Review: This Universalism Which Is Not One

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Emancipation(s) by Ernesto Laclau
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THIS UNIVERSALISM WHICH IS NOT ONE

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Judging from the recent spate of publications devoted to the question of the universal, it appears that, in the view of some critics, we are witnessing a reevaluation of its dismantling in twentieth-century thought. One of the many oddities about this "return of the universal"[1] is the idea that contemporary engagements with it are more or less of a piece, and that they reflect a growing consensus that poststructuralist political theories are incapable of generating a viable alternative to the collective fragmentation that characterizes late modernity.[2] The putative return to the universal marks, on this view, both a homecoming to Enlightenment ideals—purified of their more poisonous elements, of course—and a reconciliation of sorts between those who refuted these ideals and those who sought to realize them. Now that "we" all know and agree that poststructuralism is critically valuable but politically bankrupt; now that we all know and agree that the "old universal" was indeed a "pseudo-universal," so the homecoming narrative goes; we can get on with the project of constructing a "new universal."[3] This authentic universal would really be inclusive of all people, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and whatever else attaches to the "embarrassing etcetera" that, as Judith

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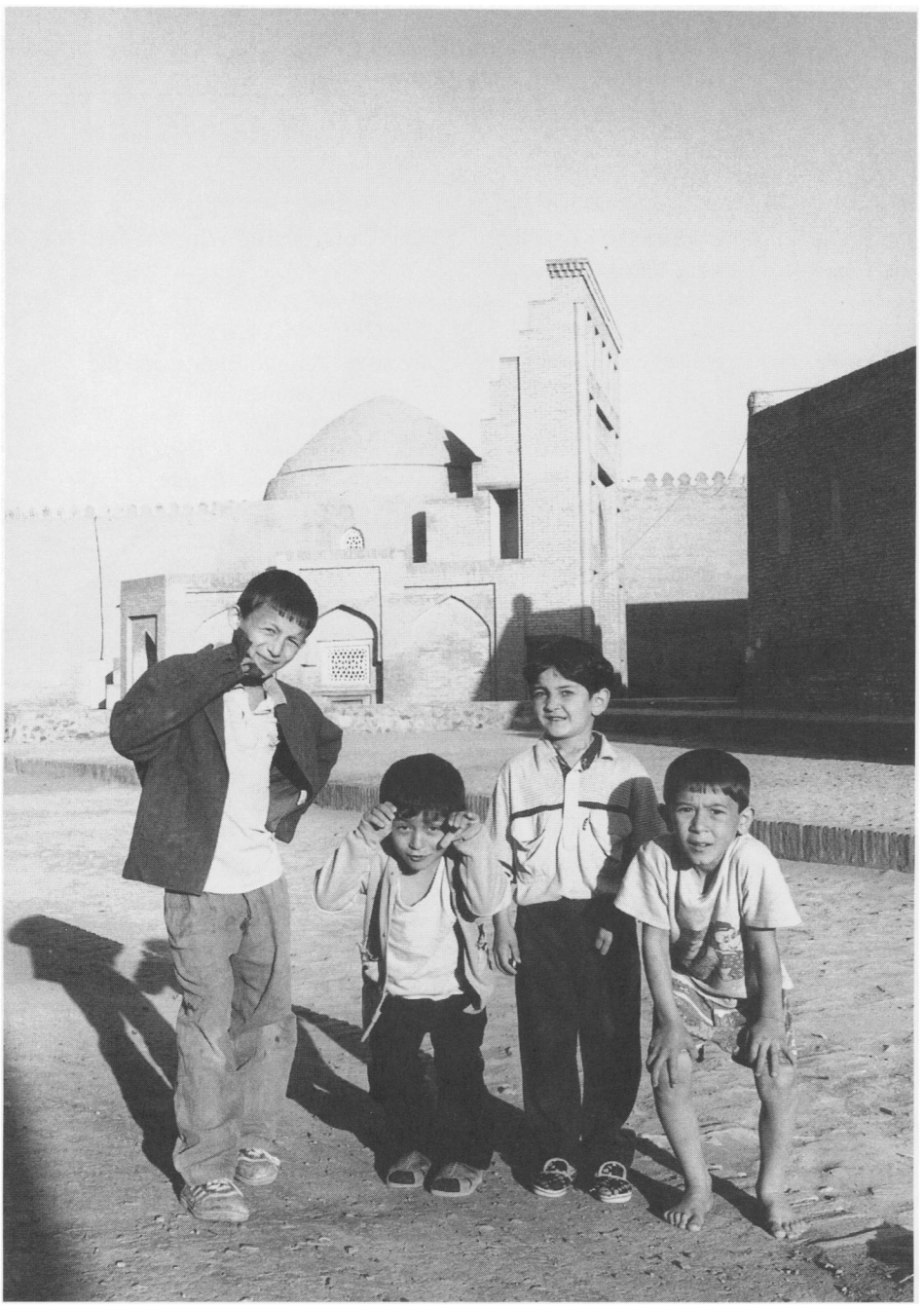
1. The phrase is Naomi Schor's [Schor 28]. Schor "dates the return of universalism within the precincts of the American academy to November 16, 1991," the day of a conference on "Identity in Question," which was held at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York [Schor 28–29].

2. The emphasis here should be on political *theories. I am not talking about a theory of politics that follows necessarily from something called poststructuralism. As Laclau astutely remarks in his essay, "Building a New Left,"*

> there is nothing that can be called a "politics of poststructuralism." The idea that theoretical approaches constitute philosophical "systems" with an unbroken continuity that goes from metaphysics to politics is an idea of the past, that corresponds to a rationalistic and ultimately idealistic conception of knowledge.... The correct question, therefore, is not so much which is the politics of poststructuralism, but rather what are the possibilities a poststructuralist theoretical perspective opens for the deepening of those political practices that go in the direction of a "radical democracy." *[*NR *191]*

3. An example of this homecoming narrative is given in the issue of differences *on "Universalism." In an essay by Naomi Schor, "the return of universalism" in poststructuralist theory is heralded as a welcome event. Of the penitent anti-universalists, Judith Butler is singled out: "It is to Butler's great credit that she has continued, in the aftermath of* Gender Trouble *..., to rethink her positions and has come in a relatively short time to recognize that identity is essential to politics and that the category of the universal cannot be done away with" [Schor 27]. In the same issue of* differences, *the title (to say nothing of the substance) of an essay by Neil Lazarus et al., "The Necessity of Universalism," leaves little doubt about the consequences of not coming home.*



Butler reminds us, inevitably accompanies such gestures of acknowledging human diversity.

Before signing on to this felicitous agreement about "the necessity of universalism," we may wish to know whether we have anything like a minimal agreement in language, that is, whether we who speak of this universal are even speaking about the same thing. Apart from the not insignificant problem of translating from a philosophical to a political idiom, the whole question of this agreement is virtually occluded by the rush to rescue politics from the virulent particularisms that admit no common ground or sense of collective belonging. Presented in terms of the familiar binary couple, the choice between universalism and particularism seems settled by merely pointing to global and domestic political realities. Universalism is the only alternative to social fragmentation, wild child of the collapse of communism, the rise of deadly nationalisms, and the multiculturalist romance with particularism. To invoke the name of the universal in any affirmative sense is already to sign on to the political diagnosis and its solution.

One of the many virtues of Ernesto Laclau's *Emancipation(s)* is that it offers both an alternative to the binarisms spawned by the "return" to the universal (for example, false universalism/true universalism) and a trenchant critique of the original binary couple itself (universalism/ particularism). Demonstrating the imbrication of the universal and the particular, Laclau shows why it is a matter not of choosing one over the other but of articulating, in a scrupulously political sense, the relation between the two. He thus explicitly rejects the notion that this relation is one of mutual exclusion, and shows that the tendency to see it as just that has led to the impasse of the contemporary debate, an impasse that is glossed over in some highly visible academic cases by proclaiming the necessary return to the universal. Although the language of universalism as spoken by Laclau searches for some common ground between particularists and universalists, it is more by way of articulating their mutual contamination, that is, how each is rendered impure by the irreducible presence of the other.

The Problem of Universals

Laclau situates his collection of essays in the context of the increasingly polarized debate over multiculturalism, a debate in which the classical universalism of the philosophical tradition has come under serious question. Reading his essays, one comes to see the deep dependence of the entire contemporary discussion on this tradition, even when its metaphysical assumptions are explicitly rejected (as, say, in the work of Seyla Benhabib) or insufficiently comprehended (as in most of the popularized political discourse). Laclau's book can help us to see that the *political* question of universalism cannot be posed properly as long as it remains tethered to the classical philosophical "problem of universals." At stake in sorting out the affinities and the differences between these two idioms of universality, I shall argue, is the question of how we understand intersubjective agreement in a democratic culture. The status of this agreement is, finally, what the debate over multiculturalism and the universal is all about.

I begin with these remarks because Laclau's exercises in rethinking the relation between universal and particular may seem somewhat formalistic to readers who are not accustomed to or even interested in its philosophical dimension. In the context of the national debate over multiculturalism, in which the term universal is a synonym for everything from "*e pluribus unum*" to "essentialist," it may be difficult to grasp the precise political relevance of a text which is laced with complex philosophical moves. But the political riches of Laclau's text, I submit, arise precisely through its engagement with traditional philosophy and, specifically, its deconstruction of classical universalism. Out

of that critique emerges an argument in which the universal looks rather different from the creature one finds in many contemporary returns to it.

Laclau's critique of philosophy interprets the universal and the particular as "tools in the language games that shape contemporary politics" [48]. He asks, among other things, whether "the alternative between an essential objectivism and a transcendental subjectivism exhaust the range of language games that it is possible to play with the 'universal'" [22]. Although Laclau himself does not elaborate fully on this notion of language game, I want to make use of it as a valuable and appropriate concept for approaching his quarrel with the philosophical tradition.

Derived from Wittgenstein, the concept of "language game" interrupts the longstanding philosophical debate on the "problem of universals," exposing it as a pseudo-problem which, as Jamil Nammour puts it, "trades on the metaphysical assumption that there is language on one side and the 'world' on the other" [Nammour 352]. Briefly summarized, this debate concerns primarily the status of the qualities by which we sort and describe particulars. It is governed by the following sorts of questions: How do we justify naming things as we do? Why do we group a collection of particulars under a general term (like chair, house, tree)? For "realists" the answer is, because those particulars have something in common, some subsistent real entity or *form*, a universal. This something, like the larger objective world in which it exists, is metaphysically distinct from the language we use to describe it, from the standpoint we occupy, and from our interests. For "nominalists," in contrast, the only thing that the particulars have in common is that they are called the same thing. What they have in common is nothing but a name: two objects *are* chairs because they are both *called* by that name. They share the name, nothing more.[4]

Wittgenstein's intervention unmasks the transcendental terms of this debate. Against realists, he argues that it is impossible to determine the existence of an extralinguistic or nonlinguistic something, a universal form or essence that makes an object what it is and gives sense to our practices of naming. We cannot "prise words off the world," as J. L. Austin once implored us to do [qtd. in Nammour 348], because even if such a distinction (words/world) did exist, Wittgenstein shows, there is no way to decide whether a Common Property or a Resemblance comes from the side of the world or from the side of language. We simply wouldn't know that we *were* finally outside of language even if we *could* find such a place (which is just another way of saying that we would never know that we had found this place and therefore could not find it). It follows from this critique of realism that, for Wittgenstein, the problem of nominalism is not that it is blind to the extralinguistic quality of the object, its *form* (as the realist contends), but that it is blind to *grammar,* the usage and thus meaning of a word (or "name") in a language-game. As he writes in *Philosophical Investigations*: "Nominalists make the mistake of interpreting all words as names, and so of not really describing their use, but only, so to speak, giving a paper draft of such a description" [no. 383]. Thus to the question, "How do I know that this color is red?," Wittgenstein gives neither the answer of the realist ("because it *is* red") nor that of the nominalist ("because it is *called* red"). Rather, he responds, "It would be an answer to say: 'I have learnt English'" [*PI* no. 381].

The notion of language game that Wittgenstein develops in his later works puts into question the transcendental conception of rules and rule following that underwrites the classical metaphysics of entity and selfsame identity. As Henry Staten observes, what Wittgenstein calls grammar or "the 'rule for the use of a word' cannot . . . be construed as a form that makes meaning present by predetermining it. And, at the same time, since

4. My invocation of the opposing camps of "realists" and "nominalists" is obviously schematic and contestable; it is meant not to encompass the entirety of Western philosophy but only to highlight certain aspects of Wittgenstein's intervention into the debate over universals and Laclau's appropriation of it. One could equally well construe the debate as being between idealists and realists, or idealists and materialists.

meaning for Wittgenstein can no longer be simply present, this means that meaning is no longer determined by the 'is,' by the being of the object" [Staten 15]. Indeed, for Wittgenstein, writes Staten,

> *a rule, where there is a rule, . . . determines but need not itself be determinate. We learn to follow it, obey it, or manipulate it, and yet the rule itself is structurally or essentially indeterminate. A rule is best thought of as an object which happens to be used as a standard of comparison within some practice or other. Because any social practice is carried on by different persons who will vary from each other in their sense of how to apply any given rule, any form of life is always transected by diverging lines of possible practice; a form is a transitive essence always in process of essential variation from itself. On this view a form of life has no self-identical and unitary form, nor does a rule, nor do we.* [Staten 134]

Staten's reading is an important corrective to communitarian interpretations of Wittgenstein which both posit "the agreement of the community as the determinant of correct rule-following" and conceive of a rule as "having a '*form*' which makes it identical with itself" [Staten 165n21]. These interpretations—which make Wittgenstein complicit with the status quo—merely subsume individual practices of rule following under an always already existing communal agreement, thereby occluding the heterogeneity of those practices and excluding the possible emergence of new ones. The question of intersubjective agreement is erased *as a question* by being grounded in rules and rule-following practices that are unitary, self-identical, and given in advance. Although not necessarily construed as "universal" in the strict sense, these forms are cast as universally repeated and repeatable by all members of a given community. They are thus seen as determinate, albeit in a more limited sense.

The notion of language game that Laclau adopts from Wittgenstein is clearly at odds with the latter's communitarian interpreters. In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Laclau (like Staten) emphasizes that "the rules of [Wittgenstein's language games] only exist in the practical instance of their application—and are consequently modified and deformed by them" [*NR* 22]. Indeed, says Laclau, "if for Wittgenstein every instance of a rule's use *modifies* the rule as such, it cannot be said that a rule is being *applied* [in the sense of communal repetition], but that it is being constantly constructed and reconstructed, between an abstract rule and the instance of its use in a particular context, it is not a relationship of *application* that occurs, but a relationship of *articulation*. And accordingly, if the different instances of an articulated structure have merely differential identities, it can only mean that in the two separate instances the rule is in fact a different one, in spite of its 'family resemblance'" [*NR* 208–09].[5]

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5. The concept of "articulation" is crucial to Laclau's critique of classical universalism and its attendant notions of essential identity and the objectivity of structures. He argues that all identity is differential and thus contingent: "Each identity is what it is only through its difference from all the others" [Emancipations *52]; each identity is both affirmed and negated by that which lies outside it and beyond its control. An objective identity is not a self-determining, stable point of reference, then, but "an articulated set of elements"* [NR *32]. Articulation occurs within discursive totalities which are never self-contained but, like every identity, "dislocated," that is, "penetrated by a basic instability and precariousness"* [NR *109], haunted by an outside which is "constitutive" in the sense of being both enabling and distorting. The fullness of any identity (and of the social totality) is therefore impossible; it is blocked by what Laclau calls "the antagonizing force" which is at once the condition of the constitution of identity and its negation. Antagonism is the limit of all objectivity, and thus of the very notion of* form *which governs the problem of universals. Citing Wittgenstein's point that "the application of a rule always involves a moment of articulation," Laclau asserts, "while this doesn't mean depriving social practices of* all *their coherence, it*

To think about the universal under the rubric of language-game is, for Laclau, to explore the limits and the possibilities of its (re)articulation in various social and political contexts. The universal, as Laclau (*pace* Wittgenstein) says of the rule, is not there to be discovered, followed or applied; this "hegemonic act will not be the realization of a rationality preceding it, but an act of radical construction" [*NR* 29]. Laclau in no way forecloses the possibility of *articulating* an intersubjective agreement in which the universal has a central place; he simply asks how such an agreement could be possible in the absence of what Staten calls the "transphenomenal entities" [Staten 134] that have traditionally been used to ground it. How does one articulate moments of agreement in the absence of a determinate notion of rules and unitary practices of rule following (to say nothing of God, Reason, or History)? This is the shape of the question of political community after metaphysics. Laclau suggests that we have been looking for answers in all the wrong places because we have not taken seriously enough the meaning of human plurality or, taking it too seriously, namely as an overwhelming problem, the problem of innumerable particulars, we treat plurality as something to be subdued or even overcome by an intersubjective agreement that is grounded in universals.

Hannah Arendt once remarked that Western philosophy would never have a conception of the political because it conceives of Man in the singular, whereas politics concerns men in the plural. Laclau is no Arendtian, but his attempt to shift the discussion of universalism from the terrain of philosophy to that of politics shares this important insight.[6] To rethink the relation between universal and particular in terms of a language game, as Laclau does, must entail a more explicitly political interpretation of that concept than Wittgenstein, the philosopher's anti-philosopher, ever gave it. Although Laclau does not cite Arendt, his critique of the classical universalism of philosophy shares with her rereading of Kant an attempt to develop just this political idiom in which to rearticulate the relation between universality and particularity, an idiom that eschews truth criteria (and rule following) in favor of opinions formed through contingent practices of publicity. In this idiom the potential moments of intersubjective agreement are anticipated in the context of plurality rather than derived from some notion of an essential commonality or the injunction to reach consensus. For Arendt (following Kant), this idiom is called critical judging: the practice, conducted in the public space of appearances, of assessing particulars without subsuming them under a pregiven universal or rule.[7] For Laclau, as we

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*nevertheless does mean denying that this coherence can have the rationalistic status of a superhard 'transcendentality.' Thus, it is precisely antagonism which constitutes the 'outside' inherent to every system of rules" [*NR *214].*

6. The difference between Arendt and Laclau is especially stark on the relationship of force to politics. For Arendt, force is by definition apolitical; for Laclau, it is ineradicable and implicit in the very practices of persuasion that Arendt calls political. See Laclau's critique of Richard Rorty in chapter seven of Emancipation(s) *for a discussion of the relationship between force, persuasion, and politics.*

*7. Arendt's account of judging elaborates Kant's notion of "enlarged thought" [*LKPP *43]. In "Truth and Politics," Arendt writes:*

> I form an opinion [a judgment] by considering a given issue [or particular] from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. *[*TP *107; see also* LKPP *43]*

shall see, this idiom is called hegemony: the reinscription (not the sublation) of particulars into chains of equivalence through reference to the universal as an empty place.

What Laclau and Arendt share, despite their differences, is the view that intersubjective agreement is not there to be discovered in the universality of experience or the sameness of identity. There is nothing that we all share by virtue of being human or of living in a particular community that guarantees a common view of the world; there is nothing extralinguistic in the world that guarantees that we all share a common experience; there is no Archimedean place from which we could accede to a universal standpoint. But if Laclau (like Arendt) refutes the false universality of abstract rationality or common identity, he by no means rejects universalism "as an old-fashioned totalitarian dream" [26]. Playing a different language game with the universal, however, Laclau does not come home to a universalism which is One. Rather, he reinterprets universality as a site of multiple significations which concern not the singular truths of classical philosophy but the irreducibly plural standpoints of democratic politics. Even those who want nothing to do with this or any other universal, says Laclau, can never quite escape the pull of its orbit.

The Limits of Particularism

Laclau's critique of the debate over particularism is inflected by the latter's meaning in the heated discussion of multiculturalism. Sympathetic to the insistence on difference that characterizes multicultural projects but critical of their fence-building tendencies, Laclau wants to reorient these projects in the direction of a concept of the universal that cannot be decided in advance or subsumed under the notion of a dialogical consensus (Habermas) that would transcend all particularisms.

The claim to difference, Laclau argues in chapters two and four of *Emancipation(s)*, imbricates multicultural groups in the very universalism they refuse. "The assertion of pure particularism, independently of any content and of the appeal to a universality transcending it, is a self-defeating enterprise" [26]. Laclau gives two reasons for this claim. First, in a complex society (like the United States), no group leads a "monadic existence" but is situated in a larger context. The identity of the group, as Laclau says of all identity, is differential. It gets articulated in an "elaborated system of relations with other groups" [48], not in splendid isolation from them. These relations will be "regulated by norms and principles which transcend the particularism of *any* group" [48], such as the language of rights. Moreover, says Laclau, the very assertion of the right of groups to their difference is already an appeal to some universal principle: "there is no particularism which does not make an appeal to such principles in the construction of its identity" [26]. What this means is that difference, when it is asserted in the political space and discourse of rights, is necessarily entangled in the logic of equivalence: "If it is asserted that all particular groups have the right to respect of their own particularity, this means that they are equal to each other in some ways" [49]. The only case in which the logic of pure difference would not be contaminated by the logic of equivalence, asserts Laclau, would be in a society in which "all groups were different from each other, and in which none of them wanted to be anything other than what they are. . . . It is not for nothing that a pure logic of difference—the notion of separate developments—lies at the root of apartheid" [49].

Laclau does not speak about rearticulating the relationship between the universal and the particular in terms of forming judgments in Arendt's sense. Nevertheless, his notion of the universal as the creation of chains of equivalence whose representative instance is the "empty signifier" shares Arendt's understanding of representative thinking as the alternative to subsuming particulars under pregiven universals.

The second reason why pure particularism is self-defeating, says Laclau, is that the assertion of one's differential identity entails "the sanctioning of the *status quo*." Inasmuch as the identity of one group is only differential vis-à-vis the identities of other existing groups, it "has to assert the identity of the other" at the very moment that it asserts its own [49]. Inasmuch as a group "cannot assert a differential identity without distinguishing it from a context" (that is, a particular set of social relations), it has to reinscribe the very context in which it would inscribe its difference [27]. Multicultural groups which cling too closely to a fantasy of pure difference risk at once ghettoization by and complicity with the dominant community. That is why "a particularism really committed to change," Laclau concludes, "can only do so [*sic*] by rejecting both what denies its own identity and identity itself" [30].

The preceding claims are certain to be received as highly controversial. Like his characterization of multiculturalism as a practice governed by an incoherent but dangerous logic of pure difference which, if realized, could only end in "self-apartheid" [32], Laclau's apparent reduction of political strategies of separate development to little more than an affirmation of what exists is bound to be criticized as a caricatured and inaccurate portrayal of a complex set of social practices. Some readers may ask: How many existing multicultural groups actually advocate what Laclau calls "total segregation" and wholly reject, in his words, "Western cultural values and institutions [as little more than] the preserve of white, male Europeans or Anglo-Americans" [32]?

Readers looking for a historically and contextually nuanced account of multiculturalism will most likely count themselves among those who find *Emancipation(s)* less than satisfactory. But to accuse Laclau of indulging in the practice of caricature and a highly formalistic mode of argumentation, or of playing into the hands of conservatives and classical universalists, would be to miss the substance of his intervention and to misconstrue the spirit of his critique. Above all, Laclau is concerned to show *both* the limits of particularism for grounding multicultural struggles *and*, as we shall see, the inadequacy of a return to the classical notion of universalism as an alternative to the social fragmentation that is both a cause and an effect of the drive toward particularism. The critique of particularism in *Emancipation(s)* is part of Laclau's broader attempt to situate both it and universality in a language game, and thus to mediate them in ways that are consistent with a political conception of plurality. From Laclau's perspective, the problem of particularism is the problem of identity politics: both assume that members of a specific group ("women," "blacks," "gays") are alike in the same way. But what counts as an essential commonality or sameness, as Laclau argued above, is the very identity that condemns the group to marginality and sustains relations of social dominance. The question would be how to articulate political relations of commonality that do not reproduce these other relations of dominance and the terrors of selfsame identity.

Laclau's portrayal of the fantasy of extreme particularism and separate development that governs certain multicultural imaginaries is a sketch of the dark outer limits of the drive for pure difference. Where it has been realized in political reality, this fantasy goes under the name of apartheid. Although he explicitly differentiates the "new particularisms" [27] that are collected under the banner of multiculturalism from actual historical instances of apartheid (South Africa), Laclau wishes to call our attention to the possibility that there may be troubling moments of affiliation, unholy places where the aspirations of very different political groups converge in their respective fantasies of absolute difference. Whether Laclau's portrait of multicultural groups is overdrawn is in this sense irrelevant: the importance of the fantasy does not depend on the existence of empirical groups which then enact it in clearly discernible ways. Rather, the fantasy's relevance for the discussion of universalism/particularism as it gets played out in the debate over multiculturalism concerns its position in the production of political identities, namely, the filling of lack. That process of filling takes us straight to Laclau's alternative to the self-

defeating logic of particularism for building a more viable multiculturalism: his reformulation of the universal as an empty place.

Universal Is an Empty Place

Laclau's critique of particularism is also an argument against Eurocentrism that passes itself off as universalism. He observes how nineteenth-century European culture posed as the "expression" of "a universal civilizing function" and how "the resistances of other cultures were, as a result, presented not as struggles between particular identities and cultures, but as an all embracing and epochal struggle between universality and particularisms–the notion of peoples without history expressing precisely their incapacity to represent the universal" [24].

A question thus arises as to whether the universal, in Laclau's telling, is little more than an "inflated particular," which is precisely how Naomi Schor has recently interpreted his position [Schor 22]. The question is crucial, not least because in the current debate an affirmative answer has become the olive branch with which to negotiate a peaceful settlement of critical differences and to make possible the putative return to the universal. Decrying this inflated particular as a "false universal," however, one implies that there could be such a thing as a "true universal," which in turn implies that the universal could someday be One.[8]

Although Laclau argues that what comes to signify the universal was once a particular, his position complicates the binary opposition of "true universal" versus "false universal" by refusing the notion that there could be an ideal universality which really was fully divested of any trace of particularity. On the contrary, we shall find Laclau maintaining that no universal is without the "remainder of particularity." To argue otherwise would be to accept the ideal of a "pure universality" and its correlate, a "reconciled society": a totality achieved through the "realization of the essence of humankind" [*NR* 78], the incorporation or transcendence of all particulars. Laclau shows how this regulative ideal structures the impasse in the polarized debate over universalism versus particularism. Multicultural groups decry universality as "false" because, in their view, it is not truly inclusive, but also because they see it as an ideal which, if it *were* realized, would obliterate each group's particularity. Universalism is thus rejected not only because, historically speaking, it has been a fraud, an inflated particular, but also because it is no longer desirable even as an ideal. The language of universalism, on this view, cannot provide the terms of intersubjective agreement in a plural democracy.

Laclau's response to these concerns is not to advocate a return to universalism as the only alternative to a war of particularisms; rather, it is to show that the latter, though irreducible, are not incommensurable, and that they can be brought together in the political field, though never made identical with each other, through the articulation of equivalential demands. A conception of the relation between the universal and the particular that would be appropriate to the plurality of a democracy requires a specific kind of political thinking or, in Laclau's terminology, hegemony. To think about this relation in hegemonic terms is to consider it as fundamentally "unstable and undecidable" [*Emancipation(s)* 15] rather than as determined in some way by the (social) structure.

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8. Naomi Schor raises a similar point when she writes, "few [feminists] grapple with the fact that to speak of a false universalism logically implies that there is such a thing as a true universalism, unless, that is, one assumes that all universalisms are by definition false" [Schor 21]. But Schor is not quite right: a universalism could be "false" in the sense of never fully devoid of particularity and yet still stand for that which we call universal. This is how Laclau understands universals in terms of what he calls "empty signifiers."

Hegemony means that the relation between universal and particular entails not the realization of a shared essence or the final overcoming of all differences but an ongoing and conflict-ridden process of mediation through which antagonistic struggles articulate common social objectives and political strategies. The very fact that commonalities must be *articulated* through the interplay of diverse political struggles—rather than discovered and then merely followed, as one follows a rule—means, first, that no group or social actor can claim to represent the totality and, second, that there can be no fixing of the final meaning of universality (especially not through rationality). The universal cannot be fixed because it "does not have a concrete content of its own but is an always preceding horizon resulting from an indefinite expansion of equivalential demands." Put slightly differently, universal is just another word for placeholder of the "absent fullness of the community." It can never actually *be* that fullness—not even as a regulative ideal.

To better grasp the distinct political significance of Laclau's reinscription of the universal as an empty place, I want to turn to the third chapter of his text, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" Starting with a formal question of signification—namely, how can a signifying system signify its own limits?—Laclau rejects the possibility of any "positive ground" [38] and argues that "a radical exclusion is the ground and condition of all differences" [39]. The system, like the subject, is penetrated by a constitutive lack; it can only be the space of differences to the extent that it is bounded by a "beyond," a limit without which the notion of context, like differential identity itself, would not be possible. What this means, says Laclau, is that the beyond cannot be just another difference but must be something which negates all differential identities, thereby establishing a relation of equivalence among them and establishing the context within which differences can be constituted as such. Just as every identity is constituted differentially—which, for Laclau, means in the first place through relations of antagonism with all other identities—so is the system, in which these differential identities are constituted, itself constituted through antagonistic limits: "Only if the beyond becomes the signifier of pure threat, of pure negativity, of the simply excluded, can there be limits and system (that is an objective order)" [38] The empty signifier emerges, then, as that which represents "the pure being of the system—or, rather, the system as pure Being"; it is "a signifier of the pure cancellation of all difference" [38, 37].

This "act of exclusion of something alien, a radical otherness" [52] builds on and significantly deepens Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's earlier notion, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, of "social antagonism" as the condition and limit of identity. It is precisely the dimension of antagonism which Slavoj Žižek found so promising in his 1987 reading of *Hegemony*. In Žižek's view, there is a "homology between the Laclau-Mouffe concept of antagonism and the Lacanian concept of the Real." Writes Žižek: "far from reducing all reality to a kind of language-game, the socio-symbolic field is conceived [according to both concepts] as structured around a certain traumatic impossibility, around a certain fissure which *cannot* be symbolized" [Žižek 249].

Žižek's interpretation invites a reading of Laclau's theory of empty signifiers in which the notion of antagonism as radical exclusion might occasion a rapprochement between "Lacanians" and "poststructuralists/postmarxists"—two intellectual camps which are on their way to becoming as opposed as those of universalists and particularists. Although this is not the place to take up the substantive issues of this rather acrimonious debate, I would like to point to one aspect of it which will become relevant to our discussion of the universal as an empty place: namely, the idea—repeated endlessly in Žižek's work–that Lacanians talk about "the subject," poststructuralists talk about "subject position," and never the twain shall meet. Why? A primary reason, says Žižek, is that they have two very different understandings of antagonism. As Žižek explains in his commentary on *Hegemony*, the poststructuralist sees antagonism as an external battle between two subject positions or terms (for example, Lord/bondsman; man/woman):

"each of them is preventing the other from achieving its identity with itself, to become what it really is." The Lacanian, in contrast, sees antagonism as internal, the subject's irreducible conflict with itself: "the negativity of the other which is preventing me from achieving my full identity with myself is just the externalization of my own auto-negativity, of my self-hindering." The first conception of antagonism, says Žižek, feeds "the illusion that after the eventual annihilation of the antagonistic enemy, I will finally abolish antagonism and arrive at an identity with myself" [Žižek 251]. The second, "more radical" notion of antagonism, he adds, exposes the illusion as just that.

> *We must then distinguish the experience of antagonism in its radical form, as a limit of the social, as the impossibility around which the social field is structured, from antagonism as the relation between antagonistic subject-positions: in Lacanian terms, we must distinguish antagonism as real from the social reality of the antagonistic fight. And the Lacanian notion of the subject [as "the empty place of the structure"] aims precisely at the experience of "pure" antagonism as self-hindering, self-blockage, this internal limit preventing the symbolic field from realizing its full identity: the stake of the entire process of subjectivation, of assuming different subject-positions, is ultimately to enable us to avoid this traumatic experience.* [Žižek 253]

Disappointed with Laclau and Mouffe's theory of subject positions but enthralled by the possibilities opened up by their notion of antagonism, Žižek seeks, in his own words, "to supplement the theoretical apparatus of *Hegemony*" with "two [Lacanian] notions": "the subject as an empty place correlative to the antagonism; social fantasy as the elementary mode to mask the antagonism" [259]. The Žižekean gesture of supplementation, however, does not merely "*distinguish* antagonism as real from the social reality of the antagonistic fight," it actually folds or collapses the Laclau-Mouffe notion of social antagonism, as the battle between two identities "presentified" as polar positions in a contingent *social* space, into the Lacanian notion of a constitutive *Spaltung* of the subject. In Žižek's view, the former is merely an illusion produced by the subject's refusal to confront the trauma of the latter, the real. The subject emerges at precisely the limit of the social, its impossibility.

Despite the fact that Laclau himself seems to accept Žižek's appropriation of his (and Mouffe's) work, seeing in it strong theoretical affinities with which to explain "the dynamic relation between lack and structure" [*MPI* 33], I want to suggest some reasons why we should at least pause and consider their substantive differences. First, Laclau's reception of Žižek's reading is somewhat puzzling insofar as he repeatedly insists—in the very same book in which Žižek's essay was published—that "in our conception of antagonism . . . denial [of identity] does not originate from the 'inside' of identity itself but, in its most radical sense from outside" [17].[9] Although this assertion is aimed at showing "the limit of objectivity," as we saw above, it is politically significant that

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9. *In* New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, *Laclau gives several examples of antagonism which would fall under the category of subject position for Žižek. "Insofar as an antagonism exists between a worker and a capitalist, such antagonism is not inherent to the relations of production themselves, but occurs between the latter and the identity of the agent outside. A fall in a worker's wage, for example, denies his identity as a consumer." This denial, Laclau continues, gives rise to "two alternatives: either the element of negativity is reabsorbed by a positivity of a higher order which reduces it to mere appearance [as in Hegel], or the negation is irreducible to any objectivity, which means that it becomes constitutive and therefore indicates the impossibility of establishing the social as an objective order" [*NR 16*]. Once again, Laclau wants to emphasize the limit of objectivity, but it is significant, I argue, that he does so by way of a notion of antagonism which does not reduce to the original* Spaltung *of the subject.*

Laclau's (and Mouffe's) notion of antagonism precisely does not reduce itself to the original *Spaltung* of the subject but maintains a crucial reference to a remainder which is always historical and contextual, and which gives to antagonism its specifically political dimension. Although Laclau and Mouffe (especially in their recent work on political identities) in no way foreclose a reference to the original division of the subject, their emphasis on the political dimension of antagonism deprives that reference of the all-important status that it has in Žižek's approach.

We can appreciate the stakes for a postfoundational democratic theory in sustaining the difference and the tension between these two notions of antagonism if we turn to a remark that Žižek makes in his commentary on *Hegemony*. Arguing for the more "radical" (that is, pure) notion of antagonism provided by the Lacanian concept of the real, Žižek writes: "the Lord is ultimately an invention of the Bondsman, a way for the Bondsman to 'give way as to his desire,' to evade the blockade of his own desire by projecting its reason into the external repression of the Lord." To this Žižek adds, "This is also the real ground for Freud's insistence that the *Verdrängung* cannot be reduced to an internalization of the *Unterdruckung* (the external repression)" [252]. And that is correct—but it is likewise the case that a psychoanalytically informed political analysis (especially a democratic theory concerned with plurality) has also to argue the reverse: the *Unterdruckung* cannot be reduced to the *Verdrängung*. The original division of the subject no more produces the specific form that social antagonisms take than the latter determine the original *Spaltung* through which the unconscious is constituted. The task of a critical analysis which takes account both of the heterogeneity of the subject (psychic division) and the heterogeneity of subjects (social plurality), then, is to relate the complexity of unconscious processes to the repressiveness of cultural norms without reducing one to the other. The same goes for the concept of antagonism.

At stake in maintaining the distinction between the Lacanian and the Laclau-Mouffe notions of antagonism, then, is a democratic theory that does not collapse into sociological or psychological reductionism. I am in no way arguing that the Lacanian real is not relevant to the Laclau-Mouffe concept of social antagonism, only that the issues it raises concerning the status of the subject cannot be substituted for the issues raised by antagonistic social and political relations. These two concepts of antagonism are related, even deeply imbricated, but they are not for all that identical, and the one cannot be accounted for as an "illusion" which conceals the trauma of the other. What I am arguing is that the field of politics cannot be divorced from the psychoanalytic notion of psychic reality but neither can it be folded into the latter—not for the naive reason that psychic reality is not "reality," but because the question of intersubjectivity is simply not the same. In politics we have to deal with plurality, with the irreducibility of diverse perspectives implicit in "the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world," to borrow Arendt's formulation [*HC* 7]. This plurality, although it cannot exist apart from, is not reducible to the plurality of (failed) identifications and misrecognitions which make up the subject's psychic reality. The assumption of various subject positions may very well serve to mask the subject's encounter with its own limit, the "pure antagonism" of which Žižek speaks. But the diversity of subject positions as well as the diverse ways in which they can be occupied or, better, performed (think here of Wittgenstein's notion of the rule), to say nothing of how that performance is indelibly shaped by the space of the public—all this cannot be accounted for by the Lacanian theory of the subject that Žižek proposes in his attempt to redefine the Laclau-Mouffe notion of social antagonism. The political specificity of the particular, the political question of particularisms, and the proliferation of particularistic political identities entail but are not reducible to that part of the subject which resists universalization, its Thing. The Real may indeed be the gap

that separates the universal from the particular in the register of psychic reality, as Žižek maintains, but in the realm of the political that gap is not reducible to the Real.[10]

We can better understand these distinctions by returning to Laclau's notion of the empty signifier. I said earlier that, according to Laclau, the empty signifier stands for the universal, the *impossible* fullness of the community. In some respects, however, the notion of the *empty* signifier may be misleading. Laclau tells us that it is a particular "which has divested itself of its particularity" or "which overflows its particularity" [22] to stand for the universal. As these two formulations of the process of emptying the signifier of its particularity indicate, it is not always clear what the place of the particular is, finally, in the empty signifier. Is this particular overcome, left behind, transformed? Is the empty signifier, strictly speaking, empty?

Actually, none of these formulations capture what Laclau has in mind under the term empty signifier. It is crucial here to recall the distinction he draws between the empty signifier's content and its function. As to the latter, it is "exhausted in introducing chains of equivalence in an otherwise purely differential world" [57]. As to the former, writes Laclau,

> *Precisely because the community as such is not a purely differential space of an objective identity but an absent fullness, it cannot have any form of representation of its own, and has to borrow the latter from some entity constituted within the equivalential space–in the same way as gold is a particular use value which assumes, as well, the function of representing value in general. This emptying of a particular signifier of its particular, differential signified is . . . what makes possible the emergence of "empty" signifiers as the signifiers of a lack, an absent totality. But this leads straight into the [following] question: If all differential struggles . . . are equally capable of expressing . . . the absent fullness of the community, . . . if none is predetermined* per se *to fulfil this role;* what does determine that one of them rather than another incarnates, at particular periods of time, this universal function? [42, emphasis added]

This is the crucial political question to ask about empty signifiers. (It is also the question that a strictly Lacanian interpretation of the empty signifier as equivalent to *objet petit a* cannot answer.) We want to know why not all claims to the universal are equally authorized; why the claims of some groups to represent the whole carry more cultural weight than those of other groups. Consistent with his critique of the objectivity of structures, Laclau rejects at once the notion that the particularity of any one group is predestined to be the content of this function (like a universal class) and the notion that the particularity of any other group is constitutively unable to become that content (like women). Does this mean he assumes that each group stands an equal chance of becoming the empty signifier of the community? Naomi Schor appears to think just this when she writes, "contrary to what Laclau suggests, it is not just any particular that arrogates

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10. Hegemony and Socialist Strategy *may be "the only real answer to Habermas" [Žižek 259] on these issues, as Žižek claims, but not for the reasons he suggests. The notion of antagonism which Habermas dissolves and Laclau and Mouffe sustain is not so much the basis of a "political project based on an ethics of the real" [Žižek 259], as Žižek would have it—the question of ethics being foreign to their notion of politics. Rather, the Laclau-Mouffe notion of antagonism shows, contra Habermas, that power and conflict cannot be eradicated from politics through the removal of constraints or distortions to intersubjective communication* both *because alterity inhabits every identity* and *because every identity encounters opposition in the form of other identities, other perspectives and opinions which cannot be settled by reference to an extrapolitical ideal of reason or reasonableness or truth.*

dominance—women could not just be promoted to the status of the universal subject" [Schor 22].

Laclau, as it turns out, would quite agree with Schor. He explicitly states that "not any position in society, not any struggle is equally capable of transforming its own contents in a nodal point that becomes an empty signifier" [43]. The reason is the "unevenness of structural locations," by which Laclau means not a "traditional conception of the historical efficacy of social forces" but a radically politicized understanding of the relationship between "logics of difference and logics of equivalence" [43]. Although Laclau in no way denies that some groups (men, for example) are better positioned socially and politically than other groups (women, for example) to make claims to the universal, he also holds that it is crucially important to foreground the undecidability of (what will come to stand for) the universal, even as one critically examines its historical asymmetry.

> *[I]t is impossible to determine at the level of the mere analysis of the* form *difference/equivalence which particular difference is going to become the locus of equivalential effects–this requires the study of a particular conjuncture, precisely because the presence of equivalential effects is always necessary, but the relation equivalence/difference is not intrinsically linked to any particular differential content. The relation by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness is exactly what we call a* hegemonic relationship. *The presence of empty signifiers . . . is the very condition of hegemony.* [43]

According to Laclau, then, the universal emerges as a "hegemonic operation [defined as] the presentation of the particularity of the group as the incarnation of that empty signifier which refers to the communitarian order as an absence, an unfulfilled reality" [44]. This competition to fill the lack—which can be defined as any number of things, including the absence of order, the need for unity, liberation, revolution—is structured by relations of power but is by no means determined in advance. "Politics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers" [44], writes Laclau. In other words, if the particularity of any one group *was* in fact predetermined to stand (or could stand indefinitely) for the absent fullness of the community, there would be no such thing as politics.

In Laclau's account, then, the universal is severed from the metaphysics of the subject (which governs the classical understanding of universalism), indeed from the very philosophical category of *the* Subject, and is reinscribed in a political idiom of plurality. This universalism is not One: it is not a preexisting something (essence or form) to which individuals accede but, rather, the fragile, shifting, and always incomplete achievement of political action; it is not the container of a presence but the placeholder of an absence, not a substantive content but an empty place. As Laclau puts it, the "dimension of universality reached through equivalence is very different from the universality which results from an underlying essence or an unconditioned a priori principle. It is not a regulative ideal either—empirically unreachable but with an unequivocal teleological content—because it cannot exist apart from the system of equivalences from which it proceeds" [55]. Universal can neither precede nor exceed the political, for it is nothing else but a hegemonic relation of *articulated* differences.

Once it is understood that equivalential relations "do not express any a priori essential unity" [54] but are themselves politically articulated relations of difference, we can see that "universal" can never stand for that which persists above and beyond all particularisms. Inasmuch as the universal cannot exist except "through its parasitic attachment to some particular body" [72], the particular inhabits the universal as an ineradicable remainder

(just as the universal inhabits every claim to the particular). On the one hand, "the particularity of the particular is subverted by this function of representing the universal"; on the other hand, "a certain particular, by making its own particularity the signifying body of a universal representation, comes to occupy—within the system of differences as a whole—a hegemonic role" [53]. What this means is that there can be no universal that would be free of all particularity and no particularity without some universal reference—short of a totally reconciled society without politics. But we are back to Schor's objection: the particularity that comes to incarnate the universal may indeed be politically determined and in that sense contingent—but it is not for all that entirely unpredictable, as Laclau well knows. What would it take for "women" to stand for universal? That is the question feminism poses to Laclau. What would it take to think about women *as* an empty signifier? That is the question Laclau poses to feminism.

Gender-Neutral or Gender-Specific?

Although Laclau's resignification of the universal as an empty place does not address itself directly to the question of sexual difference, his notion of the hegemonic relation between the universal and the particular is of significance for feminism. In some respects, Laclau's argument about the irreducible presence of particularity in universality is precisely the point made by Simone de Beauvoir, who showed that universal is just another word for Man, and that Woman is the remainder of particularity that haunts the masculine subject's claim to transcend all particularisms. Laclau's insistence that this particularity is both contingent and ineradicable can help us to see that the yearning for a gender-neutral universal, which is so often ascribed to Beauvoir, is at once impossible to achieve and necessary to articulate. It is impossible because the universal, inasmuch as it always attaches to some particular body which cannot be fully divested of its particularity, can never be sexually indifferent; it is necessary because even the particularistic claim to sexual difference cannot be made in the absence of a universal reference and the logic of equivalence (which also lends it a more global significance).

Joan Scott has shown that although feminism advocated women's political inclusion by arguing against sexual difference as the condition of their exclusion, "it had to make claims on behalf of 'women' (who were discursively produced through 'sexual difference'). To the extent that it acted for 'women,' feminism produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept and to refuse 'sexual difference' as a condition of inclusion in the universal—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history" [Scott 7]. Every feminist argument for women's inclusion in the universal, then, is also an argument for particularity, sexual difference. Scott's understanding of the paradox which structures feminism articulates in reverse Laclau's claim that every argument for the particular is also an argument for the universal.

Taken together, Laclau and Scott help us to see why the complexity of the current feminist debate over the universal exceeds the opposition "gender-specific" versus "gender-neutral" [Schor 16], which has been mapped out most recently by Naomi Schor in her recent essay on feminism and universalism. However central it has been to the sameness/difference debate in feminism, this opposition is ultimately misleading because, among other things, it cannot account for the ineradicable presence both of the particular in the universal and of the universal in the particular. I have already given some reasons why a gender-neutral universal can never be what it claims (which does not make it any less necessary to articulate), and suggested that the point was not lost on that putatively classical universalist, Simone de Beauvoir. Let me turn briefly to the central

problem raised by the idea of a gender-specific universal, as it is elaborated in the work of Luce Irigaray.

"The universal was conceived of as one, on the basis of one. But this one does not exist," writes Irigaray [*J'aime* 65; qtd. in Schor 32]. Arguing that the universal effaces sexual difference, Irigaray would counter this universal which is One with a universal which is Two—that is, sexed.[11] Irigaray's project to inscribe sexual difference into the universal is also an attempt to create the possibility for mediation between the sexes (which have heretofore stood in a relation of antagonism). In this respect, her project is not unrelated to what Laclau has in mind when he writes that the universal "is absolutely essential for any kind of political interaction, for if the latter took place without a universal reference, there would be no political interaction at all: we would only have either a complementarity of differences which would be totally non-antagonistic, or a totally antagonistic one, one where differences entirely lack any commensurability, and whose only possible resolution is the mutual destruction of the adversaries" [*Emancipations* 61]. From Irigaray's perspective, this is a perfect description of the relation between the sexes: women and men are seen as two halves of a whole and as timeless enemies. The project of a sexed universal, in her view, is precisely an attempt to move beyond "the old dream of symmetry" and to create an ethical relationship between the genders in which they are no longer "imagined as being in conflict" ["Universal as Mediation" 140]. Irigaray's universal differs in significant ways from Laclau's, however, inasmuch as it inscribes not chains of equivalence but, rather, (sexual) difference. In the absence of such an inscription, she suggests, the universal subject as well as the collective "we" that emerge through chains of equivalence will remain androcentric. Thus if the question that Laclau raises for Irigaray is whether we could call universal an inscription in which the logic of difference was not attenuated by that of equivalence, the question that Irigaray puts to Laclau is whether that attenuation does not just reduce to the masculine economy of the same.

Although Laclau is not attentive enough to the concerns raised by Irigaray, his political understanding of the universal as an empty place in which to inscribe chains of equivalence does not foreclose but insists, rather, on the ineradicable place of difference from which every universal claim (including feminist claims) is issued. Shifting the debate over universalism from the philosophical to the political field, moreover, Laclau helps us to see how a particular like "women" might be articulated as a universal (qua empty signifier) which does not depend on the classical assertion of an essential commonality. If we think about claims to a universal category of women in terms of social practices (like Wittgensteinean language games), we can see them as attempts to generate intersubjective agreement in the absence of pregiven rules or identities. These claims are fully contestable, but not according to the epistemological criteria that has governed the philosophical problem of universals. Likewise, the gendered universal of Irigaray and the gender-neutral universal of Beauvoir are language games which, to the extent that they attain any cultural authority (that is, universality), have to be *articulated*, in Laclau's distinctly political sense of the term. One can well imagine contexts in which "women" becomes the empty signifier which unites various social struggles in a chain of equivalences: where "women"—which is a particular not only in relation to "men" but to all other

11. Schor observes that Irigaray's project to inscribe sexual difference in the universal has a "blindspot": its "privileging of sexual difference over the racial," which Irigaray herself defines as a "secondary problem" and difference. Schor notes the blindspot, but she doesn't know what to do about it. Isn't the blindspot itself an example of the ineradicable particular—in this case, racial difference—which inhabits the (gendered) universal? The rhetorical character of the question is not meant to suggest that the articulation of a gendered universal is fundamentally misguided. As I argue below, this particular inscription will be mediated by other inscriptions, including those that are so-called gender-neutral or racialized.

differential identities—becomes, in Laclau's words, "the signifying body of a universal representation" [*Emancipation(s)* 53].

We can complicate the terms of the feminist debate over universalism (gender-neutral versus gender-specific) by asking this question: Under what specific political conditions does a particular mode of difference—including a particular mode of women's difference, since not every notion of women's difference is the same—come to symbolize relations of equivalence? Thinking about women as the empty signifier, we recall that the claim to the universal is not made by a subject that precedes that claim; rather, the claim itself is the articulation of a political identity in a public space. The political identity comes into being through the claim to universality, not the other way around. It is for this reason that feminism has always entailed a dimension of universality.

If Laclau is right when he says that "all articulation is contingent and . . . the articulating moment as such is always going to be an empty place," the filling of which will be "transient and submitted to contestation" [*Emancipation(s)* 59–60], then any attempt to inscribe the universal will always be confronted and limited by other inscriptions. Politics consists in the mediation of these claims or, as Judith Butler writes, "how and whether they may be reconciled with one another" [Butler 18]. It is not a matter of weighing each particular claim to the universal against some transcultural or transhistorical universal, or of deciding which claim will be authorized as the "true universal" according to some preexisting normative, ethical, or cognitive criteria. It is a matter, rather, of mediating the relation between the particular and the universal in a public space, with every mediation remaining open to further mediations. Rather than think the universal as something that is extrapolitical and that can be used to adjudicate political claims, we should think it as the product of political practice. As Laclau puts it:

> *The universal is incommensurable with the particular, but cannot, however, exist without the latter. How is this relation possible? My answer is that this paradox cannot be solved, but that its non-solution is the very precondition of democracy. The solution of the paradox would imply that a particular body had been found, which would be the true body of the universal. . . . If democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content: different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation. Society generates a whole vocabulary of empty signifiers whose temporary signified are the result of a political competition.* [*Emancipation(s)* 34]

This universalism which is not One is no ossified rule: a fixed definition which stands outside the public space and serves to order it. This universalism which is not One is no homecoming: a nostalgic return to a lost object which once (supposedly) provided a common origin or ground. When asked, "what is this new universal?" [Schor 39], we might say, whatever it "is" will not be decided in the manner of the epistemologist. And as to the question, "Is there anything in the classic conception of the universal that is worth saving?" [Schor 30], we might say that whatever is saved marks the moment of political decision—the judgment that is definite but never final.

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