

"Peronism and the Secret History of Cultural Studies:
Populism and the Substitution of Culture for State"

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I want to argue that at the heart of British cultural studies--and also impinging upon the cognate fields of communication and media studies--there is the populist sentiment. . . . Although the cultural studies approach considered here is not wholly encompassed by populism, a non-populist cultural studies is very nearly a contradiction in terms: it is an academic game which might do better calling itself something else.

(McGuigan 13)

If it is true, as Jim McGuigan suggests, not only that a non-populist cultural studies is almost unimaginable but also that "the field of study [of cultural studies] is unintelligible without recognition of its populist impulses" (32), then it is probably also true to say that cultural studies remains for the most part unintelligible to the majority of its interpreters, who have--studiously, it might appear--averted their gaze from this necessary populism. Moreover, and more importantly, to turn to the question of populism in relation to cultural studies is more than merely a move to understand an academic movement that happens to be currently in vogue, but might also be a matter of investigating the general structure of the political field in general. For while cultural studies has become the bandwagon for a particular sector of intellectuals looking to reinvent a certain image of the left, oppositional and engaged, its populist inclinations would seem to afford it little critical purchase against a dominant new right whose defining trait is precisely a rejuvenated populism. Cultural studies emerged in the shadow of Thatcherism and Reaganism, and now flourished under Gingrich and Major: is it then but a reflex of such populism, or can it provide a suitable critique of its own conditions of production?

My aim in this paper is to examine Latin American populism--specifically the experience of Peronism in

Argentina--and thereby also to engage with cultural studies, not only suggesting resonances between this academic field and political populism, but further looking at the importance of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism (for which Peronism is the prime object of analysis) as a model and theoretical influence for the project of cultural studies as a whole. It is through the apparent detour of Peronism that I hope to construct the secret (unheralded, unofficial) history of cultural studies.

The problem and challenge for cultural studies is for it to produce a theory and critique of populism in general--rather than micro-sociological analysis of subaltern resistances or piecemeal reaction to specific discourses of sexism, racism or homophobia etc. Cultural studies has only very intermittently faced this problem or even approached this challenge, in large part because any theory of populism has been blocked by cultural studies' own populist impulses.

While it may be allowed that not all populist projects are equal--and thus the description of cultural studies as populist need not be a slur or an accusation--it should equally not be assumed that the overlap or continuity between right populism and cultural studies is insignificant. For cultural studies to produce a theory of populism will not be possible without a detour through the Latin American periphery--though this may prove to be less a detour than a belated examination, via Laclau, of a founding moment of cultural studies itself. If it should happen, then, that those who presently engage in cultural studies do indeed wish to dissociate themselves from populism, they may well have to think seriously, as McGuigan suggests, of abandoning the project of cultural studies as it is presently constituted.

An interesting question would be to ask whether a context of institutionalized political populism generally allows the possibility of a left response such as cultural studies and, if so,

why no Argentine cultural studies paralleled Peronism as its left political (and academic) shadow. Two possible reasons would be, first, that Peronism was not so hostile to the educational system (and especially the academy) as have been the Anglo-American populist right and, second, that Peronism was, in fact, much more politically subtle in that it was able to present itself as on the left (and indeed from any position, Peronism can scarcely be said to be unambiguously a movement of the right) and thus limit the space for left oppositional movements; Perón covered the terrain of popular interpellations more fully than Thatcher or (say) Gingrich, although that may also be because the latter are faced with a still more fragmented and differentiated social order.

On the other hand, it might be possible to argue that the Peronist resistance (ie. the phase of Peronism between 1955 and 1973) did indeed produce cultural and political activity that parallels cultural studies, if necessarily different as a result of distinct Argentine institutional formations. For not only did the universities provide the main source of opposition to the military regime of Onganía in a process leading eventually to creation of the montoneras and other paramilitary groups (especially following the "onslaught and culture" and the intervention of the national universities in 1966; cf. Moyano 18-20), but also Peronism can claim to have produced the first Latin American testimonio in Rodolfo Walsh's Operación Masacre (an account of Aramburu's repression of a Peronist uprising in 1956, written from the point of view of the civilians accidentally caught up in these events), and the links between the testimonio genre and cultural studies are significant. For the testimonio is an instance of intellectual production, encouragement and ventriloquy of the popular voice in much the same manner as cultural studies' partisan popular ethnography as exemplified by Dick Hebdige's Subculture or Paul Willis' Learning to Labor. Further, the testimonio claims to refute aesthetic valorization in much the same manner as cultural studies' own preference for analysis of the political and cultural construction of subjectivity within the strictures of official and market-mediated institutions.

Perhaps we should examine or construct a different set of translations and a different set of contexts for cultural studies--what I am calling its secret history--that involve the global periphery but that touch at the very heart of contemporary cultural studies. For not only has populism itself reached its most successful and fully realized instantiation in this Latin American periphery, but also, I will argue, the theory of populism that is cultural studies at its best has been most fully articulated through a consideration of Latin American populism. Specifically, I propose a genealogy for cultural studies that assigns particular importance to the theoretical formulations of Ernesto Laclau (at times writing with Chantal Mouffe) and that emphasizes the extent to which Laclau (and Mouffe's) hegemony theory is indebted to the experience, consideration and theorization of Peronist populism. I thus suggest that the secret history of cultural studies necessarily passes through the figures of Juan and Evita Perón and the thirty (or more) year political movement they inaugurated.

If cultural studies is in some way essentially populist, this is not only because of its engagement with the populism of the right (indeed, such engagement scarcely characterizes its American variants at all), nor even because of its general focus on what might be called popular culture, but rather because its project can be defined as a populist attempt to construct a popular cross-class alliance against the dominant power bloc. I take this definition of populism from Laclau, whose own phrasing is as follows: "Our thesis is that populism consists in the presentation of popular-democratic interpellations as a synthetic-antagonistic complex with respect to the dominant ideology" (Politics and Ideology 172-3). Moreover, in that, for Laclau, "the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse which is in turn part of a more general social crisis" (173), it should

be clear that such were also the conditions for emergence of cultural studies, which arises not only from the defeats of the left (and the discrediting of Marxism) in the 1980s but also from the generalized climate of crisis--oil crisis, currency crisis, debt crisis, unemployment crisis--from the early 70s to the early 80s, for which the then current ideological discourse could provide neither explanation nor answer. Indeed, memorably Jim Callaghan, then Chancellor of the Exchequer in a British Labour administration about to devalue sterling and run to the IMF, responded to reporters' inquiries about the situation by asking "Crisis? What crisis?" Thus the discourse of the social democratic political consensus was literally dumbfounded in the face of this general social crisis.

We should also, of course, look at the question of political demonology as a salient characteristic of populism, the outcome of its specific antagonism. This has at times been the object of cultural studies' critique as with Michael Rogin's analysis of Reaganism, of course, but also in general analyses of subalternity, political stereotypes etc. The problem is that cultural studies has generally focussed on individual aspects of such demonology, rather than on the structure of the populist articulation as a whole.

For populist movements in general, Sagrario Torres Ballesteros emphasizes the fact that, "What is important . . . is the confrontation between the 'people' and the 'anti-people,' the struggle between 'poor and rich,' 'exploiters and exploited' [etc.]. . . . All populist rhetoric revolves around the 'people/anti-people' antagonism" (173).¹ For Peronism in particular, the anti-people was defined for the most part in terms of imperialism and its oligarchical agents within Argentina, who could be named the "enemies of the people" as in the section entitled such in Perón's Pensamiento Político de Perón (121-123). However, this manichean distinction is expressed more broadly and more succinctly in the phrase that serves as epigraph for this same

book: "For a Peronist there should be nothing better than another Peronist" (5). This phraseology offered a still greater degree of rhetorical flexibility (if also instability) to the Peronist logic of political demonology in so far as the people were thus only secondarily identified as the "poor" or "exploited" (or "descamisados"), their primary identification being as Peronists. For this is clearly a negative identification--Peronism is defined purely by its negation of and (in Laclau's term) antagonism towards an as yet undefined and perhaps indefinable other. At the same time, Peronism also conveyed an apparent refusal of conventional dualisms that might at least appear to construct a binary system of through simple negation. Peronism could variously articulate traditional (or even non-traditional) referents, such as the poor, the people, the descamisados, to a system of equivalences with Peronism, a term otherwise outside of such a referential (as opposed to phatic) discourse. Presenting itself as outside of such a binary frameworks, because its own articulations, however, consistent, were contingent rather than necessary, Peronism could position itself a third term or horizon to all such either/or logic. This then was the Peronist "Third Position" (Perón 123-125) also expressed in slogans constructed precisely through the simple addition of Peronism as negation of a given binary such as "Neither nazis nor fascists--Peronists" or "Neither Yankees nor Marxists--Peronists" (qtd. Ciria 311).

Perón was thus able to shift position constantly, defining and re-defining anti-Peronism (also therefore the "anti-people") according to situation and circumstance, while leaving the actual substance of Peronism itself relatively unclear or underdetermined and yet retaining the same apparent referent both in his own charisma (his own name) and in the notion of an ideal, unbroken movement of Peronism towards an un-named historical destiny. This tactic of presenting equivocation as constancy was (with hindsight) perhaps most notable in the early seventies, just prior to his return to Argentina, as Perón played off the Peronist Youth (and associated guerrilla movements) against the union old guard and vice versa, before finally demonizing the youth movement itself at

a mass rally they had organized for 1 May 1974. Here, Perón stated that "these treacherous infiltrators who work from within . . . are more dangerous than those who work from outside" (qtd. di Tella 66) thus expelling from the movement those who--it would now seem--had only been contingently incorporated.

Such action of definition and expulsion--in the event, however, enforceable only while Perón lived--provided the limit to what was otherwise the corollary of this same relative indefinition, this being the availability of Peronism as the legitimation and support for multiple political inflections from the far right (Perón's fascist elements) through reformism to the revolutionary ultra-left (John Cooke or some of the armed groups). To a large extent this ambiguity was increased as the figure of Evita was also available as a second pole for would-be Peronist negative identification, for example in the montonera's construction of Evita as incarnation of the Peronist left: "if Evita lived, she would be a montonera."

During Perón's exile there was a high degree of complicity between those making opportunistic use of Perón and those whom Perón himself was manipulating to maintain himself as leader, if absent. The irony, therefore, of Perón's own death was that, far from bringing political or ideological closure, it ensured the further fragmentation of these tendencies without the possibility of their unification or further authoritative re-definition. Given the triple identification of party, people and state in this antagonistic indefinition, all three aspects--in civil society, culture and state--were thus bound to disintegrate. Tomás Eloy Martínez' La Novela de Perón is perhaps most profitably read in this context as a study of both Peronism as an open field of identification and affiliation (practical and interpretive, before Perón's return and after his death) and Peronism as the moment of closure, the violence that ends interpretation and establishes the anti-people (here symbolized above all in the massacre at Ezeiza airport the day of Perón's second and final return to Argentina).

Peronism's use of image, technology and dramaturgy is connected with its attempt to define itself in a more positive manner, if without the use of strictly discursive elements, by demarcating its

proper spheres of social, symbolic and physical space. A clear example of such social (primarily urban) scenography and dramaturgy was in the use of the Plaza de Mayo, in front of the Casa Rosada from whose balconies Evita and Juan could address and present themselves (flanked by huge banners bearing portraits of their faces) to the masses below. This was a means of representing or staging the social collectivity, the people in its positivity, even if they achieved no identity except in relation to Perón, as presumed subjects and objects of a mutual and reflecting gaze between leader and mass. The use of such a scene was inaugurated in the originary myth provided by the demonstration of October 17, 1945, against Perón's enforced resignation. Mariano Plotkin analyzes at length the uses that were made both of this event (thereafter celebrated and recreated annually) and of the annual Mayday parades (which in fact predated, but were appropriated by, Peronism), while also paying attention to the struggles over the interpretation of these "political rituals," especially in so far as socialist groups attempted to reclaim the Mayday march for a non-populist agenda. However he shows that "towards the end of the Peronist regime. . . . the first of May and the 17th of October were no longer popular festivals, but rather highly ritualized celebrations organized entirely by the state" (129).

Given the regime's cinematic and theatrical imaginary, then, it is no surprise that Evita was a former radio and cinema actress. Indeed, it was her image above all--iconographically either behind a microphone or on the balcony of the Casa Rosada with, as at least one Peronist caption put it, "her arms . . . always raised, encouragingly, in a gesture of love" (qtd. Poneman, caption to plate 2)--which, as Julie Taylor suggests, "functioned as intermediary between Perón and his people, between governmental machinery and governed masses" (67). It is further, perhaps, a fitting irony that Peronism should provide the topic for the musical Evita now, of course, a film starring Madonna in the title role.

If it is true that cultural studies coincides with--and is both a symptom of and reaction to--an era of populism in Britain and the US, it would seem unsurprising to turn to Latin America in an attempt to understand this development. For the Anglo-American experience would seem somewhat belated compared to that region's own "populist epoch" (Castañeda 44), which can perhaps be dated from 1930 and the accession of Gertulio Vargas in Brazil through to the neo-populist revivals of the 1970s and (in the case of Argentina, at least) possibly even the present day. These regimes would appear to present themselves as "creole pioneers" of populism.² Moreover, Alaine Touraine also suggests that populism is a particularly Latin American phenomenon:

Populism has always been the great Latin American temptation, representing a desire for change within continuity, without the violent rupture that both socialist and capitalist processes of industrialization experienced. (qtd. Castañeda 43)

Touraine's comment is also interesting in so far as he indicates a possible reason for this with his reference to the centrality of development. Populism is usually associated with a major re-allocation of national or international economic resources within the same mode of production. Such re-allocation may involve a transfer of resources from the agricultural or extractive sectors to industry, between industrial sectors or from the industrial to the service sector, but in any case such displacements imply the rupture of existing ideological consensus and the necessity for new articulations of hegemony across very broad and diverse components of the social totality. Arguably, then, populism is associated within the industrial phase of capitalism with the condition of underdevelopment (or rather, the associated belated push for development), and within the post-industrial phase of capitalism with the

transition from dependence on an industrial base. This would at least begin to explain the apparent shift of populism from the global periphery to the metropolis over the past twenty years.

When such projects fail--or when their ideological legitimation is unavailable--the Latin American experience has been that authoritarian regimes step in to complete (or to further) this program of developmentalist re-adjustment. Though authoritarianism is generally defined by its refusal of ideological legitimation (for which it substitutes coercion), this is not to say that it gives up on discursive legitimation altogether (merely that it prioritizes efficiency over hegemony) and its self-legitimation may also be seen in terms of the populist project of national popular redemption. Thus perhaps authoritarianism is the pursuit of hegemony by other means once populism has defined hegemony as the model for the political--or perhaps rather, once populism has defined hegemony as politics by other means. That military rule should move, in the Clauzwitzian turn of phrase, to war as the continuation of politics by means of an abstraction through hegemony and populism is perhaps appropriate given the martial understanding of politics implicit in the concept of hegemony in its Gramscian derivation. Authoritarianism thus literalizes what, in cultural studies at least, is generally taken to be the figurative conceit of defining the pursuit of hegemony as a war of position.

The Argentine military president Juan Carlos Onganía in 1966 refers above all to the military re-imposition of national unity, arguing that "the cohesion of our institutions . . . ought to be our permanent concern because that cohesion is the maximum guarantor of the spirit that gave rise to the republic" (in Loveman and Davis 195). Equally, "in his farewell address to the Argentine people in 1973, General Alejandro Lanusse felt obliged to thank his fellow

citizens for their patience with a government that had not been elected" (Schoultz 20).

The major trope of populism--as indeed, of course, the major trope of cultural studies--is precisely the substitution of hegemony for all other understandings of the political. It is almost a commonplace that hegemony is the key concept of cultural studies, at least in its post-Althusserian phase; indeed, it is the contestatory connotations of hegemony, the notion that hegemony is always incomplete and thus open to negotiation that appealed to cultural studies over the bleaker structuralism of Althusser. Dick Hebdige--whose Subculture is, as Jameson points out, perhaps the single most influential book written from within the cultural studies tradition ("On 'Cultural Studies'" 51 n. 3)--simply states that the "theory of hegemony . . . provides the most adequate account of how dominance is sustained in advanced capitalist societies" (15).

Moreover, if we understand hegemony as a process rather than an accomplishment--as an effort to win consent rather than the assumption of consensus--it is unsurprising that this process becomes visible precisely in the context of peripheral failure to achieve infrastructural and political re-organization. In Antonio Gramsci's work it is Italy and thus the European semi-periphery that registers the necessity for hegemony in a context of relative political and economic underdevelopment. Likewise it is significant that the major modern theorization of hegemony--Laclau and Mouffe's--should arise precisely from a consideration of Latin American populism, and specifically from its most accomplished (if, finally, failed) instantiation, Argentine Peronism. Mapping the secret history of cultural studies via this detour through Laclau, Latin America and Peronism does more than add merely a politically correct, multicultural element to the founding fictions of cultural

studies; it also restores to cultural studies its full political investment in social theory and questions of strategy and organization.

It is noticeable that both Latin Americanists and those in cultural studies or theory seem to forget Laclau's Latin American and Argentine origins. Yet my contention in favor of this necessary Latin American detour is further bolstered by Laclau's own statement that "the years of political struggle in the Argentina of the 1960s" remain his primary context and point of reference: "I didn't have to wait to read post-structuralist texts to understand what a 'hinge,' 'hymen,' floating signifier' or the 'metaphysics of presence' were: I'd already learnt this through my practical experience as a political activist in Buenos Aires. So when today I read Of Grammatology, S/Z or the Écrits of Lacan, the examples which always spring to mind are not from philosophical and literary texts; they are from a discussion in an Argentinian trade union, a clash of opposing slogans at a demonstration, or a debate during a party congress" (New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time 200). In the same interview he recalls that he was first a member of the Partido Socialista Argentino, then later the nationalist Partido Socialista de la Izquierda Nacional which was in alliance with Peronism, considering it the bearer of the "bourgeois banners" that had started the anti-imperialist revolution. Laclau was also the editor of the party's journals Lucha Obrera and Izquierda Nacional (197-200).

Laclau's major statement on hegemony is undoubtedly his and Mouffe's Hegemony and Socialist Strategy where they construct a genealogy of the concept taking in Luxemburg, Lenin and Sorel (among others) before passing through and (they would claim) superseding Gramsci himself. However, in line with the secret history I am mapping, I would wish to by-pass the genealogy that they themselves assert, and thus re-historicize their own theorizing. If, as they state, "'hegemony' will not be the majestic unfolding of an

identity but the response to a crisis," and if their genealogy is also (as they claim, following Michel Foucault) the "archaeology of a silence" (7), then I would locate the mark of their own silence--which is also the mark of the crisis to which they are responding--in Laclau's previous book, Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. This book outlines the first steps towards this theory of hegemony, but very firmly within not an intellectual (and European) tradition of political philosophy, but rather in the historical analysis of (as the subtitle denotes) capitalism, fascism and populism.

It is Laclau's analysis of populism that enables him to clear the ground for the later Hegemony and Socialist Strategy in that he presents populism as providing the clearest proof of the error that is traditional Marxism's class essentialism. For, just as the Gramscian notion of hegemony emerges less from an abstract theoretical development and improvement of an intellectual tradition (though it may come to have such a significance) and more from the historical circumstance of Italian underdevelopment and the failed political leadership of the Northern elite, so Laclau sees populism as a stumbling block to the development of the theory of ideology and only consequently constructs this as a problem immanent to the theory itself. For the problem of populism is that it seems to have no necessary class basis: left movements such as Maoism and right movements such as nazism (not to mention problematic mixtures or undecideable movements such as Peronism) all seem to exhibit populist features. This, then, constitutes "the impossibility of linking the strictly populist element to the class nature of a determinate movement" (Politics and Ideology 158).

Yet the class reductionism that has typified Marxism precisely attempts to link ideological (or superstructural) elements to particular classes or class fractions--to say that nationalism is necessarily a bourgeois ideology, for

example--and to attribute apparent deviations from this model to instances of false consciousness--to assert, for example, that the Peronist working class were somehow duped by rhetoric or coercion into championing the interests of the national bourgeoisie. Further, even where the Leninist notion of hegemony as class alliance to construct a Popular Front allows the strategic interest for the working class in adopting some bourgeois ideological tenets, this is still taken to be a strategic deviation, going against the grain of the basic class rootedness of ideological and political expressions. Populism confounds this conception of class reductionism in that such a method becomes untenable given the variety of populist movements, which are not clear instances of either false consciousness or strategic alliance and are not so especially in its most typical exemplars (such as Peronism or Brazilian Varguism). Thus:

It is easy to see, then, why a conception which makes class reductionism the ultimate source of intelligibility of any phenomenon has met with particular difficulties in the analysis of populism, and has oscillated between reducing it to the expression of class interests--or of the immaturity of a class--and continuing to use the term in an undefined and purely allusive way.
(159)

Laclau's solution to this problem is to suggest that there is no necessary relation between class position and ideological elements (such as nationalism), but that the relations of production determine the necessary form in which these ideological elements appear. This form is the articulatory principle of all ideological elements in a determinate historical conjuncture: thus "classes exist at the ideological and political level in a process of articulation and not of reduction" (161). The process of articulation is also the process of hegemony: through articulating various ideological strands, which may appeal to distinct social groups and interests, a class succeeds in

neutralizing contradictions between ideological elements and constructing itself as the principle of unification of all these diverse elements. For the dominant class, this hegemonic process is usually that of transformism, the neutralization of dissident elements through their accommodation in a hegemonic articulatory bloc. Social democracy, for example, clearly relies upon the concept and practice of the welfare state to articulate and neutralize subaltern demands for inclusion and benefits from the dominant class. The relation, then, between any hegemonic process and its constituent ideological elements is radically contingent; it is only through a formal, functional analysis that the class character of ideological struggle can be determined.

For the purposes of the genealogy of Laclau's thought (and thus of cultural studies' understanding of hegemony) it is important to note that in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy he and Mouffe repudiate even the idea that class struggle determines the form of hegemonic articulations. In this later book, any social group--such as feminists, ecological activists or other new social movements--may come to determine the nodal point of a hegemonic bloc. This is the point at which Laclau moves decisively from a Marxist to a post-Marxist framework, as class is deprived of any epistemological or ontological priority whatsoever. The totality of all such struggles then becomes the democratic struggle--the struggle for radical democracy--which is the ever-expanding horizon of politics for Laclau and Mouffe; as the hegemonic project expands to articulate the demands of more social groups--and, implicitly, as the progress of social differentiation produces and abstracts more such groups and more such demands--this project necessarily tends to become more democratic in so far as it tends to approximate the entire social totality. As development, industrialization and modernization bring about a more differentiated society that is more open in the sense that

it is less available for simple ideological suture (as was, for example, feudal society) then this process of hegemonic articulation becomes increasingly important: "the hegemonic form of politics only becomes dominant at the beginning of modern times" (Hegemony and Socialist Strategy 138) but experiences a "constant expansion in modern times" (139).

Although such democratic struggles are ultimately subordinate to the class struggle in Politics and Ideology, on at least a first level of analysis this distinction between the earlier and later stages of the theory is of no consequence, because the form of political engagement remains the same: politics is the combined movement of articulation and antagonism. Antagonism is the necessary second moment of a democratic struggle, and the second articulating principle (in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, the sole articulating principle) of the political field. Antagonism is the confrontation between a hegemonic bloc and its constitutive outside: it is the differentiation subsequent to the establishment of a system of equivalences that is the process of hegemonic articulation. Without antagonism there is no oppositional force--and indeed, social democracy or other parliamentary systems that serve the interests of the dominant class may well try to avoid antagonism in favor of a transformism that will neutralize otherwise antagonistic demands. Antagonism, however, is the motor that drives the political progress of democratization: in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy this is presented as a consequence of the philosophical claim that "antagonism constitutes the limit of every objectivity" (125); in Politics and Ideology it is populism that provides the model for antagonism in that populism polarizes the social field in a pure relation of antagonism.

Populism polarizes the social field by pointing up the second possible principle of articulation within any social totality--that specific to the social formation between the people and the power bloc. Thus "Populism starts at the

point where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc" (173). In so far as (for Laclau of Politics and Ideology), the people-power bloc contradiction is ancillary (if ultimately subordinate) to the contradiction that is the class struggle, these two possible articulatory principles makes up the "double articulation of political discourse" (167) and both need to be specified to describe or theorize adequately any determinate political formation. Further, as the social formation, the relation between the people and the power bloc, is subordinate (in the last instance) to the mode of production, and thus the class struggle, any analysis of populism needs further to be qualified by an understanding of its principle of class hegemony. Thus there can be a populism of the left and of the right because the people-power bloc antagonism can be articulated by either the dominant or the dominated class. There is therefore both "a populism of the dominant classes and a populism of the dominated classes" (173). Differentiations between the varied expressions of populism--from fascism to Maoism--can therefore be ascertained according to analysis of their ultimate class articulation.

On the other hand, for Laclau here this popular-democratic articulation is never fully separable from a class articulation. Indeed, a successful hegemonic struggle on the part of the dominated class must also take into account this other mode of articulation, which cannot therefore be understood as an impurity or a deviation from socialism. Far from it:

The struggle of the working class for its hegemony is an effort to achieve the maximum possible fusion between popular-democratic ideology and socialist ideology. In this sense a "socialist populism" is not the most backward form of working class ideology but the most advanced--the moment when the working class has succeeded in condensing the ensemble of democratic ideology in a

determinate social formation within its own ideology. . . .

In socialism, therefore, coincide the highest form of populism and the resolution of the ultimate and most radical of class conflicts.
(174, 196)

Thus Laclau validates the populist character of Latin American liberation movements--while providing, with his appeal to class as the ultimate articulating principle, a means of differentiating and judging between various forms of populism, refusing therefore uncritical celebration.

It is thus in this sense that Laclau produces the theory of populism that cultural studies would seem to demand: a theory that is able simultaneously to validate and to criticize the populist impulse on the base of theoretical analysis exterior to the domain of popular culture itself. Now, it is true that in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy he and Mouffe move to a different validation and criterion of criticism of populism, but again this is of only superficial importance, as the project itself remains essentially the same: that of understanding populism, conceived as a hegemonic articulation of popular-democratic elements--as the principle of politics itself in these new (non class reductionist) times. In the later book, the criterion of judging populist articulations is their potential for expansion of the logic of the social, or "the struggle for a maximum autonomization of spheres on the basis of the generalization of the equivalential-egalitarian logic" (167). While purportedly this populist struggle for "radical and plural democracy" thus "finds within itself the principle of its own validity" (167), a little later I want to question this self-sufficiency. For the moment, however, I want to continue pointing up the continuity between the earlier and later theorizations.

Even at its most basic--in terms of the expansion of the electoral franchise--Peronism has to be seen as a movement to expand the

logic of the social, and thus advance radical democracy according to its definition offered by Laclau and Mouffe. Specifically and importantly, women gained the right to vote under Perón in 1949. Indeed, and especially through Evita's welfare policies, Peronism took in the sphere of daily life as a legitimate arena for political demands in a way that confounded the conception of public (masculine) citizenship advanced through liberalism. In this as in other examples--one thinks also perhaps especially of the category of youth advanced in the 60s and 70s--Peronism was far from in opposition to the logic of the new social movements, but rather the site of their nurture and encouragement, even as it worked to construct and incorporate the power of the traditional working class. If Peronism did effect a unification of the social through the binarization of the people-power bloc distinction, this was not at all through effacing difference but rather in constructing and articulating, in a relation of equivalence, a whole series of new social actors in precisely this radical democratic tendency towards colonization of the social. Like Laclau and Mouffe's vision of a radical democracy, however, Peronism did see the social as open; the constitutive antagonisms of populism remained.

Though Laclau and Mouffe argue that "popular struggles only occur in the case of relations of extreme exteriority between the dominant groups and the rest of the community" (133)--and thus presumably are therefore more likely at the capitalist periphery rather than at its more internally differentiated core--the logic of hegemonic articulation continues to be populist in that it consists of the development of ever new antagonisms. This, then, is the significance of the new social movements, which consists in the fact that "numerous new struggles have expressed resistance against the new forms of subordination, and this from within the very heart of the new society" (161). Though, as Laclau elsewhere observes, the difference between these developments and classical populism is that "Popular mobilizations are no longer based upon a model of total

society . . . but on a plurality of concrete demands leading to a proliferation of political spaces" ("New Social Movements" 41), this is not necessarily at all a move from the logic of populism. In the first place, populism is equally flexible and ambiguous, articulating different groups (descamisados, youth, unions) in different ways at different times. Second, not only is the principle of antagonism maintained, but so is the principle of the constitution of popular subjects--defined by antagonisms "within the very heart of the new society." Without this populist element, there is no hegemonic process; or as Laclau puts it in an article devoted precisely to defining hegemony as the sole (modern) form of politics, "without the constitution of popular subjects there is no war of position" ("Tesis" 24).

It is this constitution of popular subjects that is the core of cultural studies' populism. Moreover, I would suggest that any social analysis that relies upon the concept of hegemony thus inevitably partakes of a populist politics, and therefore that the concept of hegemony--rooted in the context of underdevelopment--is overdetermined by such historical conditions of enunciation. It is, however, with Laclau and with a detour through the Latin American context in which he sets the notion to work that we can see the implications and the subtleties available in its analytical use. It is in this practical analysis of Peronism that Laclau hopes to use the concept of hegemony--understood as the populist articulation of elements antagonistic to the dominant power bloc--as a tool which will also to differentiate between right and left populism, right and left hegemonic projects.

Yet it is also in Laclau's analysis of populism that the limitations--indeed evasions--of the concept of hegemony become evident. Essentially, the limitation of the concept is its evasion and equivocation concerning the role of the state--and again it is the analysis of Peronism that shows

up this feature. For while the popular elements of populism are apparent, it is not necessarily clear what he considers to be the opposing pole of the antagonism.³

I have been referring to the other pole of the basic antagonism in the social formation as the power bloc--the term Laclau most commonly uses.⁴ However, Laclau himself slips between at least three different possible terms when he discusses the nature of this antagonism. Indeed, in a mere two pages he describes this opposition in all three ways: first as "the 'people'/power bloc confrontation" (Politics and Ideology 172); second, "a synthetic-antagonistic complex with regard to the dominant ideology" (172-3); and third, "antagonism towards the State" (173). Moreover, for good measure, he also uses the mixed expression in referring to "an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc" (173). In other words, for Laclau's theory of populism it would seem to make little difference whether the dominant pole of the popular antagonism is a bloc, an ideology, the State or some combination of the three elements. A little later--on a page which also specifies the dominant pole as "the power bloc as a whole" (196) he makes and naturalizes the articulation between these different elements in a single phrase. Indeed, this is a crucial passage in Laclau's argument:

to the extent that popular resistance exerts itself against a power external and opposed to "the people," that is to say, against the very form of the State, the resolution of "the people"/power bloc contradiction can only consist in the suppression of the State as an antagonistic force with respect to the people. Therefore, the only social sector which can aspire to the full development of "the people"/power bloc contradiction, that is to say, to the highest and most radical form of populism, is that whose class interests lead it to the suppression of the State as an antagonistic force. In socialism, therefore, coincide the highest form of "populism"

and the resolution of the ultimate and most radical of class conflicts.

(196)⁵

I wish to emphasize the slippage of definition that converts "a power external and opposed to 'the people,'" into "the very form of the State" through the phrase "that is to say." Indeed, here we see a conjunction of the opposing ends of the populist spectrum discursively produced (again, "that is to say") as a normative constant. After all, even on Laclau's terms, it would seem precisely the difference between populist articulations of a vague external power (foreign agents of imperialism; the Jews; the freemasons) as the dominant pole of the social contradiction on the one hand and articulations that place themselves against the very form of the State (note the strength of this; this is not even merely "the bourgeois state" or some such other definition) that precisely marks the difference between right and left populism. Yet he here assimilates this possible set of distinctions into a single essence of populism: populism is essentially "against the very form of the State" in so far as it is an antagonism "against a power external and opposed to 'the people.'" But it is precisely this identification which remains to be demonstrated.

Laclau thus justifies the possibility of a socialist populism through a double equivocation that at each turn confuses the hitherto separable double articulation essential, in Laclau's argument, not only to populism but also to the social totality as a whole. First he identifies socialism with antagonism towards the State, then he identifies populism with socialism by similarly allowing populism an inevitable anti-Statist essence. However, the most troubling aspect of this argument is that it is unreflexively populist, again according to the very definition he has given of the populist project. For populism--again according to Laclau--precisely mobilizes

popular and anti-authoritarian ideological elements in the name of an antagonism against the form of the state, but simultaneously demobilizes this social energy by presenting an abstract figure external to the popular as the object of this antagonism, substituting an antagonism internal to civil society for a strictly political antagonism. Equally, populism mobilizes class elements--ideological elements traditionally if contingently associated with class self-consciousness--and demobilizes them by translating them into an antagonism distinct from the terrain of modes of production.

Laclau himself has to return to the notion of the state in his own analysis of Peronism: finally he notes that the distinguishing feature of Peronism by contrast with other populisms lay in its "allowing the persistence of various 'elites' which based their support of the regime upon antagonistic articulating projects, and in confirming state power as a mediating force between them" (Politics and Ideology 197). Thus, and despite his continued stress on the ideological elsewhere--the final lines of his book, from which Hegemony and Socialist Strategy indeed takes its impetus, concern the question of a "valid starting point for a scientific study of political ideologies" (198)--Laclau is forced to move from the ideological in order to explain Peronism. More significantly still, he ends up emphasizing the resistance to ideological analysis that Peronism exerts: "The renowned ideological poverty and lack of official doctrine of Peronism is to be explained precisely by this mediating character of the State and Perón himself" (198).

Otherwise, the importance and expansion of the state within Peronism is almost so obvious as (it would appear at first sight) hardly to require mention, were it not for Laclau's contention of an essential populist anti-statism. Di Tella, for example, points out that in Perón's first administration "The State increased its role substantially" (18) in financial affairs, while Juan José Sebrelli (in his admittedly very antagonistic account) underlines

the extent to which the Peronist state maintained legislative and judicial power in constant subordination (64-67). More strongly still, Portantiero and de Ipola make of this statism a principle of Peronism in that they discuss the regime's "fetishization of the State (and thus subordination to the general principle of domination)" (209). Elsewhere, de Ipola's critique of Laclau is basically open to the latter's discursive analysis, but points out above all that Laclau has neglected to account for the conditions of reception of any attempted discursive articulation, especially in so far as the state not only mediates discursive claims, but is also in a position to consolidate ground won in the field of hegemonic struggle: "After his electoral triumph, Perón had not only implanted his hegemony in the field of the popular: after that point, he controlled also the material means to maintain and consolidate that hegemony" (949). Indeed, de Ipola's conclusion is to underline the importance of the "relation existing between the relations of power, crystallized in apparatuses, hierarchies and practices that legitimate or disqualify social actors, that allow them to speak or reduce them to silence, and the relation between the discourses themselves" (960). The fact that, as Torres Ballesteros points out, "it is surprising the scant importance [Laclau] attributes to leadership" (169) in populism, especially given the identification of the Argentine state directly with Perón, is also indicative of his failure to pay attention to the principles of hierarchy and force that regulate the process of hegemony.

Thus though many have criticized Laclau and Mouffe for their apparent abandonment of class and thus equally their move from the priority of the economic--such criticisms being usually leveled by Marxists against this unabashed post-Marxism--this seems to be the wrong direction for critique, not the least because the fundamental problem with Laclau's position appears equally in his earlier work on populism, which does indeed argue for the priority of class and the fundamental importance of the economic level. The

problem is not with de-emphasizing the economy, but rather with the substitution of culture for state.

Moreover, if hegemony is the concept that links Gramsci, Laclau and cultural studies, perhaps the concept of the state is what separates these theoretical movements. For if Gramsci's turn from political to civil society (from advocating a frontal war of maneuver to theorizing a hegemonic war of position) comes from a strategic calculation, in Laclau such a turn is the result rather, as I hope to have shown, of a rhetorical sleight of hand--a sleight of hand that is characteristic of populism, and nowadays equally characteristic of cultural studies, at least in those instances of cultural studies in which the concept of the state isn't merely discarded from the outset, as beyond a horizon of intelligibility already set by cultural studies' pre-existing populism.

Finally, then, populism--as exemplified by Peronism and as theorized on that basis by Laclau--entails and is defined by a systematic set of substitutions. For example, it substitutes the moral for the ideological--as Peter Wiles points out, it "is more moralistic than programmatic . . . it valorizes less logic and effectivity than the correct attitude and spiritual character" (qtd. Torres Ballesteros 171). More importantly, however, it presents hegemony as the replacement for politics on other levels--for example the structural and organizational--and as such presents the expansion of the state as the increasing openness of civil society. In an article tracing various Marxist theories of the state, Laclau himself equivocates precisely on this point. On the one hand he notes this increasing permeation of the social by the state: "the form of the state defines the basic articulations of a society and not solely the limited field of a political superstructure" ("Teorías Marxistas del Estado" 54); however, and immediately following this recognition, he disavows it by claiming that "political struggle has passed now to extend to the totality

of civil society" (54). This, however, is precisely the repetition of the populist substitution. So long, therefore, as political analysis remains confined to the theory of hegemony--as is cultural studies--then it will remain confined to a logic of populism that is unable either to differentiate itself from the dominant political mode of rightwing populism or to recognize the transformations and substitutions that political mode demands and entails. Rather, then, than examining the articulations within the field of civil society--a field that may indeed, one might suggest with Michael Hardt, be withering away, a movement that again, perhaps, with populism begins in the periphery rather than the metropolis--one might do better to examine the organizational features of culture and state, to re-emphasize their difference rather than their similarity; or rather again to see the state as that which has to be explained.

Jon Beasley-Murray
Durham, April 1997

¹In this, and in all other cases unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

² That this is the phrase Benedict Anderson uses of Latin America's priority in the spread nationalism seems not just coincidental given the importance of national ideologies for most populist projects.

³ Perhaps there has been too much attention paid to the status of the subject of Peronism--the popular subject position especially, if not exclusively, identified with the Argentine working class--just as perhaps there has been too much attention paid to "subjectivity" in cultural studies. In some senses, Daniel James, at the end of tracing this subject's extensive history in his Resistance and Integration, can be perhaps read as also signaling the exhaustion of this mode of investigation--enabling us to lay this concern to rest. His emphasis throughout is on the mutability of Peronist identification, especially during Perón's long exile. James is concerned to argue precisely against the notion of some persistence in ideological affiliation--what he terms the "pervasive form of explanation . . . which has emphasised the continued adherence of workers to populist ideology" (262). By contrast, James wishes to point rather to the ways in which "workers could at times recast traditional tenets of Peronist ideology to express their changing needs and experience" (263) such that "Peronism had become by the late 1950s a sort of protean, malleable commonplace of working-class identification" (264). James himself thus turns from the ideological analysis of Peronism towards a more immanent concern with what he suggests might be "the ontological status of the working class" (259) using more the concept of "structures of feeling" (97) taken from Raymond Williams or Pierre Bourdieu's concern with the effects of articulation of "private experience" (30) which depends on his notion of an embodied habitus (as theorized in Outline of a Theory of Practice). Perhaps, however, as well as turning from the ideological to the ontological it might also be useful to move from the focus on either the working class or Perón (Evita or Juan) and towards the way in which the other pole of Peronist mobilization was structured and organized in

relation to both the Peronist subject and Perón himself, who might then be viewed as effects of this organization rather than their principle.

⁴ In itself this term is one whose problematic nature Juan Carlos Portantiero and Emilio de Ipola point out in so far as it "leaves standing (that is, opens without resolving) the . . . problem of the relation between populism and socialism" (210).

⁵ One might also here questioning how Laclau now insists that the class interests of the working class "lead it to the suppression of the State" when all his argument until this point has been to mark the distinction (in terms of relative autonomy) between the class struggle and the struggle within a given social formation. Laclau has been at pains to exist that classes--as defined and produced at the economic level--are not simply represented at the cultural or political levels; this he regards as the error of class reductionism. Yet he seems here prepared to assume that the State is indeed represented in some simple way in the economic level and that to misunderstand this is to misunderstand the objective "class interests" in play--a notion that precisely seems to bring with it the whole problematic of false consciousness with respect to objective interest, a problematic the move away from class reductionism was supposed to have refused.

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