Article

Two Theories of Hegemony: Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau in Conversation

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Abstract

This essay stages a critical conversation between Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau, comparing their different appropriations of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. In the 1980s, Hall and Laclau engaged with Gramsci and with one another in order to conceptualize what they regarded as a triangular relation between the rise of Thatcherism, the crisis of the Left, and the emergence of new social movements. While many of their readers emphasize the undeniable similarities and mutual influences that exist between Hall and Laclau, this essay focuses on the differences between their theories of hegemony and locates the starkest contrast between them at the level of theoretical practice. While the main lesson that Hall drew from Gramsci was the privileging of conjunctural analysis, Laclau proceeded to locate the concept of hegemony at a higher level of abstraction, developing a political ontology increasingly indifferent to any specific conjuncture. The essay argues that this difference between conjunctural analysis and political ontology has a significant impact on Hall's and Laclau's respective understandings of two key political formations: populism and identity politics. Thus by focusing on these two formations, the essay argues that Hall's work should not be read as a derivative or even undertheorized version of Laclau's, for this tendency obscures substantial differences between their

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interventions as well as the fact that Hall's theory of hegemony, as a theory of the conjuncture, ultimately possesses stronger explanatory power than Laclau's political ontology.

Keywords

Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, hegemony, populism, identity politics, Thatcherism

Introduction

In the summer of 2016, in the midst of the election that would make Donald Trump the forty-fifth president of the United States, historians N. D. B. Connolly and Keisha N. Blain assembled a "Trump Syllabus 2.0" consisting of a broad range of literature that helps explain the rise of Trump within the Republican Party and the ascendancy of "Trumpism" in society at large (Connolly and Blain 2016). Around the same time but on the other side of the Atlantic, in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, *History Workshop* magazine published a "Brexit Syllabus" curated by historian Onni Gust with the stated goal of deconstructing the allegedly "historical" arguments mobilized by the leave campaign (Gust 2016). Both syllabi suggest that to understand the historical trajectories and the social and political forces that produced "Trumpism" and Brexit, the two phenomena must be situated in relation to neoliberalism and its crises, the politics and ideology of populism, and heterogenous but intersecting struggles around race, gender, sexuality, and migration.

Two names that appear consistently in these and other reading lists for our times, such as the *New Internationalist*'s "Anti-Trump Reading List" (Fairhead 2017) or Verso's "Top 20 Books on Populism" (Verso Books 2020), are those of Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau. This is not surprising. Hall's and Laclau's untimely death in 2014, only two months apart, certainly contributed to spark new interest in their work.[1] But most importantly, it is the current crisis of neoliberal hegemony and the concomitant proliferation of populist formations left and right as well as new radical social movements on a global scale that explain the relevance of Hall and Laclau for our times. Even as they passed away just on time not to witness the election of Trump in the United States, Modi in India, or Bolsonaro in Brazil, Hall and Laclau's longstanding commitment, ever since the 1980s, to a theoretical and political renewal of the Left in the face of neoliberalism and authoritarianism—and under the pressure of external and internal crises—confers upon their work an air of exceptional actuality.

Against this background, in this essay I return to Hall's and Laclau's early work and conversations. In the 1980s, the two thinkers engaged in the process of appropriating and reactivating the conceptual apparatus elaborated five decades earlier by Italian communist Antonio Gramsci. Hall and Laclau recovered Gramsci's theory of hegemony to conceptualize the joint emergence of the neoliberal political project, embodied in Britain by Thatcherism, and of new social movements organized around antagonisms other than class struggle, such as feminist, Black, and gay and lesbian movements. In their view, these two phenomena taken together demanded a radical rethinking of the Left. Neither Hall nor Laclau simply "applied" Gramsci to their historical conjuncture. Instead, they closely engaged with Gramsci to elaborate their own understandings of hegemony, grounded in the social and political transformations of their time. Their goal was to help build an expansive Left that could live up to those transformations.

However, despite these shared theoretical and political commitments, there are important differences between Hall and Laclau and between their respective readings of Gramsci. This might sound like a truism in general but not in the case of these two thinkers, for the general tendency among many of their readers is to emphasize the extent to which their trajectories overlap. For example, Jennifer Daryl Slack (1996) foregrounds the influence of Laclau's work on Hall and, through Hall, on the epistemology adopted by the whole field of cultural studies in its formative years. Her goal is to restore a place for Laclau within the genealogy of cultural studies. Mirroring this move, Florian Cord (2018) argues that Hall must be located next to Laclau within the philosophical field that Oliver Marchart (2007) has termed "post-foundational political thought." Indeed, for Cord, underlying Hall's cultural and political analyses is a political ontology remarkably similar to Laclau's. While these similarities and mutual influences are undeniable, in this essay I adopt the opposite perspective and emphasize substantial divergences between Hall's and Laclau's theories of hegemony.

The essay proceeds in four steps. In the first section, I introduce Hall's and Laclau's readings of Gramsci in the 1980s, pointing out their shared theoretical and political concerns. Hence, in the second section, I discuss the ways in which their readings actually diverge on the terrain of theoretical practice. While Hall always privileged conjunctural analysis, Laclau located the concept of hegemony at the core of a political ontology increasingly indifferent to any specific conjuncture. I emphasize this difference because these divergent theoretical practices have a decisive impact on Hall's and Laclau's respective understandings of two key political formations: populism and identity politics. Thus, in the third and fourth sections, I turn to each of these formations in order to show the extent to which Hall's and Laclau's theories

of hegemony part ways. In the course of this analysis, I argue that Hall's work should not be read as a derivative or undertheorized version of Laclau's, for this tendency obscures substantial differences between them as well as the fact that Hall's theory of hegemony—as a theory of the conjuncture—ultimately possesses stronger explanatory power than Laclau's political ontology. Thus, as Hall and Laclau rightfully appear today alongside one another in critical syllabi and reading lists for our times, this essay's contribution is to clarify the differences between their political analyses based, in turn, on their diverging theoretical practices and the different trajectories of the theory of hegemony in their work.

Reading Gramsci in "New Times"

In the 1980s, Hall and other critics who gathered around *Marxism Today*, the theoretical magazine of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), coined the notion of "New Times" to describe what they saw as an emerging political conjuncture (Hall and Jacques 1983, 1989). In Hall's view, that conjuncture was marked by a triangular relation between the rise of Thatcherism, the crisis of the Left, and the consolidation of identity as a key terrain of political and ideological struggle. As he and Martin Jacques observed in the introduction to *The Politics of Thatcherism*, Thatcherism was more successful than the Left in articulating the antagonisms around race, gender, and sexuality politicized by new social movements. In so doing, Thatcherism also "allowed many of these contradictory forces and pressures to play more freely into the political backyard of the left and the labour movement, precipitating its own fracturing and internal crisis" (Hall and Jacques 1983, 15).

   A similar analysis informed Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001). While they engaged less explicitly than Hall with the conjuncture, the main political argument underlying their theoretical intervention was that "struggles against sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, and in defence of the environment needed to be articulated with those of the workers in a new left-wing hegemonic project" (xviii). Like Hall, Laclau and Mouffe regarded this process not just as a problem of recomposition internal to the Left but as a terrain of struggle involving the neoliberal Right. They argued that there was nothing essential in the antagonisms politicized by the new social movements that guaranteed their articulation to the Left. And, like Hall, they scolded the Left itself for its inability to understand this emerging terrain of struggle: "The Left, of course, is ill prepared to take into account these struggles, which even today it tends to dismiss as 'liberal.' Hence the danger that they may be articulated by a discourse of the Right, of the defence

of privileges" (164). In this context, both Hall and Laclau and Mouffe turned to Gramsci.

Central to Gramsci's theorizing in the 1930s—and to Hall's and Laclau and Mouffe's engagement with it in the 1980s—is the concept of "hegemony." Hall observes that Gramsci's theory of hegemony must be understood in relation to his "rigorous attack on all vestiges of 'economism' and 'reductionism' within classical Marxism" (Hall 1986a, 10). Indeed, Gramsci argued that in order to exercise its power, a dominant class in a liberal society must be able to forge a "hegemonic bloc": a composite formation that selectively integrates the interests of different social forces and class fractions. This process is mediated by political and ideological practices, so that politics and ideology do not just reflect the economic base but play an active role in shaping the social formation. In other words, as Hall puts it, social formations are "complexly structured totalities" in which the economic, political, and ideological levels do not just reflect one another but stand in a relation of relative autonomy and articulation (12). In Hall's view, turning one's attention from the mode of production alone to such complex social formations, like Gramsci did, means leaving the terrain of abstraction in favor of concrete historical analyses. As Gramsci himself wrote, economism "must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism, and combated in practice with the authentic testimony of Marx, the author of concrete political and historical works" (Gramsci 1971, 407). Thus the concept of hegemony introduces a gap between the economic base and the shape taken by concrete social formations, laying bare the theoretical and political insufficiencies of economism.

Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that while breaking with economism, Gramsci also substantially departed from previous Marxist conceptualizations of hegemony. They argue that if Lenin had deployed the concept to name the *political* leadership that the proletariat must establish over other class fractions in order to construct a revolutionary alliance, the main ingredient of hegemony becomes, in Gramsci, *intellectual and moral* leadership. For Laclau and Mouffe, this transition is key because intellectual and moral leadership requires that the different subjects involved come to share no less than a "collective will," forging what Gramsci called a "historical bloc" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 65–67). So, these subjects do not simply enter the relation to make a pragmatic use of the politics of hegemony and pursue their already-defined interests. Rather, they are entirely transformed by the hegemonic relation. For Laclau and Mouffe, only this account of hegemony makes it possible to conceptualize, in the 1980s, a real opening of the Left to the politics of new social movements, for both the Left and those movements must let themselves be transformed by their recomposition into a new hegemonic project. Laclau and Mouffe do point out that Gramsci located a fundamental

class at the core of any hegemonic formation as its unifying principle. Thus, for them, his theory of hegemony must be appropriated *beyond itself* if one wants to leave behind every possible trace of "class essentialism" (69–70, 134–38). But what makes this appropriation possible, they maintain, is Gramsci's own break with economism from within Marxist theory and politics.

This break with economism also involved a complete redefinition of the topography of the social formation, especially the relation between state and civil society. First of all, Gramsci moved away from an understanding of the state as a superstructural apparatus that simply reflects the economic base and preserves ruling class interests by means of coercion. As already mentioned, a hegemonic bloc must accommodate, if selectively, the interests of heterogenous social segments, hence constructing a broad base of consent to the exercise of power. For Gramsci, hegemony is a name for this combination of consent and coercion. This means, in turn, that a clear-cut divide between state and civil society is thrown into question, for civil society is where the consent to the exercise of state power is forged and reproduced. Gramsci coined the notion of "integral state" to conceptualize this integrated relation between state and civil society (Gramsci 1971, 206–78). It follows that to displace an existing hegemonic bloc, socialist politics cannot simply aim at seizing the state through a frontal attack but must forge a new historical bloc by conducting, first and foremost, a "war of position" across "the superstructures of civil society." As Gramsci put it:

> The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defense which was still effective. . . . Hence it is a question of studying "in depth" which elements of civil society correspond to the defensive systems in a war of position. (Gramsci 1971, 235)

This redefinition of the topography of the social formation and, accordingly, of political struggle allowed Hall and Laclau and Mouffe to address the profound political crisis experienced by the Left in the 1980s. In particular, as already mentioned, Hall drew on Gramsci to locate the crisis of the British Left in a triangular relation with the rise of Thatcherism and the identity politics of new social movements. Indeed, he came to conceptualize the terrain of identity broken open by Black, gay and lesbian, and feminist movements as a key ideological terrain in the war of position between Thatcherism and the

Left. Thus Hall argued that ideology—including the ideological struggles over the definition of collective identities—is a terrain that the Left should not dismiss or debunk, but seize on its own terms. As he once put it, "in the arena of ideological struggle . . . two can play at the game" (Hall 1988a, 140).[2] In response to those who argued that identity politics amount to an ideological mystification dividing the working class and destroying the Left, both Hall and Laclau and Mouffe insisted that the main factor weakening the Left was its own failure to transform itself in relation to the transformations of the social and political landscape.

Hall and Laclau developed these analyses in the 1980s through their close engagement with Gramsci and in conversation with one another. However, especially as their work is reengaged today as a potential source of critical understanding of our own conjuncture, their similar commitments and mutual influences should not obscure substantial differences. In the next section, I locate the starkest contrast between them at the level of theoretical practice. The main lesson that Hall drew from Gramsci was a privileging of conjunctural analysis, hence his goal was to appropriate and reactivate the theory of hegemony *through* his analysis of Thatcherism. Laclau, instead, proceeded to locate the concept of hegemony at a higher level of abstraction, developing a political ontology increasingly indifferent to any specific conjuncture. This ontological perspective made its first appearance in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, yet it was prepared in Laclau's earlier work on ideology and was significantly developed in his later work, which abandons the notion of ideology altogether.

Two Theoretical Practices: Conjunctural Analysis and Political Ontology

In *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau locates at the core of his theoretical edifice the principle according to which ideological elements—such as nationalism, militarism, and so on—do not possess any necessary class belonging. Thus Laclau argues that an ideological formation cannot be analyzed by "break[ing] it down into its constitutive *elements* according to their belonging" (Laclau 1977, 93; emphasis in original). In his view, the correct approach is the reverse, that is, "to accept that ideological 'elements' taken in isolation have no necessary class connotation, and that this connotation is only the result of the articulation of those elements in a concrete ideological discourse" (99). In this early work, Laclau puts this principle to work in a discussion of concrete politico-ideological projects. One of his main references is the trajectory of Peronism in Argentina. Peronism's strong appeal

to both nationalism and socialism helps explain Laclau's resoluteness in questioning the necessary class belongingness of ideological elements—countering the idea that nationalism always necessarily constitutes a bourgeois ideological element. As Jennifer Daryl Slack puts it, "in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau engages in the play of theorizing the concrete in terms of articulation and theorizing articulation in terms of the concrete, principally in terms of Latin American politics" (Daryl Slack 1996, 119).

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe build on Laclau's earlier work. Yet in order to insist that the subjects entering a hegemonic relation are fully transformed by it, they radicalize the principle of the non-necessary class belongingness of ideological elements and gesture toward a wholesale replacement of "ideology" with "discourse." Developing a poststructuralist reading of Gramsci, they abandon the methodological distinction between the economic, political, and ideological levels of the social formation and contest the very boundary between the discursive and the non-discursive.[3] In their account, the different elements that compose what we call "society" (including political subjects) must be considered as discursive elements that do not possess any determination other than the position they are ascribed by and within discourse itself. It bears repeating that this theoretical move is politically informed. Its goal is to displace the assumption of a ready-made historical subject—the working class—from the core of the Left, in favor of an opening toward new political subjects and struggles. The latter must be transformed, as much as they should transform the Left, through the process of their articulation into a common political project. Thus in Laclau and Mouffe's reading, hegemony becomes a name for the "political logic" according to which every political subject—and, more broadly, every social element—is entirely constituted by its contingent articulations within a discursive field.

Importantly, Laclau and Mouffe also argue that such articulations are always incomplete as they consist of an endless play between "equivalence" and "difference" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 127–45). On the one hand, each social element enters a "chain of equivalence" that tends to dissolve the differences among its elements. For example, this happens in the political field when a coalition among different struggles is forged that makes each struggle stand for the others and for the chain as a whole: feminism *stands for* antiracism, which *stands for* anticapitalism, and so on. The result is a polarization of the social through the emergence of a front of antagonism between the struggles that have entered the chain of equivalence and the "power bloc" that is identified as their common enemy. Yet, on the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe insist that this polarization of the social is never fully accomplished,

for each element entering a chain of equivalence also preserves, in a precarious balancing act, its difference from the other elements. Each element, as Laclau and Mouffe put it, is "split" between equivalence and difference (xiii), so that the social never fully establishes itself as the closed whole that we call "society." This leaves the social endlessly open to new articulations, without which, they argue, there would be no politics.

According to some critics, Laclau and Mouffe are guilty of having abandoned class as a category of analysis and the working class as a privileged political subject for the Left. This is what granted their theory of hegemony the label of "post-Marxism" (Geras 1987; Laclau and Mouffe 1987). Hall, instead, offers a different critique of their theoretical enterprise:

> While they are very responsible—whether you agree with them or not—about recognizing that their position does have political consequences, when they come down to particular political conjunctures, they don't reintegrate other levels of determination into the analysis. Instead, they take the abstractions which have been developed and elaborated, in a very rigorous and conceptual way at the high philosophical level, and insert them into the here and now. You don't see them adding, adding, adding, the different levels of determination. (Hall 1986b, 58)

Indeed, while Laclau and Mouffe's work is scattered with examples that signal the political significance of their theoretical intervention—and many such examples are drawn from the context of Thatcherism—they do not theorize *through* Thatcherism. Rather, they use it to illustrate their theoretical intervention. As Judith Butler points out, "the very possibility of illustrating an abstract point by a concrete example presupposes the separation of the abstract and the concrete—indeed, presupposes the production of an epistemic field defined by that binary opposition" (Butler 2000, 19). Hall, instead, without ever retreating from the task of theorizing, always resisted a trading of conjunctural analysis for theoretical abstraction.[4] Rather than searching for a new "political logic" in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, as Laclau and Mouffe do, Hall's primary goal was to reactivate the theory of hegemony in the historically specific context of Thatcherism. Hence his trenchant comment on Laclau and Mouffe's work: "Their problem isn't politics but history" (Hall 1986b, 58).

So, while Hall had already expressed some reservations about Laclau's earlier work on ideology (see Hall 1988a, 139–40), it is with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that their theoretical practices begin to diverge substantially. As he once put it, "I still prefer *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* over *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. . . . I like people's middle period a lot,

where . . . their thought has not yet hardened into a system" (Hall 1986b, 56). The name for Laclau's theoretical system, which kept hardening in his subsequent work, is political ontology. Two of its core elements are the replacement of ideology with discourse and the neutralization of any distinction between the economic, political, and ideological levels of the social formation. The title of Laclau's posthumously published collection of essays, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (2014), marks the end point of this trajectory, and its opening essay, "The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology," sanctions the abandonment of any theoretical interest in a topography of the social formation that distinguishes among its different levels. In fact, ideology as a category of analysis comes out of the essay more dead than alive. The political, instead, does not disappear from Laclau's theoretical edifice. On the contrary, the political is displaced from a specific region or level of the social formation onto an ontological plane, as a logic presiding over the discursive constitution of the social in its totality, *including* but not limited to politics (see Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014).

Considering the entire arch of Laclau's theoretical trajectory, Oliver Marchart (2007) identifies him as a central figure in what he calls "postfoundational political thought." For Marchart, this theoretical field is characterized by the fundamental distinction mentioned above between politics and the political. While "politics" denotes the ontic field of political phenomena, "the political" is a name for the ontological ground of the social as such—yet a ground that acts as an *absent* ground. In other words, since society has no ultimate ground and consequently cannot fully establish itself as a closed and stable whole, the social remains an open field whose making and remaking takes place according to a political logic: the endless play between equivalence and difference that produces temporary arrangements of the social around fronts of antagonism. Importantly, this political logic presides over the constitution of *all* social elements, not just political phenomena.[5] Indeed, over the years, the ontological status of the political as such became Laclau's main preoccupation: "This is a question usually overlooked in the sociological literature, which usually concentrates on actual 'conflicts,' 'confrontations' and 'struggles,' but which does not pose the question about the ontological nature of these categories. It is, however, on this nature that we must focus if we want to advance on the theoretical front" (Laclau 2014, 102). This could not contrast more with Hall's theoretical practice, which always remained primarily invested in a conjunctural analysis of those actual conflicts, confrontations, and struggles.

These differences between Hall and Laclau should not be obscured in the effort to highlight their similarities and mutual influences. First and foremost, this is important if we are to do justice to Hall's and Laclau's specific

analyses of the social and political transformations of the 1980s, for their divergent theoretical practices had a substantial impact on their respective understandings of two key political formations: populism and identity politics. In turn, clarifying those differences is also important as we reengage with Hall and Laclau today, that is, if we are to identify their potential contributions to an understanding of our own conjuncture, marked by the ongoing crisis of the neoliberal project, the proliferation of new populisms, and the emergence of new intersecting social movements such as the Movements for Black Lives (see Taylor 2016) or the current wave of transnational and transfeminist organizing (see Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019; Gago 2020). With this in mind, in the next two sections I turn to a discussion of populism and identity politics, and I show that the generalized tendency not to distinguish between Hall and Laclau—or even to read Hall's work as an undertheorized or derivative version of Laclau's—is the source of profound misunderstandings.

The Problem of Populism

In Laclau's work, the concept of populism follows a very similar trajectory as the concept of hegemony. In *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau argues that diverse political projects can be defined "populist" to the extent that their ideology contains popular-democratic interpellations that construct "the people" as an antagonistic force opposed to the "power bloc." Additionally, Laclau argues that populism is not antithetical to class struggle but on the contrary forms the ideological terrain on which class struggle *must* be conducted: "classes cannot assert their hegemony without articulating the people in their discourse; and the specific form of this articulation in the case of a class which seeks to confront the power bloc as a whole, in order to assert its hegemony, will be populism" (Laclau 1977, 196). Thus, in this early work, Laclau analyzes this relation between class interpellations and popular-democratic interpellations as it plays out in concrete politico-ideological projects. At the same time, through these analyses, he reaches his key theoretical conclusions, among which the refusal of a clear-cut distinction between populist and socialist politics: "there is no socialism without populism, and the highest forms of populism can only be socialist" (196–97). Here populism already begins to expand beyond the field of the political and ideological formations that have been historically understood as populist.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the problem of populism does not appear as such, yet the political ontology that Laclau and Mouffe begin to develop through their discursively inflected theory of hegemony informs Laclau's later reflections on the matter. Hence, in *On Populist Reason*, Laclau

argues that "populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (Laclau 2005, 67). This is the case because populism, in this work, designates not a specific kind of politico-ideological formation but the more fundamental logic according to which different social elements enter a relation of articulation and, as a consequence, an antagonistic frontier emerges in the social that separates "the people" from the "power bloc." Here the expansion of the concept of populism is fully realized. Like hegemony in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, populism becomes a "logic" inherent in the political. Laclau writes:

> One consequence of this intervention is that the referent of "populism" becomes blurred, because many phenomena which were not traditionally considered populist come under that umbrella in our analysis. . . . My attempt has not been to find the *true* referent of populism, but to do the opposite: to show that populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena. (Laclau 2005, xi)

This move defines populism with greater theoretical sophistication than is often the case, yet it also inflates the concept to the point of significantly limiting its explanatory power when it comes to the analysis of specific conjunctures and politico-ideological formations. As Anna Marie Smith argues, Laclau's tendency to embrace "an increasingly formal conception of hegemony," which entails locating both hegemony and populism at the core of his political ontology, "suppresses a historically specific analysis of the success and failure of rival political discourses" (Smith 1998, 177).

To be sure, the differences between such rival discourses can be identified with reference to other elements of the formation at hand. For example, in her latest plea for a "left populism," which she sees as the only viable alternative to right-wing populism in the context of the current crisis of neoliberal hegemony, Mouffe first argues that the frontier between Left and Right has lost its traction and that "today the political frontier needs to be constructed in a 'populist' transversal mode," yet she immediately qualifies this claim: "Nevertheless, I will also argue that the 'populist' dimension is not sufficient to specify the type of politics required by the current conjuncture. It needs to be qualified as a 'left' populism to indicate the values that this populism pursues" (Mouffe 2018, 11). This argument suggests that whatever may qualify a populist formation as left-wing will have to remain *external* to the definition of that same formation as populist, contradicting the principle that Laclau and Mouffe had solidly established in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* according to which the elements of a discursive formation are defined by

nothing else than their discursive articulation *within* that formation. Mouffe now has to posit that left-wing "values" can be attached to populism as additional "qualifiers" because she follows Laclau in defining populism as a logic cutting across all political phenomena.

For Hall, instead, populism always remained the name of a more specific formation. Drawing on Gramsci's definition of hegemony as a combination of consent and coercion, he emphasized Thatcherism's construction of *popular* consent to its *authoritarian* political project. He never suggested that the Thatcherite attempt to establish a new hegemony in the wake of the economic and political crisis of the 1970s relied exclusively on consent. On the contrary, he registered "the increasing reliance on coercive authority and the repressive apparatuses of the state in disciplining the economic and the political struggle, in the context of crisis" (Hall 1988a, 136). However, for him, central to Thatcherism's relative success was also a construction of popular consent to the exercise of force: "a dovetailing of the 'cry for discipline' from below into the call for an enforced restoration of social order and authority 'from above'" (137). He termed this articulation of consent *and* coercion "authoritarian populism."

Part and parcel of Hall's analysis of Thatcherism as a form of authoritarian populism has been a reconstruction of its history. According to Hall's account, the emergence of Thatcherism must be explained in relation to the crisis of the British "post-war settlement," that is, the historical compromise that witnessed both Labour and the Tories organize their respective political projects around a social consensus over the Keynesian welfare state. Throughout the 1960s, that consensus began to collapse—as made clear, in Hall's view, by the upheavals of the 1960s, the countercultural forms of opposition to the Vietnam War, and the industrial militancy of the early 1970s, among other phenomena. As he puts it: "One phase of hegemony had disintegrated; the society entered that era of contestations, crises, and alarms that frequently accompanies the struggles for the formation of a new hegemonic stage" (Hall 1988b, 37). Moreover, Hall points out that Labour approached the crisis through "corporatist" strategies of containment, trying to secure a partnership between the representatives of capital, those of labor, and the state (representative of "the people") yet, in fact, demobilizing popular sectors. This laid the ground for Thatcherism to capitalize on "the disorganized discontents of the popular classes," hence constructing "an alternative 'bloc' organized around the powerful themes of 'anti-statism,' 'anti-collectivism,' 'anti-creeping socialism' and 'anti-the power bloc' (i.e. social democracy in power)" (Hall 1988a, 136).

In this analysis, authoritarian populism names a specific politico-ideological project—Thatcherism—that takes root in the context of a historically

produced crisis and that can frame itself as a solution to the crisis by capitalizing on popular discontent without organizing it or letting it organize itself, but further demobilizing popular sectors and attacking their militant segments. Thus Hall makes a considerable effort to clarify the differences between this form of authoritarian populism and the left-wing political project that he hoped to see emerging as an alternative to it. Hall distinguishes between the terrain of the popular, which—he agrees with Laclau—must be located at the core of a renewed political project for the Left, and the populist articulation of that same terrain by the Right. He argues that what made Thatcherism *populist* was its effort to hegemonize a field of disorganized popular discontent while further *demobilizing* popular sectors. So, he concludes that Thatcherism "is 'populist' because it cannot be 'popular-democratic'" (Hall 1988a, 146). This conclusion runs in the opposite direction than Laclau's theory, according to which populism is a logic inherent in the political as such.

In light of this discussion, why do some readers of Laclau and Hall insist on misrepresenting their divergent conceptualizations of populism as essentially the same? For example, while Mouffe does not explicitly attribute to Hall a theory of left populism, she posits a substantial continuity between her own embrace of populism and Hall's call for the Left in the 1980s to "learn from Thatcherism" (Mouffe 2018, 29). However, what Hall meant was that the Left should have taken ideological struggle seriously—as Thatcherism did—yet in order to construct an *alternative* to populism. Marchart is even more explicit and states that "Hall's thoroughly Gramscian and, indeed, Laclauian answer to Thatcherite authoritarian populism consisted in his appeal to construct a counter-hegemonic project—a populist project from the Left—against the Thatcherite power bloc" (Marchart 2018, 120). Similarly, Cord writes: "Influenced by the work of Gramsci and Laclau, Hall has persistently and tirelessly urged the radical left to strategically enter this struggle for hegemony and to adopt a properly 'popular'/'populist' strategy" (Cord 2018, 37n10). As these passages show, the misapprehension of Hall as a theorist and advocate of left populism proceeds from reading his work through the lens of Laclau's theory or even as derivative of it. This obscures important differences not just between Hall's and Laclau's views on populism but, more fundamentally, between their respective theories of hegemony.

Unlike Laclau, Hall never let go of a topography of the social formation that distinguishes between its economic, political, and ideological levels. This allowed him to engage in a conjunctural analysis of Thatcherism as a specific formation characterized by the *ideological* construction of popular consent to its authoritarian exercise of *political* power: authoritarian populism. This analysis makes room for conceptualizing—within the same

theory—the possibility that different articulations of the same elements (first and foremost, widespread popular discontent) might produce *qualitatively* different formations. While in the arena of ideological struggle two can play at the game, this struggle can and must take, for Hall, two different forms: a popular-democratic politics, involving a redistribution of political power downward, against authoritarian populism. Such differentiations between politico-ideological projects cannot be made from *within* Laclau's theory of populism. Indeed, as I have argued about Mouffe's theory of left populism, once we accept Laclau's rejection of any distinction between the different levels of the social formation and his displacement of both hegemony and populism—as discursive logics—onto an ontological plane, a distinction such as the one between Thatcherism and a left-wing alternative to it can be established only by reference to principles or analyses *external* to the theory itself.

Matters become even more complicated if we expand this discussion to the terrain of identity politics. This is not a marginal concern, for the multiplication of social antagonisms politicized by Black, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements was a central preoccupation for Hall as well as Laclau and Mouffe in the 1980s. Moreover, as already mentioned, it is precisely the contemporary emergence of new incarnations of those movements—alongside the proliferation of populisms left and right and in the context of the ongoing crisis of neoliberal hegemony—which explains the current wave of interest in Hall's and Laclau's work. Thus, in the next section, I stage one last conversation between the two thinkers on the matter of identity politics, and I argue, once again, that the significant differences between their analyses are ultimately rooted in their divergent theoretical practices.

On the Relative Autonomy of Identity Politics

For Laclau and Mouffe, as much as for Hall, the acknowledgment of the contingency governing the social and political fields works not only as the starting point for a rethinking of the Left but also as a warning. With reference to the identity politics of the new social movements, Laclau and Mouffe comment: "every antagonism, left free to itself, is a floating signifier, a 'wild' antagonism which does not predetermine the form in which it can be articulated to other elements in a social formation" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 171). It follows that the antagonisms embodied by the new social movements shall not be assumed to align with a progressive socialist politics. Rather, they should be articulated *as* a progressive political project by inserting them in a chain of equivalence with other struggles, including class struggle. However, Laclau and Mouffe's entire theoretical enterprise proceeds from their

diagnosis of the implosion of the working class as a privileged subject for the Left and from a commitment, which they share with Hall, to open up the Left to new political subjects and struggles. So, already in some of their writings that preceded *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, they had begun to identify this proliferation of struggles—and, most importantly, the *autonomy* of each of these struggles—as one of their core matters of concern (see Laclau and Mouffe 1981; Laclau 1985).

This matter remains central in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, yet here the theoretical emphasis on the logic of equivalence—which is key to the politics of hegemony—forces Laclau and Mouffe to interrogate the potential clash between this logic and the autonomy of each subject and struggle entering an equivalential chain: "is there not an incompatibility between the proliferation of political spaces proper to a radical democracy and the construction of collective identities on the basis of the logic of equivalence?" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 181). The most convincing answer they offer to this question tends to locate hegemony itself as one political practice among others:

> The incompatibility . . . does not lie in equivalence as a social logic. It arises only from the moment at which this space of equivalences ceases to be considered as *one* political space among others and comes to be seen as the centre, which subordinates and organizes all other spaces. It arises, that is, in the case where there takes place not only the construction of equivalents at a certain level of the social, but also the transformation of this level into a unifying principle, which reduces the others to differential moments internal to itself. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 186)

However, this comment remains relatively isolated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, because Laclau and Mouffe regard hegemony not as a political practice among others but as a political logic presiding over the constitution of the social itself. In fact, the way they solve the tension between equivalence and autonomy, at a theoretical level, is by reducing them to internal logics of hegemony itself. They define them as two "*social logics*, which intervene to different degrees in the constitution of every social identity, and which partially limit their mutual effects" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 183). As already argued, Laclau and Mouffe posit this constant balancing act between equivalence and difference, or equivalence and autonomy, as the mechanism that keeps the social endlessly open to new articulations, hence to politics. However, by reducing equivalence and autonomy to two discursive logics limiting each other, they risk disavowing the concrete political tensions that exist between a politics of hegemony and the autonomy of each subject and struggle participating in it. This, in turn, tends to translate into a privileging

of equivalence over autonomy, which manifests in remarks such as this: "If the demands of a subordinated group are presented purely as negative demands subversive of a certain order, without being linked to any viable project for the reconstruction of specific areas of society, their capacity to act hegemonically will be excluded from the outset . . . and as a result the strategy is condemned to marginality" (189).

The same privileging of equivalence is carried over and further emphasized in *On Populist Reason*, where Laclau writes: "We will call a demand which, satisfied or not, remains isolated a *democratic demand*. A plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity we will call *popular demands*—they start, at a very incipient level, to constitute the 'people' as a potential historical actor. Here we have, in embryo, a populist configuration" (Laclau 2005, 74). Thus even as Laclau argues that "the people" is the result of a permanent play between equivalence and difference, he nonetheless identifies equivalence as the logic that ultimately secures the emergence of such people as a historical and political actor, hence the very possibility of politics. As Seongcheol Kim (2020) argues, in the transition from Laclau and Mouffe's theory of radical democracy to Laclau's theory of populism, the autonomy of different political subjects and struggles is fully absorbed and neutralized by the logic of equivalence.

This privileging of equivalence over autonomy has a specific impact on Laclau's approach to identity politics. For example, in an essay addressing this matter in terms of the relation between universalism and particularism, Laclau frames his discussion of identity politics as follows:

> the construction of differential identities on the basis of total closure to what is outside them is not a viable or progressive political alternative. It would be a reactionary policy in Western Europe today, for example, for immigrants from Northern Africa or Jamaica to abstain from all participation in Western European institutions, with the justification that theirs is a different cultural identity and that European institutions are not their concern. . . . The logic of apartheid is not only a discourse of the dominant group; as we said before, it can also permeate the identities of the oppressed. (Laclau 1996, 29)

Thus, based on a series of similar examples and thought experiments, Laclau goes on discussing what he considers to be the risks of identity politics, among which he mentions self-segregation and a simple reversal of domination (Laclau 1996, 29–35). Smith observes that Laclau inflates and distorts the issues at stake because his analysis proceeds in overly formalistic terms and by means of generic examples, with little reference to the concrete

discourses and practices of actually existing identity-based movements (Smith 1998, 189–91). If this is true, Laclau's privileging of equivalence over autonomy must be understood, once again, in relation to the tendency toward abstraction and formalism that characterizes his political ontology as a whole.

As an alternative, Smith foregrounds the value of conjunctural analysis. She argues that depending on the specific balance of forces of a concrete political field—for example, when confronted with hegemonic attempts of absorption and neutralization—an identity-based movement may "engage in a short-term maximization of its autonomy to strengthen its constituency" (Smith 1998, 200). This cannot be reduced to what Laclau calls "the logic of apartheid," for Smith continues: "The rejection of neutralizing articulations may allow the movement to deepen its anti-assimilatory identity and to develop further its specific democratic critique, and that may in turn give its democratic critique more force in future articulations with other political movements" (200). Thus Smith does not simply privilege autonomy over and against Laclau's privileging of equivalence. Rather, her analysis suggests that the relation between equivalence and autonomy, hegemony and identity politics, is better grasped as a relation that unfolds conjuncturally rather than one that can be established logically or ontologically.[6] This makes it possible to preserve hegemony as a terrain of theoretical and political analysis while fully apprehending the *political* nature of interventions that may actively resist the logic of equivalence.

This complex theoretical maneuvering, which Smith finds lacking in Laclau, characterizes instead Hall's accounts of identity politics. Two such accounts will serve to illustrate this point. The first is Hall's recollection of the encounter between cultural studies and feminism. Hall describes feminism as "the thief in the night" breaking in at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS): "I use the metaphor deliberately: As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies" (Hall 1992, 282). This feminist intervention is not portrayed as an effort to establish chains of equivalence. Indeed, as Charlotte Brunsdon (1996) recalls, from the Women's Studies Group that came to be established at Birmingham a proposal emerged, in 1976, to set up a separatist group within the CCCS. The proposal, which encountered strong resistances, was informed by the separatist practice of the women's liberation movement. Hall continues:

> Because of the growing importance of feminist work and the early beginnings of the feminist movement outside in the very early 1970s, many of us in the Centre—mainly, of course, men—thought it was time there was good feminist work in cultural studies. . . . And yet, when it broke in through the window,

every single unsuspected resistance rose to the surface—fully installed
patriarchal power, which believed it had disavowed itself. (Hall 1992, 282)

In this recollection, the nonhegemonic character of this feminist intervention
is what Hall values the most. To be sure, appreciating its separatist and dis-
ruptive nature does not prevent one from equally registering and emphasizing
its long-term hegemonizing effects, as Hall does elsewhere (see Hall 1989,
132), yet for him it remains essential to recognize that *certain* politics, in
certain moments, are not for *all*, and that they may derive their political force
from a lack of interest or active refusal to enter any chain of equivalence.

A second instance of Hall's acknowledgment of nonhegemonic modes of
political intervention is his account of Black cultural politics.[7] In one of his
famous essays on this matter, Hall speaks of a shift between two different
"moments." The first moment—which began in the late 1960s—was marked
by the joint objectives of granting black subjects access to the means of rep-
resentation and countering racist representations with a "positive" Black
imagery. Yet in the late 1980s, Hall registers the emergence of Black feminist
and gay critiques of Black masculinity—or, as he puts it, the end of the
"essential black subject." On the one hand, he interprets this shift through his
theory of hegemony: "The end of the essential black subject also entails a
recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articu-
lation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions" (Hall 1996, 445).
On the other hand, even as he stretches his theory of hegemony to account for
these antagonisms and recompositions *within* identity formations, Hall's tone
also acknowledges that this politics of internal criticism may not always be
driven by an effort to form hegemonic links: "the plurality of antagonisms
and differences that now seek to *destroy the unity of black politics*, given the
complexities of the structures of subordination that have been formed by the
way in which we were inserted into the black diaspora, is not at all surpris-
ing" (Hall 1992, 32; emphasis added).

So, it is not surprising either that when Laclau suggested in passing, dur-
ing a late encounter with Hall on Argentinian television and in the context of
a conversation about diasporic politics, that *all politics is hegemonic*, Hall
responded skeptically: "I suppose my hesitation arises from the example you
used, because . . . a diasporic politics is . . . not necessarily a hegemonic poli-
tics. It may seek to become one, but I'm not even sure that it does that. So, I
think we need to make some distinctions *within* politics."[8] Borrowing a
notion that Hall deployed in the context of other discussions, we could say
that identity politics maintain a relation of "relative autonomy" to any project
of Left hegemony. Hence, while hegemony always remained for Hall a theo-
retical and political horizon, he never allowed that horizon to totalize the field

of emerging struggles breaking open before his eyes. On the contrary, his attunement to the conjuncture allowed him to let the horizon of hegemony be displaced and transformed—one might even say *queered*—by so many "detours" through the relatively autonomous struggles of heterogeneous and intersecting social movements.[9] In Laclau's political ontology, instead, there is little space for such detours, for the tension between equivalence and autonomy is absorbed at the theoretical level as an endless play between two logics internal to hegemony itself.

This difference between Hall's and Laclau's respective accounts of identity politics gains additional significance today, as new transnational and intersecting social movements have emerged that function as expansive terrains of politicization. For example, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser (2019) argue that feminist movements such as Ni Una Menos or the International Women's Strikes have broken open the most promising terrain of resistance to both neoliberalism and right-wing populisms. A similar point could be made about the Movement for Black Lives in the United States, which formed under Obama—that is, under the sign of a neoliberal "postracial" ideology (Taylor 2016)—and lost none of its mobilizing power under Trump. Importantly, these are movements that have been activating processes of recomposition and ideological transformation on the Left by preserving varying degrees of ideological and political autonomy. An exemplary instance of this dynamic was the role played by Black Lives Matter (BLM) during the first Bernie Sanders campaign, which Dan La Botz (2015) even called "the great debate of our time." Unlike Laclau's theory of populism, which tends to disregard all antagonisms that cannot be fully absorbed into its logic of equivalence, Hall's theory of hegemony can help us conceptualize the conjunctural formation of these contemporary movements in relation to the crisis of neoliberal hegemony and the emergence of new populisms, yet without neutralizing their relative autonomy.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that Hall's and Laclau's divergent theoretical practices lead them to elaborate two different theories of hegemony with decisive implications for their respective understandings of populism and identity politics. While their work is marked by shared intellectual references, mutual theoretical influences, and similar political commitments, and while their theoretical interventions in the 1980s emerged from the same conjuncture, it is precisely the theoretical status of the conjuncture which sets their projects apart. Based on his conjunctural analyses of Thatcherism, for Hall it would make no sense to subsume the politics of gender, race, and

sexuality into a project of left populism, for what characterizes populism in his view is a demobilization of popular sectors, not a recomposition and expansion of their struggles. Additionally, Hall suggests that identity politics disturb *any* attempt of recomposition—not only of "the people" but of the Left itself. This never led him to abandon his commitment to a politics of hegemony. However, unlike Laclau, Hall's commitment never translated into a closed theoretical system that must sacrifice the autonomy of heterogenous political struggles. This is because Hall's theory of hegemony was, in the spirit of Gramsci, a theory *of* the conjuncture: it both emerged from the conjuncture—it belonged to it—and it preserved the conjuncture as its main object of theoretical investment.

This does not mean that Hall remained close to Gramsci on all counts. Like Laclau, Hall moved past Gramsci in the process of appropriating his theory of hegemony. However, when Laclau and Mouffe argue that their goal is to "recover the basic concepts of Gramscian analysis" and to "radicalize them in a direction that leads us beyond Gramsci" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 136), what they have in mind is not just a decentering of class as the unifying principle of hegemonic formations. Perhaps most importantly, their "radicalization" of Gramscian concepts unfolds as a process of increasing abstraction and theoretical formalization, which finds its full realization in Laclau's political ontology. For Hall, instead, moving beyond Gramsci means opening up his concepts to the concrete transformations of the social and political landscape in the 1970s and 1980s, including the emergence of identity-based movements operating autonomously from the organizations of the Left and the labor movement and according to logics other than hegemony itself. Thus, like Laclau, Hall moved past some fundamental aspects of Gramsci, but unlike Laclau, he did so because he retained *from* Gramsci a theoretical privileging of the conjuncture.

The same principle must orient our engagement with this conversation between Hall and Laclau today. Faced with the task of conceptualizing our political moment, we should not expect to find ready-made answers in that conversation, for our conjuncture is different from theirs. Through the 1990s, the neoliberal bloc that had emerged with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan expanded and came to occupy the very center of political life in Europe and the United States. Two paradigmatic expressions of this expansion were Tony Blair's New Labour and Bill Clinton's New Democrats, which also absorbed, if unevenly, segments of identity-based progressive social movements (see Duggan 2003). It is *this* expanded neoliberal center that is strongly identified today with the economic, political, and ideological crisis of neoliberalism. Thus, while Hall had conceptualized Thatcherism as a form of authoritarian populism that came to power in the wake of the crisis

of social democracy, contemporary authoritarian populisms often frame themselves as putative alternatives to the neoliberal bloc itself.

To some extent, these transformations separate us from Hall and Laclau. Yet, as Hall himself once put it about Gramsci, "Gramsci gives us, not the tools with which to solve the puzzle, but the means with which to ask the right kind of questions" (Hall 1987, 16). In the same spirit, I have argued in this essay that the main lesson we can draw from this critical conversation between Hall and Laclau is a lesson of theoretical practice. While Laclau's theory of hegemony and populism, as a political ontology, might seem more inclined to transcend its time, I have argued that Hall's theory of hegemony as a theory of the conjuncture is in fact more permeable and responsive to the transformations of the social and political fields. This also means that engaging with Hall today need not mean "applying" his theory of hegemony to our conjuncture but learning from him, as he did from Gramsci, to think conjuncturally about the present and to let our theories and concepts be transformed by the conjuncture.

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Notes

1. For example, in the wake of Hall's death, Duke University Press inaugurated the book series "Stuart Hall: Selected Writings" directed by Catherine Hall and Bill Schwarz, which by now includes several volumes of both classic and previously unpublished texts as well as Hall's posthumous intellectual memoir, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Hall with Schwarz 2017).
2. For an early debate over Hall's privileging of ideology in his analyses of Thatcherism, see his exchange with Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley, and Tom Ling on *New Left Review* (Jessop et al. 1984; Hall 1985).
3. A satisfactory discussion of Laclau and Mouffe's poststructuralist reading of Gramsci is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it must be mentioned that their notion of "discourse" primarily draws on Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference*

(1978). From Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe borrow the intuition that a discourse acquires its consistency not by reference to a principle external to it but through a principle immanent in the discursive formation itself. However, they lament that Foucault maintained a distinction, which they deem "inconsistent," between discursive and nondiscursive practices. It is Derrida's deconstruction that allows them to leave behind that distinction altogether (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105–7, 279–80).

4. For Hall's most extensive discussion of the relation between the abstract and the concrete, see his analysis of Marx's method (Hall 2003).

5. In *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology After Laclau*, Marchart distinguishes between ontology of politics (concerned with the ontic field of politics) and ontology of the political (which he attributes to Laclau, among others) (Marchart 2018, 10). When I speak of political ontology, I refer to what Marchart calls ontology of the political.

6. For a more radical critique, according to which Laclau's ontological theory of populism presupposes and reproduces the expulsion of race and racially marked subjects from the very domain of politics, see Benjamin L. McKean's (2016) analysis of the place of race in Laclau's theory and in recent projects of left populism in Europe.

7. For Hall's earlier work on race, see the fundamental *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) and his ground-breaking analysis of the articulation of race and class in postcolonial South Africa (Hall 1980).

8. This conversation between Laclau and Hall took place during an episode of the TV program *Diálogos con Laclau*. Broadcasted on Argentinian television in 2011, the program consisted of ten episodes, each of them staging a conversation between Laclau and another contemporary critical thinker. The other guests, besides Hall, were Toni Negri, Étienne Balibar, Chantal Mouffe, Horacio González, Gianni Vattimo, Doreen Massey, Jorge Alemán, Judith Revel, and Jacques Rancière.

9. Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, Hall's discussion of the politics of gender and sexuality *within* Black communities shows that he was attuned to what Black feminists in the 1980s were beginning to call "intersectionality" (Crenshaw 1989). For Hall's influence on early Black gay critique, see Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer (1996). For traces of Hall's influence on contemporary queer of color critique, see the work of Roderick A. Ferguson (2004) and Gayatri Gopinath (2005), among others.

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