Togliatti - a tradition that was gradually watered down over time as we have seen - reveals a preoccupation for the ethical and cultural questions and the cultivation of a set of human relations and habits that were antithetical to the social formation it was fighting against. The reason for attributing a counter-hegemonic character to the PCI lies in the fact that the notion encompasses both 'the political strategy of conservation as well as the disaggregation and destruction of organic



systems' (Filippini, 2015: 91). While populism has been credited with the capacity to shatter a number of political sedimentations, the complex 'organicity' of a system, that is its deep social ramifications, its cultural underpinnings, its disciplining aspects, may well remained untouched by a populist intervention. Only a strategy that takes up the task of going beyond the cursory domain of propaganda can be deemed to be acting in hegemonic terms. As put by Gramsci: 'not the passive and indirect consensus, but the active and direct one is a matter of life' (Gramsci, 1975: 1771).

As we have seen in the Ecuadorian case instead, a blend of democratic socialism and other ideologies gained particular salience over the course of almost 10 years. Many social justice battles acquired strong visibility and, by incarnating themselves in the figure of Correa, they took over the public agenda and were translated, although not without some dilution, into public policy. A more or less conscious acceptance of the Citizen's Revolution tenets among the bulk of the population took place, as well testified by the electoral predominance of Correa and his movement. Such a sway was not necessarily the fruit of a battle of ideas *per se*, as it is to be recognised that people were not always necessarily enticed by the literal contents expressed by the Citizens' Revolution, but it was especially the capacity to elicit people's passions and cast a coherent horizon in a moment of crisis that played a decisive role; to put it in Laclau's terms, to project an order when one was manifestly starting to lack. However, the grip of such an ideological complex proved to be ephemeral. At the very bottom, the subject maintained fidelity to the coordinates that predated the advent of the Citizens' Revolution. The core of the personality that sustained the social model that Correa took issues with was thus unchallenged. Consciousnesses are always contradictory as they harbour different modes of thinking, acting and feeling. It can be stated that in this period this contradiction was heightened more than ever, with the subject developing ever more

ambivalent modes of existence. In a sense, forms of critical insight were certainly fostered during this period. Nevertheless, these did not 'trickle down' so as to change the most basic 'automatic' reflexes of the subject.

French philosophers Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have come up with a similar intuition in their seminal work on neoliberalism. It is worth quoting this passage at some length as it neatly reveals the congruence of the analysis:

we might be tempted to expect a change of policies in the wake of a change of government to create the conditions for constructing a different subject. This would be to ignore the fact that the reorientation effected by neo-liberalism, although voluntaristic, was in no way a creation *ex nihilo*. It was based on the whole dynamic of the global economy, aligned with the new norm of competition, such that subjects were internally 'bent' to this norm through multiple techniques of power. Moreover, it is to forget that one does not escape a rationality or an apparatus through a mere change of policy, any more than one invents a different way of governing human beings by changing governments (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 316-317).

Their history of neoliberalism builds upon Foucault's insightful remarks on the matter and more in general on his governmentality approach, through which he explored the nexus existing between particular conceptions of human nature, subjectivities and political ideologies (Sum, 2015: 36). After all, Foucault also had a bearing - although always mediated by a robust critique - in the philosophical pantheon of Laclau's early days, only to be later repudiated (Laclau, 2000b: 285). In a recent collection of essays, Gramsci and Foucault are put in relation with each other by overcoming the traditional reciprocal mistrust between Marxist and post-structuralist perspectives (Kreps, 2015). What is it that Gramsci and Foucault share and which concerns us here? It is the fact that 'both stress the capillary and contingent nature of power' (Sum, 2015: 41), that they are 'both concerned with describing the exercise of power in ways other than through the use of force or violence' (Schulzke, 2015: 63), or put otherwise, that they both contend that 'power is concentrated in diverse institutional centers

and deployed in complex and productive relations throughout the social according to multiple and hybrid logics' (Smith, 1998: 165).

The Foucauldian stance permits us to grasp better the existence of the two levels and the Ecuadorian paradox. The outright discrediting of a particular ideology does not necessarily lead to its repudiation in terms of social relations. As put by Wendy Brown, another scholar working within this tradition: 'neoliberalism can become dominant as governmentality without being dominant as ideology' (Brown, 2005: 49). Neoliberalism's resilience has then to be located in a territory whereby it has lost its capacity to be explicitly attractive, but it has achieved the status of a rationality 'profoundly inscribed in government practices, institutional policies and managerial styles' as well in a subjectivity that spurs individuals to constantly compete between themselves (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 14). As a result, it becomes legitimate to speak of the creation of an 'entrepreneurial subject' that creates new types of psychic functioning (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 256).

Finally, an important feature characterising the notion of hegemony proposed here needs to be spelt out more clearly. It is important to make sure that no misunderstanding arises with respect to the normative and ethical character of hegemony. The position adopted here is that hegemony in itself, as in the case of populism, cannot be associated with a particular normative or ethical position. In other words, there can be normatively different types of hegemony, and hegemony is not to be located as a specifically modern concept. This clarification is needed because, as we shall see below, there are attempts to bend the notion of hegemony to normative purposes. This seems to be part of a latest trend in Laclauian

thinking by which certain categories are being normatively appropriated.<sup>56</sup> Let us make a short detour to see this more closely.

In a passage of their book in which they discuss the techniques proper of the 'personal enterprise' that are assimilated by the subject, Dardot and Laval also invoke Lacan by claiming that:

following one's desire and obeying the Other who speaks softly within the self are one and the same thing. In this sense, modern management is a 'Lacanian' government: the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other. It is up to the new power to make itself the Other of the subject (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 260).

*Prima facie*, the statement seems accurate: the process by which neoliberal governmentality works is that of sneaking into the subject without even being noticed, and making it seem as if the subject perceived it as a source of personal freedom. A closer look, however, reveals the inconsistency of the Lacanian reference: one is always spoken for, always subjectivised through the available symbolic networks. It is not neoliberalism that ignites this dynamic, even though it is fair to argue that new subtle techniques of motivation, incentivisation, stimulation and social fear (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 260-261) have enhanced its pervasiveness and made it more sophisticated. Rather, the argument becomes more cogent when the authors refer to the process of de-symbolisation, with reference to the 'capitalist discourse' as formulated by Lacan. The nutshell of the argument is that neoliberal capitalism has made for a volatility of identification, providing continuously new posts, functions and skills related to the world of the market and the enterprise in which the subject can identify and that do away with other symbolic forms (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 293-294). As they put elsewhere in the book, the

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<sup>56</sup>In this sense, it is possible to note the temptation of Stavrakakis to negate the qualification 'populist' with regard to contemporary right-wing political forces that operate a dichotomic division of society while articulating sectors that have been left behind by globalisation processes. A purely normative line of reasoning is employed in order to come up with this conclusion, thus 'disobeying' the Laclauian maxim of treating populism as a purely thin political logic (Stavrakakis, 2014b: 514).

'modern' western subject oscillated between three broad symbolic registers: Christian society, the nation-state and the monetary-productive realm. While this range may be broadened, it is possible to concur that liberal democracies 'within certain limits, enabled and respected a mixed functioning of the subject, in the sense that they guaranteed both the separation and the articulation of the different spheres of existence' (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 256). The withering away of democracy consists precisely in the colonisation of the symbolic at the hands of capitalism, through a discourse that rejects its own contingency and eliminates plurality within the symbolic domain. As they unmistakably put: neoliberalism, 'by erasing the separation between private and public sphere, erodes the foundations of liberal democracy itself' (Dardot and Laval, 2016: 303).

The discussion on de-symbolisation is picked up by a theorist that has shown a particular proximity to Laclau's thinking over the last few years, his co-national Jorge Alemán. In the light of the pervasiveness and intrusiveness of neoliberalism, Alemán concludes that there are:

two aspects of the symbolic that, though they may appear mixed in our phenomenological reality, obey radically diverse and distinct logics. The first symbolic dependence is ineradicable and constitutive of the subject. The second, insofar as it is a socio-historical construction, is susceptible to differing periodic transformations (Alemán, 2016: 14).

Accordingly, the latter has an influence on the bodies and captures the subjects through a sort of symbolic dependency (Alemán, 2016: 14). The upshot of this line of reasoning is reached a few pages later: neoliberal capitalism is not hegemonic, as by attempting to conquer the whole symbolic space it admits no heterogeneity. On the contrary, hegemony is unstable and requires a failed type of representation, while capitalism is a domination - a power - that never undergoes crisis, it is an unlimited, circular movement that presents itself as invisible (Alemán, 2016: 19, 27, 48-49, 54, 56). However, this is in contrast with Alemán's repeated assertion that 'there is no perfect crime' (Alemán, 2016: 15-71 *passim*), meaning that any

complete suture is impossible, as well with Laclau's assertion by which 'social relations [...] are always power relations' as 'taking a decision can only mean repressing possible alternatives that are not carried out' (NR: 30-31). After all, Alemán blatantly contradicts himself also when he says that 'universality is impossible if, in turn, it does not go through the hegemonic process' (Alemán, 2016: 61).

What is, then, the purpose of postulating that neoliberalism works through an aspect of the symbolic that is all-encompassing, circular and makes it invulnerable to crisis, while finally subscribing to a thesis that foregrounds contingency? It seems that Alemán treats hegemony as an imperfect synonym of democracy, and particularly as a left-wing interpretation of the latter, especially when he attributes to the right a profound hatred for hegemonic politics (Alemán, 2016: 19). In other words, for Alemán hegemony is more of an ontic/normative concept rather than an ontological one. While it is certainly possible to agree with him that neoliberalism has totalising ambitions, it seems far-fetched to say that it is the first historical formation that 'attempts to touch the ontological nucleus, that truly aims at the very production of subjectivity' (Alemán, 2016: 64). Rather, its capacity to deactivate differences is part and parcel of the differential logic that sediments social relations and sanctions, this time in a particularly accentuated way, a certain hegemony. Not surprisingly, in one of the final essays that compose his book, the disagreement between him and Laclau explicitly comes to the fore. According to the latter, Alemán says, neoliberal capitalism is a form of hegemony so sedimented so as to be perceived as natural, an assertion with which it would be difficult to disagree from the perspective adopted here and which corresponds with the quotation from the Preface of HSS provided above. He further claims that Lacan's capitalist discourse is thus incompatible with the hegemonic logic, as the former presupposes homogeneity and rejects impossibility, while the latter functions by way of a constant articulatory renegotiation

(Alemán, 2016: 176-177). However, it seems to me that this dualism is profoundly unsatisfactory as it does not permit to understand the gradation through which certain articulations gain more strength and display more resilience over time. In this dispute, Laclau certainly defends a persuasive notion of hegemony!

### **Unmediated leaderism and the question of the empty signifier**

So much for the question regarding the relationship between populism and hegemony and the definition of hegemony. In order to transition to the theme of left-wing populism, I shall advance a few remarks on how Laclau puts forward populism as a strategic tool for the Left. In his triologue with Žižek and Butler *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Laclau recognises the impossibility of value-neutral descriptions, an acknowledgement which leads him to openly speak of descriptive-normative complexes (Laclau, 2000b: 294). If we take this seriously, populism should then be treated as a descriptive-normative complex. As hinted in the second chapter already, populism is indeed both a way to analyse very distinct political phenomena and the form suggested for the Left: a form that without being normative in itself is not exempt of substantive normative repercussions, precisely because it has a prescriptive character. It is the character of this normative prescription that should be qualified with more care.

As reminded above, Laclau has postulated that the empty signifier - the singularity - keeping together the popular camp is often to be identified with the name of the leader. Even more tellingly, he has concretely and strenuously defended the personalisation of the different populist experiments of the Latin American pink-tide (Laclau, 2005c; Laclau, 2006: 119; Laclau in Arellano, 2012). The argument that the identification in a leader can ease the getting-

together of heterogeneous demands and signifiers is certainly plausible, and one can recognise its productive effects. However, even when progressively oriented, the desirability of the prolongation of the leader's prominence is open to question. In fact,

the leader may be cast as an empty signifier, but s/he is also a person, so any talk about "the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality" must also address the potential underside of the argument. [...] This prevents him from engaging with those who maintain that following a leader morphs all too easily into a cult of personality, that is, who see in the populist mode of unification unedifying traits such as the infallibility of the leader, her being beyond good and evil, the role the leader as indisputable broker among factions, the perception of challenges to the leader as treason, the suppression of dissent in the name of the unity of the "people", and so on. This undermines the presumed populist empowerment of the underdogs or produces a travesty of empowerment by subjecting the "people" to the dictates of a leader (Arditi, 2010: 490-91).

In this way, the prominence of the leader impedes the processing of decisions within the popular camp: the leader is already conceived as the embodiment of the popular will and the need for deliberation and debate is suppressed. Again, a return to Gramsci may be of help in order to strike a position that does not eliminate the figure of the leader, his vital role in the unhinging of inertias, but weakens the rather uncritical position of Laclau. To be sure, in an early passage of the *Notebooks*, while recognising that charismatic direction entails great political dynamism, Gramsci relegates the question of charisma to the 'primitive stage of mass parties' where doctrines are cashed out in vague and incoherent terms, which requires the intervention of an infallible 'Pope' for interpretation and adaptation (Gramsci, 1992: 320-321). This take cannot be quite embraced, because it is informed by a sort of stagist conception of history that has little to do with the philosophical presuppositions endorsed here. Yet Gramsci is certainly right in the same passage in pointing out that 'the longevity of charismatic parties is often dependent upon the longevity of their energy and enthusiasm, which sometimes provide a very fragile foundation' (Gramsci, 1992: 321). Importantly, once the leader disappears, what happens? Here, the insistence of Laclau on the leader is not simply naive



insofar as it fails to consider the possibility of the disappearance of the leader - be it physical or political, e.g. when a leader is swamped by scandals of any sort - but also impedes the passage to the centrality of genuine political contents, preventing the building of a truly alternative common sense and thereby becoming particularly problematic from the point of view of strategy.

In later passage on the role of leaders, Gramsci is more illuminating. Here, he firstly distinguishes the small ambition of certain leaders, characterised by opportunism and rush, from the great ambition, where the elevation of the single goes hand in hand with the elevation of a whole social stratum. He considers the great ambition as healthy, necessary and not morally reprehensible (Gramsci, 1975: 771). Similarly, he then proceeds to discriminate the bad from the good demagogic leader: while the former makes use of the masses only instrumentally, creates a desert around himself by crushing all potential competitors and enters into a direct, unmediated relationship with the masses by way of plebiscites, great oratory skills and phantasmagoric expedients, the latter tends to create an intermediate layer between himself and the masses, encourages others to take up his role, elevates the level of the masses and thinks in terms of continuity of the project he leads (Gramsci, 1975: 772). As this is not a strict dualism, but rather two ideal poles, it may be argued that, in the light of the analysis, the leadership of Corrao tended towards the former pole, while that of Togliatti towards the latter. The further consolidation of the PCI as a party following Togliatti's death confirms the impression of a political practice whose lynchpin did not lie in a person, but rather in a set of ideals, with the leader constituting a further value added that did not prevent the emergence of a vast and differentiated apparatus in society. Oppositely, it can be argued that an unmediated relationship between leader and led hampers the strategy of the war of position. The excessive centrality of the leader and the tendency to exclude

intermediate bodies obliterates anything that falls outside this relationship, thereby making it difficult to diversify the political work in a variety of sites, and spatially deconstruct the prevalent common sense in order to construct a new one. Once again, we find quite a neat example in the Citizen's Revolution, whose main political work remained confined to the electoral sphere and failed to create a new wide *classe dirigeante* that operated in the country.

Coming back to Laclau, his notion of leadership is paralleled by a specific place for the populist followers. If the primacy of the leader becomes all that matters, what is the point of struggle? Beyond the emphasis placed on elections and referenda, populism has often been accompanied by political inaction (Westlind, 1996: 104). Correa's left populism has notably rested on an overall political passivity of the population. The only modality was the activation of die-hard supporters in order to display strength in the face of challenges mounted by other political forces. The positive dynamic between the autonomy of the movements - the horizontal moment of civil society - and the assault on the state - the vertical moment which Laclau calls hegemony - (Laclau, 2014: 9) was quickly lost and replaced by the sheer verticality of the state. This is also why, after a few years, there was little 'social material' for this leftist populism to work upon or to 'hegemonise'. Even a left-wing oriented type of populism thus runs the risk of reducing politics to winning elections and keeping power, rather than empowering the people and creating new sites for the deepening of democracy and bridging the gap between representatives and represented. This in turn reinforces the impression expressed above regarding the single-minded focus on political society. Progressive decrees and laws may well still be promulgated, but people have almost no say on such matters other than ratifying their allegiance to the leader. In this sense, what seems to be missing is a healthy space for self-critique. In referring to Gramsci's conception of the party, Schulzke

reminds that 'it would have to give greater attention to its internal dynamics and ensure that they can permit conflict and competition [...] According to Gramsci's model, this task of self-critique is probably a function that would be best performed by intellectuals' (Schulzke, 2015: 70). This was well enacted by the PCI, where the intellectuals played a major role, even though we have seen how Togliatti often attempted to censor those expressions that did not suit his line. However, it would be erroneous to infer from this that the internal debate was severely curtailed, because in actual fact different positions found expression and Togliatti was at times also outvoted. In this sense, Gramsci suggests a reshaping of the typical relationship between leaders and led, such that automatic obedience of the led cannot be taken for granted, thereby extirpating what he terms 'Cadornism'<sup>57</sup>, that is 'the conviction that a thing will be done because the leader considers it just and reasonable that it should be done' (Gramsci, 1971: 145). More generally, Gramsci, while not doing entirely away with the leaders/led distinction, challenges many of the assumptions of the elitist school of Mosca, Pareto and Michels (see Filippini, 2015: 194-213), and sees the necessity of 'working to produce élites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset' (Gramsci, 1971: 340).

A solution here may be hidden behind the ambiguous status attributed to the role of the empty signifier. When it is represented by the leader, alive and kicking, the very structuring of the popular camp coincides with the emergence of the leader; differently, if the empty signifier is a prominent demand, or symbol or cause in society that acquires a mythical and salvific value, this does not necessarily belong to a determined political subject, because

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<sup>57</sup>From the Italian General and Marshal, Luigi Cadorna (1850-1928), Chief of Staff of the Italian Army during the first part of WWI.

various projects are in competition to perform the filling function (Laclau, 1994: 176; also in E: 44). To further highlight this difference, suffice it to recall that Laclau argues that sometimes the 'victory' of a signifier that becomes the rallying point of a heterogeneous body of demands ends up being a dangerous victory for its beneficiary and promoter (Laclau, 1994: 177; also in E: 44).

It follows that leaders and demands/symbols do not occupy the same status, especially because - as we have seen in the case of the Citizens' Revolution - if it is the leader to occupy that nodal position, she/he can determine in an arbitrary way what enters and what does not in the equivalential chain and, while in principle a leader may have to renounce some of her/his personal objectives, speaking of a dangerous victory or of a break of the links with the leader seems improper. By the same token, a leader is often the incarnation of a political project, while demands are claims arising from society.

Nevertheless, as the analysis of the Ecuadorian case has shown, the building of the equivalential chain may rest on the presence of more than a single privileged signifier. The importance of one signifier does not exclude that of others, as more than one singularity can play an articulating function. To put it differently, a strong leader does not prevent a specific battle or symbol from emptying itself of its own specific contents and refer to a set of different demands. Equally, this does not imply that more demands or symbols can occupy that centrality in the articulatory process. As also put by Howarth: '[t]here seems to be no reason why *one* demand should play this role - why not an amalgam or articulation of different demands?' (Howarth, 2008: 185). This is particularly important, because a left populism that goes beyond the exclusive centrality of the leader and puts certain concrete struggles at the forefront of its discourse - linked to a particular world-view and imbued with

however revisable a normative ethos - is much better equipped not only to avoid arbitrary decisions, and make the practice remain faithful both to the radical democratic and agonistic precepts, but is also in a better position to install a new hegemony and transform the social formation a whole. While many factors concur to the possibility of changing the latter in a radical fashion - the international dimension, for instance, has been overlooked in this work but is admittedly a key variable - the love for the leader may prove to be ephemeral and make it more difficult to adopt those behaviours, the needed civilisation as Gramsci put it, that are consonant with an emancipatory project. The mere libidinal bond with a person provides too frail a basis of adherence to the practice for it to have an all-encompassing function. The role of the leader is thus not denied, but embraced, in the name of the acknowledgment that inertias can be best unblocked by a figure that can easily become the personification of a number of heterogeneous societal grievances. This implies an initial search for emptiness that needs to then be transcended and filled with a new set of social relations, which are in turn introduced throughout society at large over a reasonable period of time by way of a war of position that increasingly conquers new spaces in society. In this sense, the leader needs to make room for this process to occur: the protraction of her/his prominence will risk making the focus on political society primary with respect to an equally needed level of work in civil society.

### **For an agonistic, radical-democratic and ethical left-wing populism**

Is it then just a question of a disproportionate insistence on the figure of the leader? The matter seems to go beyond that. In fact, some elements inherent to the populist model suggested by Laclau collide with the very intuitions of Laclau and Mouffe's project of radical

and plural democracy. Is a populist politics construed around the hegemonic model suggested by Laclau utterly incompatible with the respect for difference and the autonomy of movements as some suggest? (Khan, 2008; Wenman, 2003) That would be a far-fetched conclusion. From the start, the normative proposal of radical democracy has been a synonym of articulation of the different existing struggles. In particular, Laclau and Mouffe stress that since no privileged point of rupture exists and thus no exclusive subject can be devised, the imperative is to expand the equivalences, that is bringing into a unified political space a number of antagonisms, where socialism would be only one of the components (HSS: 152, 178). This roughly amounts to the definition of populism, advocated from an emancipatory perspective. The further twist is that '[t]he task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy' (HSS: 176). Mouffe examines this aspect more in depth in her writings. She conceptualises liberal-democracy as the contingent articulation between the liberal tradition of the rule of law, human rights and individual liberty on one side, and the democratic traditions constituted by equality and popular sovereignty on the other (Mouffe, 2000: 2-3). Far from being a linear and smooth process, and despite a mutual contamination between the two traditions, she views that:

The dominant tendency today consists in envisaging democracy in such a way that it is almost exclusively identified with the *Rechtsstaat* and the defence of human rights, leaving aside the element of popular sovereignty [...] creat[ing] a 'democratic deficit' (Mouffe, 2000: 4-5).

Under these circumstances, Mouffe advocates a rebalancing of the weight of the two traditions, whereby the deepening of the democratic control and its extension to more and more areas of the social should go *pari passu* with the defence of pluralism. While critical of economic liberalism, Mouffe is indeed particularly blunt in asserting that '[i]t is only by virtue of its articulation with political liberalism that the logic of popular sovereignty can avoid

descending into tyranny' (Mouffe, 1993: 105). In parallel, Mouffe complements her normative project by incorporating some key suggestions of civic republicanism, such as the enhancement of political participation and civic virtues (Mouffe, 1993: 19-20).

Is populism in it and for itself inimical of political liberalism, political participation and civic virtues? That would amount to the adoption of the view held by Bartolini and Urbinati exposed as in the literature review, by which populism is an intrinsically negative phenomenon, and negate not only that it can have positive manifestations, but also the more fundamental intuition that it is a logic that permeates politics through and through. It would also be inattentive towards the contingent articulations that populism can establish with other traditions, such as the liberal-republican tradition and that of grassroots movements, which qualify the relationship between populism and liberal-democracy on a case by case basis (Panizza, 2008: 92). As we have seen in the chapter on the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution, a left-wing populist project does not always necessarily entertain a relationship with such traditions, or they may be lost on the way. If populism leans towards a communitarian conception of the good, often enshrined in the leader, there is no plurality of struggles to articulate, or alternatively such a plurality becomes frozen and fails to maintain its dynamic character.<sup>58</sup> A left-wing populist experiment is not automatically attentive towards the differential specificity of each demand and should incorporate a special observance for the dimension of autonomy if it does not want to recede into a closed notion of the common good informed by moral rather than political values. This is even truer in contemporary societies where the rapid proliferation of radically new political spaces makes it difficult to freeze the notion of the common good in a unitary conception that fails to consider the

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<sup>58</sup> Laclau and Mouffe put this bluntly: '[a] radical and non-plural democracy would be one which constituted *one* single space of equality on the basis of the unlimited operation of the logic of equivalence, and did not recognize the irreducible moment of the plurality of spaces' (HSS: 184).

multiplicity and the dynamic evolution of communities and relations that subjects are enmeshed in (Mouffe, 1993: 20). As a consequence, the will to construe collective identities nowadays must be informed by a plastic adherence to the ever-changing political sites and, as shown by the Ecuadorian case, failure to do so runs the risk of generating a deep discomfort and ultimately the undoing of any equivalential enchainment. As suggested by Howarth: 'the autonomy and difference of each component should be respected and valued in the construction and operation of any political coalition' and this becomes possible only to the extent that 'such an ethos [...] inform[s] the democratic subjects who conduct radical democratic politics, permeating the way they hold their beliefs and demands, as well as the different ways they interact with each other in different public spaces' (Howarth, 2008: 187). Which ethos?

Drawing from the Nietzschean tradition, William Connolly develops an ethics concerned with the question of an ethos that cultivates 'relational dispositions of people', an ethics that 'does not depend upon the demand to lock all reverence for life into some universal theistic faith, rational consensus, secular contract, transcendental argument, or interior attunement to a deep identity' (Connolly, 1995: 27). Specifically, Connolly is in favour of a fluid approach that shuns the risk of an identitarian or apodictic fossilisation of politics. In this sense, the thought of Connolly is chiefly aimed at spurring openness to the constant revision and transformation of identifications (Finlayson, 2010: 11). This is crystallised in his 'politics of becoming', 'a paradoxical politics by which new cultural identities are formed out of old energies, injuries, and differences' (Connolly, 1999: 136), whereby a form of critical responsiveness is taken onboard, which entails '*careful listening and presumptive generosity* to constituencies struggling to move from an obscure or degraded subsistence below the field of recognition, justice, obligation, rights, or legitimacy' (Connolly, 2005: 126).



But are the approaches of Mouffe and Connolly entirely compatible though? According to Howarth, whether the two are variants of the same position remains an open question (Howarth, 2008: 174); on her part, Mouffe is receptive but more dubious:

An 'ethical' perspective is - potentially at least - more conducive to apprehending the limits of reason and to conceptualizing the plurality of values, and I certainly feel closer to the different approaches that speak in terms of 'ethics' instead of 'morality'. The problem with them, however, is that, while being generally more receptive to the role of rhetorics and persuasion and the importance of 'differences', they either avoid or do not emphasize enough the need to put some limits to pluralism, and they do not acknowledge the hegemonic nature of every possible consensus and the ineradicable violence that this implies (Mouffe, 2000: 134).<sup>59</sup>

In fact, it is to be admitted that the insights of Connolly furnish a precious antidote against the always pervading threats of self-absorption and self-enclosure of a political practice, but his thought is principally aimed at a micro-politics of self-modification (Dean, 2006: 44-45). Even though, as reminded by Howarth (2008: 184), Connolly does engage with questions such as the state and the suitable type of political organisation in order to forge representational assemblages (Connolly, 1995: xxi), the overall thrust of his intervention seems to be more concerned with a personal dimension that fails to engage systematically with the pragmatic aspects of politics. The solution here seems to lie in the mediation between the respect for diversity and the attentiveness towards the fluidity and plurality of demands on one side, and a more realist approach that deals with the complexities of day-to-day political activity on the other. As for the former task, Connolly remains an indispensable ally.

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<sup>59</sup>This is mostly evident in some passages in which Connolly treats hegemony as a byword for the attempt to stifle difference and impose a relationship of domination (Connolly, 2002: ix, 9, 10, 34, 40). Yet, there is the acknowledgement of the possibility of a democratic type of hegemony, whose terms closely resemble the position endorsed here, i.e. the securing of an ample and diffuse consensus coupled with a the abandonment of any suturing temptation: '[w]hat I will call a relation of democratic hegemony obtains when the perspective of an identifiable constellation attains predominance in several areas of public debate, resisting factions remain effective in publicly articulating the terms of their opposition and compelling compromises on some of these fronts, and the news media, judiciary, and electoral system function to keep the terms of contestation among coalitions reasonably open and to protect elemental rights to life, a significant degree of personal self-governance, freedom of expression, and full citizenship in a representative government' (Connolly, 2002: 212-213).

However, it is not just a matter of paying heed to the originality that may emanate from the demands and avoid suffocating them through an excessive verticalism. Possibly, one of the greatest traps that a left-wing populism should be careful not to fall into is that of neglecting contingency altogether. The case of the Citizen's Revolution suggests that what could be termed a 'besieged fortress syndrome' could take place. In other words, in a context characterised by the promulgation of policies that hit particularly strong interests and the ensuing attacks from the affected, the friend-enemy logic can take over any other consideration. In this regard, even the very agonistic model proposed by Mouffe is thrown into doubt. Let us recall what the difference with radical democracy is. While radical democracy is a political project among many, a peculiar and radical interpretation of the liberal-democratic tradition, the agonistic model provides for a fair confrontation between competing political interpretations and projects (Mouffe in Dreyer Hansen and Sonnichsen, 2014: 266). While the two are not unrelated, it is possible to claim that the latter is specifically predicated on the acknowledgement of the negativity of the social, that is the ineradicable characteristic of human societies of being permeated by antagonisms. With Carl Schmitt, Mouffe indeed maintains that relations among human beings are always permeated by a hostility that cannot be eliminated (Mouffe, 1993: 2; Mouffe, 2005: 14). However, differently from Schmitt, for Mouffe such antagonisms ought to be mediated in such a way so as to avoid seeing one's adversary as an enemy to be destroyed:

The aim of democratic politics thus is to construct a 'them' in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an 'adversary', that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question (Mouffe, 2000: 101-102).

What needs to be considered more carefully is that the exacerbation of the friend-enemy logic inherent to a practice that foregrounds an us/them distinction risks turning populism into a naturalising and essentialist politics that makes its contingency invisible by trying to

suture the social. This resurfacing temptation puts the agonistic model under threat, precisely because it may diminish the tolerance towards opponents and disagreement more generally, suggesting ways to manage dissent that collocate themselves outside the democratic perimeter. In the Ecuadorian case we have seen that the lure that such a perspective exercises on power holders with radical ideas is always around the corner, even when liberal-democratic institutions are not questioned *per se*. This does not amount to implying that politics should be rather viewed as the sphere in which rational beings coldly bargain their interests. Expressing one's own political passion with the aim of constructing collective identities is to be encouraged as 'to conceive democratic politics exclusively in terms of a struggle of a multiplicity of interest groups or of minorities for the assertion of their rights, is to remain blind to the relations of power' (Mouffe, 2005: 20). Yet, while conflict cannot be overcome, hostility needs to be domesticated and antagonism defused by abiding to democratic rules and procedures that make for a common symbolic space in which conflict can be maintained within a democratic track that respects plurality (Mouffe, 2000: 101; Mouffe, 2005: 20). It is important to stress here the need for such an approach to be not only bargained with opponents, but most especially to be assimilated by those who conduct a leftist populist politics.

More generally, we can say with Panizza that populism may well expose liberalism's blindspot, but its relationship with democracy can be problematic, especially when a political discourse 'claims to speak for the people as its unmediated representative [...] Taken to the extreme populism descends into totalitarianism' (Panizza, 2005: 29). Of course, this does not mean that populism tends necessarily towards totalitarianism. It just means that when advocating for a left-wing populism, we should not lose sight of the risks it harbours. Let us deepen the line of reasoning concerning the type of suitable democratic approach by taking a step back.

Laclau maintains that 'from the fact that there is the impossibility of ultimate closure and presence, it does not follow that there is an ethical imperative to 'cultivate' that openness or even less to be necessarily committed to a democratic society' (Laclau, 1995: 93; also in E: 77). This peremptory distancing from the ethical-as-democratic is revealing of a deeper trend, as Laclau seems to have dedicated more attention to the theoretical rigour of his post-foundational argument rather than to provide the antibodies against the always latent temptation of closure. However, it is worth emphasising that deconstruction, a tradition that to a large extent has shaped Laclau's theorising, 'brings more to political analysis than just a foregrounding of contingency' (Norval, 2004: 140). By emphasising hesitation, undecidability calls for an ethics of responsibility. According to Derrida, the subject of the decision must be guided by 'infinite analysis', by knowledge, by information, as:

political, ethical and juridical responsibility requires a task of infinite close reading. I believe this to be the condition of political responsibility: politicians should read. Now, to read does not mean to spend nights in the library; to read events, to analyze situations, to criticize the media [...] that's close reading (Derrida, 1999: 67).

The experience of the undecidable, which consists of taking a decision and assuming responsibility for it, constitutes a tragic situation, a terrible experience. While no strict normative conclusion follows, this kind of experience still cannot leave the subject unmarked.

As Norval argues:

the consequences of undecidability are far-reaching and go all the way down: it affects the manner in which one conceives of the decision as well as of subjectivity. The effect is one that *contours* the subject and his/her engagement in a democratic direction. That is, it does not determine that all subjects aware of their own contingency and relationality would act in democratic fashion. Derrida, however, has never claimed anything of this sort. Nothing follows of necessity and by determination from the field of undecidability. However, it would be equally misjudged to assume that since nothing follows by necessity, the experience of undecidability has no consequences. Undecidability and its related philosophemes establish what I would argue are the minimum conditions for the thought of democracy: in principle openness to an other and a demanding conception of responsibility, conceived in terms of

taking responsibility and of responding to, or being accountable to, an other or others (Norval, 2004: 152).

According to Critchley, Laclau runs the risk of incurring banality when he argues that the ethical is something constitutive of all societies (Critchley, 2004: 121). While such a view seems a bit ungenerous, I support that the ethical is part and parcel of democratic societies alone. According to Critchley then, 'Laclau's theory of hegemony [and of populism I suggest] requires an ethical dimension of infinite responsibility to the other if it is not going to risk collapsing into the arbitrariness of a thoroughgoing decisionism' (Critchley, 2004: 116). Let me put this clearly: while the ethical-as-'society is impossible' merely conveys that dislocation always brings about the crumbling of any identification in the name of the impossibility of an ultimate fixation of meaning, the ethical-as-democratic produces significant political repercussions, as it implies a particular attentiveness to the ways in which a political practice may undermine the ethical commitment to plurality, to openness, to responsibility and in the last instance, to put it in the language of Claude Lefort, to the emptiness at the place of power. Mark Devenney explains well the type of ethics that is involved here, as it:

functions rather differently than for traditional ethics. For it does not predetermine ethical decisions in advance. It entails serious accounting for every decision, as particular decisions are not prescribed. [...] Nonetheless, while no decision or action is predetermined by this stance, certain ethical decisions are excluded if contingency is deemed necessary [...] Indeed, there is no ethics as such, only an orientation towards the ethical which entails treating contingency seriously, and refusing an absolutism of either the subject or object (Devenney, 2004: 134).

It is not by chance then that both Norval and Howarth speak of the necessity of a democratic hegemony and a democratic populism, respectively, thus emphasising the distance between hegemony and populism *tout court* (Norval, 2004: 151; Howarth, 2008: 186). Under the logic that I propose, any normative position must foreground the ethical. This:

means that our normative stances are always relative to the ultimate contingency of social relations and practices. [...] the norms and ideals that we project [...] are intrinsically contingent, contestable and revisable. Contingency necessarily penetrates the realm of the normative, which in turn indicates the need to develop a suitable ethos (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 198).

Is such an ethos part and parcel of left-wing populism? The arbitrariness of thoroughgoing decisionism that has been one of the hallmarks of the Latin American populist projects, including that of the Citizens' Revolution, and with which Laclau did not seem to quarrel, suggests that this may not be so. Equally, the texts of Laclau on populism are tellingly devoid of such considerations.<sup>60</sup> Populism by itself does not provide any guarantee that the Other will be treated as an adversary and not as an enemy.

This is no doubt a slippery terrain. For some, 'the condition of being active politically is precisely to be unilateral: the structure of the political act as such is 'essentialist' (Žižek in Dews and Osborne, 1991: 27). Of course, it would be a caricature to impute to Laclau a position like this. Indeed, Laclau fully incorporates in the notion of radical democracy the Lacanian ethics of the real, 'cast in Laclauian terms as a kind of 'respect for the gap', where gap aims at the constitutive split of the signifier' (Glynos, 1996: 6). Such a recognition entails that while a libidinal force is indispensable when generating a sustainable identification, the latter should not necessarily disregard the fundamental lack underlying any symbolic representation - the Lacanian 'lack in the symbolic Other'. As put by Stavrakakis:

the type of investment has still to be decided. Emptiness and lack can indeed acquire a positive/institutional expression and can be enjoyed. Instead of functioning as a support for fantasy [...] the partial drive can become the leading force towards a reorientation of enjoyment faithful to the

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<sup>60</sup>It is to be noted that Laclau is not entirely unaware of the problem, but the treatment he gives to it is notably scant and mostly related to the question of the respect for the autonomy of the demands. 'What is, however, true, is that between the political centrality of the leader - and of the bureaucratic power that surrounds him - on one side, and, on the other, the autonomy of the grassroots movements, the danger of a tension that can only be resolved through incessant political negotiation will always exist' (Laclau, 2006: 119-120).

positive/negative dialectics. Only thus shall we be able to really enjoy our partial enjoyment, without subordinating it to the cataclysmic desire of fantasy (Stavrakakis, 2007: 282).

An unmediated fantasy can in fact be problematic for both radical democracy and the agonistic model. The mode of investment to be promoted should be non-ideological, whereby the ideological 'consist[s] of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture' (Laclau, 1983: 24). Rather, the mode of investment should be associated with an alternative approach that comprehends and takes into due account the contingency of social relations, maintaining an openness towards new, unexplored possibilities. It is my contention that such an attitude, which by necessity implies an ironic thrust that thickens one's normative commitment with an ethical approach, is particularly difficult to achieve in the light of the prominence of the leader. While charisma may be a necessary ingredient of the affective dimension of any project that seeks to dislodge previous political identifications and pull together diverse demands, the perpetuation creates a dependence that blinds followers and fosters an aggressive mode of militancy. Not only, it also fails to construe a genuine and durable hegemony. To sum up, it is paramount to think in terms of a democratic populism that construes equivalencies between subjectivities without ceding to the leadership cult, respecting the autonomy of each component involved in the construction of an emancipatory political coalition and accepting the common rules of the game, that is accepting defeat and contestation (Howarth, 2008: 186-187). This in turn is the only available route towards a different and democratic type of hegemony.

## Conclusion

This work started by interrogating the validity of the notions of populism and hegemony in the corpus of Ernesto Laclau. The two concepts possibly constitute the most visible categories through which he has made himself known. My own personal political and intellectual experience familiarised me with the two notions in separate and very distinct environments and to wonder whether both contained fundamental insights for the analysis of political phenomena as well as for the exploration of new avenues for emancipatory action. As stated in the introduction, Laclau provides a fascinating and theoretically potent synthesis between the two, which incorporates both the Italian insights of Gramsci and the PCI, and the Latin American 'innate' inclination for populism where his political upbringing took place, while fusing them in a post-structuralist architecture that foregrounds the importance of contingency. The latter carries enormous weight insofar as the status of his theorising is concerned. Crucially, it is not only the militant origin of Laclau's preoccupations that make his thought eminently strategic. Much of the strategic thrust resides indeed in the very political ontology that Laclau postulates, by which the hiatus between the ontological and the ontic remains fundamentally unbridgeable. This provides for a flexible and dynamic approach that shuns any pretension to fix a universal or a ground once and for all, thus recognising the importance of continuous articulations between heterogeneous elements.

Yet, despite devising new analytical and strategic roads, the framework of Laclau needs to be considered itself as contingent and open to constant modifications, and this has been precisely the idea behind the work hitherto conducted. Faithful to the retroductive approach adopted by the Essex school of discourse analysis, such a revision has taken a triple route. To begin with, it has focused on a theoretical exploration aimed at individuating the precise



development of the two notions in Laclau. By adopting a mixed methodological apparatus informed by the Foucauldian genealogical approach and the Skinnerian history of political thought, I have tried to reconstruct the birth, evolution and variations of populism and hegemony in his corpus, while trying to locate theoretical and real-world influences, pinpoint flaws, trace intellectual connections and situate populism and hegemony within the broader context of political theory/science. Despite recognising the great potential enshrined in the conceptualisations of Laclau, the first theoretical round raises a number of questions. Some of these issues are worth reiterating. Firstly, populism and hegemony maintain a conceptual proximity, to the extent that they may be said to be partly overlapping in Laclau. This jeopardises the theoretical cogency of the two categories and negatively hampers their strategic usefulness. Secondly, Laclau lays excessive emphasis on the question of antagonism and does not provide an adequate conceptualisation of this crucial notion. This complicates the possibility of a fruitful understanding of the differential character of any substantial hegemonic relationship and confines the pertinence of hegemony to modern times, thus failing to provide a genuine a-temporal political ontology. Thirdly, Laclau seems to leave behind some of the promising insights of Gramsci that were once fully active in his thought. Specifically, by excessively focussing on the signifier to the detriment of the signified, Laclau's hegemony seems to merely indicate the instability of any system and to lose sight of the contents that actually become hegemonic. Finally, the status of the empty signifier is uncertain and lends itself to misunderstandings, with the question of the leader emerging as particularly problematic.

Concurrently, this work has taken the empirical question seriously through the analysis of two emblematic cases: the Italian Communist Party's trajectory and the Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution. While the former has been historically associated with the notion of hegemony,

the latter has sparked much talk of populism. The aim of this empirical section has been to deploy the theoretical apparatus of Laclau in order to analyse both its merits and limitations from an analytical and strategic point of view. In particular, the case studies are deemed as essential in the elaboration of a sound ontology in a to-and-fro movement between the empirical and the theoretical. What are the lessons that these two cases teach us? The PCI speaks of a practice that managed to articulate a number of different demands and symbols that did not naturally tend to converge. In a sense, it created a broad popular pole, irreducible to its former identity as the mere representative of the working class. Yet, its particular empty signifier, communism, despite being emptied of much of its original contents, was still too full to become a singularity capable of becoming the rallying point of a plurality of sectors, as Laclau himself admits (OPR: 185). In other words, it was not a societal horizon that could be emptied at will, but rather the nodal point of a distinct discourse that, in the historical conditions of the Cold War, had a hard time converting itself into a surface of inscription for the majority of grievances existing in the Italian society. Nevertheless, the PCI rooted itself in the country, by establishing deep and capillary ramifications in both political and civil society and by cultivating a truly alternative political alphabet. This strongly impacted the ideology and habits of millions of men and women as well as the way in which they experienced social relations and, although indirectly, the content and shape of public policies. Over time, such an alterity with the rest of the system faded. At its basic core there was a paradoxical situation: despite its counter-hegemonic attitude, the party constantly searched for compromise with other political forces. Even though up to a point the constitution of a 'people' took place against the background of a political frontier that was not always so marked, the privileging of the work of alliances in the political rather than in the civil society meant the gradual introjection of the motives of their adversaries and the difficulty of maintaining a fundamental

diversity with rest of the system. This was only the prelude for the incorporation of the communists into the camp that they had historically opposed.

The Ecuadorian Citizen's Revolution displayed different attributes. Although, in the terms of Laclau, an equivalential chain between a variety of demands and symbols was also created, this political practice was fundamentally dissimilar. Differently from the PCI, it swiftly conquered political power understood as electoral share and, despite this, a stark frontier with the rest of the political system was maintained throughout the whole period. While this made for a strong articulatory potential at the beginning, things changed after a few years as such a division started to become a source of a societal discomfort. Even more importantly, the Ecuadorian Citizen's Revolution failed to go beyond electoral victory, thus demonstrating its incapacity to conduct a wide and differentiated struggle in civil society and to give birth to a more sustainable hegemony. Among other things, this was also made difficult by the excessive centrality of the leader. Moreover, although Rafael Correa can legitimately be considered the real cement that spurred the articulation of diverse demands and provided the spark that removed the initial inertias running against political change, the prolongation and intensification of his role gave rise to a cult of the personality and, in turn, to a suppression of deliberation within the popular camp and an approach that put pluralism at risk.

How do we make sense of these cases from a theoretical viewpoint? This is the point at which, in a third and final move, the empirical and the initial theoretical discussion merge into a full-blown proposal that reformulates some of the coordinates of Laclau's theoretical edifice while maintaining intact its overall thrust. Faithful to the problematisation approach by which unexplored or forgotten possibilities are mobilised again, this exercise has been conducted by way of a re-Gramscianisation of Laclau, both by recuperating insights of Gramsci that once

played a major role in Laclau and by taking into account others that were entirely overlooked. The first notable intervention concerns the distance between populism and hegemony. While the former designates a construction of political meaning that can prove ephemeral and is mostly concerned with the outright contestation of a political regime, the latter entails an always contingent but nevertheless much more subtle and pervasive influence of a particular normativity. Such normative contents are not granitic as they always intertwine with ideological elements of different provenience; yet, it is necessary to carefully maintain the focus on the signified rather than on the signifier and understand which particular worldview takes hold in a social formation. The road to separate out populism and hegemony in Laclau is that of providing plural conceptions of space and time, as opposed to the singular conception that he upholds. Here, the attention is directed at the existence of a myriad of sites of the social through which a particular hegemony is sanctioned. In other words, it does not suffice to conquer political power: the success of a political project that wishes to challenge the *status quo* and steer a social formation towards a meaningful emancipatory process is determined by its capacity to spread across the various fortresses of civil society. In order to talk about hegemony then, a practice needs to conduct its struggle not only in the political realm *stricto sensu*, which is to be associated with populism, but in much more enlarged terms. As for the question of time, each present is pierced by a singular time that sets the contours of the political game and determines the asymmetric plane in which day-to-day political disputes are conducted. The latter corresponds to a plural temporality, whereby different projects are in (unequal) competition with each other. Populism clearly pertains to the latter register, while hegemony to the former: it is only when populism manages to make its influence felt across society as a whole that space and time come to coincide and a project evolves from the plural to the singular temporality.

Some further details that specify the scope of the reformulated notion of hegemony are provided. Contrary to populism which entails a certain ambiguity, a certain emptiness, as it is predicated on the uneasy clustering of dispersed elements, hegemony is instead concerned with fulness, that is with a pedagogical and adaptive side that needs in turn to be informed by sound analysis and normative contents. Further to this, hegemony also defines the capacity to go beyond the cursory domain of infatuation with a political project and become instilled in concrete habits, such that a molecular change that transforms subjectivities and spurs a far-reaching moral and ideological reform takes place. Finally, hegemony is not a normative project and cannot be reduced to a particular project and, by the same token, it cannot be treated as a synonym of democracy. The political game as such is hegemonic and no articulatory predominance takes place outside its canons.

Possibly, thinking strategically from an emancipatory perspective means thinking both populistically and hegemonically, where by populism and hegemony, however, we refer to two different things. Populism *à-la* Laclau remains an effective weapon for contesting an existing political regime and create new majorities, drawing on elements of common sense and creating equivalences out of the rejection against a common opponent. Hegemony, however, is to be understood as building a consensus around a new culture and civilisation, which envisages a war of position with a 'geography' and a timing very different from those of populism, which is typically bent towards a change in political society rather than civil society and has imminence as its privileged temporal horizon. A sound emancipatory strategy should therefore be able to reach a mediation between the 'emptiness' of populism and the 'fulness' of hegemony: a strategy, in other words, able to deal with ambiguity without being overwhelmed by it.

Moreover, I advocate that both populism and hegemony need to be democratically inflected in a left-wing, emancipatory project. This is particularly true for populism, whose implementation has been marked by some worrying tendencies insofar as its democratic credentials are concerned, as the Ecuadorian case shows. In particular, the desirability of prolonging the centrality of the leader is questioned. In the long run, the excessive weight of the leader threatens to suppress deliberation in the popular camp, and to make the role of the led passive and impede the undertaking of a war of position in society that modifies common sense. Even more importantly, left populism needs to be reconciled with the project of radical democracy and the agonistic model proposed by Mouffe. As for the former, this means that populism should not withdraw into a closed version of the common good but needs to maintain itself open to the ever-changing plurality of demands and components aspiring to transform society. Insofar as the latter is concerned, populism has to respect disagreement, and heed pluralism, thus avoiding the temptation to curtail opponents' rights. By taking onboard the ethical insights of Derrida, Connolly and Lacan, it is here proposed that those who conduct a left-wing populist practice need to incorporate an ethos that fully acknowledges the contingency of social relations and the impossibility of fixing a meaning once and for all.

Finally, this work has attempted to be faithful to the idea of connecting emancipatory theory with emancipatory practice. The former often insulates itself in its concepts and convoluted jargon, and ends up providing little help to the elaboration of novel, original and effective political practices. The hiatus between two is thus seldom bridged. Even though this work is no exception in the use of a specialised language, it has put special attention on rendering its findings relevant and concrete to praxis. Whether or not it has at least partly lived up to this aim is up to the reader, and particularly to the practitioners of political theory and politics

proper, to decide. Yet this piece of work should not be seen as a conclusive contribution, but as a first approximation to a number of issues that my exposure to both political conundrums and theoretical elaborations has given way to. Not only answers have been provided, as between the lines new questions have emerged. I will mention only a few. From the point of view of the empirical research, the degenerative arch of the PCI seems to have a bearing on the current sorry state of the left in Italy. What are the political and cultural drawbacks that saw their genesis during the PCI experience and that still impact upon its leftist heirs in Italy today? Similarly, the decline of the Ecuadorian populist experience could be analysed within the broader regional context of the 'pink tide'. The similar fate of the Venezuelan, Argentinian and Brazilian left experiments begs a comparative study. The need for a potent, honest and self-reflexive account of the recent errors and flaws of the left in the Latin American continent is urgent. What about theory? The *oeuvre* of Ernesto Laclau is an open mine which provides a variety of stimuli. The exploration and mediation of his influences is a fruitful field of inquiry. Further work in the study and in the renegotiation of Laclau's political and theoretical connections with the aim of refining his theoretical edifice as well as revitalising the emancipatory potential of the latter is paramount. In this sense, the reincorporation of Gramsci conducted so far is only a first step towards more a more far-reaching restructuration of the encounter between Laclau and the Italian thinker.

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## Appendix A

### Interviews

#### **Luciana Castellina** (Interview 1)

Date of the interview: 9/1/2016

Place: Rome

Consent for quotation: given

Language of the interview: Italian

Short biography: Born in 1929. Leading member of the PCI from 1947 to 1970 and from 1984 to 1991. In the 1960s she was a close collaborator of Pietro Ingrao. In 1970 she was expelled from the PCI for factionalism after the publishing of the dissenting magazine *il manifesto*.

#### **Maria Lisa Cinciari Rodano** (Interview 2)

Date of the interview: 11/1/2016

Place: Rome

Consent for quotation: given

Language of the interview: Italian

Short biography: Born in 1921. Leading member of the PCI from 1944 to 1991. She was the first woman to become Vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies in Italian history (1963-1968). Her husband, Franco Rodano, was a very close advisor to both Palmiro Togliatti and Enrico Berlinguer.

#### **Alfredo Reichlin** (Interview 3)

Date of the interview: 12/1/2016

Place: Rome

Consent for quotation: given

Language of the interview: Italian

Short biography: Born in 1925. Leading member of the PCI from 1946 to 1991. He was a PCI's MP from 1968 until its dissolution. He was a member of the National Executive Office of the PCI in the 1970s and a close collaborator of Enrico Berlinguer. He died in 2017.

#### **Aldo Tortorella** (Interview 4)

Date of the interview: 12/1/2016

Place: Rome

Consent for quotation: given

Language of the interview: Italian

Short biography: Born in 1926. Leading member of the PCI from 1946 to 1991. From 1970 to 1975 he was the director the PCI's daily newspaper *L'Unità*. He was a PCI's MP from 1972 until its dissolution. Initially a follower of Enrico Berlinguer, he then opposed the choice of the historic compromise.