



## ERNESTO LACLAU: FROM RADICAL DEMOCRACY TO POPULISM

Céli Regina Jardim Pinto<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article examines the relationship between the concepts of hegemony, radical democracy and populism in the work of Ernesto Laclau. One of the conclusions is that populism cannot fully realize itself as a political project in scenarios of democratic competition. The central argument is that populist governments get weak and put themselves in the difficult situation of either losing power, or creating projects called popular democracy, which by the given conditions of populism tend to get close to authoritarian experiences. This is because populism does not have the necessary intrinsic conditions to carry out a pact that engenders radical democracy. On the contrary, populism is a limiting element of this possibility.

**Keywords:** Radical democracy. Populism. Ernesto Laclau.

### 1 Introduction

The 30th anniversary of the publication of "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy" (1985) (HES) by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (L & M) celebrated in the year 2015 coincided with a complex scenario in Latin America of successive crises in countries with governments center-left and left: Chavismo in Venezuela; Kischerism in Argentina, the PT governments in Brazil, the Evo Morales government in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador are strong examples. Some of these experiences, such as those of Argentina and Venezuela, are strongly informed by the theses of Ernesto Laclau. Outside Latin America, Syrizas in Greece and the We in Spain also drank from this source.

This article will deal first with the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (L & M) examining the concepts of hegemony and radical democracy. Later, it will follow Laclau's trajectory towards the concept of populism, trying to show that the way in which the notion was constructed in his work, does not constitute a moment of radicalization of democracy, but of a new political project, different from the original concept of radical democracy. The argument of this article is that populism cannot be fully realized as a political project in scenarios of democratic competition. Populist governments weaken and put themselves in the difficult situation of either

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<sup>1</sup> PhD in Political Science from the University of Essex and Full Professor of the Department of History of UFRGS (celirjp@gmail.com).

losign power, or creating projects called popular democracy, which by the given conditions of populism, tend to approach authoritarian experiences. In other words, populism does not have the intrinsic conditions necessary to carry out a pact that engenders radical democracy. On the contrary, it is a limiting element of this possibility. In order to clarify the following argument, it is understood as an experience of radical democracy a political regime that seeks to meet at least the following conditions: minimum income to all population, drastically reducing economic inequality; democratization of decision-making power through mechanisms of social control; parity of gender and ethnicity in all political and public positions, desoligarquization of party structures; effective participation, through the parties and other organizations of the society in the discursion and proposal of public policies; guarantee health and education in conditions, in equality for the entire population. In short, a radical democracy project ultimately implies overcoming the capitalist system itself.

The main argument that will be developed in this article is that Laclau, through the radical rupture with any class essentialism or economic determinism, made an important contribution to the understanding and analysis of the politician, identifying and explaining the logics of the construction of hegemony and centrality of the people as a political subject. His greatest discoveries, however, put him face to face with the complicated dilemma of how to think of a possible hegemonic stability capable of giving shelter to democratic and socialist projects. The solution of populism found by Laclau brings new problems, which seem to find no satisfactory solution in their theoretical contribution.

Two characteristics are central to the inaugural work of 1985: a break up with the constitutive foundations of Marxism and the design of a new strategy aimed at socialism, starting with a re-reading of the concept of hegemony in Gramsci. From 1985 until his death in 2014, Ernesto Laclau produced an extensive work that deepened, qualified and modified the bases put in HES. In 2005, when he published "The Populist Reason" (ARP), he presents his theory of politics in a more complete way, with some significant changes in relation to HES. The notions of hegemony and radical and plural democracy give way to those of people and populism.

The article will be organized from three entries: the concept of hegemony in the inaugural work; the concept of radical and plural democracy, in which will also show Mouffe's work, "The democratic Paradox" (2000); the concept of populism developed in "The Populist Reason".

## **2 The construction of hegemony**

The concept of L & M hegemony is tribute to Antonio Gramsci. The Italian philosopher broke with the proposed strategic alliance of the working class with other classes, contained in Lenin's vision, introducing the notion of real incorporation by the proletarian class of the demands and interests of the other classes and groups dominated and / or excluded. Gramsci thought of a mutual and spontaneous adherence of the proletarians to the demands of peasants and peasants to

the proletarian leadership. While maintaining the latter as leader, it makes room for popular discourse rather than exclusively class. Mouffe, in a comprehensive article on hegemony in Gramsci, tries to show the philosopher's opposing position to the Marxist maxim that the whole subject is a class subject, which will be instrumental in formulating the concept of hegemony in his work with Laclau. Mouffe says:

According to him [Gramsci] the subjects of political action can not be identified with social classes. [...] they are collective desires that specifically obey laws formed in view of the fact that they constitute the political expression of the hegemonic system created through ideology. Therefore, the subjects (the social classes) that exist in the economic level are not duplicated at the political level. Instead, different inter-class subjects are created "(MOUFFE, 1979, p. 189).

L & M advance in relation to the gramscian perspective, disagreeing with the maintenance of the proletarian class as essentially the leadership of the hegemonic process. For them, if there is no necessary identification between the position of agents in the relations of production and the emergence of the revolutionary subject, leadership is not assured to any of the subjects involved in the struggle against capitalism, hence it is impossible to derive an aprioristic role of the proletarian class in the revolutionary process. In defending non-essentialism of class they affirm:

Of course, this does not imply that the working class and socialism are incompatible, but rather the very different statement that fundamental interests of socialism can not be logically deduced from certain positions in the economic process. The opposite view-that such a connection is given by the workers' interest in preventing the capitalist absorption of the economic surplus-would only be valid if it were to assume, moreover, (a) that the worker is a homoeconomic consumer who tries to maximize the economic surplus as much as the capitalist; or (b) that he is a spontaneously cooperative being who aspires to the social distribution of the product of his work. The resistance of workers to certain forms of domination will depend on the position they occupy in the set of social relations, and not only on those of production (LACLAU, MOUFFE, 2015, p. 153).<sup>2</sup>

L & M claim that there is no necessary relationship between the worker as an economic agent and the revolutionary subject, which puts the former on an equal footing with other dominated groups and classes as potentially leaders of a revolutionary process. The break with class essentialism implies theoretically significant consequences. The first is the break with Marxist economism, since it is not from the economic agents, the fundamental classes of capitalism, that political positions are derived. This does not imply saying that the economic field is not central to the capitalist mode of production, nor that the classes that organize it are not central subjects in political struggles, through a discursive articulation that makes them meaningful. The second consequence is a logical consequence of the latter and concerns the idea of class consciousness or false consciousness. If the proletariat as a revolutionary agent does not exist before its constitution as a subject in the political struggle (in discourse), its consciousness

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, the quotations from the book "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy", originally published in English in 1985, will be made from the Brazilian edition of 2015.

will always be true, since there is no possibility of apprehending an awareness outside the struggle, so that a priori that starts from the false-true binomial.

Only by attributing to the proletarian class a revolutionary mission by nature could one evaluate the quality of their consciousness, which is not at all contemplated in the L & M texts. A third and no less important consequence is the centrality that the authors' perspective draws from social movements (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 2015). Smith, introducing his book on the two theorists draws attention to this, stating that:

From this perspective, the novelty of the 'new social movements' does not consist only in the articulation of new demands. In addition to their politicization of new areas of the social, these movements also somehow establish new forms of political contestation. Their struggles are irreducibly complex and plural in nature. Because classic Marxism presupposes the existence of 'universal' subjects and conceptualizes the social with the transparent rational order, it can not capture these complex movements of difference negotiations (SMITH, 1998, p. 2).

Laclau and Mouffe, when writing HES in the first half of the 1980s, were aware of the effervescence of social movements in Europe and the United States. The so-called new social movements began to give different colors to the political struggles. The feminist movement, for example, brought new questions about domination, which challenged the principles that had shaped the Left until then. He was joined by movements for disarmament, environmental movements, anti-racist movements, gay and lesbian movements. The social movements of the countries of Eastern Europe that were playing a major role in the crisis of communist regimes were completing the picture. Hence, the authors constructed their main theoretical assumptions in a scenario where the class lost its protagonism as the revolutionary element by nature, that is, the leadership of anti-capitalist political struggles. This is an important theoretical shift, which at the same time punctuated new possibilities for struggle and presented a complexity not present in the conception of the confrontation of two fundamental classes.

L & M understood social movements as a great novelty, but did not perceive them as capable of leadership. If at the abstract level the disruption with class essentialism creates the conditions for any subject to be a potential candidate for leadership, when, especially Laclau, draws the populist design as more details, these new subjects were practically forgotten, as will be seen in the final part of this article.

The rupture with class essentialism and, consequently, with economism, coupled with the presence of the multiple struggles arising from the new social movements, become central for the authors to think about the concept of hegemony, which results from articulatory practices expressed basically in two discursive logics: logic of difference and the logic of equivalence, the latter the other name of hegemony.

L & M identify in societies with stable democracies political discourses that are governed by the logic of difference, where several subjects with their own demands dispute their claims. In

these scenarios, there is no identification among the struggles. Each of the demands is exhausted in itself and are different from the others. Demands for better wages, for full-time schools, for racial quotas at universities, for disarmament policies, can coexist in stable democracies with no articulation between them. Each of them has a space of struggle and of claim. In other scenarios, low wages, corruption, unemployment, gender inequality, and racial inequality may be linked to a government that becomes a denial of all rights.

There are, then, two logics present in these examples, in the first we are faced with the logic of difference, where each demand is exhausted in itself. The second works in reverse, in a crisis scenario of the hegemonic group, the differences between the different struggles tend to fade, building a chain of equivalence. This process of establishing equivalences is fundamental for the construction of hegemony. This is what Gramsci called the "collective".

These two logics have a trajectory throughout Laclau's work, where the logic of equivalence occupies space to the detriment of the logic of difference. It is significant that in the inaugural book of the Laclanian theory these logics are located geographically:

It may seem possible to establish an important differential characteristic between advanced societies and the periphery of the capitalist world: in the former, the proliferation of points of antagonism allows the multiplication of democratic struggles, but these struggles, given their diversity, do not tend to constitute a "people", that is, to become equivalent to each other and to divide the political space into two antagonistic fields (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 2015, p. 210)

The differentiated characteristics of the imperialist exploitation of the periphery, therefore, would facilitate the construction of equivalences between the different struggles in an antagonistic relation with the enemy (the dominator). In countries of advanced capitalism, the proliferation and success of democratic struggles, such as the feminist, ecologist, gay, etc., would make it more difficult to construct antagonistic fields. What is important here is to be clear that these moments of assimilation of struggles called democratic is also a moment of great hegemony on the part of a group in power. This is not problematized either in HES or in the other works of Laclau, and in the case of the societies of modernity, what is being left out is the hegemony of capitalism and its ruling class, throughout the twentieth century, capable of transforming their own interests in universal interests.

Even though the distinction between the two logics tends to play a more secondary role in Laclau's later work, it is no less important, for it accounts for a fundamental question of the philosopher's work, which is the relation between hegemony as expressed in logic of equivalence whose name is people, and the construction of democratic political pacts. In the passage quoted above it seems that the two conditions are not in the same process, and are even geographically delimited; but in the course of the work, and especially when he develops more fully his theory of populism, these two logics find a moment of tension.

Hegemony, insofar as it is not a monopoly of a class or of any aprioristically given group,

has a purely contingent character. A hegemonic moment can only be described from its own historical existence, because it depends on the conditions that allow the appearance of demands and interests of groups and the possibility that there is a process of displacement capable of transforming them into equivalents. Strings of equivalence have two characteristics: each of its links contains a particularity, which does not end in the chain, and all, a common antagonist that makes them equivalent. In countries with underdeveloped capitalism, where social inequalities and income concentration are part of the everyday life of large portions of the population, demands for better urbanization of the popular neighborhoods, public day care centers, adequate medical care, schools, jobs, living wages circulate with intensity. These demands may be the expression of struggle by scattered groups; however, by specific emergency conditions, they can articulate themselves against a pole of power, a conservative and corrupt government for example, becoming a political expression, where the lack of day care, becomes equivalent to the lack of health care or education etc. In order for the chain of equivalence to become a discourse capable of disputing hegemony, it is still necessary for one of the links in the chain of equivalence to undergo a displacement that allows all others to be represented, as will be seen later in this text.

The theoretical contribution of Ernesto Laclau brings a vigorous contribution to the understanding of the forms, possibilities and political potentials of historically given hegemonic processes. However, in identifying hegemony as a construction based on differences, which becomes equivalences without a foundational point, as would be an ideology formulated by a social class, or even a project of socialism to be achieved, a capital question that remains open is the fragile nature of hegemony.

The process of building a hegemonic positionality has the emergence conditions in scenarios where covenants have exhausted their capacity for government and there are a myriad of fragmented demands waiting to be articulated in front of an enemy to be destroyed. The issue to be faced, however, is that at equivalent moments, which underpin hegemony, there are moments of institutionalization, where the logic of equivalence tends to collapse and be replaced by the logic of differences. Let us suppose a moment of crisis where parties of left and center left are added to the feminist movement, LGTB, black people etc. to oppose the prospect of a coup, or to a conservative government. Once the danger of the coup has been overcome or there is an electoral or revolutionary victory, the tendency is that the differences that had lost substance in the moment of crisis, will reappear. Since in the hegemonic process each of the struggles lost centrality, but entered into a process of equivalence, the question to be revolved, both theoretical and political, is that of the moment after the taking over of power by the hegemonic group. There is no reason why struggles weakened by a moment of radicalism will not appear again, charging "a price" to stay in the chain of equivalence. This seems to be one of the reasons for the difficulties of developing a theory of radical democracy. The presence of social movements as trainers of these chains does not respond to this bottleneck.

L & M and later Laclau in his solo work give a lot of centrality to social movements and the notion of demand, when they explain the chains of equivalence and hegemonic processes. It is not reasonable to disregard the importance that social movements have had in the last decades of the twentieth century and which they still have today. Nor does it seem correct not to take into account L & M's findings as to the centrality of these movements in political struggles. However, there are two questions that cannot be overlooked when it comes to thinking of hegemony based on articulatory practices: the first concerns the fact that social movements, by their very nature, do not aspire to power, do not organize themselves with this goal. Hence they tend to be protagonists of political action in situations where political life for some reason is discredited or banned as it was the case in Poland, East Germany and Hungary during the 1970s and 1980s.

A second question about the centrality of social movements as political agents refers to their position in relation to the group of the excluded. Social movements encompass important portions of the excluded, but not all of the excluded, whether we think of the population as a whole suffering social injustices or think of the subjects themselves, who by their relative conditions in the social struggle are potentially subject to social movements. In this sense Honneth (2003), with a completely different theoretical perspective, has an interesting contribution: criticizing the centrality of social movements in the theses of Nancy Fraser draws attention to the limitation of considering social movements the political subjects of contemporaneity. Honneth points out that the great mass of the excluded is not in the social movements that would already be included in the political struggle. The truly excluded are those who have failed to identify and organize their own demands (HONNETH, 2003).

Laclau, in the second moment of his work, when he develops the theory of populism, will also minimize social movements, not pointing to its limitations as Honneth does, but bringing to the center of the political struggle a new subject,.

### **3 Radical and plural democracy**

Laclau and Mouffe in HES and later Mouffe in "The democratic paradox" (2000) face the issue of democracy from the duality of freedom and equality, recognizing the necessary condition of the two dimensions, the tension between them and the possibility of what they call radical plural democracy. To construct this concept, the authors add to their theoretical contribution the notion of liberal democracy to realize the dimension of freedom. This appropriation is made by incorporating the historical experience of democratic liberties in the sense of thinking the radicalization of equality from the idea of the freedom of all. The question of freedom is put in a very original way in this thought of socialist inspiration, since socialism was always more inclined to emphasize equality to the detriment of freedom:

Insofar as the two themes of the democratic imaginary - equality and freedom - were that equality which has traditionally prevailed, demands for autonomy play an increasingly central

role in freedom. For this reason, many of these forms of resistance manifest themselves not in the form of collective struggles, but through an affirmation of individualism (the left, of course, is unprepared to take on these struggles, which it still rules out as liberals. Hence, the danger is that they can be articulated by a right-wing discourse, the defense of privileges) (LACLAU, MOUFFE, 2015, p 249).

In the inaugural work (HES) the notion of pluralism is associated to a strong degree of autonomy of the various links in the chain of equivalence.

Pluralism is radical only inasmuch as each term of this plurality of identities finds in itself the principle of its validity without it having to be sought on a positive, transcendent or underlying foundation for the hierarchy of meaning of all of them, and source and guarantee of legitimacy (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 2015, p.252).

The centrality of freedom in L & M thinking is very burning in this first moment and is directly related to the non-disappearance of demands and positions in the name of a greater cause. The authors here face the legacy of experiences of socialism that have resulted in totalitarianism. There is a theoretical effort to resolve the tension between freedom (what Mouffe calls the "self-constituency" of the links of a chain of equivalence) and the generalization of equivalence logic (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 2015). However, this generalization has a limit, which is the other, the antagonistic, that which is external to the chain and its negation. If the antagonist discards, they become independent and this is a primordial question, which offers great difficulty, especially in the field of political practice. The loosening of the chain of equivalence can mean the failure of a radical project, but, paradoxically, the guarantee of democratic freedoms.

L & M does not solve the central issues of a strategic project for socialism in the form of a radical democracy. Here are two key issues. The first refers to the very strategy for socialism, a theme completely absent in the work of Laclau and Mouffe. The second refers to the ability of the hegemonic pact to remain valid for a longer time than the critical moment.

The notion of socialism has been clearly proposed since the title of the inaugural paper, but at the same time there is a complete absence of any concrete proposal of socialism. If, on the one hand, this absence fits the discursive perspective of theory, on the other, the problem that remains is how to identify the antagonistic, without the presence of a positivity, a socialist project, for example. One consequence of this is the almost total absence in Laclau's theses of the identification of capitalism as antagonistic. In his work it is easy to perceive the existence of a positivity against the colonizer (the national project), or against patriarchal power (gender equality), or against white power in a racist (racial equality) society, but not against bourgeoisie. As Laclau withdraws from the class the centrality in the struggle for socialism, he can not advance in a project, which needs to be placed as antagonistic to capitalism, to be realized.

Two commentators on L & M's work examine these issues. Oliver Marchart points to the fact that discourse is a process "without any voluntary subject pulling the strings behind the



articulatory process" (MARCHART, 2012, p.230). His concern is very directed to methodological problems when one asks what unity of analysis, since nothing precedes the discourse itself. However, this concern raises another question that goes beyond the research problem: if one does not recognize anything prior to the discourses in a hegemonic struggle, the discourses in a given historical cut must always be treated as inaugural, which seems an analytical mistake, since each hegemonic struggle incorporates subjects already articulated in previous discourses. The non-appearance of class membership in a popular struggle after centuries of capitalism is therefore not a minor issue.

The second commentator, Thomas Brockelman, also points to the imprecise nature of discourse when he asserts that it is impossible to arrive at a concept of radical democracy. It states:

[...] which is "the imaginary of the radical democracy that both Laclau and Mouffee invoke? And the first answer and this question - almost in line with its conventionalist and historicist positions - does not necessarily mean something definite. That is, when confronted as the challenge of the question, both Mouffee and Laclau (both writing together as separate) inevitably will first invoke the anti essentialism they see as ... the genuine possibility for political life: they argue that movements politicians can gain their identity only through a particular or 'partial' identity that combines to constitute a movement (BROCKELMAN, 2003, p. 187). (my translation)

What Brockelman identifies in relation to democracy can also be said in relation to socialism, which, although central to the work of L & M to the point of giving title to the inaugural book, is never qualified as an alternative to capitalism, the latter a rare presence in the authors' work.

As for the second question mentioned above - the capacity of the hegemonic discourse to lead a new political pact - it is worth pointing out the need to maintain the minimization of the remaining peculiarities that the process of building hegemony implies in the chains of equivalence. The question to be answered is the extent to which the equivalence chain can maintain itself as such? Let us think of a situation, not so hypothetical, of a leftist party with strong relations with progressive Catholicism and with social movements, among them the feminist movement, the latter with a pro-abortion agenda. How far can the party maintain the social movement articulated in a chain of equivalence, where one of the links is the Catholic Church? How far will the social movement tolerate being a link in the chain of equivalence to guarantee partisan hegemony, having to give up its struggle for the legalization of abortion?

As L & M do not refer in their works to political institutions, legal systems, embedded history, there is no moment in which hegemony is threatened by the autonomy of the links in the chain of equivalence. If plurality is the presence of autonomy, and certainly is, radicality is the maintenance of the chain and, therefore, the limit of this plurality. In other words, what sustains the hegemonic logic is the chain of equivalence whose limit is given by the antagonistic relation

with the other external. The logic of equivalence is constructed from a necessary tension, which is the presence of the other. At the same time, for hegemony to be constituted, the chain must extend, but not to the point of extinguishing the antagonistic, which is essential for its existence. Without the presence of the other that presses as negativity, the equivalent links tend to become differences. If, on the one hand, this is the radically democratic characteristic of the hegemonic process, on the other hand, it is its own fragility, since when at the level of political struggle there is a real threat to power, its defense goes through the search for the fixation of the chain which can result in authoritarian and even totalitarian solutions.

Mouffe agrees with Carl Schmitt on the conflict between liberalism and democracy in explaining the distinction between liberal (differential) logic and (equivalential) democratic logic stating that: "There is no doubt that there is an opposition between the liberal 'grammar' of equality, which postulates universality for 'humanity' and the practice of democratic equality that requires the political moment of discrimination between the 'we' and the 'them' "(Mouffe 2000: 44).

The final resolution or equilibrium between these two conflicting logics is never possible, and there can be only temporary, pragmatic, unstable pragmatic negotiations of the tension between them. Democratic-liberal politics consists, in fact, in a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation - through different hegemonic articulations of this constitutive paradox (MOUFFE, 2000, page 45).

Hegemonic moments are best constituted if more equivalences exist between the links in the chain, that is, at least the particularities of each link are present, but these moments are in tension with the plural and radical democracy, which presses in the direction of exhausting the capacity of the constitutive of hegemony. The identification of 'we' versus 'him' does not exhaust the possibility of the rupture of the 'we', for a link may not be a moment in the chain of equivalence to be a floating signifier to a new scenario.

A fluctuating signifier is one that is detached from the chain of equivalence and it's like the disposition of different discursive articulations, (...) become self-sufficient and independent of any equivalential articulation (LACLAU, 2013, p.

A classic example is that of nationalism in Latin America, a recurring theme in political struggles in many countries since the nineteenth century, when they became independent. But it can not be attributed to a right or left ideological nature, reactionary or progressive, since it has functioned as a floating signifier associated with both dictatorial military governments and radical anti-imperialist left-wing discourses.

In 2005, with the publication of "The Populist Reason" Laclau makes two important movements in his theoretical contribution: first, bringing to the center of analysis the logic of equivalence and the empty signifier; secondly, approaching or almost merging the notions of people, democracy and populism: "The construction of a people is a sine qua non of democratic

functioning. Without the production of the empty place there are no people, there is no populism, neither democracy "(LACLAU, 2013, p.

The empty place, that is to say, the empty signifier is a component of the chain of equivalence that manages through a process of displacement not to be himself, but to be all. It is empty because it accepts all other links in the chain. It is this chain condensed into an empty signifier that Laclau calls people. When feminist women, LGBT activists, black movement activists, ecological movement activists, landless movement activists, the homeless movement are recognized in one of the links of the chain, for example, in the ecological movement, an empty signifier in an antagonistic relation to the dominant power. At that moment, Laclau identifies the existence of a people. What happens in this process is the transformation of each social movement (demand) into a link of something larger, which would constitute a political movement / discourse. This involves a new problem to be faced. To the extent that a social movement hardly becomes a signifier capable of leading the political seizure of power and as in Laclau's construct the political party has no centrality, it is not even quoted, the people ends up becoming a leader.<sup>3</sup>

There is a democratic sense in the constitution of a people, for, since the chain of equivalence does not have an a priori, that is, no leadership before it, no link by nature is more important than the other, the appearance in the chain of a link as the catalyst of all others is the result of a process that takes place in the political struggle (struggle for meaning). Thinking about a political discourse from this perspective really opens the possibility to understand how some themes are subsumed and others become protagonists. Let us return to the example of abortion and the feminist struggle. The voluntary interruption of pregnancy has always been a central theme of feminist struggle in the global north, but in Latin American feminism this theme has often lost its place in the Catholic Church's role in the struggles for democracy in the subcontinent. The establishment of equivalence chains against dictatorial military regimes in Latin America in the last three decades of the twentieth century has placed the feminist movement alongside this progressive church, displacing the centrality of abortion.

The issue that is not problematized by Laclau is that, at different historical moments, the links (movements, demands, groups) come into equivalence with different capacities to subjectify, in the Althusserian sense of the term. When one has a progressive and articulated church to popular movements, the space of a movement with the feminist is much smaller compared to scenarios of non-religious societies, where politics is completely removed from religion. In terms of the logic that presides over the theoretical contribution of Laclau, the powers and capacities of articulation constitute the struggle. Even if this is true, Laclau never considers that the different links in the chain of equivalence have distinct historicity and are in a given moment of struggle bringing these different historicities. The progressive Catholic Church may enter into a chain of

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of Latin America, leaders like Chaves and Evo Morales created the parties after their own leader figure. Before them, Peron and Getúlio Vargas had also acted that way.

equivalence with the feminist movement, but it is unlikely that the Church will minimize its content and its truth of faith or convenience in favor of feminism. The latter, as a fragile link, taken historically, will tend to minimize your demands to stay in the chain.

Laclau does not enter into the difficult discussion about the position that the link in the chain of equivalence that becomes an empty signifier takes in relation to the other links. Hegemony is a process of seizure of power, through the people, which is built on the empty signifier. The taking of power is simple to be understood, the complicator appears to the extent that this moment is necessarily succeeded by the institutionalization of that power, be it in what form and degree. The unanswered question is the ability of this empty signifier to continue to contain all the demands of the chain of equivalence after the seizure of power. Laclau speaks of a legitimate right of the signifier to occupy this place, because it has won the hegemonic struggle and that means that it has achieved a real incorporation of the other links in the chain. But the empty signifier, be it a party or a leader, needs to remain in power, vis-à-vis the inherent precariousness of the chain of equivalence, that is, maintain the conditions so that spontaneous adherence does not break or the differences maintained at each link in the chain of equivalence do not surface. This tension is not problematized in Laclau's theses, on the contrary, it becomes subsumed in the presence of the people:

Empty signifiers can only play their part if they signify a chain of equivalence and only make it constituting a people. In other words, democracy can only be based on the existence of a democratic subject whose emergence depends on the vertical articulation between equivalent demands. A set of equivalent demands articulated by an empty signifier is what constitutes a people (LACLAU, 2013, p.171).

To advance in the argument we return to the logic of equivalence. First, let us remember that the logic of equivalence only occurs from differences, which at one point in the struggle become equivalent. These equivalences have an external constituent, but at the same time maintains in each of their links the differences that constitute them (for this they are equivalent and do not become a single link). The less the difference weighs as a particular struggle, the stronger the chain and the stronger the empty signifier, the one that by a process of displacement is empty in the sense of being able to mean all others. In a struggle against a military regime, the struggles of women, blacks, peasants, and industrial workers are articulated in a chain of equivalence against military power, which does not allow any of these subjects to take place. This is a first moment of the people. The more this chain of equivalence extends, the less is the strength of each of its links, and the greater is the force of the empty signifier that contemplates all of them. In the case of military regimes, democracy can become an empty signifier.

Resuming democracy, there is a tendency to weaken the chain of equivalence, because in the new moment the enemy disappears. The various struggles that have lost space, but have not disappeared, tend to resurface. The tendency in this new scenario for the weakening of the

equivalence chain is a crucial point, because if democracy allows the emergence of differences, it also depends on an equivalential minimum to reproduce, in Laclau's language it needs a minimum of people, constituted by an empty signifier.

The solution found by Laclau so that these people continue to support the hegemony is quite explanatory of some moments of the political struggle of the modernity, but leaves open the question of the own democracy. What holds the chain of equivalence is the empty signifier and in making explicit this signifier that Laclau introduces one of his most problematic arguments, identification with individualized leadership - the leader. Laclau makes a comparison between his idea of leader and the idea of sovereign found in Hobbes.

We are to some extent in a situation comparable to that of the ruler of Hobbes: in principle there is no reason why a collective body can not perform the functions of Leviathan; but its plurality shows that it is at variance with the indivisible nature of sovereignty. Because the only natural sovereign according to Hobbes could be an individual (LACLAU, 2013, p.130).

Laclau does not consider that Hobbes had in his theory of sovereignty in mind that men should avail themselves of freedom in function of the guarantee of life given by the power of the sovereign. He asserts that the difference between Hobbes and his theory is that the philosopher is speaking of de facto government and he is speaking of a symbolic unification that "does not mechanically lead to such [government]" (LACLAU, 2013, p. 130). But throughout his work the Argentine philosopher always ends up dealing with historical scenarios, which involve political seizure and establishment of government. It may be said that Laclau made an inverse movement towards Gramsci. This replaces the prince by the party. Laclau returns to the prince through the leader, for in removing the essentiality of the class as a revolutionary subject, which is one of his great theoretical advances, he does not find a new collective subject in its discursive construction. In the populist thesis, the mandatory presence of the people and the leader seems to function as a new essentialism.

#### **4 Populism**

The problem that emerges from the centrality that Laclau attributes to the leader is that he has the responsibility of maintaining the precarious unity of the people - populist reason. The revolutionary or even post-electoral moment, where there is a leader in the conditions of representing the people, presents two possibilities: the strengthening of the chain links and, as a result, the strengthening of the people incorporated in the leader; or the weakening of links, when the leader can not express and meet the demands of each chain link. This is an unresolved tension in democratic theory, but it becomes more blatant in the laclanian perspective, insofar as it does not establish any mediation between the leader and the people, either in terms of political parties, state bureaucracy or alternative forms of popular participation. The absence in Laclau's work of any reference to a project capable of reproducing the people as an active subject of the new

hegemonic moment reinforces the presence of the leader as the guarantor of his own hegemony. The symbolic function of the people seems to hinder the possibility of a political function.

Laclau in his inaugural work of 1985 spoke of simplification versus the complexity of politics, where the former was embodied in the logic of equivalence and the second in the logic of difference, establishing a clear distinction between them. In 2005, it shows the interweaving of these two logics that are always present with distinct importance and the necessary presence of equivalence for the political to exist:

In more institutionalized discourse types (dominated by the logic of difference), this chain is reduced to a minimum, while its extension will be maximal in discourses of rupture that tend to divide the social into two fields. But a certain class of equivalence (a certain production of "people") is necessary for a discourse to be considered political (LACLAU, 2013, p.195).

Laclau, when referring to populism, reaffirms the centrality of the people and the leader, which limits the possibility of alternating moments of more people - less people, or the presence of the logic of difference. For him these more institutionalized scenarios exist outside the very problematic which he deals with. There is no discussion in his work of moving from a populist moment to a time when institutions are more present than the leader.

In his text "The Populist Reason" when referring to the position of the leader in populism points to the leader as the empty signifier, the one who represents everything and at the same time nothing: what he calls "name", the singularity that unites "Mas the extreme form of singularity is an individuality" (LACLAU, 2013, pp. 128-130).

The relationship of the leader with the people, while at the same time being a central element of populism, is where the greatest bottleneck of both theory and populist practice lies. Panizza, in his introductory essay to Populism and ther mirror of democracy (2005), points out that in all studies of populism, the presence of the leader is a constant (PANIZZA, 2005). And that one of its central characteristics is the direct leader-people relationship without any mediation:

In populist discourse, politics and political parties are often considered diversionary institutions that should be eliminated, or at least purified from particularist factions or interests, enabling the people to become united. Institutions, parties and established politicians who claim to represent the people stifle the voices they claim to represent and betray their followers, in contrast, the leader claims to have a direct relationship with the people that allows him to defend his interests without becoming a prisoner of the powerful ( PANIZZA, 2005, p.22). (my translation)

Panizza's description emphasizes two central features of populism: the contempt for institutions and the centrality of the leader as capable of replacing them. Such characteristics can reinforce the proximity of populism with authoritarianism / totalitarianism.

## 5 Conclusion

The centrality of the leader in Laclau's contribution leads to the absence of a theory of democracy, replaced by populism as a theory of politics. One of the great findings of Laclau's work is the recognition that there is always a need for a degree of populism, for the political to take place, but this needs to be thought of differently from the so-called populist experiences, which have approached authoritarian experiences and even totalitarian. The examples that populate Laclau's texts are, almost in their totality, experiences that have resulted in authoritarianism and / or totalitarianism: Mao, Peron, Vargas, De Gaulle and even Chaves. But he argues:

The construction of a chain of equivalence from a dispersion of fragmented demands and their unification around popular positions that operate as empty signifiers is not in itself totalitarian, but the very condition of the construction of the collective will, which, in many cases, can be profoundly democratic. The fact that some populist movements may be totalitarian and that present many or all of the traits that Lefort describes so aptly is undoubtedly true, but the spectrum of possible articulations is much more diverse than simple opposition totalitarianism / democracy seems to suggest (LACLAU, 2013, p. 209)

We are here again facing the paradox of freedom and equality proposed by Mouffe. The remnants of particularities, which always remain in the links of the chain, respond for freedom and threaten the equivalence that answers for equality. The maintenance of the power of leaders, such as those exemplified, can only take place through the strengthening of equality, which would reach its maximum degree in the very representation of the leader. However, such equality does not guarantee the egalitarian expression of the particularities that make up the links in the chain of equivalence. It can only guarantee equality by the existence of a leader who equally represents everyone, which can only happen at the symbolic level. Laclau recognizes the difficulty of this situation when he speaks of long-term hegemony: "The process of emptying a few central signifiers for the creation of a historical singularity will always be subject to the structural pressure of forces that will try to re-link them to their original meanings of so that any expansive hegemony does not go too far" (LACLAU, 2013, p. 231).

Panizza, at the conclusion of the article, points out the difficulties of democracies in the globalized world to guarantee the popular will. For him, in this scenario, populism poses itself in a threatening way to the experiences that "subordinate politics to technical reasons dictated by the market" and concludes in an exciting way:

By awkwardly raising questions about modern forms of democracy and often representing the ugly face of the people, populism is not the highest form of democracy or its enemy, but the mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself with all its defects and find what it is about and what is lacking (PANIZZA, 2015, p. 30, my translation).

The centrality of the notion of populism in Laclau's work has an important heuristic value when he explains the political struggle for the construction of chains of equivalences and empty signifiers. The notion of people also seems to be very robust for the understanding of radical discourses. However, these findings could not avoid the rapprochement between populism and authoritarianism / totalitarianism and a serious difficulty in approaching a democratic project.

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