

Laclau, Populism, and Emancipation: From Latin America to the U.S. Latino/a Context

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English Abstract

The aim of this paper is to begin thinking about how Ernesto Laclau's articulation of populism can help us understand the possibilities of political emancipation for US Latinos/as. On this view, emancipation is directly related to conceptions of identity on the part of marginalized or oppressed groups, and identity-formation is inextricably connected to history. My hope is to offer some preliminary yet fruitful comments that point toward a more robust engagement with the work of Laclau in the discourse surrounding emancipation for Latinos/as in the United States. Laclau's work can shed light on the idea of political emancipation for a very disparate and heterogeneous group. It is critical to not gloss over or minimize that heterogeneity, a conceptual point that Laclau relies upon in constructing his definitions of populism and emancipation. I use Laclau's framework and analysis of Peronism to investigate how helpful his ideas can be for US Latino/a emancipation.

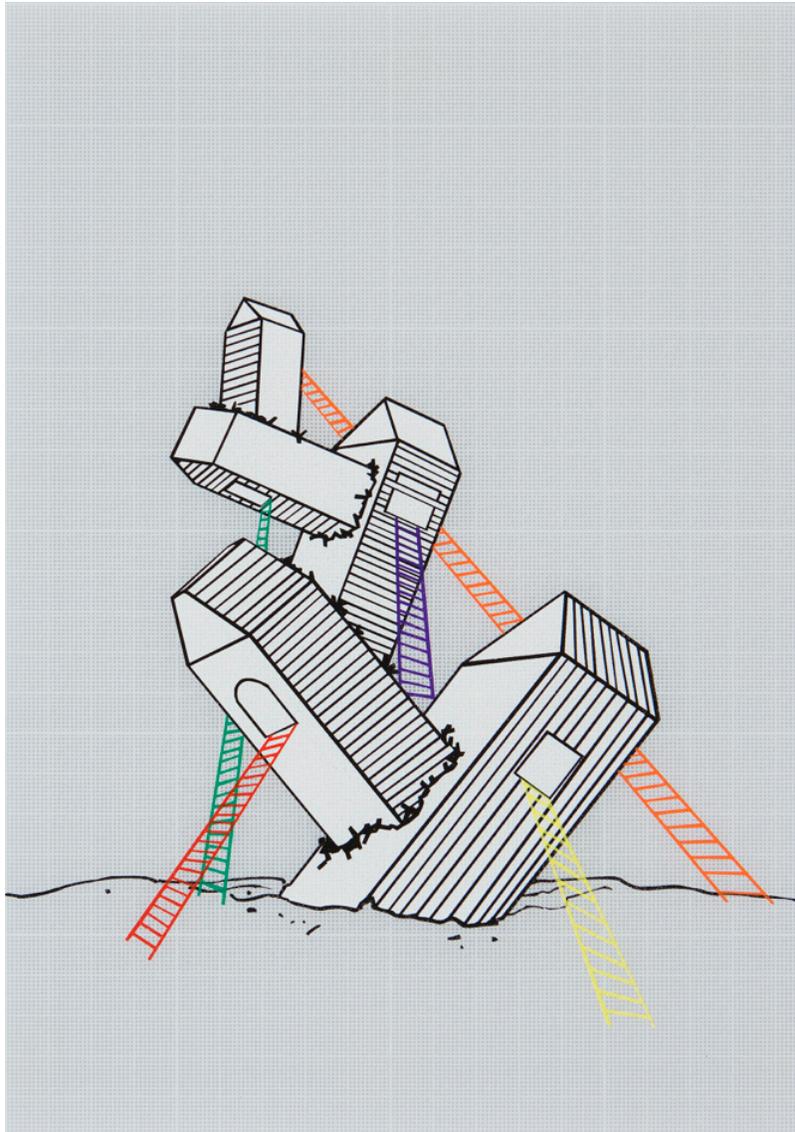
Resumen en español

El propósito del artículo es comenzar a pensar cómo la articulación del populismo en el pensamiento de Ernesto Laclau puede ayudarnos a entender las posibilidades de la emancipación política de Latinos/as en los EE.UU. Su definición de emancipación se relaciona directamente con las concepciones de la identidad de los grupos marginados y oprimidos, además de conectarse de manera inextricable con la historia. El objetivo del trabajo es ofrecer algunos comentarios preliminares que conecten más solidamente las ideas de Laclau con el discurso sobre la emancipación de los Latinos/as en EE.UU. Las obras de Laclau pueden iluminar la idea de emancipación política para un grupo muy heterogéneo, la imposibilidad de ignorar lo heterogéneo es un problema crucial que Laclau reconoce en sus definiciones de populismo y emancipación. Utilizo en particular el análisis de Perónismo como expresión de populismo para analizar los posibles lazos entre este movimiento y el discurso de emancipación de Latinos/as en EE.UU.

Resumo em português

O objetivo deste artigo é o de começar a pensar sobre como a articulação de Ernesto Laclau em populismo pode nos ajudar a compreender as possibilidades de emancipação política para o grupo dos Latinos em os EUA. Sua definição de emancipação diretamente relacionada com os conceitos de identidade de grupos marginalizados e oprimidos. Outro objetivo deste trabalho é oferecer alguns comentários preliminares para conectar as ideias do discurso de Laclau sobre a emancipação com a emancipação dos Latinos nos Estados Unidos. As obras de Laclau

pode iluminar a idéia de emancipação política de um grupo muito heterogêneo , a impossibilidade de ignorar a heterogeneidade é um problema crucial Laclau reconhece em suas definições de populismo e emancipação. Use em particular a análise do peronismo como uma expressão do populismo para analisar possíveis ligações entre este movimento eo discurso de emancipação dos Latinos em os EUA.



The principal aim of this paper is to begin thinking about how Ernesto Laclau's articulation of populism can help us understand the possibilities of political emancipation

for US Latinos/as. On this view, emancipation is directly related to conceptions of identity on the part of marginalized or oppressed groups, and identity-formation is inextricably connected to history. My hope is to offer some preliminary yet fruitful comments that point toward a more robust engagement with the work of Laclau in the discourse surrounding emancipation for Latinos/as in the United States. Regarding the term “US Latino/a population,” while I do not mean a population defined by any common essence, I do want to articulate group identity in a non-essentialist way. Our conversation must be grounded somehow, and doing so requires reference to those who would demand emancipation.[1] In this sense, I agree with Agustín Laó-Montes that Laclau’s understanding of political identities as “the politicization of social identities” helps us “to conceptualize how political subjectivities are not given and political struggles are not necessary, but instead arise in processes in which power relations become explicit matters of political contention and subjects become political actors. In turn, cultural identities can be built through the same process of politicization of subjectivities, which is an important aspect of the rise of Latino identities” (Laó-Montes 2001, 146).

Furthermore, group identification does occur, and is often the basis for the solidarity necessary for robust political action whose goal is emancipation. This is the case even though the basis for that identification is inseparable from the machinations of domination and oppression that emancipation is meant to overcome in the first place. Laclau’s conceptual framework can account for these empirical facts about group identification, which it does through two concepts that play an important role in emancipation. The first is *populism*, defined as the emergence of “the people” according to certain variables; and the second is *hegemony*, which is the relation that is constituted when a particular group identifies itself as a representation of a universal with which it is actually incommensurable. Importantly, neither concept can be separated from politics. Actions toward emancipation both proceed from inside that which they seek to escape, and toward the horizon of that escape.

I am focusing on Laclau’s work because his thoughts on populism and emancipation can shed light on the idea of political emancipation for a very disparate and heterogeneous group. It is critical not to gloss over or minimize that heterogeneity, a conceptual point that Laclau both embraces and relies upon as he constructs his definitions of populism and emancipation.[2] That being said, it remains to be seen how efficacious these definitions can be within the specificities of the US Latino/a context. I want to insist that the way that we think of and define the identities of the groups in question be open to reformulation in light of theoretical analysis, and that the reverse be true as well. Though group identities are not given in any robust ontological sense, they do undeniably exist both within the broader cultural context and the narrower way in which groups construct themselves. They exist both from perspectives external and internal to the groups themselves, existing actively with regard to their own traditions and practices, and reactively with regard to their treatment by the dominant groups.

I do not mean, however, to wholeheartedly validate the demarcations of these groups or to say that they do not sometimes operate in exclusionary fashion. The goal is to illuminate the exclusions through the possible meanings of populism and emancipation, such that the way we think about the construction of group identity, as well as the goals that we aim to accomplish through that construction, are sensitive to how the specifics of identity-formation for some means the impossibility of that same route to emancipation for others. Though this paper remains largely at the level of abstract and theoretical construction, theory depends on justification by those social beings who are actually constructing identities as opposed to merely theorizing them.

The paper will proceed in three parts. Setting up the theoretical apparatus of the paper, I first offer an elucidation of Laclau's formulations of populism, hegemony, and emancipation. In section two I discuss how Laclau's analysis of Peronism can be helpful in understanding how a particular populist movement can contribute to analyzing issues of exclusion that arise through attempts to forge new identities. Laclau illuminates how we can construct better accounts of political identities through populism's transversality, which he illustrates through his employment of the concept of the empty universal. Through the process of becoming entirely empty, "the links in the equivalential chain do not need to cohere with each other at all: the most contradictory contents can be assembled, as long as the subordination to them all to the empty signifier remains" (Laclau 2005, 217). My primary concern is investigating the possibility of a similar process in the constitution of a category named "Latinos/as," a group that, as with Peronism, exists as the nexus of a plurality of different interests.

Finally, in section three, I turn to efforts made by contemporary scholars to investigate the issue of Latino/a identity in the United States. It is important that this discussion is conducted against the background of both Laclau's theoretical view as well as his historical application of that view in his discussion of Peronism. The ways that identities get articulated are set within the contingencies of history and are at least partially dictated by them; identities are based upon political needs, and are responsive to historical movements and particular needs generated by particular contexts. With this point in mind, I will connect Laclau's work to the contemporary debate about Latino/a identity in the US in order to show how Laclau's work can provide constructive resources for that debate.

I Populism/Hegemony/Emancipation

The purpose of this section is to give an account of Laclau's analysis of how a popular movement comes into existence. He sees populism as something that surfaces in response to the failures of the status quo and of those in power. Rather than being one particular articulation of a state form, as in a populist state, it is a force that pushes back against the status quo's failure to meet the needs of the excluded. As a historically marginalized political operation, he claims, populism can lead to a politics of emancipation for those who have been disregarded as political subjects. This is why he

writes, “populism appears as a distinctive and always present possibility of saturation of political life” (Laclau 2005, 13). Accordingly, there is nothing inherently progressive about populism itself, making Laclau’s work on populism notable for attempting to distinguish between left and right populisms.[3] A rethinking of populism is not an end in itself for emancipation, but rather the first step in a new way of thinking about how emancipation may be achieved.

Hegemony is the concept that orients populism and emancipation.[4] In a 2001 essay titled “Democracy and the Question of Power,” Laclau notes:

‘Hegemony’ is for me the central category of political analysis. I conceive it as a special way of articulating the universal and the particular which avoids the two extremes of a foundational universalism—Rawls, Habermas—and a particularism which denies the possibility of any kind of mediating logic between incompatible language games [I take Laclau to be referring to Richard Rorty here]. I have defined ‘hegemony’ in my work as the type of political relation by which a particularity assumes the representation of an (impossible) universality entirely incommensurable with it (Laclau 2001, 5).[5]

Hegemony splits the difference between what Laclau sees as the two primary options for philosophers discussing political analysis. On the one hand, emphasizing the universal leads to an erasure of particular identities and their differences; and, on the other hand, emphasizing the particular leads to the inability of different particular identities to meaningfully interact with one another due to the lack of overarching mediating tools. Laclau insists on the necessary movement between the two poles so that one is never pursued at the expense of the other: particular groups need the concept of the universal to make political claims, but it cannot be a universal that denies the unique particularities of the group itself.

Laclau posits four theses to further clarify the hegemonic relation. First, it is constituted by an unevenness of power (Laclau 2001, 7). The second thesis is that “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” (Laclau 2001, 10). The prerequisite for entry into politics on this view is that a less powerful group identifies with a universal notion, which will in turn affect the way that the particular group is constituted. One example of this is Chicanos identifying with American identity, such that they claim belonging and legitimation as part of the identity of the United States, while simultaneously denying that doing so in any way negates their identity as Chicanos. Instead, what it means to be Chicano is altered through identification with the broader concept.

The third element of the hegemonic relation is that it “requires the production of tendentially empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between

universals and particulars, enable the latter to take up the representation of the former” (Laclau 2001, 11). Expanding on the previous example, the empty signifier is American identity. It is empty because it has no positive content and can be altered through the incorporation—through identification—of particular groups, in this case Chicanos. It is important to remember that the empty universal that is appealed to, and the particular group that appeals to it, are incommensurable. This ensures that the identity of the particular group is never completely subsumed into the universal and erased. It also ensures that there is a mediating device—the universal—that serves as a referent for the group’s identification and that allows for understanding on the part of those who are not members of the particular group.

Fourth, “the terrain in which [hegemony] expands is that of the generalization of the relations of representation as condition of constitution of the social order” (Laclau 2001, 12). The final dimension of the hegemonic relation makes clear that the social order is constituted through the kind of identification described in the example of Chicano identification with American identity. The social order is continually re-defined through these identifications as different groups make them, each time altering the meaning of the empty universal. In hegemony, therefore, the meaning of the social order is at stake; this is in fact the condition of politics (Laclau 2001, 6).[6]

From the links between the particular and the universal constituting hegemony, we can shift to ask the question: what is, or what constitutes, emancipation? Laclau argues that there is no coherent referent holding together the different ways that emancipation has historically been described. Though he critiques the existing discourse of emancipation, “this should not lead us, however, to the simple abandonment of the logic of emancipation. It is, on the contrary, by playing within the system of logical incompatibilities of the latter that we can open the way to new liberating discourses which are no longer hindered by the antimonies and blind alleys to which the classical notion of emancipation has led” (Laclau 1996, 2). Through making use of the empty universal we can play with the logical incompatibilities within the different dimensions of emancipation.

The view of emancipation that Laclau endorses does not presuppose a totalized view of society, for example, a complete break between the current conditions and the future emancipatory state of things. In fact, traditional notions of emancipation fail for this very reason. Laclau highlights the key distinction between homogenization and heterogeneity when he writes, “A certain universalization of social actors derives from this aggregation of particularities, which is, to a large extent, the exact opposite of the homogenization of the emancipatory subject in the Marxian notion of a universal class” (Laclau 2001, 10). Hegemony is a means toward emancipation, so on the standard view of emancipation there can be no hegemony because the asymmetry of power disappears through the unmediated universality of the ideal outcome; struggle—and politics—disappears (Laclau 2001, 6).

Laclau does not want to essentialize class or appeal to class reductionism in any way, and hegemony is the concept ensuring that contestation and renegotiation never disappear. The outcome of traditional emancipation is a universal class that is homogenous and contentful, a possibility that hegemony refuses: the place of the universal is empty and merely formal so that the hegemonic relation between the particular and the universal can always be renegotiated by diverse struggles. This is what constitutes politics, and the reason why Laclau views traditional emancipation as the end of politics (Laclau 2001, 7).

The hegemonic relation highlights the possibility of an oppressed group being confronted with multiple antagonisms that are equivalent in a negative way. The identity of an oppressed group is underdetermined, which is why Laclau concentrates on the hegemonic relation as being constitutive of the relationship between the universal and the particular (Laclau 1996, 15). However it is framed, it is the “empty” or “negative” element that grounds the fight against oppression.

A pure or contentful universal means the dissolution of politics since renegotiation is no longer needed (Laclau 2001, 7).[7] It entails a concrete organization of the social world that would serve as the one answer to the question of what emancipation looks like. Laclau does not think, however, that universals can be discarded, since they are necessary for the efficacy of political action. Hegemony is the concept he uses to walk this fine line. The emptiness of Laclau’s universal is attributed to the content of the identities of both state power and oppressed minorities, meaning both remain open to renegotiation through hegemonic operations.

A key element of hegemony is that it avoids class reductionism. Laclau uses the term *articulation* in order to “abandon the reductionist assumption [found in much of the discourse surrounding populism] and define classes as the poles of antagonistic production relations which have no *necessary* form of existence at the ideological and political levels” (Laclau 1979, 159; emphasis in original). There are three consequences that arise from defining classes this way, according to Laclau. The first is that class character is now thought of in terms of form, and not of specific content. Classes exist at the level of their process of articulation, not of reduction (Laclau 1979, 161). Nationalism, for example, can be used in any number of ways depending on who it is being employed by, be it a feudal class, the bourgeoisie, or the proletariat (Laclau 1979, 160).

The second consequence of abandoning reductionism is the existence of “non-class contents,” which are the raw material that make up class practices. I take these practices to be the articulations outlined in the first consequence. A class becomes hegemonic and dominant through these practices when it successfully neutralizes the antagonisms presented by the oppressed class or classes (Laclau 1979, 161). The oppressed or dominated classes also consist of articulating practices, and this is the point at which Laclau’s analysis and framework becomes especially important for thinking about U.S. Latinos/as.

These two different articulating projects move in the opposite directions. While the dominant class attempts to reduce and neutralize all antagonisms, the dominated class attempts to develop them in order to constitute a determinate social formation. It is not, then, in the contents of a discourse, but in the “articulating principle which unifies them” that class character must be sought (Laclau 1979, 162). Since content is now secondary the door is open for a class made up of heterogeneous elements to become unified through the practices defined within the hegemonic relation and the empty universal.

The third consequence is that classes and empirically observable groups do not necessarily coincide (Laclau 1979, 163). Once classes are defined through their form as antagonistic poles and not in terms of their content, the observable groups that are conceived of in terms of their content cannot be reduced to classes. The two may happen to coincide, but it is not necessary. Since classes come into being through articulation, their existence now becomes possible only insofar as there is struggle for hegemony (Laclau 1979, 164). Classes can be made up of heterogeneous elements—several different empirically observable groups—that become unified through their articulation of antagonisms pertaining to the disparity of power with regard to the dominant class. This non-reductionist view of class makes populism into a response to relations of power and the failure of the status quo. Indeed, as Laclau writes, “Populism starts at the point where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc” (Laclau 1979, 172).[8]

These three consequences of rejecting class reductionism highlight that “the people” is a way of constituting the unity of a group; it comes about through the emergence of social demands that transition from merely being requests to being claims. Populism actually constructs the group itself (Laclau 2005, 73). The representation of a totality by only a part means that society has effectively been divided into two camps, what Laclau calls “an antagonistic division of the social field;” the plurality of the social demands of the popular (read: dominated) side of this dichotomy is what comes to represent the empty universal (Laclau 2005, 83). The notion of a popular identity is what moves group identity beyond merely vague feelings of solidarity.

Initially there are social demands that emerge. These demands can come from different empirically observable groups, and those groups become linked through them and by virtue of them. In his earlier work, Laclau calls the resulting group a “class.” In his later work, he takes a further step regarding popular identity, which is intended to crystallize the class formed through the linking of social demands (Laclau 2005, 93). The further step is the inversion of the relationship between the link and the demands. The demands come first and cause the link. Once this occurs, in order for popular identity to become crystallized, the link has to come to take precedence over the demands, and in fact has to become the very ground for those same demands.

Now, the demand that is crystallized by the inversion is split, and again we see a relationship between the particular and the universal. On the one hand the demand is particular, since it comes from the bottom, so to speak; it is the demand of an oppressed or dominated segment of society against hegemonic state power. On the other hand, however, *qua* popular demand it must represent a wider totality. It must be what Laclau calls the “total chain of equivalential demands,” which is another way of calling it the form of the empty universal (Laclau 2005, 95). This can only take place if “a partial content takes up the representation of a universality with which it is incommensurable” (Laclau 2005, 106). The crystallization of popular identity through this process, along with its demands, is the means toward emancipation.

So far we have step one, which results only in vague feelings of solidarity, and then step two, which crystallizes these feelings into something more through the inversion of link and demand. The final element to Laclau’s account of the emergence of the people is that the link between heterogeneous groups that had been established through the emergence of a common social demand in the face of power and domination has in fact become primary, as the very ground for the demand itself. With the link established as the ground the stage is set for “radical investment (Laclau 2005, 110). Occurring at the level of affect, it is meant to finally overcome the vagueness present when it is only the social demand that ties groups together. More than a shared goal solidifying a social group, radical investment means that an affective bond is formed amongst the members of the group that is distinct from any mere consequence. The affective bond revolves around the identification with the empty universal.

On the emergence of social demands, Laclau writes, “A first form of heterogeneity emerges when, as we have seen, a particular social demand cannot be met within that system: the demand is in excess of what is differentially representable within it” (Laclau 2005, 107-08); heterogeneity is born out of a supposed homogeneity of society and its institutions. Demands come about when there is a tension between that overarching abstract homogeneity and the more particular heterogeneity of those individuals and group who make up a society. Populism is a certain kind of response to the failures and inadequacies of the contemporary social world and its institutions. Those united by it share the commonality of being subject to these inadequacies, but other than that, they remain heterogeneous.

The constitution of social demands is on the one hand at least partially determined by the manner of oppression and domination facing those who articulate the demands, and on the other hand determines, at least to some extent, the identity in question that is put forth by those who articulate the demands. Identity-formation takes place from this perspective. The project of identity-formation in Latin America certainly has a long history. Identity-formation and the struggles for independence from colonial powers often went hand in hand, though these struggles do not necessarily have to be against an *external* nation-state or colonial power. Those scenarios exist, certainly, for example in the struggles for independence from the colonial power of Spain on the part of several countries in Latin America in the 19th Century. But there are also examples

that revolve around struggles for independence from within one's own country. The Chicano rights movement in the United States, for example, seeks emancipation from the imperialism of its own government. The example of Puerto Rico is different still, given its status as neither a fully incorporated state nor a fully independent country.[9]

We now have an account of the process through which popular identities are formed and an account of the resistance and oppression that becomes manifest through such identities. I will now turn to Laclau's analysis of Peronism in Argentine to see how populism appears in a concrete context, with an eye toward providing constructive resources for the U.S. Latino/a setting.[10]

II Hegemony, Radical Investment, and Peronism

Laclau believes that "the emergence of the 'people' requires a passage—via equivalences—from isolated, heterogeneous demands to a 'global' demand, of which radical investment is a key component." Accordingly, the people's emergence involves not only the *forms* that investment takes, but also the *force* of which it consists (Laclau 2005, 110). This section will look at Laclau's example of Peronism in his native Argentina against the backdrop of the notion of affective radical investment. We will then be able to ask how such an investment can occur in the context of the self-identity of Latinos/as, given the diversity and heterogeneity of the population. I recognize that many scholars have argued against Laclau's notion of populism in general, and his analysis of Peronism in particular, but regardless of these concerns, his understanding of group formation can still be an important tool with which to analyze the problems that heterogeneity poses to US Latinos/as.[11]

Laclau is clear that Peronism in Argentina was intellectually formative for him. In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* he writes, "When I read *Of Grammatology*, *S/Z*, or *Écrits* of Lacan, the examples which always spring to mind are not from philosophical and literary texts; they are from a discussion in an Argentine trade union, a class of opposing slogans at a demonstration, or a debate during a party congress" (Laclau 1990, 200).[12] Accordingly, when in need of examples for his discussions of the more theoretical elements of his texts, Laclau often looks to Peronism.

The general context for these considerations is the period after the coup of 1955 that ousted Juan Perón from power and yielded a period of instability lasting several decades, during which a succession of military dictatorships ruled the country and Peronist symbols and groups were banned. The resulting environment was one in which the popular demands of the masses went unmet by "a succession of less and less representative regimes," leading to "an accumulation of unfulfilled democratic demands" (Laclau 1995, 54). These demands—for housing, union rights, wages, protection of national industry—were the products of particular groups, not a unified set put forth by a single entity. There was, however, something equally expressed by each of them: opposition to the regime.

The result is that previously distinct demands become unified through that opposition, gaining a dimension of universality in the process. The universality achieved is not opposed to the particularities of the demands, but instead grows out of them. As such, there is no underlying essence that is appealed to as the demands coalesce (Laclau 1995, 55). In this case Peronism—even the figure of the exiled Perón himself—became the empty universal around which all of the particular demands revolved. The idea of a “Peronism without Peron” was even widely circulated (Laclau 2005, 215). The broad unification of oppositional demands were able to use Perón’s clandestine messages, sent illegally from his exile abroad, in any fashion they wished. There were additionally many apocryphal messages circulating, which were difficult to unmask as false since even the authentic messages had to be disavowed.

Such a situation, Laclau writes, “had a paradoxical effect: the multilayered nature of the messages—resulting from the chasm between the acts and contents of the enunciation—could be consciously cultivated so that they became entirely ambiguous. As a result, Perón’s word lost none of its centrality, but the *content* of that word could allow for endless interpretations and reinterpretations.” This word gave “symbolic unity to all those disparate struggles” going on in Argentina against the country’s rulers (Laclau 2005, 216). Perón as empty signifier was able to unite an ever-broadening popular resistance movement against the government, which eventually fell as general elections were held in 1973; Perón won in a landslide precipitating his return to the country and to rule.

The question then becomes, what happens to an empty signifier—which functioned due to the very fact of its absence—once that absence becomes presence? What Laclau calls “the game of the years of exile” had to come to an end, and Perón was forced to make political decisions once again (Laclau 2005, 221). Groups that had been united in their opposition to the state prior to his return now saw themselves at odds with one another due to their different positive political needs. The point to insist upon here is the reason that Laclau gives for this transformation: “No equivalence between them had been internalized, and the only thing which kept them within the same political camp was the common identification with Perón as leader.” The result was “one of the most brutally repressive regimes of the twentieth century” (Laclau 2005, 221). This is the very pitfall that any emancipatory politics for US Latinos/as must avoid, and it is an affective radical investment between heterogeneous groups that will see that it does.

How can we see the contemporary situation of US Latinos/as reflected in Laclau’s explanation of Peronism? The heterogeneity of the Latino/a population in the US is reflected by the plurality of demands that are made by that population. Different groups in different localities within the United States have distinct and localized needs, and there is no positive universal banner to which they can all appeal in order to unify those demands. Following Laclau, we can see that this need not affect the possibility for

efficacious political action on a large scale. As noted, radical investment is what can unite these diverse demands in the place of an underlying essence.

As in the Argentine example, the demands are the product of distinct circumstances and as such have no *a priori* link. Consequently, Laclau writes, “something qualitatively new has to intervene.” This is the moment of radical investment, which Laclau ascribes to “naming” (Laclau 2005, 110). The result is a retroactive linking of the varied demands under an empty universal. In Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s Peronism was the universal under which a series of distinct demands could be unified. In the US Latino/a context what is at stake is the identity of “the people” of the United States. Simultaneously, the linking of demands is done in the name of a category called “US Latinos/as,” who collectively claim membership in the group called “the people of the United States.” Context and need determine the name that the universal takes, meaning that a term that works in one context may not work in another (Laclau 2005, 87).

We can think of Laclau’s emphasis on heterogeneity in two ways. The first is in terms of hegemony and the uneven power relations between the dominant and oppressed classes. Recall that the relation between the unstable identities of the oppressed and of state power is hegemonic and is the grounds for politics. The question now is how to think of the heterogeneous Latino/a population of the Americas in these terms, which could be especially difficult considering the disparity in power held by the different groups. The second way of thinking about heterogeneity amongst Latino/a identities is in terms of the empirically observable groups that make up the classes that are making demands.

Hegemony requires that these empirically observable groups—themselves open to questioning—come together through the emergence of a social demand, creating the link that in turn becomes the ground for affective radical investment. Put into concrete terms regarding specific groups, each must be invested in the others such that a bloc is formed that retains the particularity of the linked groups; there can be no question of splitting off for separate gains. We should understand the present moment in the United States as one in which there is a crisis about the definition of “the people.” According to Laclau, the existence of such a crisis, the fracture of those who constitute the hegemonic group, is an important step towards the formation of new political discourses. Latinos/as, of course, are active participants in these discussions. Following Laclau, interpreting the processes of discourse through an understanding of the empty signifier can open up and make possible new reflections on how groups can be constituted. A radical investment at the affective level is necessary for something like a Pan U.S. Latino/a identity to emerge as populism.

The affective dimension of solidarity—radical investment—that Laclau sees as necessary for popular movements to cohere allows us to draw a parallel with the current situation of Latinos/as in the US. The language and experience of being oppressed, dominated, or marginalized in specific ways that are unique to lived U.S. Latino/a

experiences must be central to the articulation of this kind of investment. This means looking at the ways in which contemporary philosophers, writers, poets, and other thinkers within the U.S. Latino/a community explain and describe their identities and their formations. The goal is to find resonances within descriptions of lived experience, not to reduce any one perspective to another. Laclau characterizes populism in terms of resistance and a means toward something else. We can say that Laclau's populism is resistance that is the means to overcoming domination and oppression in the quest for political agency.

Laclau prefers a populist model to a classically liberal one for addressing the issue of emerging identities within pluralistic societies. This preference undermines the liberal emphasis on defining private individuals as members of a state and replaces it with a focus on the plurality of group identities that are already present, making it more successful in understanding how to make sense of changes in group identity. A US Latino/a populist project can only be successful if the radical heterogeneity of the U.S. Latino/a population remains central to any account. This means always keeping in mind the relationship between the universal and the particular and not falling into the same traps that some intellectuals have in the past. In a recent interview Laclau cites the World Social Forum as a concrete site where universalism attempts to avoid the kinds of exclusions articulated by Latin American thinkers from previous eras. Laclau notes:

We have suggested that there is a proliferation of points of rupture and antagonism, but we do not presuppose a clear mode through which these ruptures and struggles have to converge in one unified struggle. We think that the moment of political articulation, which of course does not occur through the party in the classic sense, continues to be important. This is evident in the World Social Forum ["Foro de Porto Alegre"]. There we see an expansion of movements that discuss their concrete experiences from different parts of the world that are affected by the logic of global capitalism. The intention is to create a relatively common language to establish the links among those regions (Laclau 2013, n.p. My translation).

Laclau emphasizes the heterogeneity of the participants in a specifically *global* discourse whose interests and needs are nonetheless tied together through their distinct experiences with global capitalism. The Forum is a site of inter-cultural dialogue where that dialogue is driven by the *differences* among the experiences of the participants. The differences themselves illuminate the varied forms of oppression and domination that global capitalism can affect, and are embraced as productive instead of effaced as superfluous. The Social Forum's focus on global issues and discourse highlights the importance of immigration as an issue of concern for US Latinos/as. It is an issue very much connected to labor and economies, and is therefore largely defined by the workings of global capitalism. Yet though it is a global issue, it nonetheless manifests itself in distinct and localized ways for the varied groups of US Latinos/as that find themselves in different situations across the United States. The Social Forum is an example of a discourse where these global issues come together in recognition of their

localized manifestations. The coalitions formed in places like the Social Forum exemplify the kind of solidarity endorsed by Laclau.

III Heterogeneity & Identity for U.S. Latinos/as: Is Solidarity Possible?

We can now begin to develop and expand Laclau's theoretical apparatus in terms of the question of how subjectivities are politicized in the context of Latinos/as. The goal of this section is to prepare the way for more fruitful conversation and the further development of an emancipatory program within the U.S. Latino/a context. This entails using Laclau's framework and analysis of populism alongside other contemporary theorists of Latino/a identity in order to shed some light on the possibilities for political emancipation for Latinos/as in the United States.

From the outset it was necessary to make clear that, though the ostensible subject of this paper is a group designated as "US Latinos/as," this heading must be immediately put into question, since part of what is being investigated through Laclau's constellation of concepts surrounding populism is the instability of such designations in the first place. As Cristina Beltrán notes in her book *The Trouble With Unity*, the idea that "Latino/a" designates a group as the answer to a question is the wrong way of going about it. Instead, she rightfully highlights a point that we have seen in a different form in Laclau, the fact that the term is "a site of permanent political contest" (Beltrán 2010, 18).[13] Given the theoretical apparatus outlined thus far, and with an eye toward the possibility of political emancipation, we must ask, how can we rethink the category U.S. Latinos/as?

As Daniel Mato notes, "I do not believe that the existence of certain significant assertions of difference may invalidate *per se* any social practices which are based upon or promote representations of a US Latina/o—"Latin" American identity" (Mato 2003, 292). When Linda Alcoff asks whether Latino/a identity is a racial identity the question resonates in part because of this heterogeneity. The three answers that she gives to the question are, one, for Latino/a to connote a group of ethnic identities based around cultural, social, and political links; the second is for Latinos/as in the U.S. to accept the current racialized discourse and insert Latino/a into it alongside white and black; or third, to reject group labels altogether and embrace an individualist perspective (Alcoff 2006, 229). Though the ethnic option focuses on identification through culture and history in a positive way (Alcoff 2006, 238), the realities of the racial discourse in the United States can easily undermine such a project. As Alcoff writes, "perceived racial identity often *does* trump ethnic or cultural identity" (Alcoff 2006, 241; emphasis in original). Laclau is useful here, since he recognizes the limits that the dominant discourse sets to the emancipation movements of those who are marginalized.

Race does not necessarily or essentially trump ethnicity or culture, though Alcoff is pointing out that it is possible and indeed often does, given the contingencies of the particular situation. She does not take either race or ethnicity, however, to be permanent or essential categories. This point resonates with Laclau's claim that the

meaning of the terms is related to the concrete demands around which they coalesce and the needs that they want to satisfy. It may be that certain terms better serve to satisfy different political needs.[14] That a term has gained meaning *politically* in terms of its efficacy and the needs that it is connected to does not mean that it coalesces into an essential identity. Alcoff also points out how focusing solely on ethnic identification undermines efforts of collective agency and solidarity (Alcoff 2006, 244-45). Again, Laclau is helpful in emphasizing that collective agency and solidarity does not imply a particular end to struggle. Instead, the empty universal allows for a subsequent re-articulation of identities that can work in different ways toward the achievement of different needs.

Though Alcoff's goal shows the shortcomings of the seemingly fruitful ethnic model, we can glimpse in her conclusions a connection to Laclau's articulation of popular movements as the shared response to domination and oppression. This is the affective overlap among the heterogeneous groups that is needed to supplement to the ethnic option, leading to Alcoff's own position of thinking of Latinos/as as an ethnorace (Alcoff 2006, 246). Her position allows for solidarity and agency while in no way denying or effacing the heterogeneity of the different groups in question.

We can fill out Laclau's call for radical affective investment across the heterogeneous makeup of a popular movement by linking it with Alcoff's conclusions about the consequences of reducing Latino/a identity to ethnicity.[15] In articulating the failure of the ethnic option and pointing toward the concept of an ethnorace, Alcoff also gestures toward an affective link connecting different groups with one another in solidarity. Laclau's more robust theoretical apparatus gives a holistic context to Alcoff's reflections on the nuances of race and ethnicity for Latinos/as in the United States. The empty universal is the horizon that provides orientation, a sense of place, or coherence to the multiplicity of identity at different levels, allowing us to make and find ourselves within a complex web of social institutions. Populism is the movement in its name that resists the gaze of state power, a gaze that determines, at least to some extent, the possibilities for populism and the forms that it can take within specific contexts. Think, for example, of census data relating to racial and ethnic identification. The terms found on census forms have shifted over the years, and with them so have some of the seemingly available and recognizable identities for Latinos/as.

We can now divide populism's resistance into two levels. The first is the resistance to the state gaze that determines the context within which US Latinos/as are able to fight for political emancipation in the first place. This fight entails the articulation of a US Latino/a identity that is held together by the radical affective investment of the heterogeneous groups of which it is made up. Such an investment gives non-instrumental meaning to the connection between groups, while not implying the ontological reality of the connecting term and therefore remaining connected to the needs and the process of their articulation within a specific context.

Accordingly, the second form of resistance is internal to the first, and is the contestation of the very identity that is given voice in order to do meaningful political work. There is a plurality of contexts to which we each belong, and our identities are formed in and through them. The choices made regarding these different contexts lead to the formation of different group identities, which in turn leads to a question that is central to identity-formation: who gets left out and/or left behind? If we are not to fall prey to the same problems that previous thinkers have, there needs to be a recognition of the empty universal, on one hand, as well as the overlap of different identities. Populist discourse must remain vigilant and self-aware at all times, ever-sensitive to the consequences of the political choices that are made and the strategies that are taken up.[16]

We have to also ask, certainly with regard to our example of US Latinos/as, what the limits are of this kind of solidarity between heterogeneous groups. As Laclau notes, “Popular identity becomes increasingly full from an *extensional* point of view, for it represents an ever-larger chain of demands; but it becomes *intensionally* poorer, for it has to dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous” (Laclau 2005, 96). By “particularistic contents” he refers to the manifest differences between groups that form solidarity with one another, say, Chicanos and Cuban-Americans, for example. He recognizes the difficulty and complexity of the balancing act required for the most effective constitution of popular movements. This is actually the ground of politics, since hegemonic relations are constitutive of social formations: there is always an uneven distribution of power. That is why popular movements are constituted through an analogical ambiguity with regard to ‘the people’ (Laclau 1979, 165). The meaning of the term is both already constituted, making it the terrain and condition for the popular movement in the first place, and also the stakes of that same movement.

Popular movements emerge through the recognition of the inadequacies of the social world, connecting those heterogeneous groups who each feel its force. This commonality is in some way to be outside of the current determination of the people. The popular movement, however, also makes the claim that those excluded are in fact the people itself. “The people,” a term without determinate content, is the empty universal that is required for populism to take hold.

In terms of the US Latino/a population, we can think of American identity as the empty universal, and another way of referring to the people. Recall the need to avoid reductionism, whether in terms of class, race or ethnicity, or any other identity that could serve as the basis for popular solidarity. Laclau makes this point explicitly when he writes, “All groups are particularities within the social, structured around specific interests. But they only become hegemonic when they take up the representation of the universality of the community conceived as a whole” (Laclau 2001, 6). The varied elements of the sought-after universality in the context of the United States with respect to Latinos/as include immigration, legal rights, equal pay, work conditions, among many

others. For Laclau these form a chain of equivalences with respect to the gaze of state power.

There are many ways that Latino/a identity in the US can be constituted, both by supporters and detractors: language, food, music, skin color, legal status, class, etc. The clear differences between these groups highlight the importance of focusing on the dual empty universals of a US Latino/a identity and an American identity, insofar as both are instantiations of “the people.” The former brings together in solidarity diverse particular groups based on political need, with the recognition that no single particular group takes precedence over any other. Together, they identify with American identity, both altering the content of what the term “American” means, as well as redefining what it means to be a Latino/a in the United States.

From out of the differences between these groups, and in the name of the universal, what are the affective relations that can be forged regarding the lived experience of marginalization within the United States? The next step must be to ask this question within the context that I have sketched throughout this paper, from the history of Peronism in Argentina to Laclau’s attempt to reconcile popular solidarity and emancipation with the undeniable fact of a heterogeneous population.

My purpose has been to begin a much larger project by setting out what I see as fruitful conceptual terrain for thinking about the political emancipation of Latinos/as in the United States. This conceptual terrain is both historical and contemporary as well as situated in terms of Laclau’s framework for thinking about emancipation. My goal has been to lay a conceptual groundwork for subsequent work that will be flexible regarding the unique demands raised by the different contexts within the heterogeneous population that we call “US Latinos/as.” A robust dialogue between theory and empirical work is absolutely necessary; hence the need to look to the history of theory in Latin America and its varied theoretical conceptions of identity and nation. Not in order to merely synthesize them, but to look for hermeneutical resources that focus on the specificities of different contexts, and then we can see how the theory responds.

Laclau is helpful because he is immersed in a Latin American struggle for political identity, viewing it through the lens of the relationship that he articulates between the particular and the universal. It also carries us forward to the contemporary scene and the issues faced by Latinos/as in the United States. Laclau’s modification of the particular/universal relationship in light of the pitfalls that befell earlier theorists places him in position to help address the concrete demands facing US Latinos/as today.[17]

Notes

[1] For varied discussions of identity see collections by Alcoff & Mendieta 2003 and Moya & Hames-García 2000.

[2] My choice to engage with Ernesto Laclau's work on populism and emancipation, and place it within the context of thinking about the position of US Latinos/as, by no means implies that other approaches would not be fruitful. My contention is that Laclau's theoretical framework is helpful in shedding some light on the complexity of the US Latino/a context, and that an engagement with his thought in this regard will be rewarding. Choosing other theorists will be rewarding in alternative ways, and these avenues should not be ignored (See Beltrán 2010, 18).

[3] How successful Laclau is at drawing this distinction is up for debate. Jon Beasley-Murray argues that Laclau's later work is less able to ground such a demarcation (Beasley-Murray 2010, 41, 47, 52). While acknowledging this as a plausible reading of Laclau, I think that his work is open to being supplemented in ways that would fix the problem, instead of discarding it. Laclau even seems to embrace the point that there is no guarantee that populist movements will be pleasing to the left (see Laclau 2005, 246). This only means that we have to supplement the mechanisms of populism that he outlines with the right kind of content. No simple task, to be sure, but a distinct one.

[4] Laclau's theory of hegemony is, "by some distance, the most fully developed and the least reliant on some vague 'common sense' of theories of hegemony" (Beasley-Murray 2010, 40).

[5] Laclau has developed this concept throughout his career, beginning with his early text *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, through his collaboration with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, to his more recent work in *Emancipation(s)* and *On Populist Reason* (cf. Laclau 2005, 70). I leave the collaboration with Mouffe out of this paper because though it deals with hegemony it does not extensively discuss populism.

[6] That Laclau draws inspiration from psychoanalysis is evident in the language of signifiers. Though I will refrain from developing this relationship here, it is worth noting that he is attempting to integrate the linguistic and semiotic elements of structuralist psychoanalysis into the social and political spheres.

[7] In addition to Marx's vision of Communism, Laclau sees Rousseau's General Will as this kind of universal meant to lead to total emancipation.

[8] Laclau later avoids the term "raw material" due to his shift away from Althusser (see *For Marx*) and scientific Marxism, also refraining from use of "class" to identify the subject of popular movements.

[9] The full histories of these groups and how the theory articulated here can respond to their needs is work for a subsequent project.

[10] Jon Beasley-Murray (2010) offers an insightful critique of both Laclau and hegemony theory more broadly. There is insufficient space here to delve into the details of his analysis, but there are several concerns. Primary is that "[Laclau's] analysis is so bound up in its object [populism] that it is no position to offer a critique" (41). Summing up his position, Beasley-Murray writes, "Substituting hegemony for politics and silent about institutional power, the theory of hegemony effectively becomes an antipolitics" (41). I hope to sidestep these objections by making Laclau answerable to

the details of the specific popular struggles for emancipation on the part of Latino/a populations in the United States; and third, by readily acknowledging that Laclau does not offer a complete solution.

[11] In addition to Beasley-Murray 2010, see Ipola 1982, Plotkin 1998, and Berlanga & Ledo 2010.

[12] “Argentina is the bedrock of Laclau’s theorization of hegemony” (Beasley-Murray 2010, 42).

[13] “‘Latino politics’ is best understood as a form of enactment, a democratic moment in which subjects create new patterns of commonality and contest unequal forms of power” (Beltrán 2010, 157).

[14] For example, a broad issue such as immigration necessitates a broad term, whereas a more culturally localized issue would be undermined by that same breadth.

[15] Alcoff also writes, “A realistic identity politics, then, is one that recognizes the dynamic, variable, and negotiated character of identity. It is one that acknowledges the variability in an identity’s felt significance and cultural meaning. Yet it is also one that recognizes that social categories of identity often helpfully name specific social locations from which individuals engage in, among other things, political judgment” (Alcoff 2000, 341).

[16] An example of this tension is the relationship between documented and undocumented immigrants. The lack of solidarity between the two groups highlights the need for radical investment between them. I thank Lucia Stavig for this point.

[17] Gracious thanks to Adriana Novoa and Andrea Pitts for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as to two anonymous reviewers at the *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* for their extremely helpful comments.

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