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Response to Ernesto Laclau

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In my remarks earlier in this volume (see Chapter 2) I said that I did not think that deconstruction had done much either for the study of literature or for a grasp of our political problems – not because deconstruction is bad philosophy, but because we should not expect too much of philosophy. We should not ask philosophy, of whatever sort, to accomplish tasks for which it is unsuited. Although I have learned a great deal from Laclau's writings, I nevertheless think of him as overestimating Derrida's political utility, and thereby contributing to an unfortunate over-philosophication of leftist political debate. That over-philosophication has helped create, in the universities of the US and Britain (where Derrida's, Laclau's, and Chantal Mouffe's books are very widely read and admired) a self-involved academic left which has become increasingly irrelevant to substantive political discussion.

Such over-philosophication is evinced when Laclau isolates notions like 'toleration' or 'the political' or 'representation' and then points out that we cannot, simply by thinking about that notion, figure out what to do. Who except for a few wacky hyperrationalists, ever thought we could? Who takes seriously the idea that an idea, or notion, or principle, could contain the criteria of its own correct application?

Laclau says that 'because the structure is undecidable, because there is no possibility of algorithmic closure, the decision cannot be *ultimately* grounded in anything external to itself'. He thereby reinstates the old reason-vs.-will, algorithm-vs.-arbitrary choice, distinction. The idea that there is no middle ground between algorithms and 'ultimately groundless' acts of will lay behind the Vienna Circle's insistence that what wasn't determinable in advance by rules was 'cognitively meaningless'. As Laclau's citation of Kierkegaard's 'the instance of the decision is a madness' suggests, it also lay behind the existentialists' suggestion that if

you don't have a knock-down argument in favour of a decision, that decision somehow swings free of all rational activity.¹

I see no reason to rehabilitate this common denominator of rationalism and existentialism. Doing so will simply keep the pendulum swinging between these two unhelpful positions. Granted that decision is not deliberation, it seems to me misleading to say, with Derrida and Laclau, that 'decision always *interrupts* deliberation'. That suggests a picture of Will swooping down and taking matters out of Reason's hands. It is more plausible to describe decision as we normally do, as the *outcome* of deliberation – even when we are quite aware that equally rational deliberation might have led us to a different decision. Wittgenstein has taught us that the fact that anything can be made out to be in conformity with a rule does not mean that rules are useless, nor that decisions cannot be made in conformity with them.

I see little resemblance between taking a decision and (in Laclau's phrase) 'impersonating God', if only because we do the former, but not the latter, dozens of times a day. Nor do I see that the content of a decision has, as Laclau puts it, 'the function of embodying the absent fullness of the subject'. I can see that it might be so described if one were interested in constructing a philosophical or psychoanalytic theory of selfhood in terms of a dialectic of presence and absence. But I doubt that such a theory could be of any help in thinking about politics.²

To be a bit more concrete, consider Laclau's example of political representation. I see the election of representatives to govern a population which is too large, or too spread out, to get together in a town meeting as a sensible practical expedient. Every polity that resorts to this expedient is aware that the decisions taken by the representatives may not be those which would have been taken by a gathering of the entire citizenry. But I do not see that this situation is clarified by the claim that 'the relation of representation will be, for essential logical reasons ... constitutively impure.'

Laclau thinks that putting the matter in these terms is clarificatory, because

it allows us to understand – as possibilities that are internal to the logic of representation – many developments that had traditionally been considered perversions or distortions of the representative process. For instance, it has usually been considered that the more democratic a process, the more transparent the transmission of the will of the represented by their representatives.

But is this in fact the usual view? Ever since we started electing representatives, many of them have said (as J.S. Mill said to the electors of Westminster) that their job is to make better decisions than the electors could make for themselves. The question of just how transparent repres-

entation should be has always been on the table. The answer to this question has varied, and should vary, with a host of local factors (level of general literacy, degree of complexity of the laws, etc.). Philosophy has not contributed much, and probably cannot contribute much, to the choice between alternative answers.

Laclau goes on to say that 'these internal ambiguities of the relation of representation ... transform it into the hegemonic battlefield between a plurality of possible decisions'. Why 'transform'? What, in ethical and political deliberation, *isn't* always already a battlefield between a plurality of possible decisions? Does it help to explain the existence of such battlefields by referring to the internal ambiguities of a concept? What do we get, other than a higher level of abstraction, from using such terms and thereby (as Laclau puts it) 'widening the transcendental horizon of politics'? Isn't Laclau just telling us, in elevated language, what we already knew: that elected representatives often should not decide how to vote simply by asking their constituents how they would vote?

I have nothing against higher levels of abstraction. They often come in handy. But I think that the pressure to rise to a higher level of abstraction should, so to speak, come from below. Locally useful abstractions ought to emerge out of local and banal political deliberations. They should not be purveyed ready-made by philosophers, who tend to take the jargon of their own discipline too seriously. Unless you were already familiar with Kant's and Hegel's use of *Grund*, it would never occur to you to try to 'ground the concept [of tolerance] in itself' or to ground it in 'a norm or content different from itself'.

Consider an analogy. Although some mathematics is obviously very useful to engineers, there is a lot of mathematics that isn't. Mathematics outruns engineering pretty quickly, and starts playing with itself. Philosophy, we might say, outruns politics ('social engineering,' as it is sometimes called) pretty quickly, and also starts playing with itself. (Consider the train of thought which took Plato from the genuine political questions of the *Republic* to the ingenious and amusing versions of solitaire developed in the *Parmenides*.) I suspect the notion of 'condition of possibility and impossibility' is as useless to political deliberation as Cantorean diagonalization is to civil engineers. Surely the burden is on those who, like Laclau, think the former useful to explain just how and where the utility appears, rather than taking it for granted?

It is of course true that engineering is always catching up with mathematics – using mathematical concepts in desperate earnest which had been dreamed up just for fun, and with no thought of being applied to anything. Transcendental numbers were once of no interest in engineers, but they are now. So how can we tell in advance whether or not transcendental conditions will be of interest to the electorate, their

representatives, and onlooking kibitzers (like Laclau and me) on the political process?

We cannot, of course. Still, we should notice that the demand for more information about transcendental numbers, information which turned out to be purveyable by mathematicians in ready-made form, emerged from below, as engineers became more ambitious and courageous. The mathematicians were not in a position to predict the utility which their inventions turned out to have. Nor did they have the skills and information required to predict when and how a demand for their products might emerge.

Fans of Cantor's diagonalization method did not assume that there *should* be such a demand (from, for example, people trying to forestall flash flooding). Hegelians of both the left and the right, however, have assumed that certain notions – notions which will remain pretty much unintelligible unless one has read some Hegel – *should* be found useful (by, for example, people trying to forestall dictatorship).

Dewey complained at length about the prevalence of this assumption. 'We need guidance', he said:

in dealing with particular perplexities in domestic life, and we are met by dissertations on the Family or by assertions of the sacredness of the individual Personality. We want to know about the worth of the institution of private property as it operates under given conditions of definite time and place. We meet with the reply of Proudhon that property generally is theft, or with that of Hegel that the realization of will is the end of all institutions, and that private ownership as the mastery of personality over physical nature is a necessary element in such realization. Both answers may have a certain suggestiveness in connection with specific situations. But the conceptions are not proffered for what they may be worth in connection with special historic phenomena. They are general answers supposed to have a universal meaning that covers and dominates all particulars. Hence they do not assist inquiry. They close it.³

My reaction to Laclau's use of Derridean notions is similar to Dewey's reaction to T.H. Green's use of Hegelian notions. The twist Laclau puts on Derrida may, indeed, 'have a certain suggestiveness in connection with specific situations'. But we shall have to wait and see whether it in fact does.

To illustrate my doubts about whether it will, consider Laclau's claim that 'the duality toleration/intolerance is more basic than each of its two poles – even more: it is the undecidable ground which makes those poles possible.' I cannot figure out how to make this point suggest anything about (to use the example of a political issue which happens to be urgent

in my own country at the present moment) whether civilian authorities should be tolerant of the frequent intolerance of soldiers for their homosexual comrades-in-arms. I do not think that they should, but when I argue for this view with people on the other side of the issue, we never reach the level of abstraction at which Laclau is operating.

I agree that if we did not have a contrast effect (tolerance/intolerance, dark/light, etc.) we should have no use for either of the terms used to contrast with one another. In that rather uninteresting sense, I agree that a contrastive duality is always 'more basic' than either of its terms, and even, if you like, that 'it makes them possible'. But I do not see what 'undecidable ground' adds. I am glad to have learned (from Saussure and Wittgenstein) that Locke was wrong in thinking of words as names of discrete ideas, that the meaning of a word is its use in the language, and that words have the uses they do because of the possibility of using other, contrasting terms. But I see no way to make this new and improved philosophy of language relevant to my reflections on how political deliberations are, or should be, conducted. A theory of meaning seems as irrelevant here as a theory of a priori knowledge – *différance* as irrelevant as *Grund*; Saussure and Derrida as irrelevant as Kant and Hegel.

Laclau and I of course agree that 'language is a system of differences', but we diverge when he says that 'this systematicity depends ... on establishing the limits of the system, and this requires delimitation from what is beyond those limits'. I have no idea of what the limits of the system of differences which is language are, nor of how it could possibly have any. I agree that 'no system can be fully protected given the undecidability of its frontiers', and would cite Wittgenstein's arguments about rule-following in support of this point. But I do not see that the 'contingency' which this unprotectedness produces is anything to worry about. All this contingency comes to is, once again, the banal fact that there are no algorithms for deciding controversial questions (about what we mean, what we should say, what follows from what, and the like).

Turning now to Laclau's discussion of my own views, I quite agree with him that peaceful conversation 'is only *one* of the language games which it is possible to play within his historicist and nominalist viewpoint'. I can cheerfully grant this point because I do *not* 'want to ground on pragmatist premises the concrete politics' I advocate, nor do I think that today's liberalism is 'the moment of full awareness of what is involved in pragmatism'. On the contrary, as I have said above, I doubt that philosophy (even pragmatist philosophy) is ever going to be very useful for politics, and am quite sure that whatever utility it may have will be (as Dewey said) a matter of occasional suggestiveness rather than of 'grounding'.

Do I, as Laclau says I do, try to weld my liberalism and my pragmatism? Only to the following extent: I think that both are expressions of, and

reinforce, the same sort of suspicion of religion and metaphysics. Both can be traced back to some of the same historical causes (religious tolerance, constitutional democracy, Darwin). This is not a very tight weld, but I am not interested in making it any tighter.

Laclau queries my use of the terms 'banalization' and 'irony'. As for banalization, I agree with Laclau that 'there is no reason, if one starts from pragmatistic premises, either to reduce political language to the actual language used in political exchanges in the West, or . . . to assume that the study of this language cannot go beyond the actual categories it employs.' But, in the first place, the actual language used in such exchanges has been constantly changing, without much help from philosophy. (Consider terms like 'welfare state' and 'environmental protection', which are banal and unphilosophical, but relatively new and very useful.) In the second place, nobody who studies a language uses only the terms of the language studied; they always use some 'second-order', heuristic expressions. The issue which separates me from Laclau is not how banal it is best to be, but the extent to which Derrida's philosophy suggests some useful new language *either* for first-order, deliberative, *or* second-order, kibitzing purposes.

As for 'irony', Laclau is certainly right that this term is not a suitable description of moral courage. Yet it seemed a reasonable choice for describing what I called, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, an appreciation of the contingency of final vocabularies. I admit, however, that the word does have overtones of what Laclau calls 'offhandish detachment', so perhaps it was a bad choice. Still, now I'm stuck with it. So all I can do is remind people of my definition, and ask them to ignore the irrelevant overtones.

Towards the end of his essay, Laclau says that I am never entirely clear about the theoretical status of distinctions like public-vs.-private. This is because I am unclear about the utility of the notion of 'theoretical status'. I have never been able to make sense of the claim that something has been 'inadequately theorized'. As a good pragmatist, I think that theories are like tools: you only reach for them when there is a specific problem to be solved. There is no criterion of inadequacy of theorization apart from the specification of such a problem.

I do not see how to 'theorize' the nature of the partition between the private and the public, except to say that by 'the private' I mean the part of life in which we carry out our duties to ourselves, and do not worry about the effects of our actions on others. By the public I mean the part in which we do worry about such effects. I see what Laclau means when he says that this is 'an ideal-typical attempt at stabilizing an essentially unstable frontier which is constantly trespassed and overflowed', but I should protest that I really wasn't interested in *stabilizing* anything. I was only trying to remind my readers that sometimes philosophy (even the

most inspired and original sort of philosophy – like Kierkegaard's or Derrida's) can, like art and literature, have uses which are pretty much irrelevant to our moral and political responsibilities to other people. It is sometimes useful to remind people of a plausible distinction, without trying either to stabilize a frontier or to theorize a partition.

I agree with Laclau about the respective dangers of deconstruction and pragmatism – namely, too much reversion to the discourse of 'first' philosophy in the one case and too much parochial all-Americanism in the other. But, predictably enough, the first danger is more obvious to me than the second. I think that the level of abstraction to which Laclau ascends in order to kibitz on contemporary politics is too high – too reminiscent of 'first' philosophy. I see Laclau as continuing a tradition that began with Marx, and was encouraged by Lenin's claim that you need to study Hegel before you can grasp your time in thought (not to mention Althusser's claim that Marx gave us a 'science').

I think that it was a misfortune for the left that Marx, a brilliant political economist, happened to have taken a degree in philosophy when he was young. I also think that it is a misfortune for philosophers that their leftist admirers keep trying to make them relevant to the contemporary political situation.⁴ I see it as an advantage of American political thought that the philosophical side of Marx was never taken very seriously by American intellectuals. I think that Rawls is a good example of what I commended above – answering a demand for theorization from below, and meeting that demand with a minimal amount of first philosophy. I applaud Rawls's remark that, for the purposes of formulating a political theory of justice, it is best to 'stay on the surface, philosophically speaking'.

I realize that these views reflect what Laclau calls 'the comfortable assumptions of American liberalism', and may be highly parochial. But there is, it seems to me a parallel European (and, more specifically, French) parochialism – one which rests on equally comfortable assumptions. Perhaps the best Laclau and I can do is to keep on reminding each other of the dangers of these two forms of parochialism.

Notes

- 1 This idea also lies behind the complaints of cultural conservatives that if you follow dangerous 'irrationalists', you make morals and politics a mere struggle for power. See John Searle's citation of Kuhn, Derrida and myself as foes of 'the Western Rationalistic Tradition' in his 'Rationality and Realism: What Is At Stake?' (*Daedalus*, vol. 122, no. 4 (Fall 1992), pp. 55–84. I reply to this article in my 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', *Academe* 80, no. 6 (November/December 1994), pp. 52–63.
- 2 I am confirmed in this view that an account of the deep nature of the self does not make contact with politics by reading Slavoj Žižek's remarks on political liberalism (and on my own work) in Chapter 9 of his *Looking Awry* (Cambridge,

Mass., MIT Press, 1991). Žižek starts off from a Lacanian account of desire, and says that 'The problem with this liberal dream is that the split between the public and private never comes about without a certain remainder' and that 'the very domain of the public law is "smeared" by an obscure dimension of "private" enjoyment' (p. 159). He goes on to 'locate in a precise manner the flaw of Rorty's "liberal utopia": It presupposes the possibility of a universal social law *not* smudged by a "pathological" stain of enjoyment, i.e., delivered from the superego dimension.'

I do not see that political liberalism need presuppose anything of the sort. I imagine that *ressentiment*, as well as the mild form of sadism which is intrinsic to Kantian notions of obligation, will go on forever – or at least as long as there are judges, police, etc. But I should think the question is whether anybody has any better ideas for a legal and political system than the liberal, constitutional, social democratic one. I can find nothing in Freud, Lacan, Žižek, Derrida, Laclau or Mouffe which persuades me that anybody does.

- 3 John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, (The Middle Works of John Dewey), vol. 12, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, p. 188.
- 4 For more on this point, see my review of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, *The European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 3 (December 1995), pp.289–98.