

Contingency, Hegemony, Universality
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Identity and Hegemony:
The Role of Universality in the
Constitution of Political Logics

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I Hegemony: what's in a name?

I will take as my starting point Judith Butler's Question 8a: 'Are we all still agreed that hegemony is a useful category for describing our political dispositions?' My answer is certainly affirmative, and I would add only that 'hegemony' is more than a useful category: it defines the very terrain in which a political relation is actually constituted. To ground this assertion, however, requires throwing some light on what is specific in a hegemonic logic. I will attempt to do this through a consideration of the conceptual displacements that a hegemonic approach introduced in the basic categories of classical political theory.

Let us start by quoting a passage from Marx which could be considered as the zero-degree of hegemony:

The proletariat is coming into being in Germany only as a result of the rising *industrial* development. For it is not the *naturally arising* poor but the *artificially impoverished*, not the human masses mechanically oppressed by the gravity of society but the masses resulting from the *drastic dissolution* of society, mainly of the middle estate, that form the proletariat . . . By proclaiming the *dissolution of the hitherto world order* the proletariat merely states the *secret of its own existence*, for it is in fact the dissolution of that world order. By demanding the *negation of private property*, the proletariat simply raises to the rank of a *principle of society* what society has made the

principle of the *proletariat*, what, without its own cooperation, is already incorporated in it as the negative result of society. . . . As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy. And once the lightning of thought has squarely struck the ingenuous soil of the people the emancipation of the *Germans* into *human beings* will take place.¹

Let us now compare this passage with the following one from the same essay:

On what is a partial, a merely political revolution based? On the fact that *part of civil society* emancipates itself and attains *general domination*; on the fact that a definite class, proceeding from its *particular situation*, undertakes the general emancipation of society. . . . For the *revolution of a nation* and the *emancipation of a particular class of civil society to coincide*, for *one estate* to be acknowledged as the state of the whole society, all the defects of society must conversely be concentrated in another class, a particular estate must be looked upon as the *notorious crime* of the whole of society, so that liberation from that sphere appears as general self-liberation. For *one estate* to be *par excellence* the estate of liberation, another estate must conversely be the obvious estate of oppression.²

If we compare these two passages, we are confronted with several quite remarkable differences. In the first case, emancipation results from a 'drastic dissolution of society', while in the second it comes about as a consequence of a partial section of civil society achieving 'general domination'. That is, while all particularity dissolves in the first case, in the second a passage through particularity is the condition of emergence of any universalizing effects. We know very well the sociologico-teleological hypothesis on which the first case rests: the logic of capitalist development would lead to a proletarianization of the middle classes and the peasantry so that, in the end, a homogeneous proletarian mass will become the vast majority of the population in its final showdown with the bourgeoisie. That is to say that – the proletariat having embodied the universality of the community – the state, as a separate instance, loses any reason to exist, and its withering away is the unavoidable

consequence of the emergence of a community for which the division state/civil society has become superfluous. In the second case, on the contrary, no such given, unmediated universality can be asserted: something which does not cease to be particular has to demonstrate its rights to identify its own particular aims with the universal emancipatory aims of the community. Moreover, while in the first case power becomes superfluous, inasmuch as the actual being of civil society realizes universality in and for itself, in the second case, any potential universalizing effect depends on the antagonistic exclusion of an oppressive sector – which means that power and political mediation are inherent to any universal emancipatory identity. Thirdly, emancipation, in the first case, leads to an unmediated fullness, the retrieval of an essence which does not require anything external to itself to be what it is. In the second case, on the contrary, two mediations are needed in order to constitute the emancipatory discourse: first, the transformation of the particularistic interests of the rising dominant sector in the emancipatory discourse of the whole of society; secondly, the presence of an oppressive regime which is the very condition of that transformation. So in this case emancipation, the very possibility of a universal discourse addressing the community as a whole, depends not on a collapse of all particularities, but on a paradoxical interaction between them.

For Marx, of course, only full, non-mediated reconciliation constitutes a true emancipation. The other alternative is just the partial or spurious universality which is compatible with a class society. The attainment of full emancipation and universality depends, however, on the verification of his basic hypothesis: the simplification of class structure under capitalism. It is sufficient that the logic of capital does not move in that direction for the realm of particularism to be prolonged sine die (a particularism which, as we have seen, is not incompatible with a plurality of universalizing effects). Now, were emancipation and universalization to be restricted to this model, two consequences for the logic of our argument would follow. First, the political mediation, far from withering away, would become the very condition of universality and emancipation in society. As, however, this mediation arises from the actions of a limited historical actor within society, it cannot be attributed to a pure and separate sphere, as can the Hegelian universal class.

It is a partial and pragmatic universality. But, secondly, the very possibility of domination is made dependent on the ability of a limited historical actor to present its own 'partial' emancipation as equivalent to the emancipation of society as a whole. As this 'holistic' dimension cannot be reduced to the particularity which assumes its representation, its very possibility involves an autonomization of the sphere of ideological representations *vis-à-vis* the apparatuses of straight domination. Ideas, in the words of Marx, become material forces. If domination involves political subordination, the latter in turn can be achieved only through processes of universalization which make all domination unstable. With this we have all the dimensions of the political and theoretical situation which make possible the 'hegemonic' turn in emancipatory politics.

Let us start by considering the theoretical displacements that the 'hegemonic' intervention of Gramsci introduces in relation to both Marx's and Hegel's political thought. As Norberto Bobbio asserts in a classic essay on Gramsci's conception of civil society: '*Civil society in Gramsci does not belong to the structural moment, but to the superstructural one.*'²³ In Gramsci's own terms:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and the 'political society' or 'the State'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the 'State' and 'juridical' government.¹

The typical example of civil society's hegemony given by Gramsci is the Church during the Middle Ages.

Both Marx and Gramsci privilege, against Hegel, civil society over the state, but while Marx's reversal of Hegel involves the subordination of the superstructure to the structure, for Gramsci the reversal takes place entirely within the superstructure. The matter is further complicated by the fact that Gramsci's concept of civil society is openly derived from Hegel, but it is still considered as a superstructural one. This is

possible, according to Bobbio, only if Gramsci is referring not to Hegel's notion of a 'system of needs' but to that other moment of civil society which involves a rudimentary form of organization (corporation and police). That is, even when he privileges civil society as against the state conceived as domination (force), there is in Gramsci an emphasis on organization – on something depending on the intervention of a *will*. It is this emphasis that Bobbio stresses. As he points out, there are in the *Prison Notebooks* three dichotomies – economic moment/ethico-political moment; necessity/freedom; objective/subjective – in which the second term always plays the primary and subordinating role. The dichotomy base/superstructure would be the source of Gramsci's polemic against economism and his privileging of the political dimension crystallized in the *party*. The dichotomy institution/ideology within the superstructure leads, on the other hand, to his notion that subordinated classes have to win their battle, first, on the level of civil society. From this derives the centrality given by Gramsci to the category of *hegemony*.

There is no doubt that Gramsci, on the whole, opposes civil society to the state conceived as domination. What should we do, however, with passages such as the following: 'But what does that signify if not that by 'State' should be understood not only the apparatus of government, but also the 'private' apparatus of 'hegemony' or civil society?'⁵ 'In politics the error occurs as a result of an inaccurate understanding of what the State (in its integral meaning: dictatorship + hegemony) really is.'⁶ We could also add his analysis of 'statolatry', in which he refers to 'the two forms in which the State presents itself in the language and culture of specific epochs, i.e. as civil society and as political society'.⁷ I think we have to inscribe these apparent (or perhaps real) textual hesitations within the context of a wider question: to what extent does a 'collective will' belong to the state or to civil society, to the pre-political or to the political sphere? Let us consider Bobbio's assertion that for Gramsci the ethico-political is the moment of freedom conceived as consciousness of necessity. This assimilation – whether we can attribute it to Gramsci or not – is clearly too hasty. The notion of freedom as consciousness of necessity is a Spinozean-Hegelian notion which explicitly excludes an active subject of history who could operate in a contingent or instrumental way over given material conditions. In its Hegelian version, it

involves the idea of freedom as self-determination, and this presupposes the abolition of the subject/object distinction and the necessary determination by a whole which has nothing external to itself and cannot operate instrumentally in relation to anything. Now, if the Gramscian subject is in a *contingent* relation to its own material conditions, two necessary consequences follow:

1. There is no longer any question of an objectivity which necessarily imposes its own diktats, for the contingent interventions of the social actors partially determine such a structural objectivity. The most we can have is the transient objectivity of a 'historical bloc' which partially stabilizes the social flux, but there is no 'necessity' whose consciousness exhausts our subjectivity – political or otherwise;
2. In the same way, on the side of the 'active subject of history' we find only ultimate contingency. But the problem then arises: where and how is that subject constituted? What are the places and logics of its constitution which make the actions that subject is supposed to perform compatible with the contingent character of this intervention? As Bobbio has indicated, those movements presuppose: a) the active construction of the primacy of the moment of the *party* (not in the usual sociological sense, but as another name for the primacy of the superstructure over the structure); b) the primacy of the moment of hegemony (which is equivalent to the prevalence of the ideological over the institutional).

These two primacies combined exclude a set of places of constitution of the 'active subject of history'. First, if hegemony involves a series of universalizing effects, that place of constitution cannot be the 'system of needs', in the Hegelian sense, which is a realm of pure particularity. But, secondly, it cannot be the realm of the universal class – the state as an ethico-political sphere – because the irradiation over society of those universalizing effects prevents them from being relegated to a single sphere. Thirdly, and for the same reasons, civil society cannot be constituted as a truly separate instance, for its functions both anticipate and extend the state's role. The state would be the name or the hypostasis of a function which far exceeds its institutional frontiers.

Perhaps the ambiguities of Gramsci *vis-à-vis* the frontiers state/civil society lie not so much in Gramsci's thought but in social reality itself. If the state, defined as the ethico-political moment of society, does not constitute an instance within a topography, then it is impossible simply to identify it with the public sphere. If civil society, conceived as a site of private organizations, is itself the locus of ethico-political effects, its relation with the state as a public instance becomes blurred. Finally, the level of the 'structure' is not simply such a level if its principles of organization are themselves contaminated by the hegemonic effects deriving from the other 'levels'. Thus, we are left with a horizon of intelligibility of the social which is grounded not in *topographies* but in *logics*. These are the logics of 'party' and 'hegemony', which are ultimately identical, as both presuppose non-dialectical articulations which cannot be reduced to any system of topographical locations. The slippery Gramscian terminology reflects – while at the same time it conceals – this impossible overlapping between logics and topography. A final example of this impossible overlapping can be found in the intriguing primacy granted by Gramsci to ideology over the institutional apparatus. Does not this primacy fly in the face of the importance he gives to institutional organization in achieving hegemony? Only in appearance. If the hegemonic *universalizing* effects are going to irradiate from a *particular* sector in society, they cannot be reduced to the organization of that particularity around its own interests, which will necessarily be corporative. If the hegemony of a *particular* social sector depends for its success on presenting its own aims as those realizing the *universal* aims of the community, it is clear that this identification is not the simple prolongation of an institutional system of domination but that, on the contrary, all expansion of the latter presupposes the success of that articulation between universality and particularity (i.e. a hegemonic victory). No model in which the economic (the structure) determines a first institutional level (politics, institutions) to be followed by an epiphenomenal world of ideas will do the trick, given that society is configured as an ethico-political space, and that the latter presupposes *contingent articulations*. The centrality of the intellectual (= ideological) function in grounding the social link necessarily follows from this.

At this point the various displacements that Gramsci makes, in

relation to Hegel and Marx, become fully intelligible. With Marx and against Hegel, Gramsci moves the centre of gravity of social analysis from state to civil society – any 'universal class' arises from the latter, not from a separate sphere constituted *above* civil society. But with Hegel against Marx, he will conceive this moment of universality as a *political* moment, and not as a reconciliation of society with its own essence. For Gramsci, however, the only universality that society can achieve is a hegemonic universality – a universality contaminated by particularity. So, if on the one hand he undermines the separateness of the Hegelian state by extending the area of ethico-political effects to a multitude of organizations belonging to civil society, on the other this very extension involves, to a large extent, that civil society is constituted as a political space. This explains the hesitations, in Gramsci's texts, about the frontiers between state and civil society to which we have referred above, and also explains why he had to emphasize the moment of 'corporation' in the Hegelian analysis of civil society: the construction of the apparatuses of hegemony had to cut across the distinction between public and private.

Let us try now to put together the various threads of our argument. The two texts from Marx with which we started deal with universal human emancipation, but do so in a fundamentally different way: in the first, universality means *direct reconciliation of society with its own essence* – the universal is expressed without needing any mediation. In the second case, universal emancipation is achieved only through its transient identification with the aims of a particular social sector – which means that it is a *contingent* universality constitutively requiring political mediation and relations of representation. It is the deepening of this second view of emancipation and its generalization to the whole of politics in the modern age that constitutes Gramsci's achievement. Its result, as we have seen, was the elaboration of the theoretical framework which gave its centrality to the category of 'hegemony'. We now have to ask about the historical conditions of its generalization as a tool of political analysis, and the structural dimensions it involves.

Gramsci was writing at a time when it was already clear that mature capitalism was not advancing in the direction of an increasing homogenization of the social structure but, on the contrary, towards an ever

greater social and institutional complexity. The notion of 'organized capitalism' had been proposed in the years immediately preceding and succeeding the First World War, and this tendency was accentuated with the slump of the 1930s. In this new historical situation it was clear that any 'universal class' was going to be the effect of a laborious political construction, not of the automatic and necessary movements of any infrastructure.

The specificity of Gramsci's theoretical turn can be seen more clearly if we inscribe it within the system of politico-intellectual alternatives elaborated by Marxism since the beginning of the century. Let us take Sorel and Trotsky as two thinkers who were at least partially aware of the problems Gramsci was addressing. Sorel understood that the main trends of capitalist development were not leading in the direction predicted by Marxism but were generating, on the contrary, an increasing social complexity incompatible with the emergence in civil society of any 'universal class'. That is why the purity of the proletariat will had to be maintained, according to Sorel, through artificial means: the myth of the general strike had, as its main function, the protection of the *separate* identity of the working class. While this increasing social complexity led Gramsci to assert the need to expand the moment of political mediation, it led Sorel to a total repudiation of politics. As much as in Marx, true emancipation meant for Sorel a fully reconciled society, but while for Marx emancipation would be the result of the objective laws of capitalist development, for Sorel it was to be the consequence of an autonomous intervention of the will. And, as this will tended to reinforce the isolation of the proletariat identity, any hegemonic articulation was excluded as a matter of principle.

Something similar happens in the case of Trotsky. His thought starts with the realization that the relation between global emancipation and its possible agents is unstable: the Russian bourgeoisie is too weak to carry out its democratic revolution, and the democratic tasks have to be carried out under the leadership of the proletariat – this is what he called 'permanent revolution'. But while for Gramsci this hegemonic transference led to the construction of a complex collective will, for Trotsky it was simply the strategic occasion for the working class to carry out its own *class* revolution. The hegemonic task does not affect the

identity of the hegemonic agent. The whole approach does not go beyond the Leninist conception of 'class alliances'.

It is in these two precise points – where Gramsci parts company with Sorel and Trotsky – that we find the possibility of expanding and radicalizing a theory of hegemony. Against Sorel, emancipatory struggle requires articulation and political mediation; against Trotsky, the transference of the democratic tasks from one class to another changes not only the nature of the tasks but also the identity of the agents (who cease to be merely 'class' agents). A political dimension becomes constitutive of *all* social identity, and this leads to a further blurring of the line of demarcation state/civil society. It is precisely this further blurring that we find in contemporary society in a more accentuated way than in Gramsci's time. The globalization of the economy, the reduction of the functions and powers of nation-states, the proliferation of international quasi-state organizations – everything points in the direction of complex processes of decision-making which could be approached in terms of hegemonic logics, but certainly not on the basis of any simple distinction public/private. The only thing to add is that Gramsci was still thinking within a world in which both subjects and institutions were relatively stable – which means that most of his categories have to be redefined and radicalized if they are to be adapted to the present circumstances.

This further refinement and radicalization require us to engage in a very precise task: to move from a purely sociologicistic and descriptive account of the *concrete* agents involved in hegemonic operations to a *formal* analysis of the logics involved in the latter.⁸ We gain very little, once identities are conceived as complexly articulated collective wills, by referring to them through simple designations such as classes, ethnic groups, and so on, which are at best names for transient points of stabilization. The really important task is to understand the logics of their constitution and dissolution, as well as the formal determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate. It is to the question of these formal determinations that I will devote the rest of this section.

Let us now return to our text by Marx on *political* emancipation, and consider the logical structure of its different moments. We have, in the

first place, the identification of the aims of a particular group with the emancipatory aims of the whole community. How is this identification possible? Are we dealing with a process of *alienation* of the community, which abandons its true aims to embrace those of one of its component parts? Or with an act of demagogic manipulation by the latter, which succeeds in rallying the vast majority of society under its own banners? Not at all. The reason for that identification is that this particular sector is the one which is able to bring about the downfall of an estate which is perceived as a 'general crime'. Now, if the 'crime' is a *general* one and, however, only a *particular* sector or constellation of sectors – rather than the 'people' as a whole – is able to overthrow it, this can only mean that the distribution of power within the 'popular' pole is essentially uneven. While in our first quotation from Marx universality of the content and formal universality exactly overlapped in the body of the proletariat, we have in the so-called political emancipation a split between the particularism of the contents and the formal universalization deriving from their irradiation over the whole of society. This split is, as we have seen, the effect of the universality of the crime combined with the particularity of the power capable of abolishing it. Thus we see a first dimension of the hegemonic relation: unevenness of power is constitutive of it. We can easily see the difference with a theory like Hobbes's. For Hobbes, in the state of nature power is evenly distributed among individuals, and, as each tends towards conflicting aims, society becomes impossible. So the covenant which surrenders total power to the Leviathan is an essentially non-political act in that it totally excludes the interaction between antagonistic wills. A power which is total is no power at all. If, on the contrary, we have an originally uneven distribution of power, the possibility of ensuring social order can result from that very unevenness and not from any surrender of total power into the hands of the sovereign. In that case, however, the claim of a sector to rule will depend on its ability to present its own particular aims as the ones which are compatible with the actual functioning of the community – which is, precisely, what is intrinsic to the hegemonic operation.

This, however, is not enough. For if the generalized acceptance of the hegemony of the force carrying out political emancipation depended only on its ability to overthrow a repressive regime, the support it would

get would be strictly limited to such an act of overthrowing, and there would be no 'coincidence' between the 'revolution of the nation' and the 'emancipation' of a particular class of civil society. So, what can bring about this coincidence? I think that the answer is to be found in Marx's assertion that 'a particular estate must be looked upon as the *notorious crime* of the whole of society, so that liberation from that sphere appears as general self-liberation'. For this to be possible, several displacements become necessary, all of which point towards an increasing complexity in the relation between universality and particularity. In the first place, a system of domination is always, ontically speaking, a particular one, but if it is to be seen as 'the *notorious crime* of the whole of society', its own particularity has in turn to be seen as a symbol of something different and incommensurable with it: the obstacle which prevents society from coinciding with itself, from reaching its fullness. There is no concept, of course, which would correspond to that fullness and, as a result, no concept corresponding to a *universal* object blocking it, but an impossible object, to which no concept corresponds, can still have a name: it borrows it from the particularity of the oppressive regime – which thus becomes partially universalized. In the second place, if there is a *general* crime, there should be a *general* victim. Society, however, is a plurality of particularistic groups and demands. So if there is going to be the subject of a certain global emancipation, the subject antagonized by the general crime, it can be *politically constructed* only through the *equivalence* of a plurality of demands. As a result, these particularities are also split: through their equivalence they do not simply remain themselves, but also constitute an area of universalizing effects – not exactly Rousseau's general will, but a pragmatic and contingent version of it. Finally, what about that impossible object, the fullness of society, against which the 'notorious crime' sins, and which emancipation tries to reach? It obviously lacks any form of direct expression, and can accede to the level of representation, as in the two previous cases, only by a passage through the particular. This particular is given, in the present case, by the aims of that sector whose ability to overthrow the oppressive regime opens the way to political emancipation – to which we have to add only that, in this process, the particularity of the aims does not remain as mere particularity: it is contaminated by the chain of equivalences it comes to

represent. We can, in this way, point to a second dimension of the hegemonic relation: there is hegemony only if the dichotomy universality/particularity is superseded; universality exists only incarnated in – and subverting – some particularity but, conversely, no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalizing effects.

This second dimension leads us, however, to a new problem. What is inherent in the hegemonic relation, if the universal and the particular reject each other but nevertheless require each other, is the representation of an impossibility. Fullness of society and its correlate, total 'crime', are necessary objects if the 'coincidence' between particular and general aims is going to take place at all. If the passage through the particular is required, however, it is because universality cannot be represented in a direct way – there is no concept corresponding to the object. This means that the object, in spite of its necessity, is also impossible. If its necessity requires access to the level of representation, its impossibility means that it is always going to be a distorted representation – that the means of representation are going to be *constitutively* inadequate.⁹ We already know what these means of representation are: particularities which, without ceasing to be particularities, assume a function of universal representation. This is what is at the root of hegemonic relations.

What is the ontological possibility of relations by which particular identities take up the representation of something different from themselves? We said earlier that something to which no *concept* corresponds (a *that* without a *what*) can still have a *name* – assuming that a function of universal representation consists, in this sense, of widening the gap between the order of naming and that of what can be conceptually grasped. We are, in some way, in a comparable situation to the one described by Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena* apropos of Husserl: 'meaning' and 'knowledge' do not overlap. We can say that, as a result of this constitutive gap: (1) the more extended the chain of equivalences that a particular sector comes to represent and the more its aims become a name for global emancipation, the looser will be the links between that name and its original particular meaning, and the more it will approach the status of an empty signifier;¹⁰ (2) as this total coincidence of the universal with the particular is, however, ultimately impossible – given the constitutive inadequacy of the means of representation – a remainder of

particularity cannot be eliminated. The process of naming itself, as it is not constrained by any a priori conceptual limits, is the one that will retroactively determine – depending on contingent hegemonic articulations – what is actually named. This means that the transition from Marx's *political* emancipation to *total* emancipation can never arrive. This shows us a third dimension of the hegemonic relation: it requires the production of tendentially empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former.

Finally, a corollary of our previous conclusions is that 'representation' is constitutive of the hegemonic relation. The elimination of all representation is the illusion accompanying the notion of a total emancipation. But, in so far as the universality of the community is achievable only through the mediation of a particularity, the relation of representation becomes constitutive. We have, as inherent to the representative link, the same dialectic between name and concept that we have just mentioned. If the representation was total – if the representative moment was entirely transparent to what it represents – the 'concept' would have an unchallenged primacy over the 'name' (in Saussurean terms: the signified would entirely subordinate to itself the order of the signifier). But in that case there would be no hegemony, for its very requisite, which is the production of tendentially empty signifiers, would not obtain. In order to have hegemony we need the sectorial aims of a group to operate as the name for a universality transcending them – this is the synecdoche constitutive of the hegemonic link. But if the name (the signifier) is so attached to the concept (signified) that no displacement in the relation between the two is possible, we cannot have any hegemonic rearticulation. The idea of a totally emancipated and transparent society, from which all tropological movement between its constitutive parts would have been eliminated, involves the end of all hegemonic relation (and also, as we will see later, of all democratic politics). Here we have a fourth dimension of 'hegemony': the terrain in which it expands is that of the generalization of the relations of representation as condition of the constitution of a social order. This explains why the hegemonic form of politics tends to become general in our contemporary, globalized world: as the decentring of the structures of power tends to increase, any centrality requires that its agents are constitutively

overdetermined – that is, that they always represent *something more* than their mere particularistic identity.

To conclude, I would like to make two remarks. First: in so far as this complex dialectic between particularity and universality, between ontic content and ontological dimension, structures social reality itself, it also structures the identity of the social agents. As I will try to argue later, it is the very lack within the structure that is at the origin of the subject. This means that we do not simply have subject positions within the structure, but also the subject as an attempt to fill these structural gaps. That is why we do not have just identities but, rather, identification. If identification is required, however, there is going to be a basic ambiguity at the heart of all identity. This is the way I would approach the question of disidentification raised by Žižek.

As for the question concerning historicism, my perspective coincides entirely with Žižek's. I think that radical historicism is a self-defeating enterprise. It does not recognize the ways in which the universal enters into the constitution of all particular identities. From a theoretical point of view, the very notion of particularity presupposes that of totality (even total *separation* cannot escape the fact that separation is still a type of relation between entities – the monads require a 'pre-established harmony' as a condition of their non-interaction). And, politically speaking, the right of particular groups of agents – ethnic, national or sexual minorities, for instance – can be formulated only as universal rights. The appeal to the universal is unavoidable once, on the one hand, no agent can claim to speak *directly* for the 'totality' while, on the other, reference to the latter remains an essential component of the hegemonico-discursive operation. The universal is an empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness, produces a series of crucial effects in the structuration/destructuration of social relations. It is in this sense that it is both an impossible and a necessary object. In a recent work, Žižek has described quite accurately my own approach to the question of the universal. After referring to a first conception of universality – the Cartesian *cogito*, for which the universal has a positive and neutral content, indifferent to particularities – and a second – the Marxist one, for which the universal is the distorted expression of a particular identity – he adds:

There is, however, a third version, elaborated in detail by Ernesto Laclau: the Universal is empty, yet precisely as such always-already filled in, that is, hegemonized by some contingent, particular content that acts as its stand-in – in short, each Universal is the battleground on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony . . . The distinction between this third version and the first is that the third version allows for no content of the Universal which would be effectively neutral and, as such, common to all its species . . . all positive content of the Universal is the contingent result of hegemonic struggle – in itself, the Universal is absolutely empty.¹¹

Having reached this point, however, we have to deal in more detail with this peculiar logic by which an object, through its very impossibility, still produces a variety of effects shown in the universalization of the relations of representation – which, as we have seen, is the condition of possibility of the hegemonic link. What is the ontological structure of such a link? We will start tackling this problem through the consideration of two authors to whom our questionnaire makes repeated reference: Hegel and Lacan.

II Hegel

Let us start by considering an objection Žižek makes to my reading of Hegel, for it shows clearly what are, in my view, the limitations of Hegelian dialectic as a candidate for rendering the hegemonic relation intelligible. Žižek asserts:

The only thing to add to Laclau's formulation is that his anti-Hegelian twist is, perhaps, all too sudden:

We are not dealing here with 'determinate negation' in the Hegelian sense: while the latter comes out of the apparent positivity of the concrete and 'circulates' through contents that are always determinate, our notion of negativity depends on the failure in the constitution of all determination. (*Emancipation(s)*, p. 14)

What, however, if the infamous 'Hegelian determinate negation' aims precisely at the fact that every particular formation involves a gap between the Universal and the Particular – or, in Hegelese, that a particular formation never coincides with its (universal) notion – and that it is this very gap that brings about its dialectical dissolution?¹²

Žižek gives the example of the state: it is not that positive actual states imperfectly approach their notion, but that the very notion of the state *qua* rational totality cannot be actualized. 'Hegel's point here is not that the State which would fully fit its notion is impossible – it is possible; the catch is, rather, that *it is no longer a state, but a religious community.*'¹³

I would like to make two points to Žižek. The first is that he is entirely right in asserting that, for Hegel, no particular formation ever coincides with its own notion, simply because the notion itself is internally split, and brings about its own dialectical dissolution. I never put this into doubt. But, secondly, the dialectical pattern of this dissolution requires it to be a pattern made of necessary transitions: it is – to take the example – a religious community *and nothing else* that results from the non-coincidence of the state with its notion. The important question is this: accepting entirely that the Absolute Spirit has no positive content of its own, and is just the succession of all dialectical transitions, of its impossibility of establishing a final overlapping between the universal and the particular – are these transitions contingent or necessary? If the latter, the characterization of the whole Hegelian *project* (as opposed to what he actually did) as panlogistic can hardly be avoided.

From this point of view, the evidence is overwhelming. Let me just stress a few points:

1. As in most post-Kantian Idealist systems, Hegel aspires to a presuppositionless philosophy. This means that the irrational – and ultimately contradictory – moment of the thing in itself has to be eliminated. Furthermore, if Reason is going to be its own grounding, the Hegelian list of categories cannot be a catalogue, as in Aristotle or Kant – the categories have to deduce themselves from each other in an orderly fashion. This means that all determinations are going to be *logical* determinations. Even if something is

irrational, it has to be retrieved as such by the system of Reason.

2. If the system is going to be grounded on no presupposition, the method and the content to which it is applied cannot be external to each other.

For this reason, Hegel's account of the method can come only at the end of the *Logic*, not at the beginning. The Absolute Idea, whose 'form' is said to be the method, is visible only at the culmination: 'the Idea is thought itself . . . as the self-determining totality of its own determinations and laws, which it gives to itself rather than having them already and finding them within itself' (E: 19A).¹⁴

3. The Absolute Idea as the system of all determinations is a closed totality: beyond it, no further advance is possible. The dialectical movement from one category to the next excludes all contingency (although Hegel was far from being consistent in this respect, as is shown in his famous remarks on Krug's pen). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Hegel's panlogicism is the highest point of modern rationalism. This shows us why the hegemonic relation cannot be assimilated to a dialectical transition: for although one of the prerequisites of conceptually grasping the hegemonic link – the incommensurability between Particular and Universal – is met by a dialectical logic, the other – the contingent character of the link between the two – does not obtain.

This, however, is not the whole story. I cannot simply dismiss Žižek's reading of Hegel, for two reasons. First, that I agree with most of what he does *out of* Hegel's texts. Second, that I do not think that he is projecting into those texts a series of considerations extraneous to the texts themselves. They clearly apply to them. So how do I deal with this apparent contradiction on my part? I am certainly not prepared to concede anything concerning the panlogistic nature of Hegel's intellectual *project*. However, we should not take the word for the deed. As the highest point of modern rationalism, Hegel claimed, for Reason, a role the latter had never claimed for itself in the past: to rethink, in terms of its own logical transitions, the totality of the ontological distinctions that the philosophical tradition had discerned within the real. This gives

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way to a double movement: if Reason, on the one hand, has hegemonized the whole realm of differences, the latter, on the other, could not avoid contaminating the former. So many dialectical transitions are *spurious* logical transitions. Since the nineteenth century, criticism of Hegel has taken the form of asserting that many of his deductions derive their apparent acceptability from illegitimate empirical assumptions smuggled into the argument (Trendelenburg, for instance). This was the main line of Schelling's criticism of Hegel: he attempted to show that, apart from many inconsistent deductions in his *Logic*, the whole project of a presuppositionless philosophy was flawed, for it could not even start without accepting the laws of logic and a rationalist approach to concepts (as innate ideas), a dogmatic metaphysical realism which starts from 'Being' as a lifeless objectivity, and language as a pre-constituted medium.¹⁵ Against this vision, Schelling asserts that Philosophy cannot be presuppositionless, and that human existence is a starting point more primary than the concept. Feuerbach, Kierkegaard and Engels – all of whom attended Schelling's courses – accepted his basic criticism, and developed their own particular approaches, giving priority to 'existence' over 'reason'. In some sense, it has to be accepted that Hegel represents the closure of the metaphysical tradition which started with Plato. Schelling's 'positive philosophy' is a new beginning, in which the whole of contemporary thought was to engulf itself.

Now, I want to stress that, in my departure from dialectics, I do not take the Schellingian road. The 'discourse' approach that I take in relation to the 'social construction of reality' prevents me from accepting any sharp distinction between existence and consciousness. This does not mean, however, that I believe that a system of conceptually necessary transitions is the only alternative to an opaque empiricity. The main difficulty that stands in the way of a purely speculative dialectics is, in my view, the role of ordinary language in the dialectical transitions. Let us quote in full the passage, in Hegel's *Logic*, where he tries to tackle this problem:

Philosophy has the right to select from the language of common life which is made for the world of pictorial thinking, such expressions as *seem to approximate* to the determinations of the Notion. There cannot be any

question of *demonstrating* for a word selected from the language of common life that in common life, too, one associates with it the same Notion for which philosophy employs it; for common life has no Notions, but only pictorial thoughts and general ideas, and to recognize the Notion in what is else a general idea is philosophy itself. It must suffice therefore if pictorial thinking, in the use of its expressions that are employed for philosophical determinations, has before it some vague idea of their distinctive meaning; just as it may be the case that in these expressions one recognizes nuances of pictorial thought that are more closely related to the corresponding Notions.¹⁶

This passage is crucial, for the problem at stake here is the precise role of the 'pictorial thinking' in the dialectical transitions. If the images associated with pictorial thought are indifferent names given to entities constituted entirely outside them, the names would be entirely arbitrary and logically irrelevant; if, on the contrary, the transition depends on a verisimilitude deriving from the intuitive meaning of the name *before* its inscription in that transition, *in that case the transition cannot be a logical one*. Now, dialectical logic presupposes that you cannot dissociate form and content, that the content actually *named* is an integral part of the whole logical movement of the concept. But if the name gets its meaning from a language *pre-existing* that logical movement, the movement itself becomes something quite different from a logical deduction: it becomes a *tropological* movement by which a name fills, as a metaphor, a gap opened in a chain of reasoning. So the pictorial image is not, as Hegel claims, a vague or imprecise version of a determination made fully explicit by Philosophy, but, on the contrary, vagueness and imprecision *as such* are fully constitutive of the philosophical argument. We have to conclude that dialectical logic is the terrain of a generalized rhetoric. The richness of Hegel's texts lies not so much in their attempt strictly to derive concepts out of a presuppositionless starting point – a rule they violate on every page – but in the implicit rhetoric which governs their transitions. This is what, I think, lends its credentials to many of Žižek's *démarches*. We should not forget, however, that panlogicism is still there, operating as a strait-jacket limiting the effects of the rhetorical displacements.

This also explains my reaction to Butler's Question 9. For the reasons

that I have just presented, no sharp distinction can be maintained, in a Hegelian perspective, between form and content – they mediate each other. But also, in a perspective like mine, which approaches hegemonic transitions in terms of rhetorical displacements, it is impossible conceptually to grasp form independently from content (although not for logical reasons). As for the question of the quasi-transcendentals, it poses problems of its own to which I will return later. The only remark I would like to make to Butler is that the opposition form/content is not the same as the opposition between quasi-transcendentals and examples. For an example *is not* a content. A content is an integral part of a concept, while something, in order to be an example, should add nothing to what it is an example of, and should be substitutable by an indefinite number of other examples. If I say: 'Jews are responsible for the national decline', 'Communists are defenders of the interests of the masses', or 'Women are exploited in a patriarchal society', it is evident that all three can be examples of the agreement between subject and verb in a sentence, without the grammatical rule being altered by the semantical content of the examples. It is always, of course, possible that, through a set of discursive devices, something that in a particular discourse *appears* as an example determines the conceptual content in some way, but to establish this requires the study of particular discursive instances.

To conclude: Hegelian dialectics gives us only partially adequate ontological tools to determine the logic of the hegemonic link. The contingent dimension of politics cannot be thought within a Hegelian mould. When we move from Hegel to Lacan, however, we find an entirely different scenario.

III Lacan

Let me say, to start with, that I would not establish the opposition between 'orthodox Lacanian doxa' and 'heterodox appropriation of Lacan for the thinking of hegemony' in the sharp terms in which Butler does. Any appropriation of a theoretical approach will be more or less orthodox, depending on the degree of identification that one finds with the 'appropriated' author. But if by orthodox doxa one understands

philological obsession and mechanical repetition of the same categories without 'developing' them as required by new contexts, it is clear that any intellectual intervention worth the name will be 'heterodox'.

So: let us fully engage in a heterodox game. Judith Butler is essentially concerned with the question of whether Lacan's 'barred subject' imposes or does not impose structural limitations to the strategic movements required by a hegemonic logic. The kernel of her scepticism about the potential fruitfulness of a Lacanian approach to politics is neatly stated: 'Can the ahistorical recourse to the Lacanian bar be reconciled with the strategic question that hegemony poses, or does it stand as a quasi-transcendental limitation on all possible subject-formation and, hence, as indifferent to politics?' (Question 1). Now, to some extent Žižek hints to what would be my own answer to Butler's question when he refers to the Lacanian Real as 'its [the symbolic's] totally non-substantial inherent limit, point of failure, which maintains the very gap between reality and its symbolization and thus sets in motion the contingent process of historicization-symbolization?' (Question 1).

Let us consider the matter carefully. What is involved in constructing a quasi-transcendental category as (1) 'a limitation on all possible subject-formation', and (2) a limitation which is 'indifferent to politics'? In my view, it involves the introduction of two contradictory requirements because 'limitation' seems to imply that some political identities are excluded as a result of the quasi-transcendental limit. If, however, what results from the latter is an indifference to politics, one should apparently conclude that the limit is no limit at all – and, as a corollary, that the only way of superseding such indifference would be some kind of *positive* transcendental grounding, which is precisely what the first requirement was attempting to undermine. In order to go beyond this blind alley, one should perhaps ask oneself a different question: *Is it a bar whose function consists in showing the ultimate impossibility of full representation, a limit on what can be represented, or, rather, does it expand the relation of representation (as a failed representation, of course) beyond all limitation? If this were the case, it would open the way to a more radical historicism than anything that could be grounded in either a system of positive transcendental categories or in an appeal to a 'concrete' which lives in the ignorance of its own conditions of possibility.* Hegemony requires, as we

have seen, a generalization of the relations of representation, but in such a way that the process of representation itself creates retroactively the entity to be represented. The non-transparency of the representative to the represented, the irreducible autonomy of the signifier *vis-à-vis* the signified, is the condition of a hegemony which structures the social from its very ground and is not the epiphenomenal expression of a transcendental signified which would submit the signifier to its own predetermined movements. This 'liberation' of the signifier *vis-à-vis* the signified – the very precondition of hegemony – is what the Lacanian bar attempts to express. The other side of the coin, the contingent imposition of limits or partial fixations – without which we would be living in a psychotic universe – is what the notion of 'point de capiton' brings about.¹⁷

The representation of the unrepresentable constitutes the terms of the paradox within which hegemony is constructed – or, in the terms we used earlier, we are dealing with an object which is at the same time impossible and necessary. This is not far from the terrain of the Lacanian notion of a 'real' which resists symbolization. At this point, however, Butler raises an objection: 'to claim that the real resists symbolization is still to symbolize the real as a kind of resistance. The former claim (the real resists symbolization) can only be true if the latter claim ('the real resists symbolization' is a symbolization) is true, but if the second claim is true, the first is necessarily false.'¹⁸

Butler presents her argument in terms of Russell's paradox ('the class of all classes which are not members of themselves, is it a member of itself?', etc.), but the very way she formulates it evokes, quite easily, the standard Idealist criticism of Kant's 'thing in itself' (if categories apply only to phenomena, I cannot say that the thing is the external cause of my sensations, that it *exists*, etc.). Now, if her assertion was of this last type, she would be advocating *total* representability, pure transparency of thought to itself, and in that case unrepresentability could be conceived only as radical unawareness – but to admit even the *possibility* of existence of something of which we are *essentially* unaware (that is, not even potentially mediated by thought) would break the link between representability and actuality. As Hegel said in the *Encyclopaedia*:

Only when we discern that the content – the particular, is not self-subsistent, but derivative from something else, are its finitude and untruth shown in their proper light. . . . The only content which can be held to be the truth is one not mediated with something else, not limited by other things: or, otherwise expressed, it is one mediated by itself, where mediation and immediate reference-to-self coincide. . . . Abstract thought (the scientific form used by 'reflective' metaphysic) and abstract intuition (the form used by immediate knowledge) are one and the same.¹⁹

But perhaps Butler is not advocating total representability – although it is difficult to see how the sublation of any 'non-representable' within the field of representation could lead to any different reading. Perhaps what she intends to point to is not a contradiction *sensu stricto* but a paradox – in that case she would be referring to an *aporia* of thought, and we would be back to the terms of Russell's dilemma. The question there would be: what can we do when we are confronted with a discursive space organized around logically unanswerable aporias? We can do several things, but there is one especially that I want to stress, given its centrality for what I have to say later on: we can initiate a topological (rhetorical) movement between the categories establishing the terms of the *aporia*. Let us consider, as an example, the analysis made by Paul de Man of the role of the 'zero' in 'Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion'.²⁰ Pascal was confronted with the objection to his principle of infinite smallness: that – if the postulate of a homogeneity between space and number was to be maintained – it would be possible to conceive of an extension composed of parts that are not extended, given that we have numbers made of units which are devoid of number (the one). Pascal's answer consists of two movements: on the one hand he tried to dissociate the order of number from the order of space – by showing that if the *one* is, strictly speaking, not a number, for it is exempt from plurality, it still belongs to the order of number because, through reiterated multiplication, all other numbers are obtained from, made of units which include, the *one*. On the other hand, however, if the homology between number, time and motion is to be maintained, the equivalent of 'instant' or 'stasis' has to be found in the order of number. Pascal finds it in the

'zero'. Now, as to the difference with the *one*, the zero is radically heterogeneous with the order of number and, moreover, crucial if there is going to be an order of number at all. In De Man's words: "There can be no *one* without zero, but the zero always appears in the guise of a *one*, of a (some)thing. The name is the trope of the zero. The zero is *always* called a one, when the zero is actually nameless, "*innomable*".²¹ So we have a situation in which: (1) a systemic totality cannot be constituted without appealing to something radically heterogeneous *vis-à-vis* what is representable within it; (2) this something has, anyway, to be somehow represented if there is to be a system at all; (3) as this will, however, be the representation of something which is *not* representable within the system – even more: the representation of the radical impossibility of representing the latter – that representation can take place only through tropological substitution.

This is the point Butler's argument is really missing: if the representation of the Real was a representation of something entirely *outside* the symbolic, this representation of the unrepresentable as *unrepresentable* would amount, indeed, to full inclusion – this was, for instance, the way in which Hegel was able to include the 'contingent' within his logical system. But if what is represented is an *internal* limit of the process of representation as such, the relationship between internality and externality is subverted: the Real becomes a name for the very failure of the Symbolic in achieving its own fullness. The Real would be, in that sense, a retroactive effect of the failure of the Symbolic. Its name would be both the name of an empty place and the attempt to fill it through that very naming of what, in De Man's words, is nameless, *innomable*. This means that the presence of that name within the system has the status of a suturing *tropos*. Bruce Fink has shown that there are, in Lacan, 'two different orders of the real: (1) a real before the letter, that is, a presymbolic real, which, in the final analysis, is but our own hypothesis (R_1), and (2) a real after the letter which is characterized by impassés and impossibilities due to the relations among elements of the symbolic order itself (R_2), that is, which is generated by the symbolic'.²²

Thus we can start seeing how the hegemonic operation involves both the presence of a Real which subverts signification and the representation of Real through tropological substitution. The bar in the relation $\frac{S}{S}$ is the

very precondition of a primacy of the signifier without which hegemonic displacements would be inconceivable. There are, however, two concomitant aspects that I want to stress because they have capital importance in understanding the workings of the hegemonic logic. The first concerns the break of the isomorphism postulated by Saussure between the order of the signifier and the order of the signified. It was very quickly realized that such an isomorphism led to a contradiction with the principle that language is form, and not substance, which was the cornerstone of Saussurean linguistics. For if there was total isomorphism between the order of the signifier and the order of the signified, it was impossible to distinguish one from the other in purely formal terms, so that the only alternatives were either to maintain a strict formalism which would necessarily lead to the collapse of the distinction between signifier and signified (and the dissolution of the category of sign) or to smuggle – inconsistently – the substances (phonic and conceptual) into linguistic analysis. It was at this point that the decisive advance was made by Hjelmslev and the Copenhagen School, who broke with the principle of isomorphism and constructed the difference between the two orders – signifier and signified – in purely formal terms. Now, this change is decisive from a psychoanalytic perspective, for it allows the exploration of the unconscious to detach itself from the search for an ultimate meaning. In Lacan's words, the psychoanalytic process is concerned not with *meaning* but with *truth*. To mention just one example that I take from Fink: Freud's 'Rat Man', through 'verbal bridges', constructed a 'rat complex', partly through meaningful associations – for example, rat = penis, for rats spread diseases such as syphilis, and so on – but partly also through purely verbal associations which have nothing to do with meaning – '*Raten* means instalments, and leads to the equation of rats and florins; *Spielratte* means gambler, and the Rat Man's father, having incurred a debt gambling, becomes drawn into the rat complex'.²³ The importance of this dissociation of truth from meaning for hegemonic analysis is that it enables us to break with the dependence on the signified to which a rationalist conception of politics would have otherwise confined us. What is crucial is not to conceive the hegemonic process as one in which empty places in the structure would be simply filled by preconstituted hegemonic forces.²⁴ There is a process

of contamination of the empty signifiers by the particularities which carry out the hegemonic sutures, but this is a process of *mutual* contamination; it does operate in both directions. For that reason it leads to an autonomization of the signifier which is decisive to the understanding of the political efficacy of certain symbols. To give just one example: without this autonomization it would be impossible to understand the eruptions of xenophobia in former Yugoslavia over the last ten years.

This leads me, however, to stress a second point which goes, to some extent, in the opposite direction from the first. There have been certain forms of argumentation, in Lacanian circles, which tend to emphasize what has been called the 'materiality of the signifier'. Now, if by 'materiality' one refers to the bar which breaks the transparency of the process of signification (the isomorphism we referred to above), this notion would be unobjectionable. But what is important is not to confuse 'materiality' conceived in this sense with the phonic substance as such, because in that case we would be reintroducing substance into the analysis, and we would fall back into the inconsistent Saussurean position discussed above.²⁵ As has recently been argued, the primacy of the signifier should be asserted, but with the proviso that signifiers, signifieds and signs should all be conceived of as signifiers.²⁶ To go back to the example of the 'rat complex': the fact that the association of 'rat' with 'penis' involves a passage through the signified, while the association with 'instalment' takes place through a merely verbal bridge, constitutes a perfectly secondary distinction: in both cases there is a displacement of signification determined by a system of structural positions in which each element (conceptual or phonic) functions as a signifier – that is, it acquires its value only through its reference to the whole system of signifiers within which it is inscribed. This point is important for political analysis, because some rationalistic attempts to 'domesticate' the theory of hegemony assert that it is a remainder *at the level of the signified* which provides a necessary anchoring point to what would otherwise be a limitless flux, unable to signify anything. The problem, however, does not actually pose itself in those terms. There is, certainly, an anchoring role played by certain privileged discursive elements – this is what the notion of *point de capiton* or 'Master-Signifier' involves – but this anchoring function does not consist in an ultimate

remainder of conceptual substance which would persist through all processes of discursive variation. To give an example: the fact that in some political contexts – South Africa, for example – 'black' can operate as a Master-Signifier organizing a whole set of discursive positions does not mean that 'black' has an ultimate signified independent of all discursive articulation. It functions, rather, as a pure signifier, in the sense that its signifying function would depend on its position within a signifying chain – a position which will be determined partly through 'meaningful' associations (as in the case of 'rat' and 'penis') and partly through verbal bridges, in Freud's sense. The relatively stable set of all these positions is what constitutes a 'hegemonic formation'. So we will understand by 'materiality of the signifier' not the phonic substance as such but the inability of *any* linguistic element – whether phonic or conceptual – to refer *directly* to a signified. This means the priority of value over signification, and what Lacan called the permanent sliding of the signified under the signifier.

The ultimate point which makes an exchange between Lacanian theory and the hegemonic approach to politics possible and fruitful is that in both cases, any kind of unfixity, tropic displacement, and so on, is organized around an original lack which, while it imposes an extra duty on all processes of representation – they have to represent not just a determinate ontic content but equally the principle of representability as such – also, as this dual task cannot but ultimately fail in achieving the suture it attempts, opens the way to a series of indefinite substitutions which are the very ground of a radical historicism. The examples chosen by Žižek in his questions are very relevant to illustrate the point. If repetition is made possible/impossible by a primordial lack, no ontic content can ultimately monopolize the ontological function of representing representability as such (in the same way that, as I have tried to show,²⁷ the function of *ordering*, in Hobbes, cannot be the special privilege of any *concrete social order* – it is not an attribute of a *good* society, as in Plato, but an ontological dimension whose connection with particular ontic arrangements is, of its own nature, contingent). So there is no possibility of 'reinscription of the process of repetition in the metaphysical logic of identity'. For the same reason the 'barred subject', which prevents the process of interpellation from chaining the 'individual' entirely to a

subject position, introduces an area of indeterminacy which makes possible, among other things, Butler's parodic performances. The same can be said of the status of sexual difference, which – as Žižek has convincingly shown – is linked not to particular sexual roles but to a real/impossible kernel which can enter the field of representation only through topological displacements/incarnations.²⁸ (In terms of the theory of hegemony, this presents a strict homology with the notion of 'antagonism' as a real kernel preventing the closure of the symbolic order. As we have repeatedly argued, antagonisms are not objective relations but the point where the limit of all objectivity is shown. Something at least comparable is involved in Lacan's assertion that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship.) Finally, I want to add that I agree entirely with Žižek that the notion of 'phallus' in Lacan does not have any necessary phallogocentric implications. 'Phallus', as the signifier of desire, has largely been replaced in Lacan's later teaching by the '*objet petit a*', and this makes possible, even more clearly, the study of its whole range of effects on the structuration of the field of representation.

I would like to conclude this section by referring to Butler's question about the relation between politics and psychoanalysis. Let me just say that a theoretical intervention, when it really makes a difference, is never restricted to the field of its initial formulation. It always produces some kind of restructuration of the ontological horizon within which knowledge had moved so far. Mentioning some examples of which Althusser was fond, we can say that behind Platonic philosophy is Greek mathematics; behind seventeenth-century rationalisms, Galileo's mathematization of nature, and behind Kantianism, Newton's physics. We can similarly say that we are still living in the century of Freud, and I would go as far as to say that most of what is fruitful and innovative in contemporary philosophy is, to a large extent, an attempt to come to terms with Freud's discovery of the unconscious. This transformation, however, should not be conceived so much as the incorporation, for philosophical consideration, of a new *regional field* but, rather, as the opening of a new transcendental horizon within which the whole field of objectivity has to be thought again – as a widening, on the ontological level, of the kind of relations between objects which it is possible to think about. What, for instance, involves asserting that an object is impossible

and, at the same time, necessary? What effects would such an object have in the restructuration of the whole field of representation? Seen from this perspective, Lacanian theory should be considered a radicalization and development of what was *in nuce* contained in the Freudian discovery. But, considered from this angle, psychoanalysis is not alone: it is, rather, the epicentre of a wider transformation embracing contemporary thought as a whole. It is to this aspect of our discussion that I now want to move.

IV Objectivity and rhetoric *Difference*

In his work, Žižek has tried, forcefully and repeatedly, to present the image of a Lacan entirely outside the field of a poststructuralism that he identifies mainly with deconstruction. The frontier between the two traditions turns, for him, around the Lacanian maintenance of the *cogito*. How valid is this thesis? In his latest book²⁹ – a work that I deeply admire – Žižek starts by asserting that a 'spectre is haunting Western academia', which is none other than 'the spectre of the Cartesian subject'.³⁰ We are, however, a bit perplexed when, after this spectacular beginning of what announces itself as a Cartesian manifesto, we read on the following page that '[t]he point, of course, is not to return to the *cogito* in the guise in which this notion has dominated modern thought (the self-transparent thinking subject), but to bring to light its forgotten obverse, the excessive, unacknowledged kernel of the *cogito*, which is far from the pacifying image of the transparent Self'.³¹ Now, one has to recognize that this is a *most* peculiar way of being Cartesian. It is like calling oneself a fully fledged Platonist while rejecting the theory of forms; or proclaiming *ubi et orbi* that one is a Kantian – with just the small qualification that one denies that categories are transcendental conditions of understanding. It is evident that if Descartes had come to terms with the obverse side to which Žižek refers, he would have considered that his intellectual project had utterly failed. And it is also clear to me that one cannot relate Lacan to philosophers such as Hegel or Descartes, in the way Žižek wants, without emptying them of what constitutes the kernel of their theoretical projects.

So I want to offer a different outline concerning the saga of twentieth-century intellectual thought. The main aspects would be the following. The century started with three illusions of immediacy, of the possibility of an immediate access to the 'things themselves'. These illusions were the referent, the phenomenon, and the sign, and they were the starting point of the three traditions of Analytic Philosophy, Phenomenology and Structuralism. Since then, the history of these three traditions has been remarkably similar: at some stage, in all three, the illusion of immediacy disintegrates and gives way to one or other form of thought in which discursive mediation becomes primary and constitutive. This is what happens to Analytic Philosophy after Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, to phenomenology after Heidegger's existential analytic, and to Structuralism after the poststructuralist critique of the sign. (And, I would argue, to Marxism after Gramsci.) Within this historical framework, it is clear to me that one of the most important moments in the critique of the transparency of the linguistic sign is to be found in Lacan's *linguistics*, in his notion of the primacy of the signifier to which we referred earlier. So Lacan is not only, for me, a poststructuralist, but also one of the two crucial moments in the emergence of a poststructuralist theoretical terrain. The other is deconstruction, of course, which I see as extending the field of the undecidable quasi-infrastructures³² and, as a result, expanding the field of what are for Lacan the 'kinks in the symbolic order'³³ – in a more rigorous fashion, in some respects, than anything to be found in Lacanianism.

The way which I am proposing of establishing the dominant break governing the emergence of a thought that we can properly call 'contemporary' is clearly very different from that suggested by Žižek and it explains our partially divergent intellectual allegiances. This does not mean, however, that I reject *in toto* the criterion Žižek uses in drawing his intellectual frontiers. The criterion is valid, but I would deny that one can establish, on this basis, a *dominant* frontier in the way Žižek does. Žižek's frontier is established by asserting the need – in Lacanian theory – for an object which is simultaneously *impossible* and *necessary*. The deduction of its possibility from its necessity – the non-acknowledgement of its obverse, obscene side, to use Žižek's words – would be the inner limitation of modernity's logic of transparency;

while the opposite move, the denial of its necessity out of its impossibility, would be the stigma of postmodernity and poststructuralism (a rather forced assimilation, for it can hardly be claimed of, for instance, Derrida). Now, with the need to assert both sides – necessity and impossibility – I could hardly be in disagreement, for it is the cornerstone of my own approach to hegemonic logics – the latter not involving a flat rejection of categories of classical political theory such as 'sovereignty', 'representation', 'interest', and so on, but conceiving of them, instead, as objects *presupposed* by hegemonic articulatory logics but, however, always ultimately unachievable by them. I am a Gramscian, not a Baudrillardian.

This double condition of necessity and impossibility makes possible, among other things, three endeavours: (1) to understand the logics by which each of the two dimensions subverts the other; (2) to look at the political productivity of this mutual subversion – that is, what it makes possible to understand about the workings of our societies which goes beyond what is achievable by unilateralizing either of the two poles; 3) to trace the genealogy of this undecidable logic, the way it was *already* subverting the central texts of our political and philosophical tradition. An always open intertextuality is the ultimately undecidable terrain in which hegemonic logics operate. Žižek, however, has constructed his discourse through a different intellectual strategy: he has privileged the moment of necessity, and on the basis of that he has constructed a genealogy which locates Lacan within the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, weakening in this way his links with the whole intellectual revolution of the twentieth century, to which he really belongs. As, however, the moment of impossibility is really working in the Lacanian texts – and Žižek would be the last to deny it – he has Lacanianized the tradition of modernity, most visibly in the case of Hegel,³⁴ in a way which I see as hardly legitimate. Instead of exploring the logics of what follows from the relationship necessity/impossibility, we are confronted with an – in my view – arbitrary decision of privileging one pole of this dichotomy, while the effects of the other are severely limited from the outset by this initial privilege. This is not without some consequences for Žižek's discourse concerning politics – as we will see later. Indulging for once in one of those jokes Žižek is so fond of, I would say that I am an

intellectual bigamist trying to exploit this ambiguity by drawing on its best strategic possibilities, while Žižek is a staunch monogamist (Lacanian) in theory, who, however, makes all kinds of practical concessions – this is his obverse, obscene side – to his never publicly recognized mistress (deconstruction).

With this conclusion in mind, we can now move to some more general matters concerning social knowledge. Let us refer, first, to the question of the status of the transcendental. I would argue that the transcendental dimension is unavoidable but that transcendental, in the full sense of the term, is impossible (that is why that we can speak of quasi-transcendentals).³⁵ Why this impossibility? Because full transcendental would require, to start with, a neat demarcatory frontier from the empirical, which is not available. There is no object without conditions of possibility transcending it (this is the unavoidable transcendental horizon), but, as this horizon consists of undecidable infrastructures – iteration, supplementarity, re-mark, and so on – the empirical moment of the decision is in a complex relation internality/externality to the transcendental horizon. The category of 'difference' has undergone a considerable process of inflation in contemporary thought, but, of its many uses, there is one which I think is particularly fruitful: the one which sees it as what closes a structure while remaining utterly heterogeneous *vis-a-vis* it. This is why my answer to Butler's question concerning the unicity or plurality of 'the metaphysical logic of identity' would be that, irrespective of its many variations, a hard nucleus of meaning remains in all of them, which is the denial of the constitutive character of difference, the assertion of the possibility of a closure of the structure through its own internal resources.

We can now move to Butler's various questions concerning social logics and their relation to social practices. What, in the first place, is a social logic? We are not, of course, talking about formal logic, or even about a general dialectical logic, but about the notion which is implicit in expressions such as 'the logic of kinship', 'the logic of the market', and so forth. I would characterize it as a rarefied system of objects, as a 'grammar' or cluster of rules which make some combinations and substitutions possible and exclude others. It is what, in our work, we have called 'discourse',³⁶ which broadly coincides with what in Lacanian

theory is called the 'symbolic'. Now, if the symbolic was all there was in social life, social logics and social practices would exactly overlap. But we know there is more in social practices than the enactment of the symbolic through institutionalized performances. There is, in our analysis, the moment of antagonism, which – as we pointed out above – is not part of social objectivity but the limit of objectivity (of the symbolic) in constituting itself. Although our analysis of antagonism is not derivative from Lacanian theory, it can overlap to a large extent with Lacan's notion of the Real as an ultimate core which resists symbolization – as Žižek perceived very early, in his review of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* published in 1985, almost immediately after the publication of our book.³⁷

This subversion of the Symbolic by the Real has to take place, however, with the only raw materials available: the different structural locations shaping the symbolic space. This system of structural locations (or distinctions) has, like any linguistic structure, only two properties: their relations of combination and substitution – what in strictly linguistic terms would be the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. In terms of broader social analysis, these would correspond to the distinction that we have established between logics of difference (of differential institutionalization) and logics of equivalence (which construct antagonisms on the basis of the dichotomization of the social space via substitutions).

What happens when we move from the purely linguistic side of social practices to their performative dimension, in which Butler is especially interested? When we make this move we are not, strictly speaking, outside the linguistic, because if – as we stated above – language is form, not substance, the fact that we are dealing with words in one case and with actions in the other is something that we can keep fully within a unified grammar as long as the principle of differentiability is strictly maintained. But the performative dimension helps to make more visible an aspect of any meaningful action that a purely logicist notion of language could otherwise have kept in the dark: it is the fact that a strict enactment of a rule via an institutionalized performance is ultimately impossible. The application of a rule already involves its own subversion. Let us think of Derrida's notion of iteration: something, in order to be

repeatable, has to be different from itself. Or Wittgenstein's conception of applying a rule: I need a second rule to know how to apply the first, a third one to know how to apply the second, and so on . . . so that the only possible conclusion is that the instance of application is internal to the rule itself, and constantly displaces the latter. The importance of this notion of a continuity operating through partial discontinuities is obvious for the theory of hegemony.

But this reflection makes fully visible one of Butler's potentially most original contributions to social theory, her notion of 'parodic performance'. Butler has applied her notion only to very precise examples, and has not gone far enough in the direction of universalizing her own notion, but my optimistic reading of her texts is that this generalization, if it is fully developed, can tell us something really important concerning the structuration of social life. My argument would be as follows: if a parodic performance means the creation of a distance between the action actually being performed and the rule being enacted, and if the instance of application of the rule is internal to the rule itself, parody is constitutive of any social action. Of course the word 'parody' has a playful ring to it, but this is not essential. One can think of very tragic parodies of universal dimensions, like the one of Greeks and Romans enacted in the course of the French Revolution. In actual fact, *any* political action – a strike, a speech in an election, the assertion of its right by an oppressed group – has a parodic component, as far as a certain meaning which was fixated within the horizon of an ensemble of institutionalized practices is displaced towards new uses which subvert its literality. This movement is *tropological* inasmuch as the displacement is not governed by any necessary logic dictated by what is being displaced, and *catachrestical* inasmuch as the entities constituted through the displacement do not have any literal meaning outside the very displacements from which they emerge. This is why I prefer to speak not of *parody* but of the social organized as a rhetorical space – not only because in that way we can avoid misunderstanding based on the playful connotations of the term parody, but also because the latter unduly restricts the *tropoi* which could be constitutive of social identities.

I would argue that the space of this tropological movement subverting the symbolic order is the place of emergence of the Subject. In *New*

Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time,³⁸ I maintained that the Subject is the distance between the undecidability of the structure and the decision. If what emerges from the tropological displacement was pre-announced by what is being displaced – or if the logic of the displacement was governed by an a priori specifiable norm – the tropological dimension could not be constitutive of the social (it would simply be an adornment of the expression – as in ancient rhetoric – easily substitutable by a literal formulation). If, on the contrary, the tropological movement is essentially catachrestical, it is constitutive, and the moment of the decision does not recognize a principle of grounding external to itself. As Kierkegaard – quoted by Derrida – said: 'the moment of the decision is the moment of madness'. And as I would add (which Derrida wouldn't): this is the moment of the subject before subjectivation.

This point is crucial because it shows us the basic distinction on which, I think, all political – and, finally, social – analysis is grounded. If we conceive of the decision in the terms just presented, all decision is internally split: it is, on the one hand, *this* decision (a precise ontic content) but it is, on the other hand, *a* decision (it has the ontological function of bringing a certain closure to what was structurally open). The crucial point is that the ontic content cannot be derived from the ontological function, and so the former will be only a transient incarnation of the latter. The fullness of society is an impossible object which successive contingent contents try to impersonate through catachrestical displacements. This is exactly what hegemony means. And it is also the source of whatever freedom can exist in society: no such freedom would be possible if the 'fullness' of society had reached its 'true' ontic form – the good society, as in Plato – and the tropological movement would have been replaced by a fully fledged literality.³⁹

This is the point of introducing a short remark on Ethics. I have been confronted many times with one or other version of the following question: if hegemony involves a decision taken in a radically contingent terrain, what are the grounds for deciding one way or the other? Žižek, for instance, observes: 'Laclau's notion of hegemony describes the universal mechanism of ideological "cement" which binds any social body together, a notion that can analyse all possible sociopolitical orders,

from Fascism to liberal democracy; on the other hand, Laclau none the less advocates a determinate political option, "radical democracy".⁴⁰ I do not think this is a valid objection. It is grounded in a strict distinction between the descriptive and the normative which is ultimately derivative from the Kantian separation between pure and practical Reason. But this is, precisely, a distinction which should be eroded: there is no such strict separation between fact and value. A value-orientated practical activity will be confronted with problems, facilities, resistances, and so on, which it will discursively construct as 'facts' – facts, however, which could have emerged in their facticity only from within such activity. A theory of hegemony is not, in that sense, a neutral description of what is going on in the world, but a description whose very condition of possibility is a normative element governing, from the very beginning, whatever apprehension of 'facts' as facts there could be.

That being said, the problem remains of how these two dimensions, even if they cannot be entirely separated, can actually be articulated. Let us consider Marx's postulate of a society in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. Is this an ethical postulate or a descriptive statement? It is clear that it is both, for it is, on the one hand, a description of the final, necessary movement of History and, on the other, an aim with which we are asked to identify. If freedom is conceived as self-determination, the very distinction between freedom and necessity collapses. The link between the two aspects is so close that we can hardly speak of articulation. For that reason, it is wrong to present classical Marxism as a purely descriptive science, purified of all ethical commitment. What it does not have is a *separate* ethical argument, for the objective process it recognizes *already* has a normative dimension. It was only later, when the faith in the necessary laws of historical development was put into question, that the need for an ethical grounding of socialism was experienced, and it led to a return to Kantian dualisms, as happened with Bernstein and Austro-Marxism.

So what about hegemony? A hegemonic approach would fully accept that the moment of the ethical is the moment of the universality of the community, the moment in which, beyond any particularism, the universal speaks by itself. The other side of it, however, is that society consists only of particularities, and that in this sense, all universality

will have to be incarnated in something that is utterly incommensurable with it. This point is crucial: there is no logical transition from an unavoidable ethical moment, in which the fullness of society manifests itself as an empty symbol, to any particular normative order. There is an ethical investment in particular normative orders, but no normative order which is, in and for itself, ethical. So – the true question of a contemporary ethics is not the old-fashioned debate on the articulation between the descriptive and the normative, but the much more fundamental question of the relationship between the *ethical* (as the moment of madness in which the fullness of society shows itself as both impossible and necessary) and the *descriptive/normative complexes* which are the ontic raw materials incarnating, in a transient way, that universality – that elusive fullness. Hegemony is, in this sense, the name for this unstable relation between the ethical and the normative, our way of addressing this infinite process of investments which draws its dignity from its very failure. The object being invested is an essentially ethical object. I would go even further: it is the *only* ethical object. (I think Emmanuel Levinas progressed to some extent towards this distinction between the ethical and the normative, through his differentiation between ethics and morality. He did not, however, resist the temptation to give some sort of content to ethics, which considerably diminished the radicalism of his undeniable breakthrough.) So, going back to our original question, I would say that 'hegemony' is a theoretical approach which depends on the essentially ethical decision to accept, as the horizon of any possible intelligibility, the incommensurability between the ethical and the normative (the latter including the descriptive). It is this incommensurability which is the source of the unevenness between discourses, of a moment of *investment* which is not dictated by the nature of its object and which, as a result, redefines the terms of the relationship between what *is* and what *ought* to be (between ontology and ethics): ontology is ethical through and through, inasmuch as any description depends on the presence (through its absence) of a fullness which, while it is the condition of any description, makes any *pure* description utterly impossible. But if, with these considerations, we have displaced the terms of the debate from the normative/descriptive distinction to one grounded in the incommensurability between ethics and the normative order, we have said very little

about the ways in which this incommensurability is negotiated. So we have to start speaking about politics.

V Politics and the negotiation of universality

If the moment of the ethical is the moment of a radical investment (in the sense that there is nothing in the ontic characteristics of the object receiving the investment that predetermines that it, rather than other objects, should be such a recipient), two important conclusions follow. First, only that aspect of a decision which is not predetermined by an existing normative framework is, properly speaking, ethical. Second, any normative order is nothing but the sedimented form of an initial ethical event. This explains why I reject two polarly opposed approaches which tend to universalize the conditions of the decision. The first consists of the different variants of a universalistic ethics which attempt to reintroduce some normative content in the ethical moment, and to subordinate the decision to such a content, however minimal it could be (Rawls, Habermas, etc.). The second is pure decisionism, the notion of the decision as an original *fiat* which, because it has no *aprioristic* limits, is conceived as having no limits at all. So what are those limits which are other than *aprioristic*? The answer is: the ensemble of sedimented practices constituting the normative framework of a certain society. This framework can experience deep dislocations requiring drastic recompositions, but it never disappears to the point of requiring an act of *total* refoundation. There is no place for Lycurguses of the social order.

This leads to other aspects which require consideration. First, that if the radical ethical investment looks, on one side, like a *pure* decision, on the other it has to be collectively accepted. From this point of view it operates as a surface for the inscription of something external to itself – as a principle of *articulation*. To give just one example: Antonio Conselheiro, a millenarian preacher, had wandered for decades in the Brazilian *sertão*, at the end of the nineteenth century, without recruiting too many followers. Everything changed with the transition from the Empire to the republic, and the many administrative and economic changes it brought about – which, in various ways, dislocated traditional

life in the rural areas. One day Conselheiro arrived in a village where people were rioting against the tax collectors, and pronounced the words which were to become the key equivalence of his prophetic discourse: 'The Republic is the Antichrist'. From that point onwards his discourse provided a surface of inscription for all forms of rural discontent, and became the starting point of a mass rebellion which took several years for the government to defeat. We see here the articulation between the two dimensions mentioned above: (1) the transformation of the signifiers of Good and Evil in those of the opposition Empire/Republic is something which was not predetermined by anything inherent in the two pairs of categories – it was a contingent equivalence and, in that sense, a radical decision. People accepted it because it was the only available discourse addressing their plight. (2) But if that discourse had clashed with important unshakeable beliefs of the rural masses, it would have had no effectivity at all. This is the way in which I would establish distances with 'decisionism': the subject who takes the decision is only *partially* a subject; he is also a background of sedimented practices organizing a normative framework which operates as a limitation on the horizon of options. But if this background persists through the contamination of the moment of the decision, I would also say that the decision persists through the subversion of the background. This means that the construction of a communitarian normative background (which is a political and in no way a merely ethical operation) takes place through the limitation of the ethical by the normative and the subversion of the normative by the ethical. Isn't this one more way of stating what hegemony is about?

So inscription means an investment not based on any preceding rationality. It is constitutive. But could we not say that the opposite move, an investment which is always-already contaminated by normative particularity, is also operating from the outset? For what *has to be* invested, in order to have actual historical effectivity, subverts the object of the investment as much as it needs the latter for that process of subversion to take place. Let us give another historical example to illustrate the point: Sorel's notion of the constitution of the historical will through the myth of the 'general strike'.⁴¹ That myth has all the characteristics of an ethical principle: in order to function as a proper myth, it has to be

an object devoid of any particular determination – an empty signifier. But in order to be empty, it has to signify *emptiness* as such; it has to be like a body which can show *nakedness* only by the very *absence* of dress.⁴² Let us assume that I participate in a demonstration for *particular* aims, in a strike for a rise in wages, in a factory occupation for improvements in working conditions. All these demands can be seen as aiming at particular targets which, once achieved, put an end to the movement. But they can be seen in a different way: what the demands aim for is not actually their *concretely* specified targets: these are only the contingent occasion of achieving (in a partial way) something that utterly transcends them: the fullness of society as an impossible object which – through its very impossibility – becomes thoroughly ethical. The ethical dimension is what *persists* in a chain of successive events in so far as the latter are seen as something which is split from their own particularity from the very beginning. Only if I live an action as incarnating an impossible fullness transcending it does the investment become an *ethical* investment; but only if the materiality of the investment is not fully absorbed by the *act* of investment as such – if the distance between the ontic and the ontological, between *investing* (the ethical) and that in which one invests (the normative order) is never filled – can we have hegemony and politics (but, I would argue, also ethics).⁴³

Let us now recapitulate our main conclusions.

1. The ethical substance of the community – the moment of its totalization or universalization – represents an object which is simultaneously impossible and necessary. As impossible, it is incommensurable with any normative order; as necessary, it has to have access to the field of representation, which is possible only if the ethical substance is invested in some form of normative order.
2. This investment, as it shows no inner connection between what is invested and the social norms which receive the investment, depends on the central category of *decision*, conceived as an act of articulation grounded on no a priori principle external to the decision itself.
3. Since the subject constituted through that decision is no pure subject, but always the partial result of sedimented practices, its

decision will never be *ex nihilo* but a displacement – within existing social norms – of the impossible object of the ethical investment (the alternative ways of naming it).

4. All decision is internally split: as required by a dislocated situation, it is *a* decision; but it is also *this* decision, this particular ontic content. This is the distinction between *ordering* and *order*, between *changing* and *change*, between the *ontological* and the *ontic* – oppositions which are only contingently articulated through the investment of the first of the terms into the second. This investment is the cornerstone of the operation called hegemony, which has within it, as we have seen, an ethical component. The description of the *facts* of social life and the normative orders on which those facts are based, which is compatible with a hegemonic approach, is different from those approaches which start by identifying the ethical with a hard normative core, and with those which postulate total decisionism.
5. So the question: 'If the decision is contingent, what are the grounds for choosing this option rather than a different one?', is not relevant. If decisions are contingent displacements within contextual communitarian orders, they can show their verisimilitude to people living inside those orders, but not to somebody conceived as a pure mind outside *any* order. This radical contextualization of the normative/descriptive order has, however, been possible only because of the radical decontextualization introduced by the ethical moment.

I now want to state a corollary of my analysis which will be crucial for the argument I intend to present in the second round of this exchange. If the ethical moment is essentially linked to the presence of empty symbols in the community, the community requires the constant production of those symbols in order for an ethical life to be possible. If the community, on top of that, is to be a democratic one, everything turns around the possibility of keeping always open and ultimately undecided the moment of articulation between the particularity of the normative order and the universality of the ethical moment. Any kind of full absorption of the latter by the former can lead only either to totalitarian

unification or to the implosion of the community through a proliferation of purely particularistic identities. (This is, frequently, the atomistic version of the totalitarian dream. The secret link between both is often provided by the defence of religious or ethnic fundamentalisms in terms of the right to cultural diversity.) The only democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations – in our terms, permanently keeps open the gap between the ethical moment and the normative order.

¹ This, in my view, is the main political question confronting us at this end of the century: what is the destiny of the universal in our societies? Is a proliferation of particularisms – or their correlative side: authoritarian unification – the only alternative in a world in which dreams of a global human emancipation are rapidly fading away? Or can we think of the possibility of relaunching new emancipatory projects which are compatible with the complex multiplicity of differences shaping the fabric of present-day societies? It is on these questions that my next intervention in this discussion will be centred.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, London: Lawrence & Wishart 1975, pp. 186–7; original emphasis.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 184–5.

3. Norberto Bobbio, 'Gramsci and the concept of civil society', in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, London: Routledge 1979, p. 30; original emphasis.

4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence & Wishart 1971, p. 12.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

8. Formal analysis and abstraction are essential for the study of concrete historical processes – not only because the theoretical construction of the object is the requirement of any intellectual practice worthy of the name, but also because social reality itself generates abstractions which organize its own principles of functioning. Thus Marx, for instance, showed how the *formal* and *abstract* laws of commodity production are at the core of the actual concrete workings of capitalist societies. In the same way, when we try to explain the structuration of political fields through categories such as

'logic of equivalence', 'logic of difference' and 'production of empty signifiers', we are attempting to construct a theoretical horizon whose abstractions are not merely analytical but *real abstractions* on which the constitution of identities and political articulations depends. This, of course, is not understood by a certain empiricism, very widespread in some approaches within the social sciences, which confuses analysis of the concrete with purely factual and journalistic accounts. For a particularly crude example of this misconception (together with several others), see Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe. The Radical Democratic Imaginary*, London and New York: Routledge 1998.

9. See Ernesto Laclau, 'Power and Representation' *Emancipation(s)*, London and New York: Verso 1996, pp. 84–104.

10. See my essay 'Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?' in *Ibid.*, pp. 34–46.

11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London and New York: Verso 1999, pp. 100–101.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 176–7.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 177; original emphasis.

14. Alan White, *Absolute Knowledge: Hegel and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Athens, OH and London: Ohio University Press 1983, pp. 51.

15. Behind this problem there is, of course, the one of determining whether Hegel's philosophy should be conceived as a metaphysico-theological doctrine or as a transcendental ontology. On this question, see White, (*passim*); and Klaus Hartmann, 'Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View', in Alastair MacIntyre, ed., *Hegel. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Garden City, Anchor 1972.

16. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. by A.V. Miller, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International Inc 1993, p. 708.

17. For a clear and rigorous discussion of the various dimensions of this matter, see Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, London: Routledge 1999.

18. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, New York: Routledge 1993, p. 207.

19. *The Logic of Hegel*, trans. from *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* by W. Wallace, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1892, p. 137.

20. Paul de Man, 'Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 1996, pp. 51–69.

21. *Ibid.* p. 59.

22. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1995, p. 27.

23. *Ibid.* p. 22.

24. This tendency is found in a great deal of the literature on Gramsci.

25. It has to be said that Lacan's position on this issue is rather ambivalent and fluctuating.

26. The point has been cogently made by Jason Glynos in an unpublished paper, 'Of Signifiers, Signifieds and Remainders of Particularity: from Signifying Dissemination to Real Fixity', presented in the Ideology and Discourse Analysis seminar, University of Essex, 25 February 1998.

27. See Ernesto Laclau, 'Subject of Politics. Politics of the Subject', in *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 47–65.
28. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, ch. 6.
29. *The Ticklish Subject*.
30. Ibid. p. 1.
31. Ibid. p. 2.
32. See the systematization of the Derridan 'infrastructures' presented by Rodolphe Gasché in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 1986, Part Two.
33. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 30–31.
34. Let us be precise. Žižek's work on the Hegelian texts is always insightful and worth taking into consideration. As I said above, my disagreement starts only when he conceives of his own findings as the only logic shaping Hegel's intellectual project, without realizing that panlogicism is still very much part of the latter, and it limits the effects of the rhetorical moves that Žižek is pointing out.
35. See Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*.
36. See Ernesto Laclau, entry on 'Discourse', in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* ed. by Robert A. Goodin and Philip Pettit, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993, pp. 431–7.
37. Slavoj Žižek, 'La société n'existe pas', *L'Âne, magazine du Champ Freudien*: 17 (Winter 1986): 33.
38. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London and New York: Verso 1990, pp. 60–68.
39. It is precisely because I fully appreciate the potentialities of the notion of 'parodic performances' for a theory of hegemony, that I find some of Butler's questions rather perplexing. She asks: 'If sexual difference is "real" in the Lacanian sense, does that mean that it has no place in hegemonic struggles?' I would argue that exactly because sexual difference is real and not symbolic, because it is not necessarily linked to any aprioristic pattern of symbolic positions, that the way is open to the kind of historicist variation that Butler asserts – and that a hegemonic game becomes possible. The same goes for some of Butler's other questions: 'Does a logic that invariably results in aporias produce a kind of stasis that is inimical to the project of hegemony?' If there were no aporia, there would be no possibility of hegemony, for a necessary logic inimical to hegemonic variations would impose itself, entirely unchallenged. We have here the same mutually subverting relationship between necessity and impossibility to which we have been referring from the beginning.
40. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 174.
41. I have presented this argument concerning Sorel in various essays. See especially 'The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1.3 (1996): 201–20; and 'The Politics of Rhetoric', paper presented at the conference on 'Culture and Materiality', which took place at the University of California, Davis, 23–25 April 1998 (forthcoming 2000).
42. In Art History the distinction is often made between *the nude* (a body represented

as it is, without reference to dress, as in Ancient sculpture) and the *naked* (where the absence of dress is fully visible, as in Northern painting of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance).

43. The same argument that I have made about Sorel could be made about the dialectic between representability/unrepresentability in mystical discourse. See Ernesto Laclau, 'On the Names of God', in Sue Golding, ed., *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, London: Routledge 1997, pp. 253–64.