

# The Break between Old and New Orders in Laclau's Theory of Hegemony

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**Abstract.** Drawing inspiration from Alain Badiou's philosophical project of thinking radical change and novelty, this paper raises the question of whether Ernesto Laclau's *theory of hegemony* provides an adequate conceptualization of social change. Laclau claims that the transition between old and new hegemonic formations constitutes a "radical break." However, it shall be shown that Laclau's claim apropos radical break is in tension with his elaboration of the conditions under which a particularity – including particular political projects or social orders – may become hegemonic. As a result, how a process of transformation is to be conceptually distinguished from a process of reproduction is left unclear within the hegemony theory.

**Keywords:** Ernesto Laclau, theory of hegemony, Alain Badiou, social change, radical break

## Lūžis tarp senos ir naujos tvarkos Laclau hegemonijos teorijoje

**Santrauka.** Atskaitos tašku laikydamos Alaino Badiou mąstymo apie radikalius pokyčius ir naujoves filosofinį projektą, šis straipsnis iškelia klausimą, ar Ernesto Laclau hegemonijos teorija socialiniam pokyčiui suteikia adekvačią konceptualizaciją. Laclau teigia, kad perėjimas nuo senųjų prie naujųjų hegemoninių struktūrų reiškia radikalų lūžį. Tačiau šis straipsnis atskleidžia, kad Laclau teiginys apie radikalų lūžį sunkiai dera su tuo, kaip jis aiškina sąlygas, kurioms susidarius, tam tikras specifiškumas (įskaitant konkrečius politinius projektus ar socialines tvarkas) gali tapti dominuojantis. Tai lemia, kad hegemonijos teorijos kontekste lieka neaišku, kaip įmanoma transformacijos procesą konceptualiai atskirti nuo reprodukcijos proceso.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Ernesto Laclau, hegemonijos teorija, Alainas Badiou, socialinis pokytis, radikalus lūžis

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## Introduction

Ernesto Laclau stipulates that the “breakdown” – or structural dislocation – of the existing order which prefigures the emergence of a new order or hegemonic formation is always partial, and that a breakdown does not entail a situation wherein “*everything* becomes possible or that *all* symbolic frameworks disappear” (1990: 42–43). By rejecting such a “psychotic universe” as the starting point of radical social change, Laclau holds instead that the possibilities for change that are opened up are proportional to the extent of the breakdown. He writes, in this vein, that the “more points of dislocation a structure has, the greater the expansion of the field of politics will be” (Laclau 1990: 50), such that the outcome of political processes will become less determined by the extant state of affairs. That the breakdown is always partial implies that there will always be a limit to what a political project may hope to achieve within its historical circumstance.

The implications of this position for radical politics have been one of the key points of contention in the debate between Laclau and Slavoj Žižek since *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (particularly Laclau 2000a, 2000b, and Žižek 2000), in the course of which, the latter suggested that Laclau’s ‘deconstructive’ problematization of the categorial distinction between ‘revolution’ and ‘reformation’ effectively leaves “anti-utopian ‘reformist’ gradualist politics” as the only sort of politics thinkable within his theory of hegemony (Žižek 2000: 101).<sup>1</sup> However, his rejection of any thought of social change that appeals to speculative leftist fantasies of absolute beginnings and acts of total refoundation did not preclude Laclau from affirming the possibility of a political process to institute an order that is radically *other* than that of the past, as seen, for instance, in his assertion that not all elements of a newly emerging hegemonic formation have to be ‘new’ for its emergence to be an instance of ‘radical break’ from the previous formation (Laclau 2005: 227–228). On the contrary, a social order may be considered new if its ‘core’ or ‘articulating point’ – that is, the hegemonic identity represented and held together by an empty signifier, whose production Jelica Šumič (2004) described as “absolutely creative” and likened to the moment of ‘naming’ an event that features centrally in Badiou’s account of radical change – emerged as such through a process that is not determined by the order that precedes it.

Laclau’s most detailed elaboration of the possibility of a radical break between the old and the new orders – which, as Geoff Boucher (2021: 374) observed, is also an apparent rejoinder to charges of reformism or gradualism – is found in *On Populist Reason* (2005), wherein the ‘hegemonic logic’ of the empty signifier is asserted to be ‘identical’ to the

<sup>1</sup> Despite the undeniable importance of the works of Jacques Derrida for Laclauian thought, the question of how ‘faithful’ Laclau was in appropriating elements from the works of Derrida – as well as from his other major source of theoretical inspiration, the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan – is a complicated one. As Geoff Boucher (2008) showed, analyses of the signifier and the signified in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) already diverge in important ways from Derrida’s. Martin Hägglund (2008) and Molly Anne Rothenberg (2010) each showed further ways in which Laclau does not adhere to Derridean and Lacanian lines of thought, respectively. In the end, as Yannis Stavrakakis (2002: 327) had once suggested, it may be the case that Laclau’s works are better regarded as “neither Derridean nor Lacanian but mostly Laclauian.”

Lacanian “logic of the *objet petit a*” (Laclau 2005: 116). What this assertion of identity highlights is the centrality, in the Laclauian account of the (re)institution of the society, of the instance of ‘radical investment’, whereby a particular object is elevated, as in Jacques Lacan’s (1997) formula of sublimation, into the incarnation of an absent ‘fullness’. While fullness names the ultimate object of desire for the subject whose being is marked by a *lack*, no particular object – such as a particular political project or social order – is actually commensurable to fullness.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the elevation of a particular object into an embodiment of fullness and thus into the aforementioned ‘core’ of a new order cannot but have the formal structure of a groundless decision, a decision made in madness. The emergence of a particularity as the incarnation of fullness, hence as the object(ive) to which some given political subject devotes itself, is, as Laclau (2005: 228) suggests, akin to a “*creatio ex nihilo*,” and subjective investment in that object(ive), a “genuine ethical act” in the Kierkegaardian vein. That a new order escapes complete determination by the order that precedes it through this constitutive “*Aktus der Freiheit*” of the subject is regarded by Laclau as sufficient for ensuring a moment that is rightly describable as that of a radical break in the transition between the new order and the one that precedes it.

The elaboration of the Theory of Radical Investment in *On Populist Reason* and in several essays collected in *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (Laclau 2014) should be seen as an attempt to realize the ambitions to develop a theorization of politics, within which, extensive, far-reaching social change becomes conceivable under an irreducibly pluralistic and post-foundationalist (Marchart 2007) conception of the social first articulated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Yet, it might be questioned whether Laclau’s conceptualization of the break between the old and the new orders in terms of radical investment constitutes an adequate response to the Žižekian line of criticism – versions of which continue to appear in Marxist-oriented evaluations of Laclau’s thought (see, for example, Kouvelakis 2021) – that consigns the hegemony theory to gradualist or reformist politics. For despite the sense of *novelty* of the new hegemonic formations that Laclau wishes to convey with such expressions as “*creatio ex nihilo*,” whatever meaning such terms as ‘new’ and ‘radical break’ actually carry within his theorization of the social change becomes less clear once one begins to examine the conditions under which a particularity is able to receive the investment of the subject and become the core of a new hegemonic formation. This paper will begin with a consideration of disagreement between Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou on the question of the radical social change, which raises the key themes that will become relevant in the critical discussion of Laclau’s theory of hegemony in the rest of the paper. Subsequently, the Laclauian text shall be examined with the aim of showing that what is absent therein

<sup>2</sup> As it is clear from his assertion regarding the “hegemonic logic” and the “logic of the *objet petit a*” (Laclau 2005: 116), Laclau’s account of subjectivity relies heavily on the Lacanian account of the subject as the ‘subject of lack’. In the Lacanian account, desire is ‘caused’ by the ever-elusive *objet petit a*, the attainment of which is expected to provide full *jouissance* for the subject. Like the fullness of which Laclau speaks, *objet petit a* does not have a positivity of its own: it can only appear as embodied in some other particular object, toward which the subject’s desire would then be directed. For a discussion of this aspect of Laclau’s *theory of hegemony*, see Kim 2022a.

is a conceptual determination of novelty adequate to support the claim that the transition between hegemonic formations constitutes a radical break.

### **Žižek and Badiou on the transition to a new order**

Laclau's postulation of the limits of political action appears reasonable in as much as no actual political project can be an absolutely new beginning undertaken inside a socio-historical vacuum. Nevertheless, it might still be asked whether a truly 'revolutionary' political process would consist precisely in the shifting of the horizon of what is possible. This is the thought that leads Žižek (1999: 264) to insist on a distinction between "a mere 'performative reconfiguration', a subversive displacement which remains *within* the hegemonic field" – which he likens to an "internal guerrilla war" – and "the much more radical *act* of a thorough reconfiguration of the entire field which redefines the very conditions of socially sustained performativity."

Žižek's notion of the radical act alludes to a distinction made by Lacan between *passage à l'acte* and *acting out*. Although both refer to an impulsive and violent outburst of the subject, Lacan (2014: 116–125) explains that acting out is still "an appeal to the Other," an attempt to be recognized by the Other (as in a child's tantrum), whereas *passage à l'acte* amounts to an "exit" from "the *stage* of the Other where man as subject has to be constituted." In other words, the outcome of *passage à l'acte* (the act) is the dissolution of the subject whose social existence is conditional on representation by a signifier in the discourse of the Other. The act, therefore, effects a "symbolic death," or a "separation from the Symbolic" (Chiesa 2007: 148–149). Yet, as the readers of Lacan have noted, this dissolution of the subject is temporary, as it has an *after*: "After an act, I am "not the same as before." In the act, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn [...]; the act involves a kind of temporary eclipse of the subject" (Zupančič 2000: 83), which subsequently enables a "new symbolic reinscription" (Chiesa 2007: 149). From this Lacanian idea, Žižek (2002) draws a provocative political conclusion: only by subtracting itself from symbolically mediated reality (and whatever that passes as objective historical tendencies) can the subject be reborn as the bearer of a revolutionary project. Just as an act, according to Lacan, is experienced by the subject as though it were something miraculous that befalls it, Žižek emphasizes that the radical political act is not an outcome of analysis, prediction, or strategizing. To accept the act as the condition of radical social change, for Žižek (2002: 225), is to "*accept the risk* that a blind violent outburst will be followed by its proper politicization – there is no short cut here, and no guarantee of a successful outcome either."

Given that Žižek's account of the radical act shares deep affinities with the notion of the event developed by Badiou, it should come as no surprise that Alberto Toscano (2008), a close reader of Badiou, contrasted Badiou and Laclau largely along the lines that Žižek drew, namely, between the radical act of 'exiting' the field of the Other and the Gramscian war of positions that inspires Laclau. Toscano (2008: 534) argues that, whereas Laclau's hegemonic politics involves "strategic rearrangement and occupation of discourse (what Badiou would call 'the language of the situation')," Badiou elaborates a more fundamental

separation of political subjectivity from those very discourses “structuring and stratifying” reality. Both the Žižekian act and the Badiouian event are unpredictable and quasi-miraculous occurrences that suspend the symbolic mechanisms regulating a given situation. Both imply, moreover, a profound transformation of the subject: just as the subject of the Žižekian act is “reborn,” Badiou (2002) describes the event as lifting “human animals” from their banal existence to become the subject of a “truth,” that is, the material support for a process of realizing a new egalitarian universality. Finally, while the consequences of acts and events alike are unforeseeable, both Žižek and Badiou wager on the possibility of a radically transformed order that would emerge in the aftermath of the interruption of normalcy. As Alenka Zupančič (2000: 204) rightly noted, an act for Lacan is “not simply an act of outrage, a word of defiance launched at the Other,” but “also an act of the creation of the Other.” This sense of a new, different symbolic order that emerges subsequent to an act is reflected in Badiou’s theorization of truths, the most lasting consequences of which include the transformation of the “codes of communication” and “rules of opinions” such that “they become other” (Zupančič 2000: 204).

In spite of the substantive proximity between Žižek’s political thought and his own, in the postscript to *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou offers a brief remark indicating that there is an aspect of his account of eventual change against which the Žižekian notion of radical act stands in tension. Badiou (2009a: 563) contends that the effects of the “ephemeral,” “brutally punctual,” “frenzied upsurge” of the Žižekian act are “ultimately indiscernible from those of scepticism,” in as much as “it is impossible to uphold its consequences.” The gist of Badiou’s criticism becomes clearer when it is recalled that the theoretical concern that motivates the French post-Maoist philosopher is “not only the ontological delimitation of the event in terms of a fulgurating cut, or a punctual encounter of the real, but also its logical and topological inscription at the heart of a given situation” (Bosteels 2011: 176). One finds Badiou writing in *Saint Paul*, for example, that “an event always constitutes its subject in the divided form of a ‘no...but’,” where the *no* refers to “the potential dissolution of closed particularities (whose name is the ‘law’),” and the *but* signals “the task, the faithful labour, of which the subjects of the process opened by the event [...] are co-workers” (Badiou 2003: 67–68). For Badiou, then, an event is not merely the instant of the negation of the present. It is also the beginning of a positive process in a situation, which is something to be *transformed* through the supplementation of a truth – this supplementation being precisely the work of ‘fidelity’ undertaken by a subject inspired by an event – rather than *destroyed*. By contrast, there is no process or praxis that the Žižekian act itself prescribes: it can only be hoped that some gesture that severs the subject from its socio-symbolic existence will have made it into a revolutionary subject and will be subsequently followed by “the emergence of the ‘New Harmony’ sustained by a newly emerged Master-Signifier” (Žižek 1999: 154). Despite the proximity of the desired outcome (namely, a radically transformed symbolic order), from Badiou’s perspective, what can be judged to be absent in Žižek’s thought is the distinction between a new order whose transformation has been effected by a certain *process* of truth (*procès du vérité*) and a new order whose emergence is merely accidental. This is no insignificant difference, for it is with respect to the task of making radical change

intelligible as a process that Badiou's theorization of truth, which unfolds within an intricate set-theoretical ontology, proves to be the most innovative.

While the details of his philosophical system and set-theoretical ontology are beyond the scope of the present paper,<sup>3</sup> it can nonetheless be said that what Badiou (2005) shows in his magnum opus, *Being and Event*, is that the transformative effects of a truth on the situation – such as the production of novelty, the reconfiguration of the coordinates of what is deemed possible and impossible, existent and non-existent – are not beyond rigorous conceptualization, even if that truth *as such* must remain beyond predictability and consensual verifiability that Badiou calls “knowledge.” In the subsequent sections of the present paper, this Badiouian imperative of delineating that which is truly new in a new order shall serve as the lens from which Laclau's hegemony theory shall be examined. As glimpsed in Badiou's critique of Žižek, the Badiouian perspective sees that the indeterminacy – or, better, radical contingency – does not in itself suffice to secure a conceptual determination of the newness of the “elements of an emerging configuration” (Laclau 2005: 228) that will have come to replace the old. The question, then, is whether the hegemony theory provides such a determination.

### Laclau's account of radical investment

A “true decision,” as Laclau (1996a: 53) writes, “cannot be *ultimately* grounded in anything external to itself,” and “has to be grounded in itself, in its own singularity.” Such a decision – one which “escapes always what any rule can hope to subsume under itself” (Laclau 1996a: 53) – is the fundamental structure of *radical investment*, a notion utilized most notably in *On Populist Reason* to explain how some particular object can become the incarnation of an absent fullness, the Thing (*das Ding*) that commands a profound libidinal cathexis. In the context of Laclau's theorization of hegemonic politics, the investment may be understood as a moment of identification by a subject whereby a particular political project becomes constitutive of its identity, to the extent that the pursuit of that project becomes the subject's ultimate objective of action. It is worth noting that an account of this kind is in fact necessary within Laclau's poststructuralist paradigm, which affirms the ultimate impossibility of fullness while simultaneously stipulating that the potential of a political project to transform the society is inseparable from its capacity to represent that always-already absent fullness for a plurality of subjectivities. This is because without allowing that some particular projects can, at some historical conjunctures, become embodiments of fullness for certain subjects, the very possibility of hegemony – indeed, of politics *tout court* for Laclau (Arditi 2010) – would be diminished.

In as much as Laclau embraces the singularity of a decision, his position may appear to be close to those of Badiou and Žižek. At first glance, Laclau's affirmation of a decision

<sup>3</sup> Burhanuddin Baki (2015) provides a book-length exegesis of Badiou's use of the Set Theory. For a much more succinct presentation of set-theoretical ontology that focuses on how the domain of the social could be understood in accordance with it, see Kim 2022b.

that is analogous to ‘impersonating’ God – “that who has not to give account of his actions before any tribunal of reason, because He is the source of any rationality” (Laclau 1996a: 56) – resembles the cancellation of the Other in the Žižekian act as well as the decisionism that has sometimes been regarded as characteristic of Badiou’s thoughts on post-evental subjectivation (Lecerle 1999; Bensaïd 2004). However, Laclau immediately hedges his idea of the self-grounding decision with the qualification that the madness of *human* decision inescapably falls short of that of an omnipotent God. Human beings are “mortal gods” for whom “the madness of decision is [...] a regulated one” (Laclau 1996a: 56–57), wherein “the range of what is thinkable and decidable” for the subject is limited by the situation within which the subject finds itself (Laclau 2014: 133–134). What limits the range of the thinkable and the decidable is the background of sedimented values, ideas, and beliefs, from which social agents, even in their condition as subjects that are “condemned to be free” due to an extensive dislocation of the structure, cannot entirely be freed (Laclau 1990: 44). Without some of such sedimented background, one would not have any *reason* to choose a particular course of action over others as all options would have equal valence.

That at least some decisions be able to be presented as reasonable, or as “preferable to other decisions” (Laclau 1990: 31), is a possibility that Laclau needs to preserve if the political activity involves, as he believes is the case, discursive engagements, including argumentation and persuasion. From the Laclauian point of view, then, what Žižek has posited is the possibility of an absolute separation from historical circumstances, or the *Sittlichkeit* of the community that comprises a certain stratum of facticity that, though not immutable, is never completely subverted. Hence, in the courses of a heated exchange with Žižek on the pages of *Critical Inquiry*, Laclau argues that Žižek’s attempts to identify the “protagonists of what he sees as true revolutionary action” are based on “grotesquely misinformed” analyses of social reality, which verges on “pure delirium” (Laclau 2006: 680). In the late 1980s, Laclau insisted that the assertion that “everything is contingent” is one that would “only make sense for an inhabitant of Mars” (Laclau 1990: 27). In Žižek, whose thought of a revolutionary change presupposes the kind of act – a total separation from the Other – that no subject can actually perform, Laclau (2006: 657) sees a thinker who is “waiting for Martians.”

Notwithstanding Laclau’s presentation of his position as the more cogent of the two, his realist position invites its own set of difficulties. Corollary to Laclau’s suggestion that a stratum of facticity – deeply sedimented beliefs and practices – regulates radical investment is the idea that the emergence (and effectivity) of a new hegemonic formation is conditional on the *availability* of particular projects as candidates of radical investment, as well as their *credibility*, which “will not be granted if [their] proposals clash with the basic principles informing the organization of a group” (Laclau 1990: 65–66). Such conditions for the elevation of a particularity into a hegemonic one are understood within Laclau’s system in terms of power: “The ability of a group to assume a function of universal representation presupposes that it is in a better position than other groups to assume this role, so that power is unevenly distributed between various organisms and social sectors” (Laclau 2000b: 208). Since Laclau (1990: 31) also holds that the “consti-

tution of a social identity is an act of power” – indeed, that “identity as such *is* power” (Laclau 1990: 31) – it must be concluded that the power of a particular group or project to become hegemonic, hence its power to repress certain possibilities whilst actualizing others, derives from the background of sedimented normative frameworks and practices of the extant social order. An important result follows: although processes by which a social order is reconfigured may result in changes in the identity (including that of the ‘core’ element that embodies the hegemonic function of universal representation) of all the elements in a relation of ‘equivalence’ *qua* elements of one and the same formation (this much is simply entailed by Laclau’s structuralist premise that ‘relations’ and ‘objectivity’ are synonymous), whatever change a hegemonic identity may undergo cannot be as extensive as to divest it of what Maeve Cooke (2006: 102) has described as the “cohesive power” that it acquires from the sedimented background. This is because the loss of the said cohesive power would undermine the capacity of a hegemonic identity to continue to remain as the object of political desire as it would simply cease to be hegemonic. Thus, Laclau (2000b: 208) maintains that there is “no universality that operates as pure universality,” but only “the relative universalization created by expanding the chain of equivalences around a central particularistic core.” In other words, there “is not, on the one hand, a purely empty signifier and, on the other, an incorporated one. The two of them are exactly the same” (Laclau 2004a: 318).

Since an empty signifier cannot be emptied completely even in principle, it becomes imperative to examine what the implications of the aforementioned “particularistic core” that is retained in a process of social change are. Laclau (2005: 217) writes that, in hegemonic political projects – the Polish *Solidarność* being one of his go-to examples – that construct “equivalential associations vaster than themselves,” those associations are “still linked to a certain programmatic content.” That content, that particularistic core, is precisely what allows “a certain coherence between the particularities integrating the chain” to be maintained (Laclau 2005: 217). Conversely, in the hypothetical case where the “empty signifier becomes entirely empty,” hegemonic identity would not determine in any way what is articulated into the chain of equivalence that expands around itself, thereby allowing “the most contradictory contents” to be articulated into the chain (Laclau 2005: 217). Such a chain would be “extremely fragile,” however, as “potential antagonism between contradictory contents can break out at any moment” (Laclau 2005: 217). In a hegemonic formation that is sustainable enough to continue to remain hegemonic, then, the expansion of the equivalential chain would need to be limited “once a set of core links has been established,” which would render some contents simply “incompatible with the remainders of particularity which are already part of the chain” (Laclau 1997: 321). In its condition of being limited in the range of its possible new articulations due to the particular contents with which it is linked, an empty signifier can be said to be “imprisoned” (Laclau 1997: 320). Paradoxically, this imprisonment by some particularity, that is, the impossibility of the total emptiness of empty signifiers, is one of the very conditions of the possibility of their political efficacy.

The particularity that cannot finally be stripped from a hegemonic identity in its function as an empty signifier, in fact, fulfills a crucial requirement within the Laclauian



theoretical architecture. If, as Laclau holds, no amount of dislocation entails that everything becomes possible, *some* limit with respect to what can be achieved has to be reflected in the transition between hegemonic formations. This is the requirement that is fulfilled by the stipulation that a hegemonic formation that is sustainable is not limitlessly open, in as much as the extent of its universality or inclusivity is restrained by some particular content that is the condition of the possibility of its sustainability. The account of social change conceived by the hegemony theory therefore reflects the particularity which is preserved in a newly achieved universality as the necessary marker of its having emerged under a certain historical circumstance. This means, conversely, that the concept of an empty signifier that completely divests it of its particularity is tantamount to detaching it from its condition of emergence, thus from any determinate context. By denying the possibility of the latter, Laclau evades the problem of disassociation from concrete contexts, which he detects in Žižek's – and also in Badiou's (Laclau 2004b) – conceptualization of change. Instead, for Laclau, what is decidable and achievable is always limited, and the institution of a social order through a political project, even if it were in some sense more inclusive than the superseded order, is conditioned by the particularities of the circumstances from which it had emerged. The order achieved by hegemonic processes tends to represent “the limit of socially attainable universalization” (Laclau 2000b: 211).

Although it is a universalizing process, hegemony does not realize a universality akin to the ‘generic’ universality that underpins a truth for Badiou, in that it does not break entirely from the particularity that it finally is. Hegemonic universality is a partial universality: it is never, even in principle, “offered to all,” as Badiou says of a truth, and Šumič (2004: 194), by adopting the Badiouian expression, says of the Laclauian empty signifier. What is thereby abandoned in the hegemony theory is the theoretical aspiration underpinning the Badiouian account of change, namely, the determination of a process of change that is situated but whose trajectory nonetheless is unconstrained by the regulatory mechanisms of the situation. There is, to be sure, no reason to view the attempt in hegemony theory to reflect in its theorization the limits of social change, which is stipulated to exist in so far as they occur in concrete historical situations, as insinuating a theoretical weakness. Yet, even if it is conceded that a process of social change can neither begin from a point of the total exteriority nor realize the ideal of radical inclusivity in so far as it has as one of its tasks the institution of *an* order under the constraints of some historical circumstance, the question of the newness, or novelty, of a transformed order that can be achieved under that given historical circumstance remains to be examined further.

### **The ambiguous novelty of a new order**

As seen in the preceding discussion, the institution of a different order is a process that presupposes investment in some project that is already in possession of what might be regarded as its symbolic power, which it commands due to the sedimented norms and practices at a given time that has made it available and convincing for a diverse range of social agents. Since the Laclauian subject makes a radical investment in a particular project

in so far as the latter promises to deliver a fullness that is experienced by the subject as lacking, the direction that it will be able to take while preserving itself from the possibility of disintegration is constrained by its own particularity and the desires, beliefs, or normative frameworks from which the ‘investors’ it has mobilized cannot completely detach themselves. This seems to imply that a political project toward the institution of a new order promotes the exclusion of certain positions or possibilities, ones whose repression might actually be, owing to the sedimented normative frameworks of the community, the condition of its becoming hegemonic. This exclusion of certain terms is what *particularizes* that project and imposes a restriction on the content – or, in Badiouian parlance, *what will have been presented* – of the order that it may eventually succeed in instituting.

It cannot be denied that a political project constrained in this way could nevertheless result in social change that will “solve a variety of partial problems” (Laclau 2000c: 244), or possibly lead to a far-reaching alternative social arrangement that overcomes extensive structural dislocations. What that arrangement will be, and which elements will be included and excluded in that arrangement, is not *determined* by the previous order. Nor is there an element that is such that it will *necessarily* remain excluded. But what remains unclear is whether, within the framework of the hegemony theory, processes and outcomes that may be reflections of the *status quo* – ones in which *certain* positions and possibilities *continue* to be excluded or repressed – could be distinguished from processes and outcomes that will have introduced something decisively different or new into the situation. It is at this point that the hegemony theory apparently stands the furthest away from incorporating the thought that the Badiouian theorization of politics as a “truth procedure” – that is, the process by which a truth, a radical novelty, comes to supplement a situation so as to change it – is an attempt to elaborate. This distance between the Badiouian and Laclauian approaches certainly attests to their divergent theoretical problematics. Yet it also points to the possible *need* for a conceptual distinction that the Laclauian approach has been reluctant to make.

In his study of Badiou’s philosophy, Sam Gillespie (2008: 79) made the crucial observation that one of the key theoretical objectives of Badiou’s thought is the determination of a process through which “situations *necessarily* transform themselves.” It is toward the specification of a transformative process that introduces into the situation elements that would have continued to remain excluded if it were not transformed that the Badiouian account of change – wherein change is conceived as the supplementation, or extension, of a situation by a truth built from the unrepresented elements at its structural ‘void’ – makes its critical contribution. The theoretical objective to conceptualize a process of the necessary transformation is also why, from a/the Badiouian perspective, it is not satisfactory to simply say that the outcome of a hegemonic process is contingent and not determined by what precedes the new order. Even though the previously excluded elements may come to be included in a new hegemonic formation, this new formation, given the manner in which the transition between formations is conceived under the hegemony theory, is not the outcome of a process that necessarily effects the transformation of the preceding formation.

The Badiouian theorization of the said process as a truth procedure might go in the direction of speculative thought that Laclau may be unwilling to follow. But the absence of a comparable theoretical specification – of the new as distinct from the old in some decisive manner, of a process of transformation as distinct from that of reproduction – in his account of radical investment, on which Laclau rests his claim that new hegemonic formations mark a radical break, renders the hegemony theory susceptible to the challenge that whatever ‘new’ arrangement that prevails may not be “new enough,” or largely be a reflection of the *status quo*. The persistence of this challenge (which the radical investment was supposed to circumvent) starts to become visible when Laclau resorts to a contextualist argument for the possibility of making reasonable proposals for a course of action:

[...] sedimentation of social practices is an *existential* in the Heideggerian sense: it is constitutive of all possible experience. So, to the questions, Why prefer a certain normative order to others? Why invest ethically in certain practices rather than in different ones? The answer can only be a contextual one: Because I live in a world in which people believe in A, B and C, I can argue that the course of action D is better than E; but in a totally presuppositionless situation in which no system of beliefs exists, the question is obviously unanswerable. (Laclau 2014: 134)

The scope of the sort of contextual argument depicted above is not limited to deliberation within an established and stable normative framework. Laclau's contextualism, in fact, applies equally to the subjective decision involved in radical investment. Laclau (2000a: 82) writes that although radical investment “looks, on the one side, like a *pure* decision, on the other, it has to be collectively accepted.” As noted above, Laclau (1990: 65–66) holds that the call for a particular course of action, hence the call to actualize certain possibilities, will not be answered if it clashes with the “basic principles” that social agents hold. It is not just the range of what is thinkable and decidable that is limited – as the range of what will *actually* be decided is also limited.

It is probably true that any proposal that runs against a sedimented, widely accepted normative framework is likely to face resistance, marginalization, and incredulous stares. If hegemony, as per Laclau's view, names the universal “form of politics” (Arditi 2010: 491), it would indeed align with the aims of the hegemony theory to accommodate political projects and outcomes that could be said to be gradualist or reformist. Moreover, that the hegemony theory can accommodate drastic reorganization of the field of the social as an empirical possibility is a proposition that need not be denied outright. Laclau (2000a: 82) explains that sedimented normative frameworks, despite “never [disappearing] to the point of requiring an act of total refoundation,” can undergo “deep dislocations requiring drastic recompositions.” That no normative framework is finally immutable – to deny this would be to deny history – suggests that a series of dislocations, in time, may eventually reshape the exclusionary limit of a social order, even if the reproduction of that limit might appear, especially to the social actors embedded in that order, to be unavoidable for the foreseeable future. Conceding these points, however, does not dissolve the problem that persists because the process of the social change conceived by the hegemony theory is one in which two processes are inextricably entwined: a socially transformative process

that makes actual certain possibilities that had been hitherto repressed *and* a socially reproductive process that accounts for the project's efficacy, which it attains by offering a promise of fullness – whose necessarily partial achievement (since fullness, as such, is impossible) in a new order implies repression and exclusion of certain possibilities and positions – that is convincing and acceptable for a wide range of social agents whose evaluative criteria are necessarily at least in part products of the old order. Since this entwinement of reproductive and transformative aspects is constitutive *also* of radical investment (as Laclau formulates it), radical investment cannot fulfill, by itself, the task for which it was designed: to establish that transitions – or at least some of them – between the old and the new orders do mark a “radical break,” “*creatio ex nihilo*,” or “*Aktus der Freiheit*.”

It might be argued that rather than establishing the sense in which some instances of transition between the old and the new orders are indeed radical breaks, Laclau's account of radical investment, in particular the stipulation of collective acceptability, exacerbates the need for further conceptualizations of novelty, break, and change within the hegemony theory. As Oliver Harrison (2014: 67–68) noted, for Laclau, there is no particular normative order or discourse that is “ethically preferable in-itself, and the only basis for deciding as much is through the degree of attachment or ‘investment’ that people decide to place in it. [...] It is the subject that decides as to what is both ethical and normative, not the discourse theorist,” for whom the content and nature of the order chosen by historical actors is, as Laclau (2000a: 85) suggests, “not relevant.” Yet if Laclau's theory does not propose a standpoint of evaluation beyond the particular substantive values in which the subject has invested, then the contextualism to which Laclau does make recourse when explaining a condition of radical investment – collective acceptance – appears to give credence to an assessment that Laclau himself must find unacceptable: “In appealing to the *Sittlichkeit* of particular communities Laclau avoids the accusation of decisionism, but at the price of opening himself to the charge of conventionalism” (Cooke 2006: 93).<sup>4</sup>

Having rejected both the Žižekian radical act and the Badiouian truth procedure but without sufficiently resolving the problem of change and novelty that these alternatives attempted to address, Laclau leaves his theory vulnerable to the same sort of criticism that Badiou had advanced apropos certain implications of the Lacanian theory of subject – a shared source of inspiration for Badiou, Žižek, and Laclau – in order to delineate his own theoretical endeavor. In his book *Theory of the Subject* (1982), Badiou argues that the consistency of the Lacanian subject is dependent on keeping the raw, disruptive real at a distance. The Lacanian subject, according to Badiou, is thus defined by “a consistent repetition in which the real ex-ists” (Badiou 2009b: 239). Badiou then goes on to draw an analogy between the Lacanian theory of the subject and the kind of political thinking

<sup>4</sup> Cooke (2006) proposes that, in order to avoid this outcome, the Laclauian approach should be supplemented by an account of context-transcending validity, which she finds in the works of Jürgen Habermas. She is not alone in proposing some kind of synthesis between Laclau and Habermas. For example, Mark Devenney (2004), while accepting Laclau's thesis that language and meaning are always contaminated by power, nevertheless argues that the hegemony theory would benefit from incorporating Habermasian insights apropos the symmetrical relations of communication and the possibility of normative validity.

in which the disruption of the social order – which Badiou, more Maoist here than in his later works, describes as the “real of the cut that can be found in the impulse of the masses” (Badiou 2009b: 246) – is regarded as something to be avoided, and advises that, should such a disruption occur, the restoration of order is of utmost importance.<sup>5</sup> For Badiou, what is lacking in Lacan, for whom “every Truth displays the structure of a (symbolic) fiction, that is, it is unable to touch the Real,” is the thought of the “arduous work of transforming this explosion of negativity into a new order” that would become central to his own philosophy (Žižek 2004: 177).

Still, one need not have embraced the Badiouian solution to perceive in one of Laclau's exemplary illustrations of the logic of hegemony a lack that a Badiouian perspective would most certainly problematize:

Let us consider the extreme situation of a radical disorganization of the social fabric. In such conditions – which are not far away from Hobbes's state of nature – people need an order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. “Order” as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder “order” is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function (Laclau 1996b: 44).

The Hobbesian realism expressed herein may not be entirely implausible as an empirical description of political processes. However, Laclau, like Lacan, fails to accommodate the thought that the transformation of the social is contained not only in the establishment of *an* order, but also in establishing a new consistency of the situation through the introduction of something that could have been neither produced nor embraced under the previous order. Although the hegemony theory registers the disruptive effects of dislocation and antagonism – the two elements of the hegemony theory that have been likened to the Lacanian real by Laclau himself and his readers alike – in the social, its account of the process through which a social order is thereafter reconfigured provides no conceptual determination of a process that would lead, not just to *an* order, but to a *different* order. In the hegemony theory, it is precisely that difference, the difference in the ‘content’ of orders, that becomes a ‘secondary consideration’ in the very circumstance, namely, a situation of “radical disorganization of the social fabric,” at which the possibility of far-reaching change – or, as Laclau had put it, “drastic recompositions” of the social – would, according to the theory itself, be opened.

## Conclusion

The series of qualifications which Laclau introduces concerning decisions, conditions of radical investment, and the extent to which a political process could be universalized

<sup>5</sup> Badiou's critique of Lacan in relation to the political thought was elaborated by Ed Pluth (2008).

implies that any process of the social change conceived under the hegemony theory features aspects of both social reproduction and transformation. The relation between those two aspects, as this paper has attempted to show, is such that the instance of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” “radical break,” or “*Aktus der Freiheit*” – in spite of Laclau’s association of those expressions with the emergence of a new order – can never actually arrive. The complex and nuanced relation between processes of reproduction and transformation hinted at in this outcome can be seen under a positive light, as a reflection of the Derridean postulate of essential *contaminability* in the Laclauian theorization of political possibilities and the transition between different orders. However, what could be regarded as one of its strengths is perhaps also what leaves Laclau’s Theory of hegemony with an unfulfilled task. For without some further elaboration of how aspects of transformation and those of reproduction are to be distinguished in a hegemonic process, formulating a decisive rejoinder to the criticism that the hegemony theory fails to think social change beyond gradualism or reformism would remain a challenge. In this respect, Badiou’s summation in *Theory of the Subject* of that which is lacking in the Lacanian theory serves as an apt expression of that which is missing in the Laclauian account of the break between the old and the new orders: “the thought of an effective destruction of the old law and the observation that what recomposes itself can no longer in any way be *the same*” (Badiou 2009b: 246).

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