

HEGEMONY, RADICAL DEMOCRACY, POPULISM

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This article demonstrates what it means to construe Ernesto Laclau's work as precisely *political theory*. By analysing his work in terms of the relations between 'hegemony' as a theory of the political, 'radical democracy' as a normative theory, and the ever-present but often overlooked element of 'populism' as a theory of a form of politics, it captures the full-fledged political character of his work (as opposed to simply moral theory). Though the article makes a number of criticisms of the ways in which the three elements are elaborated and interlinked, especially through the imprecise notions of 'the underdogs' and 'the underprivileged', it also highlights the value of attempting to situate the act of political theorising in the world at hand by explicitly trying to identify an immanent form of politics thought *in terms of* a theory of the political and a normative theory, an act that will allow one to go beyond value-neutral political analysis, empty moral theory, or blind political strategising. Only together do these three elements make up properly political theory.

HEGEMONY, RADICAL DEMOCRACY, POPULISM*

The constituent elements of Ernesto Laclau's work as a political theorist can be summarised through a slight rewriting of the title of the book he and Chantal Mouffe published in 1985: Hegemony, radical democracy, and populism. My argument is that Laclau's writings can be construed as an elaboration and interlinking of these three elements into *one* act of political theorising. *Hegemony* as a theory of the political. *Radical democracy* as a normative theory. *Populism* as a theory of a form of politics. If one does not want to conceive him simply as a thinker preoccupied with conceptual explorations of the ontological character of the political,¹ someone positing a theory of what the good society could be,² or a strategist arguing for the revival of a form of leftist populism,³ Laclau's overall argument has to be assessed in terms of each of these elements *and* the way in which they mutually discipline each other in an intervention in the present world as it is characterised by historically specific combinations of exclusions and inequalities. The reading I advance here thus runs against the grain of widespread criticisms claiming that Laclau's work lack a theorisation of normative issues. Even those contributions that explicitly recognise that he does indeed provides this, and analyse his work with reference to the relations between the theory of hegemony and radical democracy, have continually neglected the role the notion of 'populism' has played

* I would like to thank Ulrik Pram Gad, Jacqueline Vimo, and especially the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism.

¹ As when Townshend (2003) discuss him as the founder of 'Essex school discourse theory'.

² Warren (1996) can serve as an example of this approach.

³ See for instance Beverly (1997).

throughout his career as a form of politics that can relate the two *in the world*.⁴ They thereby miss something I want to highlight, namely Laclau's attempt to situate the intervention made through an explicit identification of an immanent form of politics thought *in terms of* his theory of the political and his normative theory. This is something that distinguishes Laclau's work from much else that goes under the name of political theory. The attempt to find a home in the world is what differentiates his act of political theorising from simply theorising the political, theorising the normative, or simply politicising. I find this full-fledged character of his work a contribution in itself, because it carves out a precise place of political – in opposition to simply moral – theory, even though I have reservations when it comes to the constituent elements (as I will make clear below). I focus first on the character of each of the three elements especially in their most recent formulations (Laclau, 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c), and then discuss the force of the overall argument's linkage of them into a single act of political theorising.

A theory of the political

At the most general level, the political, for Laclau, pertains to the constitution of social reality as never complete orders (2004: 325-326; 2005a: 117). These are the orders that Laclau call 'discourses', a term that only really identifies the object of reference if one abstracts from its conventional usage and accepts the inclusion of *both* material and ideational elements into the relational structuring of one particular order (2005a: 68). The precise contribution of his theory of hegemony is that it does not simply – like for

⁴ Anna Marie Smith (1998: 1) rightly makes the point that Laclau and Mouffe's work should be read 'as political theory', but her focus solely on the theory of hegemony and the theory of radical democracy crucially leaves out the key element of populism as a form of politics that connects the two. Torfing (1999) and the essays collected by Critchley and Marchart (2004) are other examples of this reading.

instance Lefort (1988) – assert *that* the political constitutes the social, but elaborates a theory of *how* this happens through struggles named ‘hegemonic’. The key to the theory of hegemony is its conception of the ontological character of the terrain of the political; the understanding of hegemonization; and how the whole processes is taken to be animated.⁵ I deal with each in turn.

Laclau presents the ontological premise for the political under the heading ‘constitutive heterogeneity’ (2004: 324; 2005a: 139-156). This refers to the appearance of elements that cannot be innocently represented in a separate space where they can simply be left aside, but which *appear* and are simultaneously irreconcilable as *being* within a particular existing order. They therefore exist only as the negativity that highlights the contingency of any positive orders and all identities stabilised within them. The appearance of heterogeneous elements equal the general ‘fact of dislocation’ by simultaneously demonstrating every order’s character of ‘failed unicity’ (2005c: 256) and the ‘deficient being’ (2005a: 86) of identities defined within it.

An example can illustrate the somewhat abstract argument. A refugee or migrant appears in a social order structured around a proto-Kantian notion of individuals as carriers of rights. Through the application of the category ‘illegal immigrant’ as it has been transferred from legal terminology to general usage by the new right, her appearance is registered, but her representation in the social order as being simultaneously who she appears to be in particular (from somewhere else), what she appears to be in general (an individual), and what this is within the order held to entail

⁵ Throughout the article, I follow Howarth (ex. 2004: 266) in applying to Laclau’s work the Heideggarian distinction between *ontological* questions dealing with the being of *any kind of* objects and relations (the ‘Seinsfrage’ of ‘the being of being’) and *ontic* questions dealing with the being of *particular* entities.

(being the carrier of certain rights), is denied at the level of *being*. She *is* an individual, but she *is not* what the order suggests being an individual normally *entails*. She therefore appears as a heterogeneous element that has no clear insertion in this social order.⁶ This element is represented as negativity ('they are not like us') through the denial of a positive identity that would challenge the order. Precisely *due* to this denial, her appearance problematise not only the *order* by demonstrating the contingent link between the notions of 'individual' and 'carrier of rights', but also thereby highlights the contingency of the identity of those *within* the order – if her rights as an individual can be denied, so can mine.

The political-theoretical importance of this notion is immediately apparent. Order is not only seen as faced with an excess of ideational and semantic contents that introduce an element of undecidability into every text, or with a multiplicity of fully constituted different identities and demands. It is – more radically – always faced with things, people and demands that appear though they have no representation as positive beings in an order their very appearance therefore problematise, even when they are excluded in attempts to stabilise it. This excludes the idea that everything either has its place or at least has a separate atomistic positive identity that can simply be given a place in an innocent way.

⁶ Obviously, this does not entail that it has no *consequences* for her. As Jacqueline Vimo has rightly pointed out (personal communication), the pertinence of both my examples and the categories it illustrates is complicated by the increasing saliency of the wider transnational context (to the point where even legal rights are no longer exclusively rights-as-citizens, but supplemented by a set of rights as human beings). I will stick to national examples because they allow for a simpler illustration of an argument I believe remains valid even beyond whatever inadvertent 'methodological nationalism' may plague the work of Laclau.

With the ontological conception of the terrain of the political in place, the understanding of such attempts at generating order – through hegemonization – can be introduced. Precisely because the fact of heterogeneity mean that orders are always failed and identities within them always deficient, hegemony is never definitively established, but better understood as a process.

Thus conceived, hegemony is a process where ‘particular social demands [are] organized around particular points of dislocation [where] ... one demand or group of demands assumes, without entirely giving up its particularity, the added function of representing the [positive order]’ (2004: 281, see also 2005a: 70). The quote identifies the key elements in the hegemonic operation. Presented in the order I will discuss them, they are: First, as the starting point, a group of different, particular demands. Then, secondly, the organisation of these around a particular that is invested with a relative universal meaning as signifying the order-as-such in opposition to that which is excluded. This then, thirdly, produce the representation of an antagonism, a particular point (as opposed to the general fact of) dislocation against which the moments within the order are equal. It also alerts us to what exactly it is that is hegemonized, which is not a preconstituted ‘society’, but instead a number of demands, an universal by a particular, and an order that is defined by this operation and its exclusionary side. Hegemonic processes do not operate in a given terrain, but produce something – like in Gramsci, hegemony is not simply about conquering the given, but about becoming the being. Hegemony is the political *par excellence* precisely because it does not operate purely *within* the social, but constitutes the social. The theoretical grasp of how this process works is what takes us beyond banal constructivism.

The fact of heterogeneity and the constant flux of the social in face of it means that there will always be a plethora of social demands, some being excluded from the social order, some represented within it, but still subject to deficient being (2005a: 73). Both are susceptible to inscription (or reinscription) in an alternative conception of the social, though already represented demands are often less easily so. Proponents of an existing order will typically – through institutional designs, etc – attempt to address appearing demands in differential ways, but, as discussed above, an order can never completely totalise the horizon of demands as such, and never completely fix the place of those demands it does represent. The first moment of a hegemonic operation is the attempt to link a specific series of such demands – some outside an existing order, perhaps also some from inside – together in a unity that would – if realised – produce an alternative order.⁷

Both existing and alternative orders are identical in the sense that they play a double role in terms of signification. On the one hand, the order makes it possible for each representation within it to appear as differentiated from other representations. At the same time, the order-as-order is distanced from that which is not simply yet another difference within it, but excluded as something other than itself. Vis-à-vis the excluded, all differential representations within the order are equivalent (in this sense, the order is present in every moment in it), but at the same time, insofar as they *are* representations (in the plural), they are still different. How is this double character of the system represented in social reality? Laclau's argument is that

⁷ As opposed to fellow post-Althusserians Alain Badiou (2005) and Jacques Rancière (2001), Laclau therefore does not *conceptually* exclude the established institutions of politics from the political – compare the account given here with the idea that politics should (Badiou) be thought at a distance from the order (of the state) or even (Rancière) as opposed to the order (of the police).

One difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of the incommensurable totality [of the order]. In that way, its body is split between the particularity which it still is and the more universal signification of which it is a bearer.

(2005a: 70, see also 2004: 281)

This is the role of ‘relative universals’ in the argument – the radical investment of a tendentially empty meaning with a high potential for universal reach (like ‘justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘the people’, etc) into a particular that comes to represent simultaneously itself and the universal(s) invested into it. It thereby orders the order as more than just related demands, but demands equivalent in a certain way in addition to being differential particulars. This is how a flag functions in nationalist discourse – it does not lose its differential symbolic meaning, nor does the demands it brings together, but in addition, it comes to represent the unity of the people-as-such against that and those excluded, and the demands it unites come to represent themselves as specifically *popular* demands. This is not an innocent operation, but a highly political one. Writes Laclau: ‘we are dealing not with a conceptual operation of *finding* an abstract common feature underlying all social grievances, but with a performative operation constituting a chain as such’ (2005a: 97). No matter the amount of empirical flags around, ‘the people’ as a notion ordering the social and as a political subjectivity does not pre-exist its constitution as a unity around a

particular invested with a significance that allows it to become the *name* of a universality that transcends its actual particular content.⁸

This allows for the introduction of the flip side of the particular-universal's function. It also gives presence to a sutured inscription of dislocation in the form of an antagonism that gives negativity a presence in opposition to the positivity of the order (2004: 317-319). Antagonism gives dislocation a precise presence *in* the order by showing an exteriority that cannot be retrieved, only kept at bay or overcome. An example can illustrate the difference: The flag that is invested with the universal significance of the people is not antagonistically denied by the presence of 'objective' (juridical) nationals rejecting interpellation by nationalist discourse. They are, like those who appear under the rubric 'illegal immigrants' simply present as the absence of the full presence of the posited national unity. They are presented as heterogeneous to the order. What is 'fully represented as a negative reverse' (2005a: 139) of nationalist popular identity are those who are *simultaneously* 'the Strangers' *and* 'the National-People' – therefore the particular significance of 'second-generation immigrants' in new right nationalism. These can either be overcome ('go back to where they come from'), kept apart (differentiated endlessly by being made the object of integration policies, police surveillance, the regulation of intimacy through rules concerning marriage, etc) or alternatively – in rare cases – be allowed to become part of the National-People by denying any differential identity they may have had (the obligatory singular stories of 'the good immigrant').

⁸ This is the argument that is often made with reference to the term 'empty signifier' (Laclau 1996), a term that has generated considerable confusion (see the essays in Critchley and Marchart 2004), and which I have therefore avoided here.

Given that hegemony was from the outset theorised as a process in an unfixed terrain, the question remains – what animates this process? In the initial version of the argument, the answer seems to be nothing but internal contradictions within the orders and the constant flows back and forth between order and surplus – there is no conceptualisation of subjective agency

Whenever we use the category of ‘subject’ in this text, we will do so in the sense of ‘subject positions’ within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations – not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible – as all ‘experience’ depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility.

(Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 115)

This position is modified importantly in Laclau’s recent work. Though subjects *as individuals* are still rejected in favour of analysis of failed wholes, and subjectivity is still taken to be constituted through political practices, subjective experiences, which are precisely not taken to have precise discursive conditions of possibility, are seen as the elementary form in the building up of the social link. These experiences cross-cutting the borders established between order and heterogeneity are what are expressed as ‘social demands’ (2005a: 73; 2005b: 35). Social demands arise on the basis of the experience of something that cannot be satisfied through self-management, and is therefore directed at something else (this why the demands relevant here are *social*). Such demands can be more or less heterogeneous to the social order, ranging from those that arise within it and

are satisfied within it, over those that arise within and are not satisfied, to those that arise from heterogeneous elements outside. The introduction of demands as a theoretical category facilitates not only the reintroduction of what is *at stake* in politics beyond the symbolic structuring of society (which would sound rather abstract to most of those involved), but also opens up for a systematic inquiry into the dynamics of social transformation.⁹

One thing is to map the *form* taken by the signifying operations that lead to the radical investment of a universal like ‘the people’ into a particular, and how this contributes to the constitution of the social. Another is to understand *the force that explains* particular investments by subjects created through the ordering of specific demands – in other words, the step beyond discourse-descriptivism. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Laclau has here introduced ‘affect’ as a theoretical category for explaining why particular investments are made (2004: 326). Subjects desiring to overcome their experience of their own deficient being will affectively invest objects with an excess of meaning that represent the fullness of being they long for. This can take either a private or a social-public form. Laclau describes the relation between the form of signification and the investment as follows:

the object of investment can be contingent, but it is most certainly not indifferent – it cannot be changed at will. With this we reach a full explanation of what radical investment means: making an object the

⁹ Crucially, Laclau does not delve into the question of where demands come from, and given the workings of the notion of heterogeneity in his work, it is difficult to imagine how it would be possible to address this question *theoretically* – analytically, however, nothing prevents one from profiting from sociological literature in the attempt to understand the relative structurality of a given context when one conducts concrete studies, something for instance Barros (2005) does with considerable analytical purchase.

embodiment of a mythical fullness. Affect (that is, enjoyment) is the very essence of investment.

(2005a: 115)¹⁰

This is the affective dimension of the universal(s) a particular is brought to represent. It comes to exceed its own ontic particularity but still represents a lack in the sense that it is not the full universal it is posited to be – ‘the people’ is never a fully sutured community. It is, because of the affective investment made in it, a particular failed unity that marks those within it with deficient being – a deficiency that can be formulated as demands, connected with other demands, and start the whole dynamic process of constituting the social all over again. The combination of Christians demanding containment of other religions, people feeling that the EU denies their identities as nationals, or as citizens in a sovereign state, those attached to the welfare state who are alienated by incomprehensible technocratic Social Democrats, and those who find that immigration is a threat to their way of life does not *automatically* make up a new right constituency, but nor is it *arbitrary* that these particulars are linked through signifying operations conquering the flag as a symbol of national unity in opposition to the threatening Strange – an investment has been made in the representation of the sutured society, and it is this investment that those who want to oppose such a political movement have to work on.

¹⁰ In contrast to the earlier idea of ‘the subject as lack’ (Laclau 1990) which, given the idea of all being as deficient, almost amounted to a pleonasm, this new conceptualisation allows one to differentiate different levels that can be studied separately even if they are in reality intertwined – the failed unicity of a discourse is always matched by the deficient being of the subjects it define, these are, as Lacan have argued, driven by the desire to overcome this deficiency which they experience as a lack, but it is, qua the introduction of the concept of demand, only politically –as opposed to therapeutically – relevant when the lack and the desire to overcome it is turned towards society.

The introduction of demands and affect as theoretical categories allow Laclau to move away from the tendencies towards empty decisionism in his work of the mid-nineties, where hegemonic processes tended to be understood as animated by ‘the madness of the decision [as the] ... blind spot in the structure ... something totally heterogeneous with it ... [which has] to supplement it’ (1996a: 55, partly reiterated in 2000). Where this conception seemed to suggest a somewhat apocalyptic extra-normative clash of discourses, the combination of the centrality given to contestable universals and their relation to affective investments seems to be better calibrated to bring into focus the normative dimension in even violently antagonistic political clashes, and opens up for a form of politics that recognises commonalities between at least *parts* of conflicting orders.¹¹ How this plays out in Laclau’s political theory is defined by the theory of the political’s relation to a normative theory, to which I turn now, and a theory of a form of politics that I discuss in the penultimate part of the article.

¹¹ Though the approach discussed above has proven empirically useful (see for instance Howarth & Torfing 2005 for a recent collection of analyses), problems remain. Even if one leaves aside the question of where demands come from, the theoretical grasp of power, persistence, and articulation seems insufficient. Affect may be one way of addressing the side of hegemony that Gramsci named ‘consent’, but the dimension of ‘coercion’ seems to have no theoretical place in Laclau’s work beyond the analytically somewhat imprecise catch-all phrase of the ‘unevenness’ of the social (2005a: 80). If explanation hinges on grasping how objects are made the embodiment of fullness, a whole plethora of social phenomena like control over and regulation of the (real and virtual) spaces of appearance, the legal regulation of certain forms of material or ideational linkage and investment, and so on seems to be of pre-eminent importance. Here, I share Zerilli’s (2004) and Smith’s (1998) scepticism as to the fruitfulness of Laclau’s move towards Lacan. The reintroduction of a concept of power could be one way to grasp this. Similar paths seem to be what should be explored if one wants to account for the persistence of certain orders over others. Finally, the key category of articulation, which with Laclau’s transfer of it from the ontic level in Althusser to the ontological level of the actual constitution of subjectivities and the social is of central importance, seems to be too broad and undifferentiated to offer much analytical leverage as to how relations are built in practice, when they are picked up when offered, why attempts at reaching out are so often incomprehensible to those addressed, and especially how the interplay between ideational and material forms of articulation play together.

A normative theory

The notion of radical democracy is perhaps more strongly associated with the work of Chantal Mouffe (for instance 2000), but it is also a notion that Laclau himself has returned to time and again (1996a; 2004; 2005a; 2005c). Now, Laclau primarily presents radical democracy as a ‘political project’ (2000: 82) and rejects the distinction between the normative and the descriptive that would typically be involved in presentations of radical democracy as having the *ambitions* commonly associated with normative theory, ambitions which are supposedly relatively independent of descriptive issues – universality, context-transcendence, ahistoricity, and so on. When dealing with this level, Laclau prefers to talk about ‘the ethical’ as ‘the moment in which, beyond any particularism, the universal speaks for itself’ (2000: 80) – obviously, this moment of pure universality is not a moment that he will accept as accessible to human experience. As made clear above, Laclau insists that society consists only of particularities, some of which functions as failed universalities, but never as fully universal. As the universal *aspirations* are still part and parcel of the ontology of the political, the ethical moment is always hovering somewhere beyond our reach, but in practice has to be mediated by an investment in what he calls particular ‘normative orders’ (2000: 81). Even accepting that such investments (a) are – *pace* the theory of hegemony – political, (b) does not equal the ethical moment, (c) always involve historical particulars incommensurable with the universals, and therefore (d) never reach the lofty heights some traditions of normative theory aspire to, this does not change the fact that such investments are also still precisely *normative* as they involve judgements not only of facts, but also of value. Thus, in so far as radical democracy is not only a *description* of a normative phenomena, but also a

theoretical articulation of a *particular* normative investment, a specific mediation of the gap between the ethical and social reality that entails a valuation and distinction between what is and what ought to be, it can be construed as a normative theory, despite Laclau's hesitations. It is particular, contextual, historical and does not provide purely external 'grounds' from which answers to ethical questions can be deduced, but it still plays the role of normative theory, of deciding, to put it bluntly, between good and bad.

From the outset, the link between the theory of hegemony and radical democracy has been understood as *contingent* (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 168). An anti-foundationalist theory cannot in itself provide an *archē* (foundational principle), and thereby stands opposed to a whole line of thought that has tried to reduce the normative question to the ontological one. This line, ultimately going back all the way to Plato, in the twentieth century ranging from Heidegger on the right to Gramsci on the left, has tried to found its normative dimension and its politics on principles fully *derived* from the ontological properties of something (the people in Heidegger, the proletariat in Gramsci). Not so with the theory of hegemony – it does not claim a *necessary* relation to radical democracy. Critchley (forthcoming) has, for instance, tried to link a similar conception of the political with a *pre-archic* normative theory in the form of Levinasian ethics as first philosophy. Laclau instead pursues a *post-archic* path by taking the fact of heterogeneity, hegemonization as the investment of universals into particulars, and the resulting constitution of subjectivities through the linkage of demands as the imaginary within which the theory of radical democracy is elaborated. This disciplining is not a one-way street, something which is underlined by the normative impulse that was involved in the

very elaboration of the ontological theory of hegemony on the basis of the belief that it may be 'an useful instrument in the struggle for a radical, libertarian, and plural democracy' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 4). The theory of the political means that the pursuit of radical democracies in the world will always entail hegemonic processes. The normative theory tries to identify the traits that will allow one to identify hegemonic processes in the world as having a radically democratic thrust. It is not about telling concrete agents what society is the good society (emancipated, equal, etc), but about providing ways of ascertaining whether particular political struggles are good in the sense that they pursue radical democratic aspirations of emancipation(s), equality and so on.

Laclau presents radical democracy as a 'general theory' of the constituent ontological dimensions (and precisely *not* principles) of democracy. He argues that if one wants to avoid simply identifying it with particular sets of institutions and practices at the ontic level 'democracy itself requires to be specified beyond any normative-institutional content' (2004: 295). Though he explicitly highlights the obvious concrete importance of the ontic level and underlines that 'the internal democratisation of liberal institutions on the basis of an unlimited application of universal rules is a first possible meaning of radical democracy' (2005c: 259), the key parts of the normative theory are articulated in relation to ontological processes. As Laclau writes, he 'do[es] not see democracy as a political regime ... but [as] a dimension of politics which, as such, can be present in regimes which widely differs from each other.' (2004: 310). Though ontic questions of institutions, redistribution and recognition are central to the *workings* of democracy,

Laclau maintains as his question the ontological, what is (in Heidegger's somewhat cumbersome prose) the 'being of being' of democracy?¹²

In dealing with it, he radicalises Lefort's (1988) theory of democracy as a symbolic form of society where the place of power is empty by shifting the referent of emptiness from a structural location to the production of types of identity. Given that this is, as theoretically elaborated in the theory of hegemony, always a process and never a given, the kernel of democracy is here also displaced from particular static states of being to becoming (and therefore emerge as post-archic). Democracy is about democratic *politics*, not the good society, but good political struggles. For Laclau, democratic processes have two traits. First, the identity of 'the people' has to be simultaneously present *and* empty in the sense that it is open for contestation. 'The very possibility of democracy depends on the constitution of a democratic 'people' (2005a: 169; 2005c: 259).¹³ Secondly, for a people-identity to be a *democratic* people, the process has to be a self-reflexive one where those involved are aware of their particularity and 'the undecidable character of this interaction, the impossibility of conceptually mastering the contingent forms in which it crystallises' (2005c: 261).¹⁴ Here, Laclau is, if on a different level, in line with Tocqueville-inspired political scientists in underlining that the key to democracy is not

¹² The insistence that the dimensions of democracy has to be identified at the ontological and not the ontic level is the basis for the recurrent barbed remarks made by Laclau about Habermasian conceptions of democracy (ex 2004: 296-298), who he argues identifies democracy with particular ontic processes, and therefore collapse into ethnocentrism and sociological essentialism. The criticism does not seem entirely justified.

¹³ In line with my remarks above about power, control and resources in note 11, I find it important to maintain Lefort's position as a central supplement to Laclau's. The very possibility of democratically constituting political subjectivities depends on the structural locations of governmental power being empty as well as signifiers like 'the people' being recognised as contestable.

¹⁴ And of course this has an ontic – if somewhat unspecific – corollary: 'Institutionalisation of uncertainty as the incorporation into democratic deliberations of actors who had been, so far, excluded from the process of decision-making' (2004: 295).

institutions, but democrats (Putnam, 1993). This is the minimum level of democracy that radical democracy calls for, ‘reflexive democrats’ who recognise the political nature of the act of constituting contingent subjectivities, even as they engage in it – it calls for ‘fidelity to politics’.¹⁵

The starting point of the normative argument is thus the view that it is not just *any* construction of the people that will do if a social order is to be thought of as democratic. Democracy takes recognition of contingency and particularity on behalf of those involved in self-government. To qualify as radically democratic, democratic practices furthermore has to be involved in pursuing a radicalisation of the key elements of the old political imaginary of the Left that Laclau so often refers to – liberty (thought by Laclau in terms of emancipation(s)), equality, and solidarity. Contrary to criticisms to the opposite effect (Žižek 2000, Critchley 2004), it is not the case that Laclau does not provide a normative theory for making a democratic/undemocratic distinction, or a normative valuation, for that matter. Radical democracy as a political and normative imaginary is a theorisation of the emergence of a people that not only shows ‘fidelity to politics’ but also struggles for a certain normative order because it is deemed better than alternatives is precisely an attempt to allow one to do this. Identification with the theory of radical democracy thus serves like identification with *any* normative theory to offer a position of some discursive exteriority (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 154) *relative to given orders*. From such a position, where the normative stipulations exceed the descriptive order of facts, relations that are within those orders cast as being merely of difference or

¹⁵ It is true that this minimum definition makes it possible to identify democratic elements in some regimes that would not normally be thought of as so as having such, but theoretical notions would be practically worthless if they did nothing but reiterated what we already believed – whether this is legitimate in particular cases is something I will leave out of my discussion here.

subordination can be articulated and recast as being relations of domination, oppression – or even antagonistic. It is through for instance the before-mentioned attempts to extend ‘universal rules’ shared by both liberal and radical democratic discourses that the situation of the ‘illegal immigrant’ mentioned above can be transformed from one of heterogeneity to an antagonistic frontier between those approving the right and those denying it, and thereby serve in a political attempt to reconstitute the social order – which is precisely what is happening in the United States right now. It is in such *applications* of radical democratic ideals relative to existing orders that the normative theory can achieve what Cook (2006: 4) claims post-structuralist and critical political theory needs to aim for: ‘a context-transcending ethical [normative] validity without violating their own anti-authoritarian impulse’. One part of politics is bordering on the extra-normative, such as clashes between (conservative) Right-wing belief in the universal value of hierarchy and a Left-wing belief in the universal value of equality. But it also involves a normative dimension precisely where context-transcending interventions can be made through investments in universals from the position of partly exterior normative discourses that lay claim to some of the *same* universal terms that the practice of politics circle around (justice, democracy, freedom, etc). Radical democracy provides one such point from which interventions can be made. The question is then whether the process-oriented argument works when put to use. I have two problems with the way it is presented here.

First, why would one necessarily conceive of ‘the people’ in singular (‘a’ in the quotation above)? It seems to leave radical democracy within the imaginary of a nation-state form of politics that often amounts to a both normatively and pragmatically problematic

‘misframing’ of politics (cf. Fraser 2005). The idea of popular sovereignty closely tied to notions like *the* people, the general will, and – a term Laclau in line with Gramsci uses – the collective will, is certainly an important strand in democratic thought, but so is the idea of the self-government of *people*. The history of ideas of democracy quite rightly insists that *demos*-kratos requires *people*, but does not agree as to whether it necessarily requires *a* people. A pursuit of the more plural tradition of multiple subjectivities along the lines of governance and transnationalism seems to be called for here, but will have to be left aside in this article.¹⁶

I will instead focus on a second, and more fundamental problem: Laclau’s criteria for distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic constitutions of subjectivities seem to be insufficiently clearly articulated to provide a way of making the distinction. His position oscillates between two ideals of democracy that he does not reconcile theoretically. On the one hand, we have democracy as defined by ‘equality of citizens’ (2004: 297). On the other, we have democracy as entailing ‘positive discrimination’ to create ‘the elementary preconditions for participating in the public life of the community’ (2004: 296). Obviously, these tie into his *radical* democratic project too in the form of equality and solidarity. One dimension is about interacting as being *equal* in a certain (political and social) sense. The other is about being treated *unequally* to become (politically and socially) equal. Both are rightly seen as parts of what democracy means for those who want to go beyond purely negative liberties, and are dealt with in much normative theory. The central question remains how they are to be combined. Laclau explicitly recognises that there is a ‘tension between these two logics in the attempt to

¹⁶ In this respect, it is a bit of a shame that more than half of the people contributing to *Laclau: a critical reader* are closely associated with Laclau – more engagement with other strands of thoughts could maybe have forced his reply to move into previously unexplored territory.

build up a democratic society in a context of deep inequality' (2004: 297).¹⁷ The problem is that he leaves this tension untouched through a vague reference to their mutual 'complex articulations' in concrete cases, and then go on to argue as if the outcome of such complex articulations were somehow already known by stating for instance that there is 'no doubt that Jacobinism was a democratic movement, although it violated all the procedural rules Habermasians postulate [i.e. the first dimension of equality as citizens]' (2004: 297). The real question is of course: *why* is there no doubt? Can the reasons be theoretically articulated at the level of abstraction where Laclau operates, for instance through the introduction of a notion of 'democratic justice' explicitly trying to link the two, such as the notions Nancy Fraser, Rainer Forst, or for that matter John Rawls, have elaborated? They try to deal with the key question of *what* 'complex articulations' of equality and inequality are normatively justifiable.

Instead of engaging with this question, Laclau takes recourse to the idea that precisely *democratic* (and therefore normatively justifiable) subjectivity is linked to the emergence of 'the underdog as a political actor' (2005c: 259). His discussion of Gramsci illustrates the importance of this category in his argument. Despite Gramsci's notorious lack of explicit normative theorisation, as expressed in the collapse of the normative dimension into the political through the term 'ethico-political', Laclau asserts that 'Gramsci's vision of hegemony [is] ... profoundly democratic, because it involves launching new historical subjects ['underdogs'] into the historical arena' (2005a: 168). Presumably, this is also the

¹⁷ Where Mouffe (2000) in her discussion of the contributions made by Habermas and Rawls identifies the 'democratic paradox' in the constitutive tension between liberalism as rule of law, and democracy as popular sovereignty, Laclau here seems to identify the constitutive tension between liberalism as rule of law (equality as citizens), the social question (what it means to be equal in anything but a purely formal sense), and *then* relate it democracy (the emergence of the people).

argument for why Jacobinism is deemed democratic. Then again, the Sendero Luminoso in Peru also tried to launch new historical subjects into the arena, and hardly seems to be a democratic movement, even in what was a highly oppressive, exclusionary and unequal context. The central thing here is the intellectual reason why both Gramsci and Chariman Gonzalo did not have to confront the question of whether their practice would entail a *normatively* justifiable (democratically, for instance) form of historical subjectivity and political practice. They still relied on Marx's notion of the proletariat as the universal class, a short-cut past normative theory through the mere *positing* of something that is in an *a priori* fashion taken to *ontologically* be the excluded underdog-as-such – a return to an archic form of justification that seems untenable in the light of criticism made by, amongst others, precisely Laclau. Interestingly enough, Laclau comes quite close to the argument behind all this – Marx's position (1844: 123) that the proletariat is the universal class 'because its sufferings are universal', and that it in its political practice therefore 'does not claim a *particular* redress, because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular* wrong but *wrong as such*'. Laclau writes: 'when we identify with the cause of the underdog ... we do not identify with them as pure singularities, but "as *exemplary species* of the oppressed and of oppression in general"' (2004: 310). I beg to differ. *Pace* Laclau's own work and the first part of this article, accepting the point that there *are* no atomistic 'pure singularities' does not entail that the only alternative is *universalism* ('in general') – I think the process is better understood in Laclau's own terms. Particular forms of oppression (racism, economic exploitation, patriarchy, etc) are *invested* with the tendentially universal meaning of oppression ('in general') without ever identifying oppression-as-such or exclusion-as-such.

In this light, I must say that ‘underdog’ does not seem to me to be perspicuous theoretical category. First: To categorise those excluded from orders (or oppressed) as ‘underdogs’ obscures first of all the central (if today rather banal) point that patterns of inclusion/exclusion do not necessarily converge in homogenising patterns – being white, male, unemployed and a convicted felon is a different combination of inclusions and exclusions than being Arab, female, housewife and an important activist in neighbourhood associations.¹⁸ There *is* no such thing as exclusion or oppression *in general*, only oppressions. Secondly: Laclau presents a theoretical framework that insists that inclusions always entail other exclusions, that equality (which entails a dimension of equivalence) always involves inequality (which similarly entails a dimension of difference) – as explained above. If this is precise, one cannot bring in the excluded or oppressed *in toto* – this idea is simply the reintroduction of the mirage of a fully reconciled society, something the theory of hegemony rejects as impossible. How can one then summarise democratic politics simply as the bringing in of previously excluded actors?

Instead, the challenge seems to be the question of which *combinations* of exclusions/inclusions and equalities/inequalities are normatively justifiable. Laclau recognises, addresses, but ultimately dodges the whole question of how one can judge such particular patterns involved in the emergence of a new political project democratic or not, let alone radically so. Once one leaves behind the idea of the proletariat (or the underdogs) as the universal class so central to Marxism as a normative project (and today lurking in the background of Žižek and Hardt & Negri’s work), Jacobinism, Gramscian

¹⁸ Something Laclau of all people is of course aware of – see for instance his remarks on multiple selves (2005a: 199).

communist politics (and Sendero Luminoso) like all other political struggles has to be seen not only as struggles for inclusion, but as pursuing historically specific combinations of inclusion and exclusion that attempt to introduce some actors *at the expense of others*. Any hegemony, *also* one pursued in radically democratic fashion, will be based on *both* coercion and consent, and the normative challenges are not so much which types of consent and inclusion are legitimate, but which types of coercion and exclusion are legitimate, who gets to decide that, and how. The possibility of precisely adjudicating between movements' democratic and non-democratic dimensions without artificially separating their ideology from their practice seems to depend on a more explicit theoretical linkage between the two dimensions of democracy (equality and positive discrimination) than what Laclau offers. The importance of the undertheorised second dimension of positive discrimination for his argument in situations of inequality is clear when he (quite rightly, in my view) argues that the 'social inequalities in the present world are deeper than anything that mere procedural agreements [can] supersede' (2004: 296) because it raise the question of what normatively justifiable form of politics (that includes coercion) can lead to an outcome (that includes exclusion) that is also normatively justifiable. It is in the light of this challenge that Laclau's link between his theory of the political, normative theory and the theory of a populist form of politics as formulated through the insistence that 'radical democracy is always populist' (2005c: 259) shall be considered in the last part of the article – first, however, I will take a closer look at the final element, the form of politics he identifies as populist.

A theory of a form of politics

Involved in the link between radical democracy and populism is the rejection of identifications of populism with a particular sociological constituency (marginalized rural groups), a precise ideological position (as opposed to nationalism, liberalism, etc) or the psychological foundation that crowd theorists like Taine, Le Bon, Tarde and MacDougall tried to give it. Using Freud's introduction of the notion of 'identification' into discussions of crowds as a departure point from psychological reductionism, Laclau instead proposes that we see populism as a particular political logic (2005a: 117) – a form of politics.

Though populism of different political hues seems to be on the rise again in some parts of the world, the reason for studying precisely this phenomena is not simply its empirical interest – indeed, part of Laclau's argument is that as a form of politics it has in many countries, especially the 'overdeveloped' West, been superseded by forms of politics that stand in the way of the constitution of 'the people'. Think here parliamentarian and especially corporatist welfare states that differentiate and isolate demands and the particulars making them in the very process of addressing them. Instead, the centrality of populism in Laclau's optic stems from its possible relation to the *political* emergence of the *people* as a transformative force, and therefore the relation it seems possible to establish between it, democracy and democratic politics (2005a: 74). Read in the light of his and Mouffe's previous attempts to formulate 'a new politics for the Left', an imaginary alternative title of his most recent work would be *Populism as Radical Democratic Strategy* – the claim that radical democracy is always populist echoes his Marxist work in the seventies, where he argued that 'there is no socialism

without populism' (1977: 196). Laclau's thirty years of writings on populism as a form of politics is central to his work as precisely a *political theorist* because it represents the theorisation of how the normative project imagined within the terrain of the theory of the political can find a home in the world – it is what moves his work beyond the elaboration of formal categories for empirical analysis and the development of a purely normative theory of the good society.

As a form of politics, populism follows a particular path through the steps discussed above as involved in hegemonic politics. A number of heterogeneous demands are brought together and linked. They achieve a collective identity through their differentiation from an antagonistic force represented in their discourse, namely the particular other of the 'establishment' that is taken to deny their demands. Finally, a particular demand, often signified by a leader, is affectively invested with the empty universal of the 'people' and comes to represent 'the people' in the ultimate move of the populist hegemonic operation (2005a: 116). The achievement of this marks the transformation of the populist political subject: 'in order to have the people of populism ... we need a *plebs* who claim to be the only legitimate *populus* – that is, a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community' (2005a: 81). The often-lamented 'vagueness' of populist discourse (as opposed to the finely differentiated positions within parliamentarian systems and establishment political discourse) thus stems from precisely the operation that brings 'the people' into being.

Now, both Laclau's own work and the collection of analyses in Panizza (2005) demonstrates the considerable analytical purchase of this approach in contrast to traditional theories and their eclectic and often self-contradictory conceptualisations of populism. In terms of political theory, it is also clear what his perspective contributes in contrast to the simple *positing* of an ontological 'proletariat' and its struggle as 'class war' in Marxism – today reemergent in the idea of an 'ontological multitude' and its auto-justified fight against 'Empire' (Hardt & Negri, 2004: 221). If one leaves aside for a moment his appeal to the notion of the 'underdogs', Laclau's theory of the political points to the contingency, coercion and exclusion involved in *any* processes producing subjectivities and thereby raise the normative question of how concrete forms of politics forming potentially transformative subjects can be justified – both questions are silenced in these alternative accounts, both come together in the theory of a populist form of politics. The proletariat is simply there and simply socialist. The multitude is simply there, and simply fighting Empire. Because they are who they are, neither needs normativity or ethics. Paraphrasing Critchley's (forthcoming) beautiful phrase, 'ethics without politics is empty, politics without ethics is blind', one can say that in these theories, politics is normatively blind because it takes as its starting point that it *does not need to see*, it has always-already *seen*. In contrast, Laclau minus the underdog insists that politics *sees itself as political and necessarily normative* and as having *never seen a priori*, because there are no one to see before their own political constitution. Contrary to what for instance Badiou (2005) seems to suggest, politics is never only back then and there, but here and now, and the involved has to see themselves as such to recognise what they are doing as political and normative and not just the unfolding of history. This

position is immensely valuable in itself because it insists on bringing together the political and the normative *in* the world as a form of politics. What I will dispute here is the link that Laclau *given* these insights wants to make between radical democracy and populism as a form of politics. I have two objections. The first ties in with my criticism of the notion of the ‘underdogs’ and pertains to the idea that those people (the *plebs*) ‘the people’ emerge from can be fruitfully understood as ‘the underprivileged’ (2005a: 81). The second concerns Laclau’s attempts to equate populism with the political as such.

The theoretical part of my problem with the idea of *plebs* as simply ‘the underprivileged’ is already laid out in my above discussion of the notion of the underdog that provides the key linkage between the normative project and the populist form of politics. Patterns of exclusion/inclusion and equality/inequality do not necessarily (or even often) coalesce in handy total dichotomies identifying two distinct groups as *the* privileged and *the* underprivileged. The very establishment of such a dichotomy seems to be involved in the populist political act, and like all such acts, it entails the constitution not of a new order of inclusion-as-such, but of a new combination of inclusion and exclusion. The notion of ‘the people’ have in Europe both historically and in the contemporary world worked in precisely this way, because it is not only differentiated from the establishment (*populus/grandi*), but also from the Stranger that nationalist discourse has brought back to haunt us together with the re-emergence of the people as a historical agent. The many changing incarnations of the Stranger (the Jew, the Gypsy, the German ‘Hun’, the second-generation immigrant) underlines that the universalist potential that lies in the concept ‘people’ (as *humans* – think: *die Leute*, *les gens*, *folk*, etc) is often replaced by the particularism of *the* people (*das Volk*, *le peuple*, *folket*, etc) –

which may still represent national *unity*, but definitely *not* an inclusive people the emergence of which amounts to the overcoming of unequal distributions of privilege. It is often only conceived of as an attempt to bring *the national people* onto the scene, and has historically often been used by political elites to manoeuvre this precise political subject against more radical projects striving for social change (see for instance Hansen & Jelstrup 2005). This use has to be kept in mind as a concrete counter-example to Gramsci's dreams about a progressive national-popular and new idols of the left like Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. Though the Latin American experience is partly different, history is ripe with examples of populisms at odds with radical democratic aspirations, and even those less so are also involved in coercion and exclusion. Just as Laclau does not hold that the identification of hegemony has any necessary links to the project of radical democracy, he also at one point writes that 'there is no a priori guarantee that the 'people' as a historical actor will be constituted around a progressive identity (from the point of view of the Left)' (2005a: 246). But the opposite link – which he makes – seems equally contingent (that radical democracy is *a priori* populist as suggested in the quotation above). As already discussed, the point that democracy involves *people* does not amount to it involving a political subject claiming to be *the* people. What would make a political subjectivity constituted around the investment of, say, 'justice' any less democratic than one constituted around the notion of 'the people'? The defining traits of radical democratic politics seems to lie elsewhere, in the recognition of a subject's own contingency and particularity, in the pursuit of emancipation(s), and in the precise combination of equality and inequality that its political projects deem valid.

The second problem arise from the following puzzling passage:

Does ... the political [then] become synonymous with populism? Yes, in the sense in which I conceive this last notion. ... the construction of the 'people' is the political act *par excellence* – as opposed to pure administration within a stable institutional framework

(2005a: 154)

This is an interpretation that seems to flatly contradict Laclau's own introduction to the very same book (with which I align myself). Here, the argument is that 'populism is, quite simply, *a way of constructing the political*' (2005a: xi, my emphasis). In the latter reading, the opposition established in the quotation above between politics and pure administration is untenable, and the equivalence between populism and the political denied. This seems to be the necessary implication of the theory of hegemony – if political processes are ontologically primary and never complete, they cannot be thought of as opposed to any particular ontic form – there is no such thing as 'pure administration' that successfully extinguishes the political, even things that pass themselves off as purely social have political origins. If the theory of hegemony is precise, the political is an inescapable part of human existence. Another quote illustrates the importance of this difference:

'in the dismissal of populism far more is involved than the relegation of a peripheral set of phenomena to the margins of social explanation. What is

involved in such a disdainful rejection is, I think, the dismissal of politics
tour court
(2005a: x)

Here, two points can be disentangled in the light of the above. One is the truism that democratic politics necessarily entails precisely *politics*. But if the political is an ontological condition of human existence, denial of it can only amount to ideological self-deception, not an actually effective dismissal.¹⁹ Radical democracy may require ‘fidelity to politics’, but not necessarily populism. Norval (2004) is an example of an author that operates more or less within the ontological theory of the political that Laclau has elaborated, sympathises with the notion of radical democracy, but still tries to insert something between the rather stark dichotomy between institutional politics and anti-establishment populist politics that Laclau seems to suggest. And with good reason, in my view – the challenge seems to be to identify a form of politics that can be normatively justified through self-disciplination around a project like radical democracy, can carry out a hegemonic operation that will probably have to include the linkage of demands from both within and outside existing social orders, and instigate change towards a social ordering that is more democratic and just than the current. This may take a populist form, but I doubt it, and the claim that it *must* is untenable.

¹⁹ Along the same line, the normative-political problem plaguing the Marxist tradition that Laclau & Mouffe deconstructs (1985) is not that its theoretical dismissal of the independent importance of politics and its inability to perceive it led to Marxist-inspired political practices (for instance revolution!) into becoming *apolitical* – they were *necessarily* so. The problem is that it, along with the notion of the universal class, prevented Marxism from developing a position that was *radically democratic* political, because it did not show fidelity to politics and refused normative reflection on the process of the political.

A full act of political theorising

As noted in the introduction, the three elements of Laclau's work discussed above are often presented as separate. Seen as such, the theory of hegemony appears purely analytical, radical democracy as simply another normative theory, and the argument for a populist form of politics as nothing but strategy. Each element has individual strengths and weaknesses, but the central point to be made here is that they *together* make up *one* act of political theory.

Their interlinkage can be summarised as follows: Given the historical starting point is not some abstract original position, but an empirical world entailing exclusions and inequalities maintained by a number of existing social orders that are not *in themselves* defined by immanent or structural logics that necessarily lead to any normatively preferable place, any project for change for the better must identify the potential and logics of change to be anything but empty speculation.²⁰ The question then is 'how is change possible?'

Laclau address this question by identifying *hegemony* as the process of (re)constituting the social order, the ontological logic and transformative potential of the political that is ever-present. The explicit motivation for the initial formulation of this theory was *not* simply the development of what it *also* is – an analytical concept – but an attempt to alert the Left to the logic of the political so that it could be put to use for normative purposes. While Laclau leaves behind the dialectical development of the forces *of* history, he reintroduces the emancipatory potential *in* history by insisting on its inescapable political dimension. If it is possible to think of emancipation(s) from

²⁰ In this light, a homology between the Frankfurt School and Laclau's work emerge in the common ambition to identify a potential for change in the real world.

historical forms of oppression, it is because historical subjects overcome them through political struggles, not because history does due to self-contained immanent or internal logics. The question the development of this theory leads to, especially since it entailed the abolishment of the class essentialism that had made Marxism avoid explicitly normative theorising, is: 'what changes' are emancipatory changes?

The answer is theoretically specified in the normative idea of *radical democracy*. The development of the theory of hegemony as a potential tool for Leftist politics would not make much sense unless it is taken to be possible to distinguish between good and bad change from a certain normative-political position. The normative theory tries to furnish categories for precisely this distinction and the self-disciplination of a political project around it. It incorporates the fact of heterogeneity and the form of hegemonic politics into its very conception of the good society. Accepting heterogeneity, it radicalises deontological logics also pursued by other strands of thought in an argument about the primacy of *democracy* as open-ended and unfixed. It makes it possible to think that precisely *democratic* subjectivities can be constituted. I have argued here that the theory despite its merits (the recognition of the political in the form of heterogeneity, hegemony, and subjectivity) is still plagued by the lack of co-articulation of the two different dimensions of democracy it identifies (equality and the inequality of positive discrimination). A fleshing out of, for instance, a notion of democratic justice should be pursued to reach a level where more precise adjudications between democratic and nondemocratic subjectivities and projects are possible. But even given the accomplishment of such a task, the final question remains: 'how can *that* normative change be pursued?'

Laclau suggests *populism* as the politics of a radical democratic project. Though the link is made to the notion of democracy and the emergence of the people, I have criticised this link on both historical and theoretical premises and argued that it is not a convincing part of the project. Even the ‘least populist’ version of a theory of a form of politics - the idea presented by him and Mouffe (1985: 182-183) as the linkage of anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-capitalist struggles into one radical democratic project still seems to me to avoid the question that the reconceptualisation of the formation of subjectivities around the notion of demands allow one to pose: how can a radical democratic project be constituted around demands from *both* included and excluded around some normative notion like justice that in some places span the political frontiers that separates them? This is where the future of a radical democratic form of politics that recognises the points I have made in part two and three above seem to lie.

What *despite* the problems identified remains an important contribution of Laclau’s political theorising, especially the recent focus on populism, is the underlying insistence that an act of political theorising entail all three elements. Against thinkers such as Rawls, who offers very little as to the political question of ‘how change’ and the politics question of ‘how *that* change’, and instead remains almost exclusively within the realm of a purely normative theory that is therefore unconditioned by ontology and worldly realities, or thinkers such as Gramsci, who offers a lot on those two questions, but nothing but simply appeals to the universal class when it comes to the normative question of ‘what change’, Laclau combines ontological, normative, and ontic questions in *one* act of political theorising. Even if it ultimately does not yet fully reach the heights it aspires to, it

therefore still manages to differentiate itself from normatively indifferent political science, abstract moral theorising, and unprincipled political strategising in an act that performatively shows, even if it does not fully explain, what it means when Laclau says that he speaks not as a philosopher, but ‘as a political theorist’ (1996b: 47). The meaning, merit, and problems of this is what I have sought to make clear here.

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