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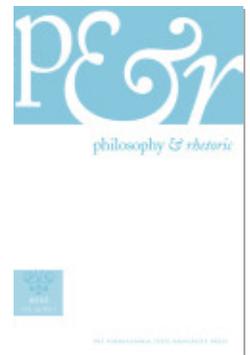
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The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes

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The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes

Michael Kaplan

INTRODUCTION

The work of Ernesto Laclau (both with and without his occasional collaborator, Chantal Mouffe) has exerted considerable influence in rhetorical studies over the past two decades. Emerging alongside the so-called epistemic and cultural turns, the project of “critical rhetoric” and cognate endeavors have found in Laclau a revision of Gramsci’s hegemony thesis that places discursive—and thus, evidently, rhetorical—operations at the center of politics, culture, and social processes generally. While Raymie McKerrow’s seminal essay (1989) drew on Laclau and Mouffe to outline a set of tasks for rhetoric that clearly remained within the ambit of ideology critique, subsequent appropriations of what is variously called “articulation” or “discourse” theory have, like Laclau himself, broken with the last vestiges of this tradition to proffer modes of politically engaged rhetorical critique animated by the insight that “ideology” is finally intrinsic to signification as such.

Writing at the same time as McKerrow, Barbara Biesecker (1989) turned to “articulation” as the optimal candidate to supplant “persuasion” as the name for what transpires in “the rhetorical situation” rethought from a

deconstructive perspective. A few years later, Celeste Condit (1994) ventured her own influential reformulation of the concept of hegemony as “concordance,” which likewise relied on a critical appropriation of Laclau and Mouffe. Subsequently, Ronald Greene (1998) drew heavily on Lawrence Grossberg’s, Stuart Hall’s, and his own critical revisions of Laclau and Mouffe’s work to argue for a “materialist” conception of rhetoric that would abandon rhetoric’s longstanding reliance on a “logic of influence” in favor of “a logic of articulation.” Around the same time, Kevin DeLuca enthusiastically recommended the integration of “articulation theory” into rhetorical studies, arguing that it provided “contingent grounds for a fundamentally rhetorical understanding of the postmodern world” characterized by proliferating social struggles, identity politics, and heterogeneous problems that defied existing models of political agency (1999, 335).

Meanwhile, as his work has been variously appropriated by rhetoricians, Laclau himself has increasingly come to invoke rhetoric explicitly as the theoretical model for the theory of hegemony. Since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, his interest in and reliance on rhetoric have grown steadily—so much so that his latest elaboration of the theory of politics as hegemonic struggle—paradigmatically exemplified by populism—verges on becoming a theory of rhetoric (2005).¹ To be sure, his engagement with rhetoric is motivated by a specific political interest, that of opening a new, postfoundationalist and postideological, path for leftist politics. Laclau has long conceived of the challenge facing the Left as that of integrating the copious new social movements and identities struggling against diverse forms of oppression into a more cohesive project aimed at winning and exercising legitimate political power—without relying on, or producing, what are now regarded as inherently antidemocratic metaphysical foundations or totalizations. This was the impetus behind his and Mouffe’s classic Gramscian revision of Marxism and remains the impulse animating his most recent work.

It is to be expected that this impulse should influence the theory of rhetoric on which its cogency now fully depends. Yet while an extraordinary amount of attention has, quite rightly, been lavished on Laclau’s innovative, sophisticated, and fertile work, his own explicit turn to rhetoric has, despite its decisive importance, received only intermittent notice and no systematic analysis. This is a serious problem for two interrelated reasons. First, without a sufficiently elaborated account of Laclau’s conception of rhetoric, his theory of politics cannot be adequately understood. But—and this is the second problem—Laclau himself has yet to offer such

an account—that is, one capable of explaining the conduct and outcomes of concrete political struggles. Moreover, closer attention to the model of rhetoric underpinning Laclau's theory of politics suggests that this lacuna may not be entirely accidental. On the contrary, the determination of politics as hegemonic struggle seems to require a form of rhetorical agency that Laclau's theory of discourse explicitly precludes.

Conversely, Laclau's theory of hegemony relies on a highly restricted conception of rhetoric that, ironically, appears inadequate to the daunting political task it has been assigned. In this regard, DeLuca may be unduly optimistic when he avers that "the discursive turn expands the possibilities and importance of rhetoric" because within "a discursive frame, rhetoric is no longer an instrument in the service of reality, but, rather, becomes constitutive of the meaning of the world" (1999, 342). Paradoxically, it appears that in the course of radically amplifying rhetoric's scope, Laclau is compelled to restrict considerably its capabilities. Centered on the necessity of structural integration as the precondition of signification, Laclau's approach confines him to a topological conception of rhetoric derived from structuralist poetics. Beyond this conception's inherent limitations, this restriction deprives Laclau's theory of a model of rhetorical efficiency adequate to his project of popular democracy.

RADICALIZING POLITICS RHETORICALLY

Laclau is in search of a politics that is "radical" in a double sense—both impelled by the possibility of wholesale social transformation and anterior to, as well as constitutive of, any possible origin or teleology alleged to govern and transcend the irrepressible play of social forces. Put simply, politics, in order to be what it is in its very notion, must be radical. For if any principle of social integration escaped possible modification by the processes through which such integration is achieved, then these processes would no longer count as *political* at all. On the contrary, the governing principle would never *itself* be at stake and would therefore be absolutely sovereign, so that social processes of all kinds would be mere expressions of its inexorable rule. Apart from being intolerable, such a state of affairs would be illogical, since it would exclude the possibility of change—except by effectively catastrophic chance. Given the impossibility of a transpolitical principle, radical politics is the only alternative. The question, then, is how anything resembling a social structure is possible at all in a context where such structure must be created solely out of the operations and activities that undermine every principle of integration. That is, in the absence of any

inviolable guarantees of truth, justice, or authority, what lends coherence and viability to any given political project, and what renders one political form preferable to any other?

In response to this impasse, Laclau turns to rhetoric for a discursive model of politics. Laclau's theory has undergone a series of significant modifications over the past two decades, but its most fully elaborated formulation to date appears in *On Populist Reason*, a cause for considerable and well-deserved fanfare (2005). After a lengthy demonstration of the incoherencies plaguing the prevailing literature on populism, Laclau summarizes the key features of the alternative approach he is proposing in a few crystalline pages (2005, 67–72). First, he assigns ontological priority to *discourse*, which designates not merely linguistic or broadly symbolic activity but

the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such. By discourse . . . I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which *relations* play a constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it. Thus “relations” and “objectivity” are synonymous. (2005, 68, emphasis his)

Invoking Saussure, Laclau affirms that every objective element acquires its identity and significance only through its relation with other elements. Further, “only two types of relation can possibly exist between . . . signifying elements: combination and substitution,” or what Saussurean linguistics defines as the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes (2005, 68). This, in turn, makes it necessary “to determine the whole within which those identities, as different, are constituted,” because, “if we have a purely differential ensemble, its totality has to be present in each individual act of signification. Conceptually grasping that totality is the condition of signification as such” (2005, 69). However, distinguishing his approach from the structuralisms of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, Laclau explains that, for him, “there is no beyond the play of differences, no ground which would” secure this totality (2005, 69). Consequently, the “centering’ effects that manage to constitute a precarious totalizing horizon have to proceed from the interaction of the differences themselves” (2005, 69).

Summarizing the argument he made in “Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” (1996), Laclau recapitulates the now familiar deconstruction of semiotic totality, demonstrating the latter's ultimate impossibility.

In brief, the problem is that, by definition, a totality must embrace absolutely everything, but, if it did, it would lack the limits required to determine it *as* a totality, distinct from something other than itself. Conversely, a limited totality would not embrace everything but would paradoxically rely on whatever it excludes to secure its unity. This, in turn, would render all the differential elements within the totality equivalent to each other in relation to that which the totality excludes. This equivalence, however, undermines their identities as *different* elements within the totality. The result is that “all identity is constructed within this tension between the differential and equivalential logics,” so that “in the locus of the totality we find only this tension” (2005, 70).

It is here that the contrast with early structuralism is clearest. The inevitable deconstruction of totality means that “totality . . . is both impossible and necessary. Impossible, because the tension between equivalence and difference is ultimately insurmountable; necessary, because without some kind of closure, however precarious it might be, there would be no signification and no identity” (2005, 70).² The challenge, then, is to represent this “impossible” totality so as to produce a sufficiently stable and coherent field of relatively determinate differences. Such “representation has, however, as its only means, particular differences” within this signifying field (2005, 70). Consequently, “one difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. . . . This operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have called *hegemony*” (2005, 70, emphasis his).

A major reason Laclau selects Gramsci’s term to complete his theory of signification is that there cannot be any a priori requirement that any given particularity should—or, conversely, should not—assume the task of representing the requisite but necessarily “missing” or “failed” whole. Since in principle any particularity may do so, whichever one actually fulfills this task does so by, in effect, dominating (provisionally and incompletely) the field of representation and suppressing other, in principle equally viable, candidates.³ This is also why Laclau turns to rhetoric for an account of the hegemonic operation itself.

A difference that assumes the totalizing function does so by losing much, though not all, of its specificity and “becomes something on the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness” (Laclau 2005, 71, emphasis his). Meanwhile, hegemonically produced totalities are characterized by an “essential contingency, for they consist of relational ensembles that do not obey any inner logic other than

their factually being together” (Laclau 2006, 672). Since the totality that the empty signifier represents is, strictly speaking, impossible, the signifier *itself* occupies the place of this “missing” or “failed” object. Accordingly, every objectivity depends irreducibly on the efficacy of an empty signifier to confer precarious and fictive coherence on it. A crucial corollary is that “if the empty signifier arises from the need to name an object which is both impossible and necessary, . . . the hegemonic operation will be catachrestical through and through” (Laclau 2005, 72).

With this, rhetoric enters the picture and assumes a pivotal role. For Laclau, “rhetoric” refers to the contingent, discursive, and fundamentally tropological process that brings objective reality into existence by imposing on an array of heterogeneous elements the semblance of a structure within which they acquire identity/meaning. In this way, rhetoric is distinguished from any sort of calculus capable of mandating relationships among elements; indeed, the necessity of establishing such a distinction underwrites the turn to the rhetorical idiom (2001b). Accordingly, if “the totalization of a system of differences is impossible without a *constitutive* exclusion,” this necessitates a

split of any signifying element between an equivalential and a differential side. As these two sides cannot be logically sutured, the result is that any suture will be *rhetorical*; a certain particularity, without ceasing to be particular, will assume a certain role of universal signification. Ergo, unevenness within signification is the only terrain within which a signifying process can unfold. Catachresis = rhetoricity = the very possibility of meaning. (652, emphasis his)

Catachresis designates the operation whereby a figural term takes the place of a missing literal one, so that the literal reference is in effect the product of figuration. Of course, in this case, the entire distinction between the literal and the figural collapses, and this collapse is what Laclau, like others before him, understands as the “rhetoricity” of language—or signification—in general. From this, by now familiar, vantage, the linguistic code postulated by Saussure is an effect of irreducible tropological play. And this is precisely the situation with hegemony: the precondition of a signifying objectivity is the emergence of a catachrestical designation that itself directly occupies the place of a missing totality.

For Laclau, this play both ensures the ontological primacy of politics and determines politics as unending hegemonic struggle. That is, the

irreducible possibility of postulating or subverting a hegemonic empty signifier implicit in every discursive act renders every act at least potentially political—that is, capable of transforming social objectivity. By the same token, every discursive act can potentially become inscribed within a wider struggle or project that brings about such a transformation. Moreover, the “unevenness within signification” to which Laclau refers corresponds to the relations of power that inevitably obtain within all structures owing to their formation through hegemonic articulation as well as to the “constitutive exclusion” that produces an unsurpassable antagonism between structures and what they must expel. It should now be clear why the coherence of Laclau’s theory of politics depends significantly on his deployment of the rhetorical idiom to reconceive the structure and dynamics of signification.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS: “CONSTRUCTING A PEOPLE”

The conceit organizing *On Populist Reason* is the thesis that the banal, commonly derogated or dismissed political phenomenon of “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such” (2005, 67). This “something” is nothing other than the rhetorical character of social ontology. The central political lesson this rhetorical ontology underwrites is neatly condensed by Laclau in the title of a subsequent article, “Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics” (2006), written in response to a rather slapdash and uncharitable response to the book by Slavoj Žižek (2006). The signifier “the people” is generally regarded as the particular name organizing populist discourse, but for Laclau it designates the entire category of political names: in a crucial sense, every political project is undertaken “in the name of the people,” whatever the actual term selected to perform this function. This is because every political project must invoke the community within which it is to take place, and this community is at once necessary and impossible, a “missing” totality required to endow a political gesture with meaning but also only a catachrestical effect of the signifying acts that refer to it. In “Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity” (1992), Laclau argued strenuously that political acts must make at least an implicit reference to some universal category or else be incoherent and self-defeating. At stake in such reference to universals is a sort of mandatory wish to restore the missing fullness of a community—this is what makes them per se political—and “the people” is the paradigmatic political name of this fullness.

In psychoanalytic terms, the emergence of such an empty signifier corresponds to an affective “radical investment” that confers on it “the dignity of the Thing”—that is, of an object which, in standing in for the constitutively missing “true” object of desire, comes to function directly as that object (Laclau 2005, 119). Politically, this description is meant to account for the identity-forming power of hegemonic signifiers. In classical Marxian terms, empty signifiers are fetishes that derive their efficacy from collective belief in their reality and that consequently confront the believers as apparently objective and independent powers. But whereas Marx wishes to abolish fetishism by exposing its origins in material processes, for Laclau this fetishistic mediation is constitutive of the social as such—there is neither society nor materiality without some ungrounded investment in a fetishized signifier.

If reference to a universal category is a necessary condition of signification, reference to a proxy for “the people” is a necessary dimension of politics. Put another way, political struggle invariably involves the task of “constructing a people.” Laclau sketches this process as the activity of pressing assorted popular—what he calls “democratic”—demands, of which one emerges as the “particular universal” that serves to link most of the others in a chain of equivalence established by reference to a common obstacle or enemy (say, elite corruption, foreign interlopers, economic exploitation, or some other “general crime” said to impede the final coincidence of a community with itself).⁴ Outlining what “hegemonic struggle” entails, Laclau traces the typical trajectory of such demands as follows:

Any demand starts as a *request*; institutions of local power, for instance, are asked to meet the grievances of people in a particular area—for example, housing. . . . [T]he second dimension of our analysis [concerns] the social process through which a request is transformed into a *claim*. How does this mutation take place? . . . [I]t happens through the operation of the equivalential logic. People whose demands concerning housing are frustrated see that other demands concerning transport, health, security, schooling, and so on are not met either. . . . [T]he frustration of an *individual* demand transforms the request into a claim as far as people see themselves as bearers of rights that are not recognized. These claims are, however, limited, for the referential entity to which they are addressed is perfectly identifiable—in our example of housing, the town hall. But if the equivalence between claims is extended . . . it becomes far more difficult to determine which is the instance to

which the claims are addressed. One has to discursively construct the enemy—the oligarchy, the establishment, big money, capitalism, globalization, and so on—and, for the same reason, the identity of the claimers is transformed in this process of universalization of both the aims and the enemy. . . . Once we move beyond a certain point, what were requests *within* institutions became claims addressed *to* institutions, and at some stage they became claims *against* the institutional order. When this process has overflowed the institutional apparatuses beyond a certain limit, we start having the people of populism.⁵ (2006, 654–55, emphasis his)

In the book, Laclau offers several examples familiar to readers of his earlier work—Chartism, Leninism, Perónism, Solidarnosc, and others—each described so as to evince this progression of steps. It is important to note that in every case, demands arise as a consequence of existing structural conditions and come to be inscribed in wider popular chains when an apparent shared enemy more or less spontaneously comes into view. Indeed, Laclau is quite explicit that in cases where requests or claims can be satisfied, demands do not arise; that is, the frustration required for demands to appear is a function of existing conditions, not the product of inventive acts of rhetorical agitation. By the same token, notwithstanding the stipulation that “one has to discursively construct the enemy,” in every case Laclau discusses it is shared frustration that converges on the enemy’s name when several discrete demands happen, through chance or structural affinity, to be addressed to the same entity (e.g., “city hall”) or to invoke the same process (e.g., “globalization”). So, for example, in the case of Solidarnosc,

We have . . . a society where the *frustration* of a plurality of demands by an oppressive regime had created a spontaneous equivalence between them, which, however, needed to be expressed by some form of symbolic unity. We have here a clear alternative: either there is an ultimately *conceptually* specifiable content that is negated by the oppressive regime—in which case that content can be directly expressed, in its *positive* differential identity—or the demands are radically heterogeneous and the only thing they share is a *negative* feature—their common opposition to the oppressive regime. In that case, it is not a question of a *direct* expression of a positive feature underlying the different demands; because what has to be expressed is an irreducible negativity, its

representation will necessarily have a symbolic character. The demands of *Solidarnosc* will become the symbol of a wider chain of demands whose unstable equivalence around that symbol will constitute a wider popular identity. This constitution of the symbolic unity of the popular camp—and its correlatum: the symbolic unification of the oppressive regime through similar discursive/equivalential means involve[s] figural embodiments resulting from a *creatio ex nihilo* that is not possible to reduce to any preceding or ultimate literality. (2006, 652–53, emphasis his)

What remains unclear in this account, as well as in every other example adduced by Laclau, is what these “discursive/equivalential means” could be. Indeed, the term “means” is itself misleading if it implies anything like a strategic use of language, which Laclau’s theoretical stipulations rigorously exclude. It is hardly surprising, then, that in his discussions of populist discourses, Laclau invariably resorts to the passive voice in describing the *spontaneous* emergence of popular identification with an empty signifier. Clearly, while populist articulations undoubtedly take place, they cannot be ascribed to the purposive actions of willing agents.

A key question, then, is whether the processes through which such articulations emerge can be described in the existing rhetorical idiom. This question is of critical importance given Laclau’s reliance on rhetoric, and it’s particularly important for the explication of might be called *rhetorical efficiency*. If the unity of a signifying ensemble (such as a social order) is given by nothing other than the retroactive performative force of its name, and if a semblance of such unity is the irreducible precondition for the emergence of objectivity as such, then a central rhetorical problem is how to explain the selection of one name—or one proxy for the missing fullness of the community—as the hegemonic point of identification through “radical investment.”

This is a particularly daunting problem insofar as Laclau’s approach seems both to require and to preclude reference to something like persuasion. On the one hand, as Jakob Torfing explains in his study of discourse theory, the “rhetoricity” of every signifying structure means that every structure “fails to provide super-hard rules for our decision-making,” so that the decision-making process “will have nothing in common with a mathematical proof where the conclusion is logically derived from a set of axiomatic assumptions. As such, we will never arrive at a situation where the decisions are, so to speak, taken by the structure and subsequently presented as a *fait accompli*” (1999, 67). On the contrary,

the non-algorithmic character of constitutive decisions implies that these become dependent on the creation of a consensus for a certain option among a range of alternative options. . . . The creation of consensus cannot be reduced to simply identifying a shared opinion . . . but rather describes an active process of coming into agreement through *persuasion*. Persuasion involves making somebody [acquire] a different set of beliefs by means of quasi-logical argumentation. (1999, 67, emphasis his)

So, if all social relations are ultimately shaped by fundamentally ungrounded “decisions” that engender, rather than presuppose, the axioms to which they appeal, then political struggle precedes any instituted social order and continues at every moment to condition it (Laclau 1997).⁶ By the same token, however, every effort to persuade involves a constitutive gap between the causal rationality implicit in the giving of reasons—and, for that matter, in emotional appeals, insofar as these presuppose some organized pattern, however unconscious, linking affective and cognitive operations—and the final arbitrariness of “agreement.” This is why Torfing qualifies persuasion as “quasi-logical.” At the same time, just as there is no way to “make” anyone acquire a new set of beliefs, there is no warrant for regarding “decisions” and “agreements” as the conscious acts of willing subjects exercising their sovereign capacity to choose. To the contrary: “What I have asserted is exactly the opposite: that the decision is not grounded in any rationality external to itself; that this ‘itself,’ however, should not be conceived in terms of any self-transparency, but as a complex situation whose mechanisms—largely unconscious—escape the ‘subject’ of the decision; and that this subject does not precede the decision but is rather the product of the latter” (Laclau 2004, 307).

So Laclau’s insistence that “one has to discursively construct the enemy” lacks theoretical force: if reference to totality is implicit in every signifying act, and if demands emerge out of frustrated claims, every political demand is always already constructing the enemy, and there is no particular modification of discursive strategy capable of facilitating this process that can be recommended on the basis of Laclau’s theory (2006, 655).

The resulting impasse of rhetorical agency has led commentators to advance antithetical objections to Laclau’s approach. On the one hand, J. Hillis Miller chides him for inadvertently smuggling in the humanist conception of intentional agency that his theory forbids: “Laclau’s theory of political change for the better cannot do without the recuperation

of the subject or 'I' that decides arbitrarily and without justification, but nevertheless rationally and logically" (2004, 224). On the other hand, Lew Zipin insists that such a conception of agency is precisely what Laclau's theory lacks and that without it, it cannot be coherent:

In seeking to chase down such cohesion-generating *agency* in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of "discursive articulation," I find it unelaborated, yet needed. It is a missing link without which their explanations of social-structural cohesion entail a slippery circularity. The discursive intelligibility of social practices results from the action of "articulatory practices" which seem already infused with discursive intelligibility. The "signification" of coherence across dispersed elements occurs by virtue of "rules of formation" which either exist, ontologically, *in advance* (despite stipulations to the contrary), or are of a most mysterious origin: the product of a magical alchemy in which "regularity" spontaneously converges in-and-of "dispersion itself." If, as I argue, some force or capacity *to originate coherence* is theoretically necessary, it seems a prohibitive obstacle for post-humanist projects. Laclau and Mouffe do not demonstrate how it can be theorized without recourse to ontological essences inhering in a "human" substrate, *nor* to essences inhering within the (supposedly) contingent historical-cultural ground of "discursive conditions of possibility." (2004, 227, emphasis his)

Needless to say, Laclau must reject this line of critique, inasmuch as it leads inexorably to a humanist ontology his theory would supplant. Consequently, Laclau must refrain from prescribing the turn to persuasion that Torfing ascribes to him. Accordingly, in response to Hillis Miller, Laclau quotes Ernesto Grassi, who explains that "'rhetoric' is not, nor can it be, the art of the technique of an external persuasion: it is rather the speech which is the basis of rational thought" (2004, 307). The incontrovertible implication, then, is that no "one," in fact, *can* "discursively construct the enemy," which emerges out of radically impersonal discursive operations utterly and necessarily indifferent to strategic attempts to hasten what may or may not happen in any case.⁷

This indifference and the passivity it entails derive directly from Laclau's reliance on catachresis as the paradigmatic trope of ontological rhetoricity:

I have insisted that the empty signifier is a pure name that does not belong to the conceptual order. . . . As in the case of the psychoanalytic perspective—the elevation of an object to the dignity of the Thing, as in the case of signification—where we have the presence of a figural term that is catachrestical because it names and, thus, gives discursive presence to an essential void within the signifying structure, we have in politics also a constitution of new agents—peoples, in our sense—through the articulation between equivalential and differential logics. These logics involve figural embodiments resulting from a *creatio ex nihilo* that is not possible to reduce to any preceding or ultimate literality. (2006, 653)

To explain how catachresis produces its effects, Laclau turns to Žižek's intervention into the debate in analytical philosophy between descriptivists and antidescriptivists concerning the relationship between names and things. Briefly, the classical descriptivist account theorized that names acquire their efficacy from a cluster of features associated with the referent—in short, they describe, or once described, what they name. This approach suffered from numerous difficulties, which gave rise to the antidescriptivist theory advanced by Saul Kripke. For Kripke, words acquire their designative power from a “primal baptism” whereby an object is simply assigned a word that thenceforth functions as its name irrespective of any particular features this object may possess. Žižek concurs with Kripke but perceives a new problem: if the name pertains to the object irrespective of the latter's particular features, what is it that the name actually designates? For without reference to some identifying feature of the object it is impossible to distinguish the object as such from any other, or from its background of sheer existential “noise.” What, then, makes an object identical with itself in the first place, so that it *can* be assigned a name? Žižek's answer is: the name alone (Laclau 2005, 102–3).

How, exactly, does the name support the unity and identity of that which it names? The answer to this question sheds considerable new light on the impasse Laclau's approach confronts, since it contravenes his basic premise concerning the necessity of totalization for meaning production. In the first place, it should be absolutely clear that, for both Žižek and Laclau, nothing like Kripke's “primal baptism” ever in fact takes place; it is a fiction retrospectively inferred from the operative link between name and object. As Derrida (1988) makes abundantly clear, the performative force of a speech act—such as a baptism—does not arise either out of the willing

consciousness of the speaker or out of the instituted conventions (Zipin's "rules") understood to govern its performance. Instead, both are effects of what Derrida terms "iterability," or the possibility of repetition inherent in the structure of every mark. That is, the unity/identity of an object, no less than that of a sign, derives from the intrinsic possibility of its repetition. Like the "missing" original of a photographic image, this identity is a virtual semblance produced by the sheer multiplicity of "copies" that seem to have their source in the image to which they refer. This repeatability is precisely the mechanism by means of which catachresis produces the naming effect.

But if this is so, then a minimal sort of unity/identity constituting an object *precedes* and *conditions* its inscription within a differential totality. An object, if it is one, already (that is, potentially) "refers" to itself by virtue of its iterability; it is, as it were, immediately a sign of itself—its own trace, image, or "name." As for signifying structures, Derrida does insist, as Laclau correctly understands, that reference to a "missing" totality is "necessary/impossible" for the production of regulated differences and the unity of the structure.⁸ However, such reference is not a requirement *anterior* to signification but rather one of its features. As Derrida has shown, performatives—and therefore all signifying acts—postulate the context of their deployment, a context whose existence and force are themselves virtual effects of the performances that repeatedly invoke it. Crucially, such effects result not from the sovereign—or baptismal—power inherent in performance but from the inevitable *deferral and displacement of reference* that condition every performance and therefore reference itself. In other words, context (the category that necessarily supplants that of linguistic structure) itself derives from the iterability of signifying acts. In sum, the unity/identity of *both* objects *and* the precarious and incomplete totalities within which they may be inscribed is an effect of iterability.

The implications for the theory of politics as hegemony are clearly far reaching. Laclau's injunction to "construct a people" is, at best, in tension with his acknowledgment that no strategy can actually bring about, or account for the emergence of, that which it aspires to construct. No proxy for "the people" can have a *cause* in rhetorical acts, since even the force of catachresis—the locus of radical rhetoricity—is itself an effect of iterability. To be sure, such a proxy can have a *source* in strategic activity—which can fortuitously give rise to collective identification with an empty signifier—but this possibility constitutes the weakest of motives for action. Moreover, to the extent that hegemonic signifiers, such as "the people," circulate on condition of being widely understood as metaphorical names of counterfactual

referents, “radical investment” in them is rendered far less likely. In effect, a specific metadiscourse condensed within the “emptiness” of the signifier itself *deters* investment in its referent (Kaplan, forthcoming).⁹

It appears, then, that Laclau’s theoretical commitments undermine his political injunction to construct “the people” and its enemy. Insofar as his theory of rhetoric as catachresis rules out any sort of persuasion, it deprives him of any way to transform rhetorical ontology into ontic rhetorical practice. Does this mean that Laclau’s renunciation of persuasion in favor of catachrestical performance is mistaken and should be reconsidered? No: it means that his theory must be supplemented with a more robust account of rhetorical efficiency. The problem is that “rhetoricity” is not exhausted by ontological incompleteness or lack. The “dislocation” or “undecidability” of structure means that it is neither structure nor strategy that “acts” but rather *discursive form*.

By now it should be clear that Laclau’s discovery of rhetoric’s ontological status underwrites a prescription to engage in hegemonic struggle by constructing plausible metaphorical “enemies of the people.” It should also be clear that the sort of agentive rhetoric implicit in Laclau’s politics is severely undermined by his rhetorical ontology. The problem, however, is not how to reconcile the apparent requirement of purposive agency with the radical passivity imposed by the inherently fortuitous efficacy of catachresis. Rather, the challenge is to interrogate and revise the passage between the ontological and the ontic dimensions of rhetoric in Laclau’s theory. This means taking seriously the agency of iterability and *différance* so as to retrieve a more productive understanding of rhetorical form.

RESIDUAL STRUCTURALISM AND THE RULE OF CATACHRESIS

Laclau’s preoccupation with catachresis follows from his earlier turn to metaphor (1988).¹⁰ Incorporating the implications of what Hans Blumenberg famously called “absolute metaphor,” he astutely avoids confusing ordinary metaphor with the “metaphoricity” of language in general by appropriating catachresis as the hallmark of ontological rhetoricity. Hence, catachresis demonstrates that “the name is the ground of the thing,” with the caveat that this ground is inherently unstable and subject to constant renegotiation; it is, in a word, political. As we have seen, in Laclau’s account the catachrestical operation works by performative retroactivity: the objectivity it designates is an effect of the semblance of totality the name institutes and supports. This name emerges from within the field of heterogeneous particularities

to designate the field as a totality that bestows on these particularities the status of differences. In other words, it is a “particular universal” or a species that encompasses the genus to which it appears already to belong precisely as a consequence of naming it.

Students of rhetoric will recognize in this progression of steps strong resonances with the familiar debate concerning the relationship among rhetoric, Saussurean linguistics, structuralist poetics, and deconstruction. At issue in that debate was the putative “reduction” of rhetoric to trope. The standard argument against the tropological turn—a development which dates at least to Quintilian and reemerges in, among others, Giambattista Vico, Kenneth Burke, Group Mu, and structuralist poetics—is that it “reduces” rhetoric to trope, trope to metaphor, and, by extension in Laclau, metaphor to catachresis, in effect suppressing or abolishing the specificity of rhetoric (Abbott 2006). By grounding signification in rhetoric conceived as figuration, this approach produces only a sort of radically contingent semiotics. But while this criticism, strenuously propounded by Brian Vickers (1988), aims to restore a more traditional conception of rhetoric by specifying its proper domain, it seems evident that the radicalization of rhetoric as tropological play is neither an error nor a theoretical turn that can be reversed.¹¹ The project of “saving” rhetoric by confining its scope is theoretically hopeless. This does not mean, however, that the tropological play underpinning all objectivity exhausts the significance of rhetoric by identifying it with the discursive struggle to install an empty signifier as the catachrestical embodiment of missing totality. Rather, the deconstruction of the semiotic model that demonstrates the necessity/impossibility of totalization eventuates in two analytically distinct implications that Laclau’s approach misapprehends and inadvertently conflates: first, that, as already noted, the source of simultaneous identity effects and structure effects is iterability, and, second, that discursive form is the dimension of signifying performance where *the conditions of possibility and salience of signification itself* are established, conditioned, and renegotiated.

The issue arises in “Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor” (2008), where Laclau is concerned to establish the ontological priority of rhetoric with respect to both discursive form and political possibilities. Setting out from Gérard Genette’s famous study of narrative in Proust, Laclau endeavors to show that the unity of a narrative, and by extension of any discourse up to and including social objectivity itself, is a rhetorical effect of catachresis. Following Genette, he observes that

without the mutual implication between metaphor and metonymy, it would be impossible to ensure the unity of a discursive space. . . . only the mutual crossing of a metonymic net and a metaphoric chain ensures the coherence, the necessary cohesion of *text*. . . . For Genette, it is this crossing between metaphor and metonymy that ensures that there is a narrative. . . . The question that remains, to be posed, however, is that concerning the kind of unity that the articulation metaphor/metonymy manages to constitute. (2008, 62–63)

Note how Laclau has already begun to formulate the problem in terms of the emergence of (narrative) *form* from semiotic articulation. It does not occur to him to ask whether *form itself* affects the articulatory logics on which it depends. Indeed, the pattern of influence will, for Laclau, move in only one direction: “Genette speaks, on the one hand, of an ‘abusive’ use of rhetorical categories, but, on the other, he describes such an abuse as a transgression involving a movement from the *form* of the figure to a *semantic* relation that, while implicit in that form, goes clearly beyond those formed limits” (2008, 65). At this point, Laclau poses the obvious question:

If the semantic relations underlying both metaphor and metonymy transcend their rhetorical form, are not those relations anchored in signification as such, beyond classical rhetorical limits, or, alternatively, could not signification be seen as a generalized rhetoric—i.e. hat “rhetoricity” could be seen not as an abuse but as constitutive (in the transcendental sense) of signification? (2008, 65)

The problem, however, is whether it is

enough to conceive of that “beyond the rhetorical form” as simply “semantic”—or would [that] necessarily attach it to the level of the signified? Would not the relationship signifier/signified involve a dialectic that takes us beyond semantics, to a materiality of the signifier that inscribes rhetorical displacements in the very structure of the sign? (65)

But if so, then “Why are those displacements rhetorical in nature—i.e., dominated by the basic opposition metaphor/metonymy?” Note that Laclau is *not* asking why the topological displacements intrinsic in the

structure of the sign should be regarded as rhetorical; instead, he is asking why such displacements in fact turn out to be tropological. Indeed, nowhere does he consider the theoretical implications of designating the tropology of the sign “rhetorical,” implications that have preoccupied staunch defenders of the rhetorical tradition such as Vickers. On the contrary, Laclau goes on immediately to invoke Roman Jakobson’s aphasia studies to justify the move to rhetoric that Vickers strenuously rejects (1988): “From these two axes of language—the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, substitution and combination—Jakobson moves to the rhetorical field: metonymy would correspond to combination and metaphor to substitution” (2008, 66).¹² Laclau accepts this move without reservation:

The great merit of Jakobson’s analysis is to have brought rhetorical categories to their specific location within linguistic structure, that is, to have shown that it is the latter that is at the root of all figural movements. Metaphor and metonymy, in that sense, are not just some figures among many, but the two fundamental matrices around which all other figures and tropes should be ordered. So the classification of rhetorical figures ceases to be a heteroclite enumeration of forms and presents a clear structure anchored in the figures’ dependence on the fundamental dimensions of language. (2008, 67)

In fact, Laclau has good reason to insist on describing “the fundamental dimensions of language” as rhetorical. This is a strategic theoretical move that facilitates the transition from language to politics. By contrast, for example, when Derrida (1985) undertakes the deconstruction of the distinction between concept and metaphor in “White Mythology,” he carefully stipulates that the Nietzschean reversal of the hierarchy between the literal and the figural puts in question the latter category as much as it does the former and proposes to designate the play of displacement operating within both as “metaphoricity.” Although Laclau, for his part, repeatedly uses the term “rhetoricity,” he quite clearly means to endorse the ontological priority of tropes without pursuing the implications of this radicalization for their status as formal devices. Indeed, his theory of politics *requires* metaphor, metonymy, and catachresis to retain a degree of the specificity they derive from their inscription within the classical rhetorical tradition. That is, the irreducibly ambiguous play of deferral and displacement—that is, of *différance*—that makes possible and undermines this specificity poses

problems for the theory of hegemony that largely disappear from view if the traditional terms are retained. At the same time, the traditional terms permit Laclau to redescribe politics in the rhetorical idiom, paving the way for his injunction to employ the arsenal of rhetoric as the *immediate practice* of politics.

This is precisely what he goes on to do, reiterating a favorite example:

Let us suppose that there is a neighborhood where there is racist violence and the only force capable of confronting it in that area are the trade unions. We would think that, normally, opposing racism is not the natural task of the trade unions, and that if it is taken up by them in that place, it is by a contingent constellation of social forces. That is, that such a “taking up” derives from a relation of contiguity—i.e., that its nature is metonymic. Let us, however, think that this “taking up” continues for a long period of time—in that case, people would get accustomed to it and would tend to think that it is a normal part of trade union practices. So what was a case of contingent articulation becomes a part of the central meaning of the term “trade union”—“contiguity” shades into “analogy,” “metonymy” into “metaphor.”¹³ (2008, 69)

This shading, then, forms the primary process through which hegemony emerges:

Inherent to the central political operation that we call “hegemony” . . . [is] the movement from metonymy to metaphor, from *contingent* articulation to *essential* belonging. The name—of a social movement, of an ideology, of a political institution—is always the metaphorical crystallization of contents whose analogical links result from concealing the contingent contiguity of their metonymical origins. (2008, 69)

Laclau goes on to draw the logical inference: “Once the status of rhetoric has been recognized in its true ontological generality, relations that . . . we have approached in a strictly tropological terminology are likely to be reproduced at different levels of analysis of human reality, . . . [including] within the political field” (2008, 72). Before proceeding to identify a series of exemplary cases, Laclau offers this definition: “Politics is articulation of heterogeneous elements, and such an articulation is essentially tropological, for it

presupposes the duality between institution and subversion of differential positions that we found as defining a rhetorical intervention” (2008, 73). Finally, having elicited from his examples lessons that, predictably, confirm the overall thrust of his argument, Laclau concludes by reiterating his understanding of the relationship between politics and rhetorical form:

Hegemony means the passage from metonymy to metaphor, from a “contiguous” starting point to its consolidation in “analogy.” But with this we are very close to the relationship metaphor/metonymy that Genette finds in Proust’s text. Translating it into political language, we could say that because there is Narrative (*Récit*) there is strategy. But as the identity of the agents of that strategy is not given beforehand, we will always have short-term strategic movements, not anchored in any eschatology. They will exactly operate at the point at which metaphor and metonymy cross each other and limit their mutual effects. (2008, 82–83)

It is difficult to see what “intervention” and “strategy” can mean here. After all, Laclau’s trade union example demonstrates the utter irrelevance of strategy to the transformation of metonymic association into metaphoric equivalence. Since hegemony involves a “passage” that takes place irrespective of any aspiration to stabilize a field of differences—and insofar as, in Genette’s own account, Proust’s text produces its effects “behind the back” of its author—it is crucial to stress that “narrative” *cannot* be the product of the “short-term strategic movements, not anchored in any eschatology.” On the contrary, the relation between hegemonic structure—what Laclau mistakenly identifies with discursive form, such as narrative—and heterogeneous strategic (“rhetorical”) movements is their shared genesis in *iterability*.

But to recognize the coemergence of structure effects (such as hegemony) and strategy effects (such as social movements) is to confront a limit of Laclau’s theoretical edifice. Simply put, this recognition means that there is no passage between the level of tropological play (Derrida’s “metaphoricity”) and the strategic level of “constructing a people.” What is missing is precisely the level of discursive form (such as the various modes of narrative, genre, style, and so forth) that Laclau’s theory, in appropriating structuralist poetics, “reduces” to the ontological articulation between metaphor and metonymy structured by reference to an empty signifier. Despite the deconstructive remodeling and corresponding renaming of semiotic

terms after their rhetorical counterparts, articulation remains a semantic relation—and the theory of hegemony a kind of political grammar.¹⁴

Consider, in this regard, Paul de Man, whose work Laclau correctly reads as endorsing a “generalized rhetoric” while failing to appreciate what this meant for de Man himself (Laclau 1998). Reading de Man’s famous analysis of Pascal, Laclau reproduces the familiar steps of his own account of hegemony, arguing that the upshot of de Man’s intervention is to have specified the integrating function of zero as an empty (literally!) signifier tasked with closing the Pascalian system. He goes on to praise de Man for demonstrating the primacy of catachresis with respect to metonymy (and thus metaphor) and thereby establishing the performative dimension of language as constitutive of its signifying capacity. It is impossible to quarrel with either of these attributions; however, Laclau completely overlooks de Man’s recourse to allegory and its implications for any theory of rhetoric.

Although de Man’s primary interest concerns the epistemological implications of language, his rigorous formalism offers an important lesson for posthumanist rhetorical theory. For example, when he asserts that a text may be considered literary if it “implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature, that is, of its ‘rhetoricity,’” he can be read as highlighting a mark of rhetoricity that characterizes *all* discourse to some degree (1983, 136). Similarly, when he writes that a question “becomes rhetorical . . . when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings [literal or figurative] prevails,” he can be read as stressing the decisive role of formal—that is, rhetorical—operations in making language “as such” work, and work in a particular way that cannot be deduced from the structural properties, however aporetic and tropological, of signification (1982, 10).

This scrupulous attention to form helps explain why allegory acquires such pride of place in de Man’s work:

The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or the third) degree *allegories*. Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read

whereas tropological narratives . . . tell the story of the failure to denominate. The difference is only a difference of degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading. (1982, 205)

Note that the deconstructive moment is, for de Man, as constitutive of a text as it is of the system of figures it mobilizes. This does not mean only that all texts are subject to “failure”; it means also that the eventuality of their *failure can itself be a formal structuring principle*, whether asserted by the text or not. It is for this reason that texts can allegorize—narrate through their enunciated content—the impossibility of reading them. For de Man, such allegorical metanarration is emblematic of the discourse of modernity, which is centrally concerned precisely with the impossibility of “metaphorical” closure. That is, de Man demonstrates that allegory can supply the *rhetorical form* of a discourse that preempts what Laclau calls hegemony.

The rhetorical efficacy of such a discourse inheres in allegory’s capacity *to stage the problems of signification as political problems* par excellence. Put another way, allegory corresponds to a specific (and hardly unique) discursive way of coordinating the tropological play of signification and the necessity/impossibility of hegemonic closure. But it does more than coordinate, if this implies the operation of these forces prior to their imbrication within an allegorical or any other discursive mode. We have seen that tropological play is nothing other than *différance*, and that structure effects are products of iterability. Rhetoric, then, is not the mere articulation of difference and equivalence through an empty signifier but *pertains to those formal operations that specify the conditions of possibility and social significance* of such articulations.

Once the rhetoricity of discourse is understood in terms of iterable performances rather than tropological interactions, a crucial further lesson to be drawn from de Man is that the formal aspects of discourse play a decisive role in determining what language “itself” is, what it is for, and how it functions—in sum, what Michael Silverstein has called the “language ideology” implicit in discursive performances and ultimately indissociable from language “as such.” Discursive structure, while it presupposes the aporetic interaction of difference and equivalence, is a function not of *semiotic* closure (however notional) but of the complex recursive or self-referential operations of the signifying medium, operations that

themselves stabilize the coherence they “presuppose.” As Silverstein explains, “The ‘event’ model of discursive interaction . . . is already a *metapragmatic* representation of the facts of indexicality, attributing to them a *cohesive structure* that orders discursive interaction as some *interactional text* with event-relevant sequentiality, accomplishable or achievable purposivity, etc.” (1993, 36, emphasis his).

As a constitutive dimension of its functional operation, discourse necessarily includes normative conceptions of language, its capabilities, functions, and uses. For Silverstein, these language ideologies embed metalinguistic premises about what language is, can do, and is for within discursive patterns that engender meaning precisely to the extent that they meet the normative expectations they postulate. This means that language use invariably involves a set of reflexive operations that preclude any reduction of discourse to what Laclau calls articulation. Language is not rhetorical because it has to rely on tropes in its effort acquire the “impossible” semblance of a closed system; rather, it is rhetorical because meaning presupposes intralinguistic formal operations whose variability corresponds to a plurality of possible ways of orienting and governing signification.

As Laclau insists, what is true of language is true of discourse generally and thus applies to social objectivity *tout court*. In this context, then, rhetoric would pertain to concrete social forms, or what Stuart Hall calls the “different levels of determination” that escape analysis in Laclau and Mouffe’s work (1996, 148).¹⁵ For example, as I argue extensively elsewhere, Laclau’s selection of “the people” as the paradigmatic instance of political agency itself presupposes the historical emergence of a social imaginary whose rhetorical form encodes a novel logic of representation organized around the systematic production of denotative “emptiness” as its signature feature (Kaplan, forthcoming). That is, “the people” is central to the rhetorical ontology of social objectivity not simply because it is an apt expression of rudimentary discursive logics but also because a rhetoric of emptiness installs “the people” as the social form condensing a discrete ideology of signification (Warner, 1990; Lee, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Integrating de Man’s insights concerning the significance of form with Silverstein’s elucidation of language ideology and metapragmatics makes it possible to see that the discourses of modernity proliferate rhetorical forms that militate against hegemonic closure and that, indeed, this

proliferation overdetermines what “politics” has come to mean. It follows that the contemporary political imaginary corresponds to a kind of “rule of allegory”—a kind of antihegemonic hegemony in which it is not an empty *signifier* but the reflexive allegorical *form* that “constructs a people” by explicitly stipulating that this “people” is *only* a metaphor. The significance of *this* “people” is precisely that, through its genesis in allegory, it mediates the production of meaning by *forestalling* the integration of a discursive totality. The metapragmatic features of this discourse comprise a language ideology that construes totalization as a dangerous ruse. In other words, Laclau’s consternation regarding the proliferation of heterogeneous political identities and movements misconstrues the problem as a historical contingency: this proliferation is not the result of a temporary failure to integrate diverse political projects around an empty signifier but precisely evidence of a hegemonic discursive form that preempts such integration.

Before lighting on populism as the exemplar of political logic predicated on what he idiosyncratically calls “democratic” demands (it seems “demotic” is a more appropriate term), Laclau defined democracy in a way that clearly resonates with de Man’s notion of deconstructive allegory:

There is only hegemony if the dichotomy universality/particularity is constantly renegotiated: universality only exists incarnating—and subverting—particularity, but, conversely, no particularity can become political without being the locus of universalizing effects. Democracy, as a result, as the institutionalization of this space of renegotiation, is the only truly political regime. . . . Democracy is simply the name of the terrain of that undecidability between content and procedures . . . which can never coalesce into any clear-cut blueprint of society. . . . This means that democracy requires the social production of empty signifiers and equivalential relations which involve both the posing and the retreat of the particular. . . . This is why representative democracy is not a second best . . . but . . . the only possible democracy. (2001b, 10, emphasis his)

If this definition also sounds like that of liberal constitutionalism, this, too, is no accident, since Laclau’s rhetorical ontology universalizes the predominant “language ideology” of liberal democracies into a general theory of discourse. But hegemonic—or “rhetorical”—struggle is not the universal condition of signification (though it is certainly always latent within signifying practice); it represents the normative self-understanding

underpinning the liberal democratic imaginary. No wonder all of Laclau's examples of political struggle date from the past two or three centuries and take place in what might be called "posttraditional" societies. This conflation of the ontic and the ontological, despite his deconstruction of the distinction itself, leaves Laclau with a model of radical politics that is, in the end, not as radical as it aspires to be. But more importantly in the present context, it leads to a model of rhetoric peculiarly inadequate to the political task Laclau assigns it.

Language is rhetorical not chiefly because its necessary/impossible closure relies on the tropological displacement epitomized by catachresis but precisely because its signifying capacity *does not* depend on such closure. System effects, structure effects, or context effects are unavoidable features of meaning production, but the actual absence of such totalities is proof that they are not preconditions for meaning. Postulated as virtualities by signifying acts, hegemonies are byproducts, not sources, of rhetorical efficiency. In brief, signification is rhetorical because it is a product of the interaction between the pragmatic and metapragmatic capacities of language. Like de Man's allegory, democracy, as Laclau defined it prior to opting for populism as a model grounded in "democratic" (or demotic) demands, is a metapragmatic discourse—one that takes its pragmatic dimension as an object and thereby short-circuits the hierarchy of functions presupposed by the operational efficiency of communication. Thus the problem with Laclau's theory of rhetoric is not that, like its sources in structuralist poetics, it "reduces" rhetoric to trope and thereby robs it of its proper dignity as the essential art and medium of human accommodation; rather, it is that Laclau's residual structuralism survives its deconstructive modification and leads him to situate rhetorical efficiency in the wrong place.

What is the right place? It is what I am here calling "form," or the discursive locus of the nexus between the pragmatic and metapragmatic functions of language, neither of which exists as such outside this nexus. It is within this nexus that "undecidability" becomes important, since their mutual influence undermines any hierarchy between the pragmatic ("semiotic") and metapragmatic ("ideological") dimensions of discourse. This undecidable relationship constitutive of form, rather than either Laclau's dislocated semiotic ontology or the realm of human cooperation valorized by Vickers, is the site of rhetorical efficiency. Laclau's innovative theory of politics seems to require a robust account of rhetorical agency free of humanist conceit yet capable of explaining historical phenomena, one that incorporates an adequately sophisticated conception of discursive form.

To develop such a conception, it will be necessary to eliminate the residual structuralism constraining the theory of hegemony.

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NOTES

1. It is worth noting that Laclau has recently assumed the post of distinguished professor of humanities and rhetorical studies at Northwestern University.

2. It is vital to see that the lesson Laclau extracts from deconstruction—the aporia between the necessity and impossibility of totalization—becomes the engine of politics in his theory. But there is another way to understand Derrida's insight into this aporia. For Derrida, the production of identity and totality is 1) simultaneous and 2) fortuitous. As we will see, the notion of struggle runs afoul of this.

3. There is an important further reason—the inevitability of antagonism between the principle of totalization and the excluded element—to which we will return.

4. “The minimal unit in our social analysis is the category of demand. It presupposes that the social group is not an ultimately homogeneous referent but that its unity should rather be conceived as an articulation of heterogeneous demands” (2006, 654).

5. It is worth pausing to ask how it happens that the frustration of demands brings about reference to something like “rights.” The concept of right has a very specific cultural derivation and involves an entire historically novel social imaginary. But even if all Laclau has in mind is an inchoate sense of lack, it matters a great deal whether this sense is converted into a corresponding sense of entitlement linked to social relations, assumes the form of resignation to fate, or finds expression as longing for natural or divine compensation. These are not merely different proxies filling the place of lack but presuppose radically different conceptions of order that vary in the specific status and roles assigned to lack and fullness themselves. These implications are embedded in the corresponding empty signifiers, but they cannot be reduced to these signifiers or to the articulations of difference and equivalence they coordinate.

6. During the 1990s, Laclau relied much more explicitly on the Derridean notion of “undecidability” to underwrite his theory radical politics. For an extended elaboration of his theory at that stage of its development, see Laclau 1997.

7. In arguing that identity is constituted through “radical investment,” Laclau links the catachrestical production of hegemony to the affective production of subjectivity. On this point, he encounters an objection from Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis (2004), who argue that he has collapsed the crucial Lacanian distinction between the discursive symbolic order and the affective “fundamental fantasy” of the subject. The point of the distinction is to differentiate between a *social* logic (the big Other, structured around an

“empty” Master signifier) and its *psychic* counterpart (structured around constitutively “missing” *jouissance*). The lack in the Other is “filled” by a paradoxical symbol; the lack in the subject is “filled” by the paradoxical operation of desire. The latter functions as the support of the former, yet the two remain analytically and functionally distinct. As Glynos and Stavrakakis insist, this is the reason why ideology critique must go beyond identifying the contingency and emptiness of the “Master signifier” and take the additional step of “traversing the fantasy” that enables the subject to *enjoy* and even *desire* her submission to the hegemonic symbolic order.

In response to this objection, Laclau insists that the distinction they draw between the logic of the symbolic order and the affective structure of fundamental fantasy is, following his revision of the category of discourse, superfluous. Instead, “affect” is simply the name of the subject’s “radical investment” in the hegemonic signifier; it is not an independent psychological counterpart to the symbolic (2004, 299–304). The problem with this explanation is that it begs the question of whether the psyche is ordered by the *same* relations of difference and equivalence that integrate a hegemonic order or whether it possesses a principle of coherence that enables it to link psychically heterogeneous subjects to the same *social* object of desire. The turn to tropes is precisely the moment when this distinction is annulled and refashioned as the rhetoricity of language. Put simply, the symbolic would not be a logic distinct from fantasy; instead, fantasy would be a socially shared discourse that simultaneously posits and defers symbolic integration. Laclau’s erasure of the distinction between the symbolic and the affective transforms the category of affect into an enigmatic supplement. On the one hand, it is tautologically assimilated to radical investment; on the other, it is adduced to explain what radical investment is. It is thus supposed to *add* something to the theory of hegemony, but it *occupies an already occupied place* in that theory. And it is a crucial place, insofar as hegemony corresponds to a structure of identification.

One implication of the possibility that affective investment produces a psychic order distinct from the hegemonic one is the pivotal role of a whole range of rhetorical operations “mediating” the relationship between these orders, operations that are not reducible to either the production of equivalential chains of elements or the subversion of hegemonic signifiers. Such a notion of mediation returns us, however, to the impasse of the agentive willing subject both required and precluded by discourse theory. In short, recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis, whether to recover the realm of fantasy or to assimilate it to the symbolic, only reproduces, in deferred form, the dilemmas arising out of structuralist linguistics and poetics, now encoded in the supplementary notion of affect.

8. This is why he consistently expresses skepticism concerning the possibility of the “end of metaphysics.” For Derrida, metaphysics is not a simple error to be avoided or an ideological ruse to be overcome but is built into signification itself. The question, however, concerns the status and rhetorical implications of its necessity.

9. This is a key implication of Paul de Man’s notion of allegory, to which we will return.

10. The essay condenses the more detailed discussion offered in the first three chapters of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

11. Vickers approvingly quotes R. H. Robins: “We must situate language in the world, in concrete human situations, for ‘it is contextual function alone that constitutes and guarantees linguistic meaning’” (1988, 55). In retrospect, it seems clear that Vickers substantially misunderstood what he, with palpable derision, called “deconstructionism” and in particular the import of Paul de Man’s work for rhetoric. It also seems clear that the nostalgia for the concrete human world is itself a symptom of the discursive phenomena that deconstruction sought to explain. Nonetheless, radical contextualism is today back in force and in vogue, although perhaps not in the form for which Vickers agitated. Among my aims here is to suggest that de Man’s work constitutes a formalism that, if revised, could prove helpful in recuperating a more contextually alert mode of rhetorical theory and criticism, one that does not, however, lapse back into nostalgic humanism.

12. Vickers, of course, argues strenuously against the “reduction” of rhetoric to first four and then just two tropes. The problem, for Vickers, is precisely what he sees as the error of equating syntagm and paradigm with metonymy and metaphor, which he insists involve much greater formal complexity than these linguistic logics do. From this vantage, of course, Laclau risks reducing rhetoric to just one trope—catachresis.

13. It is crucial to note what Laclau himself does not, namely that the agency of this transformation of metonymy into metaphor is *time*. It is not, in other words, by the “primal baptism” of catachresis that protection against violence acquires the name “trade union” but by repetition. More precisely, the agency of catachresis is repetition, or repeatability.

14. Laclau himself uses the term, and vigorously defends his use of it, in his exchange with Judith Butler and Žižek (2000). In his initial reply to a series of questions posed by Butler, he explains that by “logic” he means “a rarefied system of objects, . . . a ‘grammar’ or cluster of rules which make some combinations and substitutions possible and exclude others” (Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000, 76). When Butler objects that his approach commits him to a transcendental notion of language severed from its concrete use, he insists that Butler has misread him, explaining that “without making an abstraction of the ideological content of the sentences, of the instances of their enunciation, and so on, a grammatical description of a language would be impossible” (186). He goes on to offer two examples:

The movement of commodities under capitalism does away with their particular individual characteristics to make them equivalent as bearers of value. Here we have an abstraction which directly structures social relations themselves. The *formal* characteristics of commodities are not imposed upon them by any aprioristic formalism, but emerges [sic] out of their *concrete* interaction. Now take another example—the discourse on human rights. In order to assert the rights of people *as* human beings, we have to make an abstraction of differences of race, gender, status, and so on. Here again we have abstractions which produce concrete historical effects in so far as they are incarnated in institutions, codes, practices, and so forth. (191)

Laclau is quite right to invoke the implications of social forms such as institutions and codes, but he fails to grasp fully their import for his theory. Commodities, for example, do not “directly structure social relations” but appear to do so only because they are embedded in a discourse—precisely, a rhetoric—that governs their concrete movement and produces the social space in which such a movement is possible. This discourse is not limited to linguistic representations; it includes particular institutions, normative self-understandings, repertoires of intelligible actions and forms of authority, criteria and logics of legitimation, and so on. A “grammar” of capitalism focused on the tropological displacements articulated in and by commodities will always fall short of accounting for the rhetorical operations of the discourse of markets that enable and condition these displacements, making possible and productive the concrete social fiction of equivalence—a rhetorical materiality that took centuries to generate. To gloss the social efficacy of commodities as “emerg[ing] out of their . . . interactions” is precisely to occlude, by grammaticizing, the complex rhetoric of this emergence.

15. For Hall, the problem with Laclau’s approach is that it tends to “produc[e] the concrete philosophically” and to evade the difficult task of analyzing precisely those features of a given historical conjuncture that transform conceptually contingent stabilizations into recalcitrant objectivities confronting social agents. Thus he chides Laclau and Mouffe for not “adding, adding, adding the different levels of determination” (1996, 148). In other words, Hall’s reservation is fundamentally a political one; he is not interested in the prospect of deploying a rhetorical vocabulary to conduct the critique of concrete “levels of determination.” Nor is he interested in pursuing the implications of such “levels” for discourse theory. From the perspective I am advocating here, it is precisely not a question of “addition.” Rather it is a question of substitution: structural logics are effects of rhetorical forces, which operate at the level of discursive—or social—form comprising every historical situation. Accordingly, a remodeled account of rhetorical form is what Hall’s own project would seem to require.



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