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## THE FORGETTING OF HEGEL IN ERNESTO LACLAU: AN UNFORTUNATE DISENGAGEMENT

**ABSTRACT**

Ernesto Laclau criticises Hegelian dialectics for allegedly introducing the logic of necessity into Marxism, which, he argues, hinders the consideration of contingency. This article examines Laclau's interpretation of Hegelian dialectics across various works and scrutinises his exploration of the concepts of determination, negativity, and contingency. Revisiting these concepts may offer a non-deterministic understanding of dialectics more aligned with post-foundational political thought, thereby facilitating reflection on social ontology and antagonisms.

**KEYWORDS**

Laclau, Hegel, Marx,  
Post-Marxism,  
dialectics, hegemony.

### Introduction

“So forget Hegel”.  
(Laclau 2004: 148)

Ernesto Laclau has been a persistent presence in contemporary left-wing political theory for over four decades. Since his early works, his ideas have sparked a series of particularly intense debates that have articulated theoretical discussions, hermeneutic quarrels over different authors, and paradigmatic categorical refinement with passionate discussions about contemporary political processes and the historical action of left-wing, emancipatory, or liberation projects. The works compiled in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* of 1977, for example, sparked controversies, especially due to attempts to reconcile a type of populism and socialism, in a theoretical context marked by Althusserianism and the presence of national liberation movements in countries of what was then called the Third World.

The 1980s and the crisis of the left, the changing political context in Europe and Latin America, had a space for reflection in – perhaps – Ernesto Laclau's most influential work (alongside Chantal Mouffe), *Hegemony and Socialist*



*Strategy: Towards a Radicalization of Democracy* (1985). A new reading of Gramsci in a terrain marked by post-structuralism (psychoanalytic and linguistic), a space for new social movements, and the proposal of a radical democracy fueled controversies. The provocative label of “Post-Marxism” clouded many receptions that reacted more focused on denouncing a renunciation of Marxism by labeling them as ex-Marxism (Geras 1987, 1988) or pre-Marxism (Borón 1996), and a concession to postmodernism (Boucher 2000), if not to neoliberalism. However, there were other lucid readings that recovered and examined the fundamental critiques of Marxism, focused on pointing out the “metaphysics of presence” contained in an essentialist (and deterministic) idea of both society and social identities.

The *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (NRR), originally published in 1990, had fewer repercussions, perhaps due to its predominantly theoretical nature and the lesser evidence of the political consequences of intervention. However, the text is fundamental insofar as it operates the radicalization of the anti-essentialist ruptures outlined in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HyES) and is one of the places where a theory of the political subject is glimpsed (in relation to concepts such as antagonism, decision, myth, and the imaginary). Likewise, in the effort to elaborate a theory of the construction of social objectivity (society), the concept of dislocation is developed as a key to thinking about constitutive failure and options for social change. Associated with this – but analytically differentiated – the stylization of the category of antagonism is a vehicle for thinking about a theory of the subject that, in our view, remains in its infancy and needs to be deepened.

*On Populist Reason* (2004) has unleashed a controversial deluge. There, on one hand, the exacerbation of two theoretical roots already present in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HyES), Lacanian psychoanalysis and rhetoric, is evident. The former, present from the outset in works such as “The Impossibility of Society” (1983) and “Psychoanalysis and Marxism” (1987a), the latter hints at a shift from a theory of discourse to a theory of rhetoric inaugurated in works prior to HyES such as “Populist Rupture and Discourse” (1980), through “Why are Empty Signifiers Important for Politics?” (1996) and other articles, and *Politics* (2002) to his latest book *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (2014). On the other hand, the theorization of a battered concept such as populism – “the poor relative of political theory” (Laclau 1987b: 25) – and the historical background of left-wing populisms, especially in Latin America and Southern Europe (Greece and Spain), but also of right-wing populisms in Europe linked to xenophobic positions, placed this work among the most controversial. The proposition of populism as a political logic to construct the “people” subject, the relationship with democracy, sovereignty, as well as the question of leadership, has been widely addressed in academic circles, in mass media, and political fields.

In Laclau’s work, one of the most intense debates revolves around the thorny terrain of his relationship with Marx or, in other words, the relationship between Marxism and post-Marxism, in which Hegel plays a subterranean role. What are the ruptures Laclau establishes with respect to Marx, and what are

the continuities? What does ‘post’ imply in relation to Marxism? And what is left of Marxism if we add the prefix ‘post’ to it? The authors’ criticisms of Marxism operate on different levels. Firstly, there is a theoretical disagreement due to a paradigmatic limitation in the conceptualisation of the configuration of social subjects (the question of subjectivity and social classes as agents). Secondly, there is a disagreement with an empirical claim related to the course of history and the development of capitalism towards a polarised simplification of the social. Thirdly, there is a focus on the political project (communism as reconciliation). In this article, we are particularly interested in the theoretical critique situated at the level of social ontology (with consequences for the conception of history) and the shaping of political subjects (with implications for social struggles). The theoretical critique contains a dual argument: the questioning of the idea of ‘contradiction’ and the abandonment of dialectics within the framework of a critique of the determinism and essentialism attributed to Marxism. This implies the need to forget Hegel.

The hypothesis of this article is that Laclau abandons dialectics due to its deterministic and teleological nature, attributed to Hegel and sometimes to Marx by certain authors who mediate Laclau’s reception, primarily Louis Althusser and Lucio Colletti. However, in order to resolve some of the theoretical problems posed by Laclau himself, it is possible to recover dialectics detached from the idea of necessary resolution (such as reconciliation) and linked to an open (and contingent) play between constitutive negativity and necessary precarious positivity. This implies separating negativity from necessary reconciliation and from logical-formal contradiction on the one hand, and rethinking the relationship between contingency and determination by subverting that dichotomy on the other. In the following section, we will review Hegel’s presence in Laclau’s work before advancing into the potential role that dialectics could play in contemporary political theory.

## The Forgetting of Dialectics in the Forgetting of Hegel

In this context, we address a relatively unexplored aspect related to Laclau’s relationship with dialectics (which he claims to renounce), whose ontological logic – according to Laclau – is shared by Hegel and Marx albeit with different content. In his own words:

It is from this point that we must begin our consideration of the Marxist tradition, since at its root there is a discourse anchored in Hegelian teleology. We are familiar with the characteristics that define the latter: the essential determinations of any entity are found in its conceptual specificity, the inherent conceptual contradictions of this specificity compel us to move towards a new entity embodying a new conceptual stage, etc. Marx did not change things at all with his ‘inversion’ of Hegelian dialectics: if the foundation is ‘matter’ instead of ‘idea’, but matter has internal laws of motion that are conceptually specifiable, Marx’s materialism is as idealistic as Hegel’s. Ontologically speaking, they are not, in fact, different from each other. (Laclau, 2010: 30)

To speak of dialectics is to discuss one of the most debated concepts within Marxism and a philosophical tradition that traces back to the Eleatics, passing through Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, and, of course, Hegel. In the specific field of Marxism and political philosophy, controversies regarding its ontological or methodological status have generated thousands of interventions of varying kinds and rigor. However, as we argue, Laclau's abandonment of dialectics operates in the realm of reaction against determinism and the metaphysics of presence, that is, in the ontological terrain. For Laclau,

Whereas classical Marxism fixed an objective meaning on history which subsequently operated as an unquestioned transcendental horizon in the analysis of concrete social processes, what we try to do is to historicize the horizon itself, this to say, to show it in its radical contingency, which is only possible insofar as the radicalization of the interrogation opens the possibility of different contingencies. (Laclau 1990: 161)

Laclau, therefore, proposes – albeit inadvertently – a recuperation of Hegel that consists of historicizing the horizon to demonstrate radical contingency, something that Gramsci had already mentioned as absolute historicism. Laclau (and Mouffe) evokes Hegel in almost all of their works. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, he introduces him to address the problem of articulating elements in the context of hegemony theory when it is preached as an ontological concept (Retamozo 2011). The issue at hand is the loss of foundation of social order with the death of God and the attempt to erect other myths as shapers of society. If the Enlightenment proposed recourse to reason, stemming from the crisis of the conception of the cosmos as an organic unity due to the disintegrating tensions of liberalism and capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Romantic generation was able to reinscribe the classical problems of freedom and necessity in a new historical context. The evidence of the absence of foundation (hence the idea of post-foundational thought) forced a consideration of new foundations and the legitimacy of the order of the cosmos (natural and political) but this time as human production. Let us quote Laclau extensively in a clear passage:

From our present perspective, this is the ambiguity which Hegel's thought presents in its approach to the dialectic of unity and fragmentation. His work is at once the highest moment of German Romanticism and the first modern – that is to say, post-Enlightenment – reflection on society. It is not a critique of society from Utopia, nor a description and theorization of the mechanisms which make possible an order that is accepted as certain and given; rather, Hegel's reflection starts from the opaqueness of the social vis-a-vis elusive forms of a rationality and intelligibility detectable only by reference to a cunning of reason which leads separation back to unity. Hegel thus appears as located in a watershed between two epochs. In a first sense, he represents the highest point of rationalism: the moment when it attempts to embrace within the field of reason, without dualisms, the totality of the universe of differences. History and society, therefore, have a rational and intelligible structure. But, in a second sense, this

synthesis contains all the seeds of its dissolution, as the rationality of history can be affirmed only at the price of introducing contradiction into the field of reason. It would, therefore, be sufficient to show that this is an impossible operation requiring constant violation of the method that it itself postulates – as was already demonstrated in the nineteenth century by Trendelenburg – for the Hegelian discourse to become something very different: a series of contingent and not logical transitions. It is precisely here that Hegel’s modernity lies: for him, identity is never positive and closed in itself, but is constituted as transition, relation, Difference. If, however, Hegel’s logical relations become contingent transitions, the connections between them cannot be fixed as moments of an underlying or sutured totality. This means that they are articulations. In the Marxist tradition, this area of ambiguity is displayed in the contradictory uses of the concept of dialectics’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 94–95)

Laclau retrieves Hegel’s contribution to ponder the problem of constituting order, introducing contingency and questioning the legacy of dialectics, which he believes Marx inherits from Hegel. However, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HyES), there are no direct citations of Hegel. Laclau employs two mediations via Marx to approach Hegel: Louis Althusser and Lucio Colletti. Each author serves as a vehicle to address two theoretical problems, whose analytical distinction is worth noting: the issue of social totality (social order) and the issue of subjects (and antagonism). The underlying logic of the treatment is the same and is guided by theoretical decisions seeking to break with essentialism (both of society and identities). Following Althusser, and certainly not an exclusive interpretation of the French philosopher, Laclau attributes to Hegel the idea of a complex totality that self-unfolds (and therefore contains the necessity of a teleology synthesized in the “cunning of reason”). The concept of overdetermination that Althusser (1965) borrows from Freud, on the other hand, offers a (in)determined (or overdetermined) totality open to the play of contingent articulation. What Laclau seeks to recover from Althusser – rightly in our view – is the possibility of overcoming a deterministic version of Marxism that will be radicalized in post-structuralism (by abandoning “determination in the last instance”). The impossibility of fixing an a priori and/or ultimate structure opens up the possibility of thinking about the contingent formation of society as a discursive construction (in the specific sense Laclau gives it as an articulation of elements). The conclusion Laclau draws is relevant in theoretical terms: introducing contingency implies addressing the problem of human freedom and a radical historicism in social formation (which does not mean, as we will see, historical indeterminacy).

The problem – perhaps – lies in the relatively scant attention given to the notion of contingency, its place in political theory, and its relationship with the ideas of necessity and determination. In this regard, Hegel operates as a deterministic, idealistic, and teleological “commonplace,” whose conception seeps into Marxism as a shadow from which one must escape. Carlos Pérez Soto directly challenges this assertion, stating that “[b]y never making a distinction between Hegel and the Soviet versions of Hegelianism, Laclau produces

the unfortunate confusion of criticizing in Hegel what could legitimately be criticized in Soviet philosophy. And, in this line, he goes so far as to commit the abuse, already consecrated by Popper, of citing Soviet philosophy when he wants to criticize Hegel. When one examines, in his texts, how he criticizes Hegelian philosophy, what we find is an argumentation completely based on Della Volpe and Colletti, and even on the unfortunate Popperian texts.” (Perez Soto 1997: 32) Laclau has acknowledged the influence of Galvano Della Volpe, although also acknowledging the “exaggerated optimism” initially generated by his arguments against dialectics. In this sense, he affirms, “An idealist philosophy like Hegel’s, which reduces the real to the concept, could conceive antagonisms as contradictions; but, as the Della Volpe school in Italy pointed out, it is incompatible with a materialist philosophy like Marxism, which asserts the extra-mental character of the real” (Laclau 2006: 104). In his theory of antagonism, Laclau follows the criticism of the Della Volpe school – especially Colletti’s – of dialectical contradiction but deviates from their conclusions (Laclau and Mouffe 2004, Laclau 2012). Antagonism is neither a dialectical relationship nor a relationship of real opposition (as it does not imply a relationship between positive terms), but rather the way in which the impossibility of completeness presents itself. In a text bridging between PIM and HyES, Laclau (1980) had equated contradiction and antagonism, but in HyES he corrects this issue to propose antagonism as a relationship that is neither subsumed as contradiction nor as real opposition (the figures that Colletti takes from Kant).

For Laclau, Colletti starts from Kant’s distinction between real opposition (*Realrepugnanz.*) and logical contradiction. While the former can be formulated as a relationship between A and B, where their terms do not lose identity, the latter is a true logical contradiction and can be formulated as “A and not A” ( $A \boxtimes \boxtimes A$ ). What Laclau extracts from this is that contradiction can only occur at a logical-conceptual level and not as a historical manifestation. In other words, it’s a formulation of thought rather than a social process. However, the first type of opposition is configured when two positivities come into contact, negating each other in a contingent process. Therefore, according to Colletti in the Laclauian reading, while contradiction does not enter into history, it is not only possible but necessary for a scientific thought to expel dialectics. Antagonism, in this sense, does not imply contradiction.

The relationship between contradiction, antagonism, and dialectics is crucial to understand Laclau’s conception. He diverges from Marx – and by extension, Hegel – by referring to the treatment of this issue in two canonical texts of Marxism: *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Preface of 1859*. In the former, the relationship occurs between classes, while in the latter, it is between social relations of production and productive forces. The class struggle can be understood as antagonism without contradiction (since there is nothing inherently contradictory within the relationship of buying and selling labor power), while in the latter, there is a contradiction but not necessarily an antagonism. Therefore, what interests us here is the idea of contradiction (both formal and dialectical).

The attack on dialectics is one of the central points of post-Marxism. For this, a first operation is necessary that prepares the ground for criticism: reducing dialectical contradiction to formal logic. Indeed, it is absurd to maintain that in historical reality one can think under a strict idea of contradiction of the type A and not A, but this does not follow the challenge to dialectical contradiction. According to Laclau:

The dialectical explanation we have rejected presupposes that if there is an antagonistic (that is, contradictory) relation between A and B, I have within the concept of A everything we need to know that it will be negated by B and only by B. (Laclau 2005: 148)

The problem, of course, lies in what is understood by dialectical contradiction. If this falls under the scheme A and not A, the criticism would be appropriate. However, if the idea of dialectics cannot be articulated under the notion of a formal contradiction, not under the equivocal scheme of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, we find ourselves in another terrain. Moreover, if this is far from what Marx himself understood. Even more importantly, can we sustain dialectics beyond what Hegel and Marx have said? And in that case, what dialectics? Beyond doing justice to Laclau's (in)just critique of Hegel, we are more interested in the ideas that emerge than in an act of philology and exegesis. However, it is worth noting that asserting that concept and the Idea in Hegel can be reduced to a dichotomy of materiality/mentality is, at the very least, a questionable reduction (perhaps of Feuerbachian origin). Marxist theorists still owe us an answer to this question of what is meant by contradiction (dialectic) without resorting to more or less dogmatic formulas. The point of departure for the reconceptualization of dialectics is found in the realm of negativity. Laclau seeks to preserve something from dialectics (negativity) while dispensing with another element frequently associated with it, the supposed necessary resolution:

The Hegelian notion of negativity is that of a necessary negativity and as such was conceived as determinate negation. That is to say that the negative is a moment in the internal unfolding of the concept which is destined to be reabsorbed in an *Aufhebung* or higher unity. It is not even necessary here, as has been occasionally claimed, for the final term of the dialectical movement to be positive; even if the system is conceived as a successive movement between positivity and negativity, the later is always internal to it. Contingency itself is absorbed as a moment in the self-unfolding of the – necessary. (Laclau 1990: 26)

It is evident that if Hegel affirmed panlogism as a reduction of being to the concept (and if the concept refers to thought and the mental realm), his effort would not merit the place it holds in the history of philosophy. However, if it is possible to conceive with Hegel being as the historicity of humanity unfolding, as the unfolding of freedom and rationality, then we are facing another horizon. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in one possible reading, is the attempt to address the challenge of thinking the experience of freedom and community.

The Absolute Knowledge implies, in some way, the attempt (and with Laclau we can say: “necessary and impossible”) to constitute a community with freedom as a condition of possibility. Hence, Hegel has been reclaimed by communitarian strands in contemporary political philosophy, such as Charles Taylor (1975), and also as the first post-Marxist, as Žižek does (1992). However, Laclau acknowledges in Hegel this idea of the necessity of a limit, although in his view “external,” momentary, and not constitutive:

For Hegel, for example, the perception of a limit was the perception of what is beyond it; the limit, then, lies within the conceivable. Structuralism’s radical relationalism would thus be subsumable under the category of the infinite regress. This point could be generalized: the most diverse forms of contemporary thought are permeated by the relational character of identities in conjunction with the impossibility of intellectual mastery over the context (Laclau 1989: 69–70)

However, negativity in Hegelian thought also resides in the ontological realm, which is equally relevant for post-structuralism. Indeed, it is the inscription of nothingness into being (a constitutive negativity) that remains unmediated in the becoming of human history and needs to be filled in a transition from contingency to determination. A post-foundational reading of Hegel is consistent with his post-Enlightenment attempt to address historical processes under a conception of history that incorporates negativity and the incessant play of filling the constitutive void (of society and social identities).

Slavoj Žižek has been, in many of his interventions, a defender of Hegel against Laclau’s critiques, to the extent that Laclau dedicates Section II.B. under the title “Hegel” in “Identity and Hegemony” (2000) to him. In these dialogues with Žižek and Judith Butler, Laclau acknowledges that both authors have joined forces against him to defend Hegel (just as he has joined forces with Butler to defend deconstruction against Žižek, and with Žižek to defend Lacan against Butler’s arguments). Žižek accuses Laclau of an “all-too-quick” anti-Hegelian turn, and Laclau responds:

I cannot simply dismiss Žižek’s reading of Hegel, for two reasons. First, because I agree with almost everything he extracts from the texts of Hegel. Second, because I do not think he is projecting onto these texts a series of considerations foreign to the texts themselves, but rather they apply perfectly to these texts (Laclau 2003a: 67).

However, Laclau departs from Hegel on two aspects. The first – here a first citation from the *Logic* appears – attacks Hegel for his reflection on language. It is strange that from a reflection on the distinction between common language and philosophical language, Laclau draws conclusions about the place of rhetoric in his theory compared to the place of language in Hegelian theory. We can only think of this as a symptom of a necessary shift from discourse to language to include rhetoric, which can be considered a regression concerning the notion of discourse, which not only produces meaning but also institutes conditions of possibility for action, characteristic of a materialist theory of

discourse. This does not imply ignoring rhetoric but rather relocating it and, consequently, detaching it from its ontological function, that is, from the “rhetorical foundation of society” as titled in Laclau’s posthumous book (although rhetorical tropes help us understand logics of social constitution). The second aspect highlighted by the author is the rejection of the distinction between form and content (as proposed by Butler, invoking Hegel) and the subsequent deepening of disagreement regarding the concept of concrete universality (or the concrete abstract) (Laclau 2000).

However, while it can be conceded that most uses of “dialectic” in purported Marxist contexts are imprecise (resembling more an idea of complexity, interrelation, or conflict without delving into the definition of contradiction and negativity), it does not follow that the concept should be abandoned, let alone that this is necessarily what must be derived from Hegel’s texts. Laclau, in response to the objection raised by Carlos Perez Soto in the aforementioned interventions during his conferences in Chile, states:

In regard to Hegel, this is evidently a problem of interpretation. In Hegel, there is a duality; on the one hand, we see the subjection of all concrete content to the principle of a rationality that grounds it, but on the other hand, due to the fact that rationality extends to so many concrete contents, rationality itself begins to be colored by these contents, by the concreteness of these contents, and starts to do something that goes beyond itself. All interpretations of Hegel are dominated by one or the other of these types of interpretations; either Hegel is seen as the precursor of Marxism and the precursor of an existentialist conception of history, or Hegel is seen as the first of the post-Marxists. I have taken a line in my reading of Hegel, which tends to emphasize the rationalistic character of the Hegelian system, called panlogicism. There are other authors, for example Slavoj Žižek, who see in Hegel a prefiguration of Lacan and of the thought of the indeterminate character of identities (Laclau 2002: 148).

### **Dialectics, Negativity, and the Quest for Lost Positivity**

In Laclau’s work, three main issues can be identified where his theoretical arsenal operates: the constitution of society (ontological), the shaping of social agents (identity-related), and the logic in the field of politics. This is particularly evident in his use of the categories of hegemony, populism, and antagonism, which he also employs to address different problems related to the constitution of society, the formation of political identities, and the dynamics of politics. As argued in some works, this has led to a series of confusions. However, it is crucial to integrate these dimensions into a political theory that is consistent in thinking about the ways in which order is constructed, how its institution is contested, and the agents who carry it out (Arditi 2010, Retamozo 2011). As shown in this article, the (dis)encounter with Hegel and dialectics operates fundamentally in the ontological terrain by objecting to an assumed immanent teleologism. However, this theoretical movement affects other terrains as well because, ultimately, if there is no room for the contingency of the

political, then it makes no sense to think of the shaping of political subjects as a historical and political task.

In this context, restoring dialectics is key to an integrative movement when linking the post-foundational ontological proposal with a theory that helps to understand the configuration of social subjects and their struggles. The recovery of dialectics in post-foundational political thought does not lie in nostalgia for a concept dear to the emancipatory political tradition but rather in its value for thinking about the processes of configuring social order and emerging struggles. This recovery goes hand in hand with the idea of negativity, accepted by Laclau but underexplored in his work. Therefore, separating negativity from the realm of its necessary resolution will be key to our purpose. Let's see how negativity operates in post-structuralism.

In the political theory we are discussing, there is a double inscription of nothingness. On the one hand, as absence (of foundation), which allows for the discussion of a post-foundational political theory (Marchart 2007). The absence of foundation implies conceiving that the foundations of order cannot be conceived a priori (theoretical thesis) and that any attempt to postulate transcendent foundations denies democracy (ethical-political thesis). The conception of a constitutive nothingness of being is clearly of Hegelian inspiration. *Principio del formulario*

Now, if post-foundationalism is not an anti-foundational theory, it's because it doesn't deny that organizing human life requires providing foundations (partial, contingent, finite) that can be subject to various disputes (class, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, etc.). What we're interested in recovering here is the presence of that absence (of a void that inevitably needs to be filled), but whose ontic appearance allows for plurality, even if it remains latent.

The absence of foundation is, however, a form of positivity and possibility. There is nothingness (as absence), and that nothingness contains Being (the need for a foundation). But also Being – as foundation – contains that absence (the nothingness) whose filling is retrospective (as Hegel said!) since it sets its own foundations. That lack is already a positivity in not-yet, to use Bloch's turn of phrase, it is the absence of something that is something. As Groppo, following Espósito, argues: "That is, the lack is not purely negative but implies a positive dimension, its presence as a lack. This lack is constitutive, primordial, precisely because it does not come to cut, castrate, prohibit, erase a previous fullness, but is itself prior" (Groppo 2011:59).

The configuration of order implies a conception of negativity to generate positivity (here we have an example of the dialectic of opposites). Producing life implies negating it, as Marx detected with his analysis of living labor and surplus value. Enrique Dussel (1998 and 2007) has meticulously worked on the idea of a constitutive negativity of the order that produces victims whose praxis is the vehicle of emancipation (via the negation of negation). In his terms – and this he recovers from Levinas – totality (social order) produces exclusions by denying the life of part of the community. The recognition of that otherness to the order is the source of analexis and the critical principle of action of the

victims that legitimizes their struggle to negate that negativity and open spaces for the becoming-other of the system to institute orders that reduce negativity and increase the positivity of life. In the production of antagonism, the negation of negation thus appears. The exercise of productive negativity on bodies and subjectivity (indistinguishable, as biopower) is a condition of possibility of life (biopotency).

Articulation, in Laclau's terminology, is not just the ordering of preconstituted elements but the genuine production of social relations (and, in this sense, of life). The difference between Dussel and Laclau is that the former has the advantage of starting from an ethics of liberation that allows him to distinguish genuine struggles (of the victims) from struggles for domination. The latter contributes comprehensive capacity towards other struggles, even those that are conservative. Negativity in post-foundational political thought is necessary as a condition for the production of order, but both negation and what is negated are historical (because social being is historical, and identities are too). Consequently, if there is always negativity, it is possible to think about the construction of demands from dominant sectors in the social totality that feel negated in their historical being, perceiving that their rights are denied (to live in a hierarchical community, to bear firearms, to dispose of women, workers, to own slaves, etc.). It is also possible to conceive situations where the very demandization of subaltern negativity constructs conservative order projects (for example, higher levels of repression and implementation of control devices in response to the demand for security, theocratic regimes, etc.). The elaboration of the demand from an instance of negativity (the meanings to construct an experience of negativity as such) and the reverse, understood as a project (whether autonomous or heteronomous), are political constructions, contingent and historically determined. Constitutive actions (which fill the void of order and produce the negation of negativity) are historical.

Now, our proposal at this point is to take a step further, which consists of no longer considering that contingency subverts necessity but rather subverting that distinction in such a way that it is possible to investigate the constitutive relationship between contingency (which, as Laclau says, empirically is never absolute) and determination. The concept of contingency has little development in Laclau's work, and it is necessary to advance on this matter. From the present point of view, contingency is the reverse of the idea of unique-necessary determination. In logical terms, it means admitting that given a state of affairs A, a state of affairs B does not follow without the determinants that make the transition from situation A to situation B (mediation implies incorporating temporality). Consequently, contingency means a priori indetermination but not pure indetermination. An event B occurs because it is determined by interventions that make it B (that make it necessary). Now, what state of affairs B can follow from a state of affairs A? The shift lies in considering what is logically possible is historically possible or "actually" possible. Laclau says, "And it is also important to note that the repressed possibilities are not all those that are logically possible in a certain situation" – that is, all those

that do not violate the principle of contradiction – [but only] “those that we can call initiated possibilities, those that have had a principle of actualization and have been eliminated” (Laclau 2000: 48). By negation, Laclau introduces the concept of potentiality, and the problem then is determining that what is historically possible involves thinking that something that is currently unlikely given the events we have today may be more (or less) likely tomorrow. Hugo Zemelman (1992) developed the concept of “activation of potentialities” for political praxis based on this situation, intervening in the determinants of the course of history (eventful, microphysical, capillary, and always political). This implies analyzing the conditions of possibility of a historical moment, the condensed power, and the future contents (hence the political importance of the analysis of the conjuncture and political action).

The recovery of dialectical thought – or at least of a dialectical thought – implies understanding how one moves from one figure to another, that is, the constitutive relationship between contingency and necessity in this case. To do this, we must position contingency as ontological constitution but not as a paradoxical historical necessity (which would equate to mere chance) but as a condition of historical determination (history is the result of the incessant interplay of contingency and determinations). Determination should not be confused with determinism, and this has two related consequences. On the one hand, it shifts historical analysis towards the question of the determinants that intervened in making an event happen. On the other hand, political analysis implies the study of open processes (given and ongoing) whose knowledge relates to structures and the practice of determination towards a horizon contained as a project. Consequently, there is a subtle distinction in the relationship between contingency and determination, whether for historical thought or political thought. The former deals with investigating the determinations that gave a process a certain morphology (political, cultural, economic, climatological aspects, including chance and decision), the latter with identifying spaces of activation for praxis. The three fields in which Laclau’s theory operates (the political, politics, and political identities) then find their relationship. The conjunctures articulate them: the formation of subjects (which includes the structures that determine them) and political strategy are in tune with “the political,” that is, with the ways of partially producing society. Dialectics, as a corollary, becomes an important category in the post-Marxist framework.

In a celebrated Epilogue to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx had set out to extract from Hegelian dialectics the rational core wrapped in mysticism; perhaps it is time to unwrap the mystical wrapping with which many Marxists and post-Marxists enveloped Hegel’s dialectics. Post-foundational political thought has a horizon towards which to walk, that is, rethink the relationship between contingency, negativity, determination, and social struggles.

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## Martin Retamozo

### Zaboravljanje Hegela u delima Ernesta Laclaua: nesrećno razdruživanje

#### Apstrakt

Ernesto Laclau kritikuje hegelijansku dijalektiku zbog navodnog uvođenja logike nužnosti u marksizam, što, kako on tvrdi, ometa razmatranje kontingencije. Ovaj rad ispituje Laclauovo tumačenje hegelijanske dijalektike u njegovim različitim delima i pomno ispituje njegovo istraživanje pojmova determinacije, negativnosti i kontingencije. Ponovno razmatranje ovih koncepata može ponuditi nedeterminističko razumevanje dijalektike koje je više usklađeno sa post-fundamentalnom političkom mišlju, čime se olakšava razmišljanje o društvenoj ontologiji i antagonizmima.

Ključne reči: Laclau, Hegel, Marks, postmarksizam, dijalektika, hegemonija.