

Tragedy, Then Farce: Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Populism

Alexander Stagnell

Abstract: Slavoj Žižek is frequently portrayed as the paradigmatic anti-populist thinker. Yet he is also routinely criticized for endorsing populist causes in contemporary politics, not least after his infamous remarks concerning Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This article aims to approach this supposed contradiction by examining Žižek's theory of populism. Rather than reading his debate with Ernesto Laclau as primarily a confrontation between reformist populism and revolutionary communism, the article approaches it as a fundamental disagreement over the relationship between theory and political practice. Through a close reading of Žižek's engagement with Laclau, the analysis reveals how Žižek critiques what he perceives as a fetishistic tendency in Laclau's thought which ultimately produces a deficient account of universalization and results in the domestication of the constitutive negativity marked by the Lacanian *objet a*.

Keywords: Žižek, Laclau, populism, *objet a*, fetish

In the concluding remarks of *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau famously defines Žižek's "Martian politics" as being "grounded in two incompatible ontologies"¹: a Freudian theory of the unconscious and a Hegelian-Marxist theory of history. As an alternative to this supposedly irreconcilable divide, Laclau offers up his own pairing of Freud (and ultimately Lacan) with Gramsci, claiming it to be superior to Žižek's approach, which strays too far into Hegelian obscurities and thereby undermines the core insights of psychoanalysis. As a result, Laclau argues that anti-capitalist struggle faces a choice between different political practices ultimately grounded in antagonistic ontologies: either it must operate in accordance with populist negativity – where capitalism constitutes the outside of an anti-capitalist struggle, and through this position unites particular demands as a "people" – or through "total immanence", where the emancipatory subject must arrive from some unknown beyond to save us from the all-encompassing system of capitalism. This total immanence, Laclau claims, is also the reason why Žižek is "left without any concrete historical actor for his anti-capitalist struggle", as every subjective position is always-already an effect of the existing system, ultimately driving him into "political nihilism."²

Much of their continued debate, as well as the accompanied commentary, came to focus on this opposition in political practice, reducing the quarrel to a question of whether the left should strive for reformist populism or revolutionary communism. However, what is lost in this approach, framing the debate as a battle between two fully-fledged theoretical systems and the respective political practices they support, is a more fundamental rift in how the relationship between ontology and political practice is depicted. To fully grasp this difference, we should begin

at a point that seemingly confirms Laclau's position that Žižek lacks a coherent theory of the emancipatory subject: Žižek's analysis of populism.

Although Žižek is often described as an anti-populist thinker, his position on concrete populist politics appears at times contradictory, shifting between support and dismissal, sometimes within a single text. In 2004, discussing Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With America?* in which the author analyzes a growing populist alliance in the U.S. between blue-collar workers and financial interests opposing the liberal elite, Žižek, for instance, suggested that potential allies for the left might be found "beyond the 'rainbow coalition' of radical liberals and their single-issue struggles, and towards those who they see as their enemy"³, i.e., the unholy populist alliance. Five years later, Žižek returned to Frank's analysis at a time when a nascent left populist movement had begun protesting the economic policies enacted after the 2008 financial crisis. However, at this point the "conservative populism" Frank had described no longer offered a potential ally. Rather, populism was just another way to "convince the chicken to walk freely into the slaughterhouse" without the need for force or repression.⁴ In other words, the recommendation had changed, as Žižek now claimed that "[t]he populist slogan 'Save Main Street, not Wall Street!' is thus totally misleading, a form of ideology at its purest."⁵ Populism was even framed of as one of the socialist threats against communism proper, as the former, "in place of the egalitarian collective, offers an organic community"⁶.

Over the years, this indecisiveness has continued, as Žižek has oscillated between encouraging and dismissing specific populist strategies. This seemingly fickle approach is perhaps best captured in one of the chapter titles from *In Defense of Lost Causes*: "Populism is (sometimes) good enough in practice, but not in theory". But how should this paradoxical overturning of conventional wisdom regarding theory and practice be read? Should the left "learn from the rise of Rightist populism, because WeToo can play the populist game" or is "[t]he supreme populist moment (referendum victory) immediately reverted into capitulation, into confession of impotence with regard to the capitalist order"?⁷ Is this apparent indecisiveness merely a symptom of Laclau's thesis, namely that Žižek lacks a theory of who might be the subject of anti-capitalist struggle? Could it be explained by the fact that, at times, he grows tired of waiting for the Martians, which would help to account for these sudden shifts in his support for, or dismissal of, populist politics? Or might Žižek's analysis of populist politics still be salvaged? Determining this requires a careful examination of his critical engagement with Laclau's theory of populism. However, before turning to Žižek's critique, it is necessary to first outline some of the core questions inherent in Laclau's conception of populism.

The Nature of Populism

As noted, many have interpreted Žižek's critique of Laclau's populist logic as a sign of orthodox Marxist reductionism in which all other political struggles are treated as ephemeral, with class struggle as the sole, authentic terrain of politics. As Biglieri and Cadahia write: "Žižek returns to the traditional elements of the Marxist criticism of populism by once again associating it with fascism, and painting it as a hoax that distances the working class from its own definitive historical objective: to destroy the capitalist system."⁸ In other words, Žižek is accused of treating populism as nothing more than an ideology in the guise of false consciousness or smoke screen generated by the ruling class to obscure the true social order, thereby leaving the proletariat unaware of its purpose as the true subject of history. But to assume that Žižek would operate with such an antiquated notion of ideology – one based on a strict distinction between false and true consciousness – is to overlook the part of his work that even Laclau himself, despite his accusations, lauded in the preface to the first edition of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* by calling it a contribution of the "highest order".⁹

It is well known that Laclau, to a significant extent, modeled his own understanding of ideology on Žižek's early work. Nevertheless, Laclau's own conception of the relationship between ideology and populism remains at best vaguely defined. Throughout *On Populist Reason*, he repeatedly distances himself from the idea that populism constitutes an ideology.¹⁰ However, this critique primarily targets the notion of ideology prevalent in mainstream populism studies, which tends to oppose it to either populist *rhetoric* or populist *movements*. Yet, if we return to Laclau's preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* he highlights precisely Žižek's "description and theoretization of the fundamental mechanisms of ideology (identification, the role of the master signifier, ideological fantasy)"¹¹ as the latter's main contribution. Several of the Lacanian notions that Laclau here highlights in Žižek's work became crucial to Laclau's own theorization of the populist logic, including how "the *point de capiton* is conceived as the fundamental ideological operation; [how] 'fantasy' becomes an imaginary scenario concealing the fundamental split or 'antagonism' around which the social field is structured; [and how] 'identification' is seen as the process through which the ideological field is constituted."¹² When Laclau reintroduces *point de capiton* in *On Populist Reason*, he also writes:

It is clear that, without nodal points, there would be no configuration at all. [...] This is exactly what we have seen in the case of popular identities: without the quilting point of an equivalential identification, democratic equivalences would remain merely virtual.¹³

A few pages later, he adds:

A final and crucial dimension must, however, be added to our analysis. Our whole approach to populism turns, as we have seen, around the following theses: (1) the emergence of the 'people' requires the passage – via equivalences – from isolated, heterogeneous demands to a 'global' demand which involves the formation of political frontiers and the discursive construction of power as an antagonistic force; (2) since, however, this passage does not follow from a mere analysis of the heterogeneous demands themselves – there is no logical, dialectical or semiotic transition from one level to the other – something qualitatively new has to intervene. This is why 'naming' can have the retroactive effect I have described.¹⁴

This act of naming, catachrestically supplying an absent fullness with a name and elevating it into a thing, constitutes the ultimate populist act, as it is the gesture that causes a new people to emerge. This attempt at closure is simultaneously necessary and impossible: its absence would leave us trapped in pure difference, while its completion would entail total equivalence, both of which making meaning impossible. As Laclau concludes in his 1996 text on the notion of ideology,

[t]his [the elimination of either the logic of difference or equivalence] is the dream of the various versions of the 'end of ideology', generally associated with the ideal of pure, no-political, administrative practices. In both cases, closure would not be an illusion but a reality. But both are impossible dreams, ensuring that we will continue living in an ideological universe.¹⁵

It thus appears as if the populist logic, described as the political logic *par excellence*, must be understood as taking the form of an ideological frame. This logic operates along a spectrum between the two impossible extremes of pure difference and total equivalence, continuously attempting the impossible act of closure through which a temporary hegemonic order is established. This formal description of populism, in turn, is intended to guide political actors in formulating their own populist strategies. Hence, when Laclau describes the populist logic, he often seems to assume a unity of theory and praxis in the vein of classical Marxism-Leninism, an assumption also frequently echoed in the secondary literature. Moreover, by adopting the notion of 'rhetoricity' and linking it to concepts such as 'articulation' and 'hegemony', Laclau also positions himself within a long lineage of structuralist thought that identifies in the rhetorical tradition a particular understanding of language as an activity through which a life-world is produced or articulated.

This idea, ingrained in the rhetorical tradition, carries with it a danger already noted by Aristotle – for whom rhetoric instead should

rather strive toward describing how the orators tried to convince their different audiences – , namely that rhetorical theory can be easily converted into a heuristic tool for of producing concrete practical effects. Such problematic conceptions of rhetoric's inventive and productive powers parallel critiques of Laclau's work, which accuse it of sometimes reproducing an instrumentalist understanding of praxis.¹⁶ Although Laclau defends his theory against these charges by questioning the validity of the distinction between pure instrumentalism and more complex notions of linguistic practice by pointing out that they build on a naïve idea of cause and effect, his frequent references to rhetoric and the rhetorical tradition suggests an imagined unity of theory and praxis in the form a practical art, a *technê*. The risk of this position is that it presupposes a unified subject capable of acting upon, or even creating, the world in and through language. Such a view, however, undermines any understanding of the subject as constituted by negativity, as an effect of contradiction.

In "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor", Laclau approaches the relation between rhetorical theory and practice through the ways in which "the metaphor-metonymy continuum can be seen as fully operating in the structuration of political spaces."¹⁷ He begins by warning against two common but misleading conclusions concerning this question : (i) the view that rhetorical theory constitutes a transcendental limit of human experience, where theory can only be studied as through its appearance as categories in the empirical world; or (ii), the treatment of the theoretical and the empirical level as "fully enclosed universes" only haphazardly connected by "purely external homologies".¹⁸ Against these claims, Laclau instead emphasizes that "no level has transcendental priority over the other, so that their very interaction should be seen as an area of displacements blurring the frontiers between the empirical and the transcendental."¹⁹ In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau also offers a depiction of this displacement under the rubric of the 'partiality of the universal'. Any hegemonic system, in his account, is grounded in a radical heterogeneity, appearing as both an excess and a present absence. This heterogeneity, the Lacanian Real, is a radical outside that leaves a trace in the hegemonic order, and since it is at the same time excess and lack it allows for different particulars to (temporarily) fill its space and take on the role of overdetermining element producing a contingent – and ultimately failed – unity.²⁰ As Laclau writes:

The particular has transformed its very partiality in the name of a transcendent universality. That is why its ontological function can never be reduced to its ontic content. But because this ontological function can be present *only* when it is attached to an ontic content, the latter becomes the horizon of all there is – the point at which the ontic and the ontological fuse into a contingent but indivisible unity. [...] Since society as fullness has no proper meaning beyond the

ontic contents that embody it, those contents are, for the subjects attached to them, *all there is*.²¹

Although this unity never fully totalizes the symbolic space, the fusion of the ontic and the ontological “into a contingent but indivisible unity” tends to domesticate the destabilizing force of *objet a*. As populist subjectivity, in this framework, emerges as the effect of this contingent bridging of the gap, whereby one contingently selected ontic element, in its fusing with the ontological level, patches over a primordial field of heterogeneous antagonisms, it also provides the antagonism with a stable, external opposition between the people and the elite. Hence, as the fundamental antagonism is transposed onto the social antagonism, it rendered as external, taking the form of the people and its enemy. The externality should, however, not be understood in a Schmittian sense, but as the mark of “the very possibility of my not being”²². This enemy remains external to my own identity, in particular if we follow Laclau’s critique of the dialectical approach to understanding antagonism. In other words, the antagonism is internal to a specific symbolic field, but it remains external to the populist identity to which it provides the foundation. It is precisely here that Žižek’s critique of Laclau strikes: this externalization makes possible Laclau’s unification of theory and praxis. By locating the antagonism outside the subject, Laclau can envision a political logic capable of strategic articulation, but only at the cost of obscuring this subject’s relation to its constitutive negativity.

The Fetishism of Rhetoric

The core of Žižek’s critique of Laclau’s project was already formulated in his reading of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. *In nuce*, Žižek’s challenges Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony for taking as its starting point “an antagonistic fight with the external adversary”, thereby overlooking a more radical interpretation of antagonism: that the other only appears as the stumbling block of the subject’s completion because the subject itself is shot through with inconsistencies. As Žižek argues, the enemy is not simply external, but “an externalization of my own auto-negativity, of my self-hindering.”²³ From this standpoint, any attempt to overcome the other in pursuit of a political demand is ultimately self-defeating, as the loss of the other brings about the destruction of the identity that emerges from this demand.

Laclau clearly took this critique to heart, as evidenced by his extended engagement with Lacanian theory as a way to refute Žižek’s objections. We also see how this came to affect his understanding of populism, as he, in *On Populist Reason*, for instance wrote: “The ‘people’ will always be something more than the pure opposite of power. There is a Real of the ‘people’ which resists symbolic integration.”²⁴ This invocation

of the Lacanian Real as that which escapes symbolization, suggests that every popular identity is by nature incomplete and thus haunted by an antagonism. In a later text, the antagonism of popular identities is further clarified by Laclau:

Thus, antagonism has a revelatory function. On the one hand, the moment of identity institution transforms an ontic object into symbol of my possibility of *being*; but, on the other, the presence of the antagonistic force shows the contingent character of that identity investment.²⁵

At first glance, this might appear as Laclau's response to Žižek's early critique, an attempt to theorize an immanent antagonism which reveals itself in the construction of the other (the one who by negation makes me who I am, while also, by virtue of its partiality, reveals the limits to this identity). Yet, the ambiguity remains unresolved. Are we to understand the 'Real of the people' as some kind of noumenal kernel of unsymbolizable hard matter, so that the antagonism of any popular identity stems from the struggle between whatever contingent symbolic attachment with which the subject identifies and an unreachable core of being? Or is the antagonism immanent to the process of universalization by which a particularity is elevated to universality in the process of constructing a popular identity?

The former interpretation risks falling into some kind of transcendental idealism, a pitfall that, according to Laclau, already haunts Žižek's understanding of the Lacanian Real.²⁶ Although Žižek, on his part, has pointed out similar transcendentalist tendencies in Laclau's thought, his most pertinent critique is nonetheless directed at the second point, namely Laclau's understanding of the process of universalization. To illustrate, consider Žižek's own words concerning the limit of populism as a starting point. He writes:

As such, populism by definition contains a minimum, an elementary form, of ideological mystification, which is why, although it is effectively a formal frame or matrix of political logic that can be given different political twists (reactionary-nationalist, progressive-nationalist), nonetheless, insofar as, in its very notion, it displaces the immanent social antagonism into the antagonism between the unified people and its external enemy, it harbors in the last instance a long-term protofascist tendency.²⁷

A straightforward reading of this passage might evoke the already delineated critique against Žižek: that populism, in its inability to acknowledge the true antagonism of capitalist society always risks straying too close to fascism, the ultimate dream of an organicist-corporatist society purged of all forms of conflict. From this reading, truly

emancipatory politics must, in order to avoid the fascist lure, therefore side with the proletariat as the figure of the immanent antagonism of capitalist society and the only political subject capable of enacting true change. Populism, in contrast, is conceived of as a dead end, always-already tainted by fascist ideological mystification. However, this would entail that Žižek's critique of populism is primarily political, that its ontic content – the constitution of a people – constantly runs the risk of devolving into a fascist conspiracy concerning the Other. In other words, that it is a critique primarily directed at the “good enough” practices of populist politics. But if we instead are to follow Žižek's formula more rigorously, the shortcomings of populism must rather be located at the level of theory: Populism is inadequate as a notion articulating the process of how meaning is fixated. The issue, as we will see, lies in how Laclau develops a notion of the *rhetoricity* of ontology and how it collapses into what is essentially a fetish of rhetoric.

As previously mentioned, Laclau has often depicted Žižek's critique as arising from a problematic attachment to the possibility of a non-reified or non-ideological subjective position. Yet Žižek's concerns are not so easily dismissed. Just a few paragraphs before his critique of populism's fascist tendencies, Žižek further specifies his issue with Laclau's externalization of the antagonism:

Although Laclau's theory of populism stands out as one of today's great (and, unfortunately for social theory, rare) examples of true conceptual stringency, one should note a couple of problematic features. The first one concerns his very definition of populism. The series of formal conditions he enumerates are not sufficient to justify calling a phenomenon populist; one needs also to consider the way in which populist discourse displaces the antagonism and constructs the enemy. In populism, the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice; symmetrically, our own – the populist political agent's – identity is also perceived as preexisting the enemy's onslaught.²⁸

Laclau explicitly dismissed this critique as grounded in Žižek's “crude ‘false consciousness’ model”²⁹, supposing that the latter presumes that “any incarnation of the universal in the particular should be conceived as ‘reification’”³⁰. But the opposition that Žižek is pointing to is not one between a reified (and thus false) externalization and an unmediated, immanent expression of the antagonism. Rather, what he emphasizes is an underlying impossibility that perhaps most clearly reveals itself if we turn to Laclau's appreciation for, an appropriation of, the rhetorical tradition.

The first steps toward what might be called Laclau's ontologization of rhetoric, his claims concerning the rhetoricity of language, are found

in the French structuralist and post-structuralist rediscovery of rhetoric during the middle of the last century. Central to this revival was the notion of *l'écart*: distance, difference, deviation, or gap. One key question within this tradition was whether rhetorical language should be seen as a deviation from a neutral and natural counterpart by establishing a distance to the latter, or whether this gap or deviation, named by rhetoric, is intrinsic to language itself.³¹ As the former interpretation of gap reduces rhetoric to linguistic embellishment and flourish, Laclau naturally took up the second position, often returning to this gap, i.e., 'rhetorical/tropological displacements', as constitutive, as the very ontological foundation that the notion of rhetoricity is intended to capture.³²

However, even in this more radical framing, the risk remains that rhetoric inadvertently carries with it a notion of a subject capable of opening up the gap or enacting the deviation through the act of naming. This is due to the fact that a conception of rhetoric as intentional or purposeful language runs deep in the rhetorical tradition, perhaps first formulated by Aristotle who, in the introduction to *The Rhetoric*, points to *προαίρεσις* as the mark of the proper rhetorician.³³ Rhetorical language, in other word, has always been understood from a perspective of (moral) choices and intention, presupposing an acting subject. In modernity, the notion of deviation tied this intentionality in rhetorical language to issues surrounding invention. Regardless of whether the deviation introduced too much of the individual into discourse (Kant famously wanted to confine rhetoric to a form of entertainment), or if its form of deviation hampered true individual creativity (Hugh Blair denounced those who believed that learning rhetorical categories could aid with invention), this rhetorical gap is always understood as an effect of a subject intervening in discourse.

This risk of voluntarism seems to bleed over into Laclau's anti-foundationalist theory of articulation, especially as it concerns the act of naming.³⁴ This is particularly clear in Laclau's reading of Badiou, in which he writes that a "contamination between the evental and the situational is the very fabric of social life", meaning that "[t]he subject is only partially the subject inspired by the event; the naming of the unrepresentable in which the event consists involves reference to an unrepresented within a situation, and can only proceed through the displacement of elements already present in that situation."³⁵ In other words, while the subject of the event is transformed, it is never completely severed from the situation from which it emerges into a the new political identity. The act of naming requires an investment which is "catachrestical through and through"³⁶, i.e., it assumes an actor capable of naming the unnamable without being completely obliterated by this event. Or as Žižek puts it, Laclau's project is haunted by a "post-Cartesian mode of subjectivity which cuts its links with ontology and hinges on a contingent act of decision."³⁷

Turning to the rhetorical tradition may also help clarify the second major critique that Žižek levels against Laclau's theory of populism:

namely, that “the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity”³⁸. Against this charge, Laclau argues that reification is an insufficient concept for grasping the logic of hegemony, insofar as it presupposes the ideological model of the fetish sustaining a fantasy of an unmediated or direct access to the world.³⁹ In this respect, Laclau situates his reproach to Žižek within his larger argument that the entire theory surrounding commodity fetishism constitutes the “blind spot” of the Marxist tradition.⁴⁰

Yet, by distancing himself from Žižek’s supposed attachment to the fetish of ideology as false-consciousness, Laclau also opens a new set of theoretical tensions with regards to the problem of naming. Central to these issues is Laclau’s often-repeated claim that the empty signifier in language functions homologically to gold or the general equivalent in the economy. By drawing on this structural homology between language and economy, Laclau does not banish the fetish, but rather reintroduces it in equating language as money in the form of the general equivalent, the point at which it becomes *the commodity par excellence*. Or, as Marx put it: “[t]he riddle of the money fetish is therefore merely the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes”.⁴¹

However, the issue of the fetish, whether in rhetoric or in economy, cannot be reduced to a false image of the world. In other words, a fetish does not constitute a false consciousness about for instance the popular identity (which, through this mistake, would open the doors to a descent into fascism) or of money as the general equivalent. Rather, the fetish, through a process of reification, allows us to treat abstract relations as if they were material, i.e., the relations between signifiers as if they constitute the relationship between people, and relations of values as if they were the relations between commodities. This does not make these relations false: relations between people, as well as between commodities, truly operate through such abstractions in our daily lives. Instead, the fetish allows for something traumatic to vanish from our perception, meaning it can “play the very constructive role of allowing us to cope with the harsh reality”.⁴² By perceiving every identity as the effect of transformative rhetorical practices temporarily fixing meaning, the unbearable dimension of structural determination within capitalist society is allowed to disappear from the field of vision. Ideas like these have also been instrumental to the rediscovery of rhetoric since the middle of the last century, wherein linguistic practices are depicted as primarily creating and relating identities. Hence, the problem for Žižek is not that the creation of popular identities constitutes a form of false consciousness (as long as it is not in the form of a proletariat). Rather, it is Laclau’s failure to take into account the historical need that this fetish serves in modernity that is the point of contention. Treating an abstract network of relations as part of the material world allows the subject to cope with the crushing weight of determination within the capitalist system. What is lacking in

Laclau's depiction is, in other words, the undermining force of *objet a* as that which holds the place of what is excluded from the structure.

The Domestication of *Objet a*

In the contemporary political landscape, Marx's old formula 'first as tragedy, then as farce' seems particularly adapt when applied to the trajectory of populism. The hopeful energy of the early 2010s, marked by for instance the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, and the electoral breakthroughs of movements like Syriza and Podemos, soon gave way to tragedy: the rise of right-wing populists like Donald Trump and the repeated failures of left-populist political movements to translate their popularity into durable structural changes. Today, the farcical dimension of populism is not only embodied by the theatrical antics of Trump and other right-wing populist leaders across the globe, but also by in increasingly populist radical center. This centrist establishment, once aligned with progressive causes as a way to combat a more radical left, has begun disavow 'wokeness' and the concern for representation and inclusion of minorities, instead positioning itself as a voice for the poor and the working-class against the alleged overreach of 'woke PMC's' and 'symbolic capitalists'.⁴³

This centrist attempt at populism offers an image of a society in need of balancing the relations between classes, a manner of depicting class relations which Žižek associates with fascism and populism. What is assumed within such perspectives is the restoration, or at least the formation, of a harmonious society capable of, at the minimum, limiting the effect of social antagonisms. However, "[f]or a Marxist," as Žižek writes, "the relationship between classes is by definition that of a discord and imbalance, so that the only way to abolish class antagonism is to abolish classes as such."⁴⁴ Yet, is it not precisely the same issue that plagues Laclau's populist theory? Consider his own example of the populist logic in action:

Let me give an example of how isolated demands emerge, and how they start their process of articulation. This example, although it is imaginary, corresponds pretty well to a situation widely experienced in Third World countries. Think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in the shantytowns on the outskirts of a developing industrial city. Problems of housing arise, and the group of people affected by them request some kind of solution from the local authorities. Here we have a *demand* which initially is perhaps only a *request*. If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter; but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands – problems with water, health, schooling, and so on. If the situation remains unchanged

for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a *differential* way (each in isolation from the others), and an *equivalential* relation is established between them.⁴⁵

What this example reveals is that the emergence of a populist subject, the people, is contingent not upon any immanent structural antagonism, but on the failure of the state to meet isolated demands. The political identity that emerges is, at root, a response to administrative inadequacy, not to the irreconcilable logic of class struggle. In this view, populism becomes a reactive movement aimed at restoring balance, an appeal to the authorities to rectify a dysfunctional distribution of resources or attention. A call for populism is, in other words, a call for a rebalancing of the current configuration of society. This in turn brings us to Žižek's critique of liberal democracy as the ultimate horizon for Laclauian populism. Apropos the relation between antagonism and democracy in Laclau, Žižek writes:

Democracy it may seem, thus not only can include antagonism; it is the only political form that solicits and presupposes it, that *institutionalizes* it. What other political systems perceive as a threat (the lack of a "natural" pretender to power), democracy elevates into a "normal" positive condition of its functioning. The place of power is empty, there is no natural claimant for it, *polemos* or struggle is irreducible, and every positive government must be fought out, gained through *polemos*.⁴⁶

Against the threat of post-political depoliticization, a return to populism as "the democratic element in contemporary representative systems" appears tempting. However, as this struggle between the existing hegemony and its populist counterpart is inscribed within an existing framework, as a call from the people to the big Other to fulfill its demands, democracy must be assumed as "a basic structural feature"⁴⁷ of every populist situation. The issue, once again, lies in theory not in practice. So, when Žižek claims that "[t]he conclusion to be drawn is that populism (the way we supplemented Laclau's definition of it) is not the only mode of existence of the excess of antagonism over the institutional-democratic frame of regulated agonistic struggle"⁴⁸, we need to think the excess of populism, the reason that it is sometimes good enough in practice, from a different theoretical perspective. The aim must be to avoid what Žižek describes as Laclau's mistake of inscribing into democracy an antagonistic struggle as the middle ground between two extremes, "on the one side, the celebration of heroic struggle-confrontation that suspends democracy and its rules [...] [and] on the other side, the evacuation of true struggle out of the democratic space so that all that remains is anemic rule regulated competition [...]."⁴⁹ Such a perspective only constitutes a domestication of the immanent antagonism.

In *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, Žižek clarifies that the issue neglected by Laclau in his understanding of antagonism concerns how the fundamental “antagonism is ultimately the antagonism between the particular element which hegemonizes universality and the element which, within this universality, stands for what is excluded from it.”⁵⁰ Laclau’s theory here gives privilege to the first part of the logic of hegemony, namely the quilting point or the empty signifier. But in doing so, he “does seem to succumb to the temptation of reducing the troubles of today’s Left to a ‘mere rhetorical’ failure”.⁵¹ By focusing exclusively on the empty signifier, “the privileged particular element which ‘colors’ its universality”,⁵² the main difference between a hegemonic and a counter-hegemonic order is reduced to a contingent choice of, or investment in, a certain element out of an original heterogeneity. On the ontological level, the act itself always remains identical. Laclau even admits this implicitly in his discussion of Žižek’s and Badiou’s respective ethics, as he claims that “from an ethical point of view, fascism and communism are indistinguishable”.⁵³ The ontological distinction between their respective acts of catachrestic naming is, thereby, rendered impossible, as both constitutes an act investing into a particular in order to raise it to the status of universality. The only difference that remains are their ‘colors’: the particular manner in which a certain empty signifier temporarily sutures the system. The issue with Laclau’s theory is, therefore, the idea that “the logic of hegemony and that of the Lacanian *objet a* largely overlap”,⁵⁴ meaning that the rhetorical act of naming this impossible object is part of the same process by which “the ontic and the ontological fuse into a contingent but indivisible unit”.⁵⁵

For Žižek, the *objet a* and the empty signifier cannot be collapsed. Rather, he emphasizes the antagonistic relation between the two, wherein the former is that which, “within a structure, holds the place of what is excluded from it, of its externality”.⁵⁶ This object, which exists in an antagonistic relationship with the ordering principle, makes the totalization of the empty signifier impossible. The failure to take this into account has significant implications for how the subject can be understood. According to Laclau’s populist logic, where the *objet a* and the empty signifier are part of the same process of fusing the ontic and ontological level, the establishment of a new empty signifier only affects change at the level of the fetish, without reaching the antagonism that gave birth to it. The subject, in this scenario, only appears as an effect of this process, receiving a new place in the signifying change based on a transformation in the point of suture. Or, as Laclau put it: “Against Žižek, I maintain that the overdetermined nature of all political identities is not established a priori in a transcendental horizon, but is always the result of concrete processes and practices.”⁵⁷

Žižek response to such critiques should be read in a two-fold manner. Firstly, that the question is not whether the subject was always-

already present, or that it appears as a product of discourse. Rather, the “*subject itself IS the rip in reality, what tears apart its seamless texture*”, meaning that it “not only constitutively relates to some trauma, haunted by some primordial trauma, [the] subject IS the trauma, a traumatic cut in the order of being.”⁵⁸ As such, subject as the name for the rip in reality stands for the point of excess in a given order. In the current order, this is the excess that has to be presented with its servitude in the guise of freedom in an attempt to domesticate it, i.e., the proletariat. Secondly, “[t]his crack disappears in praxis”.⁵⁹ With this claim, Žižek turns against the idea of “language as an organic moment of social practice, as an active moment in a life-world.”⁶⁰ Thus, the political potential of language’s rhetoricity is not just “the endless process of successive institutions and subversions of different locations”⁶¹, it is the point where the world rips itself apart, producing a subject which covers over the resulting gap. This is also why the subject is not in control of this rhetoricity, as this structuring potential of language exists in an antagonistic relation to the subject. Hence, populism, to the extent that it works, functions not *because* of the subject it creates, but *despite* it.

Conclusion

What has been shown is how Žižek’s contradictory approach to populism – sometimes affirming it in practice while consistently rejecting it in theory – must be read as a performative *mise-en-scène* of the limits of populism as the attempted unification of theory and political praxis. Populism, first as tragedy, then as farce, is therefore not a statement concerning its historical trajectory in recent times, but a reflection of its key theoretical impasse: any leftist populism, regardless of its potential ‘successes’, will inevitably end in disaster. The ascendancy of right-wing populism over the past decade perfectly illustrates the left’s catastrophic failures following the 2008 financial crisis. Thus, the point is not that populism offers a praxis capable of overcoming the antagonisms of capitalism once and for all, nor that it provides a project of spurious infinity, constantly rebalancing the effects of an eternal antagonism embedded in social life. Instead, through Žižek’s critical engagement with Laclau’s theory, we are able to conceive of a populism that might overcome the antagonisms of today, only to bring about its own catastrophe.

However, outside the theoretical confines of the Žižek-Laclau debate, populism quickly loses this explanatory power. Its conceptual vocabulary, overdetermined by the opposition between the elite and the people, ultimately plunges us in the night in which all cows are black. This is why Žižek argues for the continued relevance of communism, not merely as a name for the capitalist antagonism, but as an idea “which transforms itself in the course of its actualization.”⁶²

- 1 Laclau 2005, p. 235
- 2 Laclau 2005, p. 238
- 3 Žižek 2004
- 4 Žižek 2009, p. 34
- 5 Žižek 2009, p. 14
- 6 Žižek 2009, p. 95
- 7 Žižek 2018
- 8 Biglieri and Cadhia 2021, p. 11
- 9 Laclau 1989, p. xv
- 10 Laclau 2005, pp. 10–14, 117
- 11 Laclau 1989, p. x
- 12 Laclau 1989, p. xi
- 13 Laclau 2005, p. 105
- 14 Laclau 2005, p. 110
- 15 Laclau 2014, p. 36. A similar argument is also put forth in Laclau 1990, p. 92.
- 16 Dallmayr 2004, p. 47
- 17 Laclau 2014, p. 67
- 18 Laclau 2014, p. 67
- 19 Laclau 2014, p. 67
- 20 Laclau 2005, pp. 223–24
- 21 Laclau 2005, p. 226
- 22 Laclau 2014, p. 113
- 23 Žižek 1990, p. 253
- 24 Laclau 2005, p. 152
- 25 Laclau 2014, p. 122
- 26 Laclau 2014, p. 152
- 27 Žižek 2006a, p. 557
- 28 Žižek 2006a, p. 555
- 29 Laclau 2014, p. 144
- 30 Laclau 2014, p. 143
- 31 Kuentz 1970; Ricœur 2006
- 32 Laclau 2014, p. 63
- 33 Aristotle *Rhetoric*, 1355b
- 34 Žižek points to this problem in Laclau's thought, Žižek 2006b, p. 197.
- 35 Laclau 2014, p. 202
- 36 Laclau 2014, p. 66
- 37 Žižek 2008, p. 173
- 38 Žižek 2006a, p. 555
- 39 Laclau 2014, pp. 142–43
- 40 Glynos and Stavrakakis 2010, p. 242
- 41 Marx 1990, p. 187
- 42 Žižek 2016, p. 175
- 43 A great illustration of this is the recent popularity of sociologist Musa Al-Gharbi's book *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradiction of a New Elite*, published a month before the election in the United States. The book has become a key reference in the narrative surrounding the Democrats' defeat at the hands of Donald Trump. Towards the end, Al-Gharbi writes: "Growing numbers of poor, working-class, and nonwhite voters are growing alienated from the Democratic Party and have been migrating to the GOP. It is difficult for symbolic capitalists to understand these trends because, again, we believe that we represent the will and interests of the marginalized and disadvantaged, while our opponents serve elite interests (and are driven by racism, sexism, authoritarianism, and ignorance)." al-Gharbi 2024, p. 304.
- 44 Žižek 2022, p. 158
- 45 Laclau 2005, p. 73
- 46 Žižek 2006a, p. 559
- 47 Žižek 2006a, p. 558
- 48 Žižek 2006a, p. 560
- 49 Žižek 2006a, p. 558
- 50 Žižek 2020, p. 318
- 51 Žižek 2006a, p. 562
- 52 Žižek 2020, p. 317
- 53 Laclau 2014, p. 200
- 54 Laclau 2014, p. 145

- 55 Laclau 2005, p. 226
- 56 Žižek 2020, p. 317
- 57 Laclau 2005, p. 249
- 58 Žižek 2020, p. 356
- 59 Žižek 2020, p. 356
- 60 Žižek 2020, p. 356
- 61 Laclau 2014, p. 64
- 62 Žižek 2016, p. 300

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