

Demand for Demands:

A Psychoanalytic Contribution to the Theory of Demand **in Contemporary Social and Political Movements**

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Doctor of Philosophy in Ideology and Discourse Analysis by
Claudia Liliana Mohor Valentino

Department of Government

University of Essex

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Under the supervision of:

Jason Glynos

Abstract

This thesis develops a conceptual framework for rethinking political demand in contemporary protest, particularly where demands appear absent, opaque, or resistant to articulation. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau's theory of demand articulation and Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses, it examines how demands are structured, sustained, and replied to within distinct discursive configurations. The 2019 Chilean *estallido social* serves illustratively, revealing how heterogeneity and proliferation of voices made it difficult to condense the uprising into a single, unified articulation. Rather than treating this as incoherence, the framework interprets it as a structured field of replies, ranging from efforts to stabilise meaning through authority or expertise to practices that sustain ambiguity and unsettlement, each negotiating the impossibility of fully articulating what is being demanded.

While demands are central to political discourse, the concept remains under-theorised. This thesis addresses that gap by analysing protest demands not as explicit claims but as discursive positions that exceed fixed representation. It argues that political theory often overlooks the ungraspable dimension of demand, what cannot be fully articulated or satisfied, and that Lacan's four discourse theory provides tools to conceptualise this excess.

The thesis aligns Laclau's concept of demand with Lacan's Hysteric/Master dialectic, showing how demands oscillate between disruption and stabilisation. It then examines the University discourse to reveal how expert knowledge replies to demand under a guise of neutrality while reinforcing dominant power. Finally, through the Analyst's discourse, it explores the ethical task of sustaining the gap rather than closing it.

In a time increasingly marked by attempts to close down ambiguity and overload meaning through data, algorithmic interpretation, and technocratic management, this thesis argues for the political and ethical value of indeterminacy. It offers a novel lens for engaging with protest forms that escape traditional articulation, mobilisation, and political transformation.

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Those who know me know the importance I give to time. I entertain myself doing math of years that have passed, the age I, or someone else, will be when a big event occurs. There is nostalgia but also a feeling of mercilessness about time passing. This is exactly what goes through my mind while writing these acknowledgments. These are where I first name a past I am only now beginning to recognise, realising how much time has passed since the start of this thesis, and all the people that have been there to support this process. I can think of no better way to name them than including and tracing the moments that made this work possible.

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List of Abbreviations

HSS: Hegemony and Socialist Strategy

OPR: On Populist Reason

NSM: New Social Movements

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Introduction

This thesis seeks to investigate the category of demand as a central and productive concept within contemporary political and social theory. While the term circulates widely across political discourse, referring to individual and collective claims or requests, it has not received the sustained theoretical attention granted to notions such as democracy, freedom, or equality. Despite this relative neglect, this thesis will argue that the concept of demand occupies a crucial position in political and social thought: it marks the point at which individual experience becomes collectively articulated, where private grievance turns into a public claim. Its relevance lies precisely in the fact that this is never a neutral passage. Demand introduces a moment of rupture: it interrupts what is taken for granted, opens a space of doubt, and destabilises the existing order. At the same time, it is through demand that something begins to take form. In articulating a claim, demand not only challenges what is, but also can imagine and organise what could be. It is this double movement of disruption and articulation that makes demand a central category for thinking the political.

While some strands of post-structuralist political theory, notably in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière, among others, as will be discussed further below, have placed demand at the centre of political analysis, it has usually been explored as an adjacent issue. Within the field of contentious politics, demand has been used to analyse the dynamics of mobilisation

and claim-making (Buechler, 1995; Jenkins, 2001; Klandermans, 2004; McAdam et al., 2003; Snow, 2007; Tarrow, 2013; Tilly, 2005). Similarly, theories of recognition and identity have approached demand as the medium through which struggles for justice, visibility, and rights are expressed (Cooke, 1997; Fraser, 2018; Fraser et al., 2003; Habermas, 1994, 2009; Honneth & Rancière, 2016; Reicher, 1996; Rosenau, 2006; Taylor, 1992; Weeks, 2009).

Since the early 2010s, global waves of mobilisation, from the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street to the Indignados in Spain, have made it increasingly necessary to attend to the question of political demand. Although these dynamics are not historically unprecedented, as processes of articulating and reformulating demands have long been present in collective action. What distinguishes many recent mobilisations is the way in which this moment of articulation becomes prolonged and publicly visible. Rather than quickly stabilising around a fixed set of demands, these movements often sustain a process of demanding in which claims are continuously debated, reformulated, and expanded.

The global protests of 2018 and 2019 marked another wave in this trajectory. From France, Hong Kong and Catalonia to Chile, Ecuador, and Lebanon, uprisings emerged around specific grievances, yet many persisted even after those initial claims were formally addressed by institutional actors.

The Chilean uprising of October 2019 is particularly striking in this regard. What began as a reaction to an increase in public transport fares rapidly escalated into a nationwide revolt. Riots spread across diverse parts of the country, each articulating demands for dignity in different ways. Yet, whenever a particular demand was raised and the government tried to 'satisfy' it, a new wave of protest erupted, with people returning again and again to their nearest squares. Plaza Italia, renamed Plaza Dignidad by protesters during the uprising, became the central site of mobilisation. Every Friday, for several months, it filled with demonstrations: sometimes advancing a multiplicity of claims which ranged from feminist and environmentally based calls

to action to demands for education, health, and pension reform, among others, and sometimes with no request at all. Yet people were always returning to the same space. What was striking was not only what people demanded, but the insistence of this return, like ocean waves, regardless of whether particular demands had been addressed. Despite dislocatory events such as military repression, the Covid-19 curfews, and the constitutional process that promised a new social pact, collective gatherings at the same square persisted.

The endurance of these mobilisations invites a reconsideration of both the scene and the dynamic structure of demand. Heterogeneity in protest is not new; what is distinctive here is its persistence, that is, the way protest continuously emerged and reemerged over time without consolidating into a stable programme. This combination of persistence and instability prompts a shift of attention from the completed articulations to the process of articulation itself: how demands emerge, change and fade; how moments of articulation are preceded and followed by dislocation and disarticulation; how the political field remains fleeting, unstable, and ambiguous.

At the same time, what these ‘open protests’, as the thesis will refer to them, generate a peculiar effect in the public sphere: a “demand for demands”. When observers, institutions, and commentators each take turn to ask, repeatedly, “what do they want?”, the protest not only expresses discontent but also solicits a response. This question, far from being external to the protests, reveals something intrinsic to the structure of demand itself. The “demand for demands” can thus be read as one possible reply to the unsettling openness of these protests, a way of reasserting order in the face of indeterminacy. The present research takes this as its point of departure, exploring other possible ways of replying to such ungraspable demands

drawing on Lacanian theory, and examining how different discursive logics negotiate what cannot be fully articulated.

What is at stake, then, is not a question of identifying what these protests “really” demand, but of understanding the structure that makes such indeterminacy politically productive. The persistence of the question “what do they want?” points to a gap at the heart of political address itself, a gap that cannot be resolved through empirical enumeration or policy analysis alone. To grasp this gap, it becomes necessary to turn to theoretical frameworks that enable theorising the relation between demand and response beyond the solely register of representation. It is here that the dialogue between political theory and psychoanalysis proves particularly generative.

I. The Field: Psychoanalysis and Political Theory

Psychoanalytic theory has long offered political thought a vocabulary for approaching what rationalist or deliberative frameworks tend to exclude: the affective, unconscious, and libidinal dimensions of social life. From the Frankfurt School’s early engagement with Freud’s notion of repression and civilisation (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2013; Marcuse, 2012), to the post-structuralist concern with discourse and subjectivity, psychoanalysis has continually served as a resource for thinking the limits of reason and representation in politics. A broad psychoanalytic–post-structural tradition has argued that the social is structurally non-closable, that identity and order are organised around lack, antagonism, and dislocation rather than completion (see Laclau and Mouffe, 2014; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). This move, further developed by thinkers such as Jason Glynos (2005, 2001, 2011, 2014), Yannis Stavrakakis (2008, 2011) and others, has illuminated the ways in which enjoyment, fantasy, and disavowal sustain ideological formations. Rather than treating political discourse as a transparent field of

meaning, this theoretical tradition foregrounds the unconscious logics that structure belief, identification, and authority.

Within this broader dialogue, the work of Ernesto Laclau occupies a central place. Drawing on both Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Laclau articulated a post-foundational ontology of politics in which society remains structurally incomplete, with every order only precariously sutured. This “post-foundational” orientation marks a decisive departure from both essentialist and positivist approaches to politics. Rather than assuming that social identities or interests pre-exist discourse, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2014, originally published 1985; hereafter HSS), co-authored with Mouffe, Laclau conceives them as discursively constituted: meaning and subject positions are produced through contingent articulations that never achieve full closure. In this respect, discourse theory shares the post-structuralist commitment to contingency and the critique of foundational truths, yet it differs from other constructivist or deliberative traditions by grounding political formation in antagonism and dislocation, the impossibility of any final reconciliation and closure of the social.

In HSS (2014), Laclau and Mouffe reoriented political analysis from classes and interests to discursive practices of articulation. In this framework, political identities emerge through the contingent linking of heterogeneous demands. Two key logics organise this process: the logic of equivalence, which simplifies the political space by condensing distinct grievances under a common signifier, and the logic of difference, which multiplies and differentiates positions within that space. Later, in *On Populist Reason* (2005, hereafter OPR), Laclau designated the “demand” as the minimal unit of political analysis. He distinguished between democratic demands which are isolated requests that can be met within the existing system, and popular

demands, which emerge when unmet grievances begin to link together through relations of equivalence. This articulation of demands, he argued, forms the core of any political project: it is through the construction of a chain of equivalence, a collective subject “the people” is produced, inaugurating what he calls the populist logic of politics.

In both works, the political turns on dislocation, the interruption of a settled order that compels acts of articulation and re-signification. Demand becomes the hinge between subjectivity and collectivity, the moment when grievance enters the symbolic field and becomes political. Yet Laclau’s theoretical focus remains primarily on the logic of articulation itself: on how unity is constructed out of dispersion. Even when invoking lack or antagonism, these notions are largely absorbed into the productive machinery of hegemony, or populism. What receives less theoretical elaboration is the dimension that resists articulation, the residue, failure, or excess produced by every act of symbolisation. As a result, the reply to demand, the way the social field responds to, translates, or misrecognises it, appears only as the condition for further articulation, rather than as a site of analysis in its own right.

This emphasis on construction has made Laclau’s work enormously influential but also exposes its limits. By privileging the successful chain of equivalence, Laclauian theory risks overlooking how demands that cannot be integrated nevertheless persist, return, or disturb the hegemonic field. Mouffe’s later writings on agonism and dissensus (1994) make this problem partially explicit: she insists that conflict, affect, and dissensus are constitutive of democracy and that any attempt at rational consensus risks effacing the political. Yet in both theorists, this dimension of impossibility functions more as an axiomatic background than as an analytic focus. The question: what happens to that which is not articulated, the unassimilated remainder of demand, remains under-theorised.

Building on Laclau's redefinition of demand as the minimal unit of political analysis, several recent interventions have revisited this category both from within and beyond the Laclauian framework. These studies share an unease with the status of demand as a fully articulable unit, turning instead toward what exceeds or unsettles its closure, whether figured as desire, affect, or disarticulation. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Zicman de Barros (2021) and Ronderos (2021) each challenge the notion of demand as a stable unit. Zicman de Barros argues that Laclau inadvertently attributes to demand a *noyau dur*, a hard kernel of identity, that re-introduces essentialism at the level of the element. To avoid this, he re-centres desire as the driving force behind political articulation. Similarly, Ronderos foregrounds the libidinal tie that binds political subjects together, contending that Laclau's focus on articulation neglects the Freudian dimension of cathexis. Introducing the hysteric's discourse as an analytic lens, Ronderos suggests that political movements can be understood as hysterical addresses to the Other, where the question "what do you want from us?" becomes constitutive of political desire itself.

A related strand of critique is developed by Stäheli (2003, 2014), who re-opens Laclau and Mouffe's focus on articulation by theorising the moment of disarticulation. For Stäheli, the heterogeneous elements that resist integration within hegemonic projects, that which cannot yet be articulated, or which can no longer be articulated, constitute a crucial but neglected locus of the political. His notion of disarticulation thus redirects attention toward the fleeting, indeterminate intervals between fixation and dissolution, anticipating a post-hegemonic notion of politics that resonates with the excess of demand.

These theoretical revisions echo broader debates within political theory concerning movements that resist programmatic demands. For Dean (2014) and Žižek (2012), Occupy is as an instance of political failure, a refusal of articulation that deprives the movement of transformative strategy. By contrast, Eklundh (2019) interprets the same indeterminacy as politically generative, foregrounding the affective and non-rational dimensions of mobilisation. Taken together, these interventions testify to a growing recognition that what eludes formulation as a demand may itself be politically significant: that it signals the persistence of an excess that no articulation can fully domesticate.

Across these debates, a shared intuition emerges: something in the field of the political exceeds the logic of articulation. Whether framed as desire (Zicman de Barros, 2021 Ronderos 2021), heterogeneity (Stäheli, 2003, 2014), or affect (Eklundh, 2019), these interventions converge on a crucial insight: the ungraspable remainder of demand, the point where it exceeds representation, is not a flaw to be corrected but a constitutive feature of political life. The persistence of what cannot be fully named or replied to is precisely what keeps politics open. The research presented in this thesis builds on these insights and takes them a step further. It turns to the Lacanian conception of demand not merely to provide a theoretical supplement to its Laclauian counterpart, but explores the former in its own right as a distinct formal structure. In Lacan, demand is never a transparently intelligible request; it is an address to the Other that simultaneously articulates need and expresses desire. Because recognition from the Other can never be complete, every demand carries an excess that eludes satisfaction. What matters, then, is not the content of the demand but the scene it opens, that is, the relation between the one who asks and the Other who is called upon to reply. This relation, marked by misrecognition and impossibility, is also the matrix of politics. It is from this impasse: the excess that no reply can fully contain, that the present research emerges, shifting analytical focus from the

articulation of demand to the modalities of reply through which the political field attempts to negotiate what remains unaddressed.

II. Contribution: Exploring Excess through Modalities of Reply

The title of this thesis, *Demand for Demands*, points to a tension that runs throughout contemporary protest politics. Protest movements are frequently expected to articulate clear and programmatic demands that can be recognised and addressed within institutional frameworks. This expectation can be understood as a *demand for demands*: a pressure placed on collective actors to translate discontent into clearly articulated claims. Yet many contemporary mobilisations also reveal a persistence of *demanding* as a political practice that does not immediately stabilise around a fixed set of demands. Rather than resolving into programmatic claims, the act of demanding may remain open, contested, and continuously reformulated. This tension between the demand for demands and the persistence of demanding helps clarify the stakes of this thesis, which explores how political demand operates not only as a claim addressed to institutions but also as a process through which political subjects and collective projects are constituted.

The analyses reviewed above converge on a shared insight: every articulation of demand leaves a remainder, something that cannot be fully symbolised, satisfied, or translated into representational terms. This excess has been variously described as desire, affect, or heterogeneity, yet its political productivity remains underexplored. What happens when this excess persists, when the unarticulable continues to press for a response? How do political discourses negotiate what cannot be fully articulated?

This research takes those questions as its point of departure. Rather than treating excess as a limit to theory, it explores it as a site of political and discursive activity. Its focus falls on the replies through which political discourses, institutions, and subjects attempt to negotiate what escapes articulation. Yet paying attention to the moment of reply does not displace demand as the organising category of the political. On the contrary, demand remains the vantage point from which the relation between excess and discourse becomes visible. Each chapter re-engages demand from a specific perspective: dialectical, in tracing how demands return and transform through the replies they provoke; epistemic, in examining what it means to answer under the conditions that demand can never be fully known; and ethical, in considering how the elaboration of demand involves responsibility toward what resists symbolisation. In this way, demand and reply are treated as interdependent movements within the same discursive field, bound together by the impossibility that animates both.

To conceptualise these movements, the thesis draws on Lacan's theory of discourse. In Lacan, 'discourse' names the formal structure that organises the relation between the subject, the Other, knowledge, and product. Each of the four discourses; the Master, the University, the Hysteric, and the Analyst; constitutes a distinct modality of reply to the impossibility that lies at the heart of demand. By reading these discourses politically, the thesis develops an analytical framework for examining how the political field negotiates, manages, or sustains the tension between what can and cannot be said.

This conceptual architecture also reopens the broader ontological debate that has divided contemporary political theory, between vertical models of hegemony and representation, and horizontal models of multiplicity and immanence. These positions are often presented as

mutually exclusive: one privileging symbolic construction and closure, the other the generative power of excess and dispersion. The framework developed here challenges this dichotomy.

Taken together, the four discourses reveal that the symbolic operation that structures meaning and the excess that unsettles it are not external to one another but internally entwined. In this sense, Lacan's theory does not prescribe how to reply to excess; rather, it displaces the question, showing that every discursive structure already enacts both symbolisation and its failure depending on the structural space occupied by its elements.

This theoretical move allows the research to make a double contribution. First, it situates the Laclauian category of demand within a psychoanalytic topology that can account for its internal split—between the signifying operation that organises it and the remainder that resists it. Second, it advances an ontological framework capable of thinking representation and excess, closure and productivity, within the same discursive structure. This framework opens new coordinates to examine how these dimensions shift and interact within different discursive configurations, generating distinct political effects. This provides a way to conceptualise the political as a dynamic field in which both operation. The production of sense and its disruption, coexist within an ontology of impossible closure. In this sense, the Lacanian framework provides a means to theorise the persistence of the ungraspable not as a deficit, but as the condition through which politics continually reconstitutes itself.

Beyond its theoretical reformulation, the thesis also advances a set of analytical and political insights. Conceptually, it reframes symbolic closure by showing that identity—whether embodied in the leader or an idea—can temporarily occupy the site of fixation within discourse. Analytically, it develops a method for reading protest and collective action from the standpoint

of discourse as reply, revealing how movements such as the Chilean uprising stage dislocation, sustain the gap, and produce meaning through repetition and opacity rather than through programme. Epistemically, it explores how the circulation of demands and replies is reshaped under digital and algorithmic conditions. Finally, it elaborates an ethical orientation drawn from Lacan's notion of sustaining the gap and deploys this to conceive political practice not as the resolution of lack but as the capacity to persist within the gap. Together, these interventions position the thesis as a bridge between psychoanalytic theory and post-foundational political thought, opening new coordinates for analysing how excess, symbolisation, and reply co-constitute the contemporary political field.

III. Relevance and Methodological Contribution

The relevance of this research lies in its attempt to think politics from the perspective of its excess, where representation falters, and meaning is forced to reinvent itself. By bringing together Laclau's theory of articulation and Lacan's logic of demand and reply, the thesis contributes to current debates in political theory, psychoanalysis, and protest studies in three interrelated ways: theoretical, analytical, and ethical. The following sub-sections elaborate on each three of these dimensions of relevance, before outlining the methodological contributions of this research.

A. Theoretical relevance

Within post-foundational political theory, the question of ontology has often been polarised between the horizontality of multiplicity and the verticality of representation. The tri-dimensional conception of demand developed in this thesis offers a framework capable of holding these two axes together. By distinguishing between the symbolic operation that

structures meaning, the imaginary formation that stabilises identification, and the real dimension of excess that resists symbolisation, the thesis provides a vocabulary for thinking representation and excess, closure and productivity, within the same discursive structure. This framework extends Laclau's focus on articulation by accounting for how dislocation not only destabilises meaning but also generates new possibilities of symbolisation.

The project also refines the psychoanalytic contribution to political theory. Rather than proposing a new theory, it introduces an inflection within discourse analysis—what may be described as an excess discourse analysis. This approach foregrounds the co-presence of symbolic and excessive operations within every discourse and examines how different discursive configurations manage, translate, or sustain what escapes representation. In doing so, it moves beyond the treatment of Lacanian discourse theory as either a model of ideology or a typology of subject positions, reframing it instead as a formal topology for reading political processes.

B. Analytical relevance

Analytically, the framework offers a new lens for examining contemporary political phenomena that resist programmatic articulation. It provides a means of reading protests and collective expressions, such as the Chilean *estallido social*, with an emphasis not on the absence of demands but on the circulation of replies to dislocation. By tracing the dialectical, epistemic, and ethical dimensions of reply, the framework developed here reveals how political actors and institutions negotiate what cannot be fully articulated, and how identity, knowledge, and affect are organised around this impossibility.

This analytic perspective enables a reconsideration of familiar problems: the function of leadership, the role of visibility and digital mediation, and the persistence of protest beyond

institutional cycles. It illuminates how the stabilising function of the signifier (S_1) can be temporarily occupied by identities or symbols without reducing the process to personification, and how algorithmic communication reshapes the epistemic dimension of demand by transforming visibility itself into a form of reply. In this way, the framework expands discourse theory's capacity to read the performativity of protest and its modes of address in digitally mediated contexts.

C. Ethical and Political Relevance

Finally, the research advances an ethical understanding of politics grounded in the notion of 'sustaining the gap'. This stance does not idealise or romanticise non-closure. Rather, it takes the persistence of incompleteness seriously and treats it as the very condition for democratic invention. In contrast both to the closure of mastery and to the saturation of knowledge, it foregrounds the value of elaboration, the collective work of remaining with what cannot yet be formulated. This ethical orientation resonates with ongoing efforts in political theory, feminist and decolonial thought, and protest movements that emphasise care, process, and relationality over programmatic completion.

By conceptualising politics as a field that continually replies to its own excess, the thesis provides a way of understanding how meaning, identity, and collectivity persist even when articulation fails. In this sense, its ethico-political relevance extends beyond the study of protest or discourse: it offers a lens for recognising how politics continues to act, speak, and imagine from within the conditions of its own constitutive impossibility.

D. Methodological and research strategy contribution

Finally, the thesis contributes methodologically by developing a research strategy that translates its theoretical concerns into a mode of reading. Rather than applying psychoanalytic or discourse-theoretical concepts as external tools, it constructs a reading protocol that mirrors the very dynamics it investigates: the relation between demand and reply, articulation and excess. Empirical material, such as protest scenes, interviews, or graffiti—is approached not as data to be explained or as ‘evidence’ for the theory, but as a set of discursive acts that stage the problem of reply in their own terms. In this way, the strategy remains consistent with the post-foundational ontology of the thesis, maintaining the impossibility of full closure while tracing how meaning and subjectivity are nonetheless produced.

Methodologically, the project aligns with the Essex School of discourse analysis, which conceives research as an interpretive and retroductive practice (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 2019, Laclau, 1990). ‘Retroduction’ here refers to the movement between theoretical abstraction and empirical illustration, where the aim is not to verify hypotheses but to refine and rearticulate conceptual categories through engagement with situated discourses. In this sense, the Chilean uprising functions, once more, not as an empirical object passively awaiting explanation but as a site that renders visible the dynamics of demand, reply, and excess that the thesis seeks to conceptualise.

By shifting the analytic focus from how discourses articulate meaning to how they respond to what resists symbolisation, the research contributes ‘excess’ as a productive category for reading political phenomena. The four Lacanian discourses are used not as typologies but as interpretive coordinates for exploring the ways in which articulation and excess coexist within the same structure. In this way, the research proposes a psychoanalytically informed mode of discourse analysis that remains faithful to the post-foundational commitment to contingency.

IV. Roadmap of the Thesis

The thesis unfolds in five chapters, each building toward a psychoanalytically informed framework for understanding the political productivity of what exceeds articulation.

Chapter One introduces the problem and outlines the puzzle that motivates the research: the persistence of protests that continue even when their explicit demands have been met or dissolved. It situates this puzzle within broader theoretical debates on demand, from contentious politics to recognition theory, and identifies the 2019 Chilean uprising as an illustrative site where these tensions are rendered visible.

Chapter Two develops the theoretical framework and research strategy. It begins by tracing the limits of Laclau's conception of demand and the logic of articulation, before turning to Lacanian theory to re-situate demand as a structure marked by lack and excess. The chapter reconstructs Lacan's four discourses as modalities of reply to this structural impossibility and proposes a tri-dimensional conception of demand—comprising the symbolic operation of meaning, the imaginary register of identification, and the real dimension of that which resists symbolisation. This configuration allows the thesis to hold together the productivity and the impossibility of political articulation within the same discursive field. In the second section, the chapter elaborates the research strategy of the thesis in detail. Building on the Essex School's retroductive and interpretive methodology (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), it outlines how the thesis translates its theoretical concerns into a mode of reading. Rather than applying theory as a tool, the research constructs a reading protocol that mirrors the very relation it investigates—the interplay between demand and reply. The Chilean case is approached illustratively rather than empirically, as a field where the dynamics of excess and symbolisation become legible.

Chapter Three explores the dialectical dimension of demand. Aligning Laclau's theory of demand construction with Lacan's Master and Hysteric discourses, it examines how the ask–reply loop produces both institutional articulation and its remainder. The analysis shows how

the leader or orienting signifier sutures the social gap while protest re-opens it, and argues that this dialectical tension reveals the productive character of excess in the political field.

Chapter Four turns to the epistemic dimension of demand. It analyses how replies are organised around knowledge—expertise, data, algorithmic mediation—and situates this logic in the University discourse, where knowledge speaks while concealing a hidden Master. The chapter develops a psychoanalytic account of the impossibility of accessing truth and traces how knowledge-centred replies proliferate meaning without closure. Using the Chilean constitutional process as illustration, it shows how social-media circulation and technocratic frameworks amplify this epistemic dynamic.

Chapter Five examines the ethical dimension of demand. Drawing on the Analyst's discourse, it considers the ethical orientation of 'sustaining the gap' rather than resolving it. Through an analysis of graffiti and visual expression in the Chilean uprising, the chapter shows how protest practices can be read as forms of elaboration that resist closure and sustain ambiguity. It argues that this mode of reply opens a space for collective reflection and ethical engagement with what exceeds representation.

The Final Conclusion draws together its theoretical, methodological, and interpretive contributions. It offers three central outcomes. First, it redefines demand as a structure that includes its own excess, allowing both representation and remainder to be theorised within a single ontology. Second, it repositions Lacan's four discourses as a framework for analysing how political fields respond to what cannot be fully articulated. Third, it proposes a psychoanalytically inflected mode of reading that treats excess not as an obstacle but as a generative condition for politics and theory alike. The conclusion closes by reflecting on the ethical and epistemic stakes of this approach: to engage with what resists symbolisation is not to resolve contradiction, but to sustain the conditions of political thinking itself.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

Although political demand is to be found everywhere in social and political theory, it is rarely theorised in its own right. By definition, ‘demand’ may be described as a *strong request for something* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021) and whilst not obviously imprecise, such a definition neglects to explicitly spell out a certain scene implicitly presupposed by the concept of demand — a scene structured by an ask–reply relation. At its most basic, this scene has the following structure: 1) an individual or a group – the agent – that makes a request for something; 2) the object or content of the request – a ‘something’; and 3) the entity to which the request is addressed. Social and political studies often highlight this scene, usually focusing on the characteristics of the group or individual involved, the reasons they make a demand, or the strategic organisation they deploy to advance a particular claim. Others centre attention on the content of the claim itself; either its philosophical and normative assumptions about what ought to be requested, or the constructed character of the demand as tied to a specific agent or context. Although these studies address some dimension of political demand in relation to that scene, they largely neglect demand as an independently relevant category of analysis.

This chapter explores three distinctive fields in which political demand has taken a central role: contentious politics, politics of recognition, and post-structuralist approaches. These fields are far from being internally uniform and they also constantly overlap with each other. Nonetheless, this categorisation allows for different entry points into the concept of demand and enables the identification of common elements, persistent gaps, and recurring debates tied to the scene of demand just described, such as political struggle, identity,

recognition, representation, and political organisation. It will be argued that political struggle occupies a central position in the emergence of these theories across all three approaches. While contentious politics mostly focuses on mobilisations as the phenomenon to target, demands here are treated as central to understanding the emergence, organisation, and possible success of contentious action. In the case of the politics of recognition, the ask-reply axis of the demand scene is highlighted, and the question shifts to the procedural mechanism that allows these demands to be ‘translated’ into institutional rights. From this perspective, there is an emphasis on accounting for what ought to be recognised in a democratic society, which often implies a discussion of identity claims. Finally, the poststructuralist approach turns to political struggles and demands in order to account for the moment of rupture of the social order. It thus points toward the political implications of the whole scene of demanding and illuminates it as a break potentially generative of novelty. This perspective is unique in challenging the idea of the political as building agreement and instead marks the centrality of *disagreement* for a radical democratic account¹. Thus, in post-structuralist approaches, demand takes a central role as it marks not merely empirical grievance but the constitutive dissatisfaction, the sense of incompleteness that underlies the social order itself.

It is from this perspective that Laclau (2005) anchors his theory of political demand and uses it to develop a conceptual framework that takes demand as a central category for the social and political field. Situated within a broader post-structuralist approach, his theory treats demand not as a fixed or formal request awaiting institutional closure, but as a constitutive element in the formation of collective identity and the disruption of existing social orders. Crucially, Laclau’s model already registers the contingency and openness to contestation that attend every demand articulation—he provides a language for how different claims can cohere

¹ Radical democracy is a theory that highlights pluralism and open contestation as the central organising principles of political life, rejecting any final closure or fixed conception of society in favour of continual renegotiation and inclusion. A more in-depth discussion about radical democracy will follow in Chapter 2.

and construct a new political project. That is why post-structuralism offers the theoretically most promising base for the *turn toward a contingent and open conception of the political* invoked above: it takes demand seriously in its ambiguity and power, supplying tools to theorise rupture, rearticulation, and the emergence of new political projects.

At the same time, recent waves of protest, those diffuse, leaderless, and often resistant to clear-cut demands or straightforward institutional translation, reveal limits within existing frameworks. These movements complicate the familiar ‘ask–reply’ scene and point towards a more elusive, non-fully articulated aspect of political demands that do not neatly fit into existing conceptual models. To explore this dimension, the research developed here will build on the post-structuralist framework, drawing on Laclau's notion of demand articulation and supplementing it with insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis. The account developed on this basis will attempt to highlight the ungraspable aspect that demands exceed, and which contemporary waves of protest enable us to illustrate.

Accordingly, this chapter first examines how contentious politics, recognition theory, and poststructuralism each approach (and sometimes overlook) the category of demand and the scene it presupposes. It conducts an interpretative analysis that, where fruitful, differentiates demand from related notions such as claims, requests, or grievances. Chapter 2 then focuses on Laclau's theory in detail, unpacking his notion of demand articulation for constructing political projects, before introducing the Lacanian turn, which is argued to make room for an extended framework to account for contemporary political forms of mobilisation.

I. Demands in Contentious Politics

Collective actions such as protests, riots, and social movements have provided a fruitful terrain for exploring the concept of demand. Within this field, different theories have questioned what motivates people to mobilise, how grievances operate, and through what mechanisms actors

organise resources, shape identity, and express their discontent. All of these elements have been linked, explicitly or implicitly, to the category of demand. In what follows, an overview is offered of three major social movement paradigms that problematise the place the concept of demand occupies in each. Taking Buechler's (1995) categorisation of social movement theories as a starting point, this section proceeds in three parts: first, resource mobilisation; second, social-constructionism accounts; and third, new social movement theory—tracing how these approaches conceptualise demand and the role it plays within these frameworks.

A. Resource Mobilisation: Grievance, it's Always There

During the 70s through to the 90s, resource mobilisation theory prevailed as the dominant paradigm for studying collective action (Buechler, 1995; Jenkins, 2001). This theory provided an alternative to the prevailing deprivation and discontent hypothesis that dominated during the 60s and 70s. The deprivation hypothesis sought to explain the emergence of protests through the lens of grievances within society, where the latter were mainly understood as linked to rapid social change. It also argued that movement participation was relatively rare and that grievances were transient. A key assumption of this approach was that movement participants were 'arational, if not outright irrational' (Jenkins, 2001). Therefore, it implied that demands arose from a mass acting 'impulsively, irresponsibly, or out of self-indulgence' (McAdams et al., 2003, p. 16).

By the 1970s, scholars began to move beyond the deprivation hypothesis and to theorise collective action through an alternative prism: resource mobilisation. This theory challenged previous assumptions, for example, concerning the transience of grievance. Instead, resource mobilisation theorists argued that grievances, deriving from structural conflicts of interest, tended to be relatively constant in society. Since it was expected that some discontent would always exist, the emergence of collective action could not be explained solely based on the

presence of grievances. Moreover, echoing Olson's (in Buechler, 1995) arguments about the participation process, resource mobilisation theorists agreed that later theories of popular protest had overlooked the fact that most people sharing a grievance did not necessarily act on it, and thus failed to explain the conditions that enable people to organise and act upon their shared grievances or interests successfully. For resource mobilisation theorists, participants were seen as 'rational actors engaging in instrumental action through formal organisation to secure resources and promote mobilisation' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, in Jenkins, 2001, p. 538). From this perspective, grievances, while necessary, became theoretically secondary as focus shifted towards the strategic process of organisation, the movement's capacity for mobilisation, and its resources, which were particularly linked to money, labour, social status, knowledge, media support, and connections with the political elite.

These paradigms illuminate key stages in the study of demand: first, in the discontent hypothesis, demand is considered to be central to explaining participation in mobilisation, yet it is framed as a kind of societal tantrum – an irrational echo aimed at relieving and draining what was accumulated through periods of rapid social change. In this approach, there is an underlying assumption about how rational politics needs to be in order to be taken seriously as politics at all, whether by institutions or by the theories that seek to explain them.

Conversely, while resource mobilisation tries to give a rational character to protest, this theory construes demand as an instrumental currency. Once more, agential claims are only taken seriously as emerging from a rational, calculating subject. Although these theories differ in their respective conceptions of *how* grievances arise, one as spontaneous discontent, the other as structural constants, both approaches share a core assumption: political claims must conform to a rational logic in order to be taken seriously. Neither framework examines demands as potential signals of deep social rupture; instead, they are dismissed as noise or reduced to strategic tokens.

By the late 1980s, however, critics argued that even resource mobilisation's rational-actor framing remained insufficient – that its portrayal of protesters as *purely* rational actors who only advance calculated, instrumental demands overlooked the contingency, emotion, and interactive dynamism of collective life (McAdam et al., 2003, p.15). In response, the “political-process” variant emerged, retaining the importance of the rational-actor premise but adding a focus on how movements strategically adapt to shifting political context – namely, by deploying culturally encoded “repertoires” of contention to make their claims more credible and socially resonant (McAdam et al., 2003, p.16). Even so, this theoretical variant remained committed to a rationalist structural logic: it reaffirmed the importance of *which* claims succeed, yet still regarded those claims as outcomes of rational calculation rather than as the result of on-the-ground meaning-making. These debates, in turn, opened the door to social-constructionism approaches, which shift attention from purely rational calculation to the interpretive and framing work that transforms grievance into demand.

E. Social-Constructionism Paradigm

Drawing on symbolic interactionism, the social- constructionism paradigm shifts the study of collective action towards cultural processes and framing practices (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson et al., 1992; Snow, 2007). It views social movements as vehicles through which collectives give voice to their grievances by staging protests that dramatise their concerns and emphasise that there is “something to be done” (Snow, 2007, p. 3). By analysing *how* movements frame issues—selecting, linking, and transforming elements of experience—this approach brings grievances, demands, claims, and collective interests back to the centre of inquiry (Klandermans et al., 2001; Rucht & Neidhardt, 2002).

The social-constructionism paradigm offered two main critiques of resource-mobilisation theory's view of demand. Firstly, it argued that scholars had overlooked the interpretive processes through which meaning and mobilisation are mutually intertwined. Secondly, it challenged the assumption that the demand side of protest is simply a given existing prior to and apart from agents rather than actively constructed by them.

From this perspective, grievances are not simply objective reflections of material conditions, but products of signifying work -an interactive, culturally mediated process of meaning-making (Snow, 2013, p. 1). Drawing on Goffman's notion of 'frame' (1974) and on the linguistic turn, Snow (2007) developed the concept of framing to capture this sociocultural work: leaders, participants, and any involved actors all engage in framing, selectively punctuating, linking, and transforming elements of experience so that grievances coalesce into compelling demands.

Framing was a turning point in understanding the role of demand in collective action, both from a strategic point of view and an interpretative-analytical perspective. Snow (2013) summarises framing's contribution to three core functions:

1. Focus attention by punctuating what in our sensory field is relevant or bracketing what is irrelevant;
2. Framing acts as an articulation mechanism in the sense of linking together the various punctuated elements of the scene so that one story is told rather than another. And,
3. Framing serves a transformative role by reshaping how certain objects of attention are perceived or understood in relation to each other or to the actor.

Although framing's three core functions are often movement-specific, Snow and Benford (2005) argue that some frames attain master status—they appear early, crystallise the movement's logic, and then cascade down through later claims. In practice, a master frame does more than guide interpretation; it shapes the very contours of demand by providing the dominant narrative that participants adopt when articulating grievances. Consequently, demands are not here conceived as spontaneous eruptions but as cultural constructions built upon—and bounded by—the prevailing master frame.

For a demand to gain traction, individuals must feel both aggrieved in some specific sense and optimistic that collective action can address their concerns (Snow et al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 2005). As these collectively framed demands circulate, they also forge a shared identity—participants see themselves as part of a “we” united by the master frame's logic (McAdam et al., 2003, p. 41). In this way, framing constructs demands while producing a collective identity among claimants (McAdam et al., 2003, p. 41).

More implicitly than explicitly, grievances are here distinguished from claims or demands. From a framing perspective, grievances are still seen as unclearly defined, even whilst being ubiquitously shared, such that it is through the collective meaning-making process that they are transformed into collective claims or demands. Klandermans (2004) extends the social- constructionism insight that collective demands are the result of framing, but he disagrees with the tendency to treat grievances themselves as given. Whereas framing theory focuses on *how* shared meanings turn grievances into claims, Klandermans emphasises that one also needs to understand why and when those constructed grievances turn into *active* demands for protest—and why only some aggrieved individuals seize and act on the available opportunities for this. Using the economic distinction of “demand and supply,” he redefines ‘demand’ as society's latent potential for protest—rooted in grievance formation, socialisation, and emerging collective identities—and ‘supply’ as the organised opportunities provided by

movement entrepreneurs. He shows that, although resource-mobilisation scholarship has thoroughly mapped the supply side (repertoires, strategic resources, organisational capacity), it has largely overlooked the demand side. By doing so, Klandermans calls attention back to the social-constructionism project of examining not only how frames produce demands but also how these frames arise in the first place from a reservoir of socialised grievances.

While socio-constructionism restored grievances and demands to centre stage by revealing the process of their cultural construction, it largely bracketed structural aspects, treating economic and institutional constraints as background “data” for framing work. The early 1990s saw a turn to new social movement theory (NSM), which reintegrates these aspects by arguing that post-industrial protests cannot be understood apart from the economic and structural transformations that shape identity-based claims (Buechler, 1995, p. 441). NSM rejects both class reductionism and economic determinism, showing how the shift from industrial to service- and knowledge-based economies generates new grievances and demands related to gender, environment, ethnicity, and lifestyle. By situating demands within these historically specific social formations, NSM deepens our analysis: it traces not only the cultural logics of recognition and identity but also the material conditions that give such demands their political purchase. This theory’s contribution will be considered in the next section.

B. New Social Movements?

New² social movement (NSM) theory reconceptualises demands not merely as by-products of struggles over resources or over framing, but as symptoms and agents of profound structural–

² Regarding the debate on the novelty of ‘new’ social movements, Karl-Werner Brand (1990) suggests that “new social movements” are the latest manifestation of a cyclical pattern that has been evident for well over a century. In this argument, new social movements and their predecessors appeared in cyclical phases in response to cultural crises and critiques of modernization. In the latest cycle, a mix of moral-idealistic and aesthetic counter-cultural critiques of modernisation, along with a pessimistic civilisation critique, provided the stimuli for new social movements. However, Brand argues that similar periods of culture critique prompted similar movements around 1840 and 1900 in Britain, Germany and the United States. In various ways, these critics suggest that new social movements are continuous with past movements and are simply the latest manifestation of a cycle or a long wave

cultural change in post-industrial societies. Drawing on Castells's notion of collective consumption (2015), Touraine's post-industrial social actors (1981), Habermas's critical theory (1984), and Melucci's semiotic analysis, NSM scholars locate demands within a historically specific social formation, one in which economic reorganisation, cultural pluralisation, and shifting patterns of work and leisure actively shape what people demand and why (Buechler, 1995, p. 442). Three interconnected implications arise regarding the formation of demand within this framework:

First, demands are seen as identity projects. In a service and knowledge economy, collective claims over gender, environment, ethnicity, and lifestyle emerge not from class position alone but from struggles for recognition. Demands therefore become identity claims that articulate new subjectivities in response to changing modes of production and consumption.

Secondly, there is an assumed cultural–economic synthesis. NSM argues that grievances are dialectically bound to both material structures and cultural codes: demands express real economic dislocations, precarious labour, declining welfare, and simultaneously invoke symbols, rituals, and narratives that resonate in civil society. And thirdly, there is a structural milieu for framing. Unlike framing theory, which treats structural conditions as raw input for interpretive work, NSM theorises those conditions as an active background: the transformation of capitalism itself supplies the very condition of possibility and content of demands, delimiting which grievances surface and which symptoms of discontent acquire political traction.

By infusing analysis with this macro–micro integration, NSM advances our understanding of demand beyond tactical negotiations or narrative constructions. It maps what

of social protest movements. These critics see all these movements as romantic, cultural, idealistic, and even antimodern responses to patterns of societal evolution and modernisation, rather than being new. (Buechler, 1995, p. 448).

is demanded (recognition, lifestyle options, environmental justice), why those demands resonate (structural–cultural shifts), and how they articulate new forms of collective identity in advanced capitalist societies.

By tracing three successive paradigms, this section has shown how the study of demand has shifted across levels of analysis and political stakes. Resource mobilisation treated grievances as structural constants and reduced demand to an instrumental currency, asking why some grievances translate into successful protest amid the strategic deployment of money, labour, and elite ties. Framing theory then brought the understanding of demand down to the micro-cultural level, illuminating how interpretive work punctuates, links, and transforms latent grievances into coherent demands, and how master frames can govern which claims flourish and which sink. New social movement theory broadened the lens to a socio-political register, situating demands within post-industrial, identity-based struggles over recognition, rights, and lifestyle. NSM redefined the successful articulation of demand not just in terms of repertoires of contention but as the expression of new collective subjectivities.

Across all three approaches, questions of emergence (why demands surface), content (what they say), and selection (why some claims succeed while others fail) remain central, yet each paradigm falls short of pointing to the philosophical core of demand: what, truly, is being asked and why it matters. The next section turns to the politics of recognition, a more explicitly political-philosophical terrain that questions not only how demands are constructed and organised but also what they aim to transform in terms of social values, reshaping public institutions, and affirming the dignity of political subjects. From this perspective, politics of recognition doesn't merely concern itself with describing how demands form or with explaining why they sweep through societies; it focuses on the normative dimension of demand articulation: asking what demands ought to be and on what grounds they may claim legitimacy and justice. Although the focus remains on the debate of recognition and identity, the section

will highlight important elements that are commonly related to the concept of demand in the attempt to understand what scholars working from this theoretical approach assume about the nature and role of demand.

II. Politics of Recognition

Thus far, demand has been treated as a structural, cultural, or identity effect. As anticipated above, this section turns to political philosophy and asks not only where or how claims emerge, but why they can claim democratic legitimacy. Despite differences among the theorists discussed (Taylor, 1992; Habermas, 1994, 1996, 2009; Fraser 1990, Fraser et al, 2003), the analysis is organised around a shared set of questions: how each defines “demand,” where these are voiced, how they become legitimised, and what—or who—remains outside. The section will first revisit the Taylor–Habermas debate (Taylor 1992; Habermas 1994), focusing specifically on how each theorist situates demands within their broader accounts of rights, deliberation, and political struggle. The Fraser–Honneth (2003) debate will be considered next, contrasting Fraser’s arguments on linking cultural recognition with economic redistribution against Honneth’s threefold theory of recognition in the spheres of love, law, and solidarity. Throughout, the focus will be on what demand articulations mean for these theories—the normative claims they embody—and why they the broader set of issues in the context of which demands are articulated are understood to be essential for reshaping the moral and institutional foundations of democratic life.

A. Recognition is Something to be Demanded

Following the publication of Charles Taylor's controversial work, *The Politics of Recognition* (1992), many scholars have questioned the role that recognition and identity should play in

contemporary multicultural societies. Taylor treats recognition as a distinctly modern phenomenon: whereas in pre-modern contexts in which one's worth was secured for them through their standing in a hierarchical, honour-based, divinely sanctioned social order, in modernity recognition is no longer something naturally bestowed upon an agent but must instead be actively demanded by them. For Taylor, two quite different issues become problematic in the modern context. On the one hand, there is a demand for the equal dignity of all individuals, to be guaranteed through universalist politics. On the other hand, there is a demand for recognition of everyone's unique identity, associated with the politics of difference—yet this, too, claims universal validity (Cooke, 1997). Every demand, he argues, is rooted in a need for recognition; this need fuels a wide range of claims which are linked to demands for identity recognition (Taylor, 1992). Identity, for Taylor, is shaped by recognition—or its absence—and this shaping occurs in both private and public spheres. Drawing on Hegel's idea that self-consciousness seeks to cognise itself *as* such by obtaining recognition from another self-consciousness, Taylor suggests that the discourse of identity recognition functions in the 'intimate sphere' as a space for developing identity through dialogue and struggle with significant others, and in the 'public sphere' through political conflicts, where political conflicts around equal recognition of differences have become central. These public struggles constitute, for Taylor, the foundation of today's politics of rights. Thus, the subjective, social and political spheres are linked through a chain of need→demand→ identity. Figure 1.1 illustrates this chain, showing how needs, demands, and identity are interconnected for Taylor in these various spheres and processes.

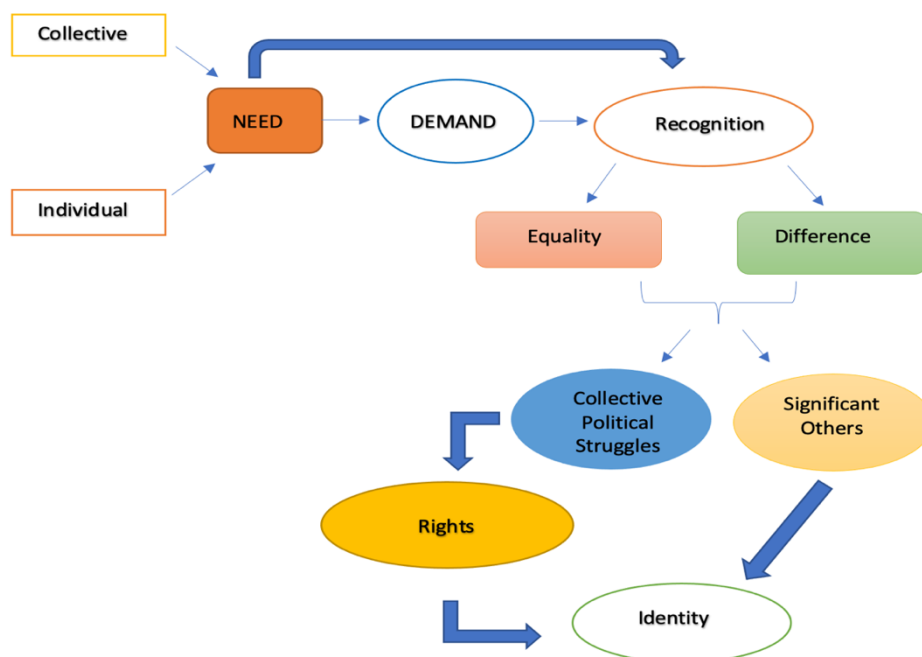


Figure 1.1. Summary of Taylor’s politics of recognition and identity in relation to demand

In Taylor’s theory, demand acts as the hinge of the argument: every public claim is ultimately the articulation of an inner need for recognition—an essential kernel of the self that seeks acknowledgement. The “need → demand” movement drives the ongoing formation of identity and, in doing so, stitches together the individual, the social, and the political spheres. Because demands travel across these levels, the category becomes a privileged entry point for debating representation, rights, and democratic legitimacy.

Yet this very architecture invites three lines of critique. (a) Essentialism: grounding demand in a pre-dialogical “inner self” risks reifying identity and importing that fixity into social and political arenas; what begins as a psychological need easily hardens into a substantive claim about what society owes to the agent. (b) Dialogue without translation rules: although Taylor posits a dialogical process, he leaves opaque how private needs become publicly recognisable demands—how the intimate sphere is transposed into the public one, and by which criteria a particular or collective claim gains universal significance, how an

individual's struggle becomes public rather than merely an internal quest for recognition from a significant other. How does a specific demand acquire universal significance? (c) Normative-liberal blind spots: Taylor's rejection of liberal neutrality exposes real exclusions, but he offers no procedural account for adjudicating between competing recognition claims once neutrality is abandoned. Who, in other words, decides which demands count as legitimate? By what rights framework or institutional procedure are conflicts to be settled without reinstalling new exclusions? If every demand for identity is ultimately a demand for recognition, what institutional mechanisms decide which demands are publicly validated and which remain marginal? Taylor distinguishes "needs" from articulated "demands," but offers no clear account of the democratic passage from one to the other—how a felt need becomes a publicly authoritative claim. Taylor tells us why recognition matters normatively, but not how a pluralist democracy should process conflicting cognitive demands without re-inscribing exclusion. These unresolved questions—about procedures, rights, and the processing of conflicting demands—set the stage for Habermas's procedural answer, which will now be explored.

B. Individual Rights for Collective Demands

The breadth and evolution of Habermas's oeuvre spans beyond the narrow focus of this section, which is to consider how the concept of demand is theorised within his recognition/democracy project. His work progresses through three interconnected stages—(1) *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), where distorted communication in the lifeworld leads to calls for mutual recognition; (2) the 1994 essays on post-national democracy, which reinterpret these calls as constitutional demands to be handled through legal and procedural safeguards; and (3) the deliberative turn (1996, 2009), in which individual rights are seen as the ongoing outcomes of citizens' struggles in a "political arena." In this section, these shifts will matter only to mark the genealogy of Habermas's conception of demand. For analytical purposes, the diagram

and discussion below take the 1994–1996 deliberative formulation as the operative model. This is because here Habermas specifies most clearly what demand is, where it is voiced and how it is legitimised. In accordance with the aim of this section, Habermas’s theorisation of demand as part of the wider debate on the politics of recognition will be examined.

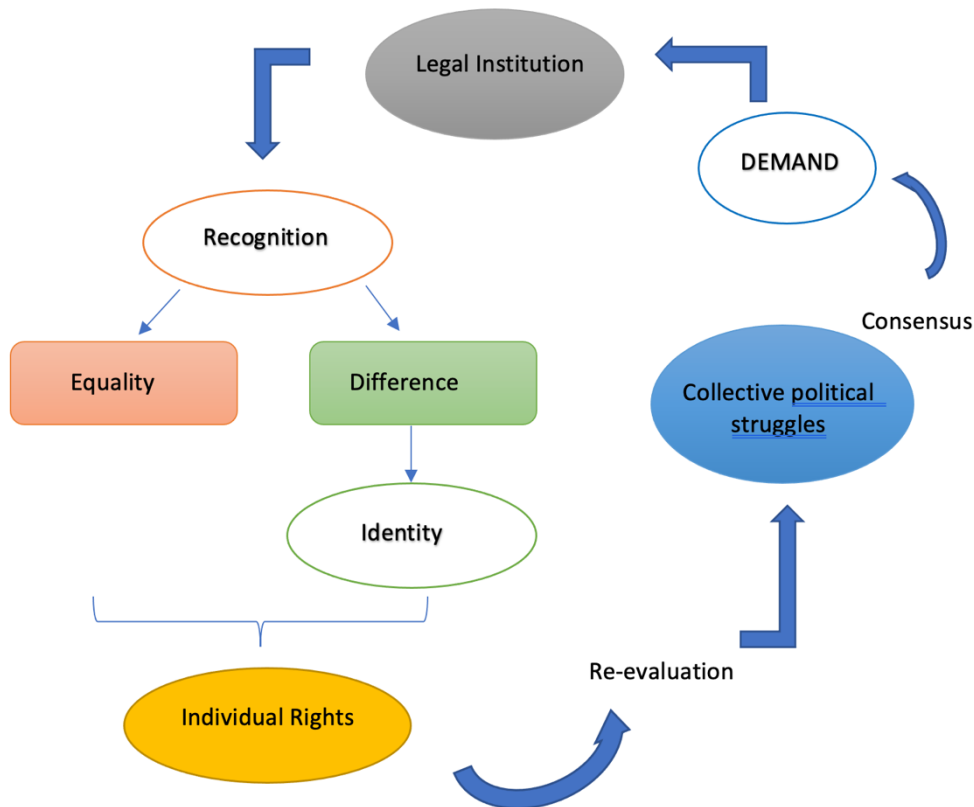
Habermas’s (1994) response to Taylor’s theory of recognition raises the following question as a guiding thread: ‘Can a theory of rights that is so individualistically constructed adequately address struggles for recognition in which it is the articulation and assertion of collective identities that seem to be at stake?’ (p.107). In this work, Habermas aims to answer Taylor’s question regarding the legitimacy of individual rights as a response to collective demands, by proposing that a dynamically constituted system of rights can translate collective demands into legitimate public representation. Taylor assumed that protecting collective identities conflicts with the right to equal, individual freedom—Kant’s original human right. Habermas argues that the opposition is falsely drawn and criticises Taylor’s diverse conception of the good life, according to which different individuals promote particular conceptions of the good life (Cooke, 1997). He defends the ethical neutrality of law and politics, arguing that only such neutrality can respect what different individuals take to be a good life. Moreover, Habermas contends that it is unnecessary to alter the system of rights to address collective struggles, since those struggles are, in a sense, already implied within it. Starting from the constitutional character and legal self-understanding of modern societies, Habermas (1994) presupposes a citizens’ agreement to a state sanctioned relation of intersubjective recognition (p. 107). In other words, individuals come together to be recognised—and to secure everyone’s recognition—through law. Habermas establishes different spheres concerning political power: the institutionalised handling of problems and the procedurally regulated mediation of interests by the system of rights. And, to address Taylor’s collective demand/individual rights dilemma, Habermas adds a further sphere, the “political arena,” where ‘collective actors confront one

another over collective goals and the distribution of collective goods' (p. 108). Accordingly, individual rights are, for him, the crystallised outcome of what has already been publicly discussed and agreed upon by the political community.

Habermas proposes that civil and human rights are coextensive in their origin. In this view, democracy should secure and institutionalise the conditions under which individuals can communicate and reach rational agreements about their rights (Habermas, 1996). In other words, a democratic politics should legally guarantee the equal rights of everyone to participate in the political process through free communication, discussion and deliberation. Although Habermas (2009) restores a certain version of a liberal and Kantian conception of freedom, he criticises the liberal administrative view of the state, where models of rational choice are assumed to uphold societal agreements on individual rights. He also takes issue with the liberal model for presuming that political subjects formally endowed with equal rights for political participation are equally equipped with the capacity to *actually* exercise these rights, failing to consider that not every member of the community has an equally developed communicative ability to articulate and express their demands in the political arena. Additionally, he rejects the republican idea of collective will, where the state assumes a merely automated bureaucratic function, arguing that this view expects too much from citizens by assuming they will consistently act as politically engaged subjects to defend their civil rights.

The conception of the state developed in Habermas' theory involves a dynamic process where various elements—such as political struggle and legal institutions—contribute to the creation of individual rights, with demand seen as a result of collective struggle agreements (see figure 1.2):

Figure
1.2.



Habermas (1994-1996) graphical model of politics of recognition and identity in relation to demand

As the diagram shows, Habermas presupposes a different definition and role for demand. In Taylor, a demand springs from an inner need—an essential kernel that seeks recognition. In Habermas, by contrast, a demand is a claim to justification: its validity hangs on reasons that others could, in principle, accept. The process is a visible loop—informal articulation → public testing → legal codification → renewed contestation—that neither posits nor thematises an inner drive as its motor. The demands of agents are co-originated in the public arena, where collective struggles surface, and they matter to politics only insofar as they can enter procedures of justification and be translated into (revisable) rights.

If Taylor asks what a demand voices (the need for recognition), Habermas asks how a demand moves—through which informal publics and formal institutions it is rendered

legitimate—thereby also feeding back into identity struggles. Normatively, Taylor starts from the principle that both dignity and difference must be recognised to secure a common good; Habermas grounds legitimacy instead in procedural rights and rational–deliberative testing. For Habermas, what is required is a dynamic, self-revising system of rights: citizens, as joint authors and addressees of the law, continually justify, reinterpret, and expand those rights through inclusive public deliberation. Legitimacy comes from ongoing practices of justification, not from embedding substantive ethical content in the constitution. Social movements are crucial here: they dramatise inequalities, push demands into the public sphere, and can eventually crystallise new individual rights.

Even if this move dissolves Taylor’s supposed clash between collective demands and individual rights—and highlights collective struggle as constitutive of the rights system—it leaves the category of demand with unresolved problems. Why must the endpoint still be cast as individual rights? Although Habermas locates demand in arenas where actors “encounter one another” and negotiate until agreement, the very procedures that promise inclusion can serve actual exclusion. Which differences cannot be translated into the rational–discursive idiom required for consensus? How are non-accepted (and thus non-represented) demands handled? Can deliberation really accommodate alterity under an ideal of full inclusion? And, more basically, how do demands arise in the first place? Habermas tells us the path a demand ideally ought to follow and how it ought to be validated, but leaves open an ineliminable remainder—claims that cannot (or refuse to) be rendered within justificatory procedures.

It is precisely this remainder that propels the next move in this chapter’s theoretical overview.

Nancy Fraser reframes the problem of recognition and representation by juxtaposing recognition with redistribution. Her theory shifts the focus from the question of the justification of cognitive claims to the question of which kinds of claims (identity, class, status) ought to be considered together, and by what criteria of “parity of participation,” if justice is to be done.

In what follows, Fraser's theory will be expounded to consider how the demand for recognition can be recast without eclipsing material inequality—and to test whether her pragmatic model copes better (or differently) than Habermas's with the surplus of unmet, misrecognised, or untranslatable demands.

C. Redistribution, Recognition, and Identity

Contemporary politics is animated by struggles over identity (Huddy, 2001), and these struggles keep the notion of demand at the centre. Demands for recognition function as acts of self-naming, voicing wrongs, and linking those wrongs to larger struggles about resources and justice. In the previous sections, it was seen how Taylor anchors demand in an inner need for recognition, and Habermas recast it as a publicly justified claim that must pass through deliberative procedures. Yet both leave open key questions: Which identities should count? How do demands for recognition relate to material inequality? Why do some demands crowd out others?

The Fraser–Honneth (2003) exchange takes these questions headon. Fraser asks how to prioritise and combine identitybased and classbased demands under the standard of “parity of participation.” Honneth, by contrast, roots demands in experiences of misrecognition and theorises the normative spheres through which recognition must be institutionalised. Turning to this debate allows the analysis to probe which demands are legitimised, on what grounds, and with what consequences for justice in plural societies.

Fraser develops a critique of identity-based struggles, arguing that the contemporary emphasis on identity has relegated struggles for redistribution to a secondary place (Alcoff, 2007; Fraser et al., 2003). In her view, current mobilisation has revived the old opposition of “race and class,” which she recasts as struggles for redistribution (class, labour, the poor, welfare rights) versus struggles for recognition (race, gender, sexuality). Redistributive

demands—seeking a more just distribution of resources and wealth—have dominated theories of social justice for roughly 150 years; but now, she contends, a second kind of claim surges in the name of justice: a demand for a “difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect” (Fraser, 2003, p. 7). She concludes that one must reformulate recognition demands so that these two kinds of struggles can be brought together.

Fraser’s argument stems from her analytical work on social movements, where she draws a practical and conceptual distinction between movements of recognition, which accentuate and valorise differentiation, and movements of redistribution, which tend toward de-differentiation. (see figure 1.3).

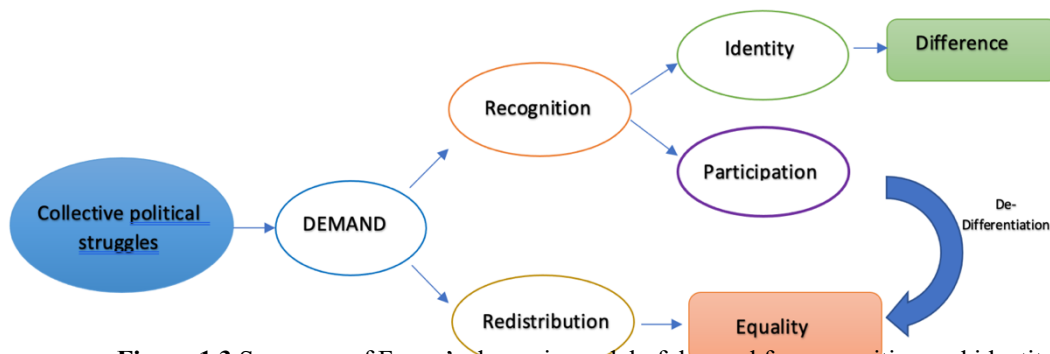


Figure 1.3 Summary of Fraser’s dynamic model of demand for recognition and identity

As is possible to see from the diagram, what is at stake in Fraser’s argument is the reconfiguration of the demand for recognition as fundamentally an identity claim. Although this is not entirely incompatible with Taylor’s and Habermas’s perspectives—both of which see identity emerging from a demand for recognition—Fraser argues that recognition primarily produces differentiation rather than equality. In her view, recognition claims “often take the form of calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group and then of affirming its value” (Fraser, 1997, p. 31). They thus reinforce group boundaries, whereas redistributive claims “call for abolishing economic arrangements that

underpin group specificity” and thereby promote dedifferentiation (ibid.). Recognition does not necessarily imply equality; it can, in fact, work against redistributive justice. From this perspective, Fraser perspective assumes that some demands should be prioritised over others and that the demands of difference must be reframed so that they also advance equality. Her focus is pragmatic and centres the attention on the strategy of political mobilisation. Demands in this sense need to be framed in a way that has a certain effect on the addressee.

While this is valuable for showing how identity-based claims can eclipse other kinds of demands and for reintroducing class into the analysis of recognition, it leaves little room for the spontaneous, affective, or “uncontrolled” dimensions of struggle and for the messy process by which demands can be articulated. Social movements appear largely as strategic phenomena—as if the task were simply to “reorient” their focus. On this view, however, it is unclear why certain demands erupt when they do, or why some identity claims come to dominate over redistributive ones. Questions regarding the limits of strategy also arise. Can social unrest and its public expression be steered, and if so, how far? What becomes of demands that cannot be effectively represented—or even voiced—within the available frames? Moreover, although Fraser is right to flag the political consequences of proliferating differentiation (evidenced, for example, in the relentless expansion of human-rights treaties and covenants), she offers a two-track system where those who ask and pose demands confront those who reply and address them. However, she develops far less the “other side” of demand: the position of the addressee. Who receives these claims, how do they answer them, and how might their replies intensify—or dampen—the very identity politics she problematises?

In later works, Fraser develops this insight further by arguing that justice disputes today present a double aspect: they still hinge on first-order questions—“How much redistribution is fair?” or “Which differences deserve recognition?”—but increasingly they give rise to second-order, meta-questions about the very frame within which such issues are decided: “Who

counts as a legitimate member of the community?” and “Which institutions or public fora have the authority to decide?” In a globalising world where states and transnational elites often monopolize the framing process—denying a voice to those they govern—misframing becomes an injustice in itself. Therefore, justice theory must expand beyond its traditional two-dimensional focus on distribution and recognition to a three-dimensional perspective that explicitly incorporates representation: the contested politics of who gets to set the terms, who is heard, and which collective is considered relevant.

This later work explicitly adds a new layer by drawing a clear distinction between the informal struggles of civil society and the formal procedures of institutions that confer institutional recognition—and thus determine who “counts.” As she writes:

For the time being, efforts to democratise the process of frame-setting are confined to contestation in transnational civil society. Indispensable as this level is, it cannot succeed so long as there exist no formal institutions that can translate transnational public opinion into binding, enforceable decisions. In general, then, the civil-society track of transnational democratic politics needs to be complemented by a formal-institutional track. (footnote 16, Fraser, 2008, p. 85)

This outlines a conception of a two-track system (Monticelli, 2021), where on one side there is civil society and agents within it articulating demands – for redistribution, identity and representation – demands capable of contesting the dominant terms of frame-setting. On the other side there is a second, formal-institutional track, which translates demands articulated within civil society into ‘binding, enforceable decisions’, and thus makes the ultimate decision of ‘Who counts?’, as the question of whose demands receive institutional form. Yet Fraser

leaves open two crucial questions: first, what mechanisms enable these institutions to become responsive to specific demand articulations? Second, how do civil society agents initially surface and frame the issues they contest? Finally, considering the sphere of disputes over framing and its terms, Fraser leaves open the question regarding which spaces should be considered politically central, and thus also how the boundaries of a meaningful political process are to be drawn.

The gaps discussed above—about the affective trigger of claims, the experiential core of injustice, and the reciprocity of recognition between asker and addressee—open directly onto Honneth’s project, which relocates demand in the lived experience of disrespect and grounds its normativity in intersubjective recognition across love, law and solidarity.

D. Demanding an equal chance to be different

Honneth responds to Fraser’s (2003) opposition between recognition of identity and redistribution by arguing that demands for recognition arise from experiences of disrespect; therefore, redistribution must be theorised as one dimension of recognition. He grounds his conception of social justice in intersubjective relations of recognition and maintains that plural societies should institutionalise conditions of social equality as a precondition for everyone’s personal identity development. As he states—drawing on Rawls’s “basic goods,” Raz’s preconditions of wellbeing, and Hegel’s account of free will—his ultimate aim is that “every individual has an equal opportunity to realise their personality” (2003, p. 117).

Normatively, Honneth seeks reciprocal recognition to enable selfrealisation. This requires institutional mechanisms through which individuals can express needs, exercise moral autonomy, and contribute meaningfully to society. He formulates three normative principles that specify what one may legitimately demand: love, meaning primary relationships that

secure basic selfconfidence; juridical equality, that is, rights guaranteeing moral respect; and performance/solidarity, which implies social esteem for one's contributions. Justice, on this view, results from the interplay between these institutionalised principles and the stillunfulfilled individual claims for recognition. (see Figure 1.4)

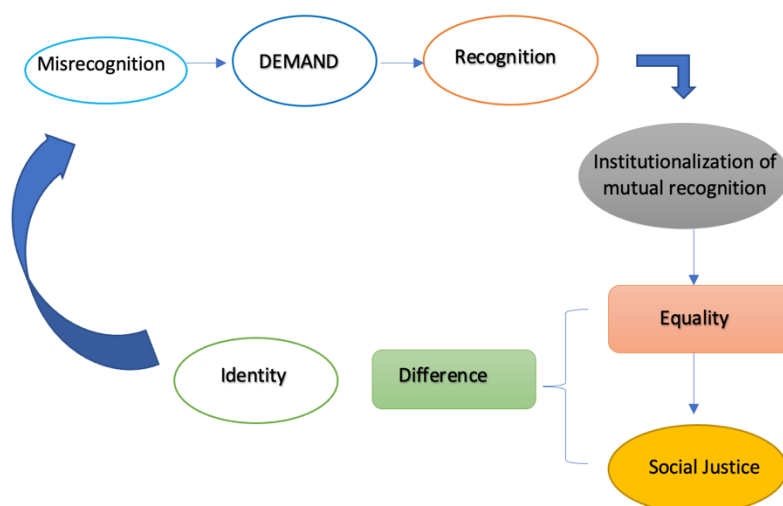


Figure 1.4 Summary of Honneth's politics of recognition in relation to demand

As is possible to see from the diagram above, for Honneth a demand is triggered when misrecognition is experienced; the felt disrespect generates the claim for recognition. Thus, for him, every demand is rooted in a social experience of disrespect which in his perspective should be institutionally addressed to remedy inequality and promote social justice. Just by going through this process a misrecognised identity can truly flourish by obtaining recognition. Honneth's point of departure—the lived experience of misrecognition—replies to Habermas's emphasis on ideal communicative conditions: recognition claims do not always emerge (or succeed) in purely linguistic, rational exchanges. Communication is also corporeal and material; nondiscursive signs of contempt and social invisibility must be analysed (2003, p. 23). From this perspective, Honneth includes a dimension that exceeds the framing of demands in

a clear-cut institutional manner and validates claims that arise in a different form, and in different spheres. However, while Honneth's normative theory enriches the debate on demand by stressing its experiential (psychological and sociological) roots, it also leaves several open gaps. First, the political dimension of the subject remains underdeveloped: the role of collective struggle in the process of self-realisation remains vague. His model also presupposes a standard of what should be recognised—yet it is unclear whether this standard is natural, socially constructed, or historically contingent. Finally, although he rightly supplements Habermas's rationalism, and there is an affirmative gesture towards political spheres and forms of demand articulation overflowing the institutional confines of liberal democracy, it is still unclear how and to whom these are addressed, and by what means they can be validated. Moreover, his calls for institutionalisation risks reintroducing exclusion: which forms of recognition become institutional norms, and how are those left outside addressed? These questions remain open in Honneth's framework.

Although the field of contentious politics richly illuminates how and where demands emerge - whether through structural economic grievances, cultural framing processes, or political identity struggles, it largely treats demands as phenomena to be observed, measured, and linked to organisational repertoires. In contrast, the politics of recognition immerses us into a philosophical-political debate about the very nature of demand: as a claim made by an individual or group for acknowledgment, whose visibility and legitimacy raise ontological questions about what articulations can be legitimately recognised as articulations of demand and by whom. This perspective compels a rethinking of representation- why certain claims gain recognition while others remain invisible, and to confront the normative dilemma of balancing equality and difference in plural societies. It highlights protests as the arenas where recognition demands surface and social identities are negotiated, highlighting the “ask-reply” axis implicitly posited by a demand articulation, thus allowing an explicit investigation of demand

by posing questions such as: ‘Who is doing the recognising?’, and ‘What role does protest play in eliciting that recognition?’. Above all, the politics of recognition reveals the function of demand itself, as the connective tissue linking structural, cultural, and identity dimensions of collective action.

Moreover, these debates about recognition reveal that demand is not just an empirical, descriptive phenomenon but a category with a normative function indispensable for democratic debates. Such debates, as previously shown, are conducted on the basis of different conceptions of democracy: Habermas’s ideal of deliberative consensus, Taylor’s dialogical politics of self-affirmation, Fraser’s principle of parity of participation and Honneth’s reciprocal recognition. Each thinker sees demand as the vehicle by which citizens claim place for themselves within a particular democratic framework. Accounting for collective action as a primary field of political contention, their argument is built around two main questions: (1) a normatively oriented question concerning which demands deserve public and institutional recognition; and (2) a procedurally oriented question concerning the institutional means through which demands receive such recognition within democratic societies. While Taylor highlights why recognition demands matter for identity and mutual respect, he leaves open how these demands translate into institutionally legitimate forms. Although Habermas’s theory fares a lot better on the procedural front than Taylor’s, the overly rationalistic cast of his model creates problems of the opposite kind, above all appearing to filter out types of demand that resist validation through standard justificatory procedures and which may even refuse effective representation in language. Fraser’s theory rebalances cognitive with redistributive claims, systematically illuminating neglected aspects of political demand by revitalising the categories of class and inequality, yet her pragmatic focus on parity also threatens to lapse into an overly proceduralist view of democracy.

All of the theorists discussed above provide different responses to the normative question concerning which demands deserve validation through recognition. Although these normative accounts are cogently articulated and defended on their own terms, neither provides a satisfactory answer to a key question: how do unspoken, unrepresented, or even (to some degree) un-representable demands break into the political process? While Habermas's idea of consensus offers a procedural model for how competing claims can reach rational agreement within democratic deliberation, it still presupposes that demands must become linguistically articulable and communicatively valid to enter the political domain. Honneth's approach, by contrast, situates recognition within a social-psychological framework that partially acknowledges the affective and pre-discursive dimensions of misrecognition, yet it ultimately translates these experiences back into a moral grammar of justice that remains bound to recognisability. A much fuller and more comprehensive response to the question is articulated by post-structuralist approaches. The following Section III will therefore present a post-structuralist analytical framework for the study of demand, one which recovers the constitutive dissensus at the heart of political life largely obscured by other theoretical approaches, and reframes democracy as an ongoing struggle over which demands are heard, validated, and transformed.

III. Post-structuralist Approaches to Demand

The next section shifts the focus from the institutional and procedural questions raised by the politics of recognition to a set of post-structuralist debates that take collective mobilisation seriously as the site where demands both appear and unsettle existing orders. These debates do not simply add another layer to the earlier accounts. Rather, they reconceive the ontological premises underpinning recognition theory, that is, about identity, agency, and society and indeed of what a "demand" is in the first place, and in so doing call for a reassessment of the

Hegelian philosophical legacy that informs its conceptual foundations. While Taylor (1992), Habermas (1994, 1996), Honneth, and Fraser (2003) operate with what might be called a positive ontology—a relatively stable “society” and a coherent notion of a subject whose deficits can be remedied through mutual recognition - post-structuralists adopt an anti-foundationalist stance (Marchant, 2018). They insist that neither society nor identity is ever fully sutured, and that every act of recognition or institutional closure is provisional, precarious, and always already haunted by what it excludes or cannot account for.

In Rancière’s (1999, 2016) reinterpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, politics does not, and could not, culminate in recognition. It could never come to a final closure because it begins, perpetually, in disagreement: the fracture of the social order that makes visible the exclusions embedded in any presumed consensus. Laclau and Mouffe, drawing on Lacanian notions of lack, likewise replace Hegel’s self-enclosed totality with a social field marked by radical contingency—where identity and hegemonic orders are temporary suturings of difference. From this perspective, demands cease to be simply “asks” directed at a pre-existing polity to fill normative gaps; they become moments of rupture that disclose the unstable ground of the existing social order and enable the construction (and contestation) of collective political projects. Identity no longer awaits recognition as a fixed kernel; it emerges as a contingent effect of chains of demand. The political, then, shifts from institutional replies toward an ongoing struggle over who is entitled to speak, which grievances count, and how the very procedures for hearing and answering are themselves re-made.

In what follows, the section first develops Rancière’s (1999) intervention and then turns to Laclau and Mouffe (2014) to elaborate how demand functions as the articulatory force that both fractures and reconstitutes political orders. That will set up the subsequent argument for why Laclau’s post-structuralist framework provides the most promising point of departure for an understanding of political demand and why it must be supplemented, in Chapter 2, with

Lacanian psychoanalysis, in light of the new contemporary movements that highlight the ungraspable aspect of demand.

A. Rancière's Turn to Dissensus

Rancière's debate with Honneth over the theory of recognition vividly illustrates the emphasis on contingency (Honneth & Rancière, 2016). He criticises Honneth's institutional forms of recognition by arguing that, even before any demand for recognition between established partners, there is already (1) a dispute over the object of the dispute, (2) a dispute over the very existence of a dispute, and (3) a dispute over the parties confronting each other (p. 55). In other words, in any social discussion, the place, the object, and the subject of the dispute are themselves an object of contestation, of disagreement.

For Rancière, politics starts precisely when the subject called to take part in the struggle is challenged. To assume, as Habermas and Honneth do, that valid conditions for expressing a demand already exist is to overlook that the way and even the very ability of each party to participate in the *logos* of rational discussion is itself subject to dispute (p. 43). He therefore rejects the goal of reaching consensus or relying on pre-established forms of recognition; instead, he locates the origin of politics in disagreement. In Rancière's terms, disagreement is an inherent conflict in human relations, expressed in a speech situation where interlocutors both understand and misunderstand one another at the same time. Only when a part of society, those who have "no part", speaks and acts to demand does politics truly takes place.

In contrast to recognition theories, Rancière argues that political emergence happens when the existing social order fails. Drawing on Machiavelli's distinction between *populus* and *plebs*, he explores how the *populus* - the constituted, represented part of society, relates to the *plebs*, the excluded, unrepresented remainder (Rancière, 1999; Vatter, 2012a, 2012b). The *plebs* play a crucial role in his framework: politics arises when the "part of no part" disrupts the social

order in the name of the empty principle of universality. The demands that emerge in this context are inherently disruptive and novel, as they cannot be anticipated or represented within the existing institutional framework.

From Rancière's (1999) perspective, the *populus* represents constitutive power as already fixed and represented, while the *plebs* correspond to an uncountable, emerging force not yet integrated into this order. His concepts of *populus* and *plebs* shed light on dynamics also present in recognition theory, such as the underlying motivations in Taylor's notion of demand, Habermas's "needs" and "claims" before reaching deliberative agreement, and Honneth's claims to pre-linguistic or emotional forms of recognition. By highlighting the *plebs* and the disruptive potential of their demands, Rancière present this as a key element in social and political change. Rancière does not elevate demand to the driving engine of politics; instead, he exposes the interruption that creates the conditions of possibility for new articulations. It is to that opening, the moment of rupture, that Laclau responds, placing demand at the centre and showing how those ruptural claims can be linked in chains of equivalence to constitute a new people and a new hegemonic project.

B. Laclau's Demand as the Minimal Unit

Rancière's account still leaves open how those disruptive moments of dissensus develop into lasting political subjects and projects. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (2014) collaborative intervention in HSS can be seen as a first step in that direction: they take the opening produced by rupture seriously and, borrowing from post-structuralist and Lacanian sources, begin to theorise how unsettled claims might be articulately linked. Mouffe's (1994) later work emphasises the agonistic nature of politics, conflict as constitutive rather than pathological, while Laclau's later work, *OPR* (2005), makes this move explicit by further positioning demand at the centre of political formation. There, he expands on the *plebs/populus*

distinction, arguing that when the *plebs* - those who have no part in the political community, wish to participate, they not only want to be part of the political society but also expect to become the *populus*, or the whole of that society (Vatter, 2012a). Laclau associates the *populus* with the “logic of representation”, while the *plebs* are linked to the “logic of expression”, focusing his attention on the construction of the *populus*, which he calls “the people”. Following this argument, Laclau distinguishes between two types of demands: intra-systemic and inter-systemic. The former, what he calls “democratic demands”, can be accommodated within the existing social order and operate through the logic of representation. The latter, “popular demands”, challenge that order and function according to the logic of expression. Popular demands typically remain unsatisfied and, in their unfulfilled status, form the basis of populism: when particular plebeian claims are linked together in chains of equivalence by a leader, they coalesce into a new collective subject, “the people,” capable of confronting the established regime (Laclau, 2005, p. 127). This process of articulation is double-edged: while it constructs a new “people” and a potential alternative order, it simultaneously divides society into antagonistic camps. In this framework, the plebs, those without a recognized part in the existing order, initiate ruptural popular demands, and the emergent people (the *populus*) is the newly constituted subject that gives those demands institutional and political weight. Populism, then, can be understood as a form of hegemony in which these popular, inter-systemic demands are welded together to produce a new “we,” confronting and reconfiguring the old order.

In this post-structuralist and psychoanalytically inflected framework, every act of rupture, every plebeian claim, must be understood as a demand that both links disparate grievances and helps constitute a new political identity. Consequently, demand becomes the fundamental unit of politics (Laclau, 2005, p. 73), the hinge through which ruptural openings are sedimented into enduring collective subjects and hegemonic projects. Having mapped this theoretical terrain, the analysis now steps back to interrogate what has been at stake across the

broader literature: how demand has been treated, where it appears, and the different ways in which the basic scene of asking and replying has been configured.

IV. Discussion

This discussion unfolds in three parts. First, it examines the conceptual neglect of demand, showing that despite its ubiquity across social and political theory, “demand” often remains under-theorised and is conflated with adjacent categories such as “claim” or “grievance.” Second, it considers the role of political struggle in the emergence of demand, tracing how contentious politics, recognition theory, and post-structuralism each locate the moments of mobilisation and contestation. Finally, it analyses the implicit ask–reply frame that structures these traditions, tracing how each reconfigures the relationship between those who ask and those who reply—from the scripted exchange of recognition, through Rancière’s ruptural dissensus, to Laclau’s response via the “people.”

A. Demand as an elusive concept

All of these approaches show that, while demand is ever-present and serves as an entry point into diverse political debates, the category itself is often taken for granted, being frequently used interchangeably, and conflated with, concepts like “ask,” “claim,” or “grievance.” Although some scholars within the contentious politics tradition (e.g., Klandermans, 2004) distinguish between grievances and constituted demands, and Taylor, in the politics of recognition, differentiates “needs” from “demands,” the concept remains underdeveloped: its precise definition or analytic role is rarely examined. It is only in Ernesto Laclau’s work that one finds a sustained, targeted analytical focus on demand and a clear inquiry into its distinctive role in political formation.

B. Political Struggle as the Crucible of Demand

It is interesting to note how all of these perspectives consider political struggle the primary site where demands arise. This matters because struggles are often the scene in which demands first emerge. In contentious politics, mobilisations are the focus, yet it is the demands themselves that signal discontent, mark potential success, shape movement identity, and indicate broader social change. In the politics of recognition, struggles are again the privileged site where demands surface; often inspired by Western protests of the 1960s and '70s, these theories question the ideal of identity recognition, and demands for difference and equality lead scholars to examine the procedures needed to ensure a good life in democratic societies. The site of struggle takes different connotations for each scholar, but at least two basic assumptions underlie these theories: the need to recognise those who demand, and the need for formal procedures to ensure they are heard. In other words, a demand begins in political struggle and only “succeeds” when it encounters agreement in an institutional outcome.

Post-structuralist approaches, in contrast, make a U-turn toward disagreement, arguing that the focus on the emergence of political struggles is crucial, and that what breaks the path to agreement - what is unrepresentable, or who is not being represented - should provide the basis of a radical democracy: one that embraces contingency and remains open to contestation. Behind all these accounts lies an implicit ask–reply framework, a scene of what demand implies that each tradition reconfigures in its own way.

C. The Ask-Reply Scene

Finally, considering the scene where demands emerge, where some individual or group asks, something is asked for, and someone else answers, one can argue that an implicit ask–reply axis underpins the study of political demand. There are those who ask and those who reply. Demand thus operates on two levels: it arises with the actors who make a request, whether or not it is a clearly articulated demand, and there is also the level of those who reply, listen, translate, reshape, or contest the demand. Different scholars approach this scene and the way demand ‘travels’ in different ways, sometimes focusing on the ones who demand, sometimes putting the reaction of those who are being addressed at the centre of analysis.

In contentious politics, this scene is implicit in resource mobilisation assumptions: a movement’s success depends on the reaction of its addressee. Similarly, in framing theory the “addressee” is typically an external audience—other citizens, the media, or state actors—who either accept or reject a movement’s interpretive frame. In contrast, New Social Movement scholars (e.g. Castells) show that movements can also treat *themselves* as the addressee, using collective identity building practices to shape internal norms and expectations, and thereby influence how their own demands and tactics evolve. In the politics of recognition, the ask–reply axis is foregrounded: the institutional and normative aims of this approach place focus on the channels, procedures, and rights that respond to emerging claims, raising questions about which voices are heard, how they are translated into institutional demands, and which ones are dismissed as noise. The post-structuralist turn, via Rancière (1999) and Laclau (2005), offers another way to conceptualise this scene: Rancière’s notion of dissensus spotlights the *plebs* as the site of politics, and Laclau’s theory locates the construction of the *populus*, the people, as the very task of politics, showing how demands both fracture and constitute political order. From this perspective, the “ask–reply” axis is itself called into question as an analytical assumption. In the politics of recognition, the focus is put on the political act of agreement – there is an agent making a claim (the ask) to an institutional or social addressee, who is then

supposed to reply through some formal channel. Rancière argues that the *plebs* are those who, by definition, have no recognised place in the established order, including and especially as equal parties to a dispute. When they ask, there is no preexisting script or procedure for a “reply” to them. Their very act of asking is a rupture, it lays bare the structural gap in a system in which one party has no part in any asking and replying to begin with. In other words, the plebeian ask doesn’t fit the ask–reply model of recognition, and that misfit is what creates politics.

V. Conclusion

This chapter has mapped three overlapping issues related to demand: the conceptual neglect of demand (often conflated with claims, grievances, or requests), its emergence in moments of political struggle, and the shifting “ask–reply” scene across contentious politics, recognition theory, and post-structuralism. Most of these theories take as their point of departure the Western mobilisations of the 1960s and ’70s, moments in which identity-based claims—over race, gender, sexuality, culture, and the like—came to the fore and forced a rethinking of who counts and what is owed. Those struggles shaped a particular form of protest: visible demands directed at institutions, seeking recognition, redress, or inclusion. It is in response to these identity claims that post-structuralist accounts first made visible the “ungraspable” of the excess of any political project—the gaps, exclusions, and ruptures that any settled order or act of recognition leaves behind

Different waves of protest—from the Arab Spring, Occupy, and the Yellow Vests to the Chilean *estallido* and other diffuse, leaderless movements—make this ungraspable dimension even more visible. They unsettle the familiar scene in which a clear “ask” is met with an institutional “reply.” Their demands are often ambiguous, affectively charged, and resistant to neat closure, suggesting that existing paradigms (whether instrumental,

recognitional, or merely interpretive) need to be supplemented to capture how demands and political projects are constructed.

From what has been explored in this chapter, this scene of ask and reply requires closer examination. It involves not only the structure of recognition and its failures—the inability of the social order to accommodate certain subjects—but also the translation process through which political expression becomes intelligible as a “demand.” In this sense, demand has generally been understood in two forms: an expressive register, where disturbance takes shape without formalisation, and an institutional register, where it is channelled into claims legible to the current system. Both unfold within what this thesis terms the ask–reply axis: the structural relation through which every political address is organised. The ask names the moment of enunciation—the act of speaking, writing, or appearing that introduces a gap in the current social and political system. The reply designates the discursive operation through which the social attempts to give a response to what appears. Expressive and institutional demands thus both intervene in the gap opened within the social, but they do so differently: the former sustain and expose the openness of the gap, not necessarily with a clear aim, while the latter seek to translate and close it through legible political and institutional articulation.

It is precisely the puzzle that becomes more visible with these new kinds of demand, and with the fraying of the conventional ask–reply script, that motivates a return to demand as a core analytic category. The next chapter undertakes that project in three stages. First, it develops Ernesto Laclau’s post-structuralist theory of demand (HSS and OPR), unpacking his logics of equivalence and difference to show how heterogeneous claims can be linked into a new “we” and how hegemonic projects are contingently constructed. Second, it turns to contemporary movements and examines the literature that, from post-structuralist and psychoanalytically informed perspectives, has emerged to account for these new forms of protest and demand. Finally, the chapter turns to Lacanian theory, via his model of the four

discourses, to offer a way of capturing and working with the ungraspable aspect of demand, which will form the basis for expanding the conceptual framework of political demand.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Framework and Research Strategy: Reassessing demand in light of a distinctive kind of protest

Chapter 1 revisited the concept of demand as understood and mobilised across key strands of social and political theory. It demonstrated how, across frameworks such as contentious politics, recognition theory, and post-structuralist approaches, demand functions not only as a conceptual lens but also as a central category for constructing strategic and normative responses to political struggles, particularly insofar as most of these theories were developed in relation to identity-based mobilisations. Each of these approaches sheds light on the dynamics of political articulation, identity and mobilisation. Yet, they all leave unresolved important questions about the very constitution of demand, especially concerning what remains unarticulated or excessive within processes of political expression. In particular, the chapter highlighted the persistent tension within the ‘ask–reply’ dynamic that underpins many models of political action—namely, the assumption that political agency is structured through a recognisable claim addressed to a responding institution or authority.

As previously discussed, some post-structuralist accounts, particularly those of Rancière and Laclau, begin to contest and displace this schema in their respective theorisations of political struggle. Yet, the emergence of what is here described as ‘open protests’ calls for a renewed theoretical engagement. These are protests that resist traditional demands for representation, suspend the address to an institutional addressee, and privilege affectively charged modes of expression over clear symbolic articulation. The unique force and political productivity of such forms of protest, as the analysis here maintains, lies in keeping the political field open for the sake of insisting on the appearance of something new- something unassimilable within existing logics of recognition and representation. Rather than dismissing such movements as the chaotic expressions of political incoherence or disorganisation, this chapter takes them as calling for a return to the concept of demand itself, focusing on its ungraspable and disarticulated dimensions as sites of theoretical and political productivity. To the end of pursuing this line of inquiry, the present chapter engages a specific body of work, Ernesto Laclau’s theory of discourse and demand articulation, further developing its insights from a Lacanian perspective, particularly via Lacan’s four discourses.

The chapter pursues four interconnected objectives. In the first section, it deepens the theoretical account of political demand through an engagement with Ernesto Laclau’s discourse theory, highlighting both its contributions and its shortcomings, particularly in its capacity to address protest forms that resist or suspend the moment of articulation. While Laclau productively theorises how demands articulate chains of equivalence and construct political frontiers, his framework leaves open questions about how to engage with what remains unarticulated, opaque, or excessive in the structure of the demand itself.

In the second section, it critically reviews key literature diagnosing transformations in contemporary protest, often framed in terms of post-hegemonic, post-foundational, or affective turns. While these accounts illuminate significant shifts and, in many cases, take the category

of demand as central, this chapter advances beyond most of them in two key respects: first, by focusing on the ungraspable or disarticulated dimensions of demand; and second, by critically reworking the ask–reply axis to account for how contemporary protests complicate the relation between demand, its addressee, and the form or possibility of reply. The chapter frames its intervention as addressing this conceptual lacuna within the presented body of literature.

In the third section, the chapter turns to Lacanian discourse theory, particularly Lacan’s four discourses, as a conceptual framework that foregrounds the constitutive excess of discursive structures and offers tools to reconfigure the ask–reply dynamic as traditionally understood within political theory. This section sketches the conceptual resources that Lacan’s four discourses can contribute to the theoretical reappraisal of demand – resources whose significance will be worked through and expanded on in subsequent chapters.

Finally, section four introduces the research strategy through which the conceptual development of the thesis unfolds. Rather than treating protest material as empirical data to be explained or subsumed under a pre-established theoretical frame, the project adopts a retroductive approach (Glynos & Howart, 2019; Laclau, 1990), in which protest cases, especially the Chilean *estallido*, are used not as evidence for the theory but as fragments that press upon, redirect, and extend theoretical categories, while also offering a possible reading of contemporary protests. The 2019 Chilean uprising thus figures here not as a conventional case study but as a situated terrain through which the tensions surrounding the category of demand can be traced. To this specific end, the chapter includes a timeline of key moments in the uprising. Rather than providing a comprehensive history, the timeline serves as a conceptual reference point to which subsequent chapters will return in order to illustrate the theoretical discussion as it progresses. The construction of this timeline followed a retroductive logic—a term that will be developed further in the research strategy section below—where events were identified through the recursive movement between theoretical elaboration and empirical

engagement, reflecting points at which the case illustrated, or complicated key conceptual developments. The timeline therefore serves less as an exhaustive chronology than as a heuristic device that situates the theoretical development of the thesis within the unfolding of the uprising.

In keeping with this orientation, the chapters unfold through a continuous movement between conceptual elaboration and contextual grounding. Theoretical reflection and methodological design are therefore developed in tandem rather than sequentially: each informs and reshapes the other. This structure reflects the retroductive logic guiding the project, in which theoretical categories emerge as results of the inquiry's own movement. For this reason, the chapter proceeds from conceptual reconstruction to methodological articulation without a sharp division between the two.

I. Demands in Laclauian Discourse Theory

Chapter 1 positioned Laclau's later work as pivotal in bringing the category of demand to the forefront of political formation, particularly through the plebs/populus distinction and the differentiation between democratic and popular demands. Following the account Laclau presents in OPR (2005), the chapter outlined how popular demands, typically unmet, can be linked in chains of equivalence, often via the figure of a leader, with the aim of constructing "the people" as a new collective subject capable of confronting the established order. This dual process, he argues, simultaneously opens up new political possibilities and deepens antagonistic divisions.

Building on this overview, the next step is to examine Laclau's theorisation of demand in greater depth. Analysing how he connects demand to the construction of collective identities, the experience of dislocation, and the suturing of political space, allows for a critical assessment of both the strengths and the limitations of his approach, particularly in light of

contemporary protest movements that contest the closure of articulation and the stability of political representation.

This section focuses primarily on OPR (2005) where Laclau offers his most sustained engagement with the theory of demand. It also draws on his earlier collaboration with Chantal Mouffe in HSS, tracing the continuity and transformation from the original theory of articulation to OPR. This shows how, in Laclau's later work, demand assumes a central role – alongside a stronger psychoanalytic inflection and the emphasis on “constructing” the people that emerges as the primary task of politics.

The aim in this section is to supplement Laclau's theory of demand in order to broaden its analytical and critical reach in the social and political field – a task that will be progressively developed in later chapters. In this sense, the section highlights that Laclau's account of articulation already gestures toward a space that resists full symbolisation. The discussion traces how his account manages the resulting tension, showing how his conception of articulation and the construction of “the people” presupposes a particular ask–reply configuration. It also shows how this configuration is intertwined with the central role that political mobilisations occupy in his framework, as already outlined from other perspectives in Chapter 1.

The discussion proceeds in four steps: first, a presentation of Laclau's early work in HSS, second, an in-depth examination of OPR's core concepts and psychoanalytic inflections in relation to demand; third, an introduction to the plebs/populus debate in the context of identity and representation (which will be revisited in the following section); and finally, an assessment of the main strengths and limitations of Laclau's theory of demand, providing the rationale to supplement on the insights of this latter by turning first to the literature on new protests and then to Lacanian theory.

A. Demand in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*

Laclau and Mouffe's HSS (2014) was written at a moment when the political landscape was shifting decisively. The wave of political mobilisation that swept through the 1960s and 1970s—marked by the rise of feminist, ecological, anti-racist, and other identity-based movements—had contested the centrality of the working class as the “natural” agent of social transformation. These movements raised difficult questions for the political organisation and indeed the very identity of the ‘left’: how to account for a plurality of struggles without collapsing them into a class-based logic, and how to reimagine the left’s political project within a post-foundational frame. HSS addresses this impasse by breaking decisively with class essentialism and, indeed, by rejecting the broader assumption of pre-constituted political subjectivity – the idea that any political subject as a stable bearer of identity is given in advance of political struggle rather than constituted in and through it. In the place of these assumptions, HSS proposes a contingent and pluralist view of social struggles in which the analytical and strategic unit is no longer the group or the class – but the demand.

This shift rests on a post-structuralist ontology, drawing primarily on Derridean deconstruction, which insists on the impossibility of full closure and serves as theoretical inspiration for Laclau and Mouffe’s argument that “society does not exist.” For the two, there is no foundational essence to the social; rather, the social is marked by an irreducible gap that renders every social order contingent and provisional. Any apparent closure is only a temporary and fragile configuration, the result of political work that can always be challenged and reconfigured. While this deconstructive insight underpins their notion of hegemony, it also resonates with later Lacanian formulations of lack and non-closure—resonances that this thesis will take up in subsequent section.

The political is thus understood as inseparable from the struggle to suture this constitutive gap, even as such suturing can never be finally or ultimately accomplished. It is on this ontological ground that Laclau and Mouffe develop their project of radical democracy. This project takes the plurality of struggles emerging in the 1960–70s not as deviations from a politics centred around class struggle but as constitutive of the democratic field as such. Radical democracy amounts here to an attempt to institutionalise this plurality – it reconceives the political as an ongoing struggle to suture an impossible social totality, where such suturing must remain perpetually open to contestation and reconfiguration. In this proposed shift, the political emerges as the result of a problem with the very institution of the social. Radical democracy is not grounded in any dogmatic essence of the social but in the affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every such essence. ‘Society’ does not exist – yet power, conflicts, and struggles do. The fixation of social order is always a temporary operation that conceals contingency, making the existing order appear whole and ‘natural’.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe conceptualise the construction of a contingent social order as *hegemony*—a political process grounded in articulation. This refers to the practice through which particular, heterogeneous demands are linked together into a discursive chain that constructs broader political identities or projects. This articulatory process operates through two interrelated logics: the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference. The logic of equivalence simplifies the social field by linking diverse demands through what they share in common, rather than what differentiates them. As demands are articulated together, their particularities are partially suspended, producing a collective identity that stands in opposition to an external force or order. In this way, the logic of equivalence not only unifies disparate struggles but also establishes an antagonistic frontier—a division between those represented within the chain and those positioned as its constitutive outside. It is through this

frontier that the political nature of hegemony, as a contestable and contingent ordering of the social, becomes visible.

Laclau and Mouffe introduce antagonism not as mere opposition or conflict, but as a structural condition of social relations. Antagonism marks the point where the contingency of any social order becomes visible—it marks the point(s) at which the existing order is disrupted by demands or identities that cannot be integrated without transforming that order itself. For example, a demand for reproductive autonomy—such as the right to accessible abortion and contraception—may enter into antagonistic relation with a conservative discourse that frames rights through the lens of individual responsibility within a traditional, heterosexual, nuclear family model, and thus stands in tension with a liberal discourse that conceives rights in terms of personal freedom and equality. While both may invoke a shared vocabulary of rights and freedom, their divergent articulations collide at the level of what constitutes the social order itself, revealing antagonism as a structural feature of sociality rather than as a merely moral or policy-based conflict. This example is offered not as a normative argument about abortion rights, but as an illustration of how antagonistic discursive frontiers emerge even within liberal-democratic frameworks purporting to express universally shared values. The two positions are not just different – they are mutually exclusive in how they define the social. Their clash exposes the impossibility of a neutral social order and forces a re-articulation of meaning. Antagonism is thus the inescapable condition in the constitution of the social that makes hegemonic struggle necessary. It reveals that social orders are not given but constructed - and thus always vulnerable to contestation and displacement. In this sense, antagonism is not an external force or destabilising factor that afflicts a given order merely contingently. Rather, it is a condition internal to all attempts to fix meaning within any given order: antagonism is what makes hegemony possible, and also what threatens it from within.

If the logic of equivalence simplifies political space by drawing antagonistic frontiers, the logic of difference works in the opposite direction. It expands political space by incorporating new demands without necessarily reducing them to a common equivalential signifier. Instead of polarising the field, the logic of difference multiplies connections and recognises diversity, allowing demands to coexist without being condensed. It operates through inclusion and differentiation, enabling the hegemonic order to adapt and absorb contestations. Pushed to its limit, however, this logic can dissolve the very possibility of a frontier—making it difficult to form a collective political identity capable of confrontation. In Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, the tension between these two logics—the equivalential drive to unify through opposition and the differential drive to accommodate and disperse—shapes the dynamics of hegemonic articulation.

Inspired by identity-based protests, HSS breaks with class essentialism by granting struggles around identity and plurality a central place within the leftist project, providing new and significant conceptual tools to think the construction of political projects as contingent and always open to contestation. Yet Laclau and Mouffe’s emphasis lies primarily on construction – not on what drives contingency or dislocation. Demands here are central to thinking contingency since they constitute the basis of the articulation process and thus of any hegemonic project. At the same time, they reveal the limits of that process, especially when considered through the extreme of the logic of difference. This constructional focus—anchored in the suturing function of articulation—will serve as a point of both continuity and departure in OPR, where demand becomes the explicit minimal unit of political analysis, and where psychoanalytic concepts are mobilised to analyse the dynamics of “the people” in populist politics.

B. Laclau in *On Populist Reason*

In OPR (2005), Laclau retains HSS's key concern with the contingent construction of political identities but redirects and deepens this project through a more formal theorisation of how collective subjects—particularly *the people*—are constituted. Whereas in *HSS* the notion of demand already displaced class as the primary unit of political analysis, it remained embedded in a wider strategy of articulating social movements and democratic struggles. In *OPR*, by contrast, Laclau elevates *demand* to the minimal logical unit of the political as such, abstracting it from any specific social content. This shift allows him to theorise the formal process by which heterogeneous demands, when unmet, can be articulated through chains of equivalence that construct new political projects and give rise to a collective subject such as *the people*. This new focus redefines the construction of hegemony not merely as a strategy of identity articulation but as a process of subject formation, where what is at stake is the emergence of 'the people' as a political force. Psychoanalytic concepts—such as lack, identification, and the categories related to the logic of the signifier—are mobilised to grasp the affective and symbolic dimensions of this process, marking a significant shift in the Laclauian project. In this context, populism is understood not as a pathology of democracy but as a logic of political construction that exposes the mechanisms by which collective identities are forged and antagonisms created.

OPR treats demand the foundational unity of political analysis. Laclau distinguishes between different types and stages of demand that emerge within the articulation of a new political project. Initially, social demands are formulated as requests addressed to the system through institutional channels. If they are satisfied, then, as he puts it, that is 'the end of the matter' (p.73). However, if they fail to be satisfied, they may persist as claims, which can then either remain isolated or begin to be articulated in links with other unfulfilled claims. Drawing on insights of HSS, Laclau notes that when such demands can no longer be accommodated within the logic of difference – the system's capacity to absorb and neutralise particularities –

they begin to exert dislocatory pressure, exposing the contingency of the social order and potentially initiating a new chain of equivalence. At this point, demands undergo a transformation: they cease to seek satisfaction within the existing institutional framework and instead acquire a political character, entering into what Laclau calls ‘the populist logic’. This is the moment when they become politically constitutive, forming the basis for the construction of a collective subject—the people—that confronts the established order. This framework allows Laclau to distinguish democratic demands – the former type of demands which remain within the system and seek redress through its mechanisms – from the latter type, popular (or undemocratic) demands, which articulate themselves against the system as a whole. The shift from intra-systemic requests to extra-systemic political demands thus marks the passage from isolated dissatisfaction to the formation of a new political frontier. While Laclau analytically distinguishes between these type of demands, the relation between popular and democratic demands is rarely a strict opposition. In practice, democratic demands may transform into popular demands when they remain unmet and become articulated within broader equivalential chains, suggesting a more complex choreography between these two logics

The formation of this frontier is a defining moment in OPR as it divides the political field into two antagonistic camps: “the people” and “the elite.” This binary structure is absent in HSS and represents a significant shift in Laclau’s theory. While HSS conceptualised antagonism as a constitutive limit to the stabilisation of meaning within any order, Laclau’s analysis in OPR transforms this logic. Rather than being treated as a non-symbolisable remainder that reveals the incompleteness of any social order, antagonism is instead symbolised as a political frontier that divides the social field between “the people” and their adversary.

However, this attempt to saturate antagonism within a formal logic does not eliminate the remainder, it displaces it. The impossibility of totalising the social persists, now internalised

within the very signifiers that seek to stabilise meaning. It is at this point that Laclau introduces the concept of the empty signifier as the mechanism through which this displacement operates. The empty signifier functions as a provisional point of condensation that momentarily sutures a plurality of unmet demands, constructing the semblance of unity under the name of “the people.” Because the signifier is structurally empty, it can stand for a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands without coinciding with any single one of them. Yet, this same emptiness prevents it from ever fully totalising the chain of equivalences.

In this way, the empty signifier marks the internalisation of constitutive excess: antagonism is not resolved but recoded into a symbolic form that remains permanently vulnerable to disruption. New demands can therefore destabilise the frontier, once this has been drawn, revealing the contingency of every collective identity.

A fair question can be made at this point. If “the people” in OPR is still unable to be fully sutured as a totality—if the empty signifier never totalises the field - then how is this different from the logic of hegemony in HSS? Further, and more precisely: what is the rationale for introducing the “adversary” into the project of constructing the people, in contrast to HSS where this is not deemed necessary? After all, in HSS, Laclau and Mouffe already acknowledge the role of a constitutive outside, drawing on the notion of “constitutive exclusion” that makes any identity possible. What distinguishes OPR is not the discovery of an constitutive limit to symbolisation, but its transformation into an explicit political frontier. The adversary, figured as “the elite”, is no longer a theoretical implication of the impossibility of closure but becomes a visible element in the articulation of “the people.” In this move, antagonism shifts from an ontological condition of dislocation to a populist logic of division, where the constitutive outside assumes a concrete form within the hegemonic project itself.

To expand on this, it is possible to divide the discussion into two levels. First, at a structural or ontological level, the incompleteness of the social, the need for articulation, and the

impossibility of final suture persist as consistent theoretical commitments throughout Laclau's work – they constitute its philosophical grounding. In both HSS and OPR, the political project is understood as the construction of partial, provisional unities in the face of the impossibility of a total social closure. Even when OPR attempts to symbolise this impossibility in the figure of the 'empty signifier' – naming the 'people' and their adversary as integral moments in political construction – the function performed by this conceptual figure is never 'fully' accomplished, remaining perennially open to contestation. The decisive change in OPR transpires at the level of the form of political construction, where Laclau introduces a specific mode of articulation: the populist logic. This mode of articulation is *relational*: it requires the drawing of a frontier between the people and their adversary in order to constitute the "people" as the collective identity embodied in a new political project. Drawing a frontier therefore presupposes the construction of an adversary that creates the division into two antagonistic poles. In this sense, in OPR, antagonism is not what destabilises the project like in HSS, but is what enables it to cohere in the first place. What threaten the unity is therefore no longer located in an external limit or constitutive outside but is internalised within the very act of naming *the people*, an internal indeterminacy that both grounds and exposes the contingency of any attempt at unity. If HSS emphasises articulating plurality through heterogeneous demands, in OPR demands serve in the construction of this – always impossible – 'unity' which already implies an antagonistic frontier.

The form of construction theorised by Laclau requires a point of unification - something or someone that can condense a plurality of demands and give them coherent political form. Laclau offers two formulations of this operation: on the one hand, through the empty signifier, which functions as a symbolic placeholder capable of holding together heterogeneous demands; and on the other, through the leader, who often becomes the embodied locus of this condensation. The leader, in this sense, is not an external addition to the populist logic but its

constitutive operator, capable of organising not only meaning but also affect. This framing, however, introduces an ambiguity that Laclau does not fully resolve: at times, it is the empty signifier that performs the unifying role; at others, it is the leader who assumes this function. This tension becomes more significant when read through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, where distinctions between the empty signifier, the master signifier, and the objet a serve different purposes: to name lack, to stabilise meaning, and to signal the remainder or excess that resists symbolisation. Laclau's conceptual language tends to slide across these terms, producing a model in which the leader both sutures the field and channels its disruption, without fully clarifying how these roles intersect. (Zicman de Barros, 2023)

C. Plebs and Populus

As noted in Chapter 1, Laclau (2005) draws on Rancière's (1999) distinction between plebs and populus to build his argument regarding the construction of the People. In Laclau's perspective, the plebs are those who have "no part" in the political community, those excluded from representation or institutional recognition. When the plebs make demands, they do not simply seek inclusion as one part among others, they assert themselves as the whole of the political community, as the populus (Laclau, 2005, p.154). This movement from exclusion to totalisation is central to Laclau's understanding of populism. As Vatter (2012) argues, Laclau associates the populus with the logic of representation, the normative configuration of who already belongs and what they are allowed to do; the plebs, by contrast, follow a logic of expression, tied to dislocation, rupture, and the constitution of new political identities. For Laclau, this transformation from plebs to populus does not occur spontaneously. Populism, for Laclau, arises when popular demands, which challenge the very structure of the system itself, are linked in a chain of equivalence. Antagonisms are drawn to divide the political field, and a leader—or an empty signifier—operates as the point of condensation. In this configuration, the

plebs does not merely express discontent but becomes the basis for the emergence of a new political subject: the people. This point of condensation is not only symbolic but also affectively charged. The ‘people’ embody the political project at the same time as this creates a new collective identity.

The foregoing reading of Laclau’s work enables the discussion to return to the foundational questions raised in Chapter 1 concerning the structure of political demand, their link with recognition, identity and the dynamics of the ask–reply relation. Laclau’s analysis makes a good case to abandon the assumption that the identity of political subjects is already bestowed upon them via their membership in some pre-existing group, and therefore also that their demands can be seen as deriving from the ‘essential’ collective identity of that group. On the contrary, it is only *through* the articulation of demands that a group is first constituted and that a collective identity can cohere to begin with. In OPR, Laclau not only positions demands as central to the constitution of collective identities, but also internally differentiates them for the sake of clarifying their political significance. As discussed above, Laclau distinguishes between two types of demands. Democratic demands remain particular to the existing social order and operate within a chain of difference. Popular demands arise when unsatisfied claims are linked through a chain of equivalence, acquiring a politically disruptive force that can no longer be satisfied within the existing order. In terms of the ask-reply axis, the first group of demands aligns more broadly with recognition-based frameworks, which presuppose an institutional addressee capable of recognising and responding to demands. Laclau’s popular demands, on the other hand, foreground a different mechanism: these demands are not simply addressed to systemic actors with the expectation of satisfactory reply. Rather than expecting recognition within the current system, popular demands construct a new site of enunciation – they ask for a reconfiguration of the system as such. For Laclau, demand becomes political only when it exceeds the ask-reply axis altogether - when it articulates a new

collective subject that confronts the existing order as a whole. This has several consequences for the theorisation of demand. The mechanism of articulation operates here as a ‘second-order’ demand – in order to produce a collective identity, demand aspires not merely to be recognised but to become the embodiment of the new ‘whole’, the new political order.

How may a specific request begin to challenge the existing order as such? If a specific claim can be absorbed by the logic of difference – i.e. when the system is able to accommodate it — it constitutes a democratic demand. If, however, the logic of difference fails to integrate it, this becomes a claim that confronts the social order as such: a popular demand capable of being linked to other popular demands in an equivalential chain. As noted above, this move marks a shift in the nature of the demand—from a request that structurally calls for a reply from a systemic actor to a foundational act of political reconfiguration that contests the systemic order as a whole. In terms of the plebs/populus distinction, it is at this point that the plebs no longer seek simply to be recognised, but to become the totality—the populus.

Laclau offers this diagram to account for the construction of second-order demands:

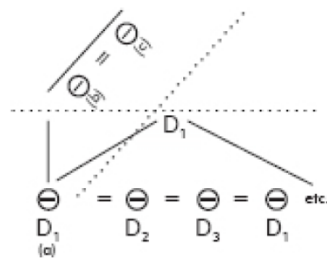


Figure 2.1., extracted from Laclau, 2005.p.124

The diagram illustrates the linkage of popular demands through a chain of equivalence. The emphasis is visibly placed on the construction of the populus rather than on the disruptive character of the plebs.

This marks the central focus of Laclau's project, continuing the theoretical endeavour initiated in HSS: how to account analytically and strategically for the construction of a new political project.

Yet, the plebs never fully disappear within this new articulation; rather, they persist as the disruptive remainder of the system they helped to constitute. The site of dislocation remains open, and the process of totalisation – incomplete. This is where the excess of the plebs is displaced—not as a symbolic antagonist, but as a force that insists, that pulses at the threshold, seeking entry yet never fully subsumed. This dynamic resembles Kuhn's account of paradigm shifts, where anomalies alone do not produce structural transformations but become decisive when linked within a broader explanatory framework. Similarly, Laclau's theory hinges not only on rupture, but on the interregnum, the moment of suspension famously described by Gramsci, where the plebs interrupt the field, and when a new articulation may or may not emerge. It is within this insistent, unresolved movement that psychoanalysis becomes indispensable.

This very juncture calls for a pause. Laclau, rushing his theory to account for the construction of the new populus, pays comparatively less attention to the moment of disruption and suspension. While Laclau embraces Lacanian ontology and psychoanalytic categories, he interprets the social as structured around a constitutive absence or lack – the impossibility for any identity or structure to fully coincide with itself – which opens up the field of the political. It is this emphasis on lack as the structural ground of the political that allows Laclau to push for its 'fictional' symbolic suture.

However, this privileging of lack risks neutralising the disruptive force of what cannot be named—the remainder that pulses at the heart of every political project. Laclau tends to conflate distinct Lacanian concepts—such as the empty signifier, the master signifier, and the *objet petit a*—into a single logic of symbolic substitution. Yet Lacan's notion of the *objet petit*

a specifically accounts for what ineluctably resists every attempt at symbolisation, marking the site of the real as that which pulsates without ever being grasped. An affinity can therefore be drawn between a and the plebs, as that force or that pulse that presses at the threshold of the symbolic and yet has no part in the current symbolic structure.

Laclau's conflation of the *objet petit a* with other psychoanalytical concepts downplays the dimension of excess, that which cannot be symbolised, which does not merely mark the impossibility of closure but continually disrupts it. While lack opens a space for articulation, excess insists: it cannot be integrated, yet it is not a simple absence but a force that presses from within, unsettling any established order. This conceptual slippage has significant theoretical consequences. It limits the capacity to think from the *objet a* the agonistic dimension as more than the symbolic division of the field; agonism risks being reduced to the formal opposition between two camps, rather than understood as the persistence of an excess remainder that resists capture. In this sense, antagonism names the symbolic line that structures conflict, whereas agonism signals the ongoing presence of what exceeds and destabilises that structure. A theory that privileges lack can formalise antagonism, but in doing so it risks neutralising the disruptive and productive force of excess—the remainder that animates and threatens every political project from within. This dimension will be further developed as the research advances, but it already suggests that the Laclauian emphasis on the construction of demand may come at a cost, namely neglecting the disruptive and productive political force of the plebs.

As noted above, Laclau moves too quickly from the moment of disruption to the moment of construction—and that the transition he hastens over deserves to be paused upon and examined more carefully, for several reasons. This moment invites more careful reflection on the nature of the “interregnum”, that in-between space in which the previous order has been disrupted, but no new articulation has yet stabilised. It is within this temporal suspension that

the potentialities of the political are perhaps at their most open, and where the contours of a new order are still undecided. Attending to this phase makes it possible to consider not only what is constructed, but also what pulses beneath construction—what resists, interrupts, or exceeds it. In Laclau’s framework, the construction of “the people” can be understood as the outcome of an ask–reply dynamic. At the first order of demand, particular demands are addressed to the existing social order, which may in principle accommodate them. At the second order, when unsatisfied demands are articulated equivalentially, “the people” emerges as a new collective subject in opposition to the existing order. Crucially, this second-order demand is not merely another ask—it already functions as a reply to the exclusion of the plebs, offering a counter-proposal for the reconfiguration of the social. In this sense, the hegemonic articulation operates both as an answer to, and a transformation of, the conditions under which the original demands were made.

Moreover, this moment reactivates a crucial set of questions concerning the structure of the ask–reply dynamic itself. Once again, something emerges that demands a response—or more precisely, something that must be transformed into a “demand” in order to be recognised within the symbolic order. How does this dynamic operate in moments of radical dislocation? Who asks, and how or in what form of address is this asking performed? Who possesses the capacity to articulate, and who is in a position to hear or respond? What kinds of outcomes are made possible, or foreclosed, by the conditions of this exchange? Is the construction of a new political subject the only available reply – and if there other possible modes of reply, how are these constructed and carried out?

These theoretical tensions, around the figure of the leader, the function of the signifier, and the unstable boundaries of political unity, reveal a limit in Laclau’s framework when confronted with contemporary protest dynamics. While Laclau offers a powerful account of how collective subjects are forged through antagonism and equivalential articulation, his model

is less able to grasp protest forms where the excess of the demand is not a temporary by-product to be sutured into unity, but a defining, enduring feature. The defining features of many recent mobilisations – refusal of clear leadership, rejection of programmatic articulation, and the expression of demands in dispersed, affective, or opaque ways – could not be dismissed as symptoms of an incomplete hegemonic process. Rather, such features appear central to the very logic of the movement.

The mechanism at play in such movements is not necessarily unprecedented—moments of openness, multiplicity, and excess can be found in other protest cycles. What is distinctive, crucially, is that these mobilisations render that moment visible, hold and sustain it, and sometimes refuse to move beyond it, allowing a critical pause to examine the pre-articulatory phase before demands are sutured into a hegemonic project – indeed, if such articulation ever occurs at all.

If the Laclauian order of protest rests on the articulation of heterogeneous demands into a hegemonic unity, contemporary forms of protest pose a puzzle. Rather than simply failing to articulate a unifying demand; such protests sustain an openness, a surplus, that resists closure altogether. The ‘ask’ in the ask–reply axis is displaced, multiplied, or refused, producing a form of political excess that unsettles the very mechanics of reply on which hegemonic articulation depends.

The following section introduces what this thesis calls the open protests, a term that brings together different waves of uprisings to capture their shared logics of sustained excess. Alongside defining this specific protest form, the section examines how other scholars have theorised their excesses and the disruptions they introduce into the ask–reply dynamic, thus offering a literature review of how the concept of political demand has been taken up in relation to these mobilisations. This, in turn, sets the stage for a proposal to supplement the Laclauian

framework through a more rigorous engagement with Lacanian categories, in order to rethink the political and organisational implications of a demand that refuses closure.

II. Open Protests: A Conceptual Frame for Recent Waves of Mobilisation

Over the past fifteen years, a wave of uprisings has emerged whose political forms and repertoires challenge the dominant frameworks used to analyse protest. The Tahrir movement, the Greek anti-austerity protests, the Indignados in Spain, and Occupy Wall Street in the United States have often been explored—and usually grouped together—as emblematic of a particular kind of protest (Gerbaudo, 2012; Thomassen, 2015; Eklundh, 2019). Typically situated in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Gerbaudo, 2012, 2014, 2017), these movements share a set of recurring features: organisational horizontality and an aversion to formal leadership; reluctance to articulate a singular, programmatic demand; hybrid and heterogeneous claims; artistic or carnivalesque forms (Tancons, 2011); and an embeddedness in online–offline media circuits (Eklund, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2017). Between 2018 and 2019, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, France’s Yellow Vests, Hong Kong, and Barcelona experienced what one may call a “second wave” of similar uprisings. While each had its own particularities, they reproduced many of the first wave’s traits, suggesting these mobilisations do not represent a simple process of escalation (McAdams, 2003), but that a new kind of protest might be taking shape. Scholars have approached these similarities from different angles: some pursuing a genealogical inquiry into which movement was “most contagious” or where specific repertoires originated (Welty et al., 2013; Tancons, 2011; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2012;

Langman, 2013), others analysing them as part of a broader shift in the “dynamics of contention” (Standing, 2012). Compared with earlier interest-driven movements of the 1960s and 1970s—feminism, ecology, civil rights—these mobilisations tend to voice hybrid, heterogeneous grievances (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2012; Boom and Thomas, 2011, p. 12), often seen as responses to intensified neoliberal precarity after 2008 (della Porta, 2015; Gerbaudo 2017; Standing, 2012). Writing from a political economy perspective, scholars have speculated why these movements have struggled to articulate clear demands, citing the rise of individualism, social media’s facilitation of rapid and sometimes contradictory claims, and the fluidity of contemporary life. In strategic terms, cases like Occupy illustrate the double-edged nature of this refusal: its broad slogan “We are the 99%” united a wide constituency but, lacking a concrete programme, the movement was often judged a failure. This has reopened debates about leadership and organisation, decision-making, and the management of multiple or contradictory demands. While some emphasise that so-called horizontal networks are often more organised than typically presumed (Nunes, 2021; Zicman de Barros, 2021; Eklundh, 2019; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2012), most agree these protests signal a shift in leadership models. Other analyses highlight elements beyond demands: the role of affect, bodily presence, and images in shaping expressions of discontent (Gerbaudo, 2014; Eklundh, 2019; Butler, 2015), or how prefigurative politics create communities in occupied spaces that already enact desired social forms (Martucelli, 2017 ; Howard & Roussos, 2022; Welty et al., 2013).

Building on this body of work, this thesis coins the label ‘open protests’ to capture these uprisings within a single conceptual frame. The term ‘open protests’ refers to a wave of mobilisations emerging since 2008 and extending into contemporary movements, characterised by a combination of organisational horizontality, aversion to formal leadership and a reluctance or difficulty to articulate singular, programmatic demands. These movements voice

grievances through hybrid, heterogeneous, and affectively charged forms of expression and are deeply embedded in online–offline media circuits.

The shared traits identified above matter not only descriptively but also theoretically: they reveal two distinct yet related challenges to the Laclauian order of protest. First, they render more acutely visible the structural excess inherent to political demand—an unruly surplus present in all protest but here amplified by the difficulty, or outright refusal, to articulate demands in the equivalential form required for hegemonic construction. Second, they disrupt the ask–reply axis not merely because of this excess, but by sustaining an interregnum between the ask and any possible reply. This pause is the mark not of mere incompleteness but of a generative suspension opening up space to reconsider the role of demands. It invites alternative forms of listening, interpretation, and political construction beyond an immediate institutional translation. In Laclau’s framework, excess is to be channelled into unity. The ask–reply sequence, oriented towards an institutional outcome, is the mechanism through which this subsumption of excess under unity occurs. In the open protests, by contrast, excess may remain uncontained and the ask–reply sequence suspended. This generates protest forms that unsettle both the closure of hegemonic articulation and the possible forms of political recognition. In what follows this category is employed to examine how scholars have reinterpreted the concept of political demand in light of contemporary waves of mobilisation. The discussion focusses on the interplay between structural excess and ask–reply disruption and also sheds light on what this reveals about the limits of the Laclauian model.

Demand formation in the open protests

Building on the definition of the new kind of protests as ‘open protests’ outlined above, this section examines how the category of political demand has been interpreted, reworked, and challenged in relation to recent waves of mobilisation. These protests—marked by

organisational horizontality, reluctance or refusal to formulate a singular programmatic claim, hybrid and heterogeneous grievances, and the prominence of affect, bodily presence, and online–offline circulation—have reopened long-standing debates about political organisation on the Left. Scholars have repeatedly returned to the question of whether the absence or indeterminacy of demands strengthens or weakens the prospects for an emancipatory political project. For some, a coherent programme and leadership structure remain essential for transforming unrest into lasting change (Badiou, 2012; Dean, 2016; Žižek, 2012). Others have taken these protests as an opportunity to foreground elements often neglected in strategic discussions—affects, embodiment, desire—as potentially generative foundations for alternative forms of political community (Butler, 2015; Eklundh, 2019; Monticelli, 2020; Zicman de Barros, 2021).

The following discussion reviews how the literature has approached these questions by organising the discussion around three analytical axes that emerge across these debates: appearance–disappearance, which concerns the visibility or invisibility of demands; rationality–irrationality, which addresses the tension between strategic calculation and affective immediacy; and unity–heterogeneity, which explores how demands (or their absence) shape the constitution of “the people.” These axes do not capture the totality of the debates, but they provide a framework for mapping the different ways scholars have made sense of the “non-demand” features of these mobilisations. Throughout, the discussion considers how the interplay between these axes is refracted through contemporary media ecologies, which both mediate and transform the performance of demands.

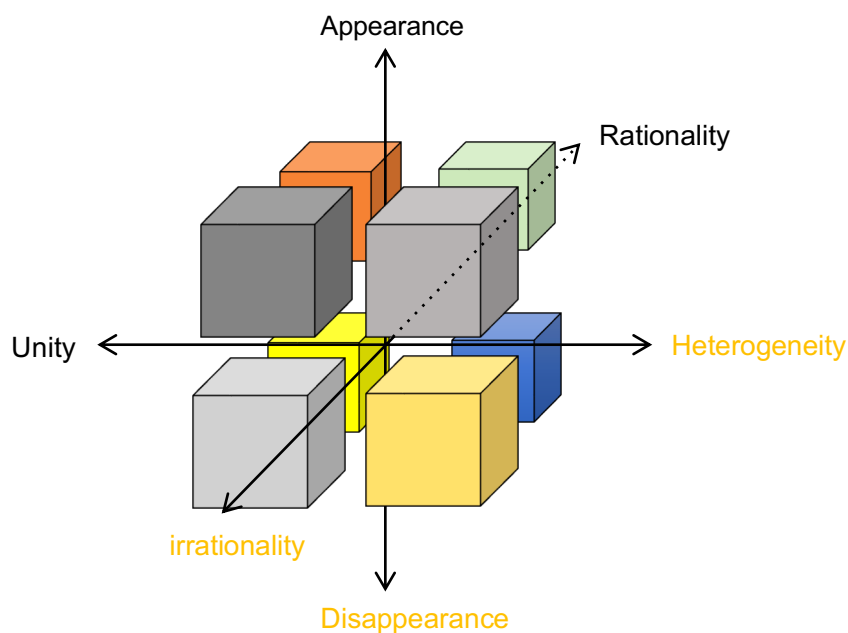


Figure 2.2 Axes of demand characterisation.

Figure 2.2 maps these axes in three-dimensional space, underscoring that they intersect and overlap rather than operate as isolated binaries. In what follows, each axis is explored in turn, with attention to how these tensions reshape the possibilities for political articulation.

A. Appearance / Disappearance

The question of demands infused the atmosphere in the early weeks and months of Occupy Wall Street with what Dean describes as an “almost unbearable openness” (Dean, 2016). The absence of a concrete demand quickly became a focal point for interest, fear, expectation, and hope. What did they want? What could they want? Commentators, often bordering on the hysterical, repeatedly insisted that “somebody has got to say what Occupy Wall Street wants!” Some observers interpreted this refusal as a strength—a way to keep open a political space within an otherwise deadlocked U.S. scene, even raising the possibility of “demanding the impossible”. Others, however, deemed the absence of demands a strategic liability, a gap that risks dissipating the movement’s momentum (Dean, 2014, 2016).

This debate over Occupy’s refusal to articulate clear demands draws attention to a broader distinction across recent uprisings. It is important to distinguish between a movement that explicitly rejects making demands and one that simply struggles to articulate a coherent programme. This section focuses on the impact of the absence of a singular demand—whether intentional or incidental—on political and scholarly responses. For Spain’s Indignados, this refusal was made explicit in May 2011, when assemblies at Puerta del Sol worked toward a *consenso de mínimos* rather than a specific list of demands (El País, 25 May 2011). In Occupy Wall Street, the NYC General Assembly’s Declaration (29 Sept 2011) set out grievances without concrete demands, and later Occupy statements explicitly rejected demand-making (Guardian, 11 May 2012). In other cases—such as Egypt’s Tahrir Square uprising, the Chilean uprising, Hong Kong’s protests, and the *gilets jaunes* in France—the absence of a central demand arose less from an explicit refusal than from a difficulty of consolidating heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting claims into a single, unified programme.

This “not-demand” feature has elicited a variety of responses, ranging from optimism about witnessing the emergence of a new political form, to scepticism about whether such movements had the political wherewithal to achieve meaningful change. For some, the puzzle was framed as: Why are these movements unable to formulate a unified demand? For others, the question was more open-ended: If demands are not the focus, then what is? These questions have given rise to two dominant perspectives, the first centring on the perceived need to articulate clear demands – a ‘demand for demands’, and a second one concerned with exploring what else might emerge in their absence.

i. In Search of Demand

As discussed in previous chapters, the main theoretical approaches to protest hitherto examined draw extensively on cases from identity-based movements. In these accounts, the success of a

mobilisation is typically assessed on the basis of its outcomes—an evaluative frame that presupposes a clearly defined, or at least definable, demand, the satisfaction of which can be unambiguously measured. From this perspective, the uprisings considered here may appear politically fragile: lacking a clearly articulated demand, they resist evaluation in conventional terms and risk being interpreted in a way that dissipates their transformative potential and political significance altogether.

This concern has been especially evident in the reception of Occupy Wall Street. Jodi Dean (2014) argued that the movement’s lack of a defined political agenda revealed a weakness at its core, particularly in terms of sustaining long-term strategy. Others echoed this view, warning that while such protests can open political space, the protest does not constitute political change by itself. As Žižek (2012) famously put it, “a carnival comes cheap”—and its true political value lies in what follows it. Without translating the event into a coherent political project, protest risks becoming mere “background noise” within neoliberalism (Badiou, 2015; Fisher, 2009).

From this perspective, representation, whether in the form of a clear programme or, as Dean (2014) contends, a party, appears as the essential mechanism for resisting capitalist co-optation and absorption. Without representation of some kind, the indeterminacy of the protest remains politically unanchored.

ii. Something Else Appears: Bodies, Affects, and Desire

For other scholars, the absence of a central demand is not a deficit to be remedied but an opening to attend that enables attending to whatever else may emerge in the political field. The mass gatherings in Cairo’s Tahrir Square in 2010–11, and in other urban spaces since, have renewed interest in the form and effect of public assemblies. Such gatherings have long been

approached ambivalently, feared as dangerous “mobs,” yet also recognised as potent enactments of popular will (Butler, 2015).

Shifting the focus away from strategic demand-making, theorists such as Butler (2015), Eklundh (2019), Zicman de Barros (2020), and Ronderos (2022) argue that these protests provide resources for political organisation that exceed the register of formal demands. Drawing on Arendt, Butler (2015) proposes that politics requires not only the existence of a “space of appearance” but also the appearance of bodies within it. This bodily co-presence constitutes a form of unity beyond language, one that “speaks before it utters any word.” Similarly, in her study of the Indignados, Eklundh (2019) emphasises the role of affect in movements that resist formulating a clear agenda. From a Lacanian perspective, Zicman de Barros (2021) and Ronderos (2020, 2022) highlight the centrality of desire—something that necessarily exceeds any singular demand, in understanding the political potential of these gatherings.

In this view, the act of appearing in the square is itself a political statement by itself, irreducible to whether such appearance is redirected to institutional channels and represented through them. Rather than assessing such movements solely by their ability to produce a coherent programme, these scholars draw attention to the emergent, embodied, and affective dimensions of political life. These dimensions may not replace demands entirely, but they fundamentally contest the assumption that demands are the sole content of political action or its primary function.

B. Rationality / Irrationality

The second analytical axis concerns how these protests are evaluated in terms of rationality, understood here as strategic clarity, coherence of aims, and organisational capacity, as opposed to the supposedly “irrational” or affective dimensions of political life. In much of the

commentary, the absence of a unified demand is treated as a deficit in rational political strategy, raising questions about the movement's ability to consolidate gains or sustain momentum. Others, however, challenge this framing, arguing that what may appear "irrational" from the standpoint of conventional strategy may constitute a distinct source of political productivity, generating new forms of meaning, solidarity, and action irreducible to a formal programme.

i. Strategy, consciousness, and willingness

As noted earlier, Žižek's remark that "a carnival comes cheap" captures a recurrent scepticism toward protests without clear demands. From this perspective, the value of an uprising is measured not in the event itself but in what follows—how, and whether, it is translated into a coherent political project capable of transforming everyday life.

Many scholars who take this view frame the articulation of a unified demand as a rational task that necessarily follows the moment of protest. The event is seen as an opening, rather than an endpoint: a gap in which strategy must be developed. This assumption positions the protest as politically incomplete until its energy is channelled into a coherent programme. This approach carries several implications. First, it risks casting uprisings as temporary catharses—spaces for venting collective tensions before "returning to normal" (Badiou, 2015). Second, it assumes that what is politically valuable is that which can be defined and pursued within familiar organizational forms. Third, it presupposes a political subject capable of knowing what they want from the outset—or capable of arriving at such knowledge through deliberation. In its most orthodox version, this perspective suggests that only by doing politics "as usual" can something truly new emerge, an assumption that itself raises questions about the temporality of the (spontaneous) political event on the one hand, and the temporality of continuous political practice, on the other (Badiou, 2015).

ii. Irrationality and the Logic of the Movement

If the first perspective treats the protest as an opening that must be anchored in a coherent programme, the second reorients the question entirely. In this view, the call for rational strategy is not dismissed outright—but neither is it granted exclusive authority over what counts as political efficacy. Many scholars arguing from this perspective acknowledge that uprisings are overdetermined phenomena that are so saturated with a variety of meanings that they cannot be reduced to a single cause, aim, or significance. Instead, uprisings have to be seen as layered with multiple, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations. Such meanings carry the potential to reshape the political. Where these scholars diverge is in their understanding of when and how meaning is created.

Some regard the protest space itself as the primary site of political meaning-making, more significant than any consensus reached afterwards (Butler, 2015). From this perspective, the crowd is already political: the encounter in the square, the occupation of a park, or the bodily alliances forged in assembly are themselves expressions of the sought change. These are not merely symbolic prefigurations but performative enactments of alternative forms of life, irreducible to the frameworks of strategic demand-making.

In this sense, the logic of the unrest unfolds within the very moment of its occurrence. The protest is neither a sterile field awaiting strategic content, nor simply a “party” or cathartic release. Rather, it is an event in which political subjectivities, alliances, and imaginaries are actively produced, often in ways that cannot be thought outside the collective that enacts them.

While the appearance/disappearance axis addressed whether demands are posed, and the rational/irrational axis examined competing views on when political meaning is constituted, the unity/heterogeneity axis, discussed in the next section, turns to the composition of demands when they do emerge. Here the question is not simply whether demands exist, but how they are negotiated across diverse constituencies—and what is gained or lost in the pursuit of unity.

C. Unity / Heterogeneity

If the first two axes focused on the presence or absence of demands and on debates over their timing and rationality, the third one, unity/heterogeneity, turns to their composition. Here, the central issue is how heterogeneous claims, rooted in different experiences, priorities, and political imaginaries, are negotiated within a collective movement.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Rancière's (1999) account of politics as the disruption of established partitions of the sensible already raises the problem of who is visible and counted as part of "the people" and who remains invisible and uncountable. In this chapter, the Laclauian discussion about People (as a constituted whole) and plebs (the excluded part that claims to be the whole) brings this debate to the table once again. This axis brings these insights into conversation with recent mobilisations, where heterogeneity is not merely a background condition but a defining feature.

Struggles over unity are thus never merely technical disputes over coordination or communication; rather, they concern deeply political matters concerning representation, delimitation, and belonging. They shape who is recognised as part of the movement, what counts as its voice, and which demands, or refusals of demands, can be legitimately made in its name.

i. Exclusion/Inclusion and the Cost of Unity

As noted earlier in this chapter, the challenge of unity in political movements is not unique to the current wave of uprisings. The discussion of Laclau and Mouffe's framework in HSS (2014) foregrounded how the institution of the "social" operates through a logic of difference that continually seeks to accommodate new demands and identities – and yet, full closure

remains structurally unachievable. From this perspective, any unity – which necessarily entails acts of exclusion –remains perennially contingent, provisional, and contestable.

Similarly to Laclau and Mouffe, Michael Saward (2006) draws attention to the tension surrounding the perceived unity of a demand. Saward reframes the problem by shifting attention from institutional outcomes to the dynamics of claim-making itself: representation, for him, is above all a performative, audience-creating practice that unfolds in plural spaces and temporalities, and that must be understood as an “art” of claiming rather than a simple transmission of interests. This focus places the political work squarely backstage: on the participants, the modes of staging, the iterations and re-presentations, so that process becomes the core object of analysis rather than the eventual recognition of a single authorised spokesperson.

The same tension between unity and heterogeneity emerges in the scholarship on recent mobilisations, albeit in a new register. Some movements intentionally refuse to formulate formal demands, while others produce such a panoply of diverse claims that no single programme can encompass them. In both cases, heterogeneity transpires not just as a descriptive fact but a political stake.

Butler’s work on assemblies highlights how the square becomes a site where multiple claims coexist without collapsing into a singular voice. Yet they also insist that unity always entails exclusion: deciding who will be heard and how “the people” are constituted inevitably leaves some outside the frame. Even the expansion of the symbolic horizon—for instance, through the extension of rights enabled by public appearance—operates within, and thereby reproduces, boundaries.

As we have seen, in later works Laclau argues that unity can function as an empty signifier around which “the people” coalesce. The absence of such a point can be politically provocative precisely because it destabilises the expectation of coherence. Dean (2014) takes

this argument further, stressing the temporariness of the crowd, "people eventually go home", and warning that dispersal creates openings for capital and the state to close the rupture and reassert dominance. From this perspective, unity—for Dean mostly embodied in the form of a party, is a necessary bulwark against rapid absorption. Yet, history also demonstrates that even well-articulated claims can be commodified and neutralised, as seen in the market co-optation of feminist, environmental, and LGBTQ+ struggles.

ii. Articulation / Disarticulation

The way demands are conceived in terms of inclusion and exclusion has been problematised through the concepts of articulation and disarticulation (Eklundh, 2019;1; Laclau 2005; Norval, 2007; Stäheli, 2003; Thomassen, 2015; Zicman de Barros, 2021). At the root of these formulations lies the broader debate between Laclau and Hardt & Negri, in which the notion of hegemony is opposed to that of multiplicity. What is ultimately at stake in this debate is the question of representation, often framed in terms of verticality versus horizontality. This section maps this controversy, opposing the biopolitical 'Multitude' to the hegemony of 'the People' as reconstructed by Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis (2016).

From the 'Multitude' perspective (Hardt & Negri 2004, 2009; Day 2005; Newman 2010), politics is horizontal and non-representational, privileging autonomy, networks, and collective practices (often described as practices of exodus and commoning). In the 'People/hegemony' current (Dean 2016; Laclau 2005; Laclau & Mouffe 2014; Mouffe 1994; Žižek 2012), politics instead turns on antagonism, articulation, representation, and leadership, with the 'People' formed via chains of equivalence around articulated and programmatic demands. Recent literature urges moving beyond a simple opposition and exploring mixtures of horizontality and verticality (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis 2016; Nunes 2021; Gerbaudo

2012). The following conceptual map clarifies what is at stake for demand here, will be recalled in Chapter 3 and revisited in Chapter 5.

Drawing on a Lacanian ontology of lack, Laclau argues that the ‘social is impossible’ and, as such, every social project is contingent—only those that achieve hegemony can temporarily stabilise it. For Laclau (2005), demands are the ‘unit of analysis’ (p. 74). Acknowledging the inherent heterogeneity of demands within the social field, he contends that the construction of ‘the People’ necessarily requires a work of articulation: linking particular demands into a general one, figured conceptually as an ‘empty signifier’ capable of representing the broader will of the People. From this perspective, a leader or a general idea may undertake the work of constructing the People, which, although emerging from the social, can never fully represent it: representation remains necessarily partial and precarious since full structural closure is impossible.

This perspective has been widely challenged by the emergence of a distinctive kind of protests which tend to favour horizontal or leaderless forms of organisation. Hardt and Negri’s notion of multiplicity, grounded in a Spinozist–Deleuzian ontology of immanence, rejects representation and instead analyses these movements – as well as their multiple, simultaneous demands, in terms of their affective and bodily dimensions. Some scholars, however, have challenged the binary implied in this debate, criticising it as sterile for the analysis of current protest movements. As Nunes observes:

We are thus left with two absolute models of group formation – ‘Leviathan logic’ and ‘the non-fascist crowd’, to borrow Jeremy Gilbert’s handy epithets – and the sharp choice as to whether both are possible, or only one. If the former, anyone who denies the possibility of the non-fascist crowd is suspect of a personal preference for vertical formations; if the latter, all groups are essentially Hobbesian, and to wish otherwise is not only utopian but as good as condemning oneself to a lifetime of political toothlessness. (2021, p.53)

Focusing on current social movements and the forces that hold people together, both Nunes and Eklundh acknowledge organisational forms beyond the appearance of unified demands. They also avoid ruling out the project of hegemony altogether. Eklundh (2019) identifies a more flexible hegemony, where leadership and demand formation occur through intermittent moments of articulation and disarticulation. Nunes' contribution is to move beyond the opposition between horizontality and centralisation by showing how contemporary movements operate through distributed forms of organisation, in which coordination emerges through networks rather than through a unified centre. Nunes (2016, 2021), from an ecological perspective, describes networks in which certain nodes act as points of capture, temporarily organising the social without collapsing multiplicity into a singular programme, this perspective helps explain how demands can circulate, connect, and acquire temporary coherence without stabilising into a fixed or centralised political project.

The concept of demand thus remains central in existing literature on new protests. The different axes presented here are not intended as closed categories but as a way to articulate these debates, where shifts in the performance of demands—and the increasing salience of affect and bodily enactment - are contested in terms of their political efficacy and their social and political meaning. Before delving further into these questions, the next section examines how social media have played a central role in the shifting performance of demands in the new protests and how they provide a fruitful terrain for deepening these debates.

The role of media

A vast literature has proliferated to address the impact of social media on contemporary social movements. Some argue that protest long predates digital platforms, and although social media can be useful to political analysis, it should not occupy a central place within it (Zicman de Barros; 2021). Conversely, others argue that platforms have fundamentally transformed how

movements are performed and perceived (Castells, 2015, Fuchs, 2014; Dean, 2014; Tremayne 2014). Building on Chapter 2, this section suggests that the tensions along the three axes are reproduced—and often heightened—by platformed communication. Social media amplifies excess (speed, scale, affect, semiotic overflow) and reconfigures the ask–reply circuit by introducing new responders (metrics, algorithms, hybrid media), diminishing the heuristic value of a rigid online/offline distinction. The section proceeds to show, first, how platforms generate appearance and disappearance (via virality and ephemerality); second, how they recalibrate the rational/irrational balance (through affective circulation and misinformation/fact-checking); and third, how they produce moments of unity amid heterogeneity (through hashtags, trends, and repetition). Establishing this platformed dynamic of excess and reply motivates the turn to Lacan in order to build a conceptual framework capable of accommodating heterogeneous modes of address and response—moments of closure, deferral, and overflow—rather than a single organisational model.

In today’s media ecology, many people first encounter protests via Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Memes and short videos circulate within seconds, reaching broad—if unevenly digitally literate, publics, and routinely “leak” into legacy media such as television and newspapers, sometimes even setting their agendas. The significance of social media extends beyond the platforms themselves: ranking, metrics, and shareability shape what is staged on the street, how journalists report, and when institutions respond. Claims about the “openness” of posting, citizens producing news, podcasts, comments, and streams, have been read as signs of democratisation. These claims have in turn been contested by research on misinformation/fake news and by critiques of purported horizontality that point to hidden hierarchies of moderation, trend logics, and digital/class inequalities, privileging certain speakers (Dean, 2014).

Regardless of content, information now moves in large, fast, and ever-fluctuating flows that transform how people engage protests: organising through official and unofficial platforms (source: Occupy! media), producing and circulating materials during and after events, and coordinating in real time. Non-human actors—especially mobile phones—co-produce protest and blur the online/offline distinction (based on Latour, 2005; also see Eklundh, 2019). Artistic interventions are often designed for rapid circulation—images, slogans, and performances made to be viralised. The effects of this are bidirectional: platforms reshape repertoires, and protest practices pressure platforms, policies, and news cycles.

Some argue that online activism mainly facilitates offline outcomes (Harlow and Harp, 2012; Opp, 2009). Yet for the creation and circulation of demands, a strict online/offline split proves analytically weak as the domains prove to be increasingly interwoven. Read through the above 3-dimensional framework, these dynamics intensify appearance/disappearance (virality and ephemerality), feed rational/irrational registers (affective circulation and misinformation/fact-checking), and generate moments of unity amid heterogeneity (hashtags, trends, repetition). They also have effects on the excess of demand and reconfigure the ask–reply axis by inserting new responder, metrics, algorithms, hybrid media, into the circulation of demands. All of these are aspects that will be further detailed as research progresses (see research strategy for details).

Linking the discussion explicitly to the three axes presented above: first, along the axis of appearance and disappearance, many scholars emphasise the crucial role that affect plays in the presentation of claims (Gerbaudo, 2017; Eklundh, 2019; Day, 2005, and many others). Other studies highlight how artistic performance within protests has reshaped the circulation of information and claims (Butler, 2015; works on art and protests). Bodies in the square, performances in the square, and the act of occupying the square are becoming increasingly salient; images, memes, and materials from remix and jam cultures circulate both within and

beyond protest spaces (Gerbaudo, 2017). Taken together, these elements strain the conventional mode of appearance of the formal claim itself—and indeed, the very type of work or function performed by a claim.

Second, and along the rational/irrational axis, this analysis can be extended. Earlier, “irrationality” was associated with protests perceived as unclear about their aims; this condition is amplified in the virtual setting by way of misinformation and rumour. “Fake news” about what supposedly happened at protests, their causes, and their effects becomes constitutive of narrative construction (source about fake news and protests). These circulations intertwine with what mainstream media extract from online sources as “data” to assemble a putative image of protest “facts,” including purportedly articulated claims. In addition, the proliferation of datasets and evidentiary regimes—platform metrics, livestreams and citizen videos, fact-checking repositories, police tallies, NGO reports—yields multiple, sometimes contradictory replies to the same issue. Some are framed as rational (numbers, verification), others as irrational (speculation, conspiracy), with each emphasising different angles. This multiplication of evidences and replies both contests and fractures consensus, setting the stage for the discussion of unity/heterogeneity which follows.

Finally, and along the axis of unity and heterogeneity – this dimension is linked to the expansive flux of virtual information, encompassing not only the diverse claims voiced in the square but also the proliferating narratives, interpretations, and commentaries that circulate around the protest and its demands. Trends and repetition can operate as temporary moments of unity. This observation has prompted scholars to emphasise that what is perceived as unity or centrality in the articulation of demands is in fact inherently unstable – a point echoed in discussions of leadership (Eklundh, 2019; Zicman de Barros, 2021; Thomassen, 2015; Nunes, 2021.). As noted above, the figure of the leader has been approached functionally—at times as an idea or a signifier that assumes temporary centrality within a movement (Nunes, 2021).

Coupled with the expansion of spaces for self-representation afforded by social media, these dynamics recalibrate how leadership is perceived and how centrality is produced.

Furthermore, as will be explored in more details in chapter 4, large, continuously accumulating datasets generate epistemic overload: too many fragments, moving too quickly and from too many vantage points. As in Borges's *Funes the Memorious* (1942), the archive "remembers" everything but cannot, by itself, prioritise. In this condition, partial and competing datasets—dashboards, police counts, livestreams, scraped tweets, fact-check repositories—produce incompatible "facts," amplifying doubt and making it easy to weaponise ambiguity through strategic flooding, distraction, and reframing. The lowered signal-to-noise ratio invites divergent replies, some framed as rational (numbers, verification), others as irrational (speculation, conspiracy). This anticipates the next claim: fleeting moments of unity coalesce around particular numbers, clips, or hashtags, only to dissolve once more into informational overflow.

Taken together, the review so far shows why contemporary forms of protest have challenged the very category of demand. While Laclau's framework clarifies how unmet demands can be articulated into "the people", recent protest scholarship foregrounds horizontality, affect, and refusal of programme; platform studies, in turn, add excess circulation, blurred online/offline practices, and shifting addressees. Across these strands—and along the three axes developed earlier in the chapter (appearance/disappearance, rationality/irrationality, unity/heterogeneity), demands do not behave as a simple ask awaiting an institutional reply. Instead, asks and replies multiply, rotate, and leave reminders that cannot be absorbed.

Since Laclau already draws on Lacan to think non-closure, it is instructive to turn directly to Lacan, not for the sake of psychologising movements, but in order to furnish a formal vocabulary for describing how excess attaches to demands and how different circuits of address

and response are staged. The next subsection outlines the argument, introducing the concepts operational for its more detailed development in subsequent chapters, before concluding with an overview of the overall research strategy.

III. Lacan's Four Discourses

This section sketches out the theoretical architecture that the thesis develops in later chapters. It opens with a brief synthesis of the limits of Laclau's notion of demand, which the preceding discussion of literature review already brought into relief. It then introduces Lacan's account of demand, its passage from need, its address to the Other, and its constitutive excess, to explain why 'satisfaction' is structurally out of reach. The discussion then proceeds to the Lacanian theory of the four discourses by first distinguishing Lacan's four elements - S1 (master signifier), S2 (knowledge), \$ (barred subject), and a (objet a; the remainder) - from their effects when positioned within a specific discourse, i.e., the move from elements to discourse positions. Finally, it presents the theory of the four discourses as a framework for theorising different modalities of reply to demand-closing, interrogating, neutralising, or re-opening it.

A. Limits and Opportunities in Laclau's Theorisation of Demand

Before turning to Laclau's account of demand, it is useful to situate the discussion within the post-foundational horizon that informs the thesis as a whole. This perspective rejects the idea of any ultimate ground of the social while recognising that every order depends on contingent acts of grounding. Within this framework, political demand becomes a privileged site for observing how such contingent foundations are produced and contested. Within Laclauian (2005) discourse theory, demand is treated as the minimal political unit whose articulation can sediment a collective subject. Norval and Howarth, drawing on Rancière, have been

instrumental in clarifying how chains of equivalence can bring together heterogeneous grievances into a political subject, “the people”, while reconfiguring the field of visibility and contestation. This remains a powerful formulation for moments where articulation achieves a provisional unity, yet its very focus on successful suturing can obscure distinctions that become crucial in contemporary protest sequences. Laclau’s psychoanalytic borrowings register the problem of excess—often glossed as the plebs that resists representation, but the vocabulary slides between empty signifier, master signifier, nodal point, and, at times, *objet a*. As Zicman de Barros (2023) observes, this polysemy offers analytical richness, yet, as Glynn and Stavrakakis (2005) have shown, it also risks obscuring the force of the *objet petit a*. The Laclauian perspective on demand further implies a privileging of the articulatory-symbolic part, which, as Zicman de Barros (2020, 2023) claims, reintroduces a positive core in tension with the anti-essentialist premises of Laclau’s framework. In sum, the effect is to privilege the articulated populus while the excessive remainder—though acknowledged conceptually—is absorbed analytically into the moment of articulation. The ask and the reply appear almost as a singular populist act, making it hard to see how different replies can be attributed to the same field of demands—or to refusals and proliferations of demand.

Recent analyses of new protest forms render that plurality of replies visible. Rather than resolving swiftly into a unifying programme, many movements stage a pause: the withholding of a singular demand, the multiplication of partial claims, prefigurative and assembly practices, and intensely affective, often memetic, registers. Eklundh’s (2019) work recasts affect from accessory to organising principle, while Ronderos (2021) foregrounds the hystericising insistence of questioning as constitutive rather than preliminary. Stäheli (2005) gives the interval itself a name, disarticulation, marking elements that have “no home of their own” prior to incorporation. Read through Rancière’s (1999) account of dissensus, such refusals transpire not as the index of political immaturity but the – intensely political – appearance of “those with

no part,” complicating representation and the passage from plebs to populus. Taken together, these interventions unsettle the ontological assumptions often underlying radical-democratic analyses of the emergent movements of the squares, and point up the need for a reframing: analytically, what matters is not only what is demanded but what exceeds demand, and how this excess is handled and processed in terms of reply, whether it is closed, interrogated, technicised, or re-opened.

A Lacanian re-turn clarifies the theoretical rationale for such reframing. The Lacanian perspective of ‘demand’ implies a complex interplay between ‘needs’- ‘demand’, and ‘desire’ (Lacan, 2013, p. 626). A disjunction is introduced at the moment at which ‘needs’ turns into demand. In its translation into language, ‘need’ is never fully expressed as ‘demand’, always leaving something unsaid. This gap renders ‘demand’ effectively infinite, since it can never exhaust what it articulates. This marks a crucial point of divergence from ego-psychology, which Lacan strongly criticises for attempting to translate the patient's desire into demands – a move he regarded as a ‘dead-end’, since any demand addressing a request to the Other necessarily fails to be satisfied. The translation of need into language not only generates desire but leaves a residue that no articulation can absorb, a remainder Lacan later formalised as the *objet petit a*. What remains ungraspable in this process organises how replies gain traction. Shifting from a generic emphasis on lack to a precise account of the excess named by *objet petit a* reorients the analysis and licenses an analytic decoupling of ask and reply. On that basis, the following sections take up Lacan’s notion of demand and, subsequently, the four discourses as distinct modalities of reply – preserving Laclau’s insight into the generativity and centrality of demand while opening new ways to interpret its handling in contemporary protest.

The limits of Laclau’s framework thus appear where the logic of articulation struggles to account for what remains unassimilable by it — the remainder that resists symbolisation. The following section extends the discussion of this impasse by employing Lacan’s distinction

between need, demand, and desire, and showing how the address to the Other introduces an irreducible gap between the ask and any possible reply. In Lacan, the “Other” designates not another person but the locus of language and address — the symbolic order in which speech takes place. When the subject speaks, it does so from within this field of signifiers that precedes and exceeds it; every demand is therefore a demand to the Other, seeking recognition or response from the place that guarantees meaning. Yet the Other is never complete: it is itself barred, lacking the signifier that would close the chain of signification. This incompleteness of the Other is what produces the remainder that sustains desire. The subject’s relation to the Other is thus not simply intersubjective but structural — an address to the place of meaning that can never deliver full satisfaction. This shift reframes political demand as a structure of address rather than as a claim requesting satisfaction. This prepares the ground for the analytic framework developed in the remainder of this chapter and in the thesis overall.

B. Some Lacanian Insights Regarding Demand and New Open Protests.

If Laclau’s account illuminates the generative role of unsatisfied requests in forging political subjects, the psychoanalytic literature to which many post-Laclau scholars have explicitly returned re-specifies what “demand” is at a more elementary level. Recent scholarship on contemporary protest highlight why this re-specification matters. Taken together, these returns to psychoanalysis do not abandon Laclau’s insight into the productivity of demand; instead, they refine it by showing that the remainder and its affects belong to the structure of demand itself rather than to a failure of strategy.

A reframing in these terms compels a decisive reframing of the form of inquiry – the question now concerns not whether a demand is met but how the demand is read, and how a reply is structured. To explore the modalities of reply, and to examine more closely how this links with the ungraspable aspect of demand at play within the ask-reply configuration, a turn

to the theory of the four discourses is justified. To this aim, the following section introduces the four basic elements of this theory, S1 (master signifier), S2 (knowledge), \$ (divided subject), and a (the ungraspable excess), distinguishing these elements from the roles they occupy within a discourse (agent, Other, truth, product). Moving from elements to discursive positions enables an analysis of modalities of reply without collapsing them back into a single mode of political response.

C. Lacan: From Elements to Discursive Positions

Recasting demand as a form of structurally unsatisfiable form of address makes it necessary to specify how replies are organised. Lacan's formalism does so by distinguishing the elements that circulate in any discursive exchange from the positions they occupy when a reply is displayed. The elements have a specific function: S1 (master signifier), which anchors meaning; S2 (knowledge), the chain of reasons and procedures; \$ (the divided subject), the speaking lack that animates questioning; and a (the excess or ungraspable remainder), what the signifying operation cannot absorb yet continues to insist. If S1, S2, and \$ describe the minimal symbolic coordinates of the subject, *objet petit a* designates what eludes them — the residue that remains once the symbolic operation is complete. It is at this point that the registers of the Real, enjoyment, and desire converge.

In Lacan's formalisation, the Real, *objet petit a*, and enjoyment (*jouissance*) each mark different inflections of the same structural impossibility. The Real names what cannot be symbolised; it is the point at which every structure fails. Within discourse, this impossibility is registered as the *objet a*—the remainder that both sustains and disturbs signification from within. It is not a positive object to be attained, nor a goal that desire seeks, but the trace of what escapes symbolisation and thus keeps desire in motion. Enjoyment designates the libidinal attachment to this failure—the paradoxical satisfaction found in returning to what resists

closure. When the remainder surfaces too directly, it gives rise to anxiety, revealing the Real not as absence but as the disruptive presence of what cannot be assimilated. In this thesis, *objet a* is foregrounded in its function as the cause of desire, understood as the element that exposes and sustains the gap itself. This reframing allows political demand to be conceived not as a request for satisfaction, but as a movement animated by its own excess—by what remains unassimilable to the symbolic order.

All four elements outlined above are always in play in Lacan's four discourses; none can be removed, yet their effects vary according to their position. What matters, therefore, is not merely which elements appear but in what specific configuration (see Figure 2.3) – which element is made to speak as agent, to whom it addresses itself (the Other), from what concealed ground it proceeds (the truth position), and what it produces as effect (the product).

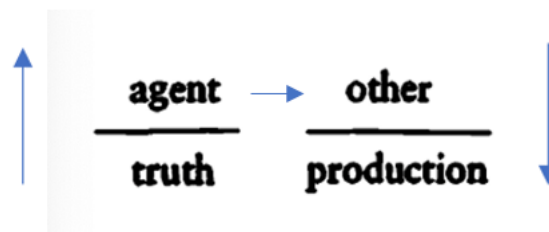


Figure 2.3 Lacanian Discursive Configuration (based on Lacan 2007, p. 181)

As said above, the meaning and function of each element are determined not by their intrinsic content but by their positional articulation, that is, by the discourse configuration

A discourse in the Lacanian theory of four discourses sense is not a linguistic statement but a structural arrangement of these four elements into four places, each defined by its relation to the others:

1. **Agent:** the position that speaks or acts, occupying the place of enunciation;
2. **Other:** the position to which the discourse is addressed;

3. **Truth:** the position beneath the agent, which supports and motivates the discourse but remains concealed;
4. **Product:** the position that emerges as the outcome of the discursive relation.

The arrows connecting these positions indicate the direction of address and effect, not causal or temporal sequence. The top horizontal arrow (Agent → Other) marks the surface articulation of the discourse—the enunciative relation through which something is said or acted upon. The diagonal arrow (Truth → Agent) marks the structural support or latent ground from which the discourse operates: what sustains the agent’s enunciation without being explicitly avowed. The bottom horizontal arrow (Truth → Product) represents the return effect produced by this structure. The lower arrow does not represent a direct communication between truth and product; in Lacan’s schema, these two positions are separated by a structural non-relation. These two positions are not in open dialogue but operate in a veiled relation. The product is thus shaped by, yet remains blind to, the truth from which it draws its support.

The movement in this configuration, then, is not between the places themselves (which are formal positions) but between the elements as they rotate through these positions. Each discourse is a particular permutation of how the four elements (S_1 , S_2 , $\$$, a) occupy these four places. When an element moves into the position of agent, the entire structure reconfigures: a new relation between truth, address, and product is established.

Thus, the four discourses (Master, University, Hysteric, Analyst) do not describe different kinds of speakers but different modes of discursive articulation, each defined by how these elements are distributed across the structural places and how their arrows organise what is said, to whom, from where, and with what remainder. What moves are the elements, not the places, the structure remains constant, but the allocation of elements to positions and the direction of address produce qualitatively distinct forms of discourse.

D. Lacan's Four Discourses and Modalities of Replies

With the distinction between elements (S1, S2, \$, a) and positions (agent, Other, truth, product) in place, the remaining task is to identify the recurrent modalities of reply that Lacan formalises. The four discourses do not add new content to demand; they instead specify how a reply is organised by deciding which element speaks as agent, to whom it addresses itself, from what concealed ground it proceeds, and what effects it produces. (see figure 2.4)

UNIVERSITY	MASTER	HYSTERIC	ANALYST
U	M	H	A
$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$	$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$	$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$	$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$

Figure 2.4 Lacanian four discourses (based on Lacan, 2007, p. 14)

When S1 occupies the agent position (the Master's discourse), the reply closes the question by promising a suture—"I will make things work"—relegating the ungraspable aspect to what escapes the signifying operation in order to prioritise stability. When \$ speaks (the Hysteric's discourse), the reply interrogates rather than settles, exposing the lack in the Other and generating knowledge without closure, though still oriented toward obturation and stability. When S2 leads (the University discourse), the reply translates demand into procedures and metrics, neutralising conflict under a mantle of expertise while a tacit master-signifier silently authorises the frame. Finally, when the objet a is placed in the agent's seat (the Analyst's

discourse), the reply keeps the gap open, working with what does not fit and allowing new signifiers to emerge without presupposing a prior unity.

Two consequences follow for the approach developed in this thesis. First, the ask and the reply are analytically decoupled: the same field of demands (including refusals or multiplicities) can elicit different replies, and it is these positional differences that organise the political scene. Second, replies can rotate and overlap over time: closures provoke interrogations; interrogations invite technicisation; technicisation, in turn, can generate new excesses that reopen the scene. Tracking such modalities of reply allows them to be read without collapsing them back into a single moment of articulation.

While much of what follows tracks enactments that remain within a scene of address (albeit in non-petitionary form), it is crucial to mark a limit-case. There are moments that approximate the *passage à l'acte*: a precipitate “exit” that does not seek, and cannot sustain, a reply from the Other. Analytically, these cases can be treated as encounters with the Real that suspend the circuit of demand and reply. What can be read from this framework are the retroactive replies they elicit- Master sutures, University codifications, Hysteric provocations, and Analyst reorderings - through which the political field attempts to re-inscribe the rupture. The analytical focus, then, is less the episode’s interior meaning than the chain of replies it compels and the remainders these replies cannot absorb.

The chapters that follow therefore use the discourse schema as a disciplined reading protocol rather than as a testable model. Illustrative materials - slogans, chants, graffiti, memes, leadership speech, media narration - are read for the positioning they instantiate (who speaks, to whom, from what truth, with what product), and for the kinds of enjoyment and remainder they organise. The aim is not empirical adjudication but conceptual clarification: to show how different replies to demand become legible once elements and positions are kept analytically distinct. The next section translates these distinctions into a compact analytical strategy—

stating the propositions that guide the readings and the operational cues that anchor them—so that the framework can be used and built consistently across the thesis without re-arguing for the theory at each step.

The following analytic reading protocol translates the theoretical distinctions developed above into an interpretive procedure. It is deployed and developed further throughout the thesis, informing each substantive analysis. Here, demand is understood in a broader sense than in Laclau's formulation, not as a discrete claim or element within a chain of equivalence, but as a scene of address that opens the possibility of reply, a notion that will be elaborated further in Chapter 3.

The protocol treats Lacan's four discourses as modalities of reply to demand and guides the identification of the agent, the addressed Other, the underlying truth, and the product or remainder in each case.

In each instance, the analysis asks how a given articulation stages a reply to demand: who or what occupies the position of the agent; how the Other is invoked; what truth underlies the exchange; and what effect this articulation produces. This procedure does not classify discourses mechanically but reads them as dynamically shifting logics through which meaning and position are continually reconfigured in the field of protest. This interpretive orientation informs the research strategy outlined below, where the relation between theoretical reconstruction and empirical reading is specified through a retroductive logic.

IV. Research Strategy

The interpretive orientation presented above provides the methodological grounding for what follows. The research strategy builds on this framework by specifying how theoretical reading is operationalised in relation to the selected corpus. While the thesis draws on materials such as speeches, graffiti, and documents, its orientation is not empirical in the conventional

qualitative sense. The corpus is approached through theoretical reading rather than coding or thematic analysis. The focus is not on measuring the frequency or content of claims but on examining how specific acts of address and reply are structured within the field of the discourse. This perspective follows the Lacanian notion of discourse as a relational topology of speaking positions rather than as a set of textual utterances.

The literature reviewed in the previous sections shows that mobilisations have been read along a spectrum: from strategic/outcome-oriented approaches that foreground demands, addressees, and tactical escalation, to accounts that privilege openness and process, attending to indeterminacy, embodied appearance, and ongoing experimentation. Rather than choosing one pole over the other, this project treats that spectrum itself as an analytic resource — not only for tracing how demands are formed, suspended, articulated, and re-signified, but also for approaching that which resists crystallisation into a demand. This involves examining the moments and practices that escape clear formulation yet remain politically generative.

A crucial inflexion point in the literature review is the shift highlighted by Laclau and Mouffe in the revised HSS: from class-centred struggles to the proliferation of identity-based claims. That shift triggered a broad re-theorisation of protest and demand. Today, however, new ways of demanding, and sometimes of suspending the demand, challenge those frameworks anew. This thesis takes that challenge as an invitation to reexamine the concept of demand by bringing two lenses into focus: (1) the ungraspable surplus that exceeds articulation, and (2) the ask–reply axis, i.e., how address and response are staged, deferred, or reconfigured.

It is here that psychoanalysis, and Lacan in particular, becomes indispensable. Within psychoanalysis, the conceptual tools to name and engage with the ungraspable - lack, *objet petit a*, master signifier - are highly developed. As Stavrakakis (1999) has long argued, the Lacanian commitment to the constitutive lack in the social offers a powerful foundation for radical democratic politics, one that resists fantasies of closure and completeness. The approach

of this thesis builds on this insight but also seeks to extend it, revisiting Laclau's deployment of Lacanian concepts, especially the *objet petit a*, to restore its force as the ungraspable kernel, and to explore its implications for the analysis of political demand.

Laclau's integration of psychoanalytic categories has been decisive for the theorisation of political subjectivity and demand, yet it also tends to blur certain distinctions. In particular, the conflation of the Lacanian *objet petit a* risks obscuring its force as the ungraspable element that resists closure. This project seeks to supplement Laclau's framework by restoring that force and exploring how it reorients the analysis of political demand.

Lacan himself lived and wrote through periods of political upheaval, including the uprisings of May 1968. His seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, where he develops his theory of the four discourses, contains both explicit and implicit references to these events. His formulations can be read as an attempt to open his theory out to broader audiences by formalising it into discursive structures. These discourses, especially the Analyst's, offer a framework for theorising political interventions that do not seek immediate mastery, but instead sustain the productive discomfort of impossible closure.

These ontological and ethical commitments also shape the methodological stance adopted here. Because the social is understood as contingent and open-ended, the relation between theory and specific cases of study cannot be linear or hierarchical. The research strategy therefore adopts a retroductive logic that reflects this openness: rather than moving from data to theory or vice versa, it proceeds through a recursive dialogue in which each informs and transforms the other. In this thesis, retroduction designates neither a bridge between induction and deduction nor a compromise between empirical and theoretical inquiry. Rather, it is conceived as a recursive movement in which case and theory continually re-specify one another. Each analytic iteration revises the initial problematisation, so that the production of concepts and the interpretation of events remain mutually formative. This approach follows

the post-structural premise that justification and discovery are not sequential stages but interwoven moments of the same critical process (cf. Glynos & Howarth 2007).

The material drawn from contemporary protest—particularly the Chilean uprising—is therefore not approached as an object awaiting the application of theory but as a site that interrogates theory from within. These mobilisations expose tensions in the Laclauian architecture of demand and compel a reconsideration of its limits through a Lacanian reading of address and reply. They serve as a retroductive hinge through which conceptual questions and empirical moments are brought into dialogue. This recursive movement ensures that theoretical elaboration remains grounded in, and continually reshaped by, the interpretive encounter.

Reflexivity

This ethical orientation is inseparable from my own trajectory into the research. The questions I ask, and the ways I choose to approach them, are shaped by lived encounters with protest, distance, and moments of political urgency that could not be easily contained in neat analytical categories. Attending to these experiences is not simply a matter of autobiography; it is part of the research process itself, illuminating how concepts take shape in relation to events, and with respect to their political and ethical positionality. The following reflexive account situates my engagement with the Chilean outburst in 2019, my encounters with other protest contexts, and the personal and political contingencies that have shaped the lens through which this project is undertaken.

My relationship to this terrain is not abstract. It is shaped by the particular ways I have experienced and engaged with protest, both in Chile and elsewhere. Before going any further into the methodological decisions I have made, it is crucial to frame the kind of intervention this research seeks to make, and how this framing came to matter to me.

The Chilean case is, of course, close to my heart. I left Chile in 2019, just before the *estallido social* began. My interest in psychoanalysis beyond the clinic had already drawn my attention to the Essex school of discourse theory, and other experimental approaches for bringing psychoanalytic concepts into politically and socially fruitful terrains.

When the protests started, not being able to participate brought deep frustration and a lingering resentment at being so far away. Many Chileans in the UK began organising and creating our own forms of protest here. I remember the first day we gathered, people from the long exile arrived with demands that had persisted for decades, even after years spent away from Chile. Others came without a clear demand, but we all felt part of the moment, and we grieved together our absence from the streets back home.

I have been in other protests, and there is something uniquely comforting about connecting, being seen and heard in such a space, recognising your own worries in the faces of others, listening to what they have to say, and reflecting on your own involvement and demands. That day, about thirty of us began singing a Chilean protest song, which quickly evoked the struggles of the dictatorship era. Someone said, “We need new songs.” I remember thinking how well the old ones still fit the present moment, and yet sensing they were right, there was something missing, something I couldn’t quite name. Why were we here? What did we want? As I came to understand deeply through this research, I wasn’t alone in this.

Graffiti was one of the most distinctive features of the Chilean *estallido*, carrying both the urgency and creativity of the uprising into public space. During COVID, I wanted to find a way to participate from afar. As a millennial already immersed in digital tools, I joined other Chileans in the UK to create an online platform inspired by the “exquisite corpse” method, where each person could start a piece of graffiti, send it on, and have others continue it.

The project “failed” in terms of final output — fewer people engaged with the online format when analogue forms of protest and creation were available again. Yet, I still see it as

significant: the long preparation sessions, the merging of different skills to build the tool, and the shared purpose all shaped how we processed our experience of living through the *estallido* from abroad. In retrospect, it is no coincidence that our attempts to push the project further ended when Chile entered a new phase with the elections for a constitutional process. In a way, our collective shifted to a different stage as well.

That same year of the outburst, I became a mother. I was pregnant when I began my PhD, and the uncertainties of first-time motherhood, alongside the question of what I was entitled to as a student-parent, made it hard to cope. Childcare challenges often left me struggling to find time to write. At some point, I began to question why we were paying the same amount as rent to have time to study, especially given the presence of an on-campus nursery.

When I saw the “Pregnant Then Screwed” protest in London, I felt immediately understood and less alone. This protest was unlike those I knew from Chile: it had a clear aim, but its affective register was entirely different: the music, the rhythm, even the march itself felt highly structured. After us, another campaign was ready to begin; the event was well-prepared, leaving little room for the unexpected, except perhaps for the speeches at Trafalgar Square.

Teaching the module *Democracy in Action*, based on community organising, confirmed my intuition that there is a different mode of claiming in the UK, more institutional, often moving in a clear escalation towards “the table” where decisions are made. At that stage, there is little room for disruption. I recall a statement from someone at Citizens UK, an organisation we collaborated with, who said, “I would never act before preparing and knowing it will have an effect.” Strategically, it made perfect sense. Affectively, it did not. That advice did, however, help me secure a student discount for nursery fees through my involvement in the student union (for any student struggling with childcare, it’s worth asking if this is still in place!).

When the genocide in Gaza began, protest once again became an urgent question. What could we do? Attending demonstrations became a way to resist the numbing pull of the algorithm, a way to remain present to what was happening. It was instructive to see people working closely on Gaza, to consider what concrete actions we might take. Protest fosters connection and a sense of involvement, but it also deepens understanding of a larger issue and possible steps forward.

When the UK imposed restrictions on Palestinian solidarity actions, I once more felt frustration, the sense that the country was making it harder to reach that point of collective thinking, that space of the unknown. The genocide continues, and the frustration is overwhelming. I write my PhD in the UK while this unfolds, unsure how to intervene, how to stop it, how to make my voice count. I see so many people who want to act but do not know how. We feel so small in the face of events, yet the need for collective action remains. And so, the question returns: How?

These moments of presence and absence, of structured aims and open-ended gatherings, of the analogue and the digital, did more than mark my personal trajectory through recent protest movements. They shaped my sense of what needed to be studied, and how. They attuned me to the tensions between clarity and openness in political demands, to the role of that which is ungraspable, to the process as an aim itself, and the need to accommodate these insights with clearer strategic outcomes, considering the ways in which different contexts and replies structure (or constrain) collective action. It is from this vantage point that I made the methodological decisions outlined below: combining post-structuralist and psychoanalytic approaches to account for what is ungraspable; adopting a retroductive reading where case and theory are inseparable, and that protests are not just illustrations but active sites for conceptual development; using the Chilean case as an illustration that can speak beyond its own

particularities; and building a corpus that can hold both the more strategically and the more ethically oriented dimensions of demand.

Methodological Orientation

The vantage point outlined above informs the methodological orientation of this research. Its approach works within a post-structuralist framework that is itself indebted to psychoanalytic thought, with a particular interest in how psychoanalytic concepts can operate “beyond the clinic” to illuminate political and social processes. Post-structuralism provides the tools to approach demands as contingent, overdetermined, and discursively articulated. Psychoanalysis, and Lacan in particular, deepens this perspective by naming that which resists full capture in any discursive articulation: the constitutive lack, or what is described here as the ungraspable dimension.

While post-structuralist accounts often take psychoanalysis as an implicit ontological foundation, this research makes that relation explicit, foregrounding the ungraspable as a productive force in the study of political demand. This positioning also engages with an ongoing ontological debate in political theory concerning mobilisation, representation, and the conditions of the political. Within post-structuralist perspectives, there is broad agreement on the impossibility of complete closure in the social. However, significant differences emerge in how this impossibility is understood and politically mobilised. Drawing on Deleuzian and Foucauldian traditions, thinkers such as Hardt and Negri emphasise excess — the generative surplus, productivity, and creative capacities that overflow existing structures. By contrast, Laclau — working from a Lacanian foundation — foregrounds lack as the constitutive condition of politics, framing antagonism and the impossibility of final suture as central to democratic practice. This research locates itself within a Lacanian perspective, yet in a way that resists framing lack and excess as mutually exclusive. In the reading developed here, a

Lacanian account can recognise excess, particularly when the analysis centres on the objet petit a. By focusing on this ungraspable element, the project seeks to show how the recognition of constitutive lack can coexist with, and even open onto, the generative possibilities emphasised in excess-oriented approaches.

From this dual orientation, the project engages with Laclau's use of psychoanalytic categories while also revisiting and supplementing them — particularly by restoring the force of the objet petit a as both the ungraspable that insists and thus also destabilises closure. This reframing opens space for tracing demands not only in their strategic, articulated forms but also in their more elusive, excessive dimensions, as these can be observed retroductively in moments of rupture such as the Chilean *estallido social*.

Approach to Cases and Corpus

The lack/excess lens outlined above shapes how empirical material is approached in this research. If demands are always animated both by what is missing and by what overflows their stated form, then analysis must attend not only to what actors say they want, but also to the dissonances, contingencies, and affective currents that escape their formulations. This requires a mode of inquiry capable of tracing the interplay between the articulated and the unarticulated, the graspable and the ungraspable.

The way cases are treated here follows from both the theoretical commitments already outlined and from the methodological debates in the literature. Protest, in this sense, operates as a trigger for theory: it provides opportunities to question and transform existing theoretical frameworks, while also illuminating the dynamics of the phenomenon itself. As Laclau (1991) notes, the relationship between case and theory is not one of strict separation — as the line between them is necessarily blurred, their dichotomy must be overcome. From a post-structuralist discourse perspective, the process of research is one of deconstructing the “text”

through intertextual strategies, which is essentially the same process employed when working with what is conventionally called a “case study.”

This case–theory blurriness has been further elaborated by Glynos and Howarth (2007; 2019) who introduce the notion of the retroductive cycle. In contrast to positivist approaches, which treat the processes of discovery and justification as separate, their metatheoretical model emphasises that justification is part of the ongoing process of problematisation itself. In this view, theoretical categories and empirical material continuously reframe one another. Justification does not emerge “naturally” but is constructed and rearticulated at different “moments” of the research process.

Following this retroductive approach, all the protests considered in this thesis are treated as sites of illustration rather than as isolated “case studies.” While acknowledging the particularities of each event and the contexts in which it emerged, the analysis is guided by the search for what they share: their status as new forms of protest that challenge how political demand is studied and conceptualised. This shared terrain is not simply descriptive; it functions as the ground on which the theoretical framework is built and refined, with the protests themselves acting as active contributors to the production of the theory rather than as passive ‘examples’ of it.

To this end, a retroactive mode of reading is adopted: rather than starting with fixed categories and applying them to “cases,” subsequent theoretical insights are allowed to reframe the meaning of earlier events, and vice versa. This approach resonates with Laclau’s view of the event as retroactively constituted within discourse, while also foregrounding the psychoanalytic idea that the object of pursuit emerges through the act of pursuing it.

In this context, the Chilean *estallido* social occupies a central place. It is chosen not only for its personal and political significance to the researcher (as discussed in the reflexive section) but also because it crystallises many of the tensions central to this project: the

challenge of formulating clear demands; the interplay between strategic organisation and open-ended process; and the proliferation of creative and affective forms of expression—such as graffiti—that resist easy incorporation into institutional channels.

The analysis of the *estallido social* will be presented through an interpretive timeline that serves both as a record of the event and as an analytic device for situating it within the broader field of contemporary mobilisation. The Chilean sequence is examined through a retroductive approach, understood as a recursive movement between empirical material and theoretical elaboration. Rather than ‘applying’ theory to the case, this method allows theoretical categories to emerge through the back-and-forth movement of re-signification that each iteration of analysis produces. The Chilean case is also placed in dialogue with other moments of mobilisation—drawn into the corpus as contrastive vignettes—to test whether the conceptual insights developed here can travel across contexts.

Chilean timeline

The timeline presented in this section is a sequence that traces the period from the days preceding *estallido social* in October 2019 through the constitutional process and its aftermath. This is not a neutral chronology or a purely descriptive historical record. Rather, it is constructed from a combination of media sources and the researcher’s own situated perspective, selectively foregrounding those events, moments, and interventions that speak to the theoretical concerns of this study.

The timeline serves several methodological purposes. First, it anchors the retroactive reading, providing a structured reference that allows earlier moments to be revisited and reinterpreted in light of subsequent developments. Second, it traces shifts in how demands are approached throughout the research, mapping changes that inform the progression of the substantive chapters. Third, although the Chilean sequence is treated as an illustration rather

than a conventional case study, the timeline offers a grounded understanding of its particularities within the broader constellation of mobilisations encompassed by the term “open protest”. In doing so, it provides both a contextual foundation for the Chilean example and a comparative frame for situating it alongside other mobilisations examined in the thesis. By integrating the timeline into the interpretive process instead of treating it as a background appendix, Chile’s recent protest cycle is approached not as a fixed “case” but as an evolving field of meaning-making — one that continues to influence how political demands and their excessive aspects can be conceptualised.

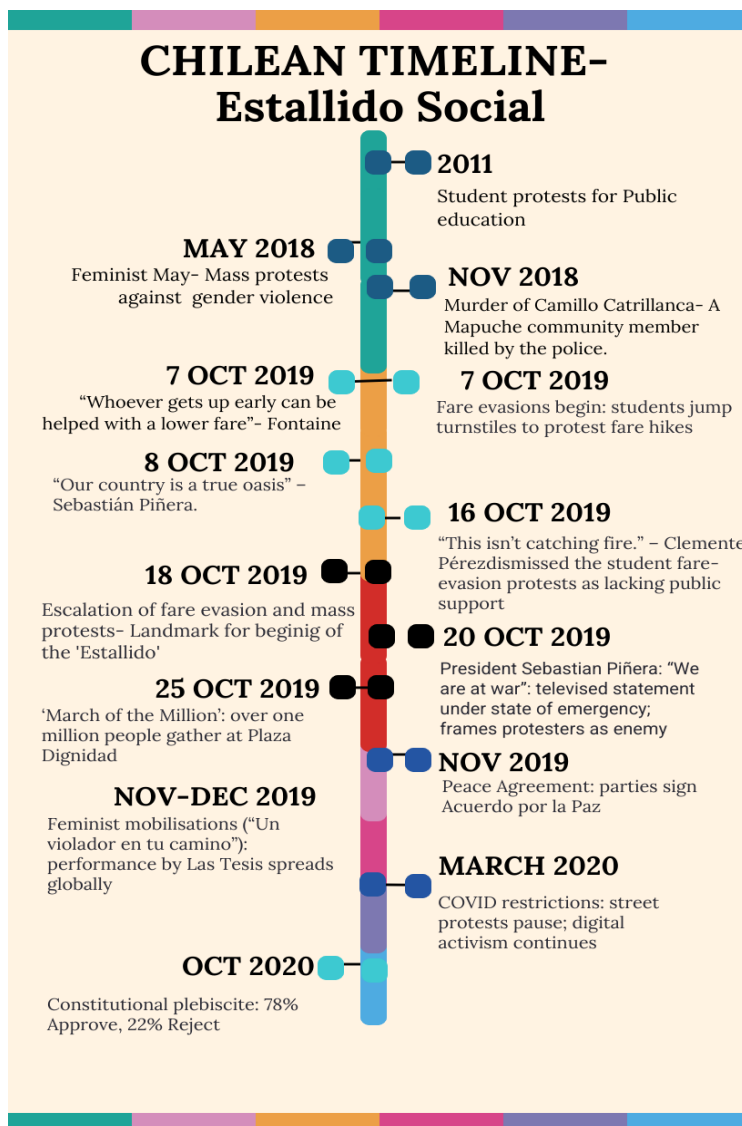


Figure 2.5. Chilean Time line of the *Estallido Social* (author’s illustration)

Methods and Data

The methodological commitments outlined above are operationalised through a qualitative, interpretive analysis of a multi-modal corpus. This corpus draws primarily on materials generated during and around the Chilean *estallido social*, supplemented by contrastive vignettes from other contexts of protest. The aim is not to produce an exhaustive archive, but to assemble a body of material that allows for sustained engagement with both the articulated and the unarticulated dimensions of political demand.

Corpus composition

The corpus includes secondary sources that provide:

- Protest products (e.g., graffiti, posters, banners, visual interventions in public space);
- Digital media (e.g., social media posts, videos, memes);
- Speeches, public statements, and manifestos;
- News and independent media coverage;
- Select movement-produced texts reflecting internal debates.

Ethics, reflexivity and limitations

Given the politically charged and sometimes high-risk nature of the contexts studied, ethical considerations include avoiding identification of individuals unless they are already public figures, respecting the integrity of protest materials, and acknowledging my own positionality as both a researcher and a participant-observer in some protest spaces. The reflexive account earlier in this chapter situates these positionalities explicitly, recognising that they shape not only what is accessible to me, but also how I interpret it.

When considering limitations, it is important to restate that this is not a “case study” in the conventional sense. The project privileges the corpus and materials used as means to illustrate the theoretical moves being made and to develop theoretical arguments, rather than aiming primarily to contribute empirical insights about the Chilean mobilisation or other protests referenced. It does not claim to represent the totality of the Chilean uprising or of any other movement. Instead, it offers an in-depth, theoretically informed reading of selected moments, artefacts, and discourses, chosen for their capacity to illuminate the research questions. This selective focus is a deliberate methodological choice that prioritises depth of analysis over breadth of coverage.

Aims and Contribution

Building on the methodological orientation outlined above, this section sets out the aims and anticipated contributions of this research. The project’s central concern is to rethink the study of political demand by foregrounding its ungraspable dimension and the modalities of reply it elicits, in order to engage with the shifting dynamics of contemporary protest. The discussion begins by presenting the main research question and the conceptual architecture that underpins it, before outlining the specific sub-questions that guide the analysis across the substantive chapters.

Research Question

How can the articulation of political demand and the modalities of reply it provokes be rethought by foregrounding its ungraspable dimension, in order to address the shifting dynamics of contemporary –or, open– forms of protest?

Core Analytical Architecture

This project is organised around four interconnected elements:

1. **Demand as the analytic entry point**, providing a concrete locus from which to examine both articulated claims and the dynamics they set in motion.
2. **The ungraspable as the structural element** within demand that insists and drives movement while resisting full articulation.
3. **Modalities of reply as the key process** through which political actors and institutions engage with both the articulated and unarticulated, ungraspable dimensions of demand.
4. **Contemporary protest as the field of application**, conceptualised as open protest, that is, forms of mobilisation that sustain rather than close the political field. Within this field, the Chilean *estallido social* serves as the principal illustration – it figures not as an empirical case study but as a site where the tensions surrounding demand, articulation, and reply become most visible. Additional episodes of mobilisation are included as contrastive vignettes, allowing the theoretical framework to be tested for transposability across contexts rather than empirical generalisation.

From Demand to Modalities of Reply

In this study, demand serves as the primary analytic entry point, even though the theoretical focus ultimately turns on the *objet petit a* and the modalities of reply to it. This choice follows

a deliberate theoretical scaffold. Lacan's definition of demand — as distinct from need and desire — foregrounds its structural incompleteness: every articulated demand both expresses and conceals the desire that animates it. Laclau has a psychoanalytically informed approach, and although he poses demand as central for the political analysis, he does not adopt a specifically Lacanian conception of demand. This research builds on post-Laclauian efforts to supplement the Lacanian conception to Laclau's theory of demand articulation, arguing that this offers a powerful tool for analysing protest. From this standpoint, demands can be treated not merely as claims to be met or denied but as critical points at which the ungraspable presses into the political field. The central question of this research is therefore not solely how demands are made, but how they are replied to — in ways that close, defer, amplify, or otherwise negotiate the gap represented by the *objet petit a*. Because any modality of reply presupposes some form of demand, analysing demands provides a concrete, traceable point of entry into the more elusive operations of the ungraspable in political life.

Definition: Modalities of Reply

'Modalities of reply' refers to the discursive, affective, and strategic forms through which political actors, institutions, or publics respond to a demand — and, more fundamentally, to the ungraspable kernel that animates it. A reply is not limited to granting or rejecting the articulated content of a demand; it may defer it, redirect it, partially incorporate it, or attempt to foreclose it altogether. By attending to these modalities, the analysis examines how replies work upon both the explicit claim and the absent or excessive dimension it indexes. This dual focus makes it possible to explore not only the political negotiation of articulated demands but also the ways in which the ungraspable is sustained, displaced, or disavowed in the process.

Sub-questions and Chapter Links

The thesis begins with Laclau's articulation of demand as an entry point into the research. It takes up insights from post-Laclauian scholarship that use Lacan's concept of demand in order to problematise the notion of reply implicit in Laclau's model. Building on this, it explores other possible modalities of reply, not exhaustive or final, but opening alternative ways of engaging with the ungraspable. These alternatives are grounded and illustrated through contemporary protests, with the Chilean *estallido social* as the central case.

The research is guided by three linked sub-questions, each corresponding to a substantive chapter:

1. **Dialectic dimension** – How does Laclau's conception of populist articulation align with the hysteric–master discourse dialectic in Lacan, and what form of reply does this assume — one centred on the mastery of a demand? What are the political effects of treating the ungraspable in this way?
2. **Epistemic dimension** – How does the university discourse, as a modality of reply grounded in knowledge, operate in contemporary contexts of data abundance? How is knowledge deployed in response to the ungraspable, and with what political consequences?
3. **Ethical dimension** – How might a modality of reply inspired by the analyst's discourse — one that places the ungraspable at the centre — open possibilities for political engagement that resist premature closure?

Taken together, these three dimensions structure the substantive chapters that follow. Each chapter examines a distinct modality of reply, analysing both its theoretical articulation and its empirical resonance within the corpus of contemporary protest. While the Chilean *estallido social* provides the primary terrain of illustration, each chapter also draws on contrastive vignettes employed to test the portability of its conceptual claims. In this way, the progression

from dialectic to epistemic to ethical modes of reply is not presented as a linear evolution or hierarchy, but as a set of distinct yet overlapping readings of how the ungraspable enters, and is negotiated within, the political field.

Introduction to Substantial Chapters



Figure 3.1 Graffiti reading “*We will ask nothing, we will demand nothing, we will take, occupy,*” London.

(University College London, n.d.)

In the course of the Occupy protests between 2011 and 2013, a series of images became viral. Still in their infancy, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms had emerged as the movement’s primary medium of communication (Blumenkranz, 2011). A number of visually striking slogans circulated on these platforms, as Occupy publicised locations and dates to coordinate the organisation of protests around the world. The image reproduced above documents just this period. Taken in London, an active site of Occupy protest activity between 2011 and 2012,³ the photo illustrates some of the movement’s most prevalent expressive forms: street art and graffiti (McKee, 2017). Atop a brick wall in Shoreditch appears a characteristic Occupy slogan. It is a borrowing from a Situationist International phrase used in the May ’68 protests: “We’ll ask nothing, we’ll take, occupy” (Situationist International, n.d., para. 21).

³ For a grounded study of how occupying urban sites translated into transformations of everyday life in London, see Halvorsen (2015)

Significantly, the adapted version shown here adds: “we will demand nothing”. Far from being a mere “throwback”, however, the recycling of this slogan crystallises what Chapter 2 identified as a core trait of these protests: a refusal to cast claims as discrete demands.

Recontextualising this slogan clarifies a core characteristic of the protests under study that will become the focus of the following chapters: the role and modalities of demand. The slogan adopts a manifesto style, with each line worded as an affirmation that seems deliberately constructed to avoid the disappointment of the 'no' in a grammatical negation. The focus is on collective action. Each sentence begins with a 'we,' and the sentences consciously contrast the 'asking' and 'demanding' with 'taking' and 'occupying.' Those who ‘ask’ and ‘demand’ are necessarily in the position of having to address an 'Other' external to the 'we/collective' that does the asking or demanding – grammatically, the verbs prefer a dative construction that redirects the action to some indirect entity to whom the asking and demanding is addressed. 'Taking' and 'occupying', on the other hand, prefer direct objects – they don't need to be addressed to some external Other from whom recognition or permission is required. The Shoreditch slogan puts both verbs in the future plural, as action to be undertaken collectively, shifting representation away from classical institutional channels. Of course, one could object that such political messaging is in no way new, especially considering the original Situationist slogan is fifty years old. This is indeed true. However, these protests call for detailed investigation not because they are radically new, but because they sharpen an existing logic in ways that are (at least potentially) uniquely politically generative. The focus here is the suspension of demand – why not pose a specific demand, or indeed, why demand ‘nothing’, and what follows once the ask–reply schema is interrupted.

The following chapters cut across the polarised debate between programme-centred demands and orientations that move beyond demand. This is done by treating Lacan's four discourses as modalities of reply to demand—an analytic that exceeds both classical

institutional framings and the strictly Laclauian account, while remaining in dialogue with them. The argument unfolds in three steps. Chapter 3 reads the dialectic between the Master and the Hysteric discourses to show how Laclau's theory of demand can be re-specified through this pairing: the Master articulates and stabilises S1, while the Hysteric unsettles it, revealing the gap that structures the address to the Other. This yields a supplement to Laclau's account, clarifying what is at stake in the distinction between asking and demanding, and why 'demand nothing' operates as a politically generative interruption. Chapter 4 turns to the University discourse to analyse how an expert/managerial modality *reads* demand and *replies* to it—translating claims into procedural, informational, and technocratic forms and thereby producing specific effects (channelisation, depoliticisation, overwhelming datafication). Chapter 5 considers the Analyst discourse as a subversion of the Master: here, demand is deliberately neither satisfied nor codified; instead, the work of elaboration becomes central, shifting the focus from demand to processes that sustain and transform the collective scene of political articulation. Read as reply-modalities, the four discourses allow the analysis to move past the ask–reply schema and to reassess the role of leadership, the spaces of political elaboration, and organisational form.

CHAPTER 3

The Dialectic of Demand – From the Master to the Hysteric, and Back Again?

This chapter develops a *Laclau avec Lacan* reading of demand by treating the four discourses as modalities of reply to demand. It contributes to the guiding question of this thesis – how to conceptualise demand in contemporary protests that suspend or refuse it – by focusing on the

Master–Hysteric pairing. Building on Chapter 2’s analysis of demand in ‘new protests’, this chapter revisits debates on political representation and identification. It focuses on three issues: leadership, the status of demands, and the sites where these demands are developed and contested. The discussion is situated within the well-known ontological dispute between lack and multiplicity—often framed as Hardt and Negri’s multitude versus Laclau’s construction of the people (see Kioupiolis & Katsambekis, 2016). Rather than reproducing this binary, the chapter seeks to loosen it by reading demand through Lacan’s four discourses. The four discourses are therefore taken as a theoretical point of departure: they open analytic pathways from the ontological alternatives and enable a rethinking of politics that is reducible neither to lack nor to multiplicity alone. The remainder of the chapter develops this move. The immediate aim is to establish the four discourses as a plausible analytic for the social and political field, using demand as an entry point. As stated in Chapter 2, the analysis offered here does not adhere uncritically to Lacanian formulae. Rather, those Lacanian insights are to be extracted that enable de-sedimenting and de-fixating the Laclauian approach to demand, introducing supplementary distinctions and nuances into it. In doing so, the analysis prepares the ground for reconsidering leadership and for sketching alternative spaces of political elaboration. In keeping with this aim, this chapter concentrates on aligning Laclau’s task of ‘constructing the people’ as proposed in OPR (2005) and central to the project of radical democracy, with the dialectic of Master and Hysteric discourses elaborated by Lacan in Seminar XVII, *The Reverse of Psychoanalysis* (1969–70). By treating the Master and Hysteric as dialectically interdependent, the analysis offered here trace the encounters and the potentially productive mis-encounters between this Lacanian framework and Laclau’s project of Radical Democracy.

The chapter is broken down into three sections. Section I introduces the Lacanian reading of the Master discourse and interpretively aligns Lacan’s insights from this reading with Laclau’s conception of the task of constructing the People. Specifically, this section

revisits Laclau's account of the process of demand formation in OPR, focusing in greater detail on the categories of democratic and popular demands, as well as on the role of demand in the construction of the People. Lacan's account of the structure and effects of the Master discourse, as well as the Master's aims, will be aligned with the specific aims implied in the construction of the Laclauian People. The chapter develops a distinction between different forms of demand according to the mode of demand formation – a distinction brought to light by new protest movements in particular. This distinction is intended to accommodate multiple conceptualisations of the role of demand in contemporary protests without privileging any single one. Deploying the Lacanian–Laclauian Master model enables the chapter to highlight the theoretical and empirical contributions of this specific approach to the study of demand, as well as to clarify its limitations.

By foregrounding the distinction between different forms of demand based on their formation, rather than in terms of Laclau's opposition between 'democratic' and 'popular' demand, the chapter clarifies the ontological status of demand as structurally unsatisfiable. This serves to redirect attention to the context of demand's emergence as the site of the political. Rather than concentrating on the content or character of particular demands, the analysis focuses on their form, space, and temporality. This yields a more productive distinction for the analysis of protest, allowing the chapter to zoom in on the different 'states' of demand – first, a broader field of expressive outputs (memes, expressive art) that follow a logic of expression; and second, the replies to such expressions, modelled through a Lacan–Laclau framework. The chapter offers this framework as a possible lens for the reading and interpretation of both these kinds of expressive output. As argued in Chapter 2, these more expressively shaped phenomena still count as demands from a Lacanian perspective insofar as they address an Other for recognition. Yet they proceed via a moment of dislocation that is central to new protests – deferring institutional replies, equivalential chains, and related closures. The Lacanian–

Laclauian Master perspective can be employed to show how a reply in this context assumes a particular form and at the same time implies and aims at the construction of a more schematic demand. The aim is to present this Lacanian-Laclauian Master reply as one among other possibilities (which will be explored in the following chapters), and to demonstrate how focussing on particular psychoanalytical elements within the aligned Lacan-Laclau framework opens up productive new avenues for analysing new protest movements.

The chapter continues by presenting an illustration of the Chilean 2019 outburst. The timeline focuses on the presidential campaign period when candidates aimed to craft a narrative addressing the protests (see timeline in chapter 2). Using a corpus from the discourses circulated on Twitter during this period, the rest of this section contextualises the figure of José Antonio Kast to exemplify the roles of leadership, demand, and the construction of the People from the Master Discourse perspective.

In section II, the chapter turns to the Lacanian Hysteric discourse, distinguishing between the hysteric function of discourse on the one hand and the discourse of the Hysteric proper, on the other. The aim is to focus on the ‘pair’ of the Master by presenting those who demand, specifically those who ‘demand a Master’. This section develops a Hysteric Lacanian-Laclauian model with the aim to show the dialectical movement that inherently structures demands. Continuing with the Chilean case to illustrate the Master-Hysteric dialectic, the section conceptualises the figure of Gabriel Boric, whose personal political trajectory renders him uniquely suitable for analysing such a dialectic – firstly, by elucidating the hysterical structure of the traditionally organised social movement in which Boric participated in 2011; secondly, by analysing the presidential role as the position of a Master. The interplay between these positions traces a tense and awkward relation between Gabriel Boric's role first as protester and then as President. The chapter concludes by analysing the implications of this

discourse, raising questions about representation, political organisation, and the spaces for political elaboration in the new kind of protests.

I. Mastering a Demand

This section develops one side of the Master-Hysteric dialectic: the Master—specifically, the mastering of demand. It treats the Master discourse as a modality of reply to demand, and reads Laclau’s task of constructing ‘the people’ through this lens. The claim is that the Master-discourse approach is homologous with Laclau’s construction of ‘the people’: stabilising an S1 (empty/master signifier), organising heterogeneous claims into an equivalential chain, and elevating a general demand. On that basis, the section draws out implications for leadership, the aims and limits of political representation, and the forms of political elaboration the Master reply both enables and forecloses.

The analysis proceeds in three moves. First, it revisits Laclau’s account of demand formation, with particular attention to the differentiation between democratic and popular demands, in order to interrogate the ontological commitments built into this categorisation. Second, it turns to the process of constructing ‘the people’ under conditions of dislocation, clarifying the place of the leader, demand, and the collective subject within that process. Third, it aligns this process with the Lacanian Master discourse, making visible the assumptions about agency, ethics, and representation that follow from replying to demand via stabilisation and suturing. Throughout, examples from the ‘new protests’—particularly the Chilean case—serve to illustrate the argument and to pressure radical-democratic categories regarding the role of demand in these mobilisations.

A. Constructing ‘The People’

Following on from the discussion in Chapter 2 concerning the Laclauian process of demand formation, this section now focuses on the task of constructing ‘the People’ – an account Laclau mostly develops in OPR (2005). As shown in the previous chapter, the category of ‘the People’ has been widely studied and debated. Some approaches lead to a more discursive understanding, establishing the basis for analysing emerging demands within a specific context (Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005; Gerbaudo, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2017), while others contest the term ‘the People’, conceiving it as a form not necessarily linked to a specific or clearly defined demand (Butler, 2015; Rancière, 1999). This distinction is significant, as new protests compel a revisiting of previous analytical categories – particularly categories of demand and leadership forms – prompting a reconsideration of the roles of agency, the political subject and the aims of political organisation. Just as Laclau saw in the social movements of the late 1960s and 1990s a way to reconceptualise theories of the political subject, class struggle, and political identity, it might be said that a similar effort is required to understand the new forms of protest emerging today. In this context, this analysis aims to unpack some of the assumptions underlying the category of ‘the People’ and the process of its construction, and to assess whether these assumptions remain useful, or if new perspectives might be required to complement them.

The discussion centres on Laclau for three reasons: (1) ‘the people’ is pivotal in his work and is explicitly linked to demand; (2) because Laclau is the canonical point of reference in contemporary discussions of ‘the people’, engaging his account therefore provides a shared entry-point into the wider debate (e.g., over ‘the people’ versus the ‘multitude’) and places this analysis in direct dialogue with its key interlocutors; and (3) Laclau’s account offers a bridge to the psychoanalytic alignment developed here, enabling a re-specification of demand and an analysis of new protest forms. Accordingly, the section revisits the link between demand formation and the construction of the people, re-examining the ontological commitments in

Laclau's differentiation between democratic and popular demands. Establishing the homology between this construction and the Lacanian Master discourse (as a modality of reply to demand) sets up a further claim that will be taken up in the conclusions and developed fully in Chapter 5: that Laclau's reading tends to conflate two distinct psychoanalytic functions—the S1 (master signifier that stabilises an equivalential chain) and *objet petit a* (the remainder or cause of desire, not a signifier). The analysis that follows marks a first step toward disaggregating these roles—reserving S1 for stabilisation and locating *objet a* as the product/remainder of articulation—to clarify the implications for agency, ethics, representation, and leadership in the context of the 'new protests'.

i. Popular Demand and Democratic Demand

As shown in Chapter Two, Laclau distinguishes between democratic demands and popular demands. Democratic demands are defined as those that, although expressing dissatisfaction with the current social order, can be fulfilled within the institutional framework, whereas popular demands are those that not only express dissatisfaction but cannot be accommodated within the current social context, leaving them unfulfilled and awaiting their articulation in a fundamental challenge the social order as such. Laclau focuses on popular demands to base his analysis of the construction of the People, linking these demands in equivalential chains that can ultimately create a narrative capable of successfully contesting the social order.

Although analytically useful for tracing how 'the People' is constructed, the distinction between 'popular' and 'democratic' demands poses several problems. Primary among these is an ontological issue concerning the status of 'satisfaction'. As has been widely noted (Zicman de Barros 2021, 2023; Ronderos, 2022; Eklundh, 2019), once Laclau grounds his account in a Lacanian ontology, one that posits the impossibility of closure, any notion of full or final

satisfaction becomes difficult to sustain. This, in turn, unsettles the criterion by which demands are said to be ‘satisfied’ and thus converted from democratic to popular.

If the Lacanian premise is taken seriously, demands—whether ‘democratic’ or ‘popular’, can never be fully satisfied. From here, two conceptual paths are open. First, one could hold that Laclau retains the Lacanian ontological assumptions and that the problem is terminological: rather than ‘satisfaction’, he should speak of ‘accommodation’, which does not entail ontological completion. Second, one could read him as moving on an ontic terrain: a given social order sustains an *illusion of satisfaction*, whereby only those demands that *appear* satisfied can be accommodated without disturbing the institutional foundations of the order. On this view, there is assumed to exist a threshold of contestation that must be crossed before a ‘democratic’ demand, whose illusion of satisfaction can no longer be socially sustained, to be understood as ‘popular’.

Accepting either path allows one to remain within an ontology of incompleteness. The analytical focus then shifts from the intrinsic content of a demand to its articulation within a prevailing social order which conditions its effects. The same demand can register very differently across social formations and historical moments. In that sense, what Laclau calls ‘popular demands’ typically becomes fully legible once dislocation has occurred—though in practice one can still track tendencies toward such elevation as they unfold.

Crucially, the emphasis of the analysis should fall on the surplus that both drives a demand and exceeds any particular demand formulation. Taking this excess as the object of inquiry opens the question of how different logics reply to demand. The Lacanian route, read here through the Master discourse, is one such reply: it clarifies the logic of suturing, whereby a general demand is stabilised by a unifying signifier and an articulatory chain. Placing this suturing dynamic alongside the excess that animates and overflows demands, often palpable in the expressive forms of new protests, allows us to distinguish replies that stabilise and recentre

from replies that keep the gap open. The psychoanalytic alignment developed here is intended to make that contrast immediately visible now, and analytically deepening it in the chapters that follow.

In Chile, when protests erupted in October 2019, the precipitating claim was the revocation of the 30-peso increase in public transport fares. On its face, this was a predictable request entirely intelligible within the coordinates of the prevailing order. Yet, two things ensued. First, even after President Sebastián Piñera rescinded the increase, mobilisation intensified rather than subsided. Second, the claim rapidly generalised: the slogan “*No son 30 pesos, son 30 años*” condensed a wider indictment of inequality and everyday precarity, and neighbourhood assemblies (*cabildos*) began to translate diffuse grievances into a constitutional horizon. In other words, what drove the cycle exceeded the discrete demand protesting the fare increase; it lay in the articulation of that demand within a turbulent time–space and in the surplus momentum that carried it beyond any specific formulation.

A similar pattern was obtained in Hong Kong (2019): the government withdrew the extradition bill, yet protests continued under the banner “five demands, not one less,” indicating that the dynamic had outstripped the initial claim. The French *gilets jaunes* (2018–19) likewise persisted after the fuel-tax rise was suspended and then cancelled, as the repertoire, frames, and addressees broadened far beyond their initial scope. These cases support the analytical shift proposed above: rather than coding demands as ‘democratic’ or ‘popular’ around the axis of *satisfaction*, the focus should be on forms of demand (expressive and schematic), on how they travel and are taken up, and on the excess that both animates them and overflows the content of any single demand. That excess becomes the proper object of analysis—and raises the subsequent question of how different logics reply to it, with the Lacanian (Master/suturing) path being one, though not the only, possibility.

One line of interpretation is to assume that these particular demands gained traction and were able to create equivalential chains with other unsatisfied demands such as those addressing cost increases in other services, or stemming from discontent over the inadequacy and clumsiness of government responses to previous demands, such as, notably, “buying flowers for the romantic”.⁴ Such demands could then be seen as feeding in to a form of “challenging demand” such as “changing the constitution” in the case of Chile. In Laclauian coordinates, such demands could be read as conjoining with emerging narratives such as “*No son 30 pesos, son 30 años*”, thus gaining the weight and necessary traction for being equivalentially linked with other demands.

While such an interpretation may be true in some respects, one could also argue that the protests began and caused sustained dislocation even before any demand was clearly articulated, thus warranting a more detailed study of the specific temporality of their emergence and development. Furthermore, the proposed interpretation does not resolve the ambiguous distinction between democratic and popular demands. If dislocation started before a ‘challenging demand’ was even constructed, this further complicates the conceptual distinction between democratic and popular demands in terms of their specific temporalities. As previously noted, these kind of protests were especially interesting in the eyes of many academics and political analysts, insofar as it was difficult to identify the cause of discontent by examining the demands it apparently produced. Sometimes even lacking articulation in traditional programme form, the process of demand construction here appears far more flexible and thus more resistant to an analysis that zooms in on the nature and causes of the *sustained* dislocation it produced.

Taken together, the foregoing discussion of Laclau’s democratic/popular distinction supports a broader account of demand in the social and political field. On a post-foundational

⁴ See timeline of the case in chapter 2.

footing, any demand is structurally open-ended: it may be accommodated to varying degrees without ever being finally satisfied. The pertinent question, therefore, is not whether closure is achieved, but how a demand is treated, read, and replied to—and where analytical focus is placed. In Laclau, the emphasis falls less on the excess as such (or the irruption of the Plebs as has been explored in chapter 2) than on the articulatory effects a demand (or an equivalential chain) can have in composing a political project; the vantage of this is strategic and oriented to narrating a demanding people.

This sets up the next move. The analysis now turns to the construction of ‘the people’ and reads it through the Lacanian discourse of the Master as one modality of reply to demand. This lens clarifies how stabilising a unifying signifier and suturing an articulatory chain can convert expressive demands into more schematic ones oriented to the composition of a political project—what such stabilisation enables, and what it forecloses. It also prepares the ground for the later argument that separates the stabilising function from the excess that animates and exceeds demands – which is to be developed further in Chapter 5.

ii. Demanding The People

To pursue Laclau’s particular approach to demand—and to prepare the subsequent reading through the Lacanian Master discourse—it is necessary to register the complexity of constructing the people and to make explicit some of the assumptions that underwrite this work of construction. As argued above, the analytic priority lies less with the intrinsic content of any given claim, or with its classification as ‘democratic’ or ‘popular’, than with the strategy and agency of demand-formation and, crucially, the specific form taken by demands.

For Laclau, constructing ‘the people’ is a *task*: it is not given at the outset. This is consistent with a post-foundational stance in which there is no necessary or essential character to ‘the people’; the collective takes a contingent form each time. It follows that there is a

process, an activity, that culminates in the very naming of ‘the people’. In many contemporary protest cycles, clear, programmatic demands are not immediately on display; nonetheless, bodies assemble, occupations proliferate, and something like what Gerbaudo (2017: 170) calls a “popular communion” becomes palpable. Enthusiasm, amazement, compassion, camaraderie—such affects are frequently reported. In moments of dislocation, the field is often marked more by affective intensification than by the immediate articulation of a reform programme. The categories ‘democratic’ and ‘popular’ tend, in this sense, to be retrospective designations—the effects of a later reading that constructs a narrative of the sequence. Attending to the forms of demand, from expressive addresses seeking recognition to more schematic, iterable formulations produced by articulatory work, will therefore be central to what follows.

Agency is, accordingly, pivotal. In Laclau’s account, equivalential chains are constructed around a common denominator; affects and discourse are not separable moments but mutually implicated in the labour of articulation. Affects are not epiphenomenal: they are constitutive of how the narrative is forged and how it can be capitalised. There is, in short, no ‘people’ without demand; it is through the work of demand-formation that ‘the people’ is posited and comes about as a subject that counts in the first place.

With the emergence of ‘the people’, the political field is redrawn. A frontier is established between those included within the articulated collective subject and those positioned against it or refusing its recognition—often framed, as Laclau notes, as an underdog/elite opposition. The newly articulated ‘people’ strives for hegemony, and this construction—though contingent—must be presented as a comprehensive project promising the restoration or refounding of order. As previously argued, although Laclau acknowledges the temporality and contingency of this process, he emphasises the need to view it as a whole, as a new suturing of the social order.

This is the hinge for what follows. The next section reads this work of construction through the Lacanian Master discourse as a modality of reply to demand, in order to clarify how stabilisation and suture convert expressive demands into more schematic, project-oriented formulations—what such conversion enables, and what it forecloses.

iii. A failed Representation of a Whole

The representation of a whole—the sense of fulfilment proposed by a new project—is a central element in building ‘the people’. This is especially relevant for the ‘new protests’, where (as argued in Chapter 2) debates over representation and organisation are heated: revolving around the questions of who counts, and how a project could represent as many as possible. One key fault line runs between the notions of immanence and representation. For Hardt and Negri, the multitude is an immanent, self-organising power that resists any transcendent representative locus; politics is made horizontally within networks of cooperation rather than delegated “upward”. By contrast, and in line with Rancière’s negativity, Laclau positions his notion of politics against any notion of a pre-established social fullness: politics does not emerge *within* an immanently given social context that conditions its possibility but rather *against* it – through the rupture and dissensus resulting from the appearance of the plebs, or, the part with no part. Following Rancière’s stance against immanentism as an explanation of social struggles, Laclau (2001) holds that ‘the people’ is a failed representation that arises when the plebs seeks to be the Populus. A difference of emphasis is nevertheless worth noting: for Rancière, the political proper is foregrounded in the momentary *irruption* of the plebs, for Laclau – in the task and process of the *construction* of the people. Because social closure is ontologically impossible, any representation of society as a whole is necessarily a failure. And whilst it is matter of ontological necessity that it could not but fail *qua* representation, for Laclau it is a matter of political necessity that such a failed representation of the whole nevertheless be put forward,

owing to its indispensable function in investing any new political project with the promise of a credible alternative and the incorporation of those previously excluded. Hence the centrality of ‘the people’ in Laclau’s framework: “in constructing the People we find the task of politics” (p.59).

These stakes are therefore both ontological (the status of a construction that, grounded in lack, cannot be completed) and ethico-political (the consequences of constructing or refusing to construct, and the fate of what cannot be counted—the remainder that resists incorporation). For present purposes, this failed-yet-necessary representation reframes how demands should be read. The decisive variable is not the binary of *satisfaction* versus *non-satisfaction*, but the form demands take and how they travel. In the early dislocatory phase, expressive forms predominate—unspecific, affect-laden, and dispersed across squares and timelines (assemblies, occupations, banners, graffiti, *cacerolazos*, chants, memes, live-streams). Through articulatory work, some of these are translated into schematic formulations—minimal, iterable, programmatic claims capable of coordination and projection.

Demands	Form
Expressive	Unspecific. Takes more affective dimension. Art expression, memes, and other forms of expression.
Schematic	Clear-cut, coherent, and programmatic.

Figure 3.2. Form of demands. Author’s elaboration

At the expressive level, what surfaces is less a list of programme points than an expressive aim—unspecific, affective, often bodily forms of appearance (as discussed in Chapter 2). The space is likewise distinctive: plazas and platforms where circulation and amplification happen quickly; this time is the moment of dislocation and its immediate aftermath, when

heterogeneity manifests itself before a more straightforward process of the creation of “collective meaning” becomes legible. This contrasts with the more schematic register with which the Laclauian approach aligns, where expression is rendered schematic, appeals more broadly, and is oriented to meaning-making and projection. Crucially, the expressive level does not disappear; rather, construction is possible *because* of the elements produced by the expressive irruption. Read this way, the Laclauian construction of the people already presupposes that irruption conceptually, and may be understood as a reply to it.

Returning to Laclau’s democratic/popular distinction, it is most useful to locate this cut within the second level of demand (the schematic register). This distinction only becomes assertable after dislocation and once multiple claims have arisen; as such, it functions as a retrospective diagnostic that helps to narrate the moment and organise meaning-making. In this frame, “satisfaction” is best reframed in terms of degrees of accommodation achieved during construction—or, conversely, in terms of the deconstruction of the social order precipitated by that order’s inability to accommodate demands. As argued above, this preserves the ontology of incompleteness (no demand can be fulfilled once and for all) while situating the democratic/popular distinction in the logic of representation (which necessarily fails ontologically).

Finally, centring the excess that survives any formulation clarifies the next step. The analytic task is to track how that excess is elaborated. This splits at the most basic level between routes that seek stabilisation—nominating a unifying name and suturing an articulatory—and alternative, non-stabilising approaches to the excess in any formulation. The following section focuses on the first route, showing how the Laclauian construction of ‘the people’ is homologous with the Lacanian Master discourse as a modality of reply to demand. The analysis draws out what such stabilisation enables and what, as a matter of its very form, it must leave out.

B. The Laclauian Master

Up to this point, the analysis has shown how demands are central to the construction of ‘*the people*’ in Laclau, and how this construction, in turn, underpins his conception of the political. It has also indicated how ‘new protests’ unsettle inherited assumptions about demands and political organisation. With the conceptual terrain of demand specified, the next step is to draw on Lacanian insights in order to elucidate a homologous logic of reply. This section first presents the Master discourse in its clinical setting in order to foreground the link between demand and a stabilising response. It then outlines the proposed alignment between the Lacanian Master structure and the Laclauian task of constructing the people, before turning to an illustration using the Chilean case, focusing on the presidential campaigns of José Antonio Kast and Gabriel Boric that followed the 2019 uprising, to register both convergences and interruptions that will open onto the subsequent chapters.

i. Clinical Setting and Political Alignment

Lacan’s use of the concept of demand highlights a fundamental disjunction within psychoanalysis concerning its own understanding of psychoanalytic practice. In Lacan’s view, the patient’s demand occupies too central a role in the psychoanalytic theories associated with so-called “ego psychology”. The latter, deriving from Freudian theory, recognises the unconscious aspect of the psyche but prioritises work on the patient’s ego. Its therapeutic goal is to strengthen that ego and make it more resistant to life’s contingencies. In this approach, the role of the analyst is pivotal in terms of identification: the ego-analyst acts as an example of a strong and healthy ego, and the process of the patient’s identification with this exemplary model is therapeutically essential for shaping their future behaviour. The role of demand is also

crucial. There is an assumption that the patient will eventually “know what they want” through consistent work on their own demand. In this context, if the patient arrives with a more or less clearly articulated demand such as “I have problems in my work relationship,” two things follow: first, the patient sees the psychoanalyst as the one who knows how to fix the problem identified by the patient. Second, the psychoanalyst positions themselves as occupying the position of the one who knows how to make things for the patient work again, demonstrating and modelling ways to respond to the particular demand identified by the patient. Lacan’s perspective is critical of this role of the analyst, referring to it as the place of the Master.

Lacan criticises ego-psychology by claiming that it fails to recognise the inherently deceptive character of demand. As noted in Chapter 2, the nature of demand is to remain unfulfilled: it can never fully mean what it appears to imply, and there is always something that exceeds and eludes any of its singular expressions. From this perspective, working with demand and positioning the analyst as the Master would mean condemning the treatment to an endless cycle of demands seeking satisfaction and failing to procure it. Instead, Lacan suggests that the analyst should resist the temptation to respond to the patient’s demand. Instead, they should confront the patient with the impossibility of closure. Encountering this impossibility is, for Lacan, a vital driving force in analysis. Chapter 5 explores this encounter with the impossibility of closure further; for present purposes, the focus is on the figure and discourse of the Master.

ii. Lacanian Master Discourse

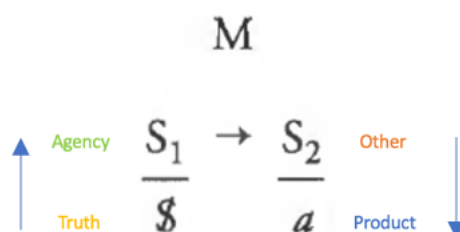


Figure 3.3. Master discourse (based on Lacan, 2007, p.14)

As noted earlier, ego psychology can be mapped onto the Master discourse (see Figure 3.3). In the Master discourse, the Master signifier (S1) occupies the position of agent and addresses knowledge (S2) in the place of the Other. The upper line of the schema thus renders the explicit relation as ‘I will make things work’—more precisely, ‘I will tell you how to make things work’. Beneath the bar, in the bottom-left quadrant, sits the position of truth, represented by the barred subject (\$), signalling division, failure, or an unanswered question, a lack that drives the discourse. The Master discourse is mobilised as a response to this lack, aiming to ‘make things work’ (Lacan, 2007, p. 11-16, 31-33). In the bottom-right quadrant lies the product of the discourse: *objet petit a*, indicating that even when the upper relation appears to function, a remainder persists—something that cannot be fully articulated or symbolised by discourse.

In this sense, the Master position is structurally unable to achieve complete closure or suture: the very form of the discourse mobilised by the Master ensures that an excess unappropriated by signification always returns – hence Lacan’s caution against adopting this discourse as the primary stance of the analyst. Installed in the Master’s place and oriented to satisfying or resolving demand, the analyst is drawn into a repetitive circuit in which what cannot be fully symbolised reappears as symptom, perpetuating an ongoing condition of ‘not working’.

iii. The Role of the Master in Laclau

It is now possible to specify where the Master discourse intersects with how Laclau conceptualises the process of constructing ‘the people’. First, both sequences share a comparable aim: to suture a gap that is structurally impossible to close. In each case, demand

mediates an attempt at stabilisation, not by satisfying it fully and conclusively, but by organising it. Further dimensions, above all agency and identification—require closer analysis for a meaningful comparison which will be developed in the next subsection develops these points. To facilitate the comparison, and to indicate the limits that the new ‘open protests’ may impose on these categories, the chapter illustrates the alignment through the Chilean case.

With the expressive phase during dislocation and the subsequent schematic construction in view, the connection between the Master discourse and the Laclauian leader becomes apparent.

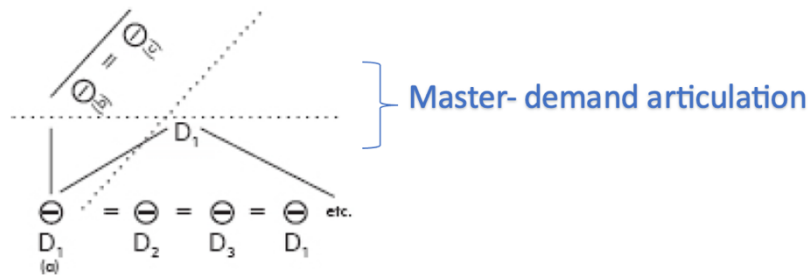


Figure 3.4 Master Demand Articulation (elaborated from Laclau, 2005, p. 124)

As Figure 3.4 suggests, taking Laclau’s (2005) scheme of demand formation as a guide, the Lacanian Master operates analogously to the Laclauian leader: both articulate a general demand while simultaneously replying to claims, thereby offering a way to stabilise the system. The particular, previously expressive demands are drawn from a different level and rendered in a schematic narrative. In Laclau, through this process, ‘the people’ acquires a specific form and meaning, projected as the demand that is elevated and points towards “what needs to be done”. Born from the gap—and from particular demands—those selected expressive demands pass through the sieve of the leader, whose endeavour is to suture. In this context, identification also operates, from a Laclauian perspective, in a way that fits in with Lacan’s discussion of ego psychology: the leader personally embodies the change to be achieved. The product, consistent

with the impossibility of closure, is an anticipated future dislocation: something always exceeds representation. This alignment can be represented in the following image (Figure 3.5).



Figure 3.5. Laclauian representation of the Master discourse

It is important to note that, in this configuration, the leader functions as the agent (S_1) who articulates and names a collective unity, while the people occupy the position of addressee (S_2), representing the field of heterogeneous demands that this signifier unifies. In this sense, the people emerge as the effect of the leader's enunciative operation. Yet, as will be developed further in the thesis, the people can also appear in the place of S_1 —that is, as the signifying operation itself rather than its product. In such cases, the collective identification works as the point of suture, making the appeal to an external leader unnecessary. For the purposes of the present analysis, however, The People are situated in the position of addressee, as the collective subject that the leader's interpellates. This shared locus clarifies why the distinction between them remains conceptually unstable in Laclauian theory.

Returning to the homologation presented in Figure 3.5, this Laclau–Lacan Master representation carries theoretical and empirical implications that merit further analysis. The next section illustrates its functioning and potential implications for demand, leadership, and the objectives of political organisation. Focusing on the period from the 2019 social unrest until the presidential election in Chile, it examines how the narrative of 'the people' was constructed during the presidential campaigns, concentrating on José Antonio Kast and Gabriel Boric. The aim is to deepen understanding of the leader as Master, 'the People' as a political project, the role of demand in this process, and how the inevitable future dislocation is managed.

C. The Master in the new kind of protests: narratives of the People in the Chilean aftermath of protests.

Following the Chilean social explosion in October 2019 and the decisive victory in the plebiscite to amend the former constitution, the country moved toward the 2021 presidential elections. The political landscape had changed significantly since the uprising, with many political analysts and parties struggling to make sense of the social uprising and its consequences. As previously noted, the movement was marked by a diversity of demands and was described as an "affective" movement, where a broad demand consistently surpassed any analytical framework. As Mayol (2018) predicted and elaborated in his analysis of Chile's social and political situation:

When abuse finally became a certainty, the dam was breached by the waters and shattered into thousands of pieces that fell like an avalanche next to the torrent of the river (Mayol, 2012, p. 304, quoted in Mayol, 2018, p. 58).

Against this backdrop, patterns of political self-identification shifted substantially relative to the three decades since the return to democracy in the early '90s (Peña, 2020; Titelman, 2022). Parties found it increasingly difficult to translate the 2019 protest demands into a schematic, institutional register at a moment when the traditional party system had already begun to lose its traction (see Figure 3.6).

Left- Right Axis	1993	2017	Difference
Right	13%	10,3%	-2,7
Centre-Right	13,1%	6,6%	-6,5
Centre	19,8%	11,3%	-8,5

Centre-left	23,2%	7,1%	-16,1
Left	10,5%	8,3%	-2,2
Independent	1,9%	3,9%	2
None	11,5%	48,6%	37,1

Figure 3.6 Table of Chilean right-left identification. (Extracted from Tittleman, 2022, p. 38, translation is mine)

This tendency intensified immediately after the uprising (see Figure 3.7).

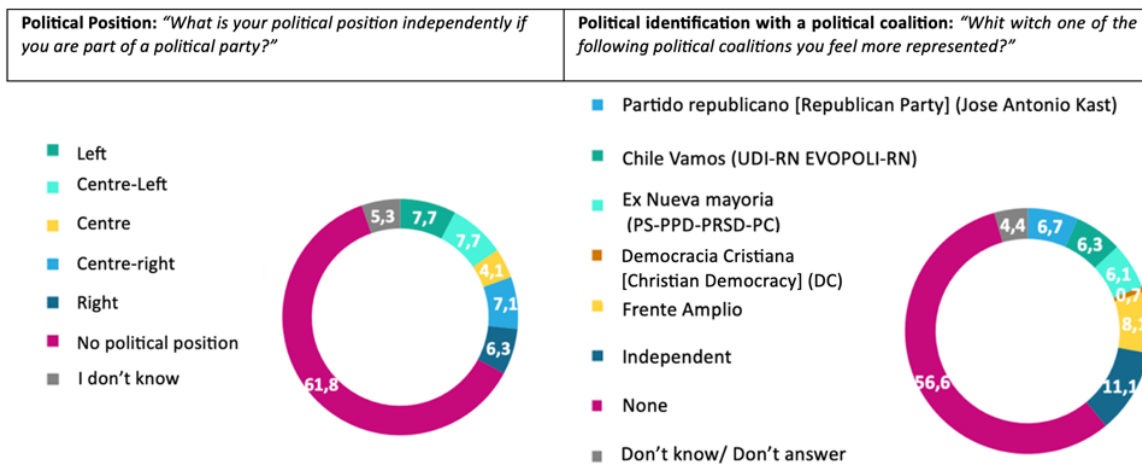


Figure 3.7 Extracted from Activa research, November 2019, translation is mine

As shown in Chapter 2, the Chilean case forms part of a wider crisis of representation, frequently cited as one driver of contemporary protest worldwide. Practices of self-representation and circulation via social media have offered alternative channels for voicing claims, while the heterogeneity of demands has been a defining feature of the squares. In this context, the notion of a traditional left–right axis governing political contestation has often been reframed as an antagonism between elite and underdog, a register more attuned to disillusioned political subjects (Titelman, 2022, p. 38).

Read through the lens developed above, the 2021 campaigns can be approached as competing attempts to stabilise an emergent field: to convert expressive grievances into schematic projects by nominating a unifying name and re-drawing the political frontier. The next subsection examines how José Antonio Kast and Gabriel Boric each sought to construct ‘the people’ under these conditions.

i. Hope and Fear in a Sustained Dislocation

During the Chilean social unrest, many demands and artistic expressions in the squares gave voice to a generalised sense of being unrepresented and unheard by traditional political institutions—a pattern widely reported across the “movement of the squares” (Gerbaudo, 2013). Physically and virtually together, protesters performed a collective, expressive discontent that many intellectuals and party actors struggled to translate into a schematic programme. Social media flooded with messages of unity and solidarity, affirming that “something” had to change—even if exactly what needed to change and how the change was to be achieved remained unclear. As government responses to the protests turned increasingly violent according to global human rights organisations, scenes of repression circulated online. Amid prolonged instability and the difficulty of pinpointing a single cause or demand of the protests, analysts and political elites voiced strong concern about what appeared to be an interminable, open-ended cycle of disorder.

Within this uncertain field, two figures emerged as the 2021 presidential finalists: José Antonio Kast, a conservative right-wing candidate, and Gabriel Boric, a progressive left candidate. After decades dominated by traditional right and centre-left parties, these candidacies offered a reconfigured conservative right and a renewed progressive left. They also

embodied contrasting replies to the unrest: Kast foregrounded a return to political and economic stability; Boric, emerging from the squares, attempted to translate expressive grievances into an institutional (schematic) horizon. Both leveraged social media—Twitter, Instagram, TikTok—as key campaign theatres.

To illustrate the Master discourse at work, the next section analyses how the candidates sought to construct ‘the people’. It begins with selected excerpts from José Antonio Kast’s campaign speeches, examining his construction of ‘the people’, his handling of demands, the leader-function he performs, and the points at which his project encounters interruptions or limits.

ii. José Antonio Kast: “Don’t Worry, Everything is Going to be Fine”

During the uprising, José Antonio Kast came to personify a hard-right project defending conservative values. Associated with an upper-class background and residence in an affluent Santiago borough, he gained support on the right as Sebastián Piñera’s incumbent government appeared to lose control. As the figurehead of the newly-founded Republican Party, Kast seized the opportunity to differentiate himself from traditional parties and coupled a promise to reignite economic growth with hardline positions on migration and protest. As Kast won increasing acceptance for a brand of politics once dismissed as being too fringe, his positions began to win traction among those eager for a rapid restoration of “stability”.

Analysts have noted the party’s intensive use of social media such as TikTok, Instagram and Twitter, to reach politically unanchored youth (see Figure 3.7), and to attract liberal-right voters disillusioned with Piñera. Tweets allowed rapid, situational replies to social unrest, revealing how the party read and addressed expressively articulated forms of discontent as this unfolded in real time. One widely circulated post stated:

A hug to all the Chileans who tonight are once again afraid of irrational violence. A lot of strength and no need to despair: they are few, and we are going to defeat them. We are going to vote in large numbers and isolate the radical left and the naive right, accomplices in the destruction of Chile (Kast, 2020, extracted from Twitter, translation is mine).

This rhetoric couples an affective reframing of the nation in terms of a frontier: “the few/irrational/radical” versus the “hard-working majority”. This resonates with contemporary conservative frames elsewhere in Latin America (e.g., Bolsonaro).

The prolonged unrest, images of violence, and uncertainty created an audience for a stabilising promise. Kast’s campaign crystallised that promise in the refrain “Don’t be afraid, everything is going to be fine”, assembling a chain of heterogenous worries—youth prospects, women’s employment, pensions, SMEs—under a single horizon of order, reconstruction, and growth. The party then presented itself as a solution to this dilemma. This is well illustrated in the following popular discourse that circulated during the presidential campaign.

"The only ones who are afraid today are the **young people**, who think that they are going to have a **worse future** or not as **good as the one their parents had**; **young women** who have lost their jobs and see that **without growth**, they will be left on the side of the road; **those who are afraid** are the pensioners who see their **savings plummet**; those who **are afraid** are the **SMEs** who see that **they cannot progress** because the conditions are not favourable. And now is the time to tell them that we, who are here, **have no fear**, that we dare to dream because it **is the hour of hope**, the **hour of reconstruction**, and I will do everything I can to move this nation forward because **it is worth taking the risk** for Chile."

"Jose Antonio Kast: Don't be afraid, everything is going to be fine" (Chile, November 2021 [translation and bolds are mine])

This type of discourse offers significant insight into Kast's campaign strategy, revealing a number of structural elements that exemplify the alignment between Lacanian Master discourse and the Laclauian construction of the people. Firstly, it is clear that on each occasion, Kast directly appeals to a specific type of voter: those who participated most actively in the social uprising, or those most affected by its economic consequences, especially since the interruption of 'business as usual' had deeply impacted small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) alongside other sectors of the economy. Despite their heterogeneous backgrounds and varying degrees of participation in the uprising, these disparate actors are discursively assembled around shared, ostensibly economic grievances, and affectively bound around a common sentiment. In this context, *fear* functions as the affective glue that provisionally sutures these otherwise heterogeneous constituencies and their demands. Figure 3.8 below breaks down the key components of this discursive-analytical discussion:

Actors	Reason to be upset	Demands	Emotion
Young people	Worst future [than their parents]	Better future	Fear
Young women	Lost their job-no growth-exclusion	Economic growth	Fear
Pensioner	Savings plummet	Increase in pension	Fear
SME's	Cannot progress/conditions be not favourable	Economic progress	Fear

Figure 3.8 Analysis of Jose Antonio Kast Discourse (elaboration is mine)

Read through Laclau, the type of discourse employed by Kast follows a classic Laclauian logic in the construction of ‘the People’. The campaign names a general demand—security and growth—under a unifying banner of “order/reconstruction” (the tagline “don’t be afraid” functions similarly), draws a frontier, and projects a coordinative programme. The leader-function is explicit: “I will do everything I can to move this nation forward,” personalising agency and identification. In Laclauian terms, this translates expressive anxieties into schematic demands oriented to a project, aiming to suture an unstable field.

Considering the Laclauian-Lacanian model, it is also possible to see a remainder as product: the other possible underlying causes of the 2019 cycle (inequality, indebtedness, precarious services, policing) are not addressed in the chain itself; rather, the response centres on consequences of the unrest (disruption, fear, stagnation). As a Master reply, the discourse promises to “make things work again”, but structurally, leaves an excess that may re-emerge as further dislocation.

iii. Identification to the Master: We who demand, we the Master

As argued above, what distinguishes this Master mode of demand-formation is the aim to suture what is perceived as not working, here, by ensuring a ‘secure future’ and ‘secure economic growth’. The leader positions himself as the one who knows what the people need to do in order to restore stability. In this respect, José Antonio Kast exemplifies a classical rendering of the Lacanian Master: he shows *how* to do it and centres the work of demand. The parallel with Laclau’s leader in OPR is evident: the leader must capitalise demands in order to construct ‘the people’, posited as the ‘demanded’ political project that will—always only temporarily—suture the gap.

The identificatory process is explicit: the discourse aims to interpellate the ‘strong’ political subjects that actively ‘make’ the nation. The identity of this interpellated subject is specified by drawing antagonistic frontiers. As Kast wrote in a widely circulated tweet:

“The true workers and social fighters are not with the hippie protesters of Plaza Ñuñoa. They are at their jobs, fighting violence and defending their country. The radical, cowardly and undemocratic left is not going to beat us. Chile wants peace and order!” (Jose Antonio Kast, 2019, translation is mine)

Here the appeal is to a *we*—those who work and desire the same Chile—against a *they*—the ‘hippies’ of Plaza Ñuñoa (a space connoted with a progressive left, from which the *Frente Amplio* is seen to emerge as a ‘new left’; see Titelman, 2022). Leader and political subjects, conjoined via identification, are thereby rendered as one of a piece. This whole configuration yields a classical Laclauian populist reading that shares the features of the Lacanian Master discourse: affects and demands power a sequence in which identification with the master is central and where the project’s declared aim is to satisfy unmet demand, in this case, by restoring stability.

iv. Laclauian Dis-alignment

Why, then, pursue a Lacanian alignment if Laclauian categories already seem to fit so well? Two considerations recommend such an alignment—not as a replacement, but as a complementary heuristic. First, and as previously noted, Lacan treats the Master discourse as one possible way of proceeding; bringing it into view widens the meta-level of demand analysis, supplementing how the form, space, and time of elaboration are conceived. Second, it clarifies how similar elements (name, leader, frontier, affects) can yield different effects

depending on their specific discursive position. Put differently, the alignment helps to read not only *what* is articulated but *where* elements are placed within a structure of reply. Crucially, at the psychoanalytic level, this approach guards against conflating the stabilising name (S1) with the remainder/excess (*objet petit a*). Reserving S1 for nomination/quilting (the unifying signifier that organises a chain) and locating *objet a* as the product/cause that animates and exceeds any formulation opens new analytic possibilities: one can track how campaigns install an S1, where an excess persists, and how different replies either suture or keep the gap open. The aim is therefore not to discard political categories but to re-specify their place, a task developed in the chapters that follow. Moreover, the ‘new’ protest cycles suggest that Master narratives are changing in presentation and duration: leadership and demand appear more flexible and unstable, which warrants revisiting these categories and exploring alternative avenues.

To move forward, the analysis pivots from the stabilising reply to its internal counterpoint. If the Master names a unifying S1 to suture the field, the Hysteric installs the divided subject (\$) as agent, addresses that S1, and presses on the excess rather than covering it—often converting dissatisfaction into questioning that produces knowledge (S2). The next section shows how the hysteric discourse works in a dialectic with the Master discourse. This will be illustrated by staging two moments of the Chilean case where Gabriel Boric is placed as the central figure for this analysis. First, the 2011 student mobilisations, where Gabriel Boric acts as a spokesperson operating in the register of hysteric discourse (exposing the gap, amplifying expressive forms and seeking for someone to address them); second, his presidential campaign, where he undertakes a transition to a Master position (nominating, frontier-drawing, project articulation). The section aims to present how a Hysteric discourse still seeks a Master, and how it works in a dialectical relation to it. It will be argued that reading out this internal and external dialectical structure shows how the same actor can traverse

discursive positions—and how that passage, in the case of Gabriel Boric, is lived awkwardly, with oscillations between keeping the gap open and promising suture.

II. Demanding a Master

As the preceding section on Mastering a Demand showed, in a Laclauian register the construction of ‘the people’ proceeds by articulating heterogeneous claims—linking them discursively and affectively—under a political project often condensed in, and sometimes embodied by, a leader who promises to close a perceived gap. This section turns to the paired form: the hysteric discourse. The focus shifts from the reply to demand (Master) to the mode of address that issues the demand: a specific way of claiming in relation to a Master, that is, when demand is directed to a putative agent of closure. Read in this way, the hysteric completes the dialectical movement of demand by interrogating the promise of suture.

The section proceeds by outlining the Lacanian hysteric discourse and proposing a Laclau–Lacan mapping adequate to its theoretical and empirical implications. It then illustrates this register through the figure of Gabriel Boric: first, in the 2011 student mobilisations, where he emerges as a spokesperson operating in a hysteric discourse register, and subsequently in the 2021 presidential campaign, where he undertakes a transition toward a Master position.

A. Lacanian Hysteric: Function vs. Discourse

The figure of the hysteric has a long history in psychoanalysis and was instrumental in the development of Freudian and Lacanian theory, chiefly because it exemplifies, as a function, the gap in discourse—its structural incompleteness. Patients whose symptoms defied medical explanation unsettled late-nineteenth-century conceptions of consciousness and made it

possible to claim that the psyche is not transparent to itself. As Freud put it, such subjects are “not master in their own house.” Lacan likewise foregrounds the hysteric. In his theory of the four discourses (Seminar XVII) and drawing on Kojève’s reading of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, Lacan locates the hysteric as the barred subject (\$) in a dialectical relation to the Master element (S1). If one function (S1) fixes meaning as a temporary anchor in the web of signifiers, the hysteric’s function is to present the gap of that fixation - condemned, as seen, always to fail. The “dialectical” nature of the hysteric’s relation to the master element names, in this context, their mutual implication and capacity to call one another forth. In this section, that usage clarifies (i) how the Hysteric (agent \$) addresses and tests S1, producing S2 (knowledge), and (ii) how this interrogation tends to elicit a Master reply that nominates and sutures.

Revisiting demand clarifies the point. For Lacan, the hysteric is inherently claiming, it is in the nature of the hysteric’s function to demand; equally, the very presence of demand signals that something is not complete. As argued in Chapter 2 and expanded in the previous section of this chapter, demand by its nature cannot be fully satisfied: when directed to an addressee, it already exceeds any particular reply. Hence, treating demand as an outcome to be addressed and “fulfilled” leads to a dead end.

As shown in Chapter 2, Lacan’s framework distinguishes the element ‘hysteric’ (\$) from the Hysteric discourse as a structural configuration. The former can erupt within any discourse as division; the latter names the specific arrangement in which \$ occupies the position of the (demanding) agent, and S1 occupies the position of addressee(s) (see Figure 3.9).

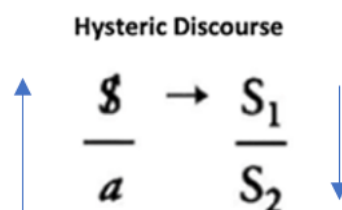


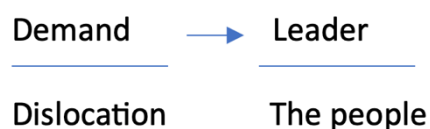
Figure 3.9 Hysteric discourse (based on Lacan, 2007, p.14)

In this discourse, the truth under the bar is *objet petit a* (the excess animating the questioning), and the product is S2—the knowledge generated by interrogation.

A dislocation drives this discourse: something exceeds the symbolic and interrupts the patient’s usual functioning. The subject therefore appears as a barred subject (\$), with the gap becoming evident. A clinical analogy here would be a patient who develops severe insomnia without an obvious cause; experiencing themselves as \$, they address a psychotherapist as the S1 who might “make them sleep again”, and the questioning generates a product of knowledge (S2)—diagnoses, techniques, routines. The place of S1 here is to answer the search of \$, which seeks someone to address the issue; the ‘answer’ accumulates as S2 (explanations, protocols, theories) brought forth by the interrogation. Because any full satisfaction is impossible, every Master reply is structurally insufficient; the Hysteric discourse therefore displays the endless return of demand and, crucially, its tendency to mobilise a Master reply even as it unsettles the sufficiency of any particular reply.

i. Lacanian-Laclauian Hysteric representation

Returning to our Lacanian-Laclauian representation and extrapolating it to the social and political sphere: if one shifts the elements of discourse to align with the Hysteric Discourse, the following is observed (see figure 3.10):

**Figure 3.10** Laclauian representation of the Hysteric Discourse

In this configuration, the demanding subject can be represented by the demand that emerges from protests. As Sebastián Ronderos (2022) observes, protests often appear in a hysteric register insofar as they mobilise and reveal a structural gap within society. Seeking to supplement Laclau's theory of populism, Ronderos invokes Lacan's Hysteric discourse to decentre the position of the Master, proposing the Hysteric Discourse as an analytic focus beyond it. However, while social movements and protests can indeed be read through the logic of the Hysteric, it is important to distinguish conceptually between the hysteric function—represented by the divided subject (\$)—and the discourse of the Hysteric as a structural configuration. As set out in Chapter 2, the hysteric function unsettles by presenting the gap in discourse. This can be seen in the function of the expressive demands described in figure 3.2. In contrast, the discourse of the Hysteric, as a structured reply, not only presents a gap but simultaneously calls forth the Master as its addressee. This distinction is crucial for the analyses developed in this chapter and in Chapter 5.

ii. Hysteric Function vs. Discourse of the Hysteric in protests

Revisiting the distinction between forms of demand presented in Section I shows that at the expressive register, demand takes on a more unstructured, affect-laden form. This aligns closely with the Lacanian category of demand, insofar as this stands for that which cannot be fully articulated or 'said'. On this level, demand may take the expressive form of a choreographed protest demonstration, artistic performance, graffiti, a meme, or another action addressed to an indeterminate addressee. By contrast, the schematic register implies a more strategic rendering of claims into programmatic form, ultimately projecting a general demand—a broad project, a collective 'demanding people'. While articulation draws on expressive materials, an operation is required to elevate them into a general demand. In many

new protests, however, this process of translating demand from the expressive to the schematic level is interrupted, and the logic of equivalence either fails to coalesce or does so only fleetingly.

As shown in Chapter 2, the hysteric element of discourse signals a specific discursive function: the presentation of gap within discourse. In contemporary protests this often appears as recurrent unmasking: emergent programmes or leaderly claims are quickly exposed, ironised, or problematised. The effect is that it interrupts premature sutures and defers translation into a single general demand. This functional productivity of the element \$ (bared subject) will be examined further in Chapter 5; for present purposes, it is essential to distinguish this hysteric function from the discourse of the Hysteric discourse, which stands in a direct, dialectical relation to the Master.

iii. Hysteric and Master Dialectic

As shown above, in the discourse of the Hysteric the barred subject (\$) occupies the agent's place and addresses S1. Its demand is not pure subversion: by exposing the gap it calls for a Master capable of suturing it. This is why the Hysteric and the Master stand in a dialectical relation—each tends to summon the other (see Figure 3.11). Crucially, both positions explicitly pursue or act from the place of mastery: the Master seeks to stabilise by nomination and suture; the Hysteric seeks a master capable of answering. The dialectic is therefore internal to mastery—a push-and-pull over who will occupy the Master place and how—unlike the alternative logics considered in later chapters that do not take mastery as their horizon.

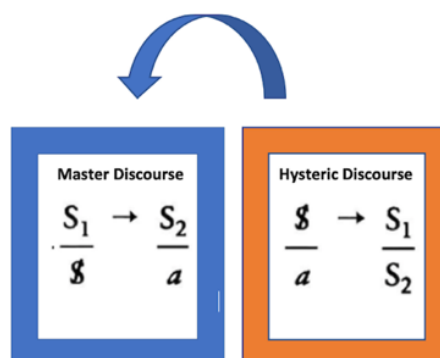


Figure 3.11. Dialectic of the discourse of the Master-Hysteric.

If the analytic focus remains on demand satisfaction—whether from the Master’s side (nominating, suturing) or from the Hysteric’s side (pressing, contesting)—the result is the same circuit: an offer to meet the demand, a contestation, and the restart of the demand–satisfaction loop. Laclau’s project acknowledges both movements: a fictitious suture that gestures to the Master, alongside an insistence on the impossibility of closure, which underwrites radical democracy’s commitment to ongoing contestation of any contingent project.

The remainder of this section turns to empirical forms of the Hysteric discourse in the social and political field, and to the recurrent return to the Master. It does so via Gabriel Boric: first, revisiting the 2011 Chilean student mobilisation to track his political emergence in a hysteric register; then examining the 2021 presidential campaign to trace the transition toward a Master position and its tensions.

B. Gabriel Boric: Between Hysteric and Master

i. Why Gabriel Boric?

Several considerations justify the focus on Gabriel Boric. First, he paradigmatically embodies the so-called “new Chilean left” (Titleman, 2022; Peña, 2020; Mayol, 2018) that originated in the 2011 student movement and later consolidated institutionally, defining itself as an

alternative to the Communist Party, Socialist Party, and the centre-left Christian Democracy. This new left, led by a younger cohort emerging from university politics, positioned itself—not without critics—as a coalition born from the squares, seeking to represent popular claims within state arenas (Titleman, 2022). Second, Boric’s trajectory is constitutively tied to protest: first as a spokesperson of the 2011 mobilisations and later as President. This trajectory was marked by a tension consistently underscored in media commentary. In a Schrödinger-like manner, Boric was criticised by street activists for “leaving” the squares to enter mainstream politics – and yet at the same time, he was *also* criticised by institutional actors for “never leaving” the squares. This renders him an instructive case for analysing the dialectics of demand and its representation.

ii. The times of the squares and the Hysterical Discourse

Back in 2011, an important social movement emerged in Chile, led by university students demanding the right to free education. Out of the student unions of two of the nation’s most prestigious universities, – also known for their political influence – emerged the figures of Gabriel Boric, Camila Vallejo and Giorgio Jackson, all of them in their early twenties at the time. They used university institutional channels and social media to organise large protests demanding the right to education. This movement coincided with many of the so-called movements of the squares. While it shared with them similar mechanisms of mobilisation and a strong social media presence (Arancibia et al., 2016), the student movement differed from the movements of the squares in that it centred on a specific demand, advocating for a clear, programmatic reform within the existing political establishment. This is precisely where the distinction between these two forms of protest lies. Many demonstrations in 2011 also included artistic performances, and yet—similar to movements such as Black Lives Matter or the feminist movement, which also displayed internal heterogeneity—it was possible for such

movements to articulate a clearly formulated, institutionally directed demand. The student movement addressed itself to the first Sebastián Piñera government and called for it to fulfil its demands concerning the right to education, as the following quotations indicate.⁵

Free quality public education: that is the slogan that has mobilised thousands of students into the streets in recent years. Public, because we want democratic higher education that responds to the interests and development of our country. Free, because we understand education as a social right that must be guaranteed by the state rather than a commodity traded on the market. And quality, because we want to restore the dignity lost to the underfunded public education sector and marginalised by the state. (“Los estudiantes perdimos” [the student lost] extracted from Veliz et al, 2022, p. 129, translation is mine)

The discursive form of demand articulation exemplified here differs significantly from the kinds of demands discussed in Chapter 2, such as the Occupy slogan “We are the 99%,” which invites interpretation of a demand rather than a demand articulated as concrete programme. By contrast, as seen in the quotation above, the 2011 student protests in Chile were not only clear regarding the demand at the centre of the protest—“free, quality public education”—but it also clearly breaks down this core demand into specific programmatic demands with a defined institutional outcome.

This does not imply that demands were always the same during this protest or that the students “knew” from the start what they wanted and intended to demand. It can be said that

⁵ The quotes presented in the section of 2011 student protest in Chile were extracted from Veliz at all (2022). In this study, an analysis of the political discourse regarding the demands in this protest was analysed by using semi-structured interviews with key actors and reviews of newspapers columns. This study was selected because it follows a progression of the process of demand formation within the protest and deploys a clear analysis of the institutional-protest relationship which gave us systematised empirical material to illustrate our theoretical argument.

there was a complex negotiation within the movement, but the discussion was already shifting towards an educational issue, as the following quotation indicates.

Let's remember that around 2011, this [student movement] emerged in a context where the student demands were different. It involved issues like student loans and public transport passes, among others. The student movement began to evolve, and suddenly, the focus shifted towards 'free tuition', which instead appeared towards the end of 2011. The banner of free tuition was raised alongside two other demands: a public, free, quality university education. (National Scholar, extracted from Veliz et al, 2022, p. 129, translation is mine)

From this quote, it is clear that while several different demands arise, there is also an aim to channel them institutionally. In this sense, following our Lacanian–Laclauian analysis, these demands schematically request an institutional reply, which needs to act by assuming the position of a Master that can effectively address the demanded issue. This recalls the 'two-track system' discussed in Chapter 1, which separates the institutional dimension from civil society and distinguishes between those who 'ask' and those who 'reply' (see Figure 3.12)

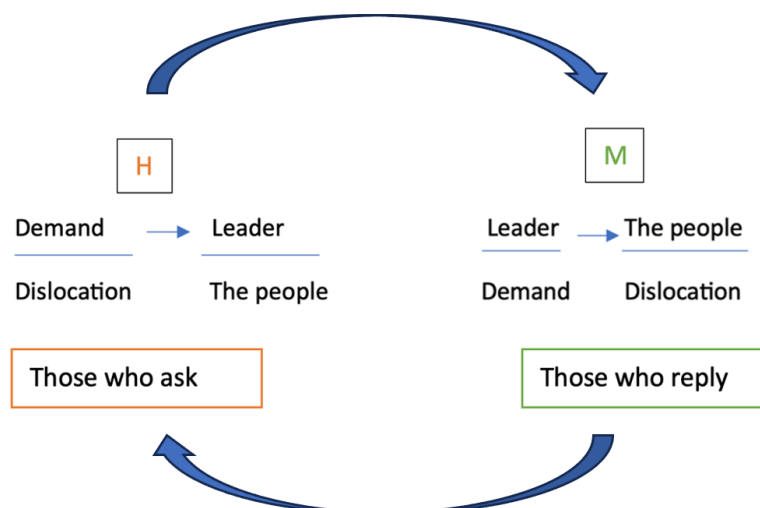


Figure 3.12. Representation of two track system (ask-reply axis) and the discursive hysteric- master dialectic

Following the aim of illustrating the discursive hysteric–Master dialectic, it is clear from the foregoing that there is a demand addressed to the government that is expected to be fulfilled. On the Master side, demands arising from the protests can serve as building blocks for a political project. Continuing the sequence of quotations from the Chilean student movement, the following shows how Nueva Mayoría, a party that needed to consolidate itself with a political project at the time of the mobilisation, benefited from these clear demands and used them to build its narrative.

“When Nueva Mayoría articulated itself, in the absence of a project, with particular demands, they knew how to listen, how to monopolise a half-finished project and win the election. I think it had to do with social needs.”

(National Scholar, Véliz et al., 2022, p. 129; translation mine)

Taken together, the 2011 cycle shows both poles of the hysteric–Master circuit: demands addressed to the state that expect institutional validation and fulfilment, and a party project that seizes those demands as building blocks for nomination and suture. Yet in each move something escapes. That surplus—visible in what the programme cannot absorb and in what keeps the demand returning—can be read, psychoanalytically, as *objet petit a*. Its place differs across discourses: in the Master, it appears as the product/remainder of nomination; in the hysteric, it sits as the truth/drive animating the address. Tracking this shift clarifies why expressive energies persist alongside schematic projects and why cycles restart after each

attempted closure. The next section turns to *objet petit a* in both discourses to specify this excess and its effects.

iii. The excess of discourse

This interplay between the discourse of the Hysteric—represented by protests that take the form of a demand clearly addressed to someone who can satisfy it—and the discourse of the Master, which replies by presenting a constructed narrative, is incomplete without acknowledging the interruptions that sustain the cycle.

To illustrate this, it is necessary to focus on *objet petit a*, the marker of what cannot be symbolised—that which resists representation. In this sense, the representation of the People that the Master constructs is always exceeded by the movement itself; it is exceeded by what lies structurally outside the project. Returning to the analysis of the People as a claim to represent the whole *populus* (see Chapter 2 and Section I of this chapter), one may use Rancière’s terms in arguing the plebs comes to exceed—indeed, to haunt—this representation. As explained earlier, any political project is always open to contestation; thus, in the Master discourse (see Figure 3.13), *objet petit a* names the remainder at the point of dislocation—the moment when the project on offer is exceeded in terms of representation.

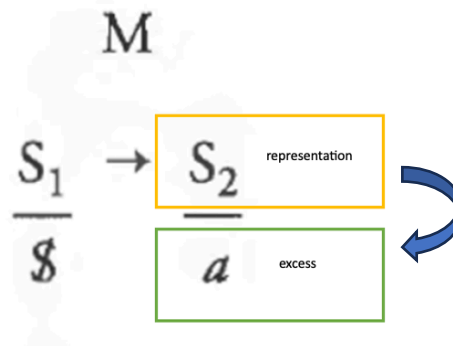


Figure 3.13. Master discourse, representation, and excess

In the hysteric discourse, *objet petit a* drives the discourse and causes the demand that occupies the agent's position. This demand is addressed to a Master, who then proposes a possible suture. As shown in the preceding analysis, the discourse of the Hysteric seeks a Master, yet the discursive structure shows the impossibility of fully accounting for or satisfying this demand, which therefore returns endlessly. In this case, the relation to the representation of the excess (*objet petit a*) is visible in the passage from that excess to its translation into a demand. The *a* cannot be fully "said" and thus cannot be fully represented. The demand cannot account for the whole and, therefore, whenever it is "satisfied" it remains partial and is condemned to return (see Figure 3.14).

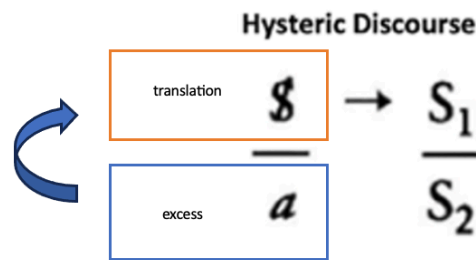


Figure 3.14. Hysteric discourse, representation of excess

In the hysteric discourse, *objet petit a* occupies the position of truth and drives the address: it is what pushes the barred subject (\$) to speak. The demand that \$ formulates to a presumed S1 is an attempt to translate that drive into words. The impossibility lies here: *a* cannot be fully said, so the translation into demand is intrinsically partial and must return an untranslatable excess. By contrast, in the Master discourse the impossibility lies later: S1 replies by quilting a representation (S2/'the People'), and this very operation produces a remainder—*objet petit a*—as what the project leaves out. Thus the hysteric fails at articulation ($a \rightarrow$ demand), whereas the master fails at representation (S1/S2), even though the master's reply also builds a demand

into a programme. Keeping these two failure points distinct clarifies why the same cycle oscillates between renewed questioning and renewed suturing.

Revisiting the illustration, several of these aspects become visible. The call to the Master from the hysteric discourse has been shown, as has the Master's reply. It can now be observed how the student movement's response to that reply—once the project was approved by the government—demonstrates that the proposal does not account for all those demanding.

“The drafted project that will be presented to Congress is very poor. It maintains the existing approach of the funding system and does not address the necessary strengthening of public education, nor does it determine mechanisms to achieve universal free tuition or establish a regulatory framework to guide the system.”

(Reyes, 2016, quoted in Véliz et al., 2022, p. 132)

In this case, it is clear that once the project assumed an institutional form it was already surpassed by the movement. This does not mean its contribution was of no significance; a large part of the movement was content to achieve, to some extent, the demands raised during the protests.

The hysteric–Master dialectic represents one possible approach to the understanding of demand, consistent with the Laclauian framework discussed above. Insights from Lacanian theory, however, also allow for alternative approaches, which the following chapters examine. As previously noted, the new kinds of protests do not adhere to the same discursive structure identified in the analysis of hysteric discourse. Rather than articulating a clear demand, these protests prioritise the act of demanding itself over the ask or content of demand—a point highlighted at the beginning of this chapter with the discussion of the slogan “we will demand nothing”. This raises the question of how exactly demand functions in such protests.

C. And back to the Master?

In the context described above—where student mobilisation sought a clear channel to the institutional order—Gabriel Boric emerged as one of the movement’s leaders. Together with student-union colleagues (FECh and FEUC), he attempted to act as a bridge between squares and institutions, channelling claims from the streets. As these actors shifted from opposition to roles within government, reactions from civil society were ambivalent: many who were disillusioned with the establishment read the move as a betrayal, even as the protagonists explicitly claimed to work “for the People” from inside the state.

This awkward position has trailed Boric since. On one hand, it has secured support among protesters who recognise him as “one of us”; on the other, it has drawn criticism from the establishment—on the grounds that one cannot be both part and whole. The tension sharpened during his 2021 presidential campaign and intensified once he assumed office. What follows examines moments from the campaign to analyse the discursive tensions in the transition from movement to party. It shows how Boric’s narrative, while seeking to distance itself from a classic Master figure, nonetheless reproduces the Master discourse’s structure. The section closes by noting interruptions to Master discourse in both Boric and José Antonio Kast, opening a discussion of the contributions and limits of these discourses under contemporary protest conditions.

i. The times of the institutional representation: an awkward position

During a period of social unrest and the rise of the “new Chilean left”, Boric positioned himself as a supporter of the protests and as a hinge to the establishment. The institutional track was central to his rhetoric. After a crucial impasse (see the timeline in Chapter 2)—when Boric

signed the agreement initiating the constitutional process—his status as the voice of the squares began to falter. Many argued that the mobilisation had already overflowed the single demand for a new constitution; unlike the 2011 student cycle, the 2019–20 demands were less determinate. Even so, Boric presented himself as a youthful, “new” alternative on the left, trading on his distance from the bad practices of traditional parties. Like Kast, he reached out to unrepresented youth through vigorous social-media campaigning.

Boric’s narrative aimed to represent the voices of the unrest while binding them to a broader institutional horizon. The new constitution served as a programme specific enough to organise policy yet flexible enough to gather diverse claims; the campaign also appealed across the elite/underdog frontier, promising tax reform on the super-rich to fund redistributive policies. Crucially for the Master analysis, the content of this narrative was explicitly rendered in a ‘non-masterly’ frame, in contrast with Kast. As he put it in the first televised debates of 2021:

“I want to be a president who, at the end of my mandate, has less power than I started with.” (Gabriel Boric, 13 March 2021; translation mine)

Here, leadership is cast as power-redistributing rather than power-claiming. The implied addressee is the People, now imagined as empowered citizens—an attempt to reconfigure leadership while still constructing a People. A second line emphasised fallibility and learning:

“When I make a mistake, José Antonio—unlike you—I am capable of correcting and asking for forgiveness, because I see in the mistake an opportunity to learn.”

(Gabriel Boric, September 2021; translation mine)

This sets his style apart from the political class, widely criticised for its refusal to admit error, and presents the “new left” as representing a break from old practices. In this way, Boric disputes Kast’s “new right” rhetoric of novelty and folds him back to the traditional political class from which he is eager to distinguish himself.

Finally, and crucially for the new protests, Boric addressed the social uprising directly, supporting the right to protest and presenting a plural image of the People:

“Unlike you, and people at home know this, we believe in diversity, inclusion, and the expression of civic activity in Chile.”

(Gabriel Boric, September 2021; translation mine)

This reflects not only sensitivity to the voices of social unrest, but also an element that Kast’s own appeals to protesters consistently neglected—especially regarding diversity and feminist issues, which were prominent in the squares. Symmetrically, Kast’s critique of Boric targeted the coalition’s heterogeneity and its alleged incapacity to make decisions, weaponising the very traits Boric aimed to value. In both cases, what escapes the constructed People returns as a point of attack—what can be read, psychoanalytically, as *objet petit a*.

Taken together, the case crystallises three points. First, Boric’s move from a hysteric register (spokesperson addressing power) to a Master position (nominating a constitutional horizon and organising a chain) is explicit yet uneasy: he disavows mastery while performing its structure. Second, the heterogeneity of post-2019 claims strains any single programme; every attempt to quilt them leaves visible remainders, which in this kind of protest is even more evident. Third, those remainders—read as *objet petit a*—become the terrain of strategic differentiation: competing projects (Boric’s and Kast’s) suture the unrest differently, each

producing a distinct excess that fuels contestation and can be mobilised by opponents. Given the form assumed by these kinds of protests, such moments of quilting seem more fleeting.

Ultimately, Boric's campaign still installs a Master position, even as it modulates its style (power-sharing, fallibility, pluralism). The sharper question, then, is whether mastery only changes style, or whether the Master function can be addressed differently—or even suspended. The chapters that follow take up this problem: they specify the role of *objet petit a* across discourses and develop alternative modalities of reply that separate the stabilising name (S1) from the excess that drives expression, exploring whether contemporary movements can reconfigure, diffuse, or decentre mastery without collapsing into indeterminacy.

Conclusion

The chapter has shown that Laclau's construction of "the People" operates as a Master-style reply to demand: a unifying name (S1) quilts a turbulent field, addresses a meaning-making chain (S2), and sutures heterogeneous grievances into a project—while, by structure, a remainder persists. Recasting Laclau's democratic/popular split within a Lacanian ontology of impossible completion clarifies why "satisfaction" cannot be a stable criterion: at best, it names degrees of accommodation achieved within a schematic register after dislocation, so the democratic/popular distinction functions retrospectively rather than as a property of contents. It stabilises the field by converting demands into an articulated project, yet what it produces is not closure but a remainder—the *objet petit a*—the trace of what resists symbolisation and cannot be fully integrated into the new order. This remainder, both the effect and the limit of the Master's articulation, signals that every suture is provisional and that the very act of reply generates the excess from which new demands will later emerge.

A psychoanalytic precision is crucial in the Laclauian reception: S_1 and *objet petit a* must not be conflated. In the Master discourse, S_1 is the stabilising name; *objet a* is the product/remainder of the operation. The Chile 2019 sequence makes these dynamics visible. The government's withdrawal of the metro fare increase did not quell the unrest; on the contrary, mobilisation intensified and condensed into the slogan "No son 30 pesos, son 30 años." What began as a localised demand transformed into a signifier of a much broader dislocation—an excess that exceeded the initial claim and resisted satisfaction. Here, the gap between demand and response was not closed but widened: the object *a* manifested as the persistence of the protest itself, a remainder that could not be symbolically absorbed. By contrast, José Antonio Kast's presidential campaign offers a clear example of a Master-style articulation: the signifiers of *order* and *reconstruction* (S_1) offer to suture the gap by presenting a unifying narrative, producing temporary coherence while leaving visible remainders, such as inequality or indebtedness, that marked the limits of its closure. In both cases, the distinction between S_1 and *a* becomes analytically salient: the former seeks to stabilise meaning, while the latter signals what remains unassimilated, the point where contestation reopens. This open space sets the stage for the counterpart analysis: the Hysteric discourse.

Turning from reply to address, the chapter reframed demand through the discourse of the Hysteric: the barred subject takes the agent's place and interrogates S_1 , with *objet petit a* as the truth that drives the questioning and S_2 as the knowledge produced by it. Distinguishing the hysteric function (the eruption of division within any discourse) from the discourse of the Hysteric proper is pivotal, because the latter not only exposes the gap but also seeks a Master to close it—hence, given the structural non-satisfiability of demand, treating fulfilment as an outcome leads to a dead end even as the address elicits a Master reply. Retaining the expressive/schematic distinction, the analysis read many contemporary protests as appearing in a hysteric register—unspecific, affect-laden, interruptive—deferring translation into a single

schematic general demand. In more traditional cycles, the dialectical coupling within mastery tends to hold: the Hysteric's interrogation calls forth nomination and suture; the Master's stabilisation invites renewed contestation, and the familiar demand–reply loop ensues. Mapping this onto Laclau clarifies how protests can function hysterically and how actors traverse positions; locating *objet a* as truth/drive in the Hysteric and as product/remainder in the Master explains why excess persists alongside any articulated project and why cycles restart after attempted closure.

By contrast, the new open protests interrupt this ask–reply axis from both sides. On the Master side, nomination quilts only fleetingly: heterogeneity keeps re-opening the field, rival projects crowd the horizon, and S1s decay fast. What results is a sequence of short-lived, readily contestable sutures in which the very excess that animates demand becomes more visible and politically operative. On the Hysteric side, the address often withholds or disperses its addressee: instead of a clear appeal to a stabilising Master, expressive acts defer translation into a single schematic “what to ask.” The consequence is a double challenge—to the answer (“what to reply?”) and to the question (“what to ask?”)—that compels exploration of alternative logics of response. Here the psychoanalytic alignment earns its keep: treating *objet petit a* as the central drive/remainder of demand (truth in the Hysteric, product in the Master) and keeping it analytically distinct from S1 (the stabilising name) clarifies both why stabilisation is short-lived and why address need not converge on nomination at all.

A final clarification prepares the ground for what follows. Whether “the People” is treated as S1 (a nominative that fixes meaning) or as S2 (the field of meaning—the articulated chain of programmes, policies, frames, and organisational know-how) depends on usage. S1 should be read as a function of nomination/quilting rather than as a fixed bearer. What fills that slot may be a leader or an idea/slogan; analytically, what matters is the suturing operation, not who embodies it. On this basis, the real distinction is S1 vs S2: ‘the People’ as a name sits at

S1, while the meanings, programmes and frames about the people belong to S2. To preserve analytic leverage, the thesis reserves “the People” for S1 when it functions as a nodal name, and uses The People for S2 when referring to the counted collective that enacts the project.

The previous analysis showed how the Master discourse, anchored in S₁, sutures dislocation through nomination, leaving *a*, the remainder, as what escapes the closure. Yet this remainder also invites another type of reply, one that shifts the locus of agency from the act of naming to the work of expalantion. In such cases, meaning-making itself (S₂) becomes the agent that responds to what cannot be fully symbolised.

Precisely on this basis, the next chapter turns to the University discourse and repositions agency at S₂: it treats the meaning-making chain as the agentic reply to *objet petit a*. Rather than centring nomination (S₁) and suture, it examines configurations in which practices, frames, organisational know-how, and policy work (S₂) take the lead in responding to the excess. This shift directly addresses the interruption posed by new open protest form and widens the repertoire beyond the explicit Master approach, offering an epistemic account of how demands travel and how political projects can be composed without immediate recourse to a stabilising name.

CHAPTER 4

The Epistemic Dimension of Demand

Chapter 3 analysed demand along a dialectical axis—those who ask and those who reply—treating this as the primary form in Laclau’s account of demand construction and aligning it with the Lacanian discourses of the Master and the Hysteric. For the Master, the imperative is not to “understand” but to “make things work”; in dialectical counterpoint, the Hysteric exposes the gap and calls for its suturing. This relation remains within an ask–reply loop that is often institutionally productive, yet new forms of protest strain this configuration and invite a more complex treatment of demand, broadening the analytical framework while keeping demand central as a political category. Chapter 3 also showed how the new kind of protest make especially visible an excess in demand—an ungraspable remainder that resists being fully named or satisfied (paired with *objet petit a* in the context of the chapter). Building on this argument, this chapter adds a further modality of reply to that excess: it examines what happens when actors approach it through knowledge, when replies take the form of explanations, expertise, frameworks, metrics, or ever more detailed programmes. This is not opposed to suturing responses, nor does it claim to replace them; it supplements the repertoire by showing how, at times, replies are organised around knowledge rather than closure.

This chapter develops a discourse-level account of this knowledge-centred reply. Drawing, in general terms, on Lacan’s “University discourse,” it treats knowledge as the voice that takes the initiative in the reply: knowledge speaks on behalf of the collective, translating

and stabilising demands so that they can be worked on by institutions, media, and platforms. The analysis traces both the promise of knowledge-centred replies (order, legibility, policy articulation) and their effects (content proliferation without closure, renewed dissatisfaction, and characteristic patterns of circulation). The chapter argues that the use of social media tends to amplify these dynamics by accelerating knowledge production and dissemination, all the while obscuring what drives and orients them. The Chilean constitutional process is used as a worked illustration, showing how a knowledge-centred reply can organise political action around the very element that exceeds capture.

The chapter is broken down into three sections. Section I clarifies a psychoanalytic claim – the impossibility of accessing the subject’s truth – and draws out the implications of this claim for a conception of political demand. Section II returns to the framework of the four discourses to specify how knowledge operates within it, focusing on the University discourse, where knowledge takes the *place of agency*, and considering what this contributes to the study of political demand and to the analysis of new protests. Section III turns to Chile’s constitutional process after the 2019 unrest in order to illustrate and probe these claims, with particular attention to the amplifying effects of social media and to a reading of algorithmic behaviour through this discourse. The conclusion draws the threads together and indicates the need to explore, in Chapter 5, an additional layer: the ethical dimension of demand.

I. Psychoanalysis, Knowledge, and Demand



Figure 4.1. Woman at Occupy Wall Street, Liberty Square, New York by Timothy Krause, 2011.

As discussed in Chapter 2, several political and academic commentaries framed contemporary protests as chaotic—leaderless, diffuse, and lacking a gravitational point that could crystallise the heterogeneous claims emerging both in squares and on social media. Protest movements around the world shaped their own self-understanding in response to such framings. Occupy is a prominent example of this – as attested by the photo reproduced above, the movement sought to affirm an *ethos* of treating its own actions and expressions as *complex* rather than chaotic, highlighting these as types of political practice not readily legible within the established coordinates of political life. On the one hand, the movement posed an explicit challenge to traditional channels and repertoires of political practice; on the other, this was paired with an open acknowledgement that its own complexity structurally resisted any complete translation into the language of mainstream politics.

This openness was sometimes dismissed as “carnavalesque” or “childish” – a mere naïve festivity rather than serious, goal-oriented politics, with critics worrying about the absence of conventional strategy and leadership. In effect, there appeared to be a *demand for a demand*. Many of these critiques revolved around knowledge: the movements were criticised

for *not knowing* what they were asking for, how to protest, how to lead, or how to organise – alongside parallel efforts to specify what such movements *should* be asking for.

Preserving complexity—rather than reducing it to chaos—remains one entry point for developing the epistemic dimension of demand. Yet the chapter’s central concern is not simply the refusal of programmatic clarity; it is the way knowledge itself operates as a mode of reply: presenting itself as neutral while concealing a directing principle beneath, and generating a proliferation of information that both organises and destabilises the field of demand. From this angle, “not-knowing” can be read as productive insofar as it holds the gap open, suspending the drive to suture and allowing the excess in demand to organise inquiry—a theme returned to in Chapter 5. The analysis here, however, concentrates on what happens when knowledge functions discursively as the centre: how it structures responses to ungraspable demands and with what effects. To elaborate this framework, the section turns to psychoanalysis and its distinction between truth and knowledge, which underpins the discourse developed in the remainder of the chapter.

A. Psychoanalysis and truth, a special alignment

This section sets out a basic psychoanalytic account of truth and knowledge in their fundamental distinction, and on that basis, it introduces the epistemic dimension of demand. It first situates the Lacanian approach to truth and knowledge alongside contemporary perspectives, and draws on key insights from Laclau (1990; 2005), Glynos (2001; 2003), and Nobus (2005) to locate this psychoanalytic view of knowledge within the social and political field. The central claim here is that the impossibility of access to truth should be treated ontologically. In line with post-foundational approaches, this yields an anti-essentialist, discursive perspective in which categories such as object and subject, or structure and agency, are re-articulated. The traditional search for “true objective knowledge” graspable through a

transparent medium gives way to contingent, discursive accounts of truth—without needing to *reduce* truth to discourse (Glynos, 2001). Before turning to its socio-political implications, the section first situates the specifically Lacanian alignment to knowledge.

As Nobus (2005) argues, the original discovery and enduring aim of psychoanalysis is to reveal a hitherto unacknowledged mode of relation at the heart of modern subjectivity: the subject's relation to *not-knowing*. For Lacan, this is tied to the existence of a domain outside knowledge (or knowledge as understood in the epistemology of modern science) which, in his account, generates a fundamental division between knowledge and truth. From this epistemological perspective, what mainstream science pursues under the banner of objective, empirically testable knowledge of true reality is to be essentially distinguished from psychoanalysis in its essential orientation to a realm – the unconscious – where effects are to be observed without (conscious) agency and where an “irreducible obscurity within the demand to know” becomes a key concern (Nobus, 2005, p. 9). This is evident in psychoanalytic technique: free association presupposes the ordinary rational linkages of subjectivity but works precisely by suspending these linkages, asking the analysand to speak whatever comes to mind, regardless of content or pace. Here *not-knowing* transpires as central for allowing psychoanalytic formations (jokes, slips, symptoms) to emerge. Psychoanalysis treats these formations as meaningful—glimpses of the subject's desire—rather than as materials to be corrected through psycho-education or normalisation to social rules. In this sense, psychoanalysis is not about identifying deviations from essential psychological or behavioural standards, and educating the individual back towards them, but about enabling another kind of truth to surface.

As seen in Chapters 2 and 3, when Laclau takes the ontological impossibility of closure in a sociological and political register, this is taken to mean that there is no essential truth about society, politics, or the subject. In all of these domains, every discursive attempt at closure is

contingent and, *qua* closure, illusory. Although Laclau does not focus on techniques aimed at producing a different kind of knowledge, he acknowledges the potential productivities of not-knowing. As Glynos (2001) puts it:

All meaningful conceptions of society, in [Laclau's] view, are discursive. From this perspective, the opposition is not between representations of society on the one hand and society as such on the other, but between representations of society and the failure of representation itself. Or: the opposition is not between substantive truth on the one side and a 'false' or 'approximately true' ideas on the other, but between substance and non-substance. Here, in other words, epistemological incapacity is transformed into the positive ontological condition of politics and political subjectivity. (pp. 196–197)

As this suggests, society cannot be fully accessed in its true essence, meaning that the impossibility of such access forms the basis and precondition for any contingent relationship to it. At the same time, and as discussed in Chapter 3, once this radical contingency is recognised, Laclau's focus shifts to how something contingent – a representation of society as a whole – can nevertheless be politically operationalised *qua* an *illusion* of closure. But besides politics as the construction of the People, Laclau does not explore other possible avenues for engaging with ontological impossibility. To deepen the analysis of how this impossibility can be connected with *knowledge* as a form of response, the discussion will now revisit Lacan's four discourses to examine the potential effects of their various interactions. In tracing these connections, the aim is to demonstrate that a complete understanding of demand is not only unattainable but also leads to specific effects resulting from attempts to explain what seems ungraspable. The section concludes by presenting the University discourse as a productive

framework for current debates about “neutral” knowledge, the proliferation of information, and contemporary protests.

II. The Place of Knowledge in the Four Discourses

The conceptual framing presented above prepares the analytical ground for treating knowledge as a modality of reply to demand – to recap, first by setting out the epistemological alignment of psychoanalysis with a notion of truth structurally distinct from knowledge, and second by indicating how post-foundational approaches (such as Laclau’s) take the impossibility of accessing ultimate or essential truth as their starting point for conceptualising political demand. As noted in the previous section, it is helpful to recall that much contemporary political discussion turns on questions of knowledge and its perceived deficits. A common case in point is the shock produced by electoral outcomes previously deemed and dismissed as impossible, or by sequences of political events whose eventual outcomes wildly confound expectations. The reaction of many observers to the recent rise of far-right conservatism in the United States, Europe, and Latin America has taken precisely this, now familiar, form. Such events prompt interrogation of one’s own knowledge of political contingency and, at times, invite moralising interpretations of others’ behaviour—often framed as voting “against their interests” (see Glynos, 2003).

These reactions of surprise have been problematised from a variety of angles. In relation to the new kind of protests, an especially rich vein of work examines social media, emphasising how algorithmic personalisation can produce epistemic bubbles (limited exposure to alternatives) and echo chambers (active discrediting of outside sources). While these topics are highly relevant—given the central use of social media in contemporary mobilisation—the argument here is that platforms primarily amplify discourses already in circulation, discourses that are sustained by a particular relation to knowledge.

Before returning to this amplification thesis, the chapter presents the distinct discursive forms in which knowledge may be engaged and shows how each one of these bears on the impossibility of accessing truth. This provides analytic leverage on the epistemic dimension of demand, clarifying and differentiating the variety of meanings that “knowledge” can take on across these discourses. The section concludes by presenting the University discourse—the discursive form in which knowledge takes the initiative in the reply—as a productive lens for current debates on social media, knowledge, and demand.

A. Epistemic dimension of demand – ontological and analytical level

As previously argued (see Chapter 2), the element of knowledge (S2) is present across all four of Lacan’s discourses, taking different meanings and producing different effects depending on its structural position within a particular discourse. In complicating the category of demand by adding an epistemic dimension, a fair question arises: if knowledge is already problematised within psychoanalysis—and within all of the four discourses— what, then, is characteristic specifically of the epistemic dimension of demand?

An initial reply helps to connect with the previous analysis. It is necessary, first, to distinguish between (a) what is ontological and therefore always at stake in the analysis, and (b) what operates at a more analytical level in the presentation of demand’s dimensions. As discussed in Section I, at the ontological level Lacanian psychoanalysis operates on the assumption of the impossibility of accessing truth; consequently, every relation to knowledge is contingent and discursively constructed rather than essential or objectively true. Within the framework of the four discourses, Lacan situates truth at the bottom position of the structure—a location hidden from the one who occupies the place of agency (see Figure 4.2)

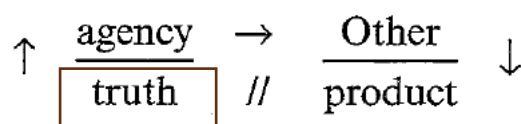


Figure 4.2. Lacanian Discursive Configuration, (elaborated to highlight the place of the truth)

In this configuration, truth can be rendered homologous with what causes a particular discourse to emerge; truth and knowledge are thereby separable. Knowledge may occupy positions other than truth and can serve purposes unrelated to the “pursuit of truth”—a point further explored below. Moreover, agency and truth are related in a concealed causal linkage that necessarily places the explicit surface of discourse in a mediated relation to truth. As Nobus (2005) contends:

We could say that in the four discourses the paradox is that the truth both is and is not spoken (...) The four discourses thus represent four possible positions regarding the relationship between truth as an unconscious cause. (p. 132)

It could be said that what is at stake is not just the separation between knowledge and truth, but that this structure shows how truth is both *spoken* and – necessarily – *not spoken*. The truth is a hidden cause of discourse. A further implication of this discursive framework concerns the rotational potential of positions: because the location of knowledge can shift, the centrality of knowledge is not fixed, and these positional shifts have consequences for the production of discourse. Thus, while there is an ontological and structural impossibility of accessing truth, there is also an analytical interplay within that structure concerning where knowledge is placed and how it operates. From this perspective, a promising analysis of the role of knowledge in each discourse becomes possible, with distinct effects depending on its position within the formation.

Returning to the guiding question—how to conceive the epistemic dimension of demand—the proposal is that one must consider both levels: the ontological (impossibility of truth) and the analytical (positional shifts/rotations of knowledge). The epistemic dimension of demand is activated precisely when questions of knowledge crystallise around demand.

The discussion now turns to the different positions, and thus the distinct meanings and effects, that knowledge can assume within this discursive framework.

B. The meaning and effects of knowledge within the four discourses

As argued above, the four discourses framework enables deeper exploration of the role and effects of knowledge within a particular discursive structure. This section outlines these for each of Lacan's four discourses.

In the Master discourse, the Master occupies the place of agency and addresses the Other's knowledge, seeking its efficiency (see Figure 4.3). As discussed in Chapter 3, the Master's concern is not with knowledge as such but with solving the problem (Lacan, 2007, p. 32). Knowledge is mobilised to keep things working—without dwelling on causes or explanations—so that “business as usual” can continue. In the Kast example (Chapter 3), there was no attempt to address the causes of social unrest or to understand the demands; rather, the content of demands was used to propose a suturing solution. The operative task prioritised form and function over the internal content of the demand, aiming to construct an equivalential chain and a persuasive “people” capable of encompassing as many demands as possible. On the other hand, Boric's campaigning exemplified a diagnosis-aware Master: his discourse acknowledged structural causes and named them but kept knowledge in a service position—oriented to deliver institutional closure (constitutional redesign, negotiated agreements). Thus, both replies remain Master-like in form (knowledge addressed for functioning), even as they differ in content and

tone (section III will deepens the analysis by examining what occurs when agreement and constitutional redesign become the organising focus of reply).

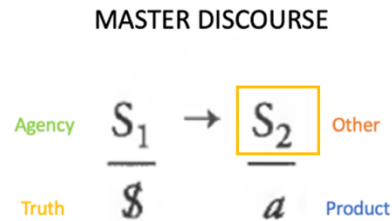


Figure 4.3. Lacanian Master discourse (elaborated to highlight knowledge)

In the Hysteric discourse, the excess that resists symbolisation—the remainder that escapes established representations and explanations—occupies the place of truth. Knowledge appears as the product of the discourse (see Figure 4.4). As argued in the previous chapter, the Hysteric’s address seeks a Master who can deal with this excess and provide meaning: knowledge that explains “what is happening”. Knowledge here can function as an anxiolytic, promising to calm anxiety. Unlike the Master, who wants things to function, the Hysteric wants to know, and – more than this – wants to know *via* someone else who is already supposed to know. As Lutereau (2018) notes, whereas in the Master discourse, knowledge is *exposed*, in the Hysteric discourse, knowledge is *supposed*. The Hysteric makes the assumption that someone else knows the cause of their suffering and is capable of curing it. In protest terms, this maps onto the “asking” pole: a demand where someone asks: “what should I do?”. The desire is for knowledge, but knowledge validated and mediated via a Master who knows how to suture.

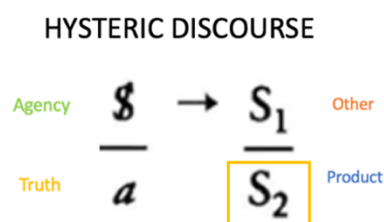


Figure 4.4. Lacanian Hysteric discourse (elaborated to highlight knowledge)

In the Analyst discourse, truth and knowledge are aligned (see Figure 4.5). Framed by Lacan as the reverse of the Master—and often read as the emancipatory discourse—the aim is to allow the subject’s truth to emerge. This chapter does not develop the Analyst discourse in full, as Chapter 5 undertakes that task; for present purposes, it suffices to note that knowledge here concerns knowing about the symptom. Unlike the Hysteric discourse, knowledge sits here at the place of truth (guiding the setting), and new signifiers (S1) are produced rather than received. The effect is not reassurance by a supposed-knowing Master but the emergence of the subject’s truth.

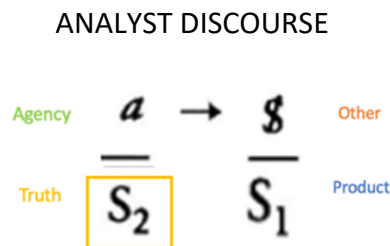


Figure 4.5. Lacanian Analyst discourse (elaborated to highlight knowledge)

Finally, the University discourse provides the analytic lens used here to interpret key features of contemporary movements. Lacan formulated this discourse in the context of the 1968 student protests, when the role of the university in the social and political landscape was under contestation. The label “university” is, in part, a provocation—Lacan’s own seminars were repeatedly interrupted by student protesters. In this discourse, knowledge occupies the place of agency, while a Master is concealed in the place of truth (see Figure 4.6). Knowledge does not arise from nowhere; rather, it is oriented by a hidden principle and shaped by implicit presuppositions. Lacan thus contributes to critiques of “neutral” knowledge by specifying the

effects of speaking from a neutral standpoint: he registers the structural impossibility for any knowledge to be genuinely neutral and emphasises the discursive consequences of presenting it as such.

As Nobus (2005) puts it, the University discourse “merely reveals the vanity of the attempt to rationalise (...)”, which, as a product, relentlessly divides the subject (p.132). Lacan aligns this effort with a Hegelian ambition to become the Master of knowledge—to make truth coincide with knowledge—a project that will necessarily “take in water” given its structural impossibility. Verhaegen (1995) captures the dynamic succinctly: *the more knowledge one uses to reach for the object, the more one becomes divided among signifiers, and the further one gets from home* (p. 95).

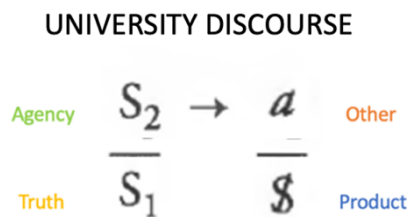


Figure 4.6. Lacanian University discourse (elaborated to highlight knowledge)

To illustrate this argument in the clinical context, this logic appears when knowledge is presented as neutral yet “speaks Master.” For example, when the analyst attempts to cure by educating the patient’s symptom, this presupposes what the symptom is and translates it into a classificatory language in order to “capture” and “teach” it—whether by assigning tasks to “control anxiety” or by compiling an ever-expanding catalogue to name the symptom. These efforts of addressing the excess of the symptom via rationalisation (alongside political–institutional drivers) can be linked to the serial expansion of diagnostic taxonomies such as the DSM: a dictionary of symptoms in which even symptoms that are unnamed are folded into

“other symptoms”. This impossible task, Lacan maintains, generates a relentless, continual production of content.

The same structure resonates beyond the clinic wherever rationalisation aims to address what appears ungraspable on the political-institutional level—for instance, proliferating definitions of rights or increasingly granular policy rubrics. Here the emphasis falls on knowing and naming the phenomenon. Knowledge is invoked to support action, justify policies, and authorise “informed” decisions— in each specific situation, an ostensibly neutral knowledge of ‘merely’ technical expertise occupies the place of the one who decides. Consider, for example, the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the rapid spread of the virus and the ensuing pressure on health systems, states adopted divergent measures to “stop the spread”. As it became clear that countries were pursuing markedly different approaches—particularly regarding social distancing and lockdowns—official statements increasingly appealed to “follow the science”⁶ in order to justify government decisions (see [*The Guardian* UK]). In this move, knowledge was invoked to underwrite the validity claimed for the pursued socio-political response. Yet a relentless flow of information continued to circulate, frequently recommending courses of action that diverged from and sometimes directly contradicted government policy, sometimes within weeks or even days of its official announcement. Read through the lens of Lacan’s University discourse, what was at stake here was not only the authority of those making pronouncements—and the putative neutrality of their knowledge—but also the ever-shifting state of knowledge itself. The resulting information “jungle”, capable of furnishing support for both official guidance and Covid denialism, plausibly generated sufficient doubt to weaken the formal authority of institutional actors.

A parallel, strategic dynamic can be seen in climate politics. In the documentary *Merchants of Doubt*, Oreskes and Conway (2010) show how organised interests manufacture

⁶ On the politics of “following the science” in COVID-19 governance, see Mercuri 2020.

uncertainty that is used to bolster climate-change denial. The authors argue that deliberately confusing statements, selectively framed research, and other expert-coded outputs were produced to disseminate uncertainty—closely echoing tactics deployed by the tobacco industry in the 1960s.

The University discourse is useful to explore these ramifications of knowledge, whereby information, data, or any other type of knowledge is put at the centre of attempts to address an ungraspable situation, generating an overwhelming amount of information and – whether strategically and intentionally or not – producing doubt.

C. Which epistemic dimension?

To resume the foregoing discussion of the epistemic dimension of demand, the impossibility of reaching truth through knowledge can be grasped at two levels: one ontological and one analytical. Ontologically, there is a structural impossibility—no quantity of knowledge can render the “truth” of demand fully accessible. Analytically, the issue concerns the distinct ways actors work with knowledge once this impossibility is assumed. What is meant by the epistemic dimension of demand is the way in which a reply is structured around specific knowledge claims—its circulation, validation, and contestation—so that demand is analysed not only as an ontological address to the Other but also in terms of the positional rotations of knowledge within Lacan’s discourses (as discussed in the previous sub-section).

Within this frame, the University discourse names the pretension to address what is ungraspable through knowledge. It is taken here as a productive framework for thinking about expressive (and/or affective) demands that elude the traditional channels of knowledge production and circulation problematised earlier. Under a knowledge-centred modality of reply, actors typically approach such demands by explaining and understanding them—building frameworks, devising categorisations, translating experiences into typologies,

indicators, or narratives. The outcome remains oriented to *sense-making*: demands are named, framed, and rendered intelligible within particular registers.

Crucially, this epistemic reply does not *resolve* the underlying lack. Rather, it often proliferates sense-making artefacts (frameworks, labels, datasets), multiplying content while leaving the excess in place—and sometimes, making that excess more visible.

To illustrate this dimension, the chapter returns to the case of Chile in the aftermath of the October 2019 protests, when a new constitutional project was offered as the deal to restore social stability. As discussed in the previous chapter concerning Boric’s presidential campaign, the latter’s proposal for a constitutional process operates as a Master-type reply—a device to restore functioning. The analysis now shifts from the President’s proposal to the constitution’s actual *production*: from naming a path to organising knowledge around it. This focus is warranted because the project arose in response to unrest and to demands that resisted institutional capture. Tracing the constitution’s “making” allows the rest of this chapter to show how knowledge becomes central—through texts, frameworks, expert commissions, and public justifications—in attempting to make sense of the protest movement’s demands, and to consider the effects set in motion by this knowledge-centred modality of reply to demand.

III. University Discourse and Constitutional “Chaos”

On 25 October 2020, one year after the Chilean uprising in which millions took to the streets, 78 per cent of voters supported drafting a new constitution and 79 per cent opted for a popularly elected body of delegates. On 4 September 2022, 61 per cent rejected the resulting draft (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile BCN, 2022).

Many scholars have questioned this reversal (Heiss, 2021; Negretto, 2021; Rojas, 2022; Prieto & Verdugo, 2021), pointing variously to the Convention’s limited representativeness and fragmentation (Heiss, 2021; Navarrete & Tricot, 2021), changes to voting procedures and

the institutional design that structured the process (Negretto, 2021; Prieto & Verdugo, 2021), the role of social media and digital participation circuits (Ruz, Henríquez & Mascareño, 2022; Pogrebinski, 2023), shifts in presidential approval (Alemán & Navia, 2023), and the exclusion of popular sectors (Vergara, 2022), among others.

How confidence in the draft eroded is a complex question—unlikely to have a single, complete explanation. In line with this chapter’s aim, the analysis will aim to contribute by focusing on the epistemic dimension.

Thus far, the chapter has clarified the particular role of knowledge in psychoanalysis and, using the framework of the four discourses, developed an epistemic dimension of demand. The present section applies these insights to Chile’s constitutional process, in which questions of knowledge played a central role.

The Chilean case is illustrative because an uprising, marked by heterogeneous and not always clear demands, was responded to with a constitutional text. This response, it is argued, involved a notable epistemic dimension that warrants further analysis. The section proceeds in three steps. First, it traces the movement from protest to constitutional proposal, showing how the institutional response to upheaval shifts from the realm of the Master to a knowledge-centred process. Second, it examines how the conditions for drafting situated demands within a specific legal register, translating them into a rights-based idiom. Third, it explores the effects of this transformation, emphasising the amplifying role of social media in the build-up to the rejection of the draft.

A. From Master to Knowledge

When protests began in October 2019, it was not evident that one institutional outcome would be the drafting of a new constitution. As noted above (Chs. 2 and 3), during the peak of mobilisation, no single comprehensive demand came to the fore. Nonetheless, scholars have

argued that the constitutional project was already circulating as a plausible institutional reply. Some link it to the 2016 and 2018 feminist mobilisations, where claims—especially around abortion and reproductive rights—were often deemed “unconstitutional” and concerns over parity became central; others trace the constitutional project back to the 2011 student revolts, which cast the 1980 dictatorship-era constitution as the keystone of Chile’s neoliberal order (Heiss, 2021; Rojas, 2022).

During Michelle Bachelet’s second term (2014–2018), a participatory constitutional initiative known as ‘cabildos’⁷ came about. (Heiss, 2018; Pogrebinschi, 2023); the process stalled under Piñera, during whose term the 2019 uprising erupted (Pogrebinschi, 2023; Rojas, 2022). In addition, many argue that despite heterogeneous claims, a through-line of social justice activism made a constitutional path appear as a meaningful reply (Suárez-Cao, 2021; Negretto, 2021; Heiss, 2021).

Even so, this was not a straightforward conclusion at the time. The new constitution



emerged as an institutional response at a pivotal moment: the Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution (see timeline below, figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7. Timeline of the constitutional process

⁷ In 2016 the government convened multi-level cabildos—self-organised local meetings feeding provincial and regional dialogues under a citizens’ observers council—using a structured ‘deliberative convergence’ method and yielding the *Bases Ciudadanas* (Heiss, 2018; Pogrebinschi, 2023); a second, largely spontaneous wave of cabildos surged after October 2019, from territorial to thematic and institutional forms (Pogrebinschi, 2023).

After nearly a month of continuous protest, party leaders announced the Agreement establishing the foundations of a constituent process (15 November 2019). The proposal set conditions of form, space, time and actors. Two plebiscite questions were scheduled for 25 October 2020: whether to draft a new constitution and which body should do so. Two drafting options were offered: a Constitutional Convention (Constituent Assembly) or a Mixed Constitutional Convention, the latter would comprise half elected citizens and half sitting parliamentarians (who would vacate their seats upon registering their candidacy). The constituent body's sole task was to produce the new charter without altering the powers of other state organs (quorums and procedures remained in force). The writing period was nine months, extendable once by three months, upon which the body would dissolve. Sixty days after submission of the draft, a mandatory ratification referendum would be held (BCN, 2019).

The Agreement was signed by parties ranging from the right-wing Independent Democratic Union to the Socialist Party (Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados, 2019; BCN, 2020). The Communist Party and parts of the *Frente Amplio* withheld endorsement—denouncing an elite bargain and warning about a *de facto* veto via the two-thirds rule. Gabriel Boric—then a *Frente Amplio* deputy—signed personally, triggering tensions within his party and the bloc (Araya & Fariás, 2023). Mainstream media framed the Agreement as historic and transversal (Araya & Fariás, 2023). A defining feature—and one often cited as unprecedented—was the emphasis on transparency, representation and participation. In the initial plebiscite, a large majority opted for an elected convention. The election established reserved seats for women and for Indigenous peoples. Deliberations were designed to be public—“democracy in real time”—with debates broadcast and recorded. A participatory mechanism allowed citizen initiatives: any petition surpassing 15,000 signatures (in a country of ~20 million) had to be considered in the Convention.

These horizontal devices contrasted with the fact that the product remained a formal, legal text, to be drafted within a tight deadline and an institutional venue. The friction between horizontal participation and vertical legal-institutional demands soon became visible.

Reinstating the epistemic dimension clarifies what shifts here. The Agreement exemplifies a Master-type reply (restore order; name a path). Yet, as the process moved from proposing a constitutional path to actually making the constitution, the centre of gravity shifted. Rather than an exposed leader pushing a determinate project, the emphasis fell on knowledge—the content of the draft, its categories, its justifications—while the Master continued to operate from a different location, a hidden orientation. Before the entry plebiscite, political discourse circulated around Approve/Reject, with actors publicly aligning ‘for’ or ‘against’ the proposal (see image 4.8).



Figure 4.8 Campaign banners used in Chile’s 2022 constitutional plebiscite (“Apruebo” / “Rechazo”).

Sources: BioBioChile (2022)

By contrast, once “Approve” prevailed and drafting began, the promise had to be filled with content: here the shift becomes evident.

The University discourse is useful for analysing moments in which content/information appears central. In the constitutional process, this corresponds to the production and contestation of the constitutional text (see Figure 4.9).

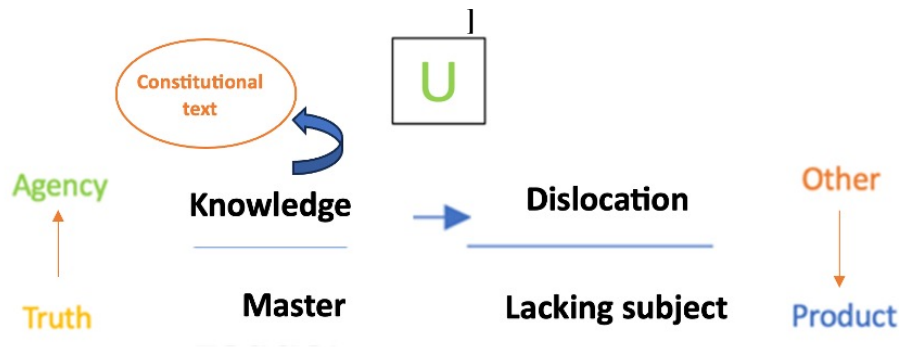


Figure 4.9. Constitutional text and University Discourse

Finally, a note on scope. The process generated a wealth of material; a full account of this would require dedicated treatment. Short of providing this, the present analysis concentrates on how the reply to a heterogeneous, ungraspable outburst was rationalised in rights-based terms, within a progressive, transparent and participatory framework and under severe time constraints—and how this knowledge-centred configuration created favourable conditions for far-right contestation. Using the University discourse, the section reads the far right’s social-media strategy as an amplification of this configuration. The discussion proceeds along three strands: (1) positioning the constitutional text through the lens of the University discourse; (2) showing how misinformation and hyper-information circulated to intensify alienation from the constitutional content; and (3) examining practices that sought to uncover and mock the alleged orientations behind the drafting.

B. University Discourse and the Excess of Constitutional rights

After the entry plebiscite produced an overwhelming 79 per cent approval for a new constitution and opted for a democratically elected body of delegates, the next phase began: the actual writing. Time was extremely limited, and the process aimed to be as participatory and transparent as possible. As drafting progressed, it became clear that the Constitution was being framed through a rights-based approach (see Figure 4.10–4.11).

Chapter	Topic	Article	Pages
I	Foundations of the Institution	10	2
II	Nationality and citizenship	18	4
III	Rights and duties	6	11
IV	Government	37	9
V	National congress	30	15
VI	Judiciary	7	7
VII	Constitutional court	4	4
VIII	Electoral Justice	2	2
IX	General Comptroller of the republic	3	1
X	Structure of the official Army forces	5	1
XI	National security council	2	1
XII	constitution of Chile (1980)	2	1
XIII	Government and Administration	16	6
XIV	Reform of the constitution	4	3

Chapter	Topic	Article	Pages
I	General principles and provisions	15	4
II	Fundamental rights	110	34
III	Nature and Environment	23	5
IV	Democratic participation	13	5
V	Good governance and public service	21	7
VI	Regional State and Territorial Organisation	63	12
VII	Legislative power	27	11
VIII	Executive power	27	13
IX	Judicial Systems	42	12
X	Constitutional autonomous bodies	32	13
XI	Reform and replacement of the constitution	5	3

There is much to analyse in the contrast between these two structures—length, level of detail, wording, and emphases across chapters. For present purposes, the focus is the rights turn. The draft of the proposed revision was roughly three times longer in terms of page count and contained over one hundred more rights-related articles than the 1980 text. This dictatorship-era text of the constitution not only devoted less space to rights; it also titled the relevant chapter “Rights and Duties,” as if rights must be paired with the debt of duties. Unsurprisingly, that version emphasised institutional attributions and security. What matters in this context is the extension and granularity of the draft’s fundamental rights. The question guiding the analysis is: *what made this section not only central but also so expansive?*

A University-discourse reading points to a mechanism at work. Turning to the name given to the constitution drafting process – ‘Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution’ – it is significant to note that “peace” had circulated as a shared signifier. On the right, it had become associated with the end of disruption and violence; on the left, with the “right to live in peace” (a slogan that revived Víctor Jara’s song from the dictatorship era) and denunciations of state violence. In Laclauian terms, ‘peace’ articulated heterogeneous claims without naming their cause (as in Kast’s campaign discussed in Chapter 3). The present analysis asks what followed once agreement was reached: how was this “peace” read in concrete terms?

For the left, “peace” was read through the frame of rights protection, with an explicit temporal reference to dictatorship and the conditions of military rule under which the old constitution had been written. A rights-based approach therefore made sense. Yet, this was not the only driver. Entangled with rights protection was a push for recognition: not merely prohibiting violence, but naming specific rights to be newly acknowledged and validated. In this way, the rights turn could also be read as an attempt to fulfil “dignity”—a central signifier

from the squares later condensed into the progressive coalition’s slogan “*Apruebo Dignidad*” (“Approve Dignity”).

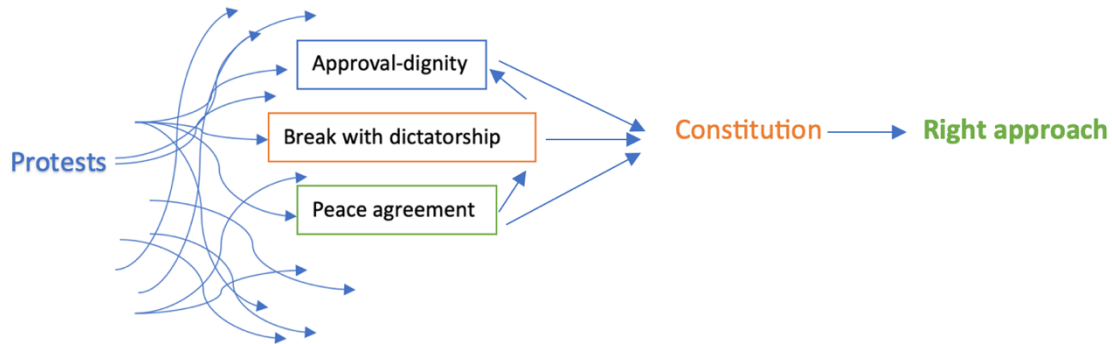


Figure 4.12. From protests into a right-based frame

The diagram above schematises (admittedly in a simplified form) the strands that converged on a rights-based logic in the drafting of the constitution: the peace agreement, the break with the dictatorship framework, and the dignity/recognition horizon. A full genealogy would require extended treatment; here the aim is to specify the epistemic mechanism. On a University-discourse reading, the rights turn fills the promise of “approve–dignity” by translating heterogeneous, ungraspable demands into named entitlements. This is the moment where the approach starts to take in water: the attempt to grasp excess through rationalisation generates relentless content production (see figure 4.13).

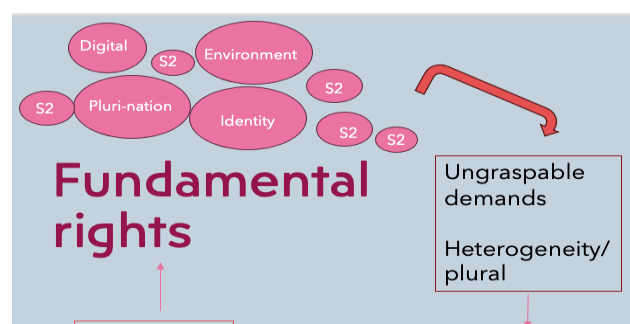


Figure 4.13. Dealing with excess through fundamental rights.

Read in terms of the university discourse, meaning-making speaks: procedures, expert drafting and legal technique take the initiative and try to make sense of the excess voiced in the squares. A guiding aim—peace, dignity, closure—implicitly orients what counts as a right and how it is framed. The outcome is: ever more content (new clauses, categories, clarifications) and a public that feels both recognised and still unsatisfied.

Considering the illustration, in the progressive effort to offer reply and recognition to what was voiced in the squares, naming and description encounter an impossibility: neither can fully satisfy excess. The result is an always-open space of what could still be named—a structurally “lacking right”—which in turn prompts further rounds of content creation (see figure 4.13).

Observers noted downstream effects including alienation among potential readers of the draft, difficulties accessing or navigating the text, and debates over its readability and clarity (Piscopo & Siavelis, 2023; Alemán & Navia, 2023). While these reactions can be read as symptoms of content proliferation, the analysis also considers the amplifying role of social media—how disinformation and hyper-information, in an already challenging environment, intensified doubt and distance from the draft.

C. ‘Adding Fuel to Fire’ - Social Media, Amplifying Excess and the Far Right

With the rights-creation dynamic in view, the analysis now turns to the far right's social-media strategy to contest the approval of the constitution. As noted, the constitution drafting process adopted a progressive commitment to participation and transparency, yet it operated within a tightly constrained drafting window. The claim here is that these conditions created a favourable stage for the far right to project an amplified sense of disorder. The section first sketches relevant social-media scholarship and then shows how these mechanisms can be read through the University discourse, clarifying how platforms amplify excess, gaps, and the orienting drive of the constitutional process.

i. University discourse and algorithm

Chapter 2 associated “new” protests with social media as tools for organisation, expression, and speech. The present discussion addresses a different dimension: social media platforms as knowledge infrastructures in the era of big data (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018; Borgman, 2015; boyd & Crawford, 2012). The aim is to link these infrastructures to the University discourse and, through the constitutional case, to the epistemic dimension of demand.

There is a growing concern about the political uses of social media, particularly around algorithms, automation, and datafication (Shorey & Howard, 2016). An algorithm may be defined as a set of rules that a computer follows to accomplish a task (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Gillespie, 2014; Gurevich, 2012). Because computers automate these rules at scale, they can operate with limited human oversight (Zarsky, 2016). As boyd and Crawford (2012) observe, data collection has outpaced human interpretation; nevertheless, platforms organise this data behind a veil of neutrality (Gillespie, 2010, 2014). Critical approaches examine the social consequences of such organisation in decisions about what to classify, prioritise, associate, and filter (Shorey & Howard, 2016).

A widely studied mechanism is personalisation (Bozdag, 2013; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016). As Bozdag (2013) shows, large platforms manage informational abundance by tailoring filtering to each user. Pariser (2011) argues that such invisible filters can construct individual information universes, limiting exposure to unfamiliar content and repeatedly confirming prior beliefs. Scholars warn that histories of personalised interaction may shape future behaviour, reducing space for surprise, creativity, and robust democratic exchange (Pariser, 2011; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Zuckerman, 2013).

This condition is often described in terms of echo chambers. On one view, echo chambers are deliberately constructed environments that discredit outsiders and curate insider credibility (Nguyen, 2020). On another, their systemic impact is contested; several studies argue that echo-chamber effects are often overstated given methodological limitations (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015). To refine this conception, Nguyen (2020) distinguishes between epistemic bubbles—where voices are merely absent—and echo chambers—where contrary voices are actively discredited. The distinction between deliberate insulation and omissive filtering complicates the attribution of responsibility for informational asymmetries. The boundary between “intentional” and “non-intentional” design is porous. Even passive behaviours (such as not clicking or scrolling past) are interpreted as signals, and collaborative filtering extrapolates preferences from the behaviour of others, generating large-scale predictions (Resnick & Varian, 1997; Ricci, Rokach, & Shapira, 2015). Outputs, therefore, could appear neutral while remaining directionally organised.

ii. Reading platforms through the University discourse

From the vantage of the University discourse, platforms exemplify a setting in which knowledge speaks: ranking, recommendation, and policy “explainers” address the excess of

demand by making sense of it—sorting, naming, linking. A guiding aim operates in the background (e.g., engagement/retention, “relevance”, brand safety), orienting what is surfaced as knowledge while remaining merely implicit and thus largely unacknowledged *as* a directional aim of ostensibly neutral knowledge. The product is familiar: proliferating content (feeds, updates, fact-checks and counter-fact-checks) alongside a divided public that oscillates between recognition and insufficiency.

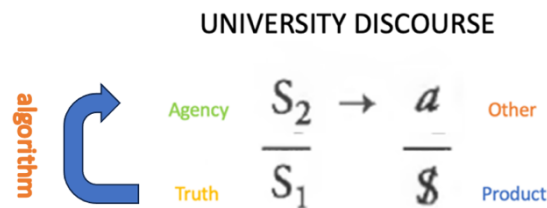


Figure 4.14. Social media through the lens of the University discourse

Whether a platform’s asymmetries arise deliberately (echo chambers) or as by-products (epistemic bubbles), the University discourse indicates a structural point: knowledge production is always directionally oriented. Work on the decolonisation of AI⁸ makes this visible by showing how systems trained on past behaviour reproduce existing biases and hegemonic frames (Hall & Dávila, 2022; Mohamed, Png, & Isaac, 2020; Birhane, 2020; Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Regardless of explicit intentions, the starting conditions embed a hidden operative direction; neutrality is a presentation, not a condition.

This epistemic reading therefore does two things. First, it explains how a medium that markets transparency—metrics, dashboards, “real-time” emotions—can still miss what matters: some elements of demand exceed datafication. Second, it clarifies how platform logics amplify an already knowledge-centred configuration in the constitutional process: accelerating

⁸ For a critical reflection on AI systems reproducing colonial epistemologies, see Birhane, 2020

circulation, magnifying gaps and over-compensations, and pushing leaks and counter-narratives at speed.

The next subsection applies this to the Chilean case, showing how far-right actors leveraged platform dynamics to accentuate doubt and frame rights-expansion as chaos, driving a process already prone to content proliferation towards overload and polarisation.

iii. Ever-Growing Information

After a few weeks of drafting, observers noted a surge of misleading and outright false claims about the constitution (CIPER, 2022).⁹ Digital space quickly became the main arena to follow the process: livestreamed sessions, delegates’ active Twitter accounts, and rapid recirculation turned platforms into hubs both for news and for translation of legal provisions into “what this means for me”.

To respond, an initiative called “Fast Check”¹⁰ took on the task of high-velocity fact-checking, prioritising items that were (i) salient, (ii) widely shared, and (iii) plausibly inaccurate (Fast Check CL, n.d.-a, pasos 2–3; Fast Check CL, n.d.-b, “Contenido viral”). Given that remit, this section uses Fast Check’s archive to illustrate patterns.

An interesting aspect about Fast Check is the recurrent difficulty in sustaining a strict true/false demarcation. Many claims were ambiguous because articles were still being drafted, cross-referenced, or revised. In a rights-heavy context, something always escaped naming; verification therefore added explanations, labels, and updates—another turn of content production.



⁹ CIPER Chile has documented how disinformation around the process spread across different platforms; see CIPER, “La desinformación sobre el plebiscito”, 2022

¹⁰ “Fast Check” describes its method in terms of assessing evidence, sources, and logical coherence; see Fast Check CL, *Metodología*, 2021

Figure 4.15. Front page of *Las Últimas Noticias* (31 March 2022) featuring Conventional Bernardo Fontaine.



Figure 4.16. Facebook post shared by Fabiola Torres (10 March 2022) reacting to the approval of abortion rights in the Chilean Constitutional Convention. Screenshot by the author.

The images above were selected from *Fast Check* as particularly illustrative cases because they circulated widely during the constitutional process. Both posts translate the Convention’s work into pocketable claims: “workers will not own their pension savings” (Figure 4.15) and “approved today” (4.16). Both offer a glimpse of “what has been decided”, suggesting that decisions were taken behind closed doors without the consultation of the public. Rather than dwelling on veracity alone, the analysis here foregrounds the effects of the circulation of such

images: these items function as information events, seeding further dissemination and disinformation. In this way, their “plus” effect—the additional layers of sharing, commentary, rebuttal, and counter-rebuttal—becomes the impact. As discussed, social media easily pushes these limits, both exposing and amplifying the excess of information. Because engagement-weighted ranking boosts items that already travel, once a post begins to circulate, every subsequent check, correction, and explainer is recirculated as content in its own right, further thickening the feed.

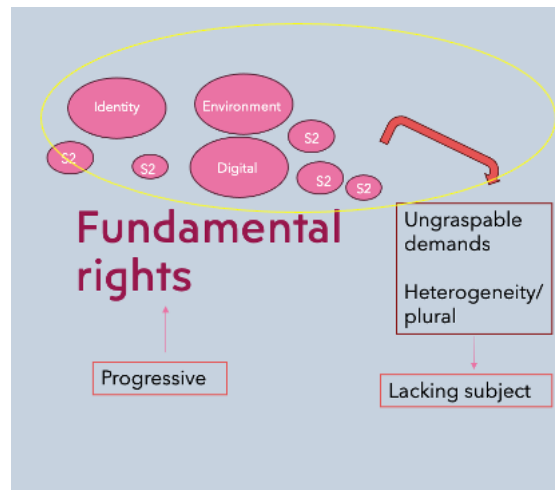


Figure 4.17 University Discourse, constitutional process and growing information

Taken together, the surge of posts and the checks they trigger expose a structural point: attempts to translate protest into information proliferate content while leaving the excess in place (see figure 4.17). The consequence is both quantitative (overabundance) and subjective (a sense of lack) – which the following section examines.

iv. The always-lacking subject

Within this scheme, the product of the University discourse is the (always) lacking (or always-divided) subject. Following Lacan, the notion has two relevant inflexions. First, at the catalogue

level: the subject appears as that which structurally resists any final, ultimate closure. In the Chilean case, this can be read in terms of the endlessly expanding list of rights in the draft—no matter how many provisions are added, something remains unaddressed, inviting yet another addition. Second, at the level of the Subject (with a capital S): the subject-of-rights is constituted in and through its encounter with the constitutional text—whereby it simultaneously recognises itself in the list of rights and yet discovers that this list always falls short of what is desired to satisfy recognitive need. This is the moment of division—a gap is made present, and the Subject appears as always lacking, always wanting more. In short, the operation yields both an object that escapes naming and a Subject who testifies to that failure. (See Figure. 4.18)

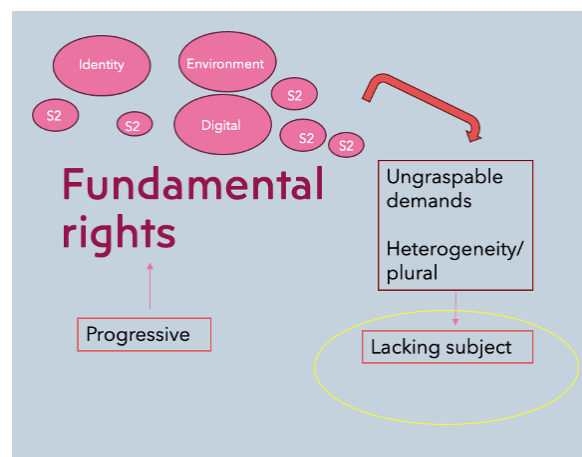


Figure 4.18. University Discourse, constitutional process and lacking subject

Returning to the illustration, a widely circulated tweet foregrounded a perceived gap in the draft regarding security—a topic the progressive new left had largely avoided, fearing it would

echo far-right frames. José Antonio Kast, the far-right presidential candidate discussed in Chapter 3, posted a tweet that went viral (Figure. 4.19). The accompanying imagery—cars on fire—conjures a vision of a dramatic, even dystopian future allegedly resulting from the Convention’s decisions. Fire had already become a metonym during the protests and features prominently in right-wing narratives about “terrorism” attributed to Mapuche actions in southern Chile (e.g., lorry burnings tied to land conflicts). At the textual level, the post frames the Constitutional Convention as separate from—indeed opposed to—“Chileans”: a small, partisan body led by “the left” that purportedly sides with terrorism and abandons “millions” to insecurity.

Crucially, Fast Check did not classify the post as false: the state of emergency was in fact reconsidered in the draft and redistributed across two categories addressing national emergencies. Precisely because it could not be cleanly falsified, the tweet travelled widely and amplified the sense of a “lacking right”—that is, the belief that the draft had abandoned responsibility for securing public safety. The effect was double. First, by highlighting “security” as something missing, the intervention marked it as a salient absence in the draft. Second, rather than closing the issue, it intensified dissatisfaction, since pointing to one omission invited scrutiny over others, calling the credibility of the draft as a whole into question: if something so essential as security was absent, what else was? This dynamic fuelled demands that the text “say more” and “protect more,” generating the sense that however many clauses were added, the constitution was always incomplete.



Figure 4.19.
 Tweet by José
 Antonio Kast
 reacting to the
 Constitutional

Assembly's decision to remove States of Emergency (9 May

2022) (translation by the author)

The Kast intervention names the lack (“security”), a move analysed in Chapter 3. What follows here, however, is not a Master line that closes the issue, but a University Discourse sequence that perpetuates it. In this way, the named lack is converted into content—legal cross-references, alternative draft wordings, fact-checking entries, graphics—which is then amplified by social media platforms. The public does not receive a command; it receives material to read, compare, and verify. The outcome is characteristic: proliferation without closure and a heightened sense of there being an always-missing article.

v. The ‘woke’ behind the ‘wake’

This subsection shows how far-right messaging re-personalised a knowledge-centred process by naming a hidden Master (“the woke left”), converting background orientation into a portable target that travels easily on platforms.

Within the University discourse, attention now turns to what Lacan calls the *drive*—the orienting truth that guides the discourse and, in this configuration, is where the Master sits. In the constitutional case, a salient media strategy –and one the far-right capitalised on – was to

amplify this Master position: to render the background orientation explicit, as if newly “discovered” behind the process. Traces of this can already be seen in the previous image, where the Constitutional Convention is repeatedly linked to “the Left.” One of the most persistent tropes connected the draft to the progressive/New Left, casting it as the agent “behind the scenes” of the Chilean unrest (see image 4.20).

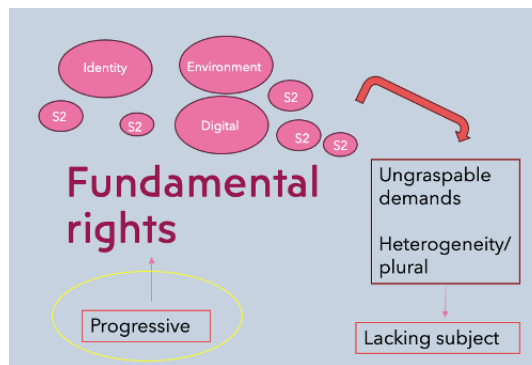


Figure 4.20. University Discourse, constitutional process and progressive Master

As noted in Chapter 2, the uprising was narrated as an awakening—“Chile despertó”¹¹ (“Chile woke up”)—a deliberate counter to President Piñera’s claim, only weeks earlier, that Chile was among the region’s most peaceful countries “Amid this convulsed Latin America, look at Chile; our country is a true oasis with a stable democracy....” (CNN Chile, 2019, translation is mine). The “wake” frame condensed accumulated discontent that had lacked overt symptoms, as if the country had been asleep until October 2019 (see figure 4.20).

¹¹ Chapter 5 returns to the “awake” framing and develops its ethical implications.



Figure 4.21. Photograph of graffiti reading “Chile Woke Up ... New Constitution Now,” Santiago, Chile.

(Hilbink & Salas, 2019)

Although the square’s heterogeneous makeup did not neatly match ‘the left’ as a unitary constituency, public debate quickly framed the constitutional project as a New Left initiative (Chs. 2–3). After the multi-party Agreement, which aimed to make the drafting representative across parties, the campaign for approval was indeed led by actors who identified with New Left values, including the coalition that explicitly adopted the name “Apruebo Dignidad.” Given the plebiscite’s overwhelming entry approval, the process might have been expected to exceed that constituency. Nevertheless, as the process unfolded, the draft was reduced in media narratives to being a ‘New Left project’. This is unsurprising—normative proximity and campaign ownership made the association easy—but the analytic focus here is different: how that normative orientation was not only “uncovered” but also amplified and mocked.

Practically, the Convention operationalised its commitment to horizontal participation through “democracy in real time” in three ways: (i) live broadcast of deliberations and committee sessions, with archived videos and clipped highlights; (ii) open channels for citizen initiatives, whereby any proposal surpassing 15,000 signatures had to be placed on the agenda (with public dashboards showing counts and status); and (iii) high-frequency procedural updates (daily agendas, roll-call votes, draft article versions, committee reports) disseminated

across official sites and delegates’ accounts. This procedural openness generated a constant stream of raw material—short clips of floor interventions, images of informal moments, screenshots of draft language mid-revision—which online critics then recirculated with framing: juxtaposing an out-of-context speech with sarcastic captions; presenting a celebratory gesture as evidence of unseriousness; or contrasting a complex clause with a meme that translated it as a naïve or maximalist demand. From these posts a derivative critique coalesced: the New Left’s alleged inexperience, a preference for performative visibility over “real work,” and the claim that the process was animated by a moralising progressivism. Hence the label “woke”,¹² which opponents used to package these accusations into a portable trope that travelled easily across platforms.

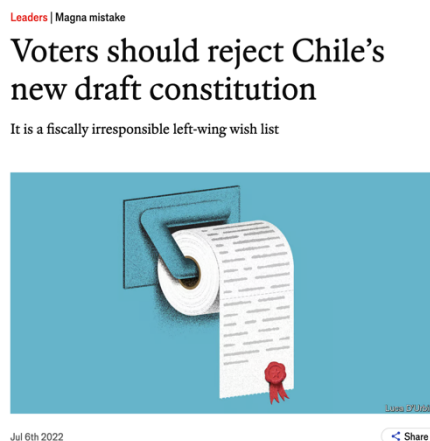


Figure 4.22. Voters should reject Chile’s new draft. Image from ‘The Economist’, 2022

¹² The term “*woke*” is used here strictly as an actors’ label—a pejorative descriptor deployed by opponents of the process. It is not adopted in this thesis as a theoretical or analytic category. For orientation: (a) Genealogies of the term—see Jeffrey Boakye, *Woke: A Guide to Social Justice* (2019) for an accessible history; journalistic/linguistic accounts by Ben Zimmer (Wall Street Journal columns) trace its path from AAVE into mainstream politics. (b) Analyses of the right’s weaponisation/pejorative use—see Helen Lewis, “The Second Wave of Anti-Woke” (*The Atlantic*, 2021); Eric Kaufmann, “The Third Awakening” (Policy Exchange reports, 2020–22); Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap* (2023) on how anti- “woke” rhetoric structures contemporary culture-war strategy. (c) Critical/left-internal discussions of performative progressivism—Olúfemi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture* (2022); Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse* (2016); Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included* (2012), which helps read institutional performance and moralised style. (d) Platformed contention and moral panics—Angela Nagle, *Kill All Norms* (2017) and Talia Stroud et al. on outrage dynamics (various, 2017–2022). (e) Latin American/Chilean context—CIPER’s dossiers on plebiscite misinformation; Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. on Chilean populism and culture-war importation; Fast Check Chile archives on the diffusion of “woke” framings.

As Chapter 3 discussed, Gabriel Boric occupied an “awkward” position between square horizontality and the verticality of the presidency. During the drafting, when the text was released, one such awkward moment became emblematic: the President’s public endorsement of the draft, read by opponents as a loss of presidential neutrality. This was folded back into the “inexperienced/woke” narrative—evidence, it was said, that the New Left “does not know” how to do real politics. A notable consequence of this linkage was that shifts in approval ratings for the presidency and for the draft itself began to move in tandem (Alemán & Navia, 2023). The president’s endorsement brought into relief the alleged ‘hidden orientation’ and implicit political agenda driving the drafting process. As a result, the draft’s alleged neutrality fell away in the eyes of broad segments of the public – rather than a shared, pluralistically composed, knowledge-driven text (University discourse), it came to be read **as** re-inscribed under the dictation of a partisan Master.

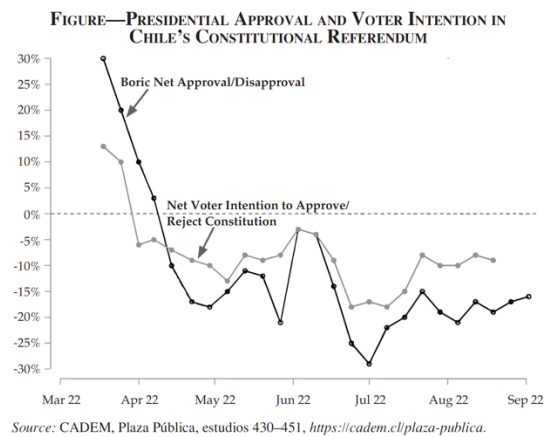


Figure 4.23. Presidential approval and voter intention From Alemán & Navia, 2023

Read through the University discourse, the far-right’s digital strategy is legible: a knowledge-centred field (procedures, explanations, clauses) is re-personalised by naming the background orientation—the “woke” left—as the Master driving the process. The effect is not to close off

the debate but to supply a target that travels well on platforms: the draft's rights-proliferation becomes "chaos," the procedural openness becomes "amateur theatre," and the hidden Master becomes "the woke behind the wake." This is not a Master command that settles the issue; it is a University sequence being re-framed as if a Master were pulling the strings—precisely a move that enables mockery and delegitimation while leaving knowledge proliferation intact.

Conclusion

This chapter has built directly on the groundwork laid in the previous chapters. Chapter 3 examined the dialectical ask-reply axis through Laclau's construction of "the people," read in homology with the Lacanian Master/Hysteric couple: the Master promises closure by organising an equivalential chain; the Hysteric exposes the gap and presses the Master to speak. Chapter 4 shifts the lens to a different modality of reply: what happens when *knowledge* occupies the place of agency. Before developing this, the chapter clarified psychoanalysis' distinction between truth and knowledge—the impossibility of accessing the subject's truth and the ways in which the four discourses stage responses to that impossibility. On that basis, the University discourse was analysed as a knowledge-centred reply that translates excess into categories, metrics, and textual clauses. The chapter then traced the amplification of this knowledge-centred reply in platformed communication more generally and in the Chilean constitutional cycle in particular. This, then, is precisely the *epistemic dimension of demand* as this was defined earlier: demand read through its structuration around knowledge claims and their proliferating replies.

The psychoanalytic claim threading this analysis is the impossibility of accessing the subject's truth. The four discourses formalise this condition, staging different ways of responding to the impossibility of fullness or ultimate closure. Each discourse provides a different type of "reply" to demand: the Master sutures by naming, the Hysteric insists on exposing the gap, the Analyst sustains division, and the University deploys knowledge to explain. Concentrating on the latter, the chapter has shown how, when knowledge occupies the place of agency, proliferation becomes the mechanism of reply. Procedures, statistics, rights catalogues, and expert explainers attempt to render legible what is structurally excessive, producing a subject (and Subject) that is always lacking and therefore always open to further specification.

The illustration of platform logics made this structure particularly visible. Social media not only hosts discourse but amplifies its dynamics. Engagement-weighted ranking ensures that every naming, check, or counter-check is recirculated as new content, thickening the feed rather than closing the issue. In this sense, platforms function as infrastructures of the University discourse: they can present knowledge as neutral explanation while implicitly orienting circulation according to hidden aims (engagement, retention, safety). The result is that the very impossibility psychoanalysis names—the gap that cannot be sutured—becomes hyper-visible as informational excess, mis/disinformation, and an audience divided between recognition and dissatisfaction.

The Chilean constitutional process exemplifies this configuration. What began as an ungraspable outburst was institutionalised through the promise of a new text. Once the constituent body was established, the work of naming began: rights multiplied, categories proliferated, and the draft itself became the vehicle for replying to excess. The Agreement for Peace named a path in a Master fashion, but as the drafting progressed the centre of gravity shifted: knowledge "spoke" through rights-based clauses, procedures, and justifications. The

attempt to contain dislocation through explanation was confronted with its own impossibility, producing ever more content and an audience that felt both recognised and estranged.

In the ‘adding fuel to the fire’ section, the argument focuses on how platforms amplified this cycle. Misinformation and hyper-information flourished, checks became content in their own right, and the sense of saturation grew. The analysis highlighted the effects: the creation of a lacking subject (forever one right short of fullness), and the formation of a Subject of rights (capital-S), constructed through the endless listing of entitlements but marked by division. Alongside this, the illustration shows how the far-right can use this amplification as a strategy to create doubt and to operate by unmasking the hidden Master, linking the process to a partisan coalition or leader (see “the woke behind the wake”). In this way, the oscillation between knowledge and mastery became evident: a discourse claiming neutrality was re-inscribed under the sign of a partisan will, tying knowledge back to the Master to mock and delegitimise it.

Subsequent developments in Chile also complicate the trajectory discussed here. The constitutional proposal drafted by the 2021–2022 Constitutional Convention was rejected in a referendum in September 2022. A second constitutional process initiated thereafter produced a more conservative draft, which was also rejected in a referendum in December 2023. These developments illustrate the enduring instability of the political moment opened by the 2019 uprising and underscore the difficulty of translating the heterogeneous demands expressed in the protests into a stable institutional settlement.

The relevance of this analysis extends beyond Chile. For protests unfolding in the age of platforms, the University discourse offers a powerful lens, extending the demand framework in a productive way. It shows how demands are translated into proliferating knowledge, how the impossibility of closure fuels content expansion, and how social media infrastructures exacerbate these dynamics. Analytically, this clarifies the dialectical interplay between discourses: Master replies seek closure but are fleeting when mediated through platforms;

University replies proliferate knowledge but are easily re-inscribed under the Master's sign; Hysteric interventions can puncture both, exposing the gap. The Chilean case illustrates how these modalities interlock and transition into one another in practice.

Taken together, this chapter demonstrates how the epistemic dimension of demand rationalises excess while creating conditions for its political reactivation. In discourse-analytic terms, this shows that “the people” cannot be read solely as an equivalential chain (Laclau) but must also be understood through the psychoanalytic insight that any such construction produces a lacking subject and a surplus of signification. This chapter has therefore contributed both a conceptual and an empirical claim: conceptually, it articulates how knowledge-centred replies operate as a modality of demand; empirically, it reframes the Chilean constitutional process as a knowledge sequence amplified by platforms rather than simply as a failed Master project.

This provides the bridge to Chapter 5. The analysis so far has presented two different approaches to what exceeds the demand process, to that which is ungraspable. As seen in Chapter 3, a *full* suture is impossible: Master/Hysteric exchanges can mobilise, clarify antagonisms, and enable decision, but they cannot finally close the gap. In this chapter, the university route shows how no knowledge can *cover over* the ungraspable: translating excess into knowledge can produce legibility, institutionalise gains (e.g., rights), design policy, and support accountability, yet it proliferates content without exhausting what demands set in motion. In positive terms, each modality has distinctive strengths—Master for coordination and direction, Hysteric for exposing what is repressed or disavowed (although via seeking a new Master), University for rendering problems workable in institutions. The point is not to abandon these positions, which are often necessary and can be productively *sequenced*, but to extend the repertoire. The question that now opens is: what follows if the ungraspable is approached in a way that neither seeks to suture it nor to explain it away? Chapter 5 turns to

this ethical register—responsibility and forms of listening—asking how an ethical reply might sustain the excess of demand without collapsing it into closure or into knowledge.

CHAPTER 5

The Ethical Dimension of Demand

Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor, set himself on fire in front of the governor's office in Tunisia after the confiscation of his wares, which subsequently sparked a wave of protests.

Drivers in France donned yellow vests following the announcement of a fuel price increase, and within hours, the squares were thronged with people. In Chile, students evaded the subway turnstiles after a 30 Chilean pesos hike, and soon, the squares were filled with protesters.

What do these “unrelated” yet similar progressions of events have in common? As argued in Chapter 2, the sudden onset and remarkable scale of these events have caught political analysts by surprise and indeed continue to puzzle them in what Bevens (2023) calls ‘a decade of uprising’. A central concern of this thesis has been the role of demand, since these movements appear to emerge without clear or pre-formulated demands, and yet—as will be explored particularly in this chapter—something else propels them. This impulse cannot be situated in a simple temporal “before,” but rather in what Lacan would describe as the structural insistence of what resists symbolisation. It is not a point preceding dislocation but that which continuously presses against its limits — what insists and will keep insisting, in excess of any attempt at interpretive closure. This chapter pauses here, not to close the question, but to bring

the ethical dimension of demand into relief — by attending to the remainder that exceeds representation which insists on being sustained rather than resolved.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the study of contemporary uprisings in the literature frequently maps their logic along the axes of vertical and horizontal organisation, often resulting in a polarised reading. Verticality is typically associated with centralised leadership, hierarchical structure, and strategic clarity, whereas horizontality is linked to decentralisation, participatory consensus and leaderless coordination. Although these orientations are commonly presented as oppositional, this thesis seeks to navigate their interplay by examining these tensions through the category of demand (see figure 2.1).

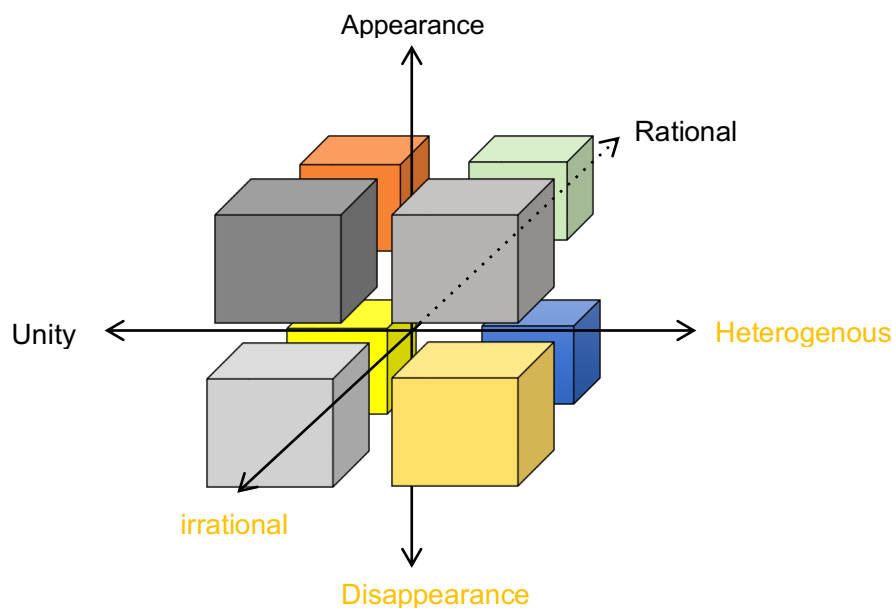


Figure 5.1. Demand characterisation. (reproduced from Figure 2.2. Chapter 2 demand characterisation).

The diagram in the figure summarises the main categories that tend to emerge in the analysis of contemporary uprisings. It visualises how debates around these events often polarise their interpretation along recurrent axes — rational versus irrational, institutional versus heteronomous, and appearance versus disappearance. These categories reveal a broader

interpretive tendency to translate the heterogeneity of protest into dichotomies of organisation, affect, or strategy. Rather than reproducing these binaries, this thesis has approached them through the category of demand, as a means to trace how such tensions are articulated, disarticulated, and sustained within the political field. As the discussion in previous chapters has made clear, the notion of demand has often been framed as a measure of institutional seriousness within social movements, prompting observers to call for protesters to “formulate clear demands.” This chapter expands that reading by opening a different approach to the articulation and disarticulation of demand—one that moves beyond the pursuit of a defined institutional agenda to attend instead to the processes through which meaning and address unfold in less determinate forms.

In previous chapters, the thesis analysed political demands through Lacan’s framework of the four discourses. Chapter 3 examined Laclau’s theory of demand articulation by aligning it with Lacan’s discourse of the Master, read in dialectical relation with the discourse of the Hysteric. This alignment made it possible to identify a specific form of demand and a corresponding form of reply. While Laclau’s work on demand is informed by psychoanalysis, it nonetheless retains a classical notion of demand where it is shaped as a form of address to institutions. By mapping the Laclauian leader onto the Lacanian Master, the analysis highlighted how demands are often processed through a figure who symbolically sutures the social gap. The chapter sought to expand this perspective in order to account for contemporary protests that defy traditional forms of demand articulation – as discussed, these movements often reject clearly articulated demands or identifiable leaders, instead opening space for more ambiguous, affectively charged expressions and organisational forms. This dynamic problematises the conventional “ask–reply” cycle (Monticelli, 2020). Chapter 4 then turned to the Lacanian University discourse to illustrate how the Master can still operate in the reply to a demand albeit from a hidden position, under the guise of epistemic neutrality. Here, the

Master's voice appears displaced, embedded in seemingly objective frameworks of scientific expertise and technocratic language. This analysis revealed a modality of the work of demand in which political direction is obscured yet persists as a decisive structuring force.

The broader aim of the analysis thus far presented has been to explore different forms of reply in cases where a demand is not clearly articulated. In responding to a demand, there is always an act of construction or interpretation, which simultaneously implies a particular ethical orientation towards it. To approach a demand in order to suture the gap differs from replying with knowledge in an attempt to master its complexity. Rather than establishing a normative distinction between right and wrong forms of reply, the thesis has sought to expand the conceptual framework to capture the richness of these different modalities and their possible effects. The present chapter focuses on another mode of reply—one that places emphasis on the *elaboration* of demand and embraces the extended or suspended moment of articulation. Instead of rushing to closure, this mode centres on the process itself. For this purpose, the analysis now turns to the analyst's discourse to explore how it can offer a productive lens through which to examine contemporary forms of protest.

As explored throughout the thesis, these forms of protest accommodate a variety of expressive forms – some align more formally with the aim of the Master to suture the gap, while others point toward an aim of elaboration itself rather than any singular closure. In this chapter, the focus is placed on a particular form of expression widely present in the Chilean unrest: graffiti. The analysis argues that the unfolding of these expressions—through images, playful polysemic slogans, and a distinctive aesthetic—sustains the ambiguity of these interventions and resists singular closure, revealing a modality of reply in the form of collective political engagement by subjects. The aim is to provide a psychoanalytically informed conceptual framework that can be used to analyse these kinds of expressions and to supplement current perspectives – particularly the Laclauian approach to political demand.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, it turns to the Lacanian analyst's discourse in order to examine its specific relation to demand, highlighting demand's distinctive mode of articulation vis-à-vis the other discourses. The first section then describes and illustrates the relevant meanings and effects produced by demand within this specific discourse. In the second section, the chapter translates this theoretical scheme and its key components to show how it can contribute a productive interpretive framework to debates on demand articulation within contemporary protests, including by contrasting the work of demand in the mode of the analyst's discourse with the other discourses. Finally, in the third section, the chapter turns to the Chilean *estallido* to offer a concrete illustration of this interpretive framework for understanding demand. For this purpose, it draws on the extensive work of *Palimpsesto*,¹³ a collective digital archive that documents the graffiti, testimonies, and visual interventions produced during the Chilean *estallido social* of 2019–2020. The aim is to present the production of graffiti within the Chilean uprising and to show how, through the lens of the analyst's discourse, the political productivity of this expressive form can be analysed. Ultimately, the chapter advocates for these forms of expression while providing a means to illuminate their political richness and complexity.

I. Analyst Discourse: Dodging the Demand

Lacan introduces the analyst's discourse as the reverse of the master's discourse (*Seminar XVII*, 1969–1970/2007), positioning it as a genuinely emancipatory form in contrast with the latter. This can be understood against the backdrop of May '68, when Lacan remarked that protesters,

¹³ Palimpsesto: Archivo de memorias del estallido social is a collaborative project developed by Chilean researchers, artists, and activists to document the visual, textual, and performative traces of the 2019 social uprising. The digital archive includes photographs of graffiti, interviews, and essays. Available at: <https://www.laciudadcomotexto.cl/> (accessed December 5, 2022).

while seeking change, often appealed to a new master rather than disrupting the structure of mastery itself (Lacan, 2007, p. 207).

As previously discussed, Lacan proposes that the goal of the Master discourse is to govern, that of the Hysteric discourse is to desire, and that of the University discourse is to educate. Although their aims differ, Lacan contends that the Master figure plays a central role in all three discourses—whether visibly, as in the Master discourse itself, or in a form that conceals a Master behind knowledge (University) or desire (Hysteric). Each preserves the subject’s dependence on this figure. For this reason, none of these discourses are seen as radically breaking with the logic of the Master; all of them reaffirm it, either explicitly or implicitly, through concealment.

The analyst’s discourse, by contrast, relocates the Master signifier (S_1) as an outcome rather than as an origin. It positions the *objet petit a*—the cause of desire—as the agent. This reconfiguration, while not abolishing the Master, potentially displaces the power of its function structurally (see figure 5.2).

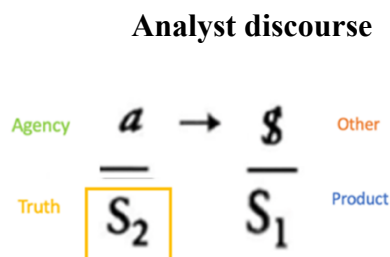


Figure 5.2. Lacanian Analyst discourse

This section begins by outlining the “work of the analyst” to highlight how demand operates radically differently in the analyst’s discourse compared to the other forms of discourse previously discussed. While each Lacanian discourse draws on the same structural elements

(S_1 , S_2 , $\$, a$), their arrangement gives rise to fundamentally distinct dynamics, with particular emphasis on the role of the *objet petit a* (a) and its interplay with the Master signifier (S_1).

As the discussion in Chapter 3 argued, one of Lacan's key motivations for theorising the analyst's discourse was to critique what he saw as the failures of certain post-Freudian psychoanalytic models, such as, most significantly, ego psychology. These traditions, he argued, risked misunderstanding the aim of psychoanalysis by failing to interrogate the structural persistence and centrality of the Master function. Too often, the analyst assumed the position of 'the one who knows'—offering interpretation, guidance, or correction—and thereby reproduced the very structure the analytic space should problematise. Lacan argued that this approach reduces the analytic process to adaptation: restoring the subject to normative functioning, productivity, or social integration.

By contrast, the analyst's discourse suspends the centrality of the Master and relocates its operation to the place of a product or outcome, rather than the *origin* or agency. The analyst does not occupy the role of expert or guide, but rather that of the *objet petit a*—the enigmatic cause of the analysand's desire. This subtle but radical repositioning allows the subject to articulate their own truth, rather than reproduce behavioural norms pre-determined by social ideals in the name of the subject's truth. This way, Lacan's reconfiguration of analytic discourse and practice not only reshapes the therapeutic scene but also challenges any clinical (or political) model that claims to know in advance what the subject should become.

Chapter 3 also examined the implications of this interpretive framework reapplied to politics and protest: protestors transpire as hysterics (asking for a Master) and political leaders as Masters (replying to suture the gap), both generating an endless loop of ask–reply. In this case, the *objet a* was defined as the excess within this dynamic, akin to Laclau's "dislocation." The "demand" can thus be understood in two senses: the demands that emerge from the protestors—those who ask—and the demands that emerge from the political leader's

construction—those who reply. This distinction will be explored further in the present chapter, but for now, what is at stake is the interruption the analyst’s discourse introduces into this ask–reply cycle.

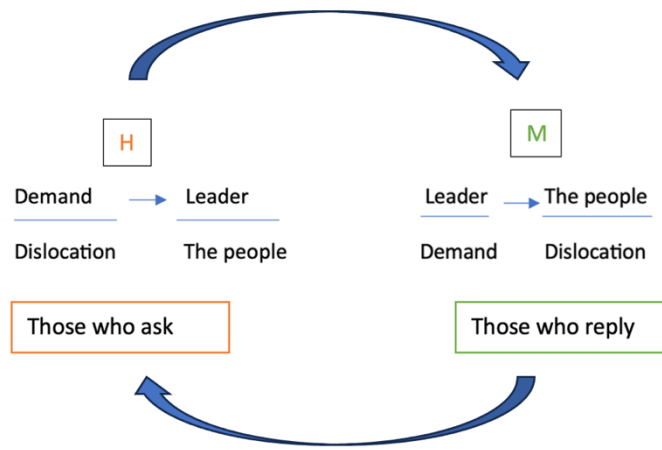


Figure 5.3. The ask–reply dynamic in Laclau’s and Lacan’s frameworks. (reproduced from Figure 3.12, chapter 3)

The analyst’s discourse challenges this cycle by refusing to produce a reply in the conventional sense. When Lacan presents this discourse, he does so with the aim of articulating a particular ethic, where the goal is not to help the patient but to transform their relation to authority, power, desire, and knowledge. The analytical process aims to encourage the analysand to speak, allowing them to construct their own narrative. To achieve this, the analyst positions themselves as the *objet petit a*—that is, not responding to a demand but causing it. For example, if the analysand presents a demand such as “I’m not sure how to stop this behaviour, can you help me?”, an analyst operating from the position of the Master might give a direct answer such as “You should stop it when you start to notice the first signs.” From the position of the

University discourse, the reply might be, “This behaviour usually happens when you’re anxious; try journaling your symptoms.” However, from the position of the analyst’s discourse, the reply would avoid placing the demand at the centre and instead open a space around it, responding with something like, “What would be at stake if you stopped?” In this sense, the demand is re-directed toward the analysand rather than taken up by the analyst, reversing the production of knowledge and the locus of “truth.” This move subverts the Master’s structure, reorienting the work of analysis to the analysand rather than to the analyst.

Lacan’s aim is to demonstrate how to subvert the position of the Master from within analysis. In this, the *work* on demand becomes central. When the analysand formulates a demand, they expect something from the clinical relationship—as in any relationship—such as relief, certainty, or knowledge. It is an ethical decision when the analyst refuses to fulfil this demand. The analyst’s refusal to take up the analysand’s demand generates movement, a process Lacan calls “hystericisation” (see image 5.4). By drawing attention to breaks in discourse, slips, and other unconscious phenomena, the analyst acts to destabilise the analysand’s existing narrative and prompt the construction of a new one. This intervention displaces the subject from a passive position and spurs them toward active inquiry. The ethic of psychoanalysis lies in creating this very space for the subject to produce their own truth and to move beyond the conception of others as those who are supposed to know and to fix.

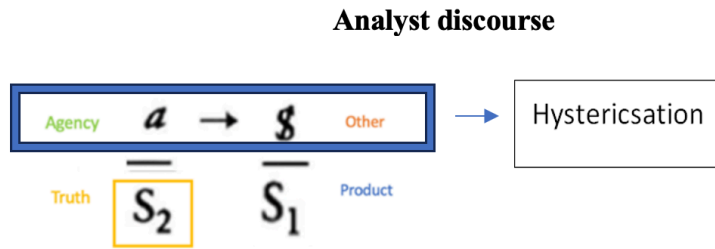


Figure 5.4. Hystericisation in the Analyst discourse

In the other discourses, the analytic process typically takes the form of producing knowledge about a demand by analysing its causes and addresses, or of pursuing the means to satisfy a demand already deemed to clearly articulated – in either case, the work on demand serves as an excuse to produce some outcome external to the analytic process itself. By contrast, the aim of the Analyst discourse is not to seek an escape from that process but to pass through it, to traverse it. Within and through the analytic process itself, the patient is meant to be brought to the point of recognising both the structural impossibility of an Other who could effectively address their demand, and the necessity of articulating something that speaks from their own desire. This work on demand thus aims to generate a signification that makes sense only from within, as an exploration and elaboration that no one else can perform on their behalf. This would amount to a ‘culmination’ of the effort to make sense of something that ultimately, does not make sense.

II. Ethics of Interpretation: The Analyst’s Discourse and the Politics of Demand

Having explored the structure and ethics of the analyst’s discourse in the clinical setting, the analysis now turns to its potential within the social and political field. Previous chapters have already traced this bridge, interpreting the elements of Lacan’s schema in political terms—

linking, for instance, the figures of the leader, demand, people, and dislocation to the dynamics of discourse. Continuing the analysis within this framework, the focus here is to extend that interpretive move and examine how the analyst's discourse can illuminate contemporary political processes.

As discussed, the Analyst discourse sets a particular motion: following the Lacanian ethic of psychoanalysis, it aims to generate interventions aiming at exploration rather than closure of complexity. From this perspective, this interpretive framework can do justice to expressive forms that emerge in contemporary protests from two interrelated angles. First, it provides conceptual tools to analyse forms of political expression that resist straightforward articulation of demand in terms of specific goals or institutional agendas. Second, it goes even further than this by foregrounding the productive role of ambiguity and enabling a conceptual reevaluation of the approach to demand altogether. Open protests here can be approached beyond the expression of unmet needs or predefined objectives, more or less clearly and unambiguously articulated. Rather, with ambiguity can also be understood in its generative condition rather than its defect, protest can be seen as a site where the very logic of demand is reconfigured – a narrative space that fosters the elaboration of meanings that exceed the established repertoire of political expression and response altogether.

This shift in perspective also entails a different mode of engagement or reply to political demands. While the clinical setting clearly delineates analyst and analysand roles, similar dynamics of expression and response can be discerned within collective action, reconfiguring both the nature of demand and the modality of reply. In this way, the analyst's discourse offers a lens through which to grasp political processes characterised by insistence, continuous movement, and a refusal to foreclose political possibility.

To develop these claims, the analysis first revisits Laclau's theory of demand articulation, already reviewed in Chapter 3 and previously aligned with Lacan's Master–

Hysteric dialectic. It now seeks to expand that discussion by rethinking the central function of the *objet petit a* in order to capture the full richness of the analyst's discourse within political theory. By repositioning the *objet a*, the analysis highlights how its meaning and function shift according to discursive configurations, accommodating both Laclau's approach to demand articulation and the analyst's capacity to sustain open-ended elaboration. Finally, the discussion advances this synthesis to examine the political implications of sustaining complexity and dislocation, rather than seeking premature closure.

A. Reframing the People

How can the analyst's discourse help navigate the debate between immanence and representation? This section presents a Lacanian account of this enduring tension, which—as explored in Chapters 2 and 3—runs through many contemporary discussions of new protest forms, especially regarding the logic of demand, strategy, and political organisation. Broadly, this debate opposes two political logics to each other: one that privileges immanence, emphasising self-organisation, horizontality, and the autonomy of collective practices; and another that foregrounds representation, stressing mediation, leadership, and institutional articulation. As discussed earlier, these positions often crystallise into competing visions of politics—between spontaneous emergence and strategic construction, between multiplicity and unity. This chapter will argue that the analyst's discourse presents a distinctive discursive structure in which the elements are so configured as to allow reading out a narrative within the political process itself – a form of symbolisation taking shape in and through the very structure of the discourse.

In Chapter 3, the thesis examined Laclau's notion of a "failed representation," specifically in the transformation from *Plebs* to *Populus* (2005). As discussed, and drawing from Rancière's (1999) conceptualisation, Laclau describes the *Plebs* as those who remain

outside or are excluded from existing political and social structures, embodying unsatisfied demands that have not yet found representation. The transformation into *Populus* occurs when these diverse and fragmented demands unify under a single symbolic narrative or identity. Crucially, this shift from fragmentation to unity involves selecting and elevating particular demands as if they were universally representative, thus strategically constituting a collective political subject: "the People." However, this constructed unity is what Laclau calls "failed representation," pointing towards the impossible task of accounting for full representation – of particular demands being *actually* universally representative rather than merely presented as such.

Laclau establishes two important points: one concerning the emergence of what accounts for "the political," and the other outlining a particular process for achieving this, namely, the task of "constructing the People." These claims are presented both as a conceptual account offering an ontology of the political moment as well as a strategic account regarding the dynamics of this task of construction.

Previously, the thesis explored this *Plebs-to-Populus* transition through a Lacanian lens, aligning it with the dialectic between the Master and Hysteric discourses and highlighting the central role of the Leader or Master figure. It argued that this figure attempts to suture the gap by establishing a unifying demand and producing the "failed representation" stipulated in Laclau's account. However, this alignment also exposed conceptual tensions arising around key Lacanian ideas, particularly the function of the *objet petit a*. In this section, the analysis revisits these tensions through the analyst's discourse, suggesting that a clearer understanding of the *objet a* can illuminate how political representation operates not merely as closure but as an ongoing symbolic negotiation. This reframing clarifies the productive potential of the unrepresentable aspects within political processes, emphasising the ontological and conceptual

significance of continuously renegotiating what constitutes “the People,” while also problematising how this narrative emerges.

B. Copjec turning point

To begin exploring the implications of this conceptual shift, the analysis returns to an important turning point in Laclau’s engagement with Lacanian theory—his interpretation of the role of the *objet petit a*. In OPR (2005), Laclau draws on the Lacanian framework to theorise how collective identities are formed. It is through the category of demand that Laclau investigates how people can be both *affectively* and *effectively* tied to collective projects. In seeking to uncover the process underlying this strong affective investment in a demand, Laclau turns to Joan Copjec’s¹⁴ interpretation of the *objet petit a*, arguing:

In political terms, that is exactly what I have called a hegemonic relation: a certain particularity which assumes the role of an impossible universality. Because the partial character of these objects does not result from a particular story but is inherent in the very structure of signification, Lacan’s *objet petit a* is the key element in a social ontology. The whole is always going to be embodied by a part. In terms of our analysis: there is no universality which is not a hegemonic one. (...) There is, however, something more: as in the examples of the close-ups and the ‘breast value’ of the milk discussed by Copjec, there is nothing in the materiality of the particular parts which predetermines one or the other to function as a whole. Nevertheless, once a

¹⁴ See Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), especially chapter 1, “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan.” Copjec develops the notion of the *objet petit a* as that which resists symbolisation within the field of vision and knowledge — an approach Laclau (2005, 116–118) draws on to articulate how the object functions as the locus of affective investment in political identification.

certain part has assumed such a function, it is its very materiality as a part which becomes a source of enjoyment. (Laclau, 2005, p. 109-110)

This moment marks a decisive turning point in how the relation between immanence and representation is understood. Most Laclauian interpretations of Lacan privilege the *lack* as the organising principle of discourse: the subject and the social are defined by what is missing, and the Master signifier or Leader emerges to suture that gap. Yet if the focus shifts from *lack* to the *objet petit a*, a different topology appears. The *a* is not exterior to discourse; it inhabits it as its point of internal excess, the trace of enjoyment that keeps the structure in motion. Immanence, from this perspective, is not lost through representation but sustained through the very insistence of what cannot be represented. Laclau's conflation of *a* with the Master signifier (S_1) reabsorbs this immanent tension into the logic of suture, foreclosing the productive dimension of "staying with the *a*".

What Laclau reads from Copjec is that (1) the *objet petit a* functions as a part that stands in for the whole, and (2) it becomes a site of libidinal investment. This investment produces a form of attachment or enjoyment that makes the *objet* particularly difficult to displace, which points to its structural 'stability', to the difficulty of getting rid of it. In other terms, for the leader to construct the demand, this demand needs to (1) act as the part that can be elevated and substitute the whole, and (2) there needs to be an affective investment in this operation pointing towards this part-demand, as a way to achieve a mythical *return* to fulness, the promise of that which will make us complete *again*. Laclau homologates this process to the process underlying the hegemonic mechanism, and thereby to the operation of populism – which ultimately is what he calls 'the' political logic.

Laclau's reading of Copjec in OPR (2005) makes this conflation explicit. When he describes the *objet petit a* as "the key element in a social ontology" and as "a certain

particularity which assumes the role of an impossible universality,” he effectively merges two distinct Lacanian functions: the symbolic elevation of the Master signifier (S_1) and the libidinal operation of the *objet a* (Laclau, 2005, p. 110). The part that stands for the whole (the hegemonic signifier) and the object that causes desire are here treated as a single mechanism of hegemony. In doing so, Laclau translates the structural remainder of desire into the representational logic of signification—an operation that secures the coherence of his ontology but risks eliding the excess that drives it.

From this standpoint, the political construction of “the People” involves the symbolic elevation of a particular demand to the level of a universal placeholder. The *objet petit a* is homologated with this elevated demand, taking on the role of a *substitute* for an impossible totality. In terms of the debate on immanence and transcendence, Laclau—drawing on Copjec’s reading of Lacan—makes clear that the elevation of the *objet a* to the place of the whole entails not a representation but a substitution: “the partial object stands in for the impossible totality—it is the substitute of a fullness which is constitutively absent” (Laclau, 2005, p. 110). This “substitution of the whole by the part” marks, for Laclau, the operation through which a contingent element momentarily assumes universality and anchors the affective investment that sustains collective identification.

This reading situates Laclau firmly against theories of pure immanence. In “*Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?*”, he argues that “‘the people’ is the specific subject of politics, and this term presupposes a sharp division in the social body which cannot be led back to any kind of immanent unity” (2001, p. 4). For Laclau, then, the social is constituted through what he elsewhere calls “failed transcendence” (2005, p. 244): an impossible fullness that appears within discourse only as lack. Yet, as this chapter proposes, this very logic of failure opens another interpretive possibility. By re-centring the *objet petit a*, the focus shifts from lack as absence toward excess as *productive immanence*—an element that insists within the

discursive field rather than standing outside it. This excess is not merely disruptive: it is what introduces division, and thus what makes struggle and creation possible within immanence itself. This proposed move does not reject the Master–Hysteric dynamic but re-situates it as one possible modality of reply within an immanent structure, as one way of negotiating excess among others. What is added here is an account of how the *a* sustains the field itself, allowing political processes to elaborate meaning without closure while remaining anchored in the insistence of what escapes symbolisation.

This reading of the *objet petit a* as a substitute is foundational to Laclau’s ontological framework. Yet it is precisely here that the present analysis departs most decisively from his interpretation. Laclau’s reading of the *objet a* establishes the affective ground of hegemony by treating it as that which fills or substitutes the absent fullness of “the social.” In this formulation, the *objet a* functions as the stand-in for an impossible totality, sustaining the promise of wholeness through its displacement to the level of *the People*. What this analysis proposes, however, is that such displacement transforms the *objet a* from a structural cause of disruption into a symbolic placeholder of completion. In other words, the element that in Lacan marks the persistence of what cannot be symbolised becomes, in Laclau, the means by which symbolic closure is temporarily secured.

Drawing on Lacan’s own formulation of the four discourses, this difference in interpretation arises from a shift in discursive position. The *objet a* does not occupy a single or fixed site across the discourses: in the Master’s discourse, it appears as the product of suture; in the University discourse, it underlies the reproduction of knowledge; in the Hysteric’s discourse, it emerges as the cause of questioning; and in the Analyst’s discourse, it becomes the agent of the process itself (Lacan, 2007, p. 33). It is this final configuration that provides the theoretical ground for the present reading and distinguishes it most sharply from Laclau’s appropriation of Lacanian theory.

This thesis proposes an alternative reading in which the *objet petit a* is situated not in the position of a unified *People*, but rather in the figure of the *Plebs*—as the structural remainder, that which cannot be integrated or symbolised within the existing discursive field. In this reframing, the *objet petit a* marks the point of *insistence* rather than *substitution*; it designates the locus from which the symbolic field is pressured, disrupted, and set into motion. Rather than reinforcing failed representation, the *objet petit a* operates as the element that sustains the movement of meaning from within the discursive structure itself. Across all discourses, it represents not the failure of symbolisation but the excess inherent to it—the remainder that prevents total closure and keeps the structure in motion. In this sense, the *objet a* acts immanently, pushing the divisions through which new articulations can emerge. Within the analyst’s discourse, this excess becomes particularly visible: it agitates the field from within, sustaining the gap rather than closing it. This reading foregrounds the political productivity of what escapes representation and shows how collective processes of elaboration and re-symbolisation can be understood as ongoing practices whose political character is *immanent* to them rather than displaced onto a structural level external to them – practices that sustain political subjectivity as open, processual, and constitutively divided rather than unified.

C. Demands and *objet petit a*

The relevance of this conceptual shift becomes particularly evident when examining how Laclau represents the structure of demand formation. Within his framework, a condensation occurs between two central elements: “demand” and the *objet petit a*, that lies at the heart of his theory of populism. This condensation, while productive, also introduces a set of theoretical ambiguities that have prompted considerable debate among Laclauian and Lacanian scholars. On the one hand, Laclau mobilises Lacanian concepts to theorise how particular demands become affectively invested and elevated to universal status; on the other, his translation of

these psychoanalytic categories into categories of political ontology generates tensions concerning the precise relation between signification and excess.

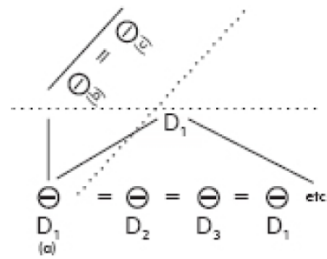


Figure 5.5. Laclauian Demand formation, extracted from Laclau, 2005.p.124

In the diagram above (image 5.5), Laclau illustrates the process of articulating political demands. Demands are represented by semi-circles (D_1 , D_2 , ...), where the upper part of each circle indicates what can be articulated within the equivalential chain, while the lower part represents what remains unrepresented. Laclau identifies the operation of elevating a particular demand to name the equivalential chain. In this case, D_1 represents a particular demand which, through the process of articulation, is elevated into a general or unifying demand.

For instance, if D_1 corresponds to a demand for “human rights,” D_2 to “children’s rights,” and D_3 to “women’s rights,” then D_1 may be elevated as the part-demand capable of subsuming most of the equivalential chain. “Human rights,” as the elevated demand that comes to stand for all other particular demands, is strategically advantageous, as it can harness the force of those other particular demands.

Although strategically useful, this diagram and the conceptual vocabulary surrounding D_1 in Laclauian theory has been problematised for its ambiguity. To clarify these conceptual tensions without over-schematising them, it is useful to pause on the existing debates concerning Laclau’s use of psychoanalysis and the productive ambiguities they generate.

Scholars such as Glynos and Stavrakakis (1998) have argued that while Laclau draws fruitfully on Lacanian categories to articulate a theory of political investment, his appropriation of Lacanian theory risks neutralising the specificity of the psychoanalytic register—particularly by subordinating desire and *jouissance* to the logic of representation. Similarly, Biglieri and Perelló (2018) trace how Laclau mobilises different “names of the Real” (antagonism, dislocation, heterogeneity) to explain social contingency, showing how these shifts progressively absorb the Real into the discursive field. More recently, Zicman de Barros (2023) has examined the polysemy of the empty signifier in Laclau’s work, suggesting that rather than a flaw, its conceptual ambiguity can be read as productive, keeping theorisation open and dynamic.

This thesis takes up that invitation but pursues it differently: by pausing at the point where ambiguity is most pronounced—the conflation of the Master signifier (S_1) and the *objet petit a* already touched upon above. It proposes that the notion of the empty signifier can be understood as an attempt to negotiate the tension this fusion creates within Laclau’s theoretical model. Rather than preserving this conflation as a (putative) source of openness, the analysis argues that undoing this conflation and differentiating the terms allows the productive dimension of the *objet a* to come into view. In this way, it becomes possible to foreground its role as the site of excess that animates meaning from within the structure.

This move builds on Glynos and Stavrakakis’s (2008) call to explore the “positive dimension” of the *objet a*. In their influential essay “*Encounters of the Real Kind: Sussing out the Limits of Laclau’s Ontology*”, Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis offer one of the first sustained assessments of how Laclau incorporates Lacanian psychoanalysis into his theory of discourse and hegemony. They argue that, while Laclau’s use of categories such as lack, antagonism, and dislocation is theoretically productive, it risks privileging the symbolic and representational register at the expense of the libidinal dimension that grounds affective and

fantasmatic attachment. As they note, Laclau's framework tends to treat the *objet petit a* primarily as a marker of lack or failed symbolisation, thereby neglecting its "positive dimension"—the capacity of the *a* to sustain identification and political investment.

For Glynos and Stavrakakis, acknowledging this positive dimension is crucial if psychoanalytic theory is to explain not only why discourses fail to close but also why they are maintained, desired, and defended. Their intervention thus foregrounds the need to account for the force that animates the field of discourse from within, rather than reducing it to a purely structural lack. Building on this insight, the present analysis extends their critique by arguing that the conceptual tension in Laclau's framework stems, once more, from its subtle conflation of the *objet petit a* and the Master signifier (S_1). Whereas for Lacan the S_1 names and closes, and the *a* indexes the excess that both sustains and unsettles this closure, Laclau's use of the *a* as a stand-in for the elevated demand or empty signifier risks collapsing these distinct functions.

Supplementing Glynos and Stavrakakis's insight by extending the "positive dimension" of the *objet petit a* beyond the terrain of libidinal investment, the present analysis builds on their intervention and proposes that the *a* not only animates attachment but also operates as the cause of desire and movement within discourse—the force that sets signification in motion while simultaneously exceeding it. Clarifying the distinction between the *a* and the Master signifier (S_1) does not seek to resolve the ambiguity surrounding the empty signifier, but to reframe it. In this sense, the analysis attempts to sharpen the blurred boundary between *signification* and *excess* that marks Laclau's notion of the empty signifier. The *objet petit a*, understood in this way, becomes the element of insistence that both exceeds signification and maintains the productive openness of the political field. Failing to distinguish these functions, by contrast, produces an ontological flattening in which the excess that sustains signification becomes domesticated within the logic of representation.

Addressing the conflation of the Master signifier with the *objet petit a* is relevant for several reasons, especially as this bears on the concept of demand. As seen in the discussion of his OPR, Laclau consistently situates himself on the side of the “reply”. His reading of demands is already mediated by their presumed role in articulation. Demands are perceived and interpreted with the strategic goal of being saturated. In this sense, demands are no longer approached as openings that expose the contingency of the social field, but rather as tools to close it. Once a demand is elevated, it takes on the role of a master signifier (S_1), effectively suturing the gap it initially revealed, as was argued in Chapter 3. This operation not only sidelines the *objet petit a* but effectively substitutes its uniquely disruptive function with one of symbolic closure. One could say that from this point on, the *a* – now sidelined and substituted – goes on to haunt Laclau’s theory as a spectral presence that persists in the form of ambiguity, polysemy, and conceptual slippage. Bracketed under a representational logic, it manifests itself as an unresolved tension, an insistence at the edge of his framework, pushing this from within.

But what does this reinterpretation mean for the understanding of political demands presented here? How can demands be approached in ways that do not necessarily lead to closure or a clearly institutionalised agenda? Does this imply that such demands no longer expect a reply, or do they rather call for a different mode of response—not as a definitive answer, but as a form of listening, witnessing, or opening? These questions have become increasingly pressing in light of contemporary protest movements, whose mode of expression often resists traditional forms of political articulation and representation, as this thesis has repeatedly noted. Scholars have explored the richness of these forms of protest from multiple perspectives: some emphasise the suspension of closure (e.g. Butler’s politics of performativity (2015) or Zournazi’s (2002) ethics of hope); others focus on what emerges before or beyond formal articulation, as in prefigurative politics (Monticelli, 2020); while still others foreground

the affective, embodied, or relational dimensions of unrest drawn from feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous traditions (Gago, 2020; Coulthard, 2014; A. Simpson, 2014; L. B. Simpson, 2017; Lugones, 2007; Segato, 2016; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; Brown & Pickerill, 2009).

While these approaches share an emphasis on expanding the interpretive horizon of demand, this analysis proposes to push the question further: to conceptualise demand as a site where *the objet petit a* operates—not as an elevated signifier seeking universality, but as an insistence that sustains movement within discourse. Rather than advocating a single correct interpretation, the aim is to provide a conceptual framework capable of analysing the different modalities through which demand functions—sometimes strategically, sometimes affectively, sometimes as an interruption that resists translation altogether. Above all, the question of demand here becomes ontological: it concerns not only what is being asked but how the act of asking reopens the field of the possible.

The analysis in this section has clarified the effects of conflating the *objet petit a* and the Master signifier (S_1), showing how this fusion tends to privilege closure over openness and movement. Within the Master–Hysteric dialectic, the *a* appears on the surface of the discourse, threatening to destabilise but never occupying the central position. The following section advances this conceptual shift by reimagining the *objet petit a* not as an elevated demand but as a principle of insistence and elaboration. Turning to the analyst discourse will make it possible to examine the political potential of this element when placed at the centre of the operation—where meaning is not fixed but continually reworked through its own impossibility. Methodologically, the following sections adopt the structure of the analyst discourse as a way of reading political expression. Rather than applying theory externally to a case, it takes up the analyst’s position as one of listening, witnessing, and sustaining the openness of meaning. This stance embodies the ethical dimension of the thesis: to engage with political acts not as objects to be decoded or resolved, but as enunciations whose value lies in their very elaboration. The

analyst discourse adopted here thus functions both as a conceptual framework and as a methodological orientation—an ethics of interpretation that mirrors the ethics of demand.

III. All eyes on Chile – The work of graffiti in the Chilean uprising

Having problematised the category of political demand and repositioned the *objet petit a* as a force of disruption and insistence rather than symbolic closure, the analysis now turns to how the analyst discourse can illuminate concrete political phenomena. Rather than treating demands as elements to be translated, represented, or elevated into institutional programmes, the analyst discourse invites one to remain with the open-endedness of expression—to witness what emerges when symbolic closure is deferred. This ontological and ethical reorientation becomes particularly relevant when attending to forms of protest that resist programmatic articulation and instead express themselves through affective, fragmented, or aesthetic means.

In this context, the discussion turns once more to the 2019 Chilean social uprising and, specifically, to the graffiti that proliferated during the *estallido social*, which has been described as one of the political archives of this moment.¹⁵ This visual and material production is read here as an instance of the *objet petit a* at work—not as a demand seeking recognition, but as an insistence that interrupts, agitates, and reopens the symbolic field. Through this lens, graffiti transpires not merely as an expressive artefact but as a site where the political reconfigures itself around desire, opacity, and refusal.

The ethical dimension of demand becomes visible here in the graffiti’s refusal to resolve the trauma it registers. Each image holds open a tension—between mourning and mobilisation,

¹⁵ see the *La Ciudad como Texto / Palimpsesto* project’s aim to ‘resguardar la memoria grabada en los muros’; Gordon-Zolov & Zolov’s study of protest walls (2023).

trauma and hope—sustaining a gap rather than suturing it through representation. In this sense, these inscriptions participate in what has been theorised as a *politics of mourning* (Butler 2009; Richard 1998), where public acts of writing and image-making enable collective elaboration of loss. Yet unlike monumental or memorial forms, these ephemeral surfaces resist closure: they remain in motion, open to revision and re-inscription. This continuous process of elaboration is precisely what is meant here by an *ethical operation*: a collective capacity to hold open meaning and to keep the field of signification alive.

A. Graffiti as Political Expression in the Chilean Uprising



Figure 5.6 Graffiti in Chilean estallido, reading “I gave my eyes so that the people would wake up.” As illustrated in a 2019 image from *La Izquierda Diario*

During the Chilean social unrest of 2019, the streets became covered in graffiti. What began in Santiago's main square soon spread across walls, buildings, and other prominent landmarks. This collective production unfolded without formal coordination or artistic guidelines—protesters, artists, and passers-by contributed spontaneously, layering new expressions over old ones in a continuous process of inscription. The graffiti multiplied daily, rapidly drawing public attention, particularly due to its unprecedented scale and ubiquity (see <https://www.laciudadcomotexto.cl/> for a virtual walk through the graffiti produced during the unrest).

As outlined in the timeline presented in Chapter 2, the *estallido* was marked by several distinctive features, especially in relation to the state's response. A large number of protesters suffered severe eye injuries as a result of police shootings—a violent irony given that one of the uprising's central slogans was “Chile despertó” (“Chile woke up,” or “Chile opened its eyes”). The recurring image of the open eye came to symbolise the act of awakening to systemic injustice, while the state's violence literalised an attempt to suppress this visibility. The outrage generated by these injuries galvanised broader public support, and protests continued for months, even through the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was during this period that graffiti proliferated with renewed intensity, expanding into new public and private spaces. As the graffiti artist Caiozama reflected:

(...) There is also the phenomenon of the neoliberal city, architecturally speaking. Chile is a neoliberal country even in its architecture. So many people, especially from more affluent neighbourhoods, never came into contact with this kind of expression. So the fact that they suddenly began encountering it and that it reached their territories—I think that was wonderful. I believe that's when many people became aware of certain things." (Palimpsesto interview, 2022)

The unrest thus produced not only an extended temporality but also an extended spatiality—beyond the designated protest zones of plazas and public squares. The graffiti reached diverse audiences and, during this period, came to function as a collective *living archive* that chronicled the evolving experience of revolt.

The following sections takes this graffiti as its primary corpus to explore the ethical dimension of demand. As stated in this chapter, following Lacan, in this framework the ethical does not refer to moral evaluation but to the capacity to sustain the gap—the refusal to foreclose meaning or to resolve the tension that animates discourse. Returning to the analyst discourse, the analysis argues that graffiti enacts a collective ask–reply dynamic which, through its disruptive, polysemic, and open-ended form, sustains the gap within discourse rather than closing it. This capacity to defer closure allows for alternative elaborations and narratives to emerge.

The discussion begins by revisiting the process of *hystericisation* examined in Section I, highlighting how the possibility of new elaborations depends on sustaining the gap—that is, resisting the compulsion to fix meaning prematurely. This process can be contrasted with Lacan’s later theorisation of the capitalist discourse, which seeks to foreclose this gap through acceleration and satisfaction. The productive dimension of sustaining the gap becomes visible in new forms of protest, particularly in practices such as the refusal or impossibility of articulating a single, unified demand. In the ongoing production of graffiti, one can observe a collective gesture that maintains openness, rejecting both the search for a guiding Other and the lure of immediate closure. Instead, this shared practice enables a space of collective elaboration.

During the Chilean uprising, graffiti underwent a remarkable transformation in both form and function. Many artists stopped signing their work, dissolving individual authorship

in favour of collective expression. Large-scale collaborative murals replaced the competitive ethos that had long characterised Santiago’s graffiti scene, and performative interventions increasingly merged with painted surfaces, blurring the boundary between visual and embodied protest. Feminist collectives such as *Las Tesis* brought this performative dimension to the forefront, intertwining slogans, song, and street art into acts of collective enunciation. These shifts mark a significant reconfiguration of graffiti’s social role—from a practice of personal assertion to one of shared elaboration—resonating with the ethical orientation developed throughout this thesis, where expression functions not as mastery or representation, but as a sustained, collective act of inscription.

The analysis in the following sections turns to selected images from *Palimpsesto* and *Ciudad como texto* (“City as Text”), two projects that documented the graffiti produced during the *estallido*. By mobilising the conceptual framework of the analyst discourse, the section offers a reading that places the *objet petit a* at the centre—as a productive force within discourse—showing how graffiti operates as a space of ongoing elaboration and as a site for the emergence of open-ended political narratives.

i. Sustaining the Gap

What is at stake in sustaining the gap? This question becomes especially pressing in the context of what has been described as a moment of ‘polycrisis’ (Tooze, 2022), whereby multiple systemic breakdowns converge. In a world marked by environmental collapse, ongoing genocides, a deepening cost-of-living crisis and a migration crisis, these overlapping emergencies not only intensify one another but also compress the collective capacity to pause, reflect, or imagine otherwise. Faced with such compounded urgencies, it might seem counterintuitive, or even irresponsible, to suggest that it is necessary to sustain the gap. And yet, it is precisely under these conditions that this becomes a critical act.

Many scholars have pointed to the ways in which contemporary capitalism infiltrates even (or especially) the most intimate aspects of life. Affect and contradiction are no longer perceived as sites of mobilisation or disruption, but rather as commodities for circulation and consumption. When something interrupts the smooth flow of daily experience, there are countless alternatives available to quickly override the discomfort. Everyday examples abound: scrolling through social media and finding the horror of Palestinian children being bombed by Israel, followed immediately by a pop star's eleven-minute trip to space launched from an already burning planet. Rage and despair can be instantly and awkwardly substituted by the comfort of a decadent dessert video. This capacity to metabolise contradiction seemingly seamlessly, without rupture, has been theorised through notions such as "hypernormalisation" (Yurchak, 2006): a condition in which catastrophe is witnessed yet incorporated into the ordinary, allowing life and our experience to continue as if nothing has fundamentally changed. It is possible to see all manner of disturbing images, feeling all manner of mixed emotions, and still carry on with the school run. There is, in other words, no gap.

It is precisely in this context that Lacan's later theorisation of the capitalist discourse becomes relevant—not as a continuation of the four discourses, but as a rupture or mutation that signals something qualitatively different. Introduced after the formalisation of the four discourses, the capitalist discourse does not simply add another structure to the series; rather, it reflects a shift in how subjectivity is shaped in the contemporary era. As examined in Chapter 2, Lacan argues that this discourse operates by short-circuiting the very space of lack by promising immediate satisfaction. The capitalist discourse bypasses the structural division of the subject in favour of instant gratification. In this way, it avoids the awkwardness of encountering the Other's desire, turning instead toward self-satisfaction.

Rather than opening a new dimension of demand, the capitalist discourse eliminates the space for demand altogether. In its place, it offers quick fixes through objects. There is no

Other. This is a discourse without a real social bond; it functions through consumption. In terms of the axis of ask–reply, the ‘ask’ never truly materialises as such, as it is quickly self-replied by an object meant to fill the gap. This is why Lacan calls it a mutation of the discursive structure: rather than seeking *someone*, the subject seeks *something*—an experience, an affect—to continue business as usual unabated.

This explains the need to introduce the capitalist discourse at this stage of the chapter. If the analyst discourse offers a framework for sustaining the gap—holding open the space of indeterminacy to allow something new to emerge—the capitalist discourse enacts the opposite. It denies the gap. It operates by turning to products, objects, and experiences that bypass the encounter with the Other altogether. It is not a conversation but a self-managed loop. Although it shares with the Master–Hysteric cycle a search for closure, it differs fundamentally in that the capitalist discourse never truly opens a space for the Other to enter. There is no mediation or regulation; the subject simply scrolls, swipes, and consumes.

As previously noted, many critics of contemporary protests have approached the issue from a similar perspective, arguing that such movements lack clear demands because they bypass the possibility of constructing something stable and durable enough to enable social change. Žižek (2012), for example, famously remarked that “carnival comes easy” in reference to Occupy Wall Street, suggesting that festive resistance must eventually give way to the “hard work” of organisation. Yet, it is crucial to ask whether these protests truly fail to open a gap. After the initial outburst and the state’s response, does a gap remain when demonstrators return to the squares in waves? The present analysis argues that indeed it does. These protests constitute a site of disruption fundamentally distinct from the passive consumption of images on a screen. They differ from the act of laughing—or despairing—at the spectacle of yet another dangerous far-right politician while making morning coffee. Even the carnival, so often

dismissed as ephemeral, brings forth something rare in the current landscape: an interruption that resists absorption.

From this perspective, the analyst discourse provides a framework to understand sustaining the gap not merely as an ethical gesture but as a radical interruption of a discourse that “works too well”—and thus leaves no room for the emergence of the new. The analyst discourse, and particularly the process of hystericisation outlined in Section I, offers a way to conceptualise how disruption can be held open and sustained rather than resolved. This stands in contrast to the Master–Hysteric dialectic, where the hysteric introduces questioning but ultimately seeks an answer from the Other—a reply that sutures the gap and restores normative order. This cycle parallels the classical logic of demand articulation, in which an initial lack is expressed only to be filled by the emergence of a new Master signifier or leader. *Hystericisation*, by contrast, gestures toward political and subjective processes that delay or resist closure. Echoes of this logic can be found in contemporary protest formations that resist clear leadership or definitive demands. Such movements do not simply call for institutional reform but attempt, consciously or not, to actively inhabit the space of the gap. They engage in collective elaboration without predetermined resolution. As discussed in Chapter 2, Occupy exemplified this dynamic through its refusal of singular leadership and explicit demands, enacting practices that sustained disruption. It is precisely within this political lineage that the Chilean graffiti of the 2019 uprising can be situated.

The graffiti produced during the uprising illustrates many of the claims presented here concerning the disruption and sustaining of the gap. First, graffiti operated as an open site of disruption. As argued by Claudio Alvarado, a historian and active participant in Chilean graffiti culture:

Most people still get information from TV. These walls aren't an exhibition—you don't go to see them; they're there. So whether you're far-right or far-left, you'll encounter something in the street. Whether you like it or not.
(Palimpsesto interview, 2019)

As previously mentioned, and as graffiti theory has long maintained (Ferrell, 1996), walls impose themselves on those who do not necessarily seek them out, creating a space of radical encounter. Graffiti is not only a site for those who choose to participate, but a practice whereby a conscious interruption of public space generates encounters among people who might not otherwise meet. Given the proliferation of informational echo chambers (as explored in Chapter 4), this quality is particularly significant. Carmen Berenguer, a Chilean poet and active participant in the graffiti movement during the uprising, notes:

It was fundamental as testimony of what happened there... It was important because three to four million people passed through those places, the huge marches, and others. It was enormous. (...) In situ, I'd say. I hope it becomes a site of memory—the memory of the uprising. The walls should be tagged again, but remain there. (Palimpsesto interview, 2019)

As Berenguer observes, the graffiti functioned as a collective and enduring form of popular testimony—a living record that made it impossible to ignore what was unfolding.

A compelling interplay unfolds between those who add layers to graffiti and those who read it. From the perspective of the analyst discourse, this can be seen as a turn toward the Other that does not seek closure but instead invites collective elaboration. The walls become

open spaces where meaning is continuously negotiated among contributors and viewers, as well as in terms of competing claims for space and memory. As Alvarado further describes:

“As a spectator, one threads it together through their own experience. This possibility is valuable: reclaiming the pedestrian as a reader of this message. The exquisite corpse metaphor links various authors, often distant from one another. Visually, it resembles a mosaic or collage that breaks down into many parts, hands, and languages. Some interventions combine many techniques: historical loops, holography, hand-drawn graphics, photography—even on a small surface. These micro-interventions, made at the scale of a desk, end up on the street and become part of this larger constellation. I find that idea compelling. This possibility—especially of close reading, pausing to see deeply—is important. There’s so much to see. And this is backed by the more distant visual impact, the quick glance, which is striking, but it’s also enriched by these second, third, or further readings that emerge from the layering of individual and collective interventions.” (Palimpsesto interview, 2019)

Graffiti, in this sense, remains open not only to meaning but also to context. What was once central may lose relevance, and this transience is mirrored in its palimpsestic form. One can still trace earlier inscriptions even as new layers overwrite the old ones, bearing witness to shifts in political and social realities that shape collective experience. This process sustains the gap through continuous reinterpretation. As Alvarado explains:

“Everything changed depending on what was happening. Some wanted to preserve the graffiti: ‘this needs to be saved!’ But I completely disagree. The

street is a living being—it changes. And so do the slogans. Maybe it said ‘Resign Chadwick’—but that no longer serves us. Now we need another resignation. That’s what the walls are for: responding to what’s happening.”
(Palimpsesto interview, 2019)

Here, the graffiti enact a process of working through—a collective elaboration in which the ask and reply unfold together, again sustaining the gap rather than closing it. The slogans, drawings, and inscriptions, though layered and heterogeneous, compose a non-chaotic narrative animated by insistence rather than resolution. As Bárbara Berenguer reflects:

“This creates an entirely different reading of all those texts. There are so many slogans (...) this sort of Dadaist exquisite corpse with a series of phrases that, regardless of coherence, one reads and watches—there is something expressive beyond the purely linguistic. (...) Poetry is a constant search to condense specific, sometimes brutal situations—wars, for instance. Sometimes poetry touches that sensitivity. Poetry is revolutionary because it disturbs. It disrupts spaces and re-signifies them—but it’s not obligated to ‘represent reality.’ The poet, or the writing itself, is a complete text. You’re a text. I’m a text. We’re all text. And outside the text, there’s nothing—except reality.” (Palimpsesto interview, 2019)

In sum, the graffiti do not act as a chaotic expression but as a public, visible, and disruptive form of address. They turn toward the Other not to disavow their expressive disruptiveness or to demand comprehension, but precisely in order to keep open a sustained process of collective

elaboration. Meaning and its making remain in motion, shared yet unfinalised—a living practice of political narration.

Having examined how graffiti can be conceptualised as a site of extended disruption, the analysis now turns to how these works allow for the emergence of multiple political narratives. As Section I argued, within the analyst discourse, sustaining the gap enables something new to emerge. The Chilean graffiti exemplifies this process: they do not dissolve into chaos but trace unfolding paths of meaning making that keep the process of its elaboration alive.

ii. *Objet petit a and Movement*

A well-known quote from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* reads: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (1971, p.276). This phrase captures the frustration of what could be described, in terms that echo the discussion of the previous section, as a *never-coming* crisis—a condition in which immediate self-managed fixes actively prevent any opening of the gap, making it ever more difficult for anything genuinely new to emerge. The analyst's discourse, by contrast, entails an active suspension that holds the gap open precisely in order to make the space in which something new can, after all, be born.

Building on from the discussion of Chilean graffiti, this section analyses how the open space of elaboration gives rise to different political narratives. Focusing on the figure of the "eyes" as a central *motif* in the Chilean outburst, it explores how this image opens different polysemic paths of collective elaboration, where trauma coexists with hope for the upcoming future.

Scholarship has long emphasised the dual function of graffiti as transgression and communication (Ferrell 1996; Chaffee 1993; Schacter 2014) – a practice that unsettles the boundary between visibility and illegibility, legality and expression. The Chilean case,

however, extends this logic by transforming the wall into a palimpsest—a layered field where each inscription overwrites yet preserves the trace of what came before. In Derridean terms, this surface becomes a site of *différance*, where meaning is endlessly deferred rather than fixed. This palimpsestic quality aligns closely with the analytic orientation pursued here: an ongoing elaboration that keeps the political field open to re-signification.

iii. *The “Eyes” of the Uprising*

The motif of ‘eyes’ emerged as a central category in the graffiti scene during the protests. As shown in the image below, speaking of ‘eyes’ encompassed both the violence of the state—referring to police shootings that blinded protesters—and the awakening of political consciousness encapsulated in the slogan “*Chile despertó*” (“Chile woke up”). The motif thus condenses narratives oscillating between trauma and hope: recalling state terror from the era of dictatorship while imagining alternative futures.



Figure 5.7. Graffiti in Chilean *estallido*, reading “Chile woke up and the State takes its eyes out.” Source: *Palimpsesto* (2022).

This category also drew together unresolved struggles that resurfaced during the *estallido*. In one piece (see image below, figure 5.8), an eye appears with drops of blood, symbolising injury, alongside the phrase “*Ni estudiando ni luchando cuesta un [eye symbol] de la cara*”—a play on the idiom “*cuesta un ojo de la cara*” (“it costs an arm and a leg”). Here, the pun connects bodily injury to the earlier 2011 student protests over the unequal education system, linking

the violence of the present to enduring structures of inequality. The eye operates as a hinge between historical grievance and renewed demand—signifying persistence, not closure.



5.8.

Figure
Graffiti

in Chilean estallido, reading “that studying or fighting shouldn’t cost an eye” Source: *Palimpsesto* (2022).

The layering of graffiti further accentuates this collective elaboration. In the upper left of the image above (figure 5.8), an image of Teresa Marinovic, a right-wing politician known for opposing the protests, appears with her eyes injured. The repeated focus on eyes ties these distinct interventions together: they share a thematic thread yet open multiple interpretations. The motif becomes a discursive node where meanings proliferate rather than resolve.



Figure 5.9. Graffiti in Chilean estallido, reading “eye for an eye. Fat Sandwich” Source: *Palimpsesto* (2022).

Continuing with this polysemy of the eye and how it aids in opening new paths, in the image above (figure 5.9), another graffiti piece reads “*Ojo por ojo*” (“Eye for an eye”), depicting Andrés Chadwick—then Minister of the Interior—rendered in blood, with the added phrase

“*Fat Sandwich*” (a play on his surname). The image adopts the aesthetic of a “wanted” poster, evoking revenge as well as irony. Its humour and exaggeration can be read as symbolic elaborations of negotiating the unrepresentable violence of the state. The graffiti thus externalises aggression and rage in a form of collective sublimation: not as a literal call to action but as a socially mediated fantasy, a way of working through what cannot be enacted.



Figure 5.10. Graffiti in Chilean *estallido*, reading “Eyes that don’t see, suffering heart” Source: *Palimpsesto* (2022).

A different dynamic appears in another piece that also contains the motif of ‘eyes’ as central (figure 5.10), where a rephrased saying reads “*Ojos que no ven, corazón sufriente*” (“Eyes that don’t see, suffering heart”), a reversal of the familiar “*Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente*” (“Eyes that don’t see, heart that doesn’t feel”). This inversion transforms an expression of detachment into a call for awareness and empathy—to see, to feel, and therefore to act.

Here again, layering becomes crucial. Over time, the graffiti has absorbed multiple temporalities. The motif of “revenge of the eyes” reappears, with President Sebastián Piñera depicted eyeless and accompanied by the phrase “*Las balas se van a devolver*” (“The bullets

will come back”). Beside him, a photograph of Camilo Catrillanca—a Mapuche man killed by police—shows his eyes obscured, under the caption “*Catrillanca vive en la lucha del pueblo*” (“Catrillanca lives in the people’s struggle”). Together, these elements compose a network of trauma, memory, and resistance in which the eye becomes a conduit through which injustice is registered and refuses to be forgotten.



Figure 5.11. Graffiti in Chilean *estallido*, reading “not one eye less” Source: *Palimpsesto* (2022).

This particular graffiti gestures toward an imagined future, one in which the feminist movement plays a central role. Not only does the large eye adopt the visual style associated with feminist activism, but in the upper-right corner, a wheat-pasted poster displays multiple eyes rendered in the movement’s colours. The poster reads “Ni un ojo menos” (“Not one eye less”), a compelling reframing of the original feminist slogan. This play on words condenses multiple struggles: the demand for women’s safety and recognition, and the denunciation of state violence that has left many protesters partially blinded during the uprising. In this sense, it echoes the viral performance by the feminist collective Las Tesis, which accused the state with the line: “El violador eres tú” (“You are the rapist”).

This gesture toward an imagined, transformed future brings other elements into view. Next to the central eye, a handwritten phrase reads: “Marcho por mi abuelo que nos ve por la tele” (“I march for my grandfather who watches us on TV”). This statement opens up several layers of interpretation. On the one hand, it highlights a generational divide between the young students who led the early protests (notably by jumping subway turnstiles) and their elders, many of whom watched the events unfold from afar. At the same time, it affirms a sense of continuity: the protesters march not only for themselves but also for those who came before them. Once again, vision is central. The act of “watching” bridges generations, the grandfather sees his descendant on TV, and the graffiti itself becomes part of the spectacle, a living visual artefact of the uprising.

Through such inscriptions, the motif of the eye operates as an *objet petit a*—a point of insistence that both gathers and disperses meaning, sustaining the collective process of elaboration. Trauma and hope coexist, the gaze becomes both wound and witness, and the political field remains open to the emergence of the new.

Conclusion: Excess in Motion, The Analyst’s Discourse and the Collective Work of Elaboration

The analysis developed in this chapter has explored how the analyst’s discourse reframes the question of political demand and its ethical implications. Through the Chilean case, it has illustrated how certain forms of collective expression—particularly graffiti—operate not by articulating determinate demands but by sustaining the space opened by dislocation. From a Lacanian perspective, this gesture corresponds to the ethical operation of the analyst’s discourse: a refusal of premature closure that allows the field of meaning to remain open for further elaboration. Rather than aiming to master or represent what erupts in the moment of

protest, this discourse engages with the insistence of the *objet petit a* as that which propels expression and sustains collective elaboration.

In this sense, the graffiti examined here do not signal a failure to formulate political demands but the emergence of a different modality of address—one that holds open the space of elaboration instead of rushing to resolution. The *a* functions as a point of insistence, a recurring element that binds the field while displacing any fixed meaning. Each reappearance of the eye motif, each layering of text and image, acts as a return to what resists symbolisation, inviting collective elaboration rather than institutional translation. The ethical dimension of demand thus resides not in its capacity to be satisfied or formalised but in its persistence as a site of encounter and creation.

This reading also clarifies how the analyst's discourse differs from the other discursive forms examined in previous chapters. The Master and Hysteric revolve around the cycle of ask and reply: the Hysteric demands an answer through a Master, and the Master sutures the gap through a signifier that organises meaning. The University discourse reproduces this operation under the guise of neutrality, translating dislocation into knowledge or expertise. The analyst's discourse, by contrast, suspends this circuit. It does not offer a reply but sustains the conditions for something new to emerge. In political terms, this corresponds to an ethical stance that acknowledges the productivity of ambiguity, uncertainty, and non-closure.

The relevance of this stance becomes particularly evident when contrasted with the logic of the capitalist discourse. As discussed above, in that configuration the structural gap is no longer sustained but bypassed altogether: desire is short-circuited through commodities, affective experiences, and instantaneous replies. There is no Other to address; satisfaction appears immediately available. When the space of demand is thus foreclosed, the possibility of elaboration disappears. Discontent becomes privatised, channelled through consumption or spectacle, and collective action risks collapsing into circulation or catharsis. Against this

backdrop, the analytic gesture of holding open the gap acquires renewed political urgency—transpiring as a refusal of the capitalist injunction to reply, resolve, and move on.

Politically necessary though it may be, the gesture of sustaining the gap cannot be romanticised. The context of violent uprising, repression, and precarious survival complicates any call for openness. To sustain the gap amid conflict is not to deny the necessity of urgent action but to insist that negation and antagonism are constitutive of the political itself. What is at stake is not a politics of waiting, but the capacity to act *without closing*—to respond while keeping open the space through which meaning and subjectivity can still be reconfigured. In situations of crisis, the temptation to resolve conflict by imposing unity or order is immense, yet such closure risks reproducing the very structures that inflict violence in the first place. The ethical demand here is therefore, in a sense, double: to recognise the urgency of response and, simultaneously, to resist the foreclosure of elaboration. This means holding a space where action and reflection can coexist, where political agency does not eliminate contradiction but works *through* it.

To clarify how these dynamics operate, it is useful to recall the structure of positions within the analyst's discourse. In the analytic setting, the *objet petit a* occupies the place of the agent, addressing the divided subject (\$), the field of knowledge (S_2) functions as the site of elaboration; and the Master signifier (S_1) emerges as the product of the process. Transposed to the political field, these positions can be read not as fixed roles but as functions that circulate within collective practices. The agentic position of the *a* corresponds to those acts or expression—such as graffiti, slogans, or gestures—that provoke dislocation and sustain the space of questioning. The divided subject designates the collective body that responds to these provocations and engages in the labour of articulation. The work of elaboration occurs in the shared field of S_2 : the collective processes of interpretation, discussion, and organisation that take shape once the gap has been opened. What eventually crystallises as S_1 —a slogan, a figure,

a policy, or a unifying narrative—appears as a temporary product of this movement rather than as its origin.

Seen in this way, sustaining the gap involves a dynamic, shifting configuration of listening and speaking distributed among members of the collective body. The analytic stance does not belong to an external observer but is enacted through practices that collectively take up the work of listening to what insists without rushing toward its closure. The one who “listens” is not a subject endowed with expertise but the collective itself when it manages to attend to its own divisions, to remain with the discomfort of dislocation long enough for elaboration to unfold. Conversely, the agentic “provocation” of the *a* can arise from any direction: from artistic expression, embodied action, or affective eruption. These positions are therefore mobile and reversible, circulating through the collective rather than fixed to hierarchical functions.

This schematic also helps to reframe the vertical/horizontal debate. The analyst’s discourse neither abolishes verticality nor celebrates horizontality; it reconfigures their relation. Verticality appears not as command but as the momentary crystallisation of meaning (S_1 as product), while horizontality corresponds to the field of elaboration (S_2), where meaning circulates and is contested. Both dimensions are mutually necessary and constantly held in tension: without the vertical moment, elaboration would lack symbolic inscription; without the horizontal, the vertical would ossify into mastery. The analytic operation lies in maintaining this circulation—allowing the *a* to press and disturb, enabling S_2 to elaborate, and keeping S_1 from becoming too rigid to accommodate what insists.

This movement can be related to the tensions illustrated in Figure 5.1 (also figure 2.2 in chapter 2), where demands oscillate between the poles of heterogeneity and autonomy, expression and disappearance. The diagram helps visualise how inscription, the symbolic function embodied in S_1 , remains necessary even as it emerges only after a process of

elaboration. In this sense, the analytic stance does not reject verticality or representation but, again, redefines them: *S*₁ crystallises as a trace of collective work rather than as its principle of command. The excess represented by the *objet a* remains immanent to this movement, pressing against both disappearance and fixation. Holding the gap open, therefore, is not about staying indefinitely in process but about allowing elaboration to produce symbolic points of consistency without foreclosing what exceeds them.

In this regard, the framework developed here resonates with, yet also departs from, existing theoretical attempts to account for the generativity of loss and openness. Feminist and decolonial politics of mourning (Butler, 2015; Gago, 2020) have highlighted how grief can become a site of collective re-signification; prefigurative politics emphasise the creation of alternative forms of living within the present; and traditions of community organising underline the slow, dialogical construction of shared agency. The analytic stance contributes to these perspectives by foregrounding the structural logic that underpins them: the capacity to sustain a lack that is constitutive rather than provisional, and to treat dislocation not as a problem to be solved but as a condition to be elaborated.

Revisiting the immanence of the *objet petit a* allows this gesture to be situated within the broader horizon of radical democracy. The *a* is not exterior to discourse; it inhabits it as the trace of what resists symbolisation, the internal excess that keeps signification in motion. From this perspective, the democratic field is never closed: it is animated by the continual return of what cannot be represented, by the insistence of those who remain in excess of existing articulations. This immanent tension is what sustains radical democracy as a project of ongoing renegotiation rather than final reconciliation. To think political demand from the standpoint of the *a* is to recognise that democracy itself depends on the maintenance of this openness—on the capacity to remain with division and to elaborate from within it.

At a normative level, then, this discussion does not propose a new organisational model or a fixed alternative to existing forms of politics. Instead, it invites a reorientation of how protest and dislocation are interpreted. To treat these as ethical sites means valuing the processes of elaboration and collective experimentation that unfold within them, even when they resist immediate institutional translation. In this light, the analytic gesture of sustaining the gap acquires its full political significance: it becomes a way of inhabiting conflict without erasing it, of transforming negativity into a politically generative force. The ethical dimension of demand lies not in its fulfilment but in its elaboration; not in the closure of meaning, but in the continued insistence of what presses for it.

This chapter thus completes the trajectory of the thesis by elaborating the ethical dimension of demand. If Chapter 3 examined the dialectical moment through which demands articulate themselves, and Chapter 4 explored the epistemic closures enacted by the University discourse, this final chapter has positioned the analyst discourse as a framework for sustaining openness. Its central contribution lies in showing how the *objet petit a*—when disentangled from the Master signifier—can be reinterpreted as a force of insistence within discourse, an immanent excess that animates rather than obstructs meaning. By reading the Chilean graffiti through this lens, the chapter demonstrates that political expression can operate as collective elaboration rather than representation, thereby reframing the relation between demand, excess, and ethics in post-Laclauian theory. This resonates with Alenka Zupančič's (2000) account of the Real, where excess is not a void or absence that representation fails to capture but the structural surplus that insists within representation itself (see also Žižek, 1999; Copjec, 2002, for related readings of the Real and excess of representation).

The following and final conclusive section will return to this claim in broader terms. It will draw together the threads developed across the thesis to articulate how the analyst's discourse redefines the role of demand in contemporary politics, situating elaboration as both

an ethical and analytic response to the impasses of the capitalist discourse and as the immanent condition of a renewed democratic horizon

CONCLUSION

This thesis began from an observation that appeared particularly striking at the outset of the research: the emergence of mobilisations that broke with established forms of expressing discontent and with the logic of representation built into the conventional repertoire of political protest. These movements remained suspended within registers of visibility, affect, and interruption rather than coalescing into coherent agendas. From the Arab Spring, Occupy, and

the Indignados to the second wave of uprisings a decade later, including the Chilean *estallido social*, such protests resisted the translation of outrage into programmatic claims. Their opacity provoked an equally intense counter-response: an insistent “demand for demands,” widely voiced across media, policy, and scholarship, which called for stabilising what appeared excessive or unintelligible in the protests. In the wake of these mobilisations, political and academic discourse alike seemed pressed by the same relentless question - *what do they want?* There was a pervasive effort to identify a concrete list of demands, a drive to render the outburst of protest into a readable agenda for reform or negotiation. This very pressure, however, exposed an even deeper problem: how could one know what in fact constitutes a demand? How could the opacity of political expression be made legible without reducing it—and should it be reduced at all?

It was at this juncture that the psychoanalytic notion of demand became conceptually decisive for this inquiry. As the preceding discussion demonstrated, Lacanian psychoanalysis treats demand not as a transparent expression of need but as a form of address that always says less, and more, than it intends. To ask, in this sense, is already to bear an excess: something that cannot be contained or fully replied to. The question “*what do they want?*” therefore transpired as both problematic and productive - not merely as a reflection of confusion but as entry point into the very structure that the thesis sought to explore. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this question did not simply inquire into protestors’ motives; rather, the inquiry reenacted the very logic it tried to decode as a structure out of their action. It thereby repeated the structure of demand itself: the compulsion to seek meaning from an Other presumed to know. In this sense, the “demand for demands” became less an obstacle to understanding protest and more a conceptual opening - a scene through which the intersection between politics and psychoanalysis could illuminate how meaning, excess, and reply are bound together in the act of asking and replying.

From this initial provocation, the thesis took shape as an attempt to rethink the political in a way that could account for this structural displacement- the gap between what is asked and what can be replied to. The research question that guided the project therefore asked how the articulation of political demand and the modalities of reply it provokes might be rethought if one foregrounds their ungraspable dimension in order to address the shifting dynamics of contemporary, open-ended forms of protest. This formulation crystallised the central wager of the thesis: that to think of the political is not only to grasp the articulation of demands, but also to attend to the ungraspable dimension that exceeds them, and to the ways in which different discourses attempt to reply to that excess.

Across the literatures of contentious politics, recognition theory, and post-structuralism, the scene of demand—the act of asking and the expectation of reply, reappeared as a recurring hinge of the political. Each of these traditions sought to stabilise this scene in different ways: for contentious politics, demand functioned as the transactional medium between claim-makers and institutions; for recognition theory, as the site where subjects negotiated visibility and legitimacy; and for post-structuralism, as the trace of dislocation that unsettles any given order. Yet in each case, the instability of this relation, the persistence of what remains unanswered or excessive, indicated that something in the structure of demand itself required sustained theoretical attention. Rather than an accessory to grievance or communication, demand came to signal the constitutive tension of the political field. It was precisely this pressure that led Laclau to place demand at the centre of his theoretical edifice, making it the minimal unit from which politics could be thought.

This problem, the persistence of what cannot be articulated, the excess that every demand leaves behind, became the thread that guided the theoretical trajectory of the thesis. From this point onward, the analysis turned to psychoanalysis not in order to supplant Laclau's framework but to expand its reach: to attend to what happens in the interval between the ask

and the reply, where meaning falters and politics nevertheless continues to speak. By reintroducing Lacan's schema of need, demand, and desire, this research examined how the relation to the Other's reply was not an external contingency but a structural condition of the political. In this light, the excess of demand no longer appeared as noise or failure. Instead, demands transpired as the locus from which different discourses attempted to respond—through closure, rationalisation, exposure, or suspension. The subsequent chapters traced these modalities of reply across theory and practice, showing how each negotiated the ungraspable dimension that animates political life.

I. The Contributions and Limits of Laclau's Theory of Demand

This thesis first examined Laclau's theory of political demand as it developed through his sustained engagement with moments of protest and rupture. Across *HSS* (2014/1985) and *OPR* (2005), demand emerged as a crucial lens through which politics could be rethought. In *HSS*, Laclau and Mouffe saw the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s as posing a profound challenge to the Left's established categories of class, revolution, and historical necessity. The proliferation of heterogeneous struggles: feminist, ecological, urban, and student, contested the hegemonic role of the working class in emancipatory politics, along with the assumption that any political identity was vouchsafed for subjects by some preestablished essence rather than brought forth by them in collective struggle. It was at this point that demand entered Laclau's theoretical vocabulary as a problem of heterogeneity, showing how theorisation of the political was still possible when claims could no longer be totalised.

Two decades later, in *OPR*, demand moved to the centre of Laclau's framework, assuming a key function as the minimal unit of analysis. There, he reformulated the question of political construction: how do heterogeneous grievances become articulated into a collective

will, and what renders such articulation possible? For Laclau, every unmet demand contained the potential to transcend its particular content and to enter a chain of equivalence that produced “the people.” With this conceptual shift, he pushed the political even further away from any pre-given subjectivity and placed the locus of politics within the process of articulation itself. In Laclau’s view, what generated the political is not the fullness of a collective identity, but the failure of satisfying demands, the constitutive lack that propelled their aggregation into new unities.

This reformulation marked a decisive advance for the theorisation of demand. Drawing on post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, Laclau conceptualised lack as the constitutive condition of the political: every construction presupposed an absence that it could not fill, and it was this incompleteness that fuelled political investment. And yet, while this insight revealed how politics is driven by what is missing or lacking, it neglected the dimension of excess. The remainder that escapes articulation, the excess produced in the very act of constructing closure, remained conceptually unaccounted for. It was this overlooked, undertheorised excess, and the different ways politics seeks to reply to it, that the thesis set out to explore.

II. Returning to Psychoanalysis: The Missing Level

The return to psychoanalysis marked not a departure from Laclau but a continuation and deepening of the trajectory that his own work had set in motion. Far from overlooking the relevance of psychoanalysis for political theory, Laclau had actively mobilised its resources, particularly in its capacity to conceptualise the constitutive incompleteness of the social. Yet his engagement with Lacan remained partial: it focused primarily on the notion of lack as the foundation of political construction and left aside the correlated dimension of excess, upon which psychoanalysis equally insists. This thesis sought to recover this overlooked dimension,

in terms of which, the political hinges not only on what is lacking in representation, but also on what exceeds and overflows representation.

In Lacanian terms, this excess is captured by the notion of *objet petit a*. Unlike lack, which marks the space opened by the impossibility of closure, *objet a* designates what resists symbolisation: the remainder that persists after every attempt to articulate unity. Within political discourse, this distinction proved crucial. The empty signifier in Laclau's theory had always oscillated between these two poles, as both the signifier of absence that enables articulation and the site where the remainder of meaning condenses. The polysemy of this conceptual figure, as Zicman de Barros (2024) has observed, stems precisely from this tension: the empty signifier sutures the field by naming absence, yet it simultaneously absorbs traces of the excess it seeks to contain. Through this oscillation, it operates as the hinge between lack and excess — between the transcendent void that grounds politics and the immanent remainder that continually unsettles it. The reorientation the thesis enacted from lack to excess was therefore not a rupture with Laclau but a further unfolding of the ambivalence already inscribed in his conceptual apparatus. By attending to this remainder, to what resists suture, the thesis reconceptualised the political in its relation to how it constructs, negotiates, and responds to its own excess.

Several recent contributions have also returned to Lacan with the aim of engaging the question of excess in Laclau's theory, whether through affect (Eklundh, 2019), enjoyment (Stavrakakis 1998), desire (Zicman de Barros, 2020), or the hystericisation of politics (Ronderos, 2020). These readings shared a concern with what exceeds articulation, yet few have examined how the structure of reply itself organises this relation. Building upon this discussion, the thesis took a further step. Rather than asking how demand articulates, it investigated how politics replies to the excess brought forth by demand. The analytical shift was from content to structure — from what is said to how it is addressed. This reframing opened

the way for a new reading of Lacan's four discourses – not as models of communication but as modalities of reply to the unassimilable remainder that every political demand entails. Each discourse — Master, University, Hysteric, and Analyst — was treated as a distinct mode of managing or sustaining this excess, offering a grammar of political response.

III. From Elements to Discourse: Demand as Scene

In the thesis, the move from *elements* to *discourse* marked a decisive step in rethinking demand as a scene of address rather than as a fixed category. Drawing on Lacan's formalism, the analysis treated the four elements— S_1 (master signifier), S_2 (knowledge), $\$$ (the divided subject), and a (objet petit a), not as stable entities but as functions whose specific significance is not decided in advance but depends in every case on their position within a discursive configuration. Once placed in relation to one another, these elements ceased to signify as isolated terms and began to operate as dynamic forces within a structure of address and reply. What emerged from this shift was a conception of discourse as an arrangement of positions that stages the encounter between subject and Other, rather than a code that merely transmits meaning.

(a) Dynamics rather than isolated elements

The thesis did not dispute that Laclau's theory already acknowledged the interplay of multiple elements in the formation of discourse. However, it shifted the analytical focus from the properties of a single element, such as the master or empty signifier, to the relations and movements that connect them. While Laclau's framework often emphasised the unifying role

of the empty signifier as the point of fixation, the Lacanian perspective developed here foregrounded the dynamic circulation through which meaning and subjectivity emerge.

In this sense, the four discourses, the Master, University, Hysteric, and Analyst, were conceptualised as distinct modalities of reply to demand, each organising the relation between subject and Other in a different way. This reorientation thus moved beyond a conception of discourse as a repository of contents, highlighting instead its structural movement: the shifting logic through which demand is articulated, answered, and displaced.

(b) Position, displacement, and differential effect

A key implication of this approach was that the same element could produce radically different effects depending on its position within the discursive structure. When S_1 occupied the agent's position, as in the Master's discourse, it functioned as command, instituting order and naming totality; when it appeared in the product position, as in the Analyst's discourse, it was revealed as contingent and open to interrogation. Likewise, the divided subject ($\$$), when situated as agent, embodied the hysteric's challenge to authority (by seeking one); when positioned as truth, it became the hidden division sustaining that authority.

Through these positional displacements, the thesis demonstrated that political signifiers such as *freedom* or *dignity* cannot be read in isolation from the discursive arrangements that animate and sustain them. Their effects are not determined only by semantic content but by relational positioning—by how they circulate, where they are located, and what kind of reply they elicit.

(c) S_1 and a : the dual economy of discourse

Within this dynamic field, the relation between the master signifier (S_1) and the *objet a* emerged as particularly significant. Both are embedded in the same discursive structure yet act in

opposite directions: S_1 seeks to stabilise meaning, while a introduces disruption and excess. Every attempt at fixation through S_1 produces its own remainder $-a-$ which cannot be fully symbolised yet continues to structure desire and political investment. The two are therefore not external to one another but structural correlates: each act of naming generates a residue that escapes it, and every return of that residue compels new acts of naming.

By shifting from elements to discourse, the thesis recast demand as a scene rather than a unit. In this scene, the positions of subject, the Other, what drives discourse and, its effects, are distributed within a dynamic structure that both enables and unsettles the act of asking and replying. Each discourse, as a distinct modality of reply, reconfigures these relations differently, producing distinct ways of managing or sustaining the ungraspable. Through this move, the thesis redefined the political not as the articulation of stable signifiers but as the structuring of a gap—the recurring interval between what is asked and what can be answered.

IV. Political and Analytical Implications: Reading the Replies to Excess

The thesis elaborated these modalities of reply to excess by illustrating them through the *open forms of protest* that have emerged over the past decade, focusing particularly on the Chilean cycle of mobilisation. The Chilean case served not as empirical proof of the theory but as a conceptual illustration, a terrain where the theoretical structure of demand and reply could be read in motion. Through the lens of Lacan's four discourses, the analysis traced how different configurations of address and response, manifested in street protest, institutional processes, and cultural expressions, revealed distinct ways of managing, translating, or sustaining the ungraspable remainder that animates political life.

Building on Lacan's theory of the four discourses, the thesis developed its conceptual framework retroductively, constructing theory in tandem with the illumination of the case.

Rather than applying a *pre-established theoretical model to an externally positioned object of theorisation*, it refined the framework through successive encounters between the theoretical structure and the dynamics observed in the Chilean mobilisation. Through this process, the analysis identified three main dimensions of reply—dialectical, epistemic, and ethical—each corresponding to a particular discursive configuration and to a specific relation between the master signifier (S_1) and the *objet petit a*.

(a) The Dialectical Dimension: Master and Hysteric Replies

The thesis aligned Laclau's construction of *the people* with what it conceptualised as the dialectical dimension of reply, a movement structured by the interplay of the Master and Hysteric discourses. In this reading, Laclau's formulation of demand already performs a reply: the conversion of heterogeneous grievances into a collective subject operates as a *suturing gesture*, equivalent to the function of the S_1 , the master signifier that quilts a dislocated field. While Laclau recognised the impossibility of full closure, his logic of articulation still presupposes this operation of nomination through which heterogeneity is momentarily unified.

From a Lacanian perspective, this suturing corresponds to a Master reply: S_1 occupies the place of agent, addressing S_2 (the chain of meaning) and producing a remainder (*a*) that cannot be assimilated. Expressive demands, those affective, non-programmatic eruptions that emerge in moments of dislocation, mark the appearance of this remainder. They do not yet seek institutional satisfaction; rather they signal that the field of meaning has been destabilised. The Hysteric discourse, by contrast, transforms this expressive excess into a structured address: the divided subject (\$) confronts S_1 and calls for its re-articulation, seeking a new stabilisation. In this sense, the Hysteric discourse presupposes the existence of a Master, it demands an answer to the unanswerable, and thus operates in a dialectical relationship with it.

The Chilean case illustrated this dynamic with particular clarity. The initial outburst of protest in 2019 was marked by acts such as mass fare evasions and the rapid appearance of improvised wall inscriptions and slogans, signalling a collective questioning of the social order without a clearly articulated aim. The subsequent translation of this moment into a constitutional process represented the Master's reply—an attempt to name, institutionalise, and suture dislocation. The tension between these two moments, between expression and nomination, between dislocation and re-articulation—made visible the dialectical logic that structures political life.

Within this movement, the thesis decoupled Laclau's psychoanalytic borrowings to restore their formal distinction. The Master signifier (S_1) was treated not as a fixed leader or symbol but as a function of stabilisation, a momentary quilting of meaning that can be performed by different actors or signifiers. In this sense, identity was not understood as a pre-given attribute or a coherent position, but as the temporary effect of this stabilising function: a contingent point of identification that holds together what is otherwise dislocated. The *objet petit a*, in turn, marked the excess of symbolisation—the unassimilable remainder that drives new cycles of demand and reply. By distinguishing these terms, the thesis clarified how the dialectical relation between S_1 and *a* underpins both the persistence of political mobilisation and the recurrent failure of closure that keeps the political field open.

(b) The Epistemic Dimension: Knowledge as Reply

In developing the epistemic dimension of demand, the thesis examined how the relation of knowledge and truth in psychoanalysis provides a crucial lens for understanding contemporary modes of political reply. Within Lacan's schema, knowledge (S_2) occupies a structural position distinct from truth: it is not access to truth, but the discursive attempt to organise what cannot be fully known as truth. The gap between S_2 and truth is therefore constitutive, not accidental.

Every discourse stages this impossibility differently; in the University discourse, knowledge takes the place of agency, producing replies to excess by translating it into explanation, data, or expertise.

This formal configuration proved central to the thesis's argument. When knowledge or data assumes the agentic position, the discursive dynamic shifts: instead of naming or commanding (as in the Master's discourse), the operation of reply proceeds through *translation* and *rationalisation*. The *objet petit a*, which resists symbolisation, is here addressed by procedures of classification, measurement, and documentation. The aim is not to suture through authority but to *render legible* what exceeds comprehension. Yet the effect is structurally similar: the ungraspable is neither eliminated nor mastered—it proliferates. Each new explanation generates further data, additional commentary, and renewed incompleteness.

The thesis identified this as the epistemic form of reply to excess: the conversion of the unrepresentable into information, categories, and evidence. In the Chilean constitutional process, this logic became visible as the initial dislocation of protest became institutionalised through the promise of a new text. The Agreement for Peace operated in a Master key, nominating a pathway and giving a name to collective hope. Yet once the constituent assembly began its work, agency shifted toward the discursive logic of the University: the expansion of rights, the multiplication of categories, and the continuous generation of textual clauses exemplified the attempt to reply to excess through knowledge. Each inclusion promised recognition, but invariably with each addition the field grew more saturated and the sense of fullness more elusive. In this way, S_2 as agent produced a new kind of remainder—an *objet a* in the form of informational excess, which manifested as doubt, confusion, and the feeling of being overwhelmed by the very processes meant to deliver clarity.

The analysis extended this insight to the digital infrastructures that mediate contemporary politics. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook amplify the

epistemic dynamic: every claim generates commentary, every correction becomes new content, and the feed thickens through algorithmic circulation. Knowledge replies to excess by producing more of it. In psychoanalytic terms, the *objet petit a*, the kernel of non-knowledge that drives repetition, becomes the engine of engagement itself. The algorithmic logics of visibility and ranking function as an automated University discourse: they appear neutral, procedural, and inclusive, yet they silently re-inscribe hierarchies of attention and value. The result is a political field in which subjects are both over-informed and under-oriented, trapped between a surplus of data and a deficit of meaning.

The Chilean *estallido* offered a particularly illuminating instance of this epistemic overdrive. It showed what happens when knowledge itself attempts to tackle the ungraspable—when the discursive logic of the University takes hold as the dominant mode of reply. The same infrastructures that enabled the eruption of expressive and affective communication also intensified the drive to translate that excess into explanation, data, and expertise. Within the constitutional process that followed, this dynamic became strikingly visible. The initial dislocation of the uprising, an event without a single subject or articulated demand, was gradually absorbed into a proliferating field of rights, recognitions, and categories. Each new formulation sought to capture the subject of the *estallido*, to render legible what had appeared as an opaque collective force. Yet in this attempt to grasp the ungraspable, knowledge confronted its own limit: the excess that it tried to contain returned in the form of endless enumeration and multiplication. The constitutional text expanded almost without measure, producing the paradox of a politics saturated with claims yet haunted by the feeling that something essential remained missing.

This proliferation of knowledge generated not clarity but confusion - a sense of disorientation that mirrored the structural impossibility of closure. Ironically, the very attempt to codify every difference, to guarantee visibility and inclusion, ended up reinvoking the

question of mastery. The call for coherence, for someone or something to stabilise meaning, began to circulate again, often through the figure of the “woke” critique. The insistence on showing that rights, data, or expertise were “not neutral” became a new supplement to knowledge, a return of the Master within the logic of the University discourse. The Chilean case thus illuminated the circular structure of epistemic reply: the excess that knowledge seeks to master invariably reappears as the drive to know more, producing new confusion, new identities, and potentially renewed calls for mastery.

Through this analysis, the thesis demonstrated how the epistemic dimension of demand laid bare the limits of knowledge as a political reply. When S_2 occupies the place of agency, *objet a* becomes both the engine and the symptom of discourse: the ungraspable that drives the production of meaning and simultaneously guarantees its failure. This double movement contributes to the understanding of contemporary politics as this oscillates between hyper-visibility and opacity, proliferation and distrust. By situating these dynamics within the framework of Lacan’s University discourse, the thesis clarified how datafication and algorithmic mediation transform the field of political demand, producing new subjects of doubt and exhaustion. The epistemic reply thus neither resolves nor dismisses excess—it multiplies it, setting the stage for the ethical problem of how to sustain what cannot be known without collapsing it into explanation.

(c) The Ethical Dimension: Sustaining the Gap

The thesis developed the ethical dimension of demand by separating, at the ontological level, the Master signifier (S_1) and the *objet petit a*, and by evaluating the implications of this deconflation for political and ethical thought. While previous chapters showed that Laclau’s construction of the political tended to conflate these two functions, treating the signifier that names unity and the surplus that fuels investment as if they coincided, the analytic framework

clarified that they operate in opposite directions. The S_1 aims at fixation and intelligibility, while the *objet a* insists as what escapes symbolisation. Once deconflated, their relation ceases to appear as a tension to be resolved and transpires instead as a productive dynamic: the movement through which discourse simultaneously strives for closure and remains animated by what exceeds it.

Recasting the ontological rupture of the social as a *gap* rather than a *lack* shifts emphasis from a purely negative ground to the interplay of absence and excess—between what is missing and what overflows. Demands take form within this oscillation: they register both non-satisfaction and the proliferation of new significations and attachments. Naming this constitutive openness as *gap* foregrounds a generative topology in which lack and excess are co-implicated, each sustaining the other.

This reconfiguration opened the way for an understanding of the generative dimension of the *objet petit a*. Far from being merely an index of failure or loss, the *a* names the insistence that keeps discourse and politics in motion. Its productivity lies in sustaining elaboration—what psychoanalysis calls *working-through*—rather than in providing definitive articulation. Politically, this reframing allowed the thesis to approach open protest and collective expression not as political failure but as sites of ongoing elaboration where the excess of demand is given form without being exhausted.

From this perspective, the Master signifier can be re-read not as the origin of discourse but as its culmination—a momentary crystallisation emerging from the labour of elaboration. Rather than being a prior condition of unity, the S_1 appears as the trace left by collective processes of meaning-making. This shift aligns the analytic framework with theories that privilege process over fixation - for example, prefigurative and community-based approaches that foreground continuous creation and relationality over programmatic closure. It also resonates with decolonial and affective politics that treat openness, care, and shared

vulnerability as constitutive rather than provisional. In this ethical dimension, the value of S_1 lies not in its power to command but in its fragility as a temporary inscription that is built from within, and its condensation of a collective act of listening and elaboration.

The contrast with what Lacan terms the capitalist discourse clarified the stakes of this position. In the capitalist configuration, the structural gap is not sustained but bypassed altogether: desire is short-circuited through commodities, affective experiences, and instantaneous replies. There is no Other to address; satisfaction appears immediately available. The capitalist logic thus erases the ethical moment of hesitation—the space where response could become responsibility. Against this background, sustaining the gap emerges as a counter-ethic: an insistence on remaining answerable to what cannot be immediately resolved or consumed.

The Chilean case, and particularly the graffiti that proliferated during and after the 2019 uprising, illustrated this ethical configuration. The graffiti did not function as demands for specific reforms but as gestures that held open the space of dislocation. The recurring eye motifs that responded to state violence and imaginary futures operated not by closing meaning but by returning insistently to what resists symbolisation. Each inscription enacted a reappearance of the *objet a*—an element that binds and unsettles the field simultaneously. In this sense, graffiti functioned as a collective analytic device or practice: it sustained the gap between expression and institution, between what is felt and what can be formulated, allowing elaboration to occur at the level of affect, imagination, and shared visibility.

The inclusion of this ethical dimension was therefore not a moral addendum but a conceptual necessity. Having shown that dialectical and epistemic replies either stabilise or multiply excess, the thesis argued that an ethical reply must sustain it. The analyst's discourse provided the formal model for this position: here, the *objet a* occupies the place of agency, addressing the divided subject and enabling the work of elaboration rather than seeking closure.

The ethical stance read out of the Chilean case recognises that political life depends on the continual re-encounter with what exceeds representation, and that the vitality of democracy lies in the capacity to keep that encounter open.

In this way, the ethical dimension of demand completed the argument of the thesis. It showed that to think politics psychoanalytically is to treat lack and excess not as deficits to be overcome or mitigated but as the very conditions of collective creation. By disentangling S_1 and a , and by situating their interplay within the analyst's discourse, the thesis proposed an alternative to both the satisfactions of mastery and the compulsions of knowledge: a politics oriented toward elaboration, listening, and the maintenance of openness—the ethics of sustaining the gap.

Taken together, these three dimensions of reply, dialectical, epistemic, and ethical, outlined a framework for reading contemporary politics through the logic of excess. Analytically, this framework provides a method for tracing how political signifiers and forms of address travel between discursive positions, generating distinct effects depending on whether the reply seeks to close, translate, or sustain what exceeds representation. It thereby extends discourse theory's capacity to account for the affective, temporal, and iterative dynamics that animate contemporary protest and political communication.

This reading also clarifies the role of S_1 within discourse theory. Rather than being fused with the empty signifier and serving merely to unify political projects, S_1 marks the point where identity is temporarily stabilised within the circuit of address and reply. Seen through the four discourses, this stabilising function gives rise to different identity processes—formation, explanation, questioning, and transformation. These processes are not sequential but coexistent modes through which the political subject engages with dislocation, revealing that identity is itself sustained through the continual negotiation of stability and change.

Politically, this approach redefines what counts as a meaningful response to dislocation. Rather than measuring politics by the success of articulation or institutionalisation, it foregrounds the capacity to inhabit divisions in the political field and to elaborate collectively from within it. This reframing matters at a conjuncture where the pressures to name, explain, and decide increasingly short-circuit the very spaces in which new political imaginaries might develop. By distinguishing the satisfactions of mastery, the compulsions of knowledge, and the ethics of sustaining the gap, the thesis offered a vocabulary for recognising how different replies to excess shape the possibilities and limits of democratic renewal.

V. Limits and Openings

The thesis has advanced a conceptual framework for analysing contemporary politics through a perspective that foregrounds the ungraspable dimension of demand and the various ways in which politics replies to it. Its contributions lie not in offering a new totalising theory of discourse but in reopening existing frameworks, particularly that of Laclau, toward the moments where meaning falters, proliferates, or suspends itself. In this sense, the project has sought to think from the point of excess: from the perspective of what resists both articulation and closure, yet continues to animate political life.

Contributions

(1) Reframing demand through excess

By situating demand at the intersection of Laclau's theory of articulation and Lacan's theory of demand, the thesis has demonstrated the analytical relevance of focusing on the *excess* that every demand produces. This approach is especially pertinent to understanding the new, open forms of protest that have marked the past decade - mobilisations that operate through affect,

interruption, and visibility rather than through programmatic claims. Reading these movements through the prism of excess allows political analysis to move beyond the question of “what they want” toward a consideration of *how they signify, how they reply, and how they sustain* collective meaning without resolving it into totality

(2) From demand to reply

A second contribution lies in the shift of focus from *demand itself* to the *modalities of reply* it provokes. This conceptual move expands the analytical horizon of discourse theory, transforming it from a theory of articulation into a framework for reading the dynamic scene of address. By treating discourses as modalities of reply to excess, the thesis provides tools for interpreting both the repetition of political forms (such as the populist suture) and the emergence of new ones (such as open, expressive, or affective protests). It also offers a vocabulary for approaching contemporary politics within datafication, opacity and misunderstanding.

(3) The deconflation of S_1 and objet petit a.

The clear separation of the Master signifier (S_1) and the objet petit a within political analysis is an important theoretical advance of the thesis. Whereas Laclau’s use of psychoanalysis tended to collapse these functions, the thesis re-established their formal distinction and traced its consequences across the four discourses. This deconflation revealed that what acts as a Master or leader is not a fixed figure but a function of temporary stabilisation, capable of being occupied by multiple actors or signifiers. Conversely, the *objet a*, far from being a residual failure, occupies a productive position: it designates the site from which elaboration, creativity, and re-signification emerge. This distinction illuminated how the hysteric discourse looks for a Master to fix meaning, how the epistemic register of data and information generates excess while claiming neutrality, and how the ethical stance of the analyst sustains the conditions for

new forms of collective elaboration. Politically, this enables the recognition of organisational and prefigurative practices that prioritise ongoing construction and reflexivity over closure and command.

(4) Rethinking the Chilean case

The Chilean cycle of mobilisation served as an illustrative terrain for these theoretical operations. The analysis did not aim to produce an exhaustive empirical account but to use this case as a scene through which the formal logic of demand and reply could be observed in motion. This approach made it possible to read expressive acts, institutional processes, and cultural inscriptions (such as graffiti) within a single analytical continuum, highlighting their shared engagement with excess. In this sense, the Chilean *estallido social* provided more than a national example: it offered a privileged site from which to think about the broader sequence of open protests that has characterised the past decade. As part of what might be considered a *second wave* of uprisings—following the Arab Spring, Occupy, and the Indignados—the Chilean case revealed both continuities and transformations in the politics of dislocation and demand. Its combination of affective eruption, symbolic invention, and institutional translation illustrated the challenges faced by movements that no longer seek immediate representation but nevertheless elicit new forms of reply. At the same time, this strategy necessarily entailed a certain loss of empirical depth—the price of privileging conceptual illustration over contextual reconstruction.

Limitations

The first limitation arises from this selective use of the case. While the Chilean uprising provided a fertile terrain for tracing the circulation of discursive forms, the analysis inevitably left aside the historical, cultural, and organisational specificities that would be required for a

full empirical study. Future research might build on this framework to explore how different contexts produce distinct inflections of the same structural logic.

A second limitation concerns the scope of the discursive framework itself. By focusing on the four Lacanian discourses, the thesis has sought to move beyond the single model offered by Laclau's theory of hegemony, yet it does not claim that these are the only or final modalities of reply. Rather, the four discourses have been deployed here as a conceptual *dispositif*—a formal apparatus that made visible the deconflation of S_1 and a , and the productive dimension of excess. The framework thus opens rather than closes inquiry: it suggests a way of mapping the field of political address without prescribing its limits.

A further limitation concerns the treatment of Laclau's corpus. The analysis engages most extensively with OPR with only brief returns to HSS. A fuller reconstruction of the transition between these works—especially regarding the shifting place of what constitute a symbolic closure and an excessive opening—remains to be developed.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limits of this project and the choices that have shaped its scope. The ambition to bring together two dense and conceptually demanding traditions, Laclauian discourse theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, required that much of the analytical effort be devoted to unpacking their internal logics and constructing a framework capable of holding them in productive tension. Within this horizon, the Chilean uprising was approached not as an empirical object of verification but as an illustrative site through which theoretical questions could be made legible. While this strategy allowed the thesis to remain faithful to its post-foundational ontology, it inevitably constrained the extent to which the historical, organisational, and interpretive dimensions of the case could be explored in depth. Future work would take this as its first point of departure: to elaborate the retroductive movement between theory and illustration more fully, exploring how the proposed framework

might guide situated readings of political practices and subjectivities in greater depth and diversity.

Especially in light of the explorations undertaken here, it became evident that to pause and reflect—to sustain the gap of the case itself—was not merely a methodological decision but an ethical one. Remaining with the opacity of the Chilean uprising, rather than seeking to close or exhaust it, became a necessary gesture consistent with the very logic the thesis defends. Yet this also leaves a productive sense of indebtedness: a recognition that the case still holds unexamined resonances and openings that call for further elaboration. In that sense, sustaining the gap has been both the analytical condition and the unfinished task that future research is invited to pursue.

VI. Concluding Gesture: Toward an Excess Discourse Analysis

These limits are also the openings of the project: what this thesis gestures toward may be called “excess discourse analysis”—an approach that treats political discourse as a field animated by the continual negotiation of what cannot be said, known, or closed. In this sense, the contribution of the thesis is not only theoretical but ethical: it proposes a mode of analysis that mirrors the politics it describes, practising sustained listening to what insists and commitment to elaboration rather than merely resolution.

Thinking from the gap also reframes the problem of representation. The gap is neither a transcendent outside nor a fully immanent closure; it is the spacing that enables both articulation and dislocation. Conflict and negativity then appear not as failures but as constitutive features of discourse—the very reason the political remains open. This yields an agonistic horizon in which competing articulations contend over partial fixations, knowing that none can be final.

The argument developed throughout this thesis holds that both construction and its interruption are necessary moments of the political. The analytical framework proposed here does not privilege one over the other, but seeks to make visible their structural relation. What it offers is a way to *read* these moments—to understand their internal logic and to identify where and how politics continues to speak even when it does not “build.” The point, therefore, is not to abandon construction or to idealise the pause, but to recognise that moments of apparent failure, suspension, or excess reveal the very conditions that make construction possible. Attending to what emerges in these pauses, in gestures such as graffiti, collective inscription, or the brief suspension of representation, makes it possible to apprehend the structure of address and remainder that underlies all political action. It is only by acknowledging this dimension that urgent acts of construction, including those required in the face of violence or crisis, can avoid reproducing their own closures blindly, and remain open to the invention that sustains the political as such.

At the conceptual level, the thesis re-specified demand by bringing Laclau’s discourse theory into dialogue with Lacan’s logic of address and lack. Through this re-reading, demand ceased to be a discrete signifier awaiting articulation, transpiring instead as a structural scene of excess—an appeal to the Other that can never be fully answered. Every demand both lacks and exceeds what it asks for; it leaves behind a remainder that sustains desire and animates the political bond. The failure of reply is not incidental but constitutive: it is what allows politics to persist as a field of invention rather than completion.

To grasp how this impossibility is managed, the thesis turned to Lacan’s four discourses, not as universal social types but as *modalities of reply to demand*. Each discourse stages a different way of responding to the structural excess at the heart of the political. The Master’s discourse seeks to close the gap through identification; the University discourse translates it into knowledge and procedure; the Hysteric discourse exposes the inconsistency

by seeking stabilisation; and the Analyst discourse sustains the gap itself, displacing and allowing new forms of address to emerge. The point, however, is not to negate the necessity of any of these replies—closure, knowledge, and articulation are indispensable to political life—but to conceptualise and read them as situated responses within the same structure of demand and excess. In this light, even the pause or suspension of articulation becomes productive: a moment in which something new may emerge precisely because the reply has not yet been secured.

This ethical reframing is what distinguishes the framework proposed here: it does not seek to replace construction with suspension, but to situate every act of construction within its constitutive impossibility. In situations of urgency, moments when the demand for decision, protection, or action cannot be deferred, the act of construction becomes indispensable. A suture is then required: meaning must be momentarily fixed so that collective action can take place. Yet even such necessary closures can remain reflexive of themselves in their own impossible completeness if they acknowledge the structural remainder that every decision leaves behind. To act in this way is not to hesitate but to decide with awareness of incompleteness - a politics that builds while keeping its sutures provisional and remains responsive to what exceeds them.

The movement of the thesis has itself followed a retroductive trajectory. Each chapter has reasoned from the effects of political dislocation, the opacity of demands, the persistence of protest, the multiplication of replies, back to the structural conditions that make these effects intelligible. Rather than applying a fixed theoretical framework, the research has allowed its central concepts to emerge retroactively through an encounter with their own limits. This methodological self-reflexivity mirrors the logic of demand itself: what appears as excess becomes the very source of theoretical construction. In this sense, retroduction functions not

only as a research strategy but as an ethical stance—one that acknowledges that understanding proceeds through the very gaps it seeks to illuminate.

In this sense, the thesis closes where it began: with the question of how to think political demand beyond the horizon of reply. To read politics through the lens of demand is to attend to this movement between the necessity of articulation and the impossibility of its completion. The ethical gesture proposed here is not to resolve that tension but to sustain it—to inhabit the gap between address and response as the space where both desire and politics are generated. Sustaining the gap does not mean remaining still; it means acting from within the awareness of incompleteness, refusing both the comfort of full closure and the paralysis of despair. It is in this interval that new forms of speech, action, and collective invention become possible.

What can be called excess discourse analysis is, ultimately, an attempt to cultivate this stance: to read the political where it falters, to listen where the reply fails, and to find in that failure not the end of politics but its beginning anew.

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