

Democracy and the Question of Power*

Ernesto Laclau

Discussion on the viability of democracy in what can be broadly conceived as a “postmodern” age has mainly turned around two central issues: 1) does not the current dispersion and fragmentation of political actors conspire against the emergence of strong social identities which could operate as nodal points for the consolidation and expansion of democratic practices?; and 2) is not this very multiplicity the source of a particularism of social aims which could result in the dissolution of the wider emancipatory discourses considered as constitutive of the democratic imaginary?

The first issue is connected with the increasing awareness of the ambiguities of those very social movements about which so many sanguine hopes were conceived in the 1970s. There is no doubt that their emergence involved an expansion of the egalitarian imaginary to increasingly wider areas of social relations. However, it also became progressively clearer that such an expansion does not necessarily lead to the aggregation of the plurality of demands around a broader collective will (in the Gramscian sense). Some years ago, for instance, in San Francisco there was widespread belief in the potential for the formation of a powerful popular pole, given the proliferation of demands coming from blacks, Chicanos, and gay people. Nothing of the kind, however, happened, among other reasons because the demands of each of these groups clashed with those of the others. Even more: does not this fragmentation of social demands make it easier for the state apparatuses to deal with them in an administrative fashion – which results in the formation of all types of clientelistic networks, capable of neutralizing any democratic opening? The horizontal expansion itself of those demands which the political system has to be sensitive to conspires against their vertical aggregation in a popular will capable of challenging the existing status quo. Political projects such as the “Third Way” or the “radical center” clearly express this ideal of creating a state apparatus sensitive to some extent to social demands, but which operates as an instrument of demobilization.

As for the second issue, its formulation runs along parallel lines. With the breaking up of the totalizing discourses of modernity, we are running the risk of being confronted with a plurality of social spaces, governed by their own aims and rules of constitution, leaving any management of the community – conceived in a global sense – in the hands of a technobureaucracy located beyond any democratic control. With this, the notion of a public sphere, to which was always linked the very *possibility* of a democratic experience, is seriously put into question. One

has only to think of Lyotard's image of the social space as consisting of a multiplicity of incommensurable language games, in which any mediation between them can only be conceived as *tort*, as an external interference which some exercise over the others.

These statements are, however, overdrawn and unilateral. For they present too rosy a picture of those features of the classical democratic experiences and discourses which the "postmodern condition" is undermining, while ignoring the possibilities of deepening such experiences that the new cultures of particularity and difference are opening. We could, in some respects, present the ensemble of the democratic tradition as dominated by an essential ambiguity: on the one hand, democracy was the attempt to organize the political space around the *universality* of the community, without hierarchies and distinctions. Jacobinism was the name of the earliest and most extreme of these efforts to constitute *one* people. On the other hand, democracy has also been conceived as the expansion of the logic of equality to increasingly wider spheres of social relations – social and economic equality, racial equality, gender equality, etc. From this point of view, democracy constitutively involves respect for differences. It goes without saying that the unilateralization of either of these tendencies leads to a perversion of democracy as a political regime. The first is confronted with the paradox of asserting an *unmediated* universality which, however, can only be obtained on the basis of *universalizing* some particularities within the community. The implicit ethnocentrism permeating the discourses of many vociferous defenders of universal reason is well known. But democracy, unilaterally conceived as the respect of difference, equally very quickly confronts its own limits, which threaten to transform it into its very opposite – i.e., it can lead to an acceptance without challenge of the "actually existing" cultural communities, ignoring the forces which, within them, fight to break their narrow and conservative cultural limits.

Thus, the ambiguity of democracy can be formulated in the following terms: it requires unity, but it is only thinkable through diversity. If either of these two incompatible dimensions prevails beyond a certain point, democracy becomes impossible. That several forms of this tension are making democracy fragile in western Europe is only too evident – witness the difficult questions concerning the status of immigrants in European countries and the explosion of all kinds of particularisms.

How are we to deal, however, with these tensions and this ambiguity once it is recognized that its terms are unavoidable but that there is no way of finding any impeccable, square-circle, solution to the problem that they pose? Our first step should, certainly, be to accept that both tensions and ambiguity are here to stay and that our only alternative is not to attempt to suppress them but to find a practical way of coping with them. What, then, does "coping" mean in this connection? One first and, apparently, obvious answer would be: "to negotiate." This is, however, too easy an answer, among other things because it is not at all clear what is involved in a *practical* negotiation. If it involves finding an ideal point of agreement between

what initially appeared as incompatible trends – as in a dialogical situation conceived à la Habermas – it is clear that the solution is theoretical and not practical, and that the term “negotiation” is actually excessive. If, however, the outcome of the negotiation is that each of the intervening forces maintains its own separate, incommensurable identity and obtains as much as it can – given its relative strength – we are simply in the terrain of Lyotard’s “tort.” It is difficult to see what can result from it as far as *democratic* politics is concerned.

Perhaps, however, the solution has to be found elsewhere, moving resolutely away from the logic of “negotiation.” Perhaps the way of properly approaching the riddle of democracy is to ask oneself whether one does not have to question the silent assumption on which both the unilateralization of incompatible trends and the negotiation between them is based: namely, the assumption that any language game that one can play within that incompatibility finds in the latter an absolute limit. Would it not be possible to engage, starting from that incompatibility of different practices, to tropologically contaminate, for instance, one incompatible trend with the other and to explore the political productivity which derives from this contamination? Perhaps the universal and the particular, the substantive and the procedural, are less impenetrable to each other once ambiguity (or undecidability) is accepted as the terrain from which any strategico-political move has to start.

Let us begin by considering some classical categories of political analysis and putting them under the pressure of the contradictory requirements dictated by the ambiguity of the democratic logic. We will see that this contradiction is not an absolute limit, but rather the condition of possibility of more complex language games which throw some light on the discursive spaces which make democracy possible. Let me say, to start with, that “hegemony” is for me the central category of political analysis. I conceive it as a special way of articulating the universal and the particular which avoids the two extremes of a foundationalist universalism – Rawls, Habermas – and a particularism which denies the possibility of any kind of mediating logic between incompatible language games. I have defined “hegemony” in my work as the type of political relation by which a particularity assumes the representation of an (impossible) universality entirely incommensurable with it.¹ It is, as a result, a relation of transient and contingent *incarnation*. To this I will add that I see democracy as a type of regime which makes fully visible the contingent character of the hegemonic link. I will organize my argument around four theses. Each will start by defining a dimension of the hegemonic link and will later derive some conclusions from each of these dimensions for the understanding of the democratic logic.

First Thesis: Asymmetry and Power

As we said, the hegemonic link presupposes a constitutive asymmetry between universality and particularity. This broadly corresponds to the distinction

established by Gramsci between a corporative and a hegemonic class. All groups are particularities within the social, structured around specific interests. But they only become hegemonic when they take up the representation of the universality of the community conceived as a whole. The question is, of course, how such a representation is possible. To start elaborating an answer to this problem, it is worthwhile quoting two texts by Marx. The first can be seen as the zero degree of hegemony:

The proletariat is coming into being in Germany as a result of the rising *industrial* development. . . . By proclaiming the *dissolution of the hitherto world order*, the proletariat merely states the *secret of its own existence*, for it *is in fact* the dissolution of that world order. By demanding the *negation of private property*, the proletariat simply raises to the rank of a principle of *society* what society has made the principle of the *proletariat*, what, without its own cooperation, is already incorporated in it as the negative result of society.²

That is, there is no dialectic between the corporative and the hegemonic dimensions: the *particular* body of the proletariat represents, by itself, unmediated universality. The difference between this road to emancipation and a hegemonic one can be seen by contrasting the above passage with the following one from the same essay, in which all the structural moments of the hegemonic operation are contained *in nuce*:

On what is a partial, a merely political revolution based? On the fact that *part of civil society* emancipates itself and attains *general* domination; on the fact that a definite class, proceeding from its *particular situation*, undertakes the general emancipation of society. . . . For the *revolution of a nation* and the *emancipation of a particular class of civil society to coincide*, for *one estate* to be acknowledged as the state of the whole society, all the defects of society must conversely be concentrated in another class, a particular estate must be looked upon as the *notorious crime* of the whole of society, so that liberation from that sphere appears as general self-liberation.³

Unlike the first road, which consisted in a non-political emancipation (for civil society constructed the universality of the community without passing through a separate political sphere), the second road presupposes political mediation as a constitutive moment (the identification of the interests of a particular class with those of society as a whole). And if for Marx only the first road constitutes true and ultimate emancipation, it is enough that the prospect of the emergence of a “universal class,” grounded in the simplification of class structure under capitalism, is not verified for political hegemony to remain the only way towards social emancipation.

The important point for our argument is that the asymmetry between the universality of the task and the particularity of the social agent capable of taking it up is the very condition of politics, for it is only as a result of it that the dualism between civil society and a public sphere could emerge. While for

Hegel the duality state/civil society was grounded in a reduction of civil society to the particularism of a system of needs, Marx's dialectic of *political* emancipation (our second passage) involves a process of mutual contamination between particularity and universality which gives emancipation its political character.

Now, if a certain particularity is able to lead the struggle against a regime perceived as a "general" or "notorious" crime, it is not so much because its differential, ontic particularity predetermines it to play such a hegemonic role, but because – given a certain constellation of forces – it is the only one which has the power to do so. Without this unevenness of power at the level of civil society there would be neither "politics" nor "hegemony" (at the limit, both terms are synonymous as both are alternative ways of naming the constitutive asymmetry between universality and particularity). Here we find a first defining dimension of the hegemonic relation: *unevenness of power is constitutive of it.*

This can be seen even more clearly if we compare the hegemonic (i.e., political) link with some non-political ways of reaching the universality of the community – Hobbes' Leviathan and Marx's notion of *human* emancipation (the one alluded to in our first quotation). Hobbes explicitly denies the existence of any unevenness of power in the "state of nature." For him, in the state of nature, all members of society have equal power. As a result, as each tends to its own aims, which clash with those of all the others, there is a constitutive stalemate. Society is radically unable to create, by itself, any social "order." The consequence is that the covenant which surrenders *total* power to the sovereign cannot be a *political* act, as it is just the rational decision of all members of society and does not presuppose any clash between antagonistic wills. For strictly the opposite reasons, the same elimination of politics takes place with the Marxian notion of a fully self-determined, emancipated society. As the proletariat as universal class realizes the universality of the community at the level of civil society, no hegemonic articulation is needed to reach the latter. Power and universality are strictly incompatible with each other. The state is there only to start the slow process of its withering away. The Saint-Simonian motto that Marxism incorporated – "from the government of men to the administration of things" – consummates this transition to a non-political conception of the management of the community.

If we now come back to the question of democracy, we can see that its precondition is the same as the precondition of hegemony: the constitutive asymmetry between universality and particularity. Democracy presupposes that the place of power remains empty (Lefort) and that it does not predetermine in its very structure the nature of the force which is going to occupy it. Unlike a hierarchical society – such as the *Anciens Régimes* – where there is a strict continuity between the universal *form* of the community and the *content* which fills it, democracy presupposes a drastic separation between the two. In order to have democracy we need particular forces that *occupy* the empty place of power but do not identify with it. This means that there is only democracy if the gap between universality and particularity is never filled but is, on the contrary, ever reproduced. Which

also means that democracy is only possible on a *hegemonic* terrain. However, the latter implies, as we have seen, that relations of power are constitutive of it, from which we can deduce that power is also constitutive of democracy. While in Marx's notion of human emancipation the obsolescence of power was synonymous with the very substance of the emancipatory process, *political* emancipation can only mean the displacement of the existent relations of power – the construction of a new power but not its radical elimination. Perceiving this was the historical achievement of Gramsci, whose theory of hegemony subverted Marxist theorization by introducing an arsenal of new concepts – historical bloc, war of position, integral state, intellectual and moral leadership – which reintroduced the political dimension into the very logic of the emancipatory process. This is highly relevant for contemporary societies, where the fragmentation of social identities gives democracy its specific fragility, but also its inherent political possibilities.

A main conclusion of this argument is that a certain visibility of its own contingency is inherent to democracy – that is, a posing and, at the same time, a withdrawal of its own contents. One has to advance certain concrete, substantial aims in the course of democratic political competition, but at the same time one has to assert the *contingency* of those aims; if one asserted their constitutive character, one would have to assert at the same time that the place of power is not empty, for there would be no democracy if it was not occupied in a certain way. In that case, democracy would be one more substantive blueprint of society. But this is not the case; if democratic visibility involves both the advancing of some aims and the assertion of their contingent character, one has to conclude that an ontological difference between the ontic contents of the aims advanced by the various political forces and a specific ontological dimension permeating those contents, which lies in the permanent assertion of their contingent nature, is constitutive of democracy.

One could present this argument in terms of the distinction between metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor grounds its work in analogical relations; in that sense it tends to essentialize the link between the terms of the analogy (in our case, it tends to suture the relation between the empty place of power and the force occupying it). Metonymy, on the contrary, is grounded in mere relations of contiguity; in that sense, the contingent character of the tropological displacement it initiates becomes fully visible. Democracy is suspended in an undecidable game between metaphor and metonymy: each of the competing forces in the democratic game tends to make as permanent as possible the occupation of the empty place of power; but if there was no simultaneous assertion of the contingent character of this occupation, there would be no democracy. Is this not the same as asserting that the terrain of democracy is that of hegemonic logics?

Second Thesis: Incompleteness and Renegotiation

That power is embedded in hegemony is, however, only a first dimension of the hegemonic link – one which we have explained in terms of the asymmetry

between the particularity of the hegemonic force and the universality of the task. But if that was all there is in the hegemonic link, the popular support for the force overthrowing the regime – seen, in Marx’s terms, as the “notorious crime of the whole of society” – would be limited to that act of overthrowing and would not give place to a more permanent identification by which a coincidence arises between the “revolution of the nation” and the “emancipation” of a particular class of civil society. What is the source of this more prolonged coincidence without which “hegemony” would be inconceivable? I think that the answer should be found in the fact that the regime that is a “notorious crime” is constructed around an internal split of its own identity. It is, on the one hand, this *particular* regime but, on the other, if it is going to be the notorious crime *of the whole of society*, its own particularity has to be seen as the symbol of something different and incommensurable with it: the obstacle which prevents society from coinciding with itself, from reaching its own fullness. Let us just think what happens when society is confronted with generalized disorder: what is needed is *some kind* of order, and the particular content of the force which brings it about becomes a secondary matter. The same happens with oppression: if a regime is seen as incarnating evil or oppression *in general*, its name tendentially loses its concrete reference and becomes the name of the obstacle which prevents society from coinciding with itself. That is why the fall of a repressive regime always liberates forces larger than what that fall, as a concrete event, can master: as the regime was seen as a symbol of oppression in general, all oppressed groups in society live for a moment in the illusion that all unfulfilled demands – in any domain – are going to be met.

It is important to see that this duality of the “notorious crime” involves the reference to an object to which, strictly speaking, no literal content corresponds. Order, in our example, is just the name for an absent fullness, the positive reverse of a situation negatively perceived as “disorder.” And the same can be said of other political terms such as “justice,” “revolution,” etc. Being the name of something to which no content *necessarily* corresponds, it borrows such a content from the particular force capable of contingently incarnating that empty universality at any particular moment in time. This is the very definition of the hegemonic operation. We see why, in Marx’s terms, the “emancipation” of a particular sector in society and the “revolution of the nation” can coincide: because the latter lacks a content of its own and only acquires one through its tropological displacement to the aims of the hegemonic force. If we want to persist in this rhetorical image, we could say that, *sensu stricto*, the hegemonic operation is not only tropological but also of the order of the *cathachresis*, as there is no literal content to name what the *tropoi* refer to.

We can say, in this sense, that the hegemonic operation is only possible insofar as it never fully succeeds in achieving what it attempts – i.e., the total fusion between the universality (fullness) of the communitarian space and the force incarnating such a universal moment. For if such a total suture was possible, it

would involve the universal having found its own and undisputed body, and no hegemonic variation would any longer be possible. This incompleteness of the hegemonic game is what we call *politics*. The very possibility of a political society depends on the assertion and reproduction of this undecidability in the relation between the universal and the particular. That is why all conceptions of a utopian society in which human essence would have found its ultimate reconciliation with itself have invariably been accompanied by one or another version of the end of politics.

But this also shows that *democracy is the only truly political society*, for it is the only one in which the gap between the (universal) place of power and the substantive forces contingently occupying it is required by the very logic of the regime. In other types of society the place of power is not seen as empty, but as essentially linked to a substantial conception of the common good. So the conditions of democracy, the conditions of hegemony, and the conditions of politics are ultimately the same.

We can summarize our second thesis in the following terms: *there is only hegemony if the dichotomy universality/particularity is constantly renegotiated: universality only exists incarnating – and subverting – particularity, but, conversely, no particularity can become political without being the locus of universalizing effects. Democracy, as a result, as the institutionalization of this space of renegotiation, is the only truly political regime.*

Third Thesis: Empty Signifiers and Undecidability

We have seen that the representation of a “notorious crime” splits the identity of the regime embodying it between its concrete, ontic content and its function of signifying the obstacle preventing a society from reconciling with itself. Now, if there is a “general crime,” there should also be a “general victim.” Society, however, is a plurality of particular groups and demands. So if there is going to be a subject of a certain global emancipation, a subject antagonized by the general crime, it can only be *politically constructed* through the *equivalence* of a plurality of demands. As a result, these particularities are also split: through their equivalence they do not simply remain themselves, but constitute an area of universalizing effects. The equivalence involves that demands cannot be dealt with in isolation from each other, in an administrative way. It is its presence within a chain of equivalences with other demands which gives each its political character: if depoliticizing, administrative practices flourish in a realm of pure particularities, the hegemonic articulation of a plurality of demands can only be satisfied through changes in the relation of forces in society. This is what the Gramscian distinction between corporative and hegemonic classes means. A certain universalization of social actors derives from this aggregation of particularities, which is, to a large extent, the exact opposite of the homogenization of the emancipatory subject in the Marxian notion of a universal class.

Thus, we have a movement of mutual contamination between the universal and the particular. The universal (the fullness of the community) can only be represented through the aims of the hegemonic sector. It will be, in that sense, a tainted, particularized universality. But the same contamination operates in the opposite direction: as the aims of the hegemonic group come to represent, through their universalization, a chain of equivalences more extended than those aims themselves, their links with the original demands of that group are weakened. We have, this time, a universalization of the particular. We can say that, as a result of this double contamination: 1) the more extended the chain of equivalences that a particular hegemonic sector comes to represent and the more its aims become a *name* for global emancipation, the looser will be the links of that name with its original particular meaning and the more it will approach the status of an empty signifier;⁴ 2) as this total coincidence of the universal and the particular is, however, impossible – given the constitutive inadequacy of the means of representation – a remainder of particularity cannot be eliminated. The process of naming itself, as it is not constrained by any a priori conceptual limits, is one that will retroactively determine – depending on contingent hegemonic articulations – what is actually named. This means that the transition from Marx's political emancipation to *total* emancipation can never arrive. This shows us a third dimension of the hegemonic relation: *it requires the production of tendentially empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between universals and particulars, enable the latter to take up the representation of the former.*

As for democracy, it is precisely this unsolvable tension between the universal and the particular that makes it possible to approach some of its apparently most intractable aporias. A purely formalistic conception of democracy, devoid of any substantive content, leads to the paradox of an entirely procedural approach which makes it possible to abolish those procedures as a result of strictly following them. But an opposite paradox emerges if democracy is so closely linked to a substantive content that the possibility of any hegemonic rearticulation disappears. Both paradoxes actually result from grounding democracy in an absolute terrain – procedural or substantive – which is not shaped by any hegemonic game. If we remain, however, within the latter, we immediately see that the tension between the universal and the particular is constitutive of democracy, as all universal principles are tendentially empty and yet nevertheless retain remainders of particularity giving them their specific historical content. Democracy is simply the name of the terrain of that undecidability between content and procedures (is separating the two not, actually, an artificial intellectual operation?) which can never coalesce into any clear-cut blueprint of society. To give either procedures or content some sort of supra-historical priority is to locate them beyond power, forgetting that democratic relations *are* relations of power, as they presuppose that undecidable game between universality and particularity which gives them their specific hegemonic dimension. This means that democracy requires the social

production of empty signifiers and equivalential relations which involve both the posing and the retreat of the particular.

Fourth Thesis: Representation

A corollary of our previous conclusions is that “representation” is constitutive of the hegemonic relation. The elimination of all representation is the illusion accompanying the notion of a *total* emancipation. But, insofar as the universality of the community is only achievable through the mediation of a particularity, the relation of representation becomes constitutive. We find here the dialectic between name and concept. If representation could succeed to the point of eliminating itself as a meaningful moment – i.e., if the representative was entirely transparent to what it represents – what we would have is the “concept” having an unchallenged primacy over the “name” (in Saussurean terms: the signified would entirely subordinate to itself the order of the signifier). But in that case there would be no hegemony, for its very requisite, the production of tendentially empty signifiers, would not obtain. In order to have hegemony we need the sectorial aims of a group to operate as the name for a universality transcending them – this is the synecdoche constitutive of the hegemonic link. But if the name (the signifier) is so attached to the concept (signified) that no displacement in the relation between the two is possible, we cannot have any hegemonic rearticulation. The idea of a totally emancipated and transparent society, from which all topological movement between its constitutive parts would have been eliminated, involves the end of all hegemonic relations (and also the end of democratic politics). Here we have a fourth dimension of “hegemony”: *the terrain in which it expands is that of the generalization of the relations of representation as condition of constitution of the social order*. This explains why the hegemonic form of politics tends to become general in our contemporary, globalized world: as the decentering of the structures of power tends to increase, any centrality requires that its agents are constitutively overdetermined – that is, that they always represent *something more* than their mere particularistic identity.

This is why Claude Lefort’s argument, according to which in democracy the place of power is empty, should, I think, be supplemented by the following statement: democracy requires the constant and active production of that emptiness. We would simply have the end of democracy if the names through which the community reaches its symbolic, universal image were so attached to particular *signifieds* that the representative mediation would lose all autonomy. This can happen in a variety of ways: through the reemergence of a hierarchical society, through totalitarian closure, or simply through administrative practices which deal bureaucratically with social issues, preventing their becoming loci of political confrontation.

But to say that democracy requires the constant recreation of the gap between the universal and the particular, between the empty place of power and the transient

forces occupying it – in other words, that democracy can only flourish in a hegemonically constructed space – is the same as saying: 1) that relations of representation are constitutive of democracy; and 2) that the function of the representative cannot be purely passive, transmitting a will constituted elsewhere, but that it has to play an active role in the constitution of that will. It is only through a hegemonic aggregation of demands – which do not tend spontaneously to coalesce around any a priori point of confluence – that a certain emancipatory universality can be constituted. And so the name *representing* that collective will is never the passive expression of any previously achieved unity; on the contrary, the name retroactively constitutes the very will that it claims to represent.

That is why *representative* democracy is not a second best, as Rousseau thought, but it is *the only possible* democracy. Its insufficiencies are actually its virtues, as it is only through those insufficiencies that the visibility of the gap between universality and particularity – without which democracy is unthinkable – can be recreated. That is also why the attempts at homogenizing the *social* space within which democracy operates (the universal class in Marx, the dissolution of social diversity in a unified public sphere in Jacobinism) necessarily produce a democratic deficit. Democracy faces the challenge of having to unify collective wills in *political* spaces of universal representation, while making such universality compatible with a plurality of social spaces dominated by particularism and difference. That is why democracy and hegemony require each other.

Conclusions

Let us draw some conclusions to close our analysis. They should concentrate on three issues which we have broached in the previous pages and which are closely linked to the contemporary experience of democratic practices, of their limitations but also of the potentiality that they open to new forms of construction of communitarian spaces.

The first issue concerns the language games that it is possible to play with the basic dichotomies around which classical democratic theory was organized. For a classical outlook, the more democratic a society, the more absolute the opposition between power and the fullness of the community is going to be. We have seen, however, that power, as the medium through which the incommensurability between particularity and universality shows itself, is not the antipode but the condition of democracy. Power, no doubt, involves domination; but domination shows, through the contingency of its sources, its own limits: there is only domination if it opens the possibility of its being overthrown. Conversely, there is only emancipation if what is emancipated is not an ultimately retrieved essence, but instead a new instantiation in the undecidable game of domination/emancipation (i.e., hegemony). Or, to put it in other terms which mean the same: there is only emancipation if the ontic order to be emancipated never exhausts, in some sort of ultimate *Aufhebung*, what is involved in the emancipatory logic. Again: there is

only emancipation if there is never ultimate self-determination, if the gap between necessity and freedom is never finally bridged. The name of this asymmetry can be called – depending on the dimension we are emphasizing – either democracy, power, or hegemony.

The second issue – related to our present predicaments in postmodern societies – concerns the ensemble of problems that have been subsumed under the term “globalization.” The dominant attitude of the left vis-à-vis the latter has been mainly defensive and negative. A globalized order would be one in which there is total concentration of power on one pole, while on the other there is only a fragmentation of social forces. What I want to suggest is that the problem is far more complex than that: if there is certainly a crisis of the old frameworks within which centers of power, social actors, and strategies were constituted, there is no new clear-cut framework of power emerging; there is, instead, a more radically undecidable terrain as a condition of strategic thinking. A dangerous universe, certainly, but not one in which pessimism is the only thinkable response.

Finally, and for the same reasons, I do not think that the plurality and fragmentation of identities and social actors in the contemporary world should be a source of political pessimism. The traditional markers of certainty are no doubt disintegrating and the *social* limits of hegemonic logics are clearly retreating. But this shows not only the dangers but also the potentialities of contemporary democracy. “*Les jeux sont faits*,” but precisely because of that, one should not claim to be a loser at the very beginning. Especially, one has always to remember that collective victories and defeats largely take place at the level of the political imaginary. To construct a political vision in the new conditions, in which keeping open the gap between universality and particularity becomes the very matrix of the political imaginary, is the real challenge confronting contemporary democracy. A dangerous adventure, no doubt, but one on which the future of our societies depends. In 1923, Ortega y Gasset started the publication of the *Revista de Occidente* with the following words: “There are, in the Western air, dissolved emotions of travelling: the excitement of departing, the tremor of the unknown adventure, the illusion of arriving, and the fear of getting lost.”

NOTES

* Some sections of this essay were originally published in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000).

1. See my book *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996).
2. Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 187.
3. *Ibid.*, 185
4. See my essay “Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” in *Emancipation(s)*, 36–46.