Virgil W. Brower

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 God.

...God knows where his first name is now.

Hegel asserts:

[...] if in the expression of the absolute, or the eternal, or God (and God would have the perfectly undisposed right that the beginning be made with him), if in the limitation or the thought of him, 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 representation of the absolute or God might be said or implied are 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 in such, therefore, the beginning of philosophy (Hegel 1996, p. 76).

Wenn also im Ausdruck des Absoluten oder Welts oder Gottes (und das unbestimmte Recht hätt-Gott, daß mir der Anfang gemacht werde), wenn in seiner Anschatzung oder Gedachtnis mehr liegt als an reinem Sein, so soll das, was dann liegt, im Wissen als denken

dich, nicht vermittelt, erst herausgenommen. [...] Wen [...] über das Sein ausgebracht, oder enthalten sein soll in der rechnew Form, also Vorsätzlich von Absolwant oder Gott, das ist im Anfang nur leere Wort und nur Sein ohne Endliche, das kann keine weitere Bedeuten

das, das erst ist also wirklich der Anfang des Philosophie (Hegel 1996, p. 76).

I've discursivity beyond mere figuration (such as a signifier or theme) 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 the

1. In a seminar at Northwestern University in the Fall of 2007, a student asked Professor Laclau, "Is a signifier always a noun?" to which Laclau immediately answered, "I think not.

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believes (or, perhaps, deserves). As such, it may then be politized 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 foreground, pericentum, initial emptiness or initiantionary 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 savoir le nom, specifically the names of different, the difference of any such name, and the differentials of naming for the sake of differentiating:

"... with the context of the constants, a similar comment can be made regarding the names of differentiation and integration so vast scull, made regarding the expressive "le titre" and "infinite," namely that the term says the opposite of what it intended. "In differentiation," indicates the positioning of differences, whereas by being differentiated an equation is in fact reduced in fewer dimensions; with the context of the constant a moment of determinate-ness is taken away... the roots of the variables are made equal, their difference therefore subtracted (Hegel 2010, p. 251)."

Mit dem Weglassen der Konstanten hängt eine ähnliche Bemerkung zusammen, die über die Namen von Differenzen und Integration gemacht werden kann, als fiel über den endlichen und unendlichen Ausdruck genauso gehandelt wurde, daß zumindest in ihrer Bedeutung vielmehr das Gegenteil von dem liegt, was der Ausdruck besagt. Differenzieren bedeutet die Setzung der Differenzen; durch das Differenzieren aber wird eine Gleichung vielmehr auf weniger Dimensioen herabgebaut, durch das Weglassen der Konstanten wird ein Moment der Bestimmtheit hinweggenommen;... die Wurzel der verstreuten Gleichheit wandert auf eine Gleichheit gesetzt, die Differenz also derselben aufhebt (Hegel 1966, p. 36).

These two notes from the Science of Logic might help contextualize Lacanian 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 Areopagite, or Rudolf Otto (Lacan 2006, p. 146).

Perhaps nowhere better than, "On the Names of Hegemon" can readers discern Lacan'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 Scottus, Nicholas of Cusa, Occam, Spinoza, Sholem, and Scotts Elginia to contemporary political theory (Lacan 2001, p. 4); Lacina 2007, p. 9; Lacan 2002, pp. 36-43). But it is Lacan'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 Hartli and Negri regarding immanence and transcendency. If Hardt, Negri, Marx, and Hegel overemphasize the former, then Eckhart helps reappropriate 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 extripated 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 exploitive (heopolitical 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 also perhaps an articulation of (or lesson in) Derridean auto-immunity/ies (Deleuze 2005, pp. 33–41) cf. Malcolm X 2010, p. 67, p. 103, p. 202).

Returning to the diagram of the empty signifier in On Populist Reason (Laclau 2005, p. 190), alongside names of god that may come to mind, a few theological correlations can perhaps be suggested.

\[ T_i \]

\[ D_i + \Theta = \Theta = \Theta = \Theta \]

\[ D_1, D_2, D_3, D_4 \]

Fig. 5: Empty Signifier, Laclau 2005, p. 130.
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. 342) and is, here, represented by the D, directly under the line under T, 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 numidity (if it is that) of heterogeneous 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 1956, 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 bel 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. 46–51; cf. Laclau 2006, 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 involved in the identifications of love and overdeterminations of love-objects by way of identifications:

![Fig. 2: Group Identification, Freud 1959, p. 61.](image)

...might be considered a leval, 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, "identity identity" (Marion 2015, p. 32) of online data doubles, or any "identity so perfectly achieved and sundered that it would leave no space for any identification in the Freudian sense of the term" (Laclau 1990, p. 171).

In the wake of "Dionysian 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, lis, or series of equivalences at the bottom, from D, to E. The "open-ended dimension" of the enumeration that "must remain indeterminate" (Laclau 2006, p. 139, p. 342) 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 Lacan's early comments on algorithmicity and algorithmic decisions with regards to political actions and social controls in a letter (13 September 1987) to Ailea J. Horvai:

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 here been undertaken as a consequence of a subjective error of judgment. If I am to realize a mathematical calculation, the erroneous solution is not a possibility which belongs to the field of mathematics itself, but the situation 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, canceling out all the possibilities which will not now be realized. [...] If the decision [...] were algorithmic [...] then the identity of the agents [...] 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 G"odel) 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. 171–0).

One can only wonder if this conception of algorithmic decisions from the late 1980s could be maintained so serenely as non-coercive, had its conceivers 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 tenacious 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 delineation of certain possibilities, liberties, or freedoms beyond such algorithmic calculation. More importantly, he intimates 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 identifi-

dation 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 \([\ldots]\) 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 \([-\cdot\cdot\cdot]\) 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 strives to reduce the decided determinateness of such syllogism 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 Helg (cf. Helg 2010, pp. 209–214, p. 226, 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):

![Diagram of a Floating Signifier](image)

Fig. 9: Floating Signifier, Laclau 2005, p. 131.

...is the possibility by which the ‘opinion,’ ‘dogma,’ 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 at least two dimensions as the very “D, O,” the it political Demand on the horizontal dimension or theological Desire on this flo-
frenital hair – perhaps floating on a side dimension – from that which Jewish
mysticism sometimes wrestles under the name of talmudism.)

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
respect 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 iden-
tification and further study by theology, media studies, data sciences, and polit-
ical 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 Lacan’s essay included in this volume, below, is
incomplete and excerpted. The entirety can be found in English in the Political

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Fig. 2: Group Identification. Sigmund Freud: Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.

Literatur


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Editorial


Dass damit vor allem die griechische Hochkultur ab dem 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr. in den Mittelpunkt der Aufmerksamkeit geriet, die oft eher widerwillig gezeigte und philosophische Grundlagenprobleme zu verhandeln sich garwegen sah, versteht sich fast von selbst. Innerhalb insitierte schon Aristoteles bei seiner maßgeblichen Ausarbeitung der formten Grundsätze des Denkens darauf, unter dem Begriff des Territorium non datur ein Drittes, mithin Mittleres, Mitthilfe und Vermittlendes aus dem Kanon logischen Denkens auszuschließen, dass er damit kraft einer unhintergehbaren dialektischen Fälliger aber zugleich in ihm einschließen sollte — mit weitreichenden Konsequenzen. Als das ‚Verdrängte‘ des Logischen bedingt es seitdem und äußert und verstärkt ein Denken, das sich als rein formale Kombinatorik in sich abdfichten, sich von jedweder Bezugszone zur materiellen Wirklichkeit abstrahieren und damit seiner regulierenden, endlich technischen Automation zurarbeitet zu können glaubt, um im Algorithmischen, dem Entscheidbaren wie Berechenbaren ihr allgemeines Telos zu finden und