

THE LOGIC OF CAPITAL AND HEGEMONIC LOGIC

<http://dx.doi.org/10.25091/S01013300201900020010>

FACUNDO NAHUEL MARTÍN*

ABSTRACT

This article aims at establishing a dialogue between the theory of hegemony of Ernesto Laclau and the categorial interpretation of Marx by Moishe Postone. First, I will show that the hegemonic logic of Laclau appears logically constituted by the dynamic of capital as Postone studies it. Second, I will defend the relevance of the hegemonic conception of politics, no longer as an originary social ontology, but as a limited (yet partially effective) social logic characteristic of capitalist society.

KEYWORDS: *hegemony; capitalism; populism; Laclau; Postone.*

A lógica do capital e a lógica hegemônica

RESUMO

Este artigo estabelece um diálogo entre a teoria da hegemonia de Ernesto Laclau e a interpretação de Marx por Moishe Postone. Mostrarei, em primeiro lugar, que a lógica hegemônica de Laclau aparece constituída pela dinâmica do capital como estudado por Postone. Em seguida, defenderei a relevância da concepção hegemônica de política, não mais como uma ontologia social originária, mas como uma lógica social limitada (mas parcialmente eficaz) característica da sociedade capitalista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *hegemonia; capitalismo; populismo; Laclau; Postone.*

[*] Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina. E-mail: facunahuel@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the critical engagement with Marxism has taken several different paths, among which I would like to highlight two. The works of Ernesto Laclau (especially *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 1985, co-written with Chantal Mouffe) have radicalized the autonomy of the political, pointing out that the hegemonic articulations which make up the discursive space of the social as such are neither inscribed in, nor subordinated to, a preexisting economic structure. His concept of hegemony tries to reconstruct how political unity is formed from the starting point of the fragmented nature of the social, where an irreducible plurality of particular and partial demands is given. Once the strong idea of *necessity* of the traditional Marxism has been broken, the very idea of a political necessity determined by a social logic would also fall. There remains, thus, contingency as the

context for the emergence of variable political units which are always under dispute, organized each time by a hegemonic operation which enables a particular demand to transiently represent the social whole and build a significant chain that grounds society as such.

By way of contrast, the work of Moishe Postone places emphasis on the logic of capital in its compulsive and automatic character, therefore, independent of politics and of contingent decisions. Emphasizing that certain types of necessity posited by capital constitute a historically determined and specifically modern form of social domination, Postone interprets the mature Marx in terms of how capitalist society *is not, ultimately, governed politically*. Postone understands that the necessary nature of the logic of capital, with its anonymous, objectified and impersonal compulsions, constitutes a form of domination that is historically unprecedented. The emancipatory ideals underlying Postone's thought aim at *broadening the horizon of politics beyond the compulsions and necessary dynamics imposed by capitalism*. The capitalist encroachment of politics is not, thus, celebrated by the author: it is not a matter of swimming with the current of historical necessity, of continuing or deepening the inevitable course of a pre-established logic that dictates the evolutionary stages of human history. On the contrary, Postone sides with poststructuralist criticisms of the strong concepts of totality inherited from Hegelianism in traditional Marxism: it is only under capitalist domination that there is social totality with a global subject. In fact, capital (and not the working class or humanity) appears as the subject of modern society, in so far as it reduces contingency and multiplicity to its self-moving dynamics. However, according to Postone, poststructuralists conflate normative and *descriptive* dimensions: they mistake the critique of totality as a form of domination for the assertion that social totality has collapsed or disintegrated. This illegitimate transition leads to the inability to identify the forms of domination actually suffered by people in capitalist society, where capital as a global subject replaces, to some extent, the contingent dynamics of politics. Postone, therefore, shares the criticism of traditional Marxism and its affirmative attitude towards strong notions of totality and historical necessity, but questions the poststructuralist turn towards the autonomy of politics because they simply render capital as a form of domination difficult to understand or identify.

In short, I will focus on two critical engagements with Marxism that appear powerfully opposed. In the first case, the emphasis is placed on the autonomy of the political, the precariousness and the contingent character of every social order. In the second, it is placed on the social constraints imposed on people by capital's impersonal, anonymous and blind logic. It is noteworthy that no significant

contributions dealing with the relation between Postone and Laclau have been found. Most Marxist criticisms of the latter attempt some kind of “defense” strategy (Geras, 1987, p. 43), attempting to rescue strong aspects of traditional Marxism from the attacks of poststructuralism. Positions such as that of Norman Geras (1987, 1988), Ellen Meiksins Wood (1987) or Atilio Borón (1986) can be regarded as examples of this argumentative strategy, attempting to affirm the priority of the material over the discursive, to uphold the centrality of class struggle, and to defend (even with nuances) a Marxist theory of history or a general Marxist theory about the priority of economics over politics and ideology.

In this article I will attempt an argumentative strategy different from the aforementioned “defense of Marxism”. I am going to undertake a dialogue between the post-Marxism of Laclau and the categorical criticism of Postone, making a double movement. As a starting point I will assume that the hegemonic logic studied by Laclau can be considered, to some extent, as the effective logic of politics in modern society. However, following Postone, I will try to show that this effectiveness is both logically and historically limited: against the idea that society is based on contingent political operations, I will argue that the hegemonic logic as such is conditioned by capitalist dynamics. In other words, the multiplicity of floating demands in the social, which are a precondition for the hegemonic articulation, only appears as such in the modernity of capital, which pushes back the traditional forms of domination (based on ties of personal dependence or overt social mediations). This calls for a *re-inscription* of the political logic reconstructed by Laclau into a preeminent capitalist social logic. Postone’s thinking, with its emphasis on modern *forms of social mediation*, is better prepared to provide an account for the historical framework within which political contingency and hegemonic logic emerge, emphasizing, at the same time, the moments of necessity imposed by that historical framework, which is inadequately analyzed by Laclau. Lastly, I will claim that post-Marxism offers strategic value to elaborate on a political logic beyond the centrality of the working class. This amounts to an unattended coincidence between Postone and the post-Marxists: in both cases we find revisions of Marxism which rejects the inherited idea of centrality of the working class. Postone considers that there is no immediate relation between the self-constitution of the working class and the radical critique of capital. However, this author does not elaborate sufficiently on how the political forms and historical movements capable of challenging or questioning capitalism as such could be reconstructed. It is at this point that the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe become relevant, allowing the reconstruction of a hegemonic project for the left that renews the possibilities of anti-capitalism. Some

political suggestions by Srnicek and Williams (2015) will prove relevant for this third argumentative movement, since they try to make use of the hegemonic logic to conceive anti-capitalist political forms in a politically fragmented—yet undeniably capitalist—world. These readers of Laclau, with whom I will deal in detail in a later section of the text, make use of certain elements of his thinking without thoroughly assuming his contingencialist ontology.

The article involves three major movements. First, I will reconstruct Laclau's notion of hegemony, trying to emphasize how the hegemonic logic appears as part of a historically specific reality, related to the dynamics of capitalism, and not as the ontological foundation of every society. Second, I will argue that Postone's categorial critique can adequately reconstruct the capitalist dynamic within which the hegemonic articulations become effective. Third, I will sustain (following Srnicek and Williams) that it is possible to revisit Laclau's strategy, reformulated within a critical theory of capitalism, as a theoretical alternative able to partially account for the production of potentially successful political forms of unity in the modern world.

HEGEMONY: AN ONTOLOGIC OR MODERN LOGIC?

Laclau's thinking starts from the *demand* as the basic unit of analysis of political logic. The author points to the proliferation of particular demands on the field of discourse as a starting point. This proliferation of multiple demands can, under certain circumstances, be articulated in a hegemonic way, giving rise to a popular identity. The author highlights five moments in populist construction (Laclau, 2005, pp. 69-72): 1) The social (structured discursively or in relational terms) is composed of differential arrangements, of a plurality of particular positions that make up a system of differences where each of them is defined by the relations it maintains with the others. These differential positions make up a plurality of particular demands; 2) Apprehending the totality of this differential system is the same as apprehending its limits, counterpoising the whole to something other than the system itself. However, since it is the totality of the system of differences we are discussing, this limiting-other can neither be a simple differential position within the system itself (because otherwise it would not fulfill the role of constitutive *otherness*), nor can it be completely exterior (for we are dealing with the *totality* of differential positions); 3) Then, the "outside" that constitutes the total system of differences must be an *excluded* element, which the whole expels in order to constitute itself. Faced with this excluded element, all the particular demands within the system are equivalent. The differences between them are not can-

celed or annulled, but all the particular positions are *equally delimited* from the other that makes the whole possible. The construction of a chain of equivalences, therefore, softens (without suppressing) the differences between demands, composing a popular identity in the tension between a differential logic and a logic of equivalence; 4) Consequently, social totality is composed as an inherently precarious whole, built on the tension between two opposing logics (differential and equivalent). The construction of a totality is necessary in order to structure the discursive field of the social and, at the same time, it is inherently flawed (since it never suppresses the tension between equivalence and difference); 5) Finally, this precarious whole is mounted on a peculiar type of representation. A particular demand, without ceasing to be such, assumes the representation of the whole, which, however, it never quite encompasses completely. This is how the hegemonic demand is constituted. In order to hegemonize the chain of equivalents, this demand becomes increasingly empty regarding its own content, constituting itself as an “empty signifier” representing the impossible-necessary totality of the system of differential positions.

The five described steps organize, according to Laclau, the logic of the hegemonic construction of a popular identity. The demands which come to be metabolized differentially by institutions are *democratic*, while those which remain unsatisfied can enter into a chain of equivalences with other demands to become *popular demands* (Laclau, 2005, p. 73). Populism presupposes, then: a) the construction of a frontier, a dichotomy between the people and “power” (Laclau, 2005, p. 74); b) the equivalence between a plurality of popular demands; c) the articulation of those demands based on a particular representation of a totality that remains absent from society. The antagonistic division of the social involves the impossible image of a social whole, whose attainment would be equivalent to the state of affairs where all demands would be metabolized. The full totality of society, then, only exists as an impossibility, as the discursive obverse of the hegemonic position and the antagonistic fracture of the social.

Now, what is the historical specificity hegemonic politics have? The chain of equivalences, the antagonistic division of the social, the emergence of the empty signifier—all these elements are postulated by Laclau as conditions for the political institution of society as such. He affirms the *ontological necessity* to create antagonistic social oppositions through hegemonic operations, independently of the contingent particular that functions as empty signifier in each case (Laclau, 2005, p. 87). The ontological function of articulating the social through antagonism and hegemony is necessary, even though the content which promotes the articulation is contingent. The particular demand hege-

monizing the signifying chain in the populist operation would then be contingent, but not so the populist logic as such.

Yet, is the populist logic an ontological necessity for structuring the social as such? Or does the “populist ontology” have a limited scope, being applicable only to capitalist society, for instance? In *On Populist Reason* (2005) Laclau tends to formalize his line of argument, linking the populist operation to *the political as such* and deriving it from his reading of Freud and Lacan (Laclau, 2005, pp. 112-5). In this context Laclau seems to derive the populist logic from the constitution of discourse or society as such. On the other hand, when he differentiates between popular and democratic demands (Laclau, 2005, pp. 73-4), it appears as if Laclau attempts to specify populism as a contingent social possibility among others: the very articulation of equivalences-antagonism-hegemony might not occur. But, in such case, would the ontological impossibility of a full society be canceled? Or would there be other ways of dealing with this impossibility (for example, in non-populist democracies, in totalitarian formats that crush particular demands, in non-democratic hierarchical orders with minimal space for contingency)? In short, Laclausian social ontology seems to be extremely ambiguous with respect to historical specificity. While emphasizing the ontic and historical preconditions of his theory in *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (co-written with Chantal Mouffe), he formalizes his argument a lot more in *On Populist Reason*. Overall, Laclau maintains a notorious ambiguity regarding the historical conditions for the production of empty signifiers and the hegemonic articulation.

Ultimately, Laclau seems to maintain that populism may or may not arise, but, at the same time, that it would explain in a more “transparent” manner the ontological conditions of every social arrangement. Apparently, populism does not have a radically different logic with respect to liberalism, fascism or socialism (Acha, 2013). In any case, its specificity lies in a greater “transparency” of the political logic: populism would neither veil nor blur, behind the contraptions of institutionalized norms, the antagonistic institution of the social. Populism would be simply more authentic or more honest with respect to the lack of foundations of the social, highlighting the precariousness of any discursive institution of collective life, where other political forms tend to disguise that precariousness. However, the question remains whether the hegemonic logic, with its instances of articulation, is effectively an ontological condition of possibility of society as such, or a historically determined dynamic of some specific societies, alas, modern ones.

The historical conditions of Laclausian hegemony can be clarified a little more by analyzing the starting point in the proliferation

of particular demands. Where do the demands come from? Are there historical conditions for their emergence? In this plane, the marks of historical specificity emerge sensitively. At least in the less formalistic argument of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the proliferation of social demands is inscribed in the “democratic revolution” as the original and specific phenomenon of modern societies. There are, apparently, historical preconditions for hegemonic politics. The medieval peasant community, for example, would be scarcely susceptible to hegemonic articulations. Without denying his ontological presumption that the social cannot be totalized, Laclau affirms that premodern societies would be relatively more saturated than their modern counterparts. There would be no discursive possibilities for the proliferation of demands: the system of differences would be too rigid and hierarchical for it.

A situation in which a system of differences had been so welded together would imply the end of the hegemonic form of politics. In that case, there would be relations of subordination or power, but not, strictly speaking, hegemonic relations. The hegemonic dimension of politics only expands as the open, non-sutured character of the social increases. In a medieval peasant community the area open to differential articulations is minimal and, thus, there are no hegemonic forms of articulation: there is an abrupt transition from repetitive practices within a closed system of differences to frontal and absolute equivalences when the community finds itself threatened. This is why the hegemonic form of politics only becomes dominant at the beginning of modern times, when the reproduction of the different social areas takes place in permanently changing conditions which constantly require the construction of new systems of differences. Hence the area of articulatory practices is immensely broadened. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 138)

If “plurality is not the phenomenon to be explained, but the starting point of the analysis” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 140), however, it seems that the plurality of differential demands is *in itself a historical product*. Following Lefort (1990), the French Revolution would mark “the decisive mutation in the political imaginary of Western societies” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 155). The proliferation of differential demands is inscribed on the spread of the “democratic discourse”. The democratic revolution is the “framework” for the logic of democratic displacements that enable hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 168). By overcoming the “saturated” social articulations of medieval societies, this democratic transformation of society may have been the decisive mutation that gave way to the plurality of subject positions that are at the base of all hegemonic logic.

The “democratic revolution” involves a new terrain which supposes a profound mutation at the symbolic level, implies a new form of institution of the social. In earlier societies, organized in accordance with a theological-political logic, power was incorporated in the person of the prince, who was the representative of God — that is to say, of sovereign justice and sovereign reason. Society was thought as a body, the hierarchy of whose members rested upon the principle of unconditional order. According to Lefort, the radical difference which democratic society introduces is that the site of power becomes an empty space; the reference to a transcendent guarantor disappears, and with it the representation of the substantial unity of society. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 186)

At the origin of specifically modern politics there would be a void in the sovereign instance (the sovereign people is not embodied by a particular individual). This opens an endless process of questioning where society can no longer be fixed and controlled by a single center. In sum, the plurality of demands in a differential system, which appears as a starting point in the analysis of Laclau, is ultimately recognized as a historical result: only modern politics, which has undergone the radical transformation of the democratic revolution, facilitates the proliferation of demands.

From the standpoint of the articulation between ontology and history, the scope of the populist logic seems to be relatively ambiguous and difficult to define. On one hand, hegemony is construed as an ontologic condition of every society. On the other hand, when we study the proliferation of particular demands, the marks of historical specificity in the Laclausian thought are poignant. The plurality of demands, starting point of the analysis, is recognized as a historical result. The egalitarian and democratic “framework” that makes the plurality of demands possible is a historical condition of the hegemonic articulation, to the point that in pre-modern societies such articulation would not take place. Inquiring into the “mystery of the origin of demand” (Waiman, 2013, p. 288) it can be shown that hegemonic politics as such is linked to the logic of capital in its historical specificity.

POSTONE'S CATEGORIAL READING OF MARX

Omar Acha (2013) has pointed out that Laclau's reading of Marx is somewhat biased, focusing almost exclusively on a debatable reading of the 1859 “Introduction” and the *Communist Manifesto*, identifying “Marxism” with a teleological philosophy of history, a reductionist conception of class struggle and a totalizing metaphysics of the subject. In other words, Laclau reduces the Marxist tradition to what Post-

one calls “traditional Marxism”. Waiman (2013) also highlights the “convenient” omission of traditions such as the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School in the Laclausian reception of Marxism. Following Postone, I will claim it is possible to construct a different reading of Marx, one that could not only hold up to the post-Marxist questioning but also provide an adequate reading on the historical framework in which the hegemonic logic takes effect. This reading does not assume the standpoint of labor understood transhistorically, it does not presuppose a philosophy of universal history and does not aspire to realize a totality as the end of history. Instead, it places emphasis on the mutations in the forms of social mediation produced by capitalist society in its historical specificity, analyzes the contradictions between the oppressive logic of capital and its emancipatory potentials, and aims at the abolition of the capitalist social totality.

Following Postone, Marx’s theory of labor value “is not a theory of the unique properties of labor in general, but it is an analysis of the historical specificity of value as a form of wealth, and of the labor that supposedly constitutes it” (Postone, 1993, p. 26). Value and the particular form of labor creating it are at the heart of the fetishist structures that structure domination in capitalism. “Capitalism’s characteristic form of social domination, according to Marx, relates to the form of social labor” (Ibid., p. 125). Three fundamental historical forms are thus considered: 1) In societies based on personal dependence, with “overt” social relations, people suffer from manifest subordination to other people; 2) In the capitalist society, social domination is given in terms of “personal independence, within a framework of a system of objective dependence” (Ibid.). In this society, the relations between people exist in a specific, particular way: they have become something quasi-objective and autonomous with respect to individuals. They are not overt relations between persons (as were, for example, feudal relations). On the contrary, they are quasi-objective structures that dominate individuals insofar as they possess an intrinsic dynamic independent of them. Individuals are now “dominated by abstractions” (Marx, 1971, p. 92), instead of immediately dominating one another; 3) Finally, post-capitalism, linked to the “fullest possible realization of human freedom” (Postone, 1993, p. 127), would imply overcoming both pre-capitalist forms of overt domination and the structures of abstract capitalist domination.

The abstract and quasi-objective structures constituting social domination in modernity are related to the capitalist form of social mediation. “We are dealing with a new sort of interdependence, one that emerged historically in a slow, spontaneous and contingent way” (Ibid., p. 148). In this new form of social interdependence, individuals do not get the things they need to live from overt social

relations with other individuals, but rather their own labor — directly or expressed in its products — serves as an “objective” means by which the products of others are acquired (Ibid., p. 150). Value, capital and labor (divided in concrete and abstract) are not mediated by direct personal relations, “recognizable” as such, but by a series of impersonal structures that they themselves constitute.

Postone breaks with any teleological vision of universal history. He does not assume the standpoint of a global historical subject that would traverse a number of developing stages in an ascending and necessary dynamic. There was no logical necessity in the transition to capitalism: such an image of necessity is, in any case, a retrospective projection (Ibid., p. 129). Instead, the author conceives capitalist society as a historically determined totality. The historical origin of this totality is contingent and spontaneous, based on politically directed processes. However, once the forms of social interdependence that characterize capitalism have been established, they possess an alienated, automatic and self-mediating character. Value-creating labor replaces personal, open and direct social relations with new fetishistic, quasi-objective and abstract ones. These new historically determined social relations have an autonomous dynamic with respect to individuals, a dynamic based on the self-mediation of labor and value. As a result of a contingent historical process, a global subject of society emerges, which is self-mediating and conducts its own development. Marx’s mature theory does not presuppose a philosophy of universal history and “cannot be grasped adequately as an essentially eschatological conception in a secular form” (Ibid., p. 79). Instead, it is a historically determined critique of capital.

Capitalist social relations conform a totality as long as their movement is independent from individuals:

The social form is a totality because it is not a collection of various particularities but, rather, is constituted by a general and homogeneous “substance” that is its own ground. Since the totality is self-grounding, self-mediating and objectified, it exists quasi-independently [...]. Capitalism, as analyzed by Marx, is a form of social life with metaphysical attributes — those of the absolute Subject. (Ibid., p. 156)

With the passage from a form of social mediation based on personal relations of direct dependence to a form of mediation centered on abstract, impersonal and objective compulsions, capitalism unfolds a dual process. On the one hand, it increasingly emancipates particular groups and individuals from personal bonds with authority, tradition and community. The modern “free, self-determining individual”, opposed to objective social necessity, is “historically constituted with

the rise and spread of the commodity-determined form of social relations” (Ibid., p. 164). Modern freedom and equality are made possible by the capitalist mutation of social mediation. By supplanting traditional ties, capitalism constitutes the modern individual, with the unprecedented freedom this implies. From this historical shift derives the tendency in capitalism to turn the social more dynamic and plural, multiply the points of conflict, enable a new democratic ideology and radicalize it permanently. On the other hand, and contradictorily, capitalist society tends to an unprecedented homogeneity: being the first society in history to have a dynamic and logic of totality, it subsumes the newly constituted “independent” particulars under a global and self-moving subject, systematically encroaching the created potential for freedom and self-determination. Capitalism, in short, is not a narrowly economic phenomenon that must be related *a posteriori* with a political, legal or ideological superstructure. On the contrary, it is based on a mutation of social forms of mediation, one which simultaneously tends to pluralize and homogenize social life, multiplying the possibilities of autonomy for the particulars and, at the same time, submitting everything to the self-mediating movement of its blind and fetishized global subject, capital. This dual face of capitalism explains, notwithstanding, its complex relation with the “democratic revolution”, which it simultaneously enables and limits.

The historical appearance of the capitalist particular has a dual meaning and value. Capitalism generates the opposition between an abstract, homogeneous universality and a self-determining individual, on the other (Ibid., p. 366). The characteristic universals of modernity, related to the general and abstract presumption of equality and freedom of individuals, can then be related to the historically situated critique of capital.

CAPITALISM, DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLES, TOTALIZED DOMINATION

Postone’s theses have enormous implications for the deployment of a Marxist theory of new social antagonisms and the correlative multiplication of demands and subject positions. Understanding the capitalist transformation of social mediation allows us to account for the new forms of subjectivity (and conflict) that emerge with it. The “democratic revolution” and the proliferation of demands and subject positions, thus, can be inscribed in the historical capitalist transformation of social mediation. The core features of the democratic revolution are the displacement of incarnated centers of power and the emergence of the empty and thus open, dynamic popular sovereignty, which does not have a corporeal and determined center. From Postone’s analysis, this “revolution” can be linked to the replacement

of open personal forms of mediation by the abstract and objectified forms of the commodity, value and labor. The democratic revolution itself, therefore, would not be an ontological condition of the social, but a milestone in the vast process of transformation of social mediations that occurs with capitalism.

This enables the development of a Marxist theory of new social movements, which would show: 1) that they are made possible under the historical transformations of social mediation that take place in capitalism; 2) that, in their struggles for individual and collective autonomy, they are systematically constrained by this new social mediation and have, therefore, emancipatory potentials. This dual process is related to the abstract, objective and impersonal character of social mediation in capitalist modernity. By displacing personal patterns of dependence, the capitalist form of mediation enables an unprecedented pluralization of the living trajectories of individuals and groups. This historical mutation is at the base of the multiplication of demands and subject positions. Similarly, once forms of personal domination are no longer the core of social mediation, the “place” of power can become empty: it no longer resides in the person of the lord or prince, but in an impersonal, anonymous and abstract system of quasi-objective social constraints. In short, the “democratic revolution” that empties the space of sovereignty and enables the proliferation of demands can be put into a structural and systematic relation with the capitalist transformation of social mediation. This is not, therefore, an originary datum, but it is embedded instead in the broader historical process of capital.

The democratic disputes studied by Laclau have a complex and contradictory relation with the capitalist mutation of social mediation, while containing powerful possibilities for its overcoming. Capital, as argued above, effectively composes a social totality. “In constituting a self-grounding social mediation, labor constitutes a determinate sort of all social whole — a totality” (Ibid., p. 151). The form of social mediation based on labor has the logical and dynamic characteristics of a self-moving subject and substance. With social relations mediated by labor, a historically specific subject of social totality emerges. “The social form is a totality because it is not a collection of various particularities but, rather, is constituted by a general and homogeneous ‘substance’ that is its own ground” (Ibid., p. 156). With the passage to capitalism, direct and open forms of personal domination recede, but this does not give way to individual and collective autonomy. Instead, an impersonal system of anonymous social compulsions now constitutes social domination. This means that, if the “democratic revolution” can be linked to the capitalist mutation of social mediation, it is also systematically constrained by it: capital as the subject of the social totality is, in its

automatic movement, radically non-political, blind and uncontrollable by people, that is, anti-democratic. Hence, “the problem of a post-capitalist democracy” must be posed in terms of “the nature of the constraints imposed upon political decisions by the forms of value and capital” (Ibid., p. 41). Capital displaces direct personal domination, but not to enable a radical social democratization. Instead, it makes possible only a limited and contradictory democratization, subject to the self-mediating totality of value and labor.

In short, Postone’s reading of Marx allows us to situate in historically accurate terms some processes that appear ambiguous in Laclau’s thought. Postone shows how the forms of the social nexus mutate in capitalism, giving rise to a partial pluralization of collective life within which the multiplicity of demands assumed as a starting point by Laclau appears. The hegemonic logic does not produce the social nor is it prior to the objectified dynamics of capital. It is a derived logic, framed within the capitalist forms of social mediation. These forms also carry some specific constraints to democratic possibilities aiming towards political openness and social contingency. If capital makes the hegemonic logic possible, it also imposes the compulsion to accumulate, which arises as a necessity above the heads of individuals and their contingent struggles. Hegemonic politics, then, articulate collective subjects and particular demands, but do so within a framework of limited contingency (constrained by capitalism and its compulsions). This way, the Postonian interpretation allows us: 1) to place the proliferation of demands that Laclau takes for granted in a more precise historical context (within the framework of capitalist logic); 2) to show that this historical framework is not neutral or merely formal, but that it constrains the possibilities of politics and contingency, subordinating them to the automatism of capital. From this it follows, finally, that the idea of political contingency is primarily an emancipatory ideal for a post-capitalist democracy, and is only achieved in a limited and distorted way in capitalist society.

EMANCIPATORY POLITICS BEYOND THE WORKING CLASS

In the previous section I attempted to reinscribe the hegemonic logic in the logic of capital. However, it is possible to give yet another twist to the argument. Indeed, both Laclau and Postone claim that present social struggles cannot be reduced to a class perspective understood in a limited way. I will argue that, following the reinscription suggested above, Laclau’s thesis may be relevant to provide a strategic perspective to Postone’s analysis. For this I will study some of the ideas introduced by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams.

According to Postone, capitalism is defined in terms of social relations that cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of class:

My discussion clearly has shown that his [Marx's] conception of capitalism's intrinsically dynamic social relations, as expressed by the categories of value and surplus value, refer to objectified forms of social mediation and cannot be understood solely in terms of class relations of exploitation. (Ibid., p. 314)

Therefore, the proletariat would not be “the social representative of a possible noncapitalist future” (Ibid., p. 355). Proletarian labor is the basis of value, but not necessarily of the social forms that could transcend capitalism. On the contrary, the abolition of proletarian labor and that of capitalism go hand in hand. Moreover, the forms of conscience and oppositional action against capitalism need not arise from the working class alone, but from a multiplicity of movements whose actions focus on subjectivity, the relation with the environment, the aspiration to a life not subject to the needs of valorization, etc. “There is no linear continuum between the demands and conceptions of the working class [...] and the needs, demands and conceptions that point beyond capitalism” (Ibid., p. 37).

Postone reinterprets Marx's critical theory by trying to give centrality to issues such as subjectivity, social mediation and political aspirations to forms of social activity that would be richer and more open and multilateral. These forms of action and critical consciousness are reflected in a plethora of social movements not necessarily focused on labor and wages. Far from affirming the standpoint of the proletariat as an exploited class, Postone's critical theory seeks to abolish proletarian labor as a fundamental category of modern society, with its forms of social interdependence and its characteristic constraints.

According to Srnicek and Williams, Laclau's concept of hegemony makes it possible to explain “why ordinary people were not revolting against capitalism” (Srnicek and Williams, 2015, p. 132), but also to construct strategic perspectives for challenging given social conditions. Capitalist development did not lead to a polarized world between the two antagonistic (and internally homogeneous) positions of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. “By the 1990s, the positioning of the working class as privileged political subject had been fully broken down, and a much wider array of social identities, desires and oppressions had gained recognition” (Ibid., p. 21). While the division of society in classes remains a relevant and even central aspect of the organization of capitalist society, effective actors in their daily struggles are not divided into two large excluding groups constituted by the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Against the forecasts of traditional Marxism, there was no historical spontaneous unification of the working class (and other social movements) by the unfolding of capitalism itself, but a growing fragmentation of social demands.

At the same time, there is a multiplicity of important social conflicts that are sometimes ignored or regarded as secondary by traditional Marxism, as is the case of feminist, LGBT, anti-racist, anti-colonial, environmentalist, among other struggles. Against this tendency, a left-wing project with possibilities of success, but also genuinely emancipatory, must be “inherently feminist, recognizing the invisible labor carried out predominantly by women”, linking with “anti-racist struggles” and “with postcolonial and indigenous struggles” (Ibid., p. 161). Today, the project of the left must maintain an open, complex and pluralistic agenda that is attentive to a diversity that is not easily reduced to a narrow set of interests, aspirations and demands.

According to Srnicek and Williams, “there is no pre-existing group that would embody universal interests or constitute the necessary vanguard of this transformative project” (Ibid., p. 158). The unity of various groups, on the contrary, must be conquered politically, and their representatives and forms of agglutination will be decided on the contingencies of struggle. Hence Srnicek and Williams recur to Laclau’s concept of hegemony as a political logic capable of articulating different demands where unity is not immediately produced at the level of objective social dynamics.

Taking the ideas of Srnicek and Williams into account, it is possible to return to the theses of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In their long genealogy of the concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe argue that political unity is always produced by way of articulation from different demands. This means that political articulations are contingent and transient. Studying Sorel, the authors claim: “The possibility of a dichotomous division of society is not given as data of the social structure, but as a construction” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 40). Here emerges a problem faced by the Marxist tradition “whenever it has tried to break with economism” (Ibid., p. 41), the problem of the contingent construction of political unity. The authors ask: “Why should this politically or mythically reconstructed subject have to be a *class* subject?” (Ibid., emphasis on the original). The concept of hegemony arises, in the Marxist tradition itself, from the need to deal with forms of antagonism that are not always structured in terms of class, but also from the attempts to bring all those antagonisms back to the arena of class struggle.

Communist discourse was confronted by a pair of crucial problems. How should one characterize that plurality of antagonisms emerging on a mass terrain different from that of classes? And how could the hegemonic force retain a strictly proletarian character, once it had incorporated the democratic demands of the masses in its own identity? (Ibid., p. 62)

In summary: the hegemonic logic allows us to think about how political syntheses are produced where the dynamics of capital or of class struggle do not automatically generate the unity of all demands under the direction of the working class. Thus, the political units that propel changes have a contingent and artificial character, *one that is not determined immediately by a previously given social logic*. Political unity “is not the confirmation of a *de facto* situation, but has a performative character. The unity of an ensemble of sectors is not a datum: it is a project to be built politically” (Ibid., p. 63). Laclau and Mouffe try to analyze how political units are produced where the centrality of the class cannot be taken for granted.

In this reinterpretation, what is central to Laclau and Mouffe’s thinking is not the contingencalist ontology of the social (which I have discussed at length in the previous sections of this work), but the reconstruction of how political struggles take place in the modernity of capital. According to this reconstruction, the proletariat cannot be considered *in advance* as the privileged agent of social change, at least not in the terms inherited from traditional Marxism. This allows us to return to Laclau through the re-inscription operation carried out above and leads to a singular, and little studied, coincidence with Postone’s thought. Earlier in the text I tried to show that the plurality of demands and the hegemonic logic is not a transhistorical condition of social ontology in general but a specific feature of capitalist modernity. I also argued that capitalism, while making the hegemonic logic possible, constrains its possibilities insofar as it imposes its necessary and automatic dynamics, constituted by value and labor. In this section, however, I tried to show (following Srinicek and Williams) that the hegemonic logic, understood (through the necessary operation of re-inscription) as a specific logic of modern society, is relevant in order to give an account of how political conflicts and actual emancipatory struggles work. This means that, by re-inscribing hegemony in the critique of capital, the concept itself is not discarded or canceled, but rather placed under precise historical conditions which also mark the scope of its effectiveness.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

This article involved three major conceptual movements. In the first section I tried to show that there is an ambiguity, an unresolved tension, around the historical specificity of the hegemonic logic in Laclau’s thought. The author postulates hegemony as the core condition for the constitution of *the social as such*. The contingent operations which produce unity from the multiplicity of demands would then produce society as such. However, in some of his passages I found the idea that the hegemonic articulation would in itself be contingent,

emerging after the modern “democratic revolution”. In the second section I reconstructed Postone’s categorial reading of Marx, trying to show that the hegemonic logic can be reinscribed as a moment of the logic of capital. Only under capitalism, which pluralizes social mediation by displacing forms of personal domination and subjecting them to the objectified, anonymous and abstract compulsions of value and capital, does the multiplicity of demands appear in their modern form. At the same time, capitalist social dynamics systematically constrain the possibilities of politics, circumscribing them within the frame of a blind, necessary logic. This means that openness to contingency is an emancipatory ideal for a postcapitalist society rather than a given fact of capitalist reality. Finally, I returned to the concept of hegemony as a powerful tool to analyze the possibilities of emancipatory politics in modernity, following the reinscription operation of the previous sections. Understood as a political logic that emerges under specific historical conditions of capitalism, and no longer as a foundational ontological dynamic of every society, hegemony is revealed as a powerful concept to understand the creation of political units in a context of dispersion and fragmentation of subjects and demands.

With these three movements I tried to relate the thoughts of Postone and Laclau. This relational account is relevant because there is no significant research on the (limited) similarities between the two authors, despite the important connections clarified in this work. The dialogue between Moishe Postone and Ernesto Laclau makes it possible to situate with precision the effectiveness of the hegemonic logic, its scope and its potentialities within the framework of capitalist society.

Received for publication
on February 6, 2018.

Approved for publication
on November 5, 2018.

NOVOS ESTUDOS

CEBRAP

114, May–Aug. 2019

pp. 459-475

FACUNDO NAHUEL MARTÍN [<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2832-3333>] holds a PhD in Philosophy from Universidad de Buenos Aires and is postdoctoral fellow at CONICET (Argentina).

REFERENCES

- Acha, O. “Del populismo marxista al postmarxista: la trayectoria de Ernesto Laclau en la Izquierda Nacional (1963-2013)”. *Archivos de Historia del Movimiento Obrero y la Izquierda*, n. 3, 2013, pp. 50-63.
- Borón, A. “¿Post-marxismo? Crisis, recomposición o liquidación del marxismo en la obra de Ernesto Laclau”. *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, v. 58, n. 1, 1996, pp. 17-42.
- Geras, N. “Post-Marxism?”. *New Left Review*, London, n. 163, 1987, pp. 40-82.
- . “Ex-Marxism without Substance: Being a Real Reply to Laclau and Mouffe”. *New Left Review*, London, n. 169, 1988, pp. 34-61.
- Laclau, E. *Emancipación y diferencia*. Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1996.
- . *On Populist Reason*. London/New York: Verso, 2005.
- Laclau, E.; Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London/New York: Verso, 2001.
- Lefort, C. *La invención democrática*. Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1990.
- Meiksins Wood, E. *The Retreat from Class. A New “True” Socialism*. London: Verso, 1986.
- Postone, M. *Time, Labor and Social Domination. A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- . “History and Helplessness”. *Public Culture*, 18, v. 1, 2006, pp. 93-110.
- . *History and Heteronomy. Critical Essays*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2009.
- Srnicek, N.; Williams, A. *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World without Work*. London: Verso, 2015.
- Waiman, J. “Dialéctica y ontología: repensando el antagonismo post-marxista en la teoría crítica”. *Constelaciones. Revista de Teoría Crítica*, n. 5, 2013, pp. 280-310.

