The Uses of Equality

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THE USES OF EQUALITY

The following exchange between Judith Butler (who at the time was in Irvine, California) and Ernesto Laclau (in Essex, England) took place during the months of May and June of 1995. Ernesto Laclau, born in Argentina, is well known for his *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* published in 1985 in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe. The work starts off by critically examining the concept of "hegemony" within a Marxist tradition, and it ends by proposing a socialist strategy that not only takes into account the criticism posited against the Marxist tradition of the last three decades, but also the emergence of new social and political fronts. *Hegemony* manifests a motive that is felt in the background of the following discussion: a politics of "radical democracy" (a term introduced in the book) should aspire to preserve the conflictive character of all social processes if it intends to avoid becoming a totalitarian system. In other words, a politics of a "radical democracy" should remain faithful to the dictum stated by the German poet Paul Celan: "build on inconsistencies." It is evident that Laclau and Judith Butler, the North American author of *Gender Trouble* (1990) and its sequel, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), share this position. In these works, Butler advocates the reactivation of the concept of "interpellation" in order to expose the ways in which any given subject is "engendered." The performative constitution of a subject, according to Butler, is defined through a reiterative convocation or "interpellation," which continuously exhorts the subject to adhere to a gender norm. Not all sequences and efforts at interpellation, however, are completely successful; hence the need for notions of "deviations" in contrast to the norm. This theoretical standpoint facilitated a deconstruction of social gender norms and addressed issues raised by the gay and lesbian communities. In *Bodies That Matter,* however, a growing emphasis was placed on the articulation of the task at hand within a broader field of the democratic claims of minorities. Here, references to Mouffe and Laclau and to the concepts of "articulation" and "hegemony" were increasingly necessary.

The link between Butler and Laclau was extended by the dialogue that follows. An example of this is the notion that all identities constitute themselves by differentiation. However, differentiation immediately implies antagonism. Identities exist because there are differences in strength, antagonism, and finally, in hegemony. According to both Butler and Laclau, the social constitutes itself as the space in which hegemonic relations unfold. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of any hegemonic position to never gain stability: any hegemonic position is always exposed to the risk of being subverted. Thus the recurrence of two issues that play a role in the following discussion: the existence of hegemonic relations and, hence, exclusion, found in the social domain. But since no particular exclusion is based on "the nature of things," or can be ultimately justified, no exclusion can be definite, and no politics can achieve a final form. It is within the gap between the recognition that exclusion always exists in the social domain, and the rupture it provokes—that is to say, between the affirmation that no situation is purely structured and that no structure formation is ever complete—that perhaps the program of radical democracy unfolds.

Equality, as a signifier and as a thing—if it exists—was the topic proposed to Butler and Laclau: their dialogue exceeds our original expectations.

Reinaldo Laddaga

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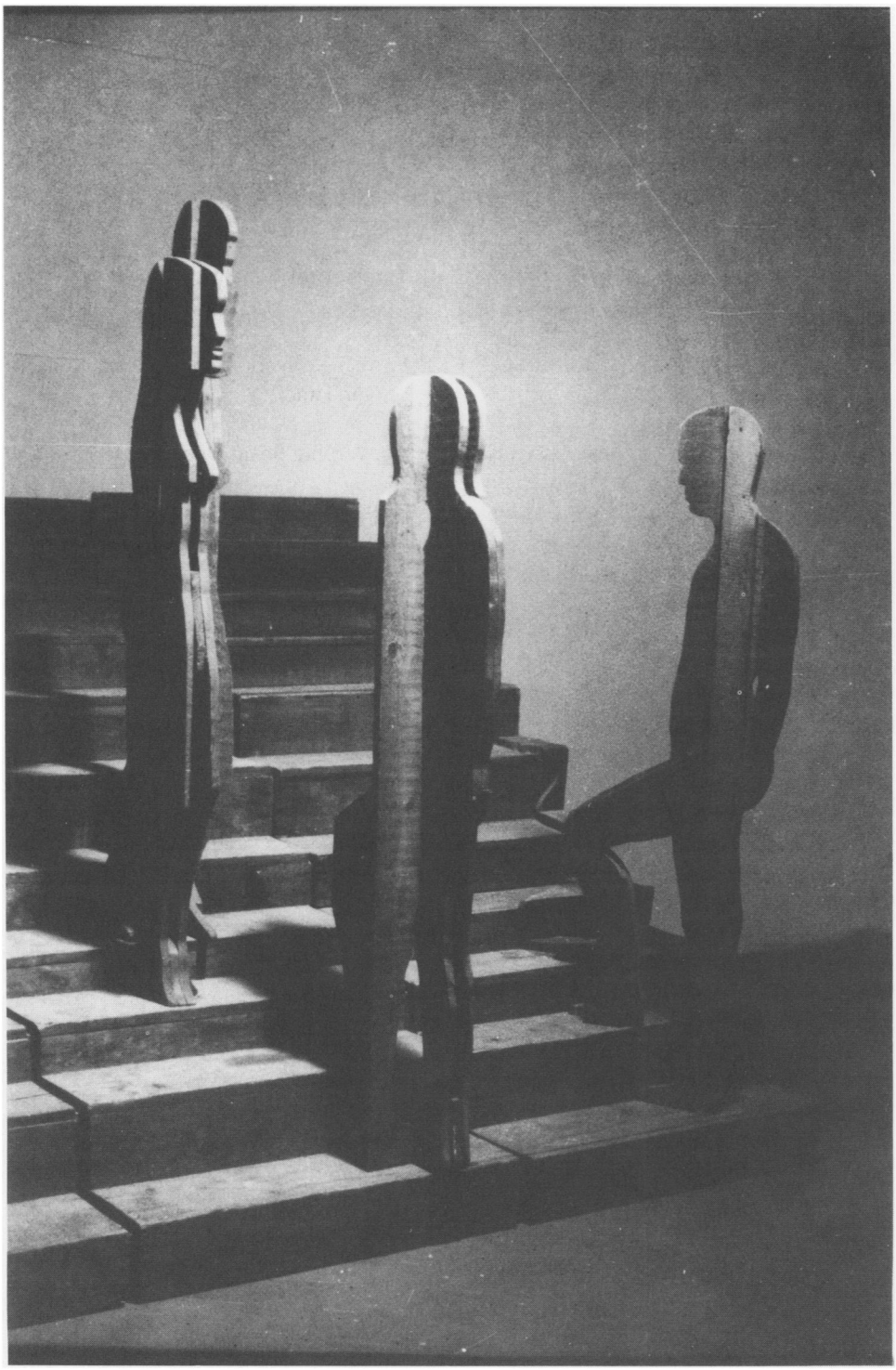

What's the political value, today, of the use of the signifier "equality"? Considering the poststructuralist elaboration of "difference," how does "equality" work today in gender and/or race politics? "Difference" has been, for more than a decade, the key word for a certain number of programs related to radical democracy. Certainly, "difference" has given space to the constitution of new types of social solidarity. Recently, however, some reservations on the extension of the term have been published. Chantal Mouffe—in her introduction to *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*—has stated that "all differences cannot be accepted" in order "for pluralism to be made compatible with the struggle against inequality." Mouffe doesn't clarify, in this particular text, the criteria with which to discriminate between "acceptable" and "nonacceptable" (or, maybe, "pertinent" and "nonpertinent") differences, neither does she give a nonequivocal definition of "equality." Both are tasks that seem crucial for the project of a radical democracy. On his part, Alain Badiou has written that "aujourd'hui, le concept de liberté n'a pas de valeur immédiate de saisie, parce qu'il est captif du liberalisme, de la doctrine des libertés parlamentaires et commerciales," such that "le vieux mot de l'égalité est aujourd'hui le meilleur" for "une politique d'émancipation post-marxiste-léniniste." Would you agree with Badiou's affirmation?

I understand, on my part, that "equality" has received in radical democratic theory, and in recent gay/lesbian and race theory, a treatment much less detailed than "freedom" or even "fraternity" (in the form of the problem of the constitution of counterhegemonic types of community). How do you interpret this fact? What sense can we make of "equality" in the context of progressive politics today?

RL

Dear Ernesto,

Sorry to begin this a day late, but too many interruptions happened yesterday. Ernesto, I'm very pleased to be in touch, and hope all is well there (I tried to call you when I was last in England but got a recording from a business that was trying to sell telephones . . . struck me as a telephonic *mise en abyme*).

We are asked to begin a conversation on equality, and on the problem of acceptable and unacceptable differences. I hardly know where to begin, and think that you would probably join me in the sense of unease that follows from being asked to decide what kinds of differences ought to be included in an ideal polity, and what kinds of differences undermine the very possibility of polity, perhaps even the very ideality without which no democratic notion of polity can proceed. I am a bit perplexed as well by the question of whether or not the notion of inclusion and exclusion, which I know has occupied your work for some time now, is strictly correlated to the notion of equality. So perhaps I will start by offering a set of distinctions between "inclusiveness" and "equality." It seems to me that inclusiveness is an ideal, an ideal that is impossible to realize, but whose unrealizability nevertheless governs the way in which a radical democratic project proceeds.

I gather that one of the reasons, or the key reason, why inclusiveness is bound to fail is precisely because the various differences that are to be included within the polity are not given in advance. They are, crucially, in the process of being formulated and elaborated, and that there is no way to circumscribe in advance the form that an ideal of inclusiveness would take. This openness or incompleteness that constitutes the ideal of inclusion is precisely an effect of the unrealized status of what is or will be the content of what is to be included. In this sense, then, inclusion as an ideal must be constituted by its

own impossibility; indeed, it must be committed to its own impossibility in order to proceed along the path of realization.

Equality is, of course, a strange concept when thought in relation to this model (a model that I take to be derived from your thinking on this issue, as well as Chantal Mouffe's). Equality would not be the equalization of given differences. That formulation suggests that differences are to be understood as tantamount to specificities or particularities. And the point of a futural re-elaboration of the notion of equality would be to hold out the possibility that we do not yet know who or what might make a claim to equality, where and when the doctrine of equality might apply, and that the field of its operation is neither given nor closed. The volatility of the Equal Protection Clause in the US Constitution gives evidence of this in an interesting way. Is it the case that those who are addressed by "hate speech" are deprived of their abilities to participate equally in the public sphere? Some feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon, argue that pornography ought to be opposed because it produces an epistemic atmosphere in which women are not entitled to exercise their rights of equal treatment and participation. Although I oppose MacKinnon's view (and her understanding of the performative operation of representation), I do appreciate the way in which the doctrine of equality becomes a site of contestation within recent US constitutional debates. It suggests that we do not yet know when and where the claim to equality might emerge, and it holds out the possibility for a futural articulation of that doctrine.

So, in one sense, then, it seems that the notion of equality would proceed undemocratically if we claim to know in advance who might make use of its claim, and what kinds of issues fall within its purview. And this relates to the ideal of an impossible inclusiveness: who is included among those who might make the claim to equality? What kinds of issues undermine the very possibility of certain groups making such a claim?

But this then raises a different question, namely, are exclusions always to be overcome, and are there certain kinds of exclusions without which no polity can proceed? How might we enumerate such excluded possibilities? Certainly, some kinds of crimes are and ought to be punishable, excluded from the realm of the acceptable, and certainly there are taboos—foreclosures in the Lacanian sense—without which no subject can function as a subject. The "inclusion" of all excluded possibilities would lead to psychosis, to a radically unlivable life, and to the destruction of polity as we understand it. So if we accept, as I think we both do, that there is no polity, no sociality, no field of the political, without certain kinds of exclusions having already been made—constitutive exclusions that produce a constitutive outside to any ideal of inclusiveness—that does not mean that we accept all sorts of exclusions as legitimate. It would be unwarranted to conclude that just because some exclusions are inevitable all exclusions are justified. But that then gets us into the tricky territory of the problem of justifying exclusions. And here I am compelled to turn the conversation over to you. . . .

Dear Judith,

Thank you, Judith. I largely agree with you. Let me complement your analysis with three remarks. The first concerns the relationship between equality and difference. Not only do I think that these two notions are not incompatible but I would even add that the proliferation of differences is the precondition for the expansion of the logic of equality. To say that two things are equal—i.e., equivalent to each other in some respects—presupposes that they are different from each other in some other respects (otherwise there would be no equality but identity). In the political field equality is a type of discourse which tries to deal with differences; it is a way of organizing them, if you want. To assert, for instance, the right of all national minorities to self-determination is to assert that these

minorities are equivalent (or equal) to each other. As a general rule I would say that the more fragmented a social identity is, the less it overlaps with the community as a whole, and the more it will have to negotiate its location within that community in terms of rights (i.e., in terms of a discourse of equality which transcends the group in question). That is why I think that a politics of *pure* particularism is self-defeating. On the other hand I think it is necessary to differentiate those situations in which an anti-egalitarian politics takes place through the imposition of a dominant and uniform canon (this is the situation confronted today by multicultural struggles in the Anglo-Saxon world) from those in which the discrimination takes place by violently asserting differences, as in the idea of "separate developments" which constituted the core of apartheid. This means that, depending on the circumstances, equality can lead to a reinforcement of the weakening of differences.

My second remark concerns the question of exclusion. I agree with you that the ideal of total equality is unreachable and, also, that a society without any kind of exclusion would be a psychotic universe. What I would like to add is that the need for exclusion is inscribed in the structure of all decision making. As I have tried to show elsewhere, a decision, in order to be a decision, has to be taken in a structurally undecidable terrain—otherwise, if the decision was predetermined by the structure it would not be *my* decision. The precondition of a decision is that actual choice is not algorithmically prefigured. But in that case, if the decision is its own ground, the discarded alternatives have been simply put aside, that is, excluded. If we pass from individual to collective decisions this is even more clear, for the excluded alternative could have been preferred by certain groups of people, and so exclusion shows a dimension of repression which was concealed in the individual decision. I would add that a society without exclusions is impossible for more basic reasons than being an empirically unreachable ideal: it is also logically impossible as far as the social is constructed through decisions taken in an undecidable terrain. We can deal as democratically as possible with exclusion (for instance, through the principle of majority, or through the protection of minorities), but this cannot conceal the fact that politics is, to a large extent, a series of negotiations around the principle of exclusion which is always there as the ineradicable terrain of the social. As usual, *determinatio est negatio.*

This leads me to my third remark. We have been asked for a criterion to determine those differences which are acceptable from those which are not. Now, this can be interpreted in various ways. It could involve, for instance, the request for a strict ethical criterion, independent of any context. If it was so, the only possible answer would be that no such criterion could be given. It could also be a question about social ethics—namely, what differences are compatible with the actual workings of a society. This would be a more pertinent question because it makes possible a historicist answer. The gist of my answer would be to say that the very criterion of what is acceptable or not is the locus of a multiplicity of social struggles and that it is wrong to try to give any kind of decontextualized response. Obviously this is not an answer to the question "how would you draw the frontier between the acceptable and the not acceptable in Western European societies today?," but it allows us to at least discriminate between pertinent and nonpertinent questions.

Ernesto

Dear Ernesto,

Thanks for your response. I would like to concentrate on the last two points you made, one concerning exclusion and its role in any decision making, and the other, concerning how

one might decide what kinds of exclusions must be made for equality to remain an active ideal. I think that these two are linked in an interesting way, and the link is suggested to me by your focus on making "decisions" in both contexts.

I think that you are right in claiming that no decision can be a decision if it is determined in advance by a structure of some kind. For there to be a decision means that there must be some contingency, which is not the same as saying that there must be radical contingency. I take it that the relative determination of structure is what differentiates a position such as yours from a more existentialist or conventionally liberal individualist view on decision making. Indeed, is it not possible to elaborate a notion of "context"—invoked in your response to the question of how best to decide what ought and ought not to be included in a polity and the inadmissibility of certain "differences"? It seems clear that a decontextualized answer to the question of what ought not to be included is impossible, and I think that the effort to elaborate principles that are radically context-free, as some "proceduralists" seek to do, is simply to embed the context in the principle, and then to rarify the principle so that its embedded context is no longer legible. And yet, this still leaves us with a quandary, since I would imagine that you find the Derridean questions raised in "Signature, Event, Context" about the "illimitability" of contexts to be persuasive, as I do. I think that contexts are in some ways produced by decisions, that is, that there is a certain redoubling of decision making in the situation (the context?) in which one is asked to decide what kinds of differences ought not to be included in a given polity. There is first the decision to mark or delimit the context in which such a decision will be made, and then there is the marking off of certain kinds of differences as inadmissible. The first decision is not itself without a context, but it would be subject to the same infinite regression as the second, since there would be no original or defining context that is not at once delimited by a decision of some kind.

I think it is a mistake to think that we might be able to list "kinds of differences" that are inadmissible, not only because you and I do not have the power to make such decisions, but because the form of the question misreads both what a decision is, and what we might mean by "differences." If there is, as you say, no decision without exclusion, without something being foreclosed, and a set of possibilities being framed, brought into relief through that foreclosure, then exclusion, as you say, makes decision-making possible. So perhaps the question is, what kinds of exclusions make decision-making possible, and is making a "decision" to be valued in such a way that certain kinds of exclusions ought to remain constitutive exclusions? This reminds me of Nietzsche's question: how does man become an animal capable of making promises? How do any of us become (through a certain kind of constitutive foreclosure) the kinds of beings who can and do make decisions? I don't mean to bypass entirely the question posed to us, about the inadmissibility of certain "differences," but I continue to have a difficult time reading the question. I wonder whether it is a question of "differences," understood as particular kinds of identities or group formations, or whether what we want to do is to keep the field of differences at play, in contestation, and that what is referred to under the rubric of "inadmissible differences" is really something which puts a freeze on the play of differences. I look forward to your further thoughts.

Judith

Dear Judith and Ernesto,

Thank you for your comments. One very brief remark. When I mentioned Mouffe's statement it was not my intention to force you to decide which differences would be acceptable (a demand that would be manifestly nonpertinent) but to point to a certain

indetermination—an indetermination that could even be considered desirable—in the uses of "equality" in the context of radical democratic theory. I would prefer my question to be read in this sense: how to freeze the play of differences—to use Judith's terms—and still maintain "equality" as an "active ideal." How do we conceive a political identity which doesn't put a freeze on (which doesn't homogenize) the play of differences internal to itself? And, finally, do we have (and, more fundamentally, do we need) a definition of "equality" that is not "conventionally liberal"? You have already begun to answer these questions, I think . . .

RL

Dear Judith,

Let me first answer some of the points raised by Reinaldo Laddaga in his last message, which can serve as an introduction to my reactions to your comments. First, I think that the play of differences is *at the same time* an opening and a freezing of that play. I say this, because I do not think that something such as an unrestricted play of differences can be maintained, not even as an active ideal. I can only open up the terrain of some historical possibilities by closing others. This is equivalent to saying that it is politics, rather than the notion of uncontaminated presence, that organizes social relations. On the other hand, I do not understand what a "play of differences 'internal' to itself" could be. If identity means difference, then the idea of a "play of differences" internal to difference is something I do not fully grasp. Instead, I think that the play of differences subverts any rigid frontier between the internal and the external. This leads me to a terrain within which I approach the last two questions from Reinaldo. I would locate the notion of equality—from the point of view of the latter's constitutive structuration—within the field of what I have called the "logic of equivalence"; that is, a process by which the differential nature of all identity is at the same time asserted and subverted. Now, a chain of equivalences is by its very definition constitutively open; there is no way of establishing its boundaries in a decontextualized universe. (Trying to do the latter would be, quoting Quine, something like asking how many points in Ohio are starting points.) Politics is, in this respect, a double operation of breaking and extending chains of equivalence. Any determinate political process in a concrete context is, precisely, an attempt to partially extend equivalences and to partially limit their indefinite expansion. I see liberalism as an attempt to fix the meaning of equality within definite parameters (individualism, and the rigid distinction between public/private, etc.) which are historically limited and in many respects superseded—and not always in a progressive direction—by the experience of contemporary politics. How to deconstruct the basic liberal distinctions while keeping a democratic potential is, as I see it, the task of radical democratic politics.

I come now, Judith, to your reactions to my comments. I am glad to find that we are in agreement on most issues. Let us make, at the start, a point of clarification. I certainly agree with you that "radical contingency" is an unacceptable notion if we understand by it some kind of abyss which creates a total lack of structuration. What we are speaking of as the course of contingency is, rather, a *failed* structuration. Thus, contingency—if it is properly contextualized—should be reinscribed within the most primary field of the distinction necessary (*contextual* necessity, of course, not logical or causal necessity)/ contingent. However, having constructed contingency in this way, I would still say that it is radical in the sense that *within the limits of a partially destructured context* it can only appeal to itself as its own source. Would you buy this?

This leads me to the important issues that you raise, starting with your critique of "proceduralism"—a critique which I subscribe to. I think that the questions that Derrida

poses in "Signature, Event, Context" need to be answered and to be very attentive to the double dimension that they open. On the one hand, he is saying that it is not possible to, strictly speaking, attribute closed boundaries to a context. However, as his is not an argument for a return to a Platonic, decontextualized meaning, the very impossibility of delimiting contexts are all we are left with. They have to be defined by their limits, and yet these limits are impossible. Everything here turns around this evanescent object, the "limit," which is something like the presence of an absence. Or, to put it in Kantian terms, an object which shows itself through the impossibility of an adequate representation. Now, my own view is that if this limit is impossible but also *necessary*—something like Lacan's "objet petit a"—it will have to, one way or the other, enter into the field of representation. But as it is necessary yet also *impossible* its representation will be constitutively inadequate. A particular difference *within* the limits will always have to assume the role of limit and, in this way, to fix (to close within itself) a transient context. This relation of fixity/unfixity by which an "ontic" content assumes the "ontological" function of constituting a transient context is, as you know, what I call a hegemonic relation. As you see, it involves the Derridean critique of boundaries, but it attempts to prolong it with a notion of the dialectic between impossibility/necessity which makes possible the construction of hegemonic contexts.

This gives me a starting point to begin some sort of response to the questions involved in our exchange. What differences are acceptable or nonacceptable? We both agree that the question cannot be answered outside any context and, also, that the notion of context is far from being an unproblematic one. If contexts, however, are constituted the way I suggest, you have various advantages: (1) you can make compatible the ultimate instability of limits with actual limitations; (2) you have certain rules to decide what will count as a valid inclusion or exclusion, it will depend on the actual hegemonic configuration of certain community; (3) this hegemonic configuration is not a simple datum but the result of the transient articulation between concrete content and universalization of the community through the construction of a limit which has no necessary link to that content; that hegemonic configuration is always open to contestation and change. In this way we can reach a more democratic view than in the case in which the hegemonic configuration depended on a noncontingent link between context-limiting/constitution function and actual content playing that role of limit; (4) finally, the unevenness that hegemonic games introduce within differential social identities allows us to solve some of the aporias connected to the "play of differences," and allows us to approach the logic through which those differences are constituted in our actual political world. I wait for your reaction.

Best,
Ernesto

Dear Ernesto,

There is much in your last text to think about, and I hope to be able to probe some of the questions raised in what follows.

I very much agree with your formulation of the logic of equivalence, namely, as a "process by which the differential nature of all identity is at the same time asserted and subverted." And I wonder whether thinking about equivalence does not significantly alter the kinds of quandaries brought up by the question of equality. It always seemed to me that you and Chantal Mouffe were trying to underscore a structural openness (and, hence, a "poststructuralism") in the problem of identity that would at once honor the place of identity in contemporary political formations and yet dishonor its foundational or "ontological" claim. I gather that the point about contingency that you raise in the

subsequent paragraph speaks to the question of identity and equivalence as well: to the extent that all identities fail to be fully structured, they are each equally (although not substantively or "ontically") formed through the same constitutive failure. This "sameness" is interesting since it is not to be rigorously understood in terms of a given "content" of identity. On the contrary, it is what guarantees the failure of any given "content" to successfully lay claim to the status of the ontological or what I call the "foundational." I understand that you seek recourse to Lacan to explain this lack or failure, and that is probably where I would differ with you, a difference in emphasis, since I think that the failure of any subject formation is an effect of its iterability, its having to be formed in time, again and again. One might say, via Althusser, that the ritual through which subjects are formed is always subject to a rerouting or a lapse by virtue of this necessity to repeat and reinstall itself.

But I do wonder whether failure, for both of us, does not become a kind of universal condition (and limit) of subject formation; a way in which we still seek to assert a common condition which assumes a transcendental status in relation to particular differences. To the extent that, no matter what our "difference," we are always only *partially* constituted as ourselves (and this, as a result of our being constituted within a field of differentiations), and to what extent are we also bound together through this "failure"? How does the limitation on subject constitution become, oddly, a new source of community or collectivity or a presumed condition of universality? I would like to know more about how a contextual necessity is established. Is there a background or context that forms the tenuous yet necessary horizon of what we call "context"? Would the context that is also partially destructured, that does not yet fully assume the status of the ontological, also have a necessity that, strictly speaking, isn't a logical or causal necessity, but perhaps a historical necessity of some kind? Is it a spatialized historical necessity (Benjamin thought that post-teleology history would have to be read in a landscape)? And what are the conditions under which such a necessity becomes readable to us as such?

I gather that in your notion of democratic hegemony, there will always be a radical incommensurability between content and universalization, but that the two will also always engender one another in some way. The democratic task would be to keep any given universalization of content from becoming a final one, that is, from shutting down the temporal horizon, the futural horizon of universalization itself. If I understand this correctly, then I agree with it wholeheartedly.

I wonder, then, whether we might conclude our conversation by turning to the question of the "Americas," a term that figures in the rubric under which our conversation takes place. I ask it because it is so interesting to see, for instance, in "American Studies," as it takes place in the United States, how the borders of the Americas are drawn. It is often the case that the borders become synonymous with the United States, at which point the border of the epistemological object, "Americas," encodes and dissimulates a history of colonialism. Or when it is restricted to the continent of North America, excluding South America and the islands in between, there are certain stories one cannot tell about trade, slavery, and colonial expansion. What becomes interesting is how we might think about equality under this rubric, where the "subject" at hand is not exactly an identity, but a political imaginary, where the very boundaries of what is meant by a pluralized "Americas" remain importantly uncertain. Clearly the question of equality or, indeed, of equivalence, cannot be asked of an entity, "the Americas," if the very delimitation of that phenomenon remains to be known. Or is there a way of posing the question of equality without claiming to know, in advance, in what this phenomenon consists? Or even more importantly, is there a way of posing the question of equality that opens up the question of what the "Americas" are, what they are to become? How does one press the futural

possibility wihin the ontic articulation in order to ward off its foreclosure as the ontological?

Best,
Judith

Dear Judith,

The problems that you raise in your last text would, indeed, require more thought and space than the limits of this exchange allow me to give. Let me, however, address some of your basic points.

1. You say, concerning my notion of democratic hegemony, that if you understand it correctly, then you agree with it wholeheartedly. As a matter of fact, you have perfectly understood it, so there is no quarrel between us about this central point of my argument.

2. On our difference of emphasis concerning the failure of any given content to lay claim to the status of the "foundational," let me say the following. I entirely agree with you "that the failure to which any subject formation yields is an effect of its iterability." This formulation presents, however, an ambiguity. For it is perfectly possible to think of this iterability as something whose recurrence—or, rather, linearity—cancels the ontological difference, i.e., whose movement is at any stage incomplete (and in that sense a failure), but which as a system does not leave anything outside itself. In that case we would be in the realm of Hegel's Greater Logic: the failure of each single stage cannot be represented as such, because its "for itself" is a higher stage and, ergo, there is never constitutive failure, no ultimate deadlock. The insistence of Being through its various manifestations is nothing beyond the sequence of the latter. What, however, if the logic of the failure/iteration is not the logic of the *Aufgehoben,* if what insists in iteration is the contingency of the series, the hopelessness of its attempt at an ultimate closure? In that case, this moment of failure, of hopelessness, cannot elude the field of representation. The variety of the insistence, the presence of the absence of the object which sustains any possible iteration has to have some form of discursive presence. The failure of the ontological absorption of all ontic content opens the way to a constitutive "ontological difference" that makes power, politics, hegemony, and democracy possible. Now, you think that this involves, as far as I'm concerned, taking a Lacanian viewpoint. I am not entirely sure about that. What I am trying to do is to detect the multiplicity of discursive surfaces in which this irreducible "ontological difference" shows itself in modern and postmodern philosophy and political theory. Lacan's theory is certainly one of those surfaces. But I would not claim that it is the main—let alone the only—one.

3. Finally, "America." As you point out, "America" is some sort of empty ambiguous signifier: it can mean both South and North America, but it can also mean only the latter. This means that (North) American functions as an unmarked term, while the series of suffixes that construct the mark of the South involves, in its succession, a whole history of imperialist domination. America without distinctions was the discourse of subordination of the South to the North: the Monroe doctrine. "Hispano-America," the name of an older colonialism; "Ibero-America," the widening of the latter to include Portugal. Finally, "Latin America" was an invention of French colonialism, at the time of the Maximilian empire in Mexico, to legitimize an intervention which could cut the links with both the Iberic past and a rising (North) American imperialism. The fact that French intervention in the continent had no future made "Latin-" an innocuous enough prefix for it to function as a political frontier separating the South from the imperialist interventions of the North.

The question, however, which remains to be answered is this: has the signifier "America" without distinctions, without separation of the South from the North, any positive role to play as far as the Latin American peoples are concerned? My answer is no, I do not think there is any political gain for Latin America in playing around with the possibility of a community of destiny with the Anglo-American peoples. However, what about the Afro-American and the Hispanic minorities in North America: is there, for them, any language game to play around the ambiguities, the floating character of the signifier "America"? The answer, in this case, has to be different. It would be definitely wrong to think that the signifier "America" is, for those groups, once and forever fixed to the narrow history represented by the white Anglo-American tradition. Enlargement of the discourse of rights, of pluralist discourses which recognize the demands of ethnic, national, and sexual groups can be presented as a widening of freedoms and rights to equality which were contained in the (North) American political imaginary from its inception, but which were restricted to limited sections of the population. This multicultural and free "America" will be the locus of much more ambiguous and open significations, but it is this openness and ambiguity which gives its meaning to a democratic political culture.

Best,
Ernesto

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