project exclusively, whether in origin or development, as they were and still are premised on modernist evolutionary eugenicist theories of human sexual difference and heterosexual procreation. Tracing the inherently international nature of feminist and Enlightenment intellectual movement in modern China in this way, she shows the link between the development of such ideas and theories in Europe and Japan and the surfacing of a national tradition of feminism in China, still firmly placed within a contemporary globalized discourse seeking to stabilize modernist concepts of womanhood. This dynamics created the problem that theoretical projects ultimately simultaneously rest on and produce the analytical need for a categorically stabilized subject and frozen in time, but which in Barlow's challenging and original feminist historiographic re-reading, also enables future potential and aim of gender equality that unites feminist theory everywhere as a globalized project. The book thus provides the reader with a comprehensively detailed, yet highly readable, insight into Chinese modern history seen from a feminist angle.

The question of women in Chinese feminism should be of interest to anyone fascinated by the challenges an increasing globalized world poses to academic understanding and analysis in terms of the interrelationship between claims to universality and local knowledge regimes, as well as to those with particular interests in China and feminist theory.

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On Populist Reason
Ernesto Laclau
Verso, London, 2005, 76pp.
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Populism and the Mirror of Democracy
Francisco Panizza (ed)
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One consequence of the so-called war against terror is that the line between 'left' and 'right' is ever more blurred. Opposition to the Iraq invasion, for

instance, united Trotskyists, Jacques Chirac, the British Liberal Democrats, and the Pope; support for the war set Europhile Tony Blair against his EU partners and brought former dissidents such as Christopher Hitchens into the same camp as George W. Bush. In part this confusion reflects an increasingly evident tension between the politics of specificity (multiculturalism and identity claims) on the one hand, and a (liberal, secular) politics of universalism on the other. The French debate over the permissibility of religious symbols or clothing in schools is perhaps the clearest symptom of this tension. Arguably, disagreements over globalization have similar roots. Equally, however, the difficulty of locating political positions results, first, from the marginalization of class from political debate and, second, from the extreme malleability of political discourse in a mediatized era of sound bite and spin.

For some, the current prevalence of uncertainty, ambiguity, and rhetoric indicates the decline of politics. For Ernesto Laclau, by contrast, it is better described as 'the arrival at a fully political era' (*On Populist Reason*, p. 222). The vagueness, slipperiness, and superficiality characteristic of the discourse of leaders such as Blair and Bush have long been dismissed as anti-political, populist gestures. Laclau, however, wants to revindicate populism, seeing it as 'the very essence of the political' (p. 222) and 'the construction of a 'people'' as 'the political operation *par excellence'* (p. 153).

On Populist Reason returns to many of the concerns of Laclau's first book, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, whose final section is 'Towards a Theory of Populism.' Much has changed in Laclau's thought since that book's publication in 1977, but his analysis of populism remains remarkably consistent. In 1977 as much as in 2005, Laclau rejects analyses of populism that focus on its ideological content. For the problem of populism is precisely that it embraces a range of diverse and often contradictory political beliefs; reciprocally, movements as varied as fascism and Maoism, or leaders as distinct as Margaret Thatcher and Hugo Chávez, have all been described as populist in one way or another. But this is no reason to dismiss the category as hopelessly vague or imprecise. The distinctiveness of populism is that it gathers together disparate ideological positions or political demands, and stresses their equivalence in terms of a shared antagonism to a given instance of political power or authority. In other words, populism should be defined by its form rather than its content: it tends to divide (and so simplify) the social field into two distinct camps, championing the 'people' over what Laclau variously terms 'the dominant ideology,' 'the dominant bloc' (1977, p. 173), 'the institutional system' (2005, p. 73), 'an institutionalized 'other'' (2005, p. 117), or even 'power' itself (2005, p. 74). The disparate and heterogeneous demands that constitute any given populist movement are unified and stabilized, Laclau adds in his most recent book, not merely by their opposition to the status quo, but also by the emergence of an 'empty signifier,' a concept or name ('freedom,'

'Perón) that loses its own specificity as it stands in for the other specific demands to which it is seen as equivalent.

Populism, therefore, follows a logic of equivalence and antagonism, whereby a part (or part object) comes to stand in for the whole. Indeed, this synecdochic substitution is doubled: first, a particular signifier from within the populist movement represents the people as a whole, retrospectively unifying their disparate demands; second and more generally, the people as an oppressed part of a divided society claim the right to stand in for society as a whole, deposing the parasitic minority who, they claim, illegitimately cling to power. Sovereignty should be returned to the people who constitute, populists argue, the full body of social totality. As Laclau points out, this same 'operation of taking up, by a particularity, of a universal signification' is what he has elsewhere, and in his work with Chantal Mouffe, 'called *hegemony*' (p. 70). It is also, as Laclau indicates, very close to Jacques Rancière's recent argument that politics is defined by the emergence of an 'uncountable part' that 'distorts the very principle of counting' and which 'while being a part, also claims to be a whole' (p. 245).

Rancière contrasts politics in this sense with what he terms 'police,' which Laclau glosses as 'the attempt to reduce all differences to partialities within the communitarian whole' (p. 245). Laclau himself, very similarly, distinguishes the logic of hegemony from the logic of 'administration' (p. 154). Here, individual demands are disaggregated (and so differentiated) and addressed separately by a bureaucracy that therefore integrates distinct elements of the people within the system. But politics and administration are merely poles or tendencies. Equivalence and difference will each play their part in any social organization, for pure politics (in which the differential particularity of each part would disappear) is as inconceivable as pure administration (in which there would be no equivalences between particularities). Moreover, and here Laclau differs from Rancière, both these poles are ambivalent: on the one hand, administration characterizes the welfare state as much as the totalitarian state; on the other hand, the immense variety of populisms demonstrates that 'there is no *a priori* guarantee that the 'people' as a historical actor will be constituted around a progressive identity' (p. 246).

Laclau is a theoretical systems builder, and over the past 30 years he has developed an increasingly intricate theoretical architecture from the building blocks offered by Saussurean linguistics. From the basic concepts of difference and equivalence, and the basic distinction between signifier and signified, Laclau constructs a discourse that could be described either as remarkably consistent or, equally, as remarkably hermetic. He offers readings of a range of texts from the crowd psychology of Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, through Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, to the contemporary political theory of Slavoj Žižek, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as Rancière.

In each case, however, such theorists are evaluated mainly for the extent to which their work resonates with or diverges from Laclau's own framework. Likewise, though Laclau considers a vast range of historical cases, from revolutionary France or Chartist Britain to Kemal Atatürk and Juan Peron, each is treated simply as an example, almost an anecdote or parable, to confirm a system whose principles are developed endogenously rather than through empirical investigation. It is left to others, such as the contributors to Francisco Panizza's collection *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, to offer more sustained engagements with specific populist movements. But almost all the essays in Panizza's book are written from within the framework that Laclau provides, and are overwhelmingly exercises in application or confirmation rather than opportunities to challenge, refine, or even develop aspects of his theorization. As such, and despite their theoretical intent, they offer little more than empirical detail about the case studies they examine (which run from William Hague's attempt to remodel the British Conservative Party to debates within the South African anti-apartheid movement). The theory they explicate is more thoroughly advanced in Laclau's own work.

Yet there are significant historical issues to which Laclau seems unable to provide an answer — or any single answer, at least. For instance, the very question as to whether or not populist logic is more widespread now than before. As I have noted, in *On Populist Reason* Laclau argues that politics may now be coming into its own, with the advent of 'globalized capitalism' and a consequent 'proliferation of new antagonisms' that 'makes traditional institutionalized forms of mediation obsolete' (p. 231). But in the essay he contributes to *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (entitled 'Populism: What's in a Name?'), Laclau suggests a quite different scenario as he points to 'the contemporary attempts by theoreticians of the Third Way and the 'radical centre' at substituting administration for politics' (p. 43). Indeed, one might add that the past 20 years have seen innumerable neoliberal regimes throughout the Third World, backed by the World Bank and the IMF, instituting technocratic administration in place of political antagonism. Moreover, where Laclau's theory would indicate an inverse relationship between neoliberalism and neopopulism (because the closer a movement or regime comes to the pole of administration, the further it moves from populism), in fact the experience of a region such as Latin America has been the opposite, that the two go quite comfortably hand in hand.

Sebastián Barros's essay 'The Discursive Continuities of the Menemist Rupture' might have addressed this problem of the relationship between politics and administration, as he considers the apparent paradox of Argentine Peronism's turn to neoliberal economics under Carlos Menem. Unfortunately, however, Barros sees neoliberalism as simply a set of discursive strategies (and so another conjunction of equivalences united under the empty signifiers of

'market' and 'efficiency') rather than as also a repertoire of institutional tactics (and so a series of arrangements to administer differentiated demands, above all through the para-state apparatus of non-governmental organizations). It may be the case that all theories configure their objects of study in such a way that they are able to visualize only what the theory is able to explain, but Laclau's discourse analysis seems quite flagrantly to lack any mechanism by which it could be corrected or even disrupted by sociological or historical analysis. Indeed, at times it suffers from extraordinary circularity, as the structure of Laclau's own discourse mimics the structure that it claims to discover in the social world that it purports to explain.

Nowhere is this mimicry clearer than in the case of the term 'discourse' itself that has, in the phrase 'discourse analysis,' come to stand in for the theoretical approach developed by Laclau (and to exclude all other approaches that invoke the term). 'Discourse' takes on the characteristics of an empty signifier within this discourse theory. As Laclau explains in *On Populist Reason*, he rejects the identification of discourse with ideology, text, or language (let alone spoken language): 'by discourse … I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role' (p. 68). Discourse is, therefore, 'the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such' (p. 68). Laclau would refuse any distinction between discursive strategies and institutional arrangements. Indeed, as he says in a quotation cited by Yannis Stavrakakis, 'the discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social as such' (qtd. *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* 232). But as discourse becomes 'co-extensive with the social' so it also becomes co-extensive with the political, while the political is equivalent to hegemonic struggle, and hegemony is nothing but the logic of populism. All particularities are radically diminished (as Laclau might claim they would be) such that any analytical distinctions are almost unsustainable.

In the process, Laclau's theory loses its capacity to say much that is meaningful about either power or politics. First, its inability to distinguish effectively between populism and administration is merely a symptom of a failure to differentiate between forms of power: power exercised in and through hegemony in civil society on the one hand, and power held and exerted by the state on the other. For Gramsci, of course, hegemony and state domination are overlapping and mutually supportive. Too often, however, Laclau seems to accept the populist argument that power is held by the state and that the people are indeed powerless underdogs. He manifests the same confusion as to what the people are opposing (is it the state, the oligarchy, the bureaucracy, or power *tout court*?) that is also evident in populism itself. Again, circularity: Laclau's theory of populism never escapes

from the logic it sets out to analyze. Second, Laclau proves unable to distinguish between different political inflections of populism, and so unable to solve the basic problem that populism poses (precisely the problem of differentiating left from right). In *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* he had resolved the issue by invoking a double articulation of populist with class politics. In the intervening period he has abandoned this appeal to a second, class, articulation, and nothing has taken its place. Thus, although he refers to the 'entirely opposite political signs' of distinct populist movements (*Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, p. 45), it is not at all clear what could be the basis for such a classification. How after all do such signs differ from the signs deployed by and in political discourse itself? If they are some type of meta-signs transcending the political itself, then they are illegitimate impositions supplementing the theory, a matter perhaps of common sense: *of course* we know that (say) Mao is on the left and Hitler on the right. But that begs the question, precisely, of those more difficult populist movements such as Peronism. If, by contrast, these signs are part of the discourse articulated within populist movements, then their meaning is surely dependent on their articulation, and cannot be given in advance by any political calculation: as Laclau himself would be the first to point out, the political valence of a given statement or demand is not given in advance, but only by the hegemonic structure within it is articulated. Hence Laclau can only distinguish between populist movements by abandoning his theory of populism and appealing to an extra-theoretical common sense; from within the theory itself, he is condemned to repeat the populist gesture that blurs all such political distinctions.

In sum, there is no doubt that Laclau's is an extremely important contribution to political theory. He demonstrates, through exemplification, the workings of populism and, by extension, hegemonic politics. But he also reveals the limits of that politics, not least the way in which it defuses and undoes political difference. Our current epoch is best described as post-hegemonic, in which any dialectic between politics and administration is decisively broken. As such we need now theories of posthegemony rather than attempts to shore up an illusory hegemony.

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