Locating the Laclausian Left: Progressive Strategy and the Politics of Anxiety

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Abstract

Ernesto Laclau's work was never one of 'merely' objective analysis, but always an active pursuit of a concrete strategy of progressive political contestation. Among the most productive avenues taking this project forward has focused on Laclau's career-long engagement with Lacanian psychoanalytical principles; Lacan's politically salient categories of *fantasy* and *juissance* in particular have vastly enriched the Essex school approach to populist discourse and crucially clarified the role and status of subjectivity and affect within Laclau's discursive framework. After an examination of the extent of Laclau's incorporation of Lacan, this paper will make the case that an as yet largely neglected Lacanian category, *anxiety*, must by Laclau's own admission be a constitutive and central dimension of his theory of populist discourse. In combination with the broader corpus of Lacanian Left scholarship on populism, an incorporation of anxiety offers a strong case for an affective (re-)reading of Laclausian populism, allowing us to infer an 'experience' of populist discourse and approach a *phenomenology* of populism to supplement — and sharpen — his ontological framework. Finally, this paper will turn its attention on the implications of this operation on progressive populist strategy in particular, strengthening some tenets of the Laclausian approach while rethinking others; synthesising Laclau, Lacan and Lacanian Left scholars, a new vision for a progressive politics of lack emerges.

Keywords: affect, anxiety, Lacan, Laclau, populism, progressive strategy.

Introduction

Ernesto Laclau's work on populism stands out as not just one of the most influential theoretical approaches to explaining populism as a social phenomenon, but also through its explicit aim — as Laclau and Mouffe put it in the foreword to the third edition of their seminal *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* — to provide something akin to a strategic blueprint for "a new politics for the Left based upon the project of a radical democracy" (Laclau & Mouffe 2014, xxiii). The political exploits of Laclau's lifelong engagement with what would come to be known as 'left populism' are well-documented, and despite its relative novelty, his framework has inspired

and informed a new wave of progressive movements throughout Europe and Latin America. It is clear, of course, that these successes are not Laclau's alone; besides the crucial influence of his co-author and wife, Chantal Mouffe, Laclau's oeuvre would not be what it is today without the critical engagement of a number of scholars, many of them Laclau's former students and collaborators at Essex University who have come to form the 'Essex school' of discourse analysis.

Among the most important contributions to the Laclausian oeuvre is undoubtedly the closer scrutiny on, and subsequent development of, the persistent kernel of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory present throughout Laclau's work since the late 1980s. In this regard, Žižek's 1985 essay *Beyond Discourse-Analysis* (Žižek 1990) constitutes perhaps the single most influential intervention, kickstarting as it did Laclau's engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis in the first place. His addendum to *Hegemony* was of particular importance because, it must be remembered, the strict discursive formalism of *Hegemony* initially left no room for a theory of subjectivity or affect, as Laclau and Mouffe declared:

> "Whenever we use the category of 'subject' in this text, we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations — not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible — as all 'experience' depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility." (Laclau & Mouffe 2014, 101)

By introducing the value of a Lacanian theory of subjectivity, Žižek's essay radically and permanently altered the trajectory of Laclau's work. Starting from a conception of antagonism that was explicitly "not derivative from Lacanian theory" in *Hegemony* (Laclau 2000, 77), Laclau would formalise his 'Lacanian turn' with the publication of *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990) and introduce the category of the subject to his framework, borrowing many key elements from Lacan; the role and theoretical importance of Lacan's theory of subjectivity, however, would continue to expand over the next two decades, culminating in Laclau's claim in *On Populist Reason* that "we are not dealing with casual or external homologies but with the same discovery taking place from two different angles — psychoanalysis and politics" (Laclau 2018, 115).

Again, however, this pretty remarkable journey of theoretical transformation owed much to the critical interventions by a number of scholars, Essex school and otherwise, for whom Laclau's gradual incorporation of more and more categories of Lacanian subjectivity proved incredibly

productive. Among them, the work of Glynos and Stavrakakis in particular stands out for its systematic engagement with what the latter has called the "neglect of the affective dimension of identity in theoretical approaches influenced by the structuralist/post-structuralist tradition" (Stavrakakis 2007, 71). Their scholarship on the Lacanian categories of *fantasy* and *juissance* not only correctly identified the value — and concrete theoretical locus — of a theory of affect in Laclau's discursive framework, but their many exchanges with Laclau over the years (cf. Glynos & Stavrakakis 2004, 2010; Laclau 2004) forced him to clarify and expound on a number of dimensions of his social ontology, thus engaging with and subsequently incorporating more dimensions of Lacanian theory into his framework of populism.

Beyond constituting 'merely' philosophical clarifications, these interventions on the role, structure, and status of the affective register in Laclau's oeuvre today form perhaps the single most productive cluster of approaches carrying the post-Marxist conception of populism forward. Against the backdrop of the broader 'affective turn' in the social sciences, these approaches have led, on the one hand, to significant contributions to the scholarship on right-wing populist discourse, its relationship to nationalism and the other (cf. Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008; Daly 1999a); on the other hand, and more importantly for our present endeavour, a number of the most promising recent advances in the radical democratic/left-populist/progressive strategic literature have emerged through attempts at clarifying, developing and expanding affective categories within Laclau's work (Daly 1999b; Mouffe 2000, 2019; Stavrakakis 1999, 2007; Eklundh 2019; Glynos 2021).

The present contribution is situated firmly in this space. However, while it is beyond doubt that the preceding literature on Laclau's affective dimension — and in particular aforementioned work on *juissance* and *fantasy* — has been extraordinarily productive, our contention is that despite his extensive engagement with the Lacanian corpus, Laclau's omission of an absolutely fundamental affective category, Lacanian *anxiety*, has extensive ramifications on a number of essential moments of his social ontology in general and his theory of populism in particular. After a brief introduction to its operative logic(s), this paper will demonstrate that, by Laclau's own admission, anxiety *must* exist as a fundamental phenomenological dynamic in his discursive conception of the social and his theory of populist identification. Next, we will examine how an incorporation of the political nature of anxiety enriches existing approaches to reactionary populism, before sketching the outlines of a progressive populist project of radical democracy that not only recognises but "actively conjures with" anxiety's consequences (Daly 1999b, 91).

Theoretical Approach — Laclau with Lacan

Laclau's dislocated subject

Before exploring Lacan's notion of anxiety and its omission by Laclau more closely, we need to first establish the key points of the Lacanian theory of subjectivity and affect that the latter does co-opt. As noted above, Laclau and Mouffe's *magnum opus*, *Hegemony*, proposed a radically anti-essentialist conception of the political space as a purely discursive terrain characterised only by a constitutive negativity and an irreducible contingency; no identity obtains a positive fullness, they remain "purely relational," inherently marked by "unfixity," "precariousness," "openness." It is because of this "precariousness of every identity" and the "impossibility of closure" that the logic of hegemony has to intervene, overcoming the gap of contingency and making claim to a *universality* of meaning that exceeds its *particular* content. (Laclau & Mouffe 2014, 76-108). Beyond the veil of hegemony, however, no ordering of moments — which Laclau and Mouffe term articulation — possesses any transcendent primacy; 'objectivity' is thus impossible, simply our designation of the stablest and most sedimented of ultimately contingent relations, in Laclau's words "merely crystallised myth" (Laclau 1990, 61).

This 'blockage' preventing the fullness of identities is not external or superficial, but inherent to the very nature of the social *qua* discursive space; all identities are objects of language and thus constituted only through their own difference to the field of other (im)possible identities. The name Laclau and Mouffe give to this internal limit is *antagonism*, in their words the "'experience' of the limit of all objectivity" (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 108). And, while this formulation hints at a phenomenological structure, we have already established that, for Laclau and Mouffe, neither the subject nor experience as such had their own independent — that is, extra-discursive — existence, the 'fullness' of both prevented by the very same limitation, antagonism. In line with their "break with the discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy" and the accompanying "abandonment of the thought/reality opposition," in other words, Laclau and Mouffe appear to deny even phenomenological processes of experience taking place outside the realm of articulatory practice (ibid, 96).

It was here that Žižek's timely intervention was located. Laclausian antagonism as 'internal failure' preventing the ultimate self-constitution of any identity, he argued, is strictly analogous to the role of the Lacanian Real, the inherently unsymbolisable fullness *beyond* language (cf. Fink 1997, 25). The Real, as the irreducible gap between signifier and signified, constitutes the ultimate failure of all symbolic constructs and thus the limits of language much akin to the role

of antagonism in Laclau; in doing so (as we will see shortly), the Real forms the very condition of possibility of the emergence of the subject and is thus central to the entire Lacanian corpus. From this viewpoint, Žižek argues that we ought to distinguish between the antagonism *qua* limit of all objectivity and the antagonism 'preventing' the subject:

> "We must then distinguish the experience of antagonism in its radical form, as a limit of the social, as the impossibility around which the social field is structured, from antagonism as the relation between antagonistic subject-positions: in Lacanian terms, we must distinguish antagonism as real from the social reality of the antagonistic fight." (Žižek ibid, 253)

From a Lacanian point of view, therefore, we could say that the *phenomenology* of antagonism, though closely related, is distinct from its *ontological* status. And, far from 'preventing' the subject, this logic is in fact its grounding gesture, as, Žižek continues: "the Lacanian notion of the subject aims precisely at the experience of 'pure' antagonism as self-hindering, self-blockage, this internal limit preventing the symbolic field from realising its full identity: the stake of the entire process of subjectivation, of assuming different subject-positions, is ultimately to enable us to avoid this traumatic experience" (ibid).

A new sensitivity to these Lacanian dynamics becomes clear in Laclau's next publication, *New Reflections*. Although Lacan is not mentioned once in its 81 pages, Laclau's newly introduced category of *dislocation* can only be understood in light of Žižek's intervention. Dislocation takes over the ontological function previously played by antagonism, describing the undecidable gap *between* every identity's constitutive incompleteness and the contingent content that hegemonises its meaning, i.e., the spectral terrain that separates an identity's universality from its particular content; this gap "cannot be dialectized" and remains, in the final instance, open and indeterminate (Laclau 1990, 27-74). The traumatic nature of this radical indeterminacy must be avoided, so social actors are forced to *decide*, to "actualize certain structural potentialities and reject others": subjectivity thus arises out of the split of dislocation as "nothing but the distance between the undecidable structure and the decision" (ibid, 30). Echoing Žižek's Lacanian injunction, the subject emerges as "the result of the impossibility of constituting the structure as such," now indeed "condemned to be free" by the very failure of closure that hegemony seeks to overcome (ibid, 41-3). The ontological state of dislocation, at once the cause of a traumatic indeterminacy, thus *also* becomes the "very form of freedom," the precondition for agency as such; in political terms, while dislocatory events continuously

threaten to de-centre the subject — to reveal the radical negativity at the heart of its subjecthood — dislocation is also the very condition of possibility of "new acts of centring," thus "giving rise not only to negative consequences but also to new possibilities of historical action" (ibid, 39-43).

Laclau demonstrates a clear engagement with the Lacanian theory of subjectivity here. As we will explore in greater detail shortly, the subject for Lacan is similarly constituted around a radical lack at its heart, sustained by the unavoidable penetration of the Real that, while traumatic, is nonetheless the necessary condition for the subject to 'come onto the scene' (Fink 2003, 247). Beyond merely adopting Lacan's structure of the 'subject of lack', Stavrakakis rightly notes that *New Reflections* points to an awareness by Laclau of the "negative and positive" modalities of the Real, that is, the Real not just as traumatic but also as productive; this of course is the basis — for Lacan as for Stavrakakis's reading of Laclau — of a theory of enjoyment, or *juissance*, which for the former emanates from the Real register, and a theory of affect more broadly (Stavrakakis 2007, 72). Although the integration of the Lacanian Real into his discursive framework is accomplished almost seamlessly, this "revenge of the Real" arguably constitutes a substantial philosophical shift in Laclau's ontology, away from the purely relational model of *Hegemony* and towards a new acknowledgment of a dimension of *immediacy* at the heart of all discursive practices (Stavrakakis 2014, 111ff).

Despite the constructive engagement by Stavrakakis, Glynos and others over the following years, however, Laclau was slow to engage with this affective turn. Although he had, by the early 2000s, fully resorted to referring to his subject as the Lacanian 'subject of lack' on multiple occasions (Laclau 2000, 58), he remained, at least in Stavrakakis's estimation, at the level of a "largely eclectic use of Lacanian insights" (Stavrakakis 2007, 83). It wasn't until 2003 that Laclau acknowledged that affect might play a role in the hegemonic process; the biggest breakthrough to date came in a response essay entitled *Glimpsing the Future* (2004) in which he conceded that "signification and *juissance* ... are conceptually distinguishable dimensions," marking the first instance Laclau did not immediately subsume something of the order of affect as reducible to its discursive conditions (Laclau 2004, 303). In his conception, however, he nonetheless maintained that affect as a whole is "not something added to signification but something consubstantial to it," while disregarding any reference to immediacy, speaking only of the "*mediating* role of affect" (ibid, 325).

Nevertheless, his long-awaited return to populism theory, *On Populist Reason* — published a year on from that exchange — showed the lasting effect of Laclau's engagement with Lacan's corpus broadly and his theory of affectivity in particular. Laclau argues that popular demands — which he affirms as the "minimal unit of analysis" of his populism theory — come into existence through subjects' "experience of a lack"; when unfulfilled, such demands can be articulated into a chain of equivalence with other unsatisfied demands, creating an antagonistic frontier necessary for the constitution of a 'people'. Populism requires such an "expansion of the equivalential logic," whereby some particular content, the Laclausian 'empty signifier,' comes to represent (i.e., hegemonises the universality of) the whole chain. (Laclau 2018, 72-85). This approach departs from the path trodden in *Hegemony*, however, when Laclau insists that this necessarily partial investment in one particular content over others is an *affective* investment: "the complexes we call 'discursive or hegemonic formations,' which articulate differential and equivalential logics would be unintelligible without the affective component" (ibid, 111). Expanding on the properly affective dimension of hegemony, Laclau quite abruptly reaches a point of theoretical convergence with Lacan: shortly after declaring their work to be "the same discovery taking place from two different angles," he posits his empty signifiers to be structurally equivalent to one of Lacan's most important categories, the *objet petit a* (ibid, 127), leading him finally to conclude that "the logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are identical," and arguing that the hegemonic procedure of designating a signifier to 'stand in' for the entire equivalential chain is the same process as the Lacanian procedure of affective (over)investment in which "an object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing [*das Ding*]," that is, the pure object of desire (ibid, 116).

It was this crescendo of theoretical integration that Stavrakakis would later praise as the "passage from a largely eclectic use of Lacanian insights to a committed engagement with the Lacanian corpus." But is this assessment wholly accurate? If we are to believe Laclau's claim that "there is no populism without affective investment" (ibid), and the empty signifiers without which hegemonic practice would not function are "identical" in structure to Lacan's *objet a*, then it stands to reason that Laclau accounts for all the consequences such an uncharacteristically absolute move would entail; and yet, Laclau omits an absolutely central affective category from Lacan's oeuvre, intimately tied to — indeed, inseparable from — the *objet a*, subjectivity and the Real: *anxiety*. Examining these connections more closely, this paper will now demonstrate that anxiety is, by Laclau's own admission, not only present but central

to his framework, and that its incorporation has substantial theoretical as well as strategic consequences on his theory of populism as a whole and radical democracy in particular.

Lacan's anxious subject

We have so far noted that Laclau's engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis focussed on two main structural components: i) in a first step, Laclau introduced a theory of subjectivity in which the presence of an irreducible dislocation — the inherent incompleteness of every identity — is the traumatic locus of emergence of the subject; ii) in a second step, this dislocation or lack is qualified as the driving force behind the hegemonic logic, in that it makes affective investment in empty signifiers necessary and productive, elevating one to stand in for the entirety of the equivalential chain. It is clear that the first step mirrors Lacan's own conception of subjectivity as arising in the interstices of the symbolic order: after the infant's perceived unity with the mother is disrupted, they confront a world structured by language, a seemingly infinite and inaccessible — and thus radically Other — symbolic order. Lacan's 'barred subject' properly arises only upon the realisation that this enigmatic Other is not whole, but holds a place for the child *qua* signifier: there must be a *gap* in this symbolic order the child is expected to fill. The first self-conception of the subject proper is thus as *something lacking* (Fink 2003, 246). Laclau's second step is intimately tied to the first, as the subject seeks to fill the void at the heart of its very being by developing desires and identifications with partial objects aimed at regaining the mythical wholeness lost upon accession to the Other; as Lacan puts it, "all the subsequent mapping-out of the subject leans on this necessity of a reconquest of this original unknown dimension" (Lacan, 63-4). The subject's lack and its economy of desire are, for Lacan, coextensive, the latter representing the *externalisation* of the former (Fink ibid, 248). Lacan's *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, represents the locus of this process; it should not be misunderstood as an object in the traditional sense but as a structural moment, the lacking subject's ideal of a fully-positivised lack, the very mythical remainder of unity originally relinquished that might finally fill the void at the heart of the subject and restore its fullness (Lacan, 37). The pursuit of the *a* is experienced affectively in the form of the *juissance*, or enjoyment, it generates.

Even from this brief summary, the close parallels between Lacan's theoretical architecture and Laclau's own should be evident; what Laclau entirely omits in this procedure, however, is that, for Lacan, the emergence of the subject and its relation to its object-cause of desire functions only through the mediation of his 'cardinal affect,' *anxiety*. The importance of anxiety to his

framework is difficult to overstate, with Lacan himself calling it "very precisely the meeting point" of all his work up to that point. (Lacan 2014, 3). Despite this, anxiety has so far received surprisingly little attention within the 'neo-Lacanian' social science literature, which has prioritised the more immediately politically salient categories of fantasy and enjoyment. This can, in part, be explained by the fact that Lacan's tenth seminar from 1962-3, simply entitled *Anxiety*, was only translated into English as recently as 2014; even the literature that has directly engaged with Lacanian anxiety, however, often fails to recognise its broader relevance to political subjectivity (cf. Žižek 2008a, 2008b; Palacios 2020), while the by now extensive corpus of works exploring themes of affect in the Laclausian framework tends generally to ignore it outright (cf. Glynos & Stavrakakis 2004; Mouffe 2019; Eklundh 2019). Perhaps worse than ignoring it, anxiety does show up in Laclau's work once, in a discussion about Jorge Luis Borges' poem *The Golem*: Laclau refers to the "inevitability of failure of any identity, and the anxiety involved with the emergence of that moment," while addressing the role of Lacanian thought in in his work (Laclau & Zac 1990, 32). Laclau is therefore seemingly aware of the existence of Lacanian anxiety as a category, but does not deem it worthy of further deconstruction or indeed incorporation into his own framework.

A brief examination of the Lacanian logic(s) of anxiety, however, will demonstrate that neither of the two moments of theoretical integration mentioned above — and indeed no engagement with the Real, the *objet a*, fantasy or *juissance*, perhaps the four most important categories in the Lacanian literature on populism — are thinkable without it. As any good Lacanian knows, the most basic experience of subjectivity is anxiety; it is the only affect that "doesn't deceive" (Lacan, 76). The emergence of the subject proper takes place in relation to a recognition of the lack in the Other and the subsequent generation of a desire to *fill* this lack — for a lack implies the absence of *something specific* and, concurrently, a desire for its return. The entire economy of desire is thus structured externally to the subject itself; it is not an innate desire it first experiences, but rather, as Lacan repeats again and again, "man's desire is the desire of the Other": beginning with the mysterious desire of the mother that might explain the disruption of the original unity — what, besides me, could she want? — the subject always desires to be desired by the Other, to gain access to the unfathomable cause of its existence (Lacan, 22; Fink ibid, 248). The subject's relation to the Other is thus always ambiguous, structured in the form of a question rather than an answer: "Che vuoi?", what do you want of me? (Lacan, 61-81; see also: Žižek 2008a, 129ff). The very inaccessibility of the Other, whose ambiguous desire drives the emergence of the subject in the first place, is thus *experienced*, precisely, as anxiety; it is

for this reason that anxiety is, in Copjec's words, "the most primitive of phenomena. It is that which nothing precedes" (Copjec 1994, 118).

The lack in the Other, *qua* locus of the subject's emergence, is strictly analogous to Laclau's dislocation as the "impossibility of constituting the structure as such" (Laclau 1990, 41), the lack itself being the irreducible trace of the Real within the symbolic (i.e. discursive) fabric of the Other. Just as dislocation is not experienced as such but only through the ways it 'distorts' discursive identities, the Real for Lacan is a "paradoxical, chimerical entity" with no objective nature except as our experience of the limit, the point where symbolisation fails (Žižek 2008a, 184). Even if Laclau's discursive universe has no phenomenology of its own — that is to say, subjects do not experience the discursive *as such*, unlike the experience of the desire of the Other in Lacan — the Laclausian subject, insofar as it is a subject of lack, cannot avoid experiencing anxiety, which according to Lacan signals the "irreducible pattern by which this Real presents itself in experience" (Lacan, 160). Anxiety is the affect that "doesn't deceive" precisely because it is the signifier that constitutes the "possibility of deception"; it is the subject's irreducible non-identity to the signifier — the trace of the Real within the discursive — that is *experienced* as anxiety, the only affect to "escape this game" of deception (ibid, 78).

Perhaps more critically, however, anxiety also mediates the relation of the subject to the *objet a*. Breaking with Freud's understanding of anxiety as *objectless* (in contrast to phobia, which always arises directed towards something nameable, conceivable) in the early pages of Seminar X, Lacan declares that anxiety is in fact "*not without* object" — with the caveat that we are not dealing with just any object but the object *par excellence*, the *objet petit a* (ibid, 89). As the spectral grammar of the 'not without' indicates, the *a* — encapsulating, as Stavrakakis aptly puts it, a paradoxical double movement, "the lack ... together with the promise of its filling" (Stavrakakis 1999, 75) — can never be found or captured, precisely because it does not exist as such; it represents the unsymbolisable penetration of the Real in the very midst of the subject, or in Žižek's words, "precisely the irreducible trace of externality in the very midst of 'internality'" (Žižek 2000, 117). Its locus is that of the lack, a "place of apparitions" (Miller 2006a, 19) as the *a* itself is constitutively beyond symbolisation: "What one calls *objets petit a*," Lacan's student and translator Jacques-Alain Miller would later write, "are only ever incarnations, representations, manifestations, translations" (Miller 2006b). Anxiety supervises the place of lack, and it is precisely the "sudden emergence of lack in positive form," an object *appearing* where there should be a lack, "that is the source of anxiety" (Lacan, 61), an experience of "radical uncanniness" when we find lack *itself* lacking (ibid, 47).

The *objet a*, invoked by Laclau as identical to the empty signifier and thus central to the very functioning of the hegemonic logic, thus cannot be thought without its accompanying affect, anxiety, as Lacan makes clear: "the most striking manifestation of this *objet a*, the signal that is intervening, is anxiety ... [the *a*] only steps in, it only functions, in correlation with anxiety" (Lacan, 86). Not only must anxiety be present to mediate the general economy of "affective investment in a partial object" without which, Laclau tells us, "there is no populism" (Laclau 2018, 116); perhaps more to the point, the hegemonic operation rests on making *one* signifier stand in for the whole chain, a radical investment, which Laclau declares is structurally equivalent to the moment in which "an object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing" (ibid). If this is the case, Laclau *must* engage with anxiety, which for Lacan "designates the most, as it were, profound object, the ultimate object, the Thing" (Lacan, 311). If we take Laclau at his word regarding the affective structure of the hegemonic process, what is at stake here is nothing short of the internal consistency of several of the most elementary moments of his entire framework. If he maintains that "the logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are ... identical," then by his own admission, anxiety must form a central — if not *the* central — phenomenological dimension of his entire theory of hegemony.

Analysis — Anxiety of Politics, Politics of Anxiety

Towards anxiety as a Laclausian category

From the preceding analysis of the internal consistency of Laclau's co-option of a Lacanian theory of subjectivity and affect, it should be clear that his omission of anxiety as a category is, at best, a critical oversight. In fact, anxiety's absence becomes all the more surprising when we go beyond the merely internal analysis of the Lacanian aspects of his work and take a broader view: if there is one logic that underpins not only Laclau's concept of hegemony but indeed all crucial moments in his framework, *the* central operative dynamic of Laclausian theory, it is the "fundamental asymmetry" between universal and particular (Laclau & Mouffe, 82). It is the inherent unrepresentability of the universal that necessitates its 'filling' by some contingent content. This is Laclau's 'ontological gap,' the most fundamental site of dislocation and the cause making hegemonic practice both possible and necessary: it is the impossibility of reaching universality that necessitates its contingent totalisation by particular content — the struggle surrounding the nature of that content is the political struggle, hegemony. As Barrett rightly argues, the "guiding principle" of Laclau's oeuvre is thus precisely "the analysis of a

tension between the always-already (indeed essentially) split and de-centred, ... and the 'suturing' hegemonic project of coherence" (Barrett 2012, 250).

This logic of tension pervades the Laclausian framework: *Hegemony* established that every identity is constituted around a fundamental antagonism, splitting it between its particular content and the negativity it excludes (ibid). The gap is present in the unbridgeable "ontological difference" between 'ordering' and 'Order,' a specific content of the former having to hegemonise the constitutive emptiness of the latter, just as "all concrete politics," in filling the empty place of the political, "will also be split" between the politics they represent and the choices foregone (Laclau 2007, 60). Regarding his theory of populism, not only does Stavrakakis correctly note that Laclausian dislocation is internally split between its negative and positive, its traumatic and productive sides, but, crucially, every decision made on its undecidable terrain has to be internally split, too: "[every decision] 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)" (Laclau 2000, 79). Relatedly, popular demands, Laclau's "minimal unit of analysis," are in hegemonic practice split between their concrete demand and the totalising role they fulfil for the equivalential chain. (Laclau 2005, 37). This means that any populist 'people' will themselves be, in Laclau's words "the locus of an ineradicable tension" between their identity as *plebs* and *populus* (Laclau 2018, 225). As Laclau stresses, the logic that makes this possible is the empty signifier, the signifier without determinate content; only a signifier that emerges out of "a structural impossibility in signification as such" can *construct* the ambiguity that makes hegemonic practice possible (Laclau 2007, 36-7). It is the inherent ambiguity of the empty signifier *qua* paradoxical failure of symbolic constitution that is the very condition of possibility for a political contestation of 'objectivity' and new acts of centring.

Taking Laclau's words concerning the empty signifier's identity to the *objet a* to heart, the never-ending process of hegemonic (non-)totalisation of the universal by the particular — the negotiation of the very asymmetry that makes the cathectic investment inherent to Laclau's discursive logic of populism not only thinkable but unavoidable — is a *process that must be affected by anxiety*. If dislocation is "both the condition of possibility and impossibility of a centre" (Laclau 1990, 40) — in other words, the very condition of the *act of centring* (and thus the ground of politics) as such — then that very ambivalence, the phenomenological terrain of dislocation, is experienced as anxiety. It is upon this terrain that hegemonic acts of articulation are constituted, and it is the primordial presence of anxiety that makes the construction of

antagonistic frontiers necessary and productive, driving the processes of identification and "designating" the object of investment. All hegemonic articulations are thus part of the "apparatus of defence" (Lacan, 173), aiming to conceal the primordial unfixity and radical openness of Laclau's discursive universe whose eternal presence, *qua* manifestation of the Real, is signalled by anxiety. The "radical uncanniness" of anxiety, however, continues to haunt, to 'intervene' and mediate the tension inherent in all hegemonic sutures, as *both* reminder of their ultimate contingency *and* experience of the possibility of their re-articulation.

Populism as the politics of anxiety

After this intense theoretical engagement with both frameworks, we are finally in position to draw some important conclusions that an engagement with the primacy of anxiety might have on the study of reactionary and progressive populist discourse. To begin with, its impact is perhaps most immediately apparent in connection with the category of *crisis*. The link between crises and so-called 'populist moments' is long- established, particularly so among affective frameworks in populism studies. Dubiel, for instance, recognised crises as conjunctures whereby

> "collective experiences of felt offense, status anxiety and frustrated expectations of happiness are dislodged from established discourses and legitimation models and take on a directionless potential which lies peculiarly opposite the spectrum of political traditions" (Dubiel 1986, 90).

Crises, then, are moments when hegemonic structures of legitimacy are suddenly unable to channel collective emotional experiences as successfully as before and the possibility for their re-articulation or replacement is opened up. In our terms, crises fragment the suture of the coherent social fantasy and expose its contingency and radical unfixity. By definition, a crisis is a situation in which the existing discursive framework that allows us to embed events within a coherent whole breaks down, a situation of vertigo where our 'cognitive mapping' fails: this is the Lacanian Real, and it is the Real's proximity that anxiety signals. For Lacan as for Laclau, it is only in such moments of dislocation, moments of disruption of the regular flow of things, that subjectivity properly arises — and it is here that we encounter the centrality and pure political importance of anxiety.

Every crisis decentres us, throws the apparent harmony of the social fantasy off balance — but for this very reason it is the condition of possibility of radically new acts of re-articulation. It is

the irreducible gap *between* those collective affective experiences and their contingent hegemonic mediation that is the realm of the political as such: it corresponds to a dimension of the "no-man's land ... making articulatory practice possible" that Laclau identifies as the formal basis for hegemonic practice and thus politics as such (Laclau & Mouffe, 97). Anxiety is the affect that governs this realm; it is only in this context that we can understand Zevnik's claim that anxiety is precisely the moment in the Lacanian framework "which turns an individual into a political subject" (Zevnik 2017, 239), and how anxiety can become a source for resistance and mobilisation. In exposing the contingency of the past and the radical openness of the future, anxiety is the experience of the politics of the *present*, opening up "a different political temporality, one which, while indeterminate, unpredictable and insecure, offers a return to politics par excellence." (Eklundh et al. 2017, 5).

Reactionary populisms thrive in conjunctures of crisis because — as a host of authors have noted — their politics rely on the construction of *securitisation discourses*, which operate on the uncertain terrain of a political space dislocated by crisis. A central dimension of such discourses is what Ruth Wodak terms the "construction of fear" (Wodak 2021, 12), which entails "attach[ing] the signifiers of fear, risk and threat to designated bodies, individuals and groups" (Hirvonen 2017, 251). Hirvonen, among the few recognising the thoroughly political status of Lacanian anxiety, has rightly pointed out that we need to understand such discursive operations not at the level of fear but of anxiety: if we accept that crises create the conditions necessary for such articulations to function in the first place, then the operative dynamic — the affective *terrain* on which securitisation discourses are constituted — is one of uncertainty. He rightly argues that reactionary discourses transform anxiety precisely by *turning it into* fear: securitisation discourse "invents objects of fear" in order to identify a source of the insecurity — "the invention of objects of fear is related to the *avoidance* of anxiety," as we need them to "project our fragmentation, insecurities, identity crises, nervousness and anxiety onto this other," for it is only "in relation to this figure of an excluded other [that] we gain total identity based on stability and purity" (ibid, 254-9).

From a Lacanian standpoint, reactionary discourse resides in the realm of the (ideological) fantasy of *completeness*; whether it is a mythical conception of the nation or of racial purity, it relies on the fantasmic suture to function (Stavrakakis 2007, 204). As such, reactionary populists are quick to 'objectify' anxiety, relying on constructible objects of fear — "straw enemies," fictional embodiments of the lack preventing the fullness of the in-group, whether race, nation, or Volk. It is here that *juissance* plays its crucial role, as reactionary discourse

implicates the other through themes of theft or sabotage, as the culprit preventing *my* enjoyment ("immigrants are ruining this country!"), or as obscenely enjoying in ways prohibited or repulsive to me (like Trump's infamous claim that "all Mexicans are rapists"). The function of this discourse is twofold: firstly, the other is discursively produced and identified as the source of the original lack, of the blockage inherent to all social relations — in other words, as embodiment of the Real source of primordial anxiety. In the second step, reactionary discourse "re-stages the encounter" within the safe confines of fantasy: if only this other could be eliminated, our mythical, promised fullness would be re-instated and social harmony would return (Daly 1999a, 224-8). Reactionary fantasy, therefore, does not just conceal insecurities, "it produces them whilst trying to offer the utopian solution in which insecurity is resolved" (Mandelbaum 2020, 457). As Mandelbaum notes, "fantasy both renders the narrative of completeness possible and prevents it from obtaining full closure": these politics of fantasy rely on the gap remaining open, but *occupied* by the other as the object of its failure (ibid, 461). The paradigmatic example of this, famously highlighted by Žižek, of course being 'the Jew' in fascist discourse, the pure positivity of the Nazi imaginary's incompleteness (Žižek 2008a, 142). The *objet a*'s unattainability is thus disavowed, and replaced by an ontic, social identity, a strategy Dubiel termed "psychoanalysis in reverse": the reactionary populist takes precisely the opposite approach to the psychoanalyst, he "seizes upon neurotic fears, cognitive insecurities and regression tendencies, systematically strengthening them in order to prevent the patient from achieving autonomy" (Dubiel, 86).

It is important to note here that, while the extensive literature on the dynamics of racist/ nationalist *juissance* constitutes perhaps the most valuable contribution of psychoanalytic literature to the study of reactionary movements, the antecedent function of anxiety in the process of designating the object of enjoyment is almost always overlooked. Lacan is very explicit in Seminar X that, between the locus of desire and its Real enjoyment, once again, stands anxiety as the "median function," the "intermediary term" that guards "the gap between desire and juissance" (Lacan, 174-5). This is of particular relevance to reactionary discourses around the other's enjoyment: as clinical psychoanalyst Paul Verhaege notes, the main manifestation of anxiety in patients arises from a "fear of being devoured, falling into the void, immixture with the other; in short: the fear of disappearing in the enjoyment of the Other" (*quoted in:* Palacios 2020, 797). Equally, we cannot understand the reactionary fantasy of "re-staging" the encounter with the other without anxiety. The Lacanian fantasy is, as Lacan stresses, the "apparatus of defence" against that which anxiety signals — in Žižek's terms, it is the

construction of an imaginary "answer to the *Che vuoi?*" of anxiety (Žižek 2008a, 128). The Lacanian fantasy functions to repress the presence of the Real, presenting instead a properly *virtual* reality as fully-sutured totality (Zižek 2006, 57). More concretely, anxiety — *qua* lack of lack — arises in the subject when the *objet a* is too *close*: the relation of any such reactionary discourse to its designated (false) *objet a* is thus, again, always accompanied by anxiety, particularly through its reliance on the gap in the fantasy remaining "open but occupied" (Daly 1999a, 233).

The productivity of anxiety

It seems, then, that an incorporation of the Lacanian conception of anxiety strengthens our understanding of some central dynamics of reactionary discourse. The astute reader however will have noticed that we now find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma regarding a progressive strategy: if anxiety is indeed as central to the very operative logics of the hegemonic process as such, and underpins and mediates the affective dimension of *all* articulations, and not just reactionary securitisation discourses, then what is to be done with respect to progressive politics? Indeed, if all hegemonic constructions perform the fantasmic suture that conceals our primal anxiety, then in virtue of what is one articulation preferable to another? How can we ground a progressive articulation as more desirable than a reactionary one (cf. Critchley 1998, 808)? And indeed, how do we make sense of Laclau's claim at the end of *New Reflections* that dislocation "must be the source for a new militancy and a new optimism" (Laclau 1990, 82)? It seems straightforward to conclude that, if reactionary discourse functions by turning anxiety into *fear*, then any progressive movement must articulate its own discourse around *hope*; in fact, a number of eminent post-foundational scholars (cf. Mouffe 2018, 74; Wodak 2021, 32) have followed such a 'Spinozan' argumentation, despite its self-evident normativity. From a Laclausian-Lacanian standpoint, however, it is clear that recourse to moralistic signifiers like hope constitutes a return to the very logic of completeness, the concealment of the lack and the suture of fantasy that is antithetical to the psychoanalytical approach to treating anxiety; in political terms, it reflects what Stavrakakis has called an "ethics of harmony," a politics that renounces the incompleteness of all subjects in favour of a *Weltanschauung* that views a fully-reconciled society free of antagonisms as attainable and desirable (Stavrakakis 1999, 112ff). While this utopian impulse is, as we have seen, evidently present in the discourse of reactionary movements, it is also the foundation of the contemporary liberal 'post-politics' and its ethics of compromise (Stavrakakis 2007, 260; cf. Mouffe 2000).

In psychoanalytical terms, the answer is radically different. As a number of scholars have noted, anxiety is not only paralysing and debilitating, but also — like Laclausian dislocation — "active" and "productive" (Miller 2006b, 24; cf. also Miller 2006a; May 1977, 374). Reflecting this duality, Miller notes that there are, in Lacan, "two approaches to anxiety," revolving around the dialectic of presence/absence of the *objet a* (Miller 2006b, 58) and reflected in what he calls the two 'statuses' of anxiety in Lacan's work, *constituted* and *constituent* anxiety. Constituted anxiety is the traumatic, abyssal encounter of the subject with its lack, the anxiety that temps the subject into the safety of the fully-sutured fantasy where discourses of harmony operate. The approach of constituent anxiety, on the other hand, is an *active* approach, not seeking completion in *objets a* but, instead, describing a "pure confrontation" with the *a*, constituted as an acknowledgment of its very loss and inherent unattainability (Miller 2006c; Žižek 2008b, 327). It is this recognition of the unavoidability of anxiety and the fantasmic support at the heart of the subject's being and its alterity to the Other — when the subject "renounces filling out the void, the lack in the Other" — that forms the basis of the most important psychoanalytical operation, which Lacan terms 'traversing the fantasy' (Žižek 2008a, 132). Only through such a confrontation with the *objet a* in its very impossibility and a recognition of our own flawed subjecthood can we find anxiety itself split, both the affect leading us into fear and fantasy, and the vehicle of our emancipation.

From the standpoint of progressive strategy, it is therefore imperative to acknowledge the primacy of constituent anxiety in our discourse. Its logic is already implicit in Laclau and Mouffe's original vision of radical democracy when they speak of "renouncing the discourse of the universal" and their aim of "institutionaliz[ing]" the "moment of tension, of openness, which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious character" (Laclau & Mouffe, 174-5); it is only though making it explicit, by creating a political project "which actively conjures with its impossibility and potential for transformation," that we can operationalise all of Lacan's insights (Daly 1999b, 91). From an organisational standpoint, it is clear that such an approach strengthens recent critiques of Laclau's "verticalism": Nunes (2021, 248) for instance has demonstrated that the 'productivity of the name' is a *functional*, rather than *organisational*, dimension of a Laclausian movement, meaning the concrete connection of individual leadership to populist movements is contingent; Eklundh (2019, 188) takes a similar approach with her notion of 'visceral ties' as a descriptor for the unity of the *Indignados* movement and thus a destabilisation of the horizontal/vertical dichotomy. The visceral affirms the importance of horizontal bonds of affect in constituting any "radical collective"; these approaches are in line

with the radical confrontation with objects of desire in our approach — of which any leader would be an example (cf. Laclau 2018, 54). Beyond this, however, Stavrakakis's notion of 'institutionalising lack' must be central to any such progressive project: this entails a radical deepening of democratic processes throughout any collective movement, opening up more arenas of exchange and systematically "detaching" processes of decision-making "from the Other" while engendering an ethos of "sustainable and interminable questioning" (Stavrakakis 2007, 262).

From a discursive standpoint, the task is much the same, to make lack *itself* the articulating principle of this radical democratic project, aiming "to create a unity *founded on* emptiness, on lack and division" (ibid, 132). This entails articulating a people not by erasing all semblance of difference but rather through their collective incompleteness; the theory of Lacan's 'lacking subject' must be expanded to include a *lacking people*, and any discourse surrounding the purity of the people must be disavowed. In line with this, there must be a constant drive to understand and acknowledge affective reactions like fear and resentment in those drawn towards reactionary discourse. Understanding the relation of such reactions to anxiety allows for their recognition, deconstruction, and reorientation; the aim of progressive politics must be to provide a discursive framework in which anxiety and its responses can be made sense of, not to alienate and exclude those whose reactions we do not share. Regarding such reorientations, Stavrakakis highlights the importance of the psychoanalytical work of *mourning*, understood as "articulating loss in a productive way," and to be contrasted to destructive melancholic fixation (ibid, 276). Both are closely related to the loss of fantasmic support: in mourning, we detach our investments while constructing new supporting narratives; melancholic fixation prevents detachment and fuels resentment (Glynos, 106). Any progressive project must champion the work of mourning, developing an openness to reorientation and change into a strength, always remaining receptive to new arguments and new information and avoiding the paralysis of doxa.

More fundamentally, however, the approach of constituent anxiety calls for the articulation of a new kind of securitisation discourse. The approach of constituent anxiety situates any progressive project as radically external to the ethics of harmony; external, therefore, to any totalitarian projects — including the vision of a reconciled communist society — but also external to liberal democracy's ethics of compromise. This implies a vigilance against any discourse that disavows the fantasmic nature of the *objet a* in favour of an ontic identity, any imaginary whose horizon is a society free of antagonism, as well as discourses of hope, part of

the "pedagogy of waiting" which prevents us from acting in the present (Invisible Committee 2017, 16). The securitisation discourse to replace it must dislocate the very notion of security itself, displacing it into the ontological register and confronting it not through the fantasmic illusion of control but through an open engagement with the impossibility of ultimate security as such. Only in this way can we create the preconditions for a "society that opens itself to a continuous process of questioning its own institutional structures and power relations, which detaches itself from fixed markers of certainty" (Stavrakakis 2007, 262). It means a radical recognition of the impossibility of 'perfect solutions,' including the project of democracy itself; we must, rather, find *juissance* in the constant, asymptotic approach through partial improvements, what Daly calls "a driving enthusiasm for [democracy's] impossible mission" (Daly 1999b, 93).

In place of a conclusion

The present contribution hopes to have outlined the theoretical locus as well as the practical and strategic importance of an engagement with the politics of anxiety within the Laclausian corpus and the study of populist phenomena more broadly. While it is clear that this paper cannot claim to have presented a conclusive articulation of a progressive politics of anxiety, it hopes to have provided the necessary contours to serve as a starting point for further analyses in the future. Today's conjuncture of radical uncertainty, rapid transformations and climate anxiety presents the ideal strategic terrain for a discourse of constituent anxiety to resonate. Only a project able to recognise the radical transformative potential of a collective platform based around the politics of the present will be able to generate the change that the coming years will necessitate. As Laclau concludes in *New Reflections*: "the future is indeterminate and certainly not guaranteed for us; but that is precisely why it is not lost either."

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