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On the Deconstructive Logic of Populism¹

Introduction

Can there be little doubt that one of the most important political developments in the past decade has been the rise of Left populism? This political formation is, as Chantal Mouffe has recently argued, a type of “radical democratic” politics entailing an immanent critique of liberal-democracy – the attempt to make its institutions live up to their normative promises. Left populism aims at the genuine expression of the will of the “demos”, constituted via an antagonism with the “oligarchy”, yet within the framework of the rule of law and constitutional “checks and balances”. Mouffe argues for a “‘radicalization’ of the ethico-political principles of liberal-democratic regime, ‘liberty and equality for all’” (Mouffe 2018, p. 39). Left populism, along with its authoritarian counter-part, emerges with the shattering of the “post-political neo-liberal consensus” in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-2008. The notion of “consensus” refers to the widespread acceptance virtually across the entire political spectrum, from nominal social democratic to conservative parties, of a neo-liberal market-based agenda of privatization, de-regulation, upward redistribution of wealth and appropriation by dispossession – the four constitutive dimensions of neo-liberalism according to David Harvey’s concise definition (see Harvey 2005). Differences between the parties is generally taken to be over style rather than the actual substance of social and economic policy. This often reflects not just lack of political will per se but institutionalized limits, for example within the EU, on deficit spending.

In contrast to the technocratic consensus, Left populism re-injects antagonism and conflict back into the ossified liberal-democratic insti-

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tutions of the Western world by emphasizing the opposition between the “demos” or the people, on the one hand, and the “oligarchy” or the powerful, on the other. While not all political movements and tendencies would accept the designation, it is possible to identify in Bernie Sanders’ bid for the Democratic Party’s 2016 Presidential Nomination, reiterating the opposition identified by Occupy Wall Street between the 99% and the 1%, in the Corbyn-led British Labour Party, emphasizing a politics “For the many and not the few”, and in Podemos, with its inflection on the opposition between the *gente* (people) and the *caste* (elite), forms of Left populism understood according to Mouffe’s theorization (see Mouffe and Errejón 2016). Indeed, in the latter party as well as in Mélenchon’s *La France Insoumise* (Unbowed France), we see the direct influence of Laclau and Mouffe’s attempts to develop the idea of “populist reason” (see Desmoulières 2016).

While the aforementioned Left populist movements and parties are the source of tremendous hope for a very different kind of politics, another example provides a somewhat more sober lesson in some of the not-inconsiderable structural constraints facing parties such as Syriza when they have formed governments and sought to exercise power (see Žižek 2019). Such practical failings may, in turn, expose certain theoretical shortcomings or blind-spots in Laclau’s “deconstructive” account of populism. Laclau’s account of populism is deconstructive insofar as it posits that it is the very heterogeneous and therefore undecidable nature of the social that constitutes the, as it were, “groundless ground” of hegemonic politics. The theoretical short-comings to which I alluded may be identified as failure to fully grasp the economic logic underlying the populist shattering of the technocratic consensus. By “economic”, I mean both the objective structures of neoliberal capitalism grounded in deregulation, privatization, accumulation by dispossession and a massive up-ward redistribution of wealth, on the one hand, and the production of a form of subjectivity, on the other, understood along “entrepreneurial” lines that entails ever-greater personal responsibility for one’s success (or failure) (see Foucault 2010). This is the process of a remaking of the figure of *homo politicus* into that of *homo economicus* (see Brown 2015). In other words, the consensus has to do with the power of finance, financialization and debt as quasi-objective processes that lie very much at the heart of our neo-liberal present as well as the psychological mechanisms or “personality structures” or what Erich Fromm calls “social character” (Fromm 1994) or the quasi-subjective conditions that are socially reproduced that ensure the maintenance of a given social order. It is necessary to attend to the relation of social character in the context of contemporary neo-liberal society to ascertain both the continuities with and departure from the previous form of capitalism, specifically with respect

to authoritarian tendencies that have in the recent decade or so have risen to the surface. This is what I refer elsewhere to as the “neo-liberal personality” (see Gandesha 2018). The affectively charged nature of the populist challenge to the neoliberal cannot be properly grasped without understanding the nature of the contradictory relations between these objective and subjective dimensions. Laclau’s deconstructive account of populism, I argue, is, unfortunately, not fully up to the task of doing so.

These failings can be attributed to Laclau’s understanding of the social as marked by increasing contingency rather than necessity which begins with the relative autonomy of politics and ideology from the “economic instance” in Althusserian or structuralist Marxism. In such a form of Marxism, as Althusser states, “from the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (Althusser 1977, p. 113). Laclau then advances to an account of the social as characterized by a deconstructive logic of undecidability, “radical heterogeneity” and the “madness of decision”. It would seem that, for Laclau, the logic of the social is one of all or nothing: *either* reductionism and economism *or* radical heterogeneity; the tension within political theory from Machiavelli through Spinoza, Kant, German Idealism, Marx, Gramsci and Arendt, among others, between necessity and freedom, appears to have been annulled. Yet, in the actual practice of politics no question is more important than what of the limits and possibilities of political action.

Neither sophisticated forms of Marxism nor psychoanalysis submit to such an either/or logic. Laclau’s insistence on the radical heterogeneity of the social makes it impossible to recognize the power of historically elaborated structures deeply at odds with the understanding of the social as characterized by an “ontological” openness and contingency. It could be retorted, however, that structures themselves can be understood as contingent. Yet such a rejoinder is ultimately unconvincing insofar as structure is typically understood as embodying necessity not contingency. This does not mean that structure and agency are to be understood as antithetical. We can understand such a logic in both sociology and in psychoanalysis.

In respect to the former, class structure manifests a form of necessity that is reproduced in the specific actions of individuals within the specific context of the family, schools and universities, medical and psychiatric institutions. With the respect to the latter, the compulsion to repeat has to do with a response to the trauma or loss which is reproduced in the life of the analysand and until its specific nature is brought to light through processes of transferential and counter-transferential relations within the course of analytical treatment. Paradoxically, Laclau’s account emerges out of the idea that the political and the ideological instances are relatively autonomous from the economic and culminates in the view that the

political issues in the “institution of the social”. But, what we see in the case of Syriza is precisely the foundering of the “political” on the shoals of the social, that is to say, the overwhelming power of finance capital. The structure of my argument is as follows: (1) I first sketch in broad brush strokes the key moves in the development in Laclau’s theory of populism, before (2) suggesting some criticisms in his account of politics before (3) zeroing in more specifically on his engagement with Marxism and (4) concluding with some reflections on the Greek case.

1.

Laclau’s initial theorization of populism arises out of a structuralist – or Althusserian – reading of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci is best known for his understanding of the Russian Revolution as a “revolution against *Capital*”, and for his critical stance towards the Third International’s inability to address the problem of the “national-popular” forms of political mobilization in unevenly developed social formations such as Italy. Such societies were marked by a profound and enduring “combined but uneven development” leading to the split – one which is still very much reflected in the politics of the current governing coalition partner Lega (formerly Lega Nord) – between an industrialized north and a largely agrarian south (see Gramsci 1978). As an attempt to address both problems, Gramsci seized upon Lenin’s idea that in the context of the particular agrarian conditions of Russia the working class was not the sole agent of political transformation, but rather had to play a leading or “hegemonic” (*egemonico*) role. The October Revolution’s slogan “Peace, land and bread” was not, of course, exclusively proletarian in content. It included the demands of other social classes, namely the peasantry – a class that Marx once argued was objectively reactionary because its members were isolated from one another, working in small groups on lord’s *demesne*, rather than in large numbers in urban industrial factories (see Marx 1979). For both Lenin and Gramsci, the politics of hegemony entailed the transcendence of what Lenin in his pamphlet *What is to be Done?* called “trade union consciousness” (Lenin 1969, p. 17) through organization. As we shall see, the capacity of populism to incorporate heterogeneous demands within the constitution of “the people” will form the core of Laclau’s conception. The logical unfolding of this conception entails a progressive decentering of the working class, to the point where social structure dissolves in a radically contingent play of signification that can only be provisionally and incompletely arrested to yield fixity and stability. For Laclau it becomes the very essence of the hegemonic logic of the political.

For Gramsci, the working class in Italy could play a hegemonic role by virtue of its claim of addressing the condition of unequal development by assuming a leadership role within the nation. That is to say that, while in other countries – paradigmatically France – it was the bourgeoisie that unified the country under the auspices of the nation-state, for Gramsci, in Italy it would be the working class that would assume the mantle of “national-popular” leadership. The Communist Party, specifically, would play the role of what Gramsci called the “Modern Prince” and echo Machiavelli’s call in the closing pages of the *The Prince* (Machiavelli 2003, pp. 82-85) for Lorenzo de Medici to unify Italy. For Gramsci, hegemony represents the “cathartic moment” whereby the working class transcends its narrow “trade union” interests and becomes capable of integrating the interests of other “subaltern” classes into its political project. It is easy to see the attraction of the Italian author of a text entitled *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* (Gramsci 1978, pp. 441-462) for a figure like Laclau who was profoundly attentive to the unique semi-peripheral status of his native Argentina.

Laclau approaches Gramsci through a structural lens, which means that he seeks to interpret him through the idea of *structural* as opposed to *expressive* totality. For the latter, most clearly outlined in the early work of Georg Lukács, totality was understood (at least according to Althusser) as *expressing* a single underlying contradiction within the realm of the economy between the relations and forces of production, that would prioritize the working class as the agent of revolutionary change (see Althusser 1977). From the standpoint of the expressive conception of totality, class determinations that arise out of this contradiction can be located at every level of society as a whole; state and politics, culture and ideology. For example, Lukács famously argued that proletarian consciousness provided an answer to some of the most complex and intractable philosophical problems arising out of German Idealism (see Lukács 1971, pp. 83-222). Writing decisively against Lukács, Althusser developed a notion of structural totality between different instances of the mode of production, each of which was relatively autonomous from the others, although the economic was ultimately the determining aspect or instance, though as noted above, such an instance was ultimately absent. While for the Lukácsian conception of totality secondary contradictions simply reflect principal contradictions, for the structuralist conception of totality, Althusser argues “the secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction, that they really constitute its conditions of existence, just as the principal contradiction constitutes their condition of existence” (Althusser 2006, p. 205). The relation between the different elements of a mode of production, for Althusser, is established via a notion of *articulation* (see Althusser 1977, p. 202).

In the “Theory of Populism” essay included in the volume *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau argues that Lukácsian Marxism seeks to understand politics and ideology – and populism by extension – on the basis of reductionism. Refusing to reduce them to the class positions, Laclau seeks to understand politics and ideology in terms of *articulation*. Laclau conceives of populism as an “antagonistic synthesis”; a synthesis of heterogeneous elements with no necessary class belonging, that plays a role in a given antagonism between the “people” and the “power bloc” or state. In other words, the contradiction between proletarian and bourgeois at the economic level took the form of an antagonism between “the people” and the “power bloc” at the level of politics and ideology. Moreover, there was no necessary relation between the two. The content – what makes a given ideology democratic or authoritarian – has to do with its precise *form of articulation* (see Laclau 1977, pp. 143-199)².

In his hugely influential yet profoundly controversial subsequent work with Chantal Mouffe entitled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau seeks to develop his analysis of populism so as to generate a new post-Marxist politics. In other words, Laclau is developing in a British context (he is now based at Essex University) a political strategy that is germane to a context that has seen the rise of what Stuart Hall called “authoritarian populism” in the form of Thatcherism (see Hall 2017, pp. 172-186). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) differs from Laclau’s earlier work in at least two ways: (1) it breaks with Althusserian Marxism, particularly that of Nicos Poulantzas, insofar as it no longer accords the working class a privileged role in social transformation; and (2) it provides a discursive account of the social. The continuity, however, lies in the fact that Laclau insists upon the centrality of the concept of hegemonic articulation of heterogeneous political demands as the basis of a leftist political strategy.

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy was widely criticized by the Marxist Left. One of the most notable of such critiques was issued by so-called “Political Marxist” Ellen Meiksins Wood. Wood argued that Laclau’s and Mouffe’s position represents a step in the wrong direction, that is, it was a form of “New True Socialism” that Marx and Engels criticize in the *Communist Manifesto* (see Wood 1986). But what Wood and other Marxist critics failed to acknowledge was the importance of thinking through the

² What’s also important, and brilliant, about Laclau’s first book on populism, is his argument that early 20th-century socialist parties focused too narrowly on the working class as the subject of revolution and ignored the progressive traditions of 19th-century democratic movements, which left it to the fascists to appropriate these traditions in their own perverted ways. Schmitt’s appropriation of Rousseau, or Gentile’s appropriation of Mazzini are exemplary in this regard. The left needed a politics that was both socialist and democratic.

specificity of the political in a manner initiated by Gramsci who does so through a brilliant appropriation of the “Machiavellian moment” (see Gandesha 2018). Indeed, it comes as no surprise that Gramsci referred to the Italian Communist Party as the “Modern Prince”, as previously stated. At the same time, it is impossible to understand the specificity of the political outside of socio-economic relations as Theodor W. Adorno suggests in one of his rare public lectures on politics: Adorno implicitly invokes Marx’s claim against Hegel, that the anatomy of the State was to be located in *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, by suggesting that politics cannot be understood as a “self-enclosed, isolated sphere [...] but rather can be conceived only in its relationship to the societal forces making up the substance of everything political and veiled by political surface phenomenon” (Adorno 1998, p. 282). I shall return to this below.

In *On Populist Reason* (2005) Laclau develops the basic notion of populism in terms of an “equivalential articulation” of differences in relation to an “antagonistic frontier”. For Laclau, as becomes apparent in his excoriating criticisms of Hardt and Negri’s concept of the “multitude” and what he calls Žižek’s “Martian politics” (see Laclau 2005, pp. 232-239) all democratic politics are “populist”. In other words, if we assume that society is inherently heterogeneous, politics must entail the hegemonic articulation of a multiplicity of political demands in a manner that is always provisional and infinitely open to revision. A given hegemonic equivalential articulation of differences is always shifting and temporary and is based on the logic of the empty signifier. Yet, whether society can be understood in terms of such heterogeneity is a question I take up below.

The key difference from his previous work is Laclau’s attempt to conceptualize the affective dimension of politics via Lacanian psychoanalysis. John Kraniauskas understands this as the articulation of a Gramscian Lacan in contradistinction to Žižek’s Hegelian Lacan (see Kraniauskas 2006). While the latter takes as its point of departure the understanding of the “desire of the Other” (the impossible-because-unattainable desire for intersubjective recognition), the former can be understood in terms of *political* desire. For Laclau political desire is geared to what Lacan calls the “objet petit a”, meaning a partial object that is a fragment of the Real (the order that eludes symbolization yet is caught within the symbolic order). The “objet petit a” is often symbolized by the bountiful breast; and as such promises a return to an originary plenitude prior to the symbolic order based on a differentiation and non-identity between signifier and signified. Political desire, then, is established through the Name or the coincidence of signifier and signified that is only set retroactively. The key point Laclau is making here is that this Lacanian understanding of political desire enables us to understand desire in a way that provides an

alternative to Freud's, the latter being mass politics grounded in the love of an authoritarian leader who represents the Imago of the father. In contrast, political desire grounded in the utopic logic of the "objet petit a" is characterized by the horizontal relations between brothers (although it's not clear if this includes "sisters" and if so, how?).

2.

Several problems can be identified with Laclau's approach to populism. A key problem is that of its formalism stemming from its reliance on structural linguistics in which signification is understood by way of a system of differences with no positive terms. This formalist premise is the basis for his understanding of the figure of the *people* as an empty signifier that can take on radically divergent contents. What the approach seems to elide is the diachronic continuity of this figure. The idea of "the people" (*demos*) has a rich and semantically charged history stretching from fifth century Athenian democracy through the Roman Republic to the bourgeois revolutionary experiences and then onto the radical Black tradition with the Black Panthers' slogan "All Power to the People". Such semantic richness does not, however, imply the kind of semiotic openness proposed by Laclau. While in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau provides (with Mouffe) a genealogy of the concept of hegemony, in *On Populist Reason* he avoids providing the kind of account of the people that is, for example, sketched by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* (see Kraniauskas 2006, p. 51). Relatedly, while Laclau quite rightly takes up a skeptical attitude towards class reductionism it simply does not follow that this necessarily implies, as Laclau seems to suggest, an account of the social as marked by radical contingency. It seems that Laclau thinks *either* we must conceive of necessity in terms of a Hegelian or Marxian philosophy of history that offers the possibility of a closed historical totality in terms either of Absolute Spirit or Communism, *or* the social dissolves completely into an infinite, deconstructive play of radical differing and deferral of meaning (see Derrida 1982, pp. 1-28).

Laclau, strangely, overlooks the materialist core of psychoanalysis according to which, for example in *Civilization and its Discontents*, class-divided societies are based on repressive mechanisms which, themselves, produce surplus frustration and aggressiveness. These can subsequently be directed at "out-groups" or "others". The necessity of producing and reproducing the conditions of human sociality are not merely *contingent* but *necessary* features of all forms of society. The tension between Eros and Thanatos, unity and destructive aggression, is, for psychoanalysis, inescapable for class societies. Central to these is the necessity of the pro-

duction of surplus product and of societal reproduction. And, of course, the irony is that the relations of objectivity and subjectivity – as Marx argued in the *Grundrisse*, an object is produced for a subject, but also a subject for an object – forms one of Gramsci's key insights. This premise is irreconcilable with Laclau's depiction of the social as characterized by a logic of radically heterogeneity.

Laclau's engagement with Marxism largely avoids Marx's own texts such as the *Civil War in France* or his particularly timely writing on slavery, the Irish and national questions and so forth (see Anderson 2016). It is especially difficult to maintain that the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is an exemplar of "economism" or "class reductionism". Rather, it is a particularly nuanced understanding of class struggle that "brushes against the grain", in the Benjaminian sense, of any straightforwardly progressivist or whiggish philosophy of history. And in this case we see, far from the radical heterogeneity of the social and the logic of "empty" or "floating" signifiers, an all-too overwhelming, inescapable semantic fullness of the sign. "History", Marx famously observes, "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (Marx 1979, p. 103). The (modernist) production (*poesis*) of new signs is a necessary requirement for any socialist movement with a future and cannot be accepted simply as a given. *In other words, Marx's question is precisely how is heterogeneity or, more specifically, semantic difference possible?* Marx's call for a "poetry of the future" is a call for precisely such difference. The homogeneity of dead labour weighs all too heavily on the potentiality of living labour. It comes as little surprise, then, that debates within Marxism in the 1920s and 1930s are centrally preoccupied by questions of art and aesthetics (see Jameson 2006; and Gandesha and Hartle 2017).

In the *Brumaire* we see, in the bourgeoisie's fixation on the heroic signifiers of alternatively the Roman Republic and Roman Empire, the traumatic realization of its situation, of being poised between the old which cannot die and the new which cannot yet be born; between the heroic bourgeois revolution of 1789 and the incipient though of course failed proletarian revolution of the Paris Commune in 1871. What better description of the nephew of Napoleon than "morbid symptom". Marx's style is provoked to such brilliant rhetorical intensity precisely out of the realization that history was less to be understood in linear narrative terms that would deliver revolution in the modern sense – the "new" – as in the *Communist Manifesto*, but rather was understood in the ancient sense, conceived as the inevitable cyclical rise and fall of political regimes as in, for example, the Book VIII of Plato's *Republic*. That the fixation with the master signifier of Rome transcended the heroic bourgeoisie's tragedy and proletarian comedy ("Communism as the solution to the riddle of history") and discharges in a farcical repetition compulsion (see Gandesha and Hartle 2017).

While providing an “ontological” understanding the “logic of the political” in a somewhat inflated way as the “*institution* of the social”, Laclau curiously downplays the actual “ontic” role of institutions in historical change and continuity (see Mouzelis 1978). Laclau’s account of the social is deconstructive insofar as it bears striking similarities with Derrida’s own early engagement with structuralism in the human sciences, in particular the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, which emphasizes temporality in the form of a logic of deferral of meaning, the “play” of signification and the role of reading in stabilizing the meaning of an inherently contingent and open-ended text (see Derrida 1978, pp. 351-370). Laclau understands this in terms of the exigencies of decision on the horizon of an inherent “undecidability”. As Laclau explains

From here we can move straight to the question of the decision. I think that the matter can be put in the following terms. To deconstruct the structure is the same as to show its undecidability, the distance between the plurality of arrangements that are possible out of it and the actual arrangement that has finally prevailed. This we can call a decision in so far as: (a) it is not predetermined by the ‘original’ terms of the structure; and (b) it requires its passage through the experience of undecidability. The moment of the decision, the moment of madness, is this jump from the experience of undecidability to a creative act, a fiat which requires its passage through that experience. As we have said, this act cannot be explained in terms of any rational underlying mediation. This moment of decision as something left to itself and unable to provide its grounds through any system of rules transcending itself, is the moment of the subject. Why call it a subject? We will approach the matter by considering the constitutive dimensions of any decision worth its name (Laclau 1996a, p. 54).

Or as he puts it in *Emancipation(s)*, hegemonic formations are always “unstable and undecidable” (Laclau 1996b, p. 15). Laclau goes on to argue for a deconstructive form of subjectivity insofar as the subject is, itself, defined in utterly formal terms as the distance between a field or horizon of undecidability and the decision. This is supplemented by a Lacanian understanding of the subject as constituted by “lack”.

Derrida’s reading itself can be regarded as a decisionistic version of what Nietzsche called “Will to Power” or “to imprint upon becoming the character of being” (Nietzsche 2009, p. 138; see Gandesha 2019, pp. 168-170). A key difference, though, is that like Machiavelli and Gramsci, Nietzsche emphasizes institutions such as those of Academic philosophy (Platonism) and the Church (Christianity) in elaborating “hegemonic” interpretations of the teachings of Socrates and Jesus respectively as the most effective and enduring instances of such “will to power” the early Derrida and the later Laclau tend to elide the role of institutions. This

becomes especially clear in Laclau's emphasis on the radical heterogeneity of the social. Can we understand the mechanism of articulation other than through institutions such as the family, the state, political parties, trades unions, and the whole host of organizations and associations that comprised what Gramsci called "civil society", which was, for him, the terrain of a "war of position" or a cultural-ideological struggle?

3.

Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, the above questions are raised by the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis upon which Laclau depends to ground his account of populism, in particular to rescue populism from the "denigration of the masses" of figures like Gustav Le Bon. However, Laclau's engagement with Freudian social psychology must be regarded as a missed opportunity, since he ignores the problem that occupies such an important role in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, namely the phenomenon of the regression of the group to the primal horde. As John Kraniauskas argues:

In Laclau's populist version, the former is no longer the authoritarian Father but just another brother, one among equals, and, as a model for thinking the hegemony of one equivalential claim among others, it is the means through which populist political identity is produced (Kraniauskas 2006 p. 51).

The possibility of regression marks a key feature of psychoanalysis that Laclau struggles with in his account of populism, namely the manner in which, as suggested above, the "past weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" and the closely related problem (for both Freud and Lacan) of the compulsion to repeat. Surely, to understand populism today (particularly its authoritarian form) it is necessary to come to terms precisely with such phenomena. In other words, from both ontogenic and phylogenic perspectives, psychoanalysis must be understood not merely a formal model by which the equivalential articulation of differences is possible, but also substantively in terms of a method for working through the stubborn persistence of effects of past traumas, which is profoundly at odds with Laclau's seemingly voluntarist emphasis on the radical *contingency* of the social.

Laclau's twin engagements with Marxism and psychoanalysis are also thrown into a new critical light in the wake of the publication of Samo Tomšič's important but flawed book *The Capitalist Unconscious* in which the author argues that in Lacan one can find not one but two returns to

Freud. The first is through the structuralist linguistics of Saussure and the second is through Marx's structural critique of political economy according to which Freud is revealed to have developed a "labour theory of the unconscious". In other words, Tomšič shows the "homology" of the two "negative" logics of a Marxian and a Freudian economy. Tomšič identifies the way in which, in late capitalist society, even the unconscious is colonized by the logic of capital. Yet, at the same time, Tomšič makes the critical error of failing to distinguish between labour (*Arbeit*) and labour power (*Arbeitskraft*) and therefore misses the key component of abstract labour, which is homogenous discrete, quantifiable *time* itself. Capital is none other than congealed surplus labour time. Yet Freud argues that the unconscious is characterized by neither time nor space. And, indeed, this is what preserves its non-identity of the unconscious—that it doesn't enter into concepts without disruptively leaving a remainder. But what remains valuable in Tomšič reading is his emphasis disavowal of treating either psychoanalysis or Marxism as simply "world-views" (see Tomšič 2015).

This finds an important echo in the so-called new readings of Marx (*neue Lektüre*) that focus on the "value-form", which emphasize that Marx's writings ought not to be understood as a kind of alternative world-view of political economy from the standpoint of the working class, and therefore a form of class reductionism, but rather a rigorous and self-reflective "critical theory" (see Heinrich 2012). In contrast, instead of taking labor as a trans-historical category, the [value-form] approach analyzes the specific form of labor in capitalist society – abstract labor, which expresses itself as value and, as such, is the means by which the structures of capitalist society are produced and reproduced. Rather than articulating a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of concrete labor and emphasizing labor processes and exploitation, the new reading of Marx emphasizes the standpoint of the totality of the moments or elements of capitalist society mediated by abstract labor or value as such. And rather than emphasizing a materialist political economy against the Idealism of classical German philosophy, this second reading emphasizes the importance and irreducibility of the idea of 'critique' understood as the de-fetishization of the categories through which capitalist society understands itself, including the one-sided understanding of concrete labor. It entails a critique of forms of subjectivity as well as of objectivity. The point is not to advocate a more equitable distribution of wealth but rather to overcome the expression of wealth *as* value". In other words, the Marxian critique of capitalism isn't simply articulated from the standpoint of "concrete" labour – which would be the object of Laclau's attack as "class reductionism" and "economism" – but is a critique that aims precisely at the relation between concrete and abstract labour.

Laclau's theorization of Left populism takes its point of departure from economistic and class reductionistic forms of Marxism. However, it is far from clear that such an account can do without a "critical theory" which is both a critique of the categories of political economy and a critique of its prevailing libidinal economy. Political and libidinal economy converge in the idea of what Erich Fromm calls "social character". As he explains:

Character in the dynamic sense of analytic psychology is the specific form in which human energy is shaped by the dynamic adaptation of human needs to the particular mode of existence of a given society. Character in its turn determines the thinking, feeling, and acting of individuals (Fromm 1994, p. 278).

Fromm uses the concept of social character to account for the way in which the German labour movement which was strong and confident prior to the rise of National Socialism was so quick to capitulate once it was politically victorious. While socialist and communist ideas were widely accepted amongst German workers, they didn't reach particularly deep. Therefore, Nazism was not met with the kind of steadfast opposition one would have expected from the working class. According to Fromm, "many of the adherents of the leftist parties, although they believed in their party programs as long as the parties had authority, were ready to resign when the hour of crisis arrive" (Fromm 1994, pp. 280-81). According to Fromm, because of the deep-seated authoritarianism stemming from Calvinistic and Lutheran traditions, they opted to subordinate themselves to an authoritarian form of rule rather than struggling for self-determination in the form of revolutionary activity.

The concept of social character, the specific concatenation of the logics of political and libidinal economy, explains the ease with which the Nazis were able to seize power. Far from confirming the radical heterogeneity of the social on the basis of which the Nazis were able to forge a new "equivalence of differential demands"; those of, say, industrial capital, the petty bourgeoisie and large swaths of the working class, in relation to the "antagonistic frontier" of Jewish financiers, Council Communists, "back-stabbing" politicians, "Versailles", etc., what we see is all-too much homogeneity or identity over difference that can be traced back to the earliest origins in the "spirit" of capitalism. Laclau, like Left-wing German political leaders, to use Fromm's own language, overemphasizes the "range" as opposed to the "weight" of Left-wing ideas. But the key thing isn't just the weight of the ideas themselves but the manner in which they become powerful in a particular socio-historical conjuncture. As Fromm explains, in contrast to the picture of the political leadership of the Left,

our analysis of Protestant and Calvinist doctrines has shown that those ideas were powerful forces within the adherents of the new religion, because they appealed to the needs and anxieties that were present in the character structure of the people to whom they were addressed. In other words, ideas can become powerful forces, but only to the extent to which they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character (Fromm 1994, p. 281).

In a sense, what Fromm is identifying is precisely what Marx referred to in the *Brumaire* as the weight of history. Insofar as the French bourgeoisie was faced with an increasingly restive proletariat, when push came to shove, it acquiesced to the leadership of Louis Bonaparte and the “party of order”. Such “Bonapartism” would, of course, anticipate the rise of fascism as a response to the devastating crisis of overproduction and under-consumption and the rise of the spectre of communism. Without grasping what the German historian, Arno J. Mayer, called the “persistence of the old regime” (2010) both in political economic and psychological terms, it is not possible to adequately come to terms with populism. After all, so many forms of right populism, rather than directly and explicitly advocating inequality and subordination (the antithesis to Left populism’s emphasis on equality and liberty), make an implicit, affective, appeal to an idealized past. This is, of course, no more crassly and directly expressed by President Donald J Trump’s slogan: “Make America Great Again” which suggests not only the economic imaginary of industrial jobs and the family wage but also a libidinal imaginary of authoritarian, racialized social order before substantial non-European immigration, an order in which African Americans, women and members of the LGBTQ community knew their subordinate positions in the social hierarchy constituted as a form of “authoritarian populism” (see Hall 2017, pp. 172-186). It is, as it were, a repetition compulsion prompted by a traumatic transformation of post-industrial America.

4.

Laclau’s account of the radical heterogeneity of the social seems to be clearly belied by the case of Greece and this important to recognize precisely at a moment in which Italy’s new right populist government has had its own budget “rejected” by the European Commission for the second time on pain of severe financial sanctions. Hit particularly hard by the reverberations of the global financial crisis that originated in Wall Street leading to spiralling sovereign debt crisis (see Tooze 2018), Greece was forced to turn to the Troika for bailout funds or risk economic collapse and a possible Grexit or a Greek exit from the Eurozone. The Syri-

za Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, called for a Referendum on whether the Greek people would accept such conditions or not. On 5 July, 2015, the answer was a resounding Oxi! or NO! (61.31% to 38.39%). But this was simply not acceptable to the Troika. As Merkel's Finance's Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, put it with arrogant candour: "Election results cannot change economic policy" (Tooze, 522). So, not only was Greece forced, contrary to the popular will, to accept austerity conditions, these conditions were even harsher than those first proposed.

In return for successive instalments or "tranches" of bailout funds, the country was forced to comply with the monetization of valuable assets for the creation of an independent fund from which Greek banks could be recapitalized, although as a Deutsche Bank strategist made clear this move was less about meaningful recapitalization and more about furthering privatization. The pensionable age was pushed back to 67 and the highest VAT rate (23%) was extended to cover more goods and services. The government was also made to put into place quasi-automatic spending cuts in order to generate a budget surplus. The Troika ruled out restructuring or "hair-cuts" and therefore insisted upon keeping 240 billion euros on the books. The austerity measures also included further liberalization of labour market as well as energy and financial sectors and a shrinking of the state (see *Guardian*, July 13, 2015).

But what is the significance of this? The IMF took a more lenient position with respect to Greece than the other two members of the Troika, as it was convinced that austerity was ill-conceived and counter-productive insofar as it was premised upon the "household fallacy" or the idea that the state's finances ought to be modeled upon that of the "oikos". The fallacy lay in the obvious fact that in that the latter ruled out deficit financing, while the former often entailed it in order to stimulate economic growth and eventually to generate a sufficient tax basis so as to replenish government coffers.

What lay at the heart of such a fallacy was not a purely technical rationality, that is of economic efficiency, but a moral imperative – a policy that ought to be undertaken for its own sake. In other words, the EC and ECB wished to teach Greece (and perhaps other member states) a lesson irrespective of the dire consequences for the country and its citizens. The household model is precisely where the political and libidinal economies intersect in an interesting way. It is in the psycho-dynamics of the household, which is to say, the family, that the super-ego is formed by way of the Oedipal complex which functions by way of a two-fold repression: of desire for the mother and murderous aggression directed at the father. The complex is successfully negotiated when the male child accepts the prohibition on incest and turns the aggression initially directed at the father against inward in the form of an internalization of morality. As Ni-

etzsche says, in his account of the ascetic ideals, “all instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly, turn inward” (Nietzsche 1989, p. 84). This leads precisely to the formation of a guilt complex. And as Maurizio Lazzarato has shown in his analysis of the Greek debt crisis, debt is a means of governance by creating “indebted” and therefore *guilty* subjects (see Lazzarato 2012 and 2015).

What happened in Greece can be understood of a playing out of ambivalence towards the European Union that, of course, represents the very embodiment of paternal(istic) authority. As Tooze recounts in his thorough account of the financial crisis of 2007-08, the vast proportion of Greece’s debts accumulated in the 1980s and 1990s when both PASOK and New Democracy “lured voters with the promise of West European modernity and affluence”. (323-324). Insofar as the Troika had made it amply clear that a refusal of the austerity conditions would not only mean no more bailout funds but also would be a possible prelude to a Grexit. It is therefore possible to discern here a playing out of crucial ambivalence for Europe on the part of Greece. On the one hand, there is a convincing rejection of the terms of austerity imposed by the Troika in which the European Commission and European Central bank took up the position that Greece (and other profligate states) needed to be taught a lesson, while the IMF took a more forgiving position. On the other hand, we witness an attachment to what had become a mere fantasy, the idea of a “social” Europe. This was an image that had long been dispelled by a succession of laws such as the Single European Act (1986), Maastricht Treaty (1992) and treaties such as the Stability and Growth Pact (1997) that re-constituted the European project along firmly neo-liberal lines. At the end of the day, such an intersection of political and libidinal economies constituted the conditions whereby the Greek “demos” far from being able to engage in an antagonistic political struggle against the “oligarchy” – both within Greece itself as well as within the EU as a whole – identified with the imago of the father, with the *aggressor*, which is to say with the cold rationality instituted by a punishing and unforgiving neo-liberal Europe. The irony of the putatively radical democratic party, Syriza’s, backtracking on the referendum results, clearly under the duress of the Troika’s threat to suspend its membership in the EU, is that democracy was being subjected to an unendurable crisis in its very birth-place. It was a deeply ironic and painful reversal of what E.M. Butler called in 1935 the “tyranny of Greece over Germany” (see Butler 2012). To use Mouffe’s language, the oligarchy or the powerful had not merely dominated but had effectively crushed the *demos*. One wonders whether on the basis of Laclau’s account quasi-deconstructive account of populist reason, it would have been possible to see this coming.

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On the Deconstructive Logic of Populism

This article examines Ernesto Laclau's deconstructive account of populism. Such an account is premised on the notion that politics entails the institution of the "social". In other words, politics stabilizes in a provisional and temporary way, the inherently heterogenous, infinitely deferring and differing logic of the social space. The article argues that Laclau over-emphasizes such heterogeneity and this becomes particularly evident when we consider the momentous challenges faced by populist parties in power such as that of Syriza in its confrontation with the Troika in the aftermath of the 2015 Referendum.

KEYWORDS: Laclau, populism, deconstruction, finance.