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Preface to *Forenames of God*

Enumerations and Incarnations of Ernesto Laclau toward a Political Theology of Algorithms

No one will ever be able to 'identify God',
said J.D.
...do you remember God's number?
...God knows where his first name is now.

Hélène Cixous (2013, p. 119, p. 144, p. 172)

Hegel asserts:

> [...] if in the expression of the absolute, or the eternal, or God (and *God* would have the perfectly undisputed right that the beginning be made with him), if in the intuition or the thought of them, *there is more* than there is in pure being, then this *more* should first *emerge* in a knowledge which is discursive and not figurative; [...] whatever in the richer representations of the absolute or God might be said or implied over and above being, all this is at the beginning only an empty word and only being; this simple determination which has no further meaning besides, this empty something, is as such, therefore, the beginning of philosophy (Hegel 2010, p. 55).

> Wenn also im Ausdrucke des Absoluten oder Ewigen oder Gottes (und das unbestrittenste Recht hätte Gott, daß mit ihm der Anfang gemacht werde), wenn in deren Anschauung oder Gedanken mehr liegt als im reinen Sein, so soll das, was darin liegt, ins Wissen als denkendes, nicht vorstellendes, erst hervortreten; [...] Was [...] über das Sein ausgesprochen oder enthalten sein soll in den reicheren Formen des Vorstellens von Absolutem oder Gott, dies ist im Anfange nur leeres Wort und nur Sein; dies Einfache, das sonst keine weitere Bedeutung hat, dies Leere ist also schlechthin der Anfang der Philosophie (Hegel 1986, p. 79).

If a discursivity beyond mere figuration (such as a signifier or name)[1] can be overdetermined, and, thereby, identified-with (beyond merely being identified), that would be due to its simple emptiness, which would never escape or exclude its theological capacities to be or have been employed in naming *that in which one*

1 In a seminar at Northwestern University in the Fall of 2007, a student asked Professor Laclau, "*Is a signifier always a name?*," to which Laclau immediately answered, "*I think so.*"

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believes (or, perhaps, desires). As such, it may then be politicized by a person along with a diversity of people with a rich variety of political demands. This would be only the beginning; simply an opening: a forename, *prénom*, initial emptiness or initiationary void from which political actions may emerge. "*There is more*," and more to come with regards to such a 'more.' This already anticipates a strange enumerative function that perhaps exceeds colloquial numeration. In critiquing previous canonical understandings of mathematical methods of quantification (equations, constants, variables, etc., perhaps too limited or outdated to his taste), Hegel finds himself drawn *sauf le nom*, specifically the names of differents, the difference of any such name, and the differentials of naming for the sake of differentiating:

> [...] with the omission of the constants, a similar comment can be made regarding the *names* of differentiation and integration as was earlier made regarding the expressions "finite" and "infinite," namely that the term says the opposite of what is intended. "To differentiate" indicates the positing of differences, whereas by being differentiated an equation is in fact reduced to fewer dimensions; with the omission of the constant a moment of determinateness is taken away [...] the roots of the variables are made equal, *their difference therefore sublated* (Hegel 2010, p. 251).

> Mit dem Weglassen der Konstanten hängt eine ähnliche Bemerkung zusammen, die über die *Namen* von Differentiation und Integration gemacht werden kann, als früher über den endlichen und unendlichen Ausdruck gemacht wurde, daß nämlich in ihrer Bestimmung vielmehr das Gegenteil von dem liegt, was der Ausdruck besagt. Differentieren bezeichnet das Setzen von Differenzen; durch das Differentieren aber wird eine Gleichung vielmehr auf weniger Dimensionen herabgebracht, durch das Weglassen der Konstante wird ein Moment der Bestimmtheit hinweggenommen; [...] die Wurzeln der veränderlichen Größe [werden] auf eine Gleichheit gesetzt, die *Differenz also derselben aufgehoben* (Hegel 1986, p. 345).

These two notes from the *Science of Logic* might help contextualize Laclau's approach to the strange enumerative functions he finds at play in political life, as well as why such a discussion might find itself engaging mysticism or theologians such as Eckhart, Dionysius Aeropagite, or Rudolf Otto (Laclau 2006, p. 144).

Perhaps nowhere better than, "On the Names of God," can readers discern Laclau's appreciation of theology, specifically, negative theology, and the radical potencies of political theology. There are hints of the importance of theology in other and previous writings. A thread is drawn through the theological concerns of Scotus, Nicholas of Cusa, Occam, Spinoza, Sholem, and Scotus Erigena to contemporary political theory (Laclau 2001, p. 4; Laclau 2007, p. 9; Laclau 2002, pp. 36-43). But it is Laclau's close attention to Eckhart and Dionysius in this essay that reveals a core theological strategy to be learned by populist reasons or social

logics and applied in politics or democracies to come. This appreciation of theology and the history of religions would not be unrelated to his disagreements with Hardt and Negri regarding immanence and transcendence. If Hardt, Negri, Marx, and Hegel overemphasize the former, then Eckhart helps reappreciate elements of the latter not to be so easily dismissed.

As much as the misuse or abuse of hegemonic power by any repressive political regime can be exerted over subjects, it can yet be expropriated from it by oppressed peoples and redirected against it. As early as *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1986), in response to Claude Lefort, careful attention is given by Laclau and Mouffe to "earlier societies, organized in accordance with a theological-political logic, [through which] power was incorporated in the person of the prince, who was the representative of God — that is to say, of sovereign justice and sovereign reason" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, p. 186). Any such opportunistic or exploitative theopolitical logic of the past sanctioning, ordaining, or absolutizing the powers of a prince, sovereign, mystical foundation of authority, or forces of law, might yet be also learned, co-opted, and redirected from below in resistance against that very representative of power. Such reverse-engineering is perhaps learned as much from Marx as from mystics (Marx 1990, pp. 928–929). It is likely a hybrid of both. It is perhaps also an articulation of (or lesson in) Derridean auto-immunity/ies (Derrida 2005, pp. 33–41; cf. Malcolm X 2010, p. 87, p. 103, p. 202).

Returning to the diagram of the empty signifier in *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005, p. 130), alongside names of god that may come to mind, a few theological correlations can perhaps be suggested.

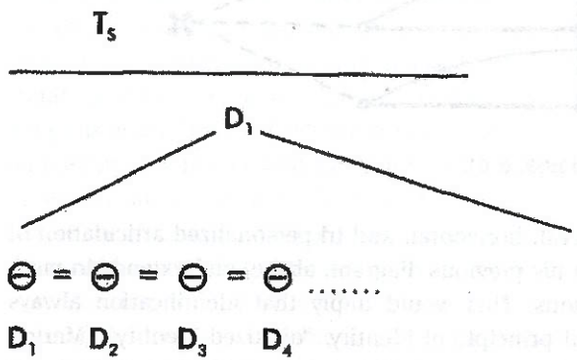

Fig. 1: Empty Signfier, Laclau 2005, p. 130.

In this particular articulation, T_s represents tsarism. But it could be substituted with any repressive political regime or hegemony abusing its hegemonic powers. *Something* (something difficult to say, describe, or write) must confront such

abuse in or with socially invested counter-hegemonic resistance. That something would be (or would be invested in or with) the "ineffable" or "an empty signifier" (Laclau 2006, p. 136, p. 142) and is, here, represented by the D_1 directly under the line under T_s, in direct confrontation with the repressive political regime. It would be a sufficiently empty (or emptied) political Demand or Desire with which an open-ended numericity (if it is that) of heterogenous political demands or desires of a diverse group of people can identify. If it is not numerical, it is perhaps something "supernumerary" by "sur-numbering" or "super-numeration" (Derrida 2020, pp. 91–2, p. 94. p. 109; cf. Mersch 2015, p. 159; Von Neumann 1958, p. 2; Zellini 2020, p. 177; cf. p. 92, p. 107, p. 115). After Eckhart and Dionysius, mystical or theological precursors to such social practices or political phenomena are suggested heir to and entangled in "the open character of the enumeration that guarantees that God can be identified with the 'ineffable'" (Laclau 2006, p. 139).

This would emerge through a process akin to that which Freud describes as "identification" in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud 1959, pp. 46–53; cf. Laclau 2005, p. 56; Laclau 2006, p. 144), while grappling with the church, military, and politics. In fact, the diagram offered by Freud (1959, p. 61) to help represent the psychic apparatus(es) involved in the identifications of love and overdeterminations of love-objects by way of identifications:

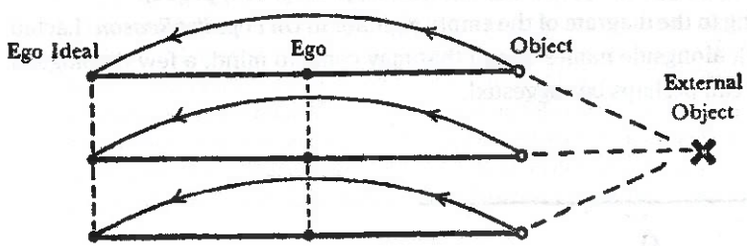

Fig. 2: Group Identification, Freud 1959, p. 61.

...might be considered a larval, horizontal, and tri-personalized articulation of what Laclau verticalizes (in his previous diagram, above) and extends in more social or political dimensions. This would imply that identification always exceeds identity, the logical principle of identity, "digitized identity" (Marion 2015, p. 32) of online data doubles, or any "identity so perfectly achieved and sutured that it would leave no space for any identification in the Freudian sense of the term" (Laclau 1990, p. 171).

In the wake of "Dionysius' enumeration," Laclau suggests "an enumeration that has no internal hierarchy" that comes to form "an enumerative chain" (Laclau 2006, p. 139). Such a chain is articulated in the above diagram as the

chain, list, or series of equivalences at the bottom, from D_1 to D_4. The "open-ended dimension of the enumeration" that "must remain indeterminate" (Laclau 2006, p. 139, p. 142) is articulated by the super-ellipse or series (if it is that) of dots or periods at the unending end of the chain [.....].

This perhaps recontextualizes Laclau's early comments on algorithmicity and algorithmic decisions with regards to political actions and social controls in a letter (10 September 1987) to Aletta J. Norval:

> If the choosing of a course of action were algorithmic, in that case there would be no coercion, because the different courses of action, although materially possible, could only have been undertaken as a consequence of a subjective error of judgment. If I make a mistake in a mathematical calculation, the erroneous solution is not a possibility which belongs to the field of mathematics itself. But if the decision *is not* algorithmic, in that case to decide implies something very different. It implies *creating* something which was not predetermined and, at the same time, cancelling out of existence possibilities which will not now be realized. [...] If the decision [...] were algorithmic [...] then the identity of the agent [...] would not be affected by the decision-making process. But if the decision is not algorithmic, it constitutes a radically new identity. [...] But in practical life we are constantly faced with decisions to take which are algorithmically undecidable [in the sense of Gödel] but which, nevertheless, have to be taken. So, I would say that systems of social organization can be seen as attempts to reduce that margin of undecidability, to make way for actions and decisions that are as coherent as possible (Laclau 1990, p. 171–2).

One can only wonder if this conception of algorithmic decisions from the late 1980s could be maintained so serenely as non-coercive, had its conceiver been witness to cyber-political entities like Cambridge Analytica. Laclau later addresses an incompatibility between "the algorithmic character of decisions – and democracy" (Laclau 1990, p. 194). What seems clear, however, is that his understanding of algorithmic and indeed, 'mathematical calculation' (perhaps a tendentious equivalence), if deployed in a system of social organization would be an operation to reduce undecidability and increase decidability, for the sake of pragmatic politics (at best). He would be the last to overlook its collateral potential for social manipulation of political agents (at worst) in the very delimitation of certain possibilities, liberties, or freedoms beyond such algorithmic calculation. More importantly, he insinuates that an *algorithmic identity* would be always already decided and incapable of choosing possibilities beyond algorithmic decisions that he suggests are ever delimited by mathematical calculation. As such, an algorithmically determined identity could never achieve the kind of identification demanded in the writings of Freud and, thereby, encouraged in Laclau's readings of Eckhart and Dionysius. Algorithmic identities, as such, would be condemned to a enumerative chain (or series) devoid of both the open-ended inde-

terminacy of the super-ellipse as well as the *relation* represented by the diagonal line [/] on the left side of the diagram stretching from the D_1 of the lower series to the D_1 of the higher ratio (or fraction) of the empty signifier and its *bar* [–] in confrontation with political repression.

This mode of an algorithmically informed negative political theology is not mathematically inert. It aspires to relate a fraction or ratio to a series (perhaps dreaming of a hybridity of both, more, and less). It strains to reduce the decided determinateness of such seriality ever condemned to the naïve metaphysics of bad infinity. It would be so condemned precisely because it is devoid of any such relations to a certain kind of ratio. This schema is drenched not only in Freud and Hegel (cf. Hegel 2010, pp. 209–214, p. 276, p. 499, p. 572), but is no less informed by the history of theology, including an important "notion of contingency" Laclau suggests is set in motion by Christianity (Laclau 1990, p. 19).

One of Laclau's disclosures with the 'Names of God' is how the mystical poetry of negative theology performs as a tangential, diagonal, or over- or underlying alternate dimension to ways by which "political discourse [...] tries to establish a stable articulation" (Laclau 2006, p. 143). One of the ways one might approach the diagram of a floating signifier in *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005, p. 131):

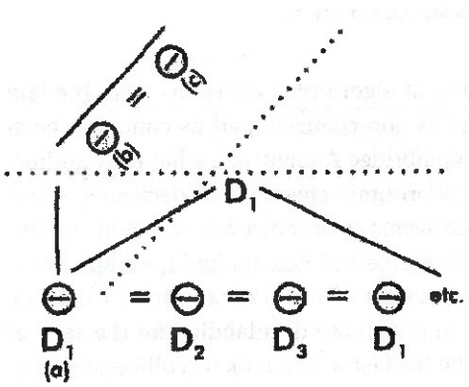

Fig. 3: Floating Signifier, Laclau 2005, p. 131.

...is the possibility by which the 'opinion,' 'logos,' and 'number' of Dionysius in "On the Names of God" (Laclau 2006, p. 139) can function on the suggested floating dimension of the (a), (b), and (c), in *On Populist Reason*. It is worth considering that it is the specific 'number' of Dionysius in differential identification with an ineffable god (and, as such, a singular becoming between theology and numbers) that is floating in a least two dimensions as the very "D_1(a)" (be it political Demand on the horizontal dimension or theological Desire on this floating dimension) that *cannot but perform the link that relinks* names of god with any political life, populist reason, social justice, or radical democracy straining toward peace. In the writings of Dionysius, Laclau finds a "number" that can find equivalence with serial enumeration, but yet exceeds such colloquial numericity or seriality through a negative identification with an ineffable, thereby initiating (or incarnating) a so-called numerical chain that is "beyond" mere arithmetical counting, ever opening to indeterminacy, that is "not indifferent to the differential contents" of differentials to come (Laclau 2006, p. 145).

If Laclau's political theory finds itself drawn toward experiences of "incarnation" (Laclau 2006, p. 145, p. 147; Laclau 2005, p. 170; Laclau 2007, pp. 9–13, pp. 23–25, p. 28; Laclau 1990, p. 81), it would have something to do with how the left diagonal line [/] linking the higher or transcendent "D_1" (as empty signifier, confronting political repression) to the lower or concrete "D_1" (as a demand first finding identification with that higher empty signifier, thereby initiating an equivalential or serial chain with others) could be understood as a way by which theology often grapples with christology or the doctrine of incarnation (cf. Baker 2011, pp. 193–194, p. 290, p. 298). It is invested with that very kind of linking or relation that was theorized for millennia between form and matter, creator and creation, god and humanity, transcendence and immanence, infinity and finitude, or eternity and time. Christology and incarnation set the stage for such a line [/] by which a higher 'god' relates and materializes down toward a lower 'human,' who not only relates and identifies with that god upward, but makes possible ways of life by which any and all humans and creatures might find equivalential relation to the sides of that human and, thereby, become or begin relating and identifying with such a god in their own idiomatic ways or religious lifestyles or practices. This line [/] performs as the "'dual movement' [of a] 'materialization of God' and a 'deification of the concrete'" (Laclau 2006, p. 147). As such, it would exceed any exclusivity of a 'chosen one' often presumed in traditional christologies or Jesuologies toward something akin to what the Asian theologian, C.S. Song, might call *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Song 1996, pp. 211–218).

Laclau's complex resistance to the supposed oppositional dualism so often presumed inescapable between transcendence – Hebrew or otherwise – and immanence – christological or otherwise – would ally his political theory with theologians that struggle with the trinity. If there was ever any question of an underlying trinitarian logic to the Hegelian dialectic or speculative philosophy (cf. Mersch 2015, p. 91), it should not go unnoticed that Laclau's schema (if it is that) of the empty signifier strains and struggles to account for a kind of relationality that is but a hair's breadth away from that with which trinitarian theology often wrestles under the name of *perichoresis* (Moltmann 1985, pp. 16–17). (Further, *perichoresis* is perhaps itself but a secondary breadth away from a dif-

ferential hair – perhaps floating on a side dimension – from that which Jewish mysticism sometimes wrestles under the name of *tzimtzum*.)

A name of god – if not god, godself – serves as *the Empty Signifier* of any and all empty signifiers, passed, passing or to come. This might have much left to teach us not only about politics, algorithms, algorithmic politics, possibilities of cyber-democracy, religion, and political theology, but also the recent emergence of an important or singular *political theology of algorithms* in need of urgent identification and further study by theology, media studies, data sciences, and political theory. Perhaps any possible future constructions of an ethical life might depend on such diverse fields of study keeping themselves open to the others.

The German translation of Laclau's essay included in this volume, below, is incomplete and excerpted. The entirety can be found in English in the *Political Theologies* collection (2006, pp. 137–147) referenced in my bibliography.

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Figures

Fig. 1: Empty Signfier, Ernesto Laclau: *On Populist Reason*. London, New York: Verso. 2005, p. 130.

Fig. 2: Group Identification, Sigmund Freud: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. London, New York: Norton & Company 1959, p. 61.

Fig. 3: Floating Signifier, Ernesto Laclau: *On Populist Reason*. London, New York: Verso 2005, p. 131.

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