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Manuel Tangorra

## PEOPLES, NATIONS AND SOCIAL HETEROGENEITY. FROM HEGEL TO LACLAU AND BACK

**ABSTRACT**

Ernesto Laclau's work, *On Populist Reason*, is a crucial landmark in the attempts of post-modern political philosophy to grasp the logic of contingency at work in the production of political subjects. However, in recent years, this post-foundationalist approach seems to have reached an impasse when confronted with the persistence, success and efficacy of certain poles of identification that seem to resist the idea of a radical contingency of collective engagements. I argue that a new dialogue between the Hegelian philosophy of history and Laclau's post-foundationalism can be fruitful in overcoming this stalemate. Rather than reigniting the debate surrounding historicism, Laclau's evocation of the notion of *peoples without history* allows for an exploration of the radical heterogeneity implied in the situational, somatic, and affective rootedness of the formation of historical identities. I ground this hypothesis in a detailed examining of Hegel's own take on the a-historical spiritual formations and on the difference he makes between the "people", as institutionalized collective consciousness and the "nation" as its situated genesis. I claim that this Hegelian dialectic approach to nationhood far from does not limit the political horizons to the "nationalist" or "nativist" rhetoric. Instead, it offers a new light on the challenges of post-foundationalist approaches when it comes to understanding the concreteness of political subjectivation.

**KEYWORDS**

Hegel, Laclau, nation, people, political identities, post-foundationalism.

### Introduction

In a text from the late 1980s entitled "Politics and the Limits of Modernity", Ernesto Laclau addresses the differences between modern and postmodern accounts of political and historical identities. Unlike modern intellectual traditions – including, above all, the Hegelian-Marxist conception of history (Laclau 1989: 66) – postmodern political thought "does not seek to establish the causes of a certain process", but rather aims to explain "the dissolution of the foundation by revealing the radical contingency of categories linked to this foundation" (ibid.: 72–73). These passages outline the driving idea of what Olivier

Marchart calls the “post-foundationalist constellation” (2007: 31–33), an influential strand within continental political philosophy for at least the last three decades and which, in addition to Laclau, comprises thinkers such as Lefort, Nancy, Badiou or Rancière. Such an epistemological stance emphasizes the contingency that underlies political agency and opens up a new approach to the discursive, rhetorical and symbolic construction of the social. This perspective does not propose new social identities to replace the old ones – otherwise the “foundational” attitude would still be at work – but instead introduces, in Laclau’s terms, a new “logic of construction” that acknowledges the inescapable ambiguity of any process of political identification (Laclau 1989: 64–65).

Towards the end of his text, however, Laclau introduces a nuance that is crucial to grasping the postmodern momentum in political philosophy: “The dissolution of the myth of foundations does not dissolve the phantom of its own absence” (ibid.: 81). This last statement anticipates an uncertainty in the post-foundationalist narrative that will only accentuate over time. Postmodern critique is increasingly confronted with the *persistence* of certain poles of identification that seem incapable of being conceived solely through the intellection of the logic of contingency. The contemporary emergence of populist identities, which is the main subject of Laclau’s later work, reveals both the assets and the difficulties of his analytical framework. His perspective succeeds in explaining the *logical functioning* of the discursive articulation of “the people”, understood as a signifier that symbolizes the absent totality and offers an object of investment for collective identification. Nevertheless, as various scholars have pointed out, the post-foundationalist approach to social identities – and to the construction of the people – struggles to explain the *actual genesis of symbolic articulation*. In this sense, Yannis Stavrakakis poses a question that remains unresolved in Laclau’s thought: How to distinguish “discourses that successfully function as objects of investment” from those that fail? (Stavrakakis 2007: 99) Judith Butler expresses a similar concern by pointing to the corporeal dimension of the performative act of assembly: “I suppose my question might be formulated this way: What are the bodily conditions for the enunciation of ‘we the people’?” (Butler 2015: 177) While these thinkers are themselves committed to a post-foundationalist approach, they point to an important blind spot in postmodern accounts of social identification: the logic of contingency, as advanced by Laclau, rightly undermines the allegedly essential content of identities, but it takes for granted the *conditions* for the actual performance of identitarian constructions.

To address this challenge to post-foundationalist political philosophy, this article revisits the dialogue between Laclau’s thought and Hegelian dialectics. This is not to argue for some kind of return to a historicist narrative of political agency, but rather to present a different perspective on the internal tensions of political post-foundationalism. The dialogue between Laclau and Hegel will lead us to an examination of the relationship between the concept of the people and that of the nation. The concept of nation, which I will reconstruct by means of the Hegelian text, will not be mobilized to identify a new

given foundation – be it natural, ethnic or cultural – but rather as an element that points to the *situated genesis* of discursive constructions. This article argues that Hegelian philosophy of history can make a substantial contribution to the challenges of contemporary political philosophy by emphasizing the *situatedness* of the symbolic making of the people.

In section 1, I reconstruct Laclau's reading of Hegel's philosophy of history and its evolution through the different texts of the former. The relationship between these two thinkers has often been addressed in terms of their opposing philosophical logics and Laclau's critique of the Hegelian-inspired Marxist conception of history has been extensively commented.<sup>1</sup> This paper takes as its starting point a different element of friction which – with a few exceptions (cf. Fiorespino 2022: 174–78; Mihkelsaar 2020) – has barely been addressed by the scholarship, namely Laclau's use of the Hegelian notion of “peoples without history”. Through an analysis of this notion – employed in *On Populist Reason* [OPR] to introduce the concept of social – I intend both to examine the dialogue between dialectics and post-foundationalism and to expose the internal tension of the latter in its account of political identification. In section 2, I turn to Hegel's text in order to analyze the status of the a-historical spiritual formations to which Laclau refers. As it is well known, in his Berlin Lectures, Hegel situates African, Native American and Asian nations at the border of the historical development, which has modern Europe as its ultimate realization. I argue that, according to Hegel, these societies do not constitute *peoples* in the proper sense of this concept, since they lack the corresponding form of historical consciousness. By emphasizing this heterogeneity within historicity, I hope to clarify the specificity of Hegel's concept of nation, as the unconscious counterpart of the historical spirit of the people. Finally, in section 3, I return to the internal tensions of Laclau's theory in order to see whether the Hegelian understanding of historical agency can allow us to address the crucial blind spot of post-foundationalist perspectives, namely the apprehension of the concrete emergence of political identification. In order to build this new dialogue between Hegelianism and postmodern approaches to politics, I will turn to another dialectical philosopher referred to by Laclau in OPR, namely Frantz Fanon.

### Laclau's Reading of Hegel

Published in 2005, *On Populist Reason* had a remarkable impact, both on the field of political philosophy and on the way political science analyzes empirical political phenomena. If the book had such a diversified reception<sup>2</sup>, and if it continues to be the subject of debates to this day, it is because its aim is not simply to provide a new understanding of a particular, local phenomenon,

1 Cf. Dallmayr 2004; Dotti 2004; Frilli 2014; Howarth 2004; Lovato 2016; Muñiz and Rossi 2014; Perez Soto 2006; Retamozo 2017.

2 For a thorough account of the impact of Laclau's theory, cf. Jäger and Borriello 2020.

i.e. “populism”. *OPR* provides a general framework for understanding the organization of social demands within political movements. In this sense, the book has introduced a new key for reading the current state of emancipatory horizons, characterized by the profound fragmentation of traditional vectors of identification. Rather than attempting to reconnect with a foundation capable of underpinning the convergence of demands, Laclau proposes to embrace this radical plurality as the ground of symbolic association. Thus, the populist logic is not a pathological deviation of contemporary democracies, but a phenomenon that reveals their inner truth. According to Laclau, populism is nothing other than the constructive operation that locates the structural absence of totality in the desiring core of collective agency.<sup>3</sup>

In order to determine populist reason as a political logic, Laclau builds on the concepts of *articulation* and *antagonism*. The unsatisfied demands of different subjects – intrinsically plural and irreducible to one another – are not, and cannot be, bound by any *a priori* law of historical development. In Laclauian terms, “articulation” means the assembly of different elements, which neither abolish nor mitigate the particularity of demands: “demands share nothing positive, just the fact that they all remain unfulfilled” (Laclau 2005: 96). Discursive articulation then operate through an element that is always particular and contingent, and that expresses the non-identity of society without saturating it. This element is what Laclau calls an “empty signifier”, which functions as a vector of association *precisely* because of the indeterminate nature of its semantic content. If the signifier brings people together through the enunciation of the absent fullness of society, it can only be enunciated on the surface of an *antagonistic* frontier through which “the people” determines itself as “a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality” (ibid.: 81). Universality and particularity interact here in a very specific way, since the idea of a substantial totality underlying social processes is abolished. It is precisely through the antagonistic boundary – and thus *through its partiality* – that the people can proclaim itself as the bearer of the inevitably absent totality. The political logic of semantic indeterminacy is the result of Laclau’s quest to construct an *explanation of the becoming-subject of political agents that is free of any meta-narrative based on the necessary laws of history*. In this sense, the main conceptual tools of *OPR* can be read in opposition with the dialectical conception of history: on the one hand, “Articulation” is the concept advanced by Laclau to counter the more organicist notion of “necessary development” and, on the other hand, the idea of “antagonism” marks the departure from the dialectical conception of “contradiction”.

However, Laclau’s critique of Hegel has not always been the same, and a brief historization can help to fully grasp the scope of Laclau’s anti-dialectical position in *OPR*. In the texts he wrote with Chantal Mouffe during the 80’s,

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3 “The need to constitute a ‘people’ (a plebs claiming to be a *populus*) arises only when that fullness is not achieved, and partial objects within society (aims, figures, symbols) are so cathected that they become the name of its absence” (Laclau 2005: 116–17).

the debate with Hegel's work is not yet characterized by a categorical rejection, but rather by an acknowledgement of its internal complexities and ambiguities. The target of objection was not dialectics *per se*, but a specific reception of Hegelianism in teleological and linear understandings of class struggle. This explains, for example, why in 1980 Laclau's own definition of antagonism still refers to the notion of *contradiction*.<sup>4</sup> In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, co-authored with Mouffe and where the distinction between contradiction and antagonism is already well established, Hegelian dialectics remains ambivalent: although it is certainly a rationalization of the world according to the laws of social transformation, dialectics also bears "the seeds of the dissolution" of social rationality (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 95). This ambivalence seems to disappear in the first references to Hegel in *OPR*. Hegel's dialectic is here directly criticized and presented as a perspective that inescapably leads to a teleological conception of history. The reason for this is not its applications to a determinist understanding of material interests, but its own logical operation. As Laclau puts it, "contradiction in its dialectical sense is completely unable to capture what is at stake in social antagonism" (Laclau 2005: 84). At this point, the break with the dialectical framework is complete, and the logic of contingency seems to require a rupture with any reference to the dialectical rationality of historical subjects.

As I stated in the introduction – and although there are important remarks to be made about Laclau's conception of Hegelian contradiction – I will not focus on Laclau's criticism of Hegelian logic.<sup>5</sup> My purpose instead is to address

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4 Of course, historicism is already criticized here, but what is important is that the notion of contradiction is not reduced to this horizon: "We know already that every antagonism at the level of discourse supposes a relation of contradiction, a relation in which the reality of one pole is purely and simply the negation of the other. Two consequences flow from this. First, the strictly contradictory element is not to be found in the allegedly causal chain, which has led to the emergence of the antagonism, but in the brute fact of the negation of a positionality, which constituted the agent as subject" (Laclau 1980: 90).

5 One might have some important remarks to make about Laclau's interpretation of Hegel's notion of contradiction. Laclau treats dialectical contradiction as a relationship between poles that are, on their side, identical to themselves: "That is, in both cases we are concerned with full identities. In the case of contradiction, it is because A is fully A that being-not-A is a contradiction — and therefore an impossibility" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:124). For a long time now, Hegelian literature has been contesting such a reading. Contradiction does not relate two self-identical determinations; on the contrary, it challenges the primary identity of the poles themselves. The very definition offered in the *Logic* provides enough material to problematize this reading of contradiction as a relationship between self-subsistent identical elements [*Selbstständig*], which would only be contradicted in their external relationship: "Since the self-subsisting determination of reflection excludes the other in the same respect as it contains it and is self-subsisting for precisely this reason, in its self-subsistence *the determination excludes its own self-subsistence from itself*. For this self-subsistence consists in that it contains the determination which is other than it in itself and does not refer to anything external for just this reason; but no less immediately in that it is itself and excludes from itself the determination that negates it. And so it is contradiction" (GW 11, p. 279.).

*another scene* of the discussion with Hegel that is at the heart of Laclau's proposal. After explicitly dismissing the dialectical framework for explaining political antagonism, Laclau unexpectedly resorts to Hegel when it comes to complexifying the logic of populist articulation by considering the element that *exceeds* the symbolization of the political scene. While in chapter 4 of *OPR* Laclau laid out the initial architecture of populist logic, chapter 5 is devoted to presenting an irreducible excess that remains beyond the articulation of society in antagonistic fields. Hegel's concept of the "peoples without history" will appear precisely "where heterogeneity comes into the picture" (ibid.: 149):

So an equivalential chain is not opposed only to an antagonistic force or power, but also to something which does not have access to a general space of representation. But 'opposed' means something different in each case: an *antagonistic* camp is fully represented as the negative reverse of a popular identity which would not exist without that negative reference; but in the case of an outside which is opposed to the inside just because it does not have access to the space of representation, 'opposition' means simply 'leaving aside' and, as such, it does not in any sense shape the identity of what is inside. We find a good example of this distinction in Hegel's philosophy of history: it is punctuated by dialectical reverses operating through processes of negation/supersession, but, apart from them, there is the presence of the 'peoples without history', entirely outside historicity (ibid.: 139–40).

Laclau's purpose in these passages is not simply to expand the original structure of articulation. Chapter 5 introduces a new register, it is no longer a matter of differentiating between demands that are articulated in a chain of equivalences, or even opposed in antagonistic chains. On the contrary, what is presented now is an exteriority that has no established place within the space of representation and is therefore excluded from the system of differentiation itself. Laclau calls this *sui generis* type of difference *social heterogeneity*. In this context, the reference to Hegel can only come as a surprise. If, in the first presentation of his theory in the book, Laclau completely rejects the dialectical structure – emptying it of the "ambiguity" he identified in his earlier works – Hegel reappears to indicate *another type of opposition*, which, according to Laclau, constitutes a "non-dialectical" relationship between the interiority and exteriority of the space of representation.

The evolution of Laclau's attitude toward Hegel that I have outlined above then has a systematic implication on his theory. In my view, the ambiguity of dialectics that Laclau recognized in his early texts has not disappeared. Rather, it is repositioned within the structure of *OPR*, in order to highlight the limits of political representability. It is true that Laclau adds that "when approached from a totalizing logic" heterogeneity is "denied" (ibid.: 142). Yet Laclau's own elaboration shows that the rupture of historicity within dialectical thought is not regional or occasional. This is the reason for Laclau's reference to Hegel's understanding of the "social question" and the concept of the rabble [*Pöbel*] which is another materialization of radical heterogeneous alterity.



As paradoxical as it may seem, Laclau draws on Hegel's work to define the element that hinders the totalization of historical rationality.

Before examining the question of the "people without history" within Hegel's text itself, I shall insist on the implications of the introduction of radical heterogeneity in the structure of *OPR*. Social heterogeneity brings, into symbolic structures, a dynamic dimension, which was still missing in the purely formal operation of the empty signifier. If we confine our reading to chapter 4 of *OPR*, then the populist articulation of demands – and, more generally, any political identification – would be defined exclusively by its relation to its antagonist. This would lead to a mirror relationship – in which "the resistance of the antagonized force" could be "logically derived from the form of the antagonizing force" (ibid.: 150) – that saturates the possibilities of *dislocation* and *rearticulation* of political actors.<sup>6</sup> Laclau foresees the danger of a purely structuralist explanation, which would fail to explain how the chains of articulation are themselves subject to transformations. Social heterogeneity thus allows Laclau to propose an alternative position somewhere between "dialectical historicism" – which conceives political temporality in terms of necessary laws of change – and the structuralist conceptualization that inevitably leads to "the static affirmation of a binary opposition" (ibid.: 149). In order to capture the constant variations in symbolic constructs, Laclau refers to an exteriority that is no longer *merely* external, but lies at the heart of the establishment of the "inside" of representation (ibid.: 152). In other words, heterogeneous alterity reshapes political identification in terms of a *post-structure*, i.e., an understanding of the articulation of the subject that presupposes the un-articulate – or the "irrepresentable", in the words of Etienne Balibar (2005: 15) – in order to explain the transformations of symbolic horizons.

To characterize this complexification, Laclau repeatedly draws on the conceptual language of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In his words, social heterogeneity "is equivalent to the Lacanian real" (Laclau 2005: 107). This means that the heterogeneous excess acts as the un-symbolizable rest that is nevertheless presupposed in every process – psychic and political – of structuring a community: "The people will always be something more than the pure opposite of power. There is a 'real of the people' that resists symbolic integration" (ibid.: 152). In this sense, Laclau accurately perceives how this *incompleteness* is always presupposed within the structure itself: "Heterogeneity inhabits the very heart of a homogeneous space" (ibid.: 152). Nevertheless, the question of the actual emergence and the conditions of the real success of the populist discourse remains unanswered. How does this social heterogeneity interact with the *concrete genesis* of symbolic articulation? Before offering an answer to this question, I will explain how this border of historicity plays out in the Hegelian

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6 "[...] if the excluded other is the condition of my own identity, persisting in my identity also requires the positing of the antagonistic other. On a terrain dominated by pure homogeneity (that is, full representability), this ambiguity in relation to the enemy cannot be superseded" (Laclau 2005: 140).

text itself. As I announced before, the aim of my reading of Hegel's philosophy of history is to examine the contribution that his conception of radical alterity can make to approach the *situated emergence* of symbolic articulation of the people.

## The Blurred Beginnings of Historical Consciousness

Laclau's interpretation of the notion of "peoples without history" takes the Hegelian notion of "people" [*Volk*] for granted, as if the latter could be applied generically to both historical and "unhistorical" phenomena. A somewhat hasty reading might indeed take the "spirit of the people" [*Volksgeist*] to be the name given to certain social entities concatenated over time through reciprocal negations. Hegel's own passages on the concept, however, offers a more complex picture. Historical negativity not only constitutes the relationship *between* peoples – implying the passage from people A to people B by means of a determined negation of the former – but it also shapes the internal constitution of each people as such. In one of the first presentations of the concept in Jena, Hegel clarifies how the people finds its substantiality in a constitutive becoming-other [*anderswerden*]: "As absolute consciousness, the people is only insofar as it makes itself become another [*er sich ein andres wird*], and insofar as in this becoming-other [*anderswerden*], it is immediately itself" (GW 6, p. 315).

Identity and difference are then not mutually exclusive. According to Hegel, what defines the structure of historical consciousness is the becoming-other of a collective in an institutional self-production.<sup>7</sup> Rather than constituting a simple, determined entity – which would only be negated externally, as if the negative were no more than an "epiphenomenon" as Laclau argues (Laclau 2005: 84) – it is the own negative movement of *objectifying itself* that is the vector of the symbolization of the totality. In my view, this lies at the core of Hegel's conception of the people: there is no collective self-consciousness prior to social objectification. Accordingly, Hegel ultimately posits the state as the objective reality that ensures the construction of historical agency. The people finds its symbolic structuring through its activity of becoming-object, which Hegel in Jena calls its "work" (GW 6, p. 315). Political institutionalization, broadly understood, is not the representation of a prior and already given identity, but rather the *medium* for the construction of the people as a political and historical agent.

What happens, then, to the "peoples without history" referred to by Laclau? In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* Hegel gave in the 1820s, he considers non-European spiritual formations to be excluded from the path of world history and not belonging to the "sphere of culture" [*Kreis der Bildung*]

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<sup>7</sup> The same bond between identity and difference is what defines the relationship between the individuals that belong to that people: "The substance of the people must be as much that in which singular consciences are one as that in which they oppose each other and that against which they are active" (GW 6, p. 315.).



(GW 27/3, p. 833). He considers African<sup>8</sup>, indigenous American<sup>9</sup> and – to a certain extent – Asian<sup>10</sup> populations as unable of objectifying their freedom in an *institutionalized* self-consciousness. In such cases, the becoming-other is not codified into the institutional shape that Hegel praises as the elementary form of objective spirit. According to him – in a blatantly Eurocentric and racist assertion<sup>11</sup> – these cultures are thus entangled in a compulsive spiritual activity in which no objective fixation is possible.<sup>12</sup>

8 “As preceding the state of culture-formation [*Bildung*] proper, Africa must be regarded as that which does not belong yet to world history” (GW 27/3, p. 833). For similar passages, see also GW 27/1, p. 84; GW 27/2, p. 516 and 526; GW 27/4, p. 1230.

9 “America presents itself in all these aspects as a weak, new country, little advanced in culture and powerless in every respect: it must therefore be excluded from the course of world history, as must the larger part of Africa” (GW 27/4, pp. 1205-1206). For related passages see GW 27/3, p. 821.

10 The situation of the Asian peoples – China and India – within Hegel’s schema implies a supplementary ambiguity. Those cultures have no positive participation in history, but they are already the first level of historicity. They are the “access point” to history: “China and India are in the calm for-itself, they do not intervene in progress, but they are the access point [*Ausgangspunkt*] for the progression of history” (GW 27/3, p. 833).

11 Which has provoked a major controversy among Hegel’s scholars. Essentially, the discussion opposes those who maintain that racial exclusion is not a structuring element of Hegel’s philosophy of history against those who, on the contrary, see in it a systemic function. The debate between J. McCarney and R. Bernasconi is exemplary in this sense. McCarney argues: “As hoped, peoples, not nations, spiritual not natural entities, are the vehicles of this process. Indeed, groups whose principle is nature, such as nations, tribes, castes and races, cannot figure as historical subjects.” McCarney’s conclusion, however, is highly questionable: “From this it follows that for Hegel there can be no racist interpretation of history” (Bernasconi & McCarney 2003: 33). Here, we follow the argument of Bernasconi’s response when he indicates that the problematic point is that “only certain races produce peoples” (Bernasconi & McCarney 2003: 36). In other words, the national and racial element is not a positive moment within historical subjectivation, yet it predisposes its *conditions*.

12 It is important to specify the scope of this ethnic-racialist thesis on the a-historicity of non-western societies. In Hegel’s view, these populations are not, *in themselves, naturally unable* of performing a historical action. The cause of their exclusion is not a potential or natural (in)capacity. It is rather their *actual condition* – somatic, territorial and driving – that hinders the stable institutionalization of the collective in a fixed objectivity – the law, God, the family and, ultimately, the state – and prevents them from reaching the rational regime of historicity *for themselves*. A passage of the *Lectures on the philosophy of subjective spirit* on the African “character” displays in a very clear manner the difference between the *potential capacity* and the *actual drive* towards culture and history: “They cannot be denied a capacity for education [*Fähigkeit zur Bildung*]; not only have they, here and there, adopted Christianity with the greatest gratitude and spoken with emotion of the freedom they have acquired through Christianity after a long spiritual servitude, but in Haiti they have even formed a state on Christian principles. But they do not show an inner drive [*Inneren Trieb*] towards culture” (GW 25/2, p.958). By allowing the possibility of becoming historical – even if not *for themselves* – Hegel legitimizes the “pedagogical” mission of western colonialism. This justifies my choice of using the term “a-historical” rather than “un-historical” peoples.

Therefore, these spiritual formations “without history” do not constitute “peoples” in the proper and accomplished sense of the term, and I take the lack of this distinction as the source of Laclau’s misguided reprise of the concept. When it comes to asserting their a-historicity, Hegel points to a dimension that somehow precedes the objective and institutional articulation of the people. Rather than the cultural content of these societies, Hegel focuses on the geographical, somatic and driving-affective embodiment of the political construction of the community. Accordingly, in the context of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel introduces another concept that is intimately linked to “the people” but cannot be reduced to it. A people without history – and without state as the objective form of identification – is not yet a people [*Volk*], but remains only a *nation* [*Nation*]:

In the existence [*Dasein*] of a people the substantial aim is to be a state and to maintain itself as a state. A people without state-formation (a nation as such) has, strictly speaking, no history, as the peoples existed before their formation of states and others still exist now as savage nations (GW 20, p. 526, § 549).

Apart from a few rare exceptions<sup>13</sup>, the specificity of the concept of nation is scarcely addressed in Hegelian literature. Many commentators translate “*Nation*” and “*Volk*” indistinctly as “nation”<sup>14</sup>, while others insist on the “insignificance” (Bienenstock 1979: 175) of the term in Hegelian philosophy, arguing that it is the consciousness of the people as state – the “*Volk als Staat*” of the *Grundlinien* (GW14/1, p. 269, § 331) – that constitutes for Hegel the true historical agent.<sup>15</sup> While it is true that Hegel sometimes uses the terms as synonyms<sup>16</sup>, the case of ahistorical nations underscores precisely the *non-coincidence* of “*Nation*” and “*Volk*”. The passages on non-European spiritual formations reveal the specificity of the concept of nation which functions, within Hegelian discourse, to designate a *border zone* of historicity.

13 For a remarkable exception, see the text by von Bogdandy (1991). However, after rightly distinguishing it from the people, von Bogdandy associates Hegel’s concept of the nation with a naturalistic view with a “low” political significance (von Bogdandy 1991: 535).

14 “ISBN”:”978-3-031-29661-1”,”language”:”en”,”note”:”DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-29662-8”,”publisher”:”Springer International Publishing”,”publisher-place”:”Cham”,”source”:”DOI.org (CrossrefCf. Oittinen 2023: 109; Wolsing 2022; Ostritsch 2021; Mowad 2013: 171; Moland 2012. In this respect, L. Carré’s critical review of L. Moland’s book is highly pertinent (cf. Carré 2015).

15 Everything happens as if Hegel’s interpretations of the question of the nation – as an anthropological reality – remain absolutely caught up in the debate on “nationalism” as a political option. All commentators’ efforts are aimed at distancing Hegel from nationalism – understood as the consecration of the natural and sensible singularity of a given community – in particular that which emerges in other variants of German idealism and Romanticism. More specifically, Hegel is confronted with the last Fichte, as an example of the opposition between nationalism and statism, between particularism and universalism. Among other works, see Avineri 1962; Pelczynski 1984; Losurdo 1997.

16 For instance, see GW14/1, p. 159, §181.

While the concept of nation cannot be assimilated to institutionalized consciousness, Hegel does not relegate the national dimension to the realm of nature. In the *Encyclopedia*, the relationship of the nation to the people is one of the expressions of the relationship between soul [*Seele*] and consciousness.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, I believe that certain naturalist interpretations of Hegel's anthropology overlook the specific status of his conception of nation<sup>18</sup>. The latter does not denote nature itself, but rather the natural side of the spirit [*Naturseite des Geistes*] (GW 25/2, p. 926)<sup>19</sup>, i.e. a naturalness of the people's spirit, which is not constituted by physical or biological nature as such. According to Hegel, there is no extrinsic causality from nature in the spirit, and he explicitly rejects the naturalistic language of the "effect" [*Wirkung*] or "influence" [*Einfluss*] that nature would have on human freedom.<sup>20</sup> The concept of the nation introduces a different, non-deterministic relationship between spirit and nature or, more specifically, between the people and their *situatedness*. Instead of referring to external natural conditions, Hegel resorts to the nation in order to explain the *emergence* of the people in a geographical, somatic, and desiring reality.

This gives the nation a kind of liminal status: it is neither an internal moment of the life of the spirit, nor a mere natural physical condition. The nation designates the local spirit [*Lokalgeist*], "the outward manner of living and occupying oneself, the bodily conformation and disposition, but even more, the inner tendency and aptitude of the intellectual and ethical character of peoples" (GW 20, p. 392). The concept of nation – of "national character" [*Nationalcharakter*], or "national spirit" [*Nationalgeist*] – captures the embeddedness of collective consciousness in a *territoriality* – which is not just physical

17 "The first thing here, then, are the qualitative, totally universal determinations of the soul. These include the physical and spiritual racial diversity of the human race, as well as the differences between national spirits [*Nationalgeister*]" (GW 25/2, p. 950).

18 In addition to the aforementioned article by von Bogdandy, there are other recent interpretations of Hegel's anthropology in a naturalistic key (See, among others, Ikäheimo 2021; Testa 2013).

19 "The reason for this is that, in history, spirits are as naturally existing existences [als natürlich daseiende Existenzen sind], because we are not here on the field of pure thought, but on that of existences. The spirit is thus present as the natural determination of a people, or rather of a nation, for the nation is what a people is in its natural form" (GW 27/1, p. 47). "This is because the people, which is the representation of a particular stage in the development of the spirit, is a nation, whose natural determination corresponds to what the spiritual principle is in the region of spiritual configuration" (GW 27/2, p. 507).

20 "There is a general, common and widespread idea that the particular spirit of a nation is linked to its climate [...]. However necessary the relationship between the spiritual principle and the natural principle may be, we must not stick to the general discourse, and attribute to the climate effects and influences too particular" (GW 27/2, p. 508). In the very same passage in which Hegel evokes the national dimension of peoples, he rejects the determinist approaches that assume they can derive the spirit from a climatic or physiological configuration: "the naturalness of the spirit does not have the power to assert itself as the pure imprint [*abdruck*] of the determinations of the concept" (GW 25/2, p. 962).

space – in a *lived corporeality* – which is not just physiological constitution – and in a drive – which is not, of course, a set of instinctive inclinations. In short, *the concept of nation raises the implications of the embodied-condition of conscious self-institutionalization*. Thus, far from evoking a natural basis that would have an after-effect on an already constituted spirit, the nation concerns the relation of the people to its own emergence in concrete existence. In defining this specific status of the nation, Hegel brings the etymology of the word to the fore: “A nation is a people as native, as *being born* [*als nativ, gebornes*]” (GW 27/2, p. 508).<sup>21</sup> The spiritual formation of a people, which culminates in social institutions and in the state, has an underlying condition that involves lived territoriality and affective disposition.

Once the specific dialectic between these two concepts is clarified, it is now possible to fully grasp the difference with Laclau’s concept of “peoples without history”, which, if we follow Hegel’s presentation, should be called “nations”. Within Hegel’s discourse, nations on the margins of history are not an indifferent exteriority or a mere exception to the norm of historicity. They reveal the complexity of the *nascence* of the construction of the people.<sup>22</sup> The “nations without history” are a *pure birth* of consciousness that does not stabilize the product of its *natality* in an objective, rational self-institution. The capacity of social agents to become political subjects is affected by the unconscious background of their own emergence. Within Hegel’s system, I take the “nations without history” to be more than an isolated, regional case. They are the symptom of the *birth* of political subjectivation, which is *affected* – rather than *determined* from the outside – by its own genesis in a shared corpo-geo-affective situation.

In Laclau’s terms, Hegelian discourse shows that social heterogeneity lies at the heart of the symbolic formation of the historical arena. This radical alterity constitutes the edges of historicity, as the dysfunctional threshold of the historical intelligibility of social existence. Now, I propose that this border of historicity – and the concept of nation it highlights – points precisely to the blind spot of Laclau’s theory of populism: his account of the *functioning* of symbolic construction takes for granted, or naturalizes, the actual *emergence*

21 We can find an analogous passage in the *Lectures of the Philosophy of Right*: “Actual peoples’ in general have a side by which they belong to nature, they are thus in external effectivity, thus they are born (Nationen) [...]” (GW 26/1, p. 580).

22 As P. Purtschert puts it, non-European social formations are the expression of a limit figure [*Grenzfigur*], of a “beginning of reflection that always remains a beginning” (Purtschert 2006:71). According to Purtschert, it is this pure birth of the African situation, for example, that prevents Hegel from decisively objectifying radical otherness in a definitive characterization: “The figure of the African, situated at the limit of history, becomes the constitutive rest of the movement of history that Hegel systematically seeks to grasp. This boundary, however, is not static; on the contrary, it is constantly produced in the text. The shifting positions of African consciousness mark the points of a beginning that, while continually re-staged as a beginning, is constantly shifting” (Purtschert 2006: 64).

of this process. At this point, Hegel's distinction between nation and people allows us to question the genesis of political subjectivation at a different level. According to Hegel, human beings do not immediately possess the constructive procedure for producing a symbolic or institutional community. I believe that this non-immediacy of the constructive process is related to the aforementioned challenge that post-foundationalist theories currently face: the logic of subjectivation does not explain its own emergence. The question of nationhood then highlights the conditioned status of the collective capacity to articulate social existence in a political symbolical horizon. A reflection on the nation is therefore needed to explain the unconscious and affective formation of the very capacity that allows the task of making the people. In what follows, I will argue that the concept of the nation, makes it possible to address what remains only presupposed in Laclau's work, that is, *the desiring conditions of the articulatory performance itself*.

### The Nation, the "Real" of the People?

I hope to have shown that the distinction between "people" and "nation" goes beyond a terminological nuance, internal to Hegel's system. In order to demonstrate its relevance to contemporary debates on political identification, I propose to address the debate that Laclau undertakes with another figure of the "dialectical" tradition broadly understood, namely Frantz Fanon. In *OPR*, Laclau evokes Fanon's reflections on the constitution of the revolutionary subject in Algeria as an example of how social heterogeneity – the colonized "classless", excluded from social representation – operates within the political articulation of "the people". Laclau's assessment is ambivalent. On the one hand, he praises the idea of a radical exteriority, which cannot be assigned to any pre-established social interest representable within the system and which constitutes nevertheless the driving force behind the anticolonial antagonism. On the other hand, Laclau criticizes Fanon for having "identified the 'outsiders' with too rigid a referent", which makes him incapable of "perceiving the problem of heterogeneity in its true generality" (Laclau 2005: 151). Finally, Laclau contests Fanon's "return to dialectical inversion" (*ibid.*: 152), which he believes fails to understand the volatility of social heterogeneity within a process of articulation. According to Laclau, the heterogeneous is not a given reference, but a function – as "a real" that *resists* symbolization – that is always *iterable* beyond its concrete content.

However, this objection is only valid if one assumes that Fanon considers political subjectivation at the level of symbolic articulation, i.e., at the level of the rhetoric making of the people. Yet, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon refers to an instance *prior* to that of discursive articulation, an instance that links political subjectivation to a shared affective condition that underlies any symbolic institution. More precisely, Fanon refers not to the people but to the nation: "These classless idlers will, by militant and decisive action, discover the path of the nation" (Fanon 1961: 126).

The difference is not terminological. Fanon also occasionally uses the term “people”. The difference with Laclau lies rather in the fact that Fanon raises the difficulties of forming *the mere capability of rhetorical elaborations*. The conditions for the discursive production of the people are not always in place. Throughout Fanon’s work in Algeria – including his analysis as a psychiatrist – the problem of the nation is related to the question of the somatic, psychic and driving conformation of the very possibility to institute a political agency. The entire political analysis of *The Wretched of the Earth* – paradigmatically in the first chapter – focuses precisely on the somatic and affective modalities – “libidinal” but also “muscular” and “respiratory” (Fanon 1961: 53–57) – that embody the production of the revolutionary symbolic horizon. The colonial context in which Fanon was engaged is thus perhaps the situation *par excellence* in which a radical heterogeneity emerges that affects the very *capacity to constitute* a historical identity and thus a people. In this context, Fanon’s aim is to identify a kind of conditionality of the symbolic synthesis of both the individual and the collective subject. The synthesis is not immediately ensured by any *logic* of subjectivation. Nor does it depend on a simply empirical or physical condition. Instead, this preliminary level entails the formation of the embodied experience of the political agent. In this sense, I argue that – in very different ways and with opposite political tendencies – Hegel and Fanon raise the same point: *the emergence of political agency is not immediately contained in the logic of its articulation*.

I take Fanon’s insistence on this preliminary layer of political subjectivity to be a possible answer to the question of the success and failure of articulation: in order to explain the actuality of political agency, political philosophy must address the primary capability of identification, which may be lacking, and which, in any case, needs to be thematized. Thus, in my view, the “rigidity” to which Laclau refers does not suggest a fixed semantic reference that can be localized in the structure of variation of the semiotic apparatus. Instead, Fanon points to the somatic, experiential and desiring existence that allows this subjectivation to *begin*. Contrary to what one might expect, there is no naturalism in Fanon’s perspective. The bodily and psycho-affective existence of the political agent is also mediated by social structures, but is not reducible to the rhetorical articulation of the subject. On the political level, Fanon’s point is that the discursive making of the people is conditioned by and inscribed in a psycho-affective situation. In order to reach the mere possibility of discursive articulation – which cannot be taken for granted – Fanon emphasizes the primary political task of the revolutionary process in Algeria as the task of bringing the nation into being: “Those action obey a simple instruction: ‘Make the nation exist!’ There are no programs, there are no discourses, there are no resolutions, there are no tendencies” (Fanon 1961: 127).

The controversy with Fanon illustrates, in my view, how the problem of the nation implicitly haunts Laclau’s theoretical program, as some readers have suggested (Balibar 2010; Sibertin-Blanc 2013). Of course, the question is explicitly addressed by Laclau within *OPR* when he reflects on what he calls



“ethno-populism” (2005: 243–44).<sup>23</sup> For Laclau, thought, this tendency is only one of many variants of the combination of signifiers through which collective demands are articulated. The problem I tackle in this paper is quite different. It is not a matter of knowing how “the nation” intervenes as a signifier in symbolic construction. The considerations proposed by Hegel and, after him, by Fanon, focus on a deeper level. The emergence of any identification – regardless of the signifiers that articulate it – presupposes a shared drive, which can be interrupted or even annihilated, as in the case of colonialism analyzed by Fanon. The problem of the nation is thus distinct from, or at least not limited to, the question of “nationalism” – “chauvinism” or “nativism” – as a particular rhetorical strategy. Rather, it raises the dimension that Vladimir Safatle has recently addressed with the notion of an “autochthony” of political action (cf. Safatle 2021)<sup>24</sup>, of a *nascence* of identification that is not limited to the signifying games of rhetorical composition.

In psychoanalytic terms – which are also Laclau’s – the problem of the nation concerns the dimension of *jouissance* that is implicated in the articulatory procedures.<sup>25</sup> Social heterogeneity, conceived by Laclau as the *rest* of antagonistic construction, implies a constitutive *incompleteness* of symbolization, an exteriority that is already implied within the field of representation. Accordingly, in *OPR*, the heterogeneous does not concern the symbolization performance itself, it merely implies a constitutive limit. Both Hegel’s and Fanon’s accounts of the nation open up the possibility of locating the radical heterogeneity at the level of the emergence, or the *nativity*, of this collective practice of construction. This prior condition cannot simply be situated in the past – as represented in

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23 A similar strategy can be seen in the distinction between “inclusivist” and “exclusivist” populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). There are also some works that, while drawing on Laclau, make a distinction between populism and nationalism, as different discursive arrangements that can possibly coexist in discursive constructions (see De Cleen 2017; De Cleen & Stravakakis 2017). Yet in all these cases, the nation remains addressed as a semiotic nodal point and not as an affective condition of identification.

24 From my perspective, the concept of “deep historicity” mobilized by Norman Ajari in his critique of C. Mouffe points in the same direction (see Ajari 2021).

25 The imperative to go beyond the question of the nation as a mere ideological content to be deconstructed is posed by several commentators who orbit a critical interpretation of Laclau. For Sibertin-Blanc, the question of the nation returns to the heart of the populist question, when it comes to identifying which “identifications are performable on a political stage” (Sibertin-Blanc 2013: 293). In a similar vein, S. Žižek and Y. Stavrakakis: “To emphasize, in a ‘deconstructivist’ mode, that the Nation is not a biological or transhistorical fact but a contingent discursive construction, an overdetermined result of textual practices, is thus misleading; it overlooks the role of a remainder of some real, non-discursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation qua discursive-entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency” (Žižek 1993: 202). In a book that I already mentioned, Stavrakakis states: “The force of national identity – or of any other identity for that matter – is not wholly attributable to the structural position of the nation as a nodal point (or of other signifiers and discursive elements). [...] There is also a much more ‘substantive’ – but not essentialist – dimension that has to be taken into account” (Stavrakakis 2007: 200).

a timeline – but is, on the contrary, what constitutes the affective background of every present experience of collective selfhood. Understood in this way, the *nativity* of political synthesis goes far beyond the “nation” in the current sense of the term. It leads to the implications of the *being born* [*gebornes*] of social processes of identification.

As a result, it becomes possible to reconsider Laclau’s account of the un-articulable “real”. Laclau establishes social heterogeneity as the un-representable that is presupposed in every symbolic political identification. In this view, heterogeneity sets then a constitutive *limit* to articulation, but the *procedure* of symbolic construction remains unaffected. I argue that the “real” implied in the question of the nation is not only what *resists* symbolization, this still would preserve the idea of a function to be fulfilled in an iterable post-structure. By contrast, the nation is what shapes the emergence of the *constructability* of collective identities. Does this point to a sort of natural basis for politics? To a new foundationalism perspective that would try to provide a ground, “in the last instance”, for political identification? At this point, I hope to have presented the elements for a negative response. The level of the affective, somatic and territorial experiences implied by the problem of the nation is not an immutable and reassuring natural background. On the contrary, by highlighting the problem of the nation, it is possible to address the fluctuations of the process of articulation and the impossibility of any definitive stabilization of collective identities.<sup>26</sup> The “real” of the nation is therefore not a fixed natural ground for politics but the inescapable *situatedness* that haunts every elaboration of symbolic horizons.

## Conclusion

The hypothesis of this article is that the dialogue between Laclau and dialectical thought is key to responding to the challenges of postmodern political philosophy and, more specifically, to tackling the problem of the emergence of political identities. In order to support this claim, I have first analyzed the ambivalent relationship between Laclau’s theory of populism and the dialectic understanding of history and the way in which the former resorts to Hegel’s concept of “peoples without history” to define social heterogeneity. I then argued that Laclau’s reading overlooks a distinction between people and nation that is crucial to grasping Hegel’s account of historical agency. Hegel’s concept of nation reveals an aspect of political identification that Laclau seems to downplay, namely the conditions for the symbolic institutionalization of the people. In the same line, I finally confronted Laclau’s reading of Frantz Fanon as based on a similar overlooking of the somatic psycho-affective situation that enables discursive

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<sup>26</sup> Fanon’s considerations on the “misadventures of national consciousness” (Fanon 1961: 145–193) confirm that the assertion of a “national” rooting of the symbolic construct provides no definitive psycho-social stabilization. On this internal tension of *The Wretched of the Earth* see Sibertin-Blanc 2014.

articulation. The gap between nation and people, I argue, manifests the need for a philosophical insight into the actual genesis of political identification.

In my view, Hegelian and post-Hegelian reflections on the affective investment of rhetorical formations provide such an insight without completely abandoning the “post-foundationalist” or “constructivist” perspective on political identities. I have argued that the dialectical account of the nation introduces the *conditionality of political construction* as a philosophical problem that cannot be disregarded. The analysis of the situated embodiment of symbolic identification is crucial to counter the naturalization of political identities. In this respect, political philosophy faces two parallel dangers: on the one hand there is the peril of taking identities as naturally given, and with all the exclusionary consequences this entails on a normative level, which post-modern philosophy rightly deconstructs. On the other hand, there is yet another risk that a post-foundationalist perspective such as Laclau’s incurs, namely the naturalization of political articulation itself, as an operation that can always be performed, reproduced and resumed. I have argued that the dialectical comprehension of the nation, by raising the conditionality of articulation, avoids reifying the formal iterability of identification.

In this paper, I have exposed the problem of the conditionality of politics by distinguishing between people and nation, that is, between discursive articulation and its embodied conditions. Nevertheless, my analysis does not confine political horizons to the “national” contexts in the strict sense, as if psycho-affective collective enactments were only possible within communities empirically defined as nations. What I called in this article the “problem of the nation” is in fact a more general focus on the constitution – troubled and contradictory – of the *collective capacity to articulate social heterogeneity*. This new angle of analysis makes it possible to address, under new lenses, a number of concrete political phenomena: in particular, the affective “success” of European conservative nationalisms, but also postcolonial investments of the nation, and even contemporary elaborations on the possibilities for plurinational states. All these phenomena, in their diversity, reveal the problematic embodiment of discursive political practices. The latter do not spontaneously proceed according to a pure logic of articulation, but also depend on a situated emergence, an affective *birth* that makes their performance *real*.

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## Manuel Tangora

### Narodi, nacije i društvena heterogenost: od Hegela do Laklaura i nazad

#### Apstrakt

Rad Ernesta Laklaura *O populističkom razumu* predstavlja ključni orijentir u pokušajima post-moderne političke filozofije da shvati logiku kontingentnosti na delu u proizvodnji političkih subjekata. Međutim, čini se da je poslednjih godina ovaj post-fundacionalistički pristup zapao u čorsokak kada se suočio sa istrajnošću, uspehom i efikasnošću određenih polova identifikacije koji se, čini se, odupiru ideji o radikalnoj kontingentnosti kolektivnih angažmana. Tvrdnja koju branim jeste da novi dijalog između hegelijanske filozofije istorije i Laklauovog post-fundacionalizma može biti plodonosan u prevazilaženju ovog zastoja. Umesto da ponovo podstakne debatu oko istorizma, Laklauovo evociranje pojma *naroda bez istorije* omogućava istraživanje radikalne heterogenosti koja se podrazumeva u situacionoj, somatskoj i afektivnoj ukorenjenosti formiranja istorijskih identiteta. Ovu hipotezu zasnivam na detaljnom ispitivanju Hegelovog sopstvenog shvatanja a-istorijskih duhovnih formacija i na različiti koju pravi između „naroda“ kao institucionalizovane kolektivne svesti i „nacije“ kao njene situirane geneze. Pokazujem da ovaj hegelijanski dijalektički pristup nacionalnosti daleko od toga da ne ograničava političke horizonte na „nacionalističku“ ili „nativističku“ retoriku. Umesto toga, on nudi novo svetlo na izazove post-fundacionalističkih pristupa kada je reč o razumevanju konkretnosti političke subjektivacije.

Ključne reči: Hegel, Laklau, nacija, narod, politički identiteti, post-fundacionalizam.