

Hegemony and the Future of Democracy: Ernesto Laclau's Political Philosophy

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For political philosopher Ernesto Laclau, social theory must become more strategic if it is to provide a productive analysis of the complexity of contemporary society. Grasping this complexity requires a discourse combining traditions of thought that begin from different starting points but that all converge on political analysis. Thus, as Laclau points out in the interview below, he seeks to deepen the project of radical democracy by operating deconstructively within Marxist categories in order to present an analysis that goes beyond Marxism but that “nourished itself from Marxism as one its roots.” It is toward the goal of developing a strategy for the left that he has devoted himself, first in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (coauthored with Chantal Mouffe) and more recently in *Emancipation(s)* and *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*.

In a bold theoretical project that has undergone development and revision over the last decade, Laclau has maintained that “hegemony” must be the key concept in political analysis; it is the precondition of any kind of strategic thinking. Working to extend Gramsci’s elaboration of the concept of hegemony, Laclau sees hegemony not as the imposition of a pre-given set of ideas but as “something that emerges from the political interaction of groups”; it is not simply the domination by an elite, but instead is a *process* of ongoing struggle that constitutes the social. Hegemonic struggle requires the identification of what Laclau calls “floating signifiers,” those signifiers that are open to continual contestation and articula-

tion to radically different political projects. “Democracy,” in his view, is a key example of a floating signifier—its meaning essentially ambiguous as a consequence of its history and widespread circulation. To hegemonize a content for “democracy” would require a fixing (always provisional) of its meaning. Indeed, the open nature of the social and the very possibility of hegemonic struggle stem from the impossibility of total fixity. As Laclau reminds us, it is “urgent” that progressive intellectuals understand the logic of hegemony and the nature of hegemonic struggle (which the neoconservative right has mastered so well in recent years), and that they develop their own hegemonic strategies.

Central to developing these strategies is the “expansion of rhetoric and rhetorical argumentation.” The process of argumentation has to operate at a “plurality of levels,” and social theory has to “advance in the direction of generalized rhetorics.” In part, this means that intellectuals must not undervalue their own potential influence on social policy. Although “high theory” and other “intellectual developments” have produced and can continue to produce real effects in the world, Laclau believes that intellectuals must also write to more popular audiences in more accessible prose. It is important to note, though, that in speaking of rhetoric, rhetorical argumentation, and persuasion, Laclau means much more than “rational demonstration.” He believes that we must deconstruct the simple opposition persuasion/force and remember that the logic of persuasion always carries within it an element of force—not necessarily physical force, but force in the sense that persuasion is “less than purely rational demonstration.” Persuasion, in other words, is not a process of moving someone logically and step-by-step from one belief to another. Rather, persuasion becomes possible when new elements enter into the given situation that cannot be accommodated by the old view. At this point, the new view may forcefully displace the old view by introducing a principle of coherence and intelligibility into the situation. But the new view must have its vocal advocates, those who understand this nonliberal view of persuasion and the possibilities it offers for mining the vast resources of incoherence, contradiction, and outrage present in contemporary society.

Clearly, then, when Laclau speaks of social and political theory he always seems to have in mind practical results in the real world. For him, “the possibility of a free society depends on the existence

of relations of power,” and understanding and using these relations is key to creating productive alliances, new hegemonies. The formation of alliances is particularly important to this effort because it is “only on the basis of large varieties of social demands of oppressed groups that success in this hegemonic offensive becomes possible.” In fact, he warns that there is a danger in any group becoming too preoccupied with the “particularity” of its own struggle because it then may fail to enter into relations of solidarity with other groups so as to engage in “wider struggles at the level of society.” Such narrow actions are certain to have “no hegemonic consequences.”

This understanding of hegemonic struggle as an ongoing and never-ending process offers a cogent critique of the liberal dream of a fully reconciled society from which “all antagonism and power relations would have been eliminated.” Laclau argues compellingly that the “paradox of freedom” is that “in order to have freedom you have to institute the other of freedom, which is power.” That is, there is no such thing as unrestricted freedom because that would mean logically the same thing as “a complete lack of freedom.” Laclau explains, “You can only free some things by unfreeing some others, and in this sense power and hegemony are constitutive of social relations.”

Laclau believes that literacy is an important element of the kind of revolutionary struggle he describes. He defines literacy in its widest sense and indeed in an entirely political sense. Literacy begins to be possible in a situation in which there is a proliferation of discourses opposed to oppression. In situations of oppression, the oppressed do not immediately or necessarily recognize themselves as such, but once discourses of liberation begin to proliferate and circulate, oppression can then become a question. For Laclau, a literate culture is a “culture of questions,” and it is the ethical and political obligation of educators and progressive intellectuals to create such a culture, one that is democratic to the extent that the possibility of unlimited questioning exists.

Laclau’s theoretical project is informed by postmodern discourses but does not surrender to postmodernism completely. His work offers a critique, on the one hand, of the postmodern position that privileges pure contextualism (what he calls “particularism”) and the celebration of the logic of difference and diversity, and, on the other hand, of the Enlightenment position that privileges univer-

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salism and seeks to transcend all particularism through the ideal of consensus. He attempts to forge a third way, a dialectic that historicizes the relational interdependence of the universal and particular. This effort is motivated by two urgent questions, posed most pointedly in the preface to *Emancipation(s)*: How is the unity of the community to be grasped when we must start from social and cultural particularisms? Does this starting point exclude any identification with more universal human values? Keenly aware that the recent focus on cultural difference represents a potential deepening of democratic struggle, Laclau is equally aware that the making of political identities involves linking particular interests to wider, more universal social aims. The process through which this articulation occurs is called hegemonic struggle.

Compositionists concerned with the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire are likely to be especially interested in the political theory of Laclau. The work of both theorists emerges from a Marxist and Gramscian perspective and attempts to analyze relations of power and domination and revitalize radical thought. Both writers exhibit a deep empathy for the oppressed, and both offer strategies for confronting systems of power and domination. In many ways, Laclau's work might be seen as a kind of extension of some of Freire's central concepts. Perhaps we can find in Laclau ways to deepen and enrich the kind of critical literacy so central to much of our own scholarship.

Q. The field of rhetoric and composition is devoted to the study of the practice of writing and its consequences. Do you think of yourself as a writer? What role has writing played in the development of your thought?

A. Well, I suppose I can say I am a writer in some sense. The point is that "writing" is not a unified category; it can refer to many different types of writing. I see myself these days as a theoretical writer: the way that I try to operate is basically through the production of theory. That has not always been the case. For instance, when I was in Argentina I worked for several years as the editor of a left-wing weekly, so there I was engaged in some form of journalism.

Q. In Richard Rorty's "liberal utopia," persuasion replaces force as a principal social arrangement. In your critique of Rorty, you

demonstrate that not only is it impossible to oppose persuasion and force but that “persuasion is one form of force.” You add, however, that persuasion cannot simply be reduced to force. Would you elaborate on the relationship of persuasion to force?

A. In the first place, the category of persuasion as used by Rorty has played the function of, let’s say, reducing the epistemological ambitions of a dialogical exchange. For instance, take the case of Habermas. Habermas maintained that finally a dialogical situation would be able, at least as an ideal point of arrival, to conclude in a situation in which one and only one position is maintained by people engaged in the dialogue. Rorty does not believe that. He believes in the purely conversational nature of the agreement that people reach, and that is why persuasion is a category that is as important for him as it is. Now, what I was trying to do in the piece to which you refer is to deepen this logic of persuasion and to find out whether in persuasion, which is the opposite of force for Rorty, there is not an element of force so that one can deconstruct the opposition persuasion/force. What I think I have shown in that piece is that persuasion, precisely because it never presents an argument that should be accepted algorithmically, involves, if you will, an element of force. For example, if you think of the quasi-logical arguments of Chaim Perelman and his analysis of how persuasion operates, you see that an element of force necessarily has to be included. You persuade by something less than a rational type of demonstration. What is this something less? There you can have many possible answers, and all of them would be valued depending on the situation. For instance, you can provoke the sympathy of the listener. You can, on the other hand, present the argument so forcefully that you intimidate the listener, and you know the whole range of these possibilities.

Now, there is one point that for me is particularly important because it leads to central questions in the theory of hegemony: it is that when you are confronted with a situation in which there is no clear answer but in which an answer is needed nonetheless, the fact that some answer is provided becomes more important than its concrete content. That is an element of force—force not in the sense of physical force, but force in the sense that it is less than purely rational demonstration; purely rational demonstration would absolutely collapse the difference between the *ontic* character of the response and the ontological character of being a

response. My argument is that in any dialogical situation these two dimensions never collapse, and that is what leads to the deconstruction of the pure alternative force/persuasion. This concept in another sense—for instance, in the Anglo-American discussion—has been very useful when we come to the notion of decision. A distinction is made between the cause of a decision and the motive of a decision, the cause being what provoked the decision. I think there is nothing more complicated than distinguishing between cause and motive, precisely because a motive is never totally algorithmically grounded. We have to play around the deconstruction of this stark opposition in which traditional rationalistic discourse is grounded.

- Q. We'd like to follow up on this subject. Throughout your work, you insist that "hegemony" must be the key concept of political analysis. You say that hegemony is not the imposition of a pre-given set of ideas and practices but "something that emerges from the political interaction of groups." That is, hegemony is not a simple matter of forceful domination by an elite but, rather, is a process of ongoing struggle that constitutes the social. In *Emancipation(s)* you at times seem to suggest an identification between hegemony and persuasion, and at other times you assert that the internal logic of the hegemonic operation *underlies* the process of persuasion, which seems to suggest a distance or difference between the two. Exactly how do you perceive the relationship of persuasion and hegemony?
- A. We can start from the point where we ended in the previous answer. The question of hegemony is linked to a situation in which something is missing and a particular content takes up the representation of that missing element. For instance, there's a very good example that I used in one of my pieces. In the immediate post-war period in Italy, people used to say that the Fascists had succeeded in carrying out the revolution in which the Communists had failed. Obviously, this is nonsense because a Fascist revolution and a Communist revolution from the point of view of their content would have been completely different. So, what created the acceptability of such an assertion? Simply the fact that revolution for people meant the realization that the Italian state had to be founded again, that the type of political organization which had emerged from the *Risorgimento* was in tatters and that as a result some radical refoundation of the Italian

state was needed. In the political semantics of the time, this is what was meant by revolution. It has a purely negative content because revolution means the fullness of society which is lacking. When people are in a situation of radical disorder, people need some kind of order, and the nature of the particular order is secondary. This relationship in which a certain particular content assumes the function of a universal fullness which is totally incommensurate with it is exactly what I call a hegemonic relationship. As you see, the dimension of force is present there, and the dimension of persuasion has to be present there as well, in the sense that I mentioned before. If we had a dialogical situation in which we reached, at least as a regulative idea, a point in which between the *ontic* and the ontological dimensions there would be no difference, in which there would be a complete overlapping, then in that case there would be nothing to hegemonize because this absent fullness of the community could be given by one and only one political content. But there is no overlapping there between particularity and universal function; in that case the relation is going to be hegemonic because there is always going to be a precarious taking up of this universal function by the particularity of social forces.

Let me give you another example. In the classical Marxist conception, the moment of universality was the moment of simplification of the social structure under capitalism. Universality was a category coming from Hegelian philosophy. For Hegel, the universal class was bureaucracy. Marx said that bureaucracy—that is, the state—is not the moment of the universal of the community but is an instrument of the ruling class, so it is also a moment of particularity. So, how do you reach the moment of universality if you have only the dispersion of concrete interests in civil society? The answer was that this is only possible if there is something going on at the level of civil society by which the moment of universality will emerge there. This was the emergence of the proletariat, which through the increasing simplification of the social structure under capitalism would represent the point of view of the totality of the community and, from this point of view, universality. Now, when society did not advance in that direction, the result was the proliferation of differences in civil society. And what happened with the moment of universality? The answer to that is hegemony. This was exactly the

problem of Gramsci. Gramsci develops hegemony theoretically up to a certain point. I think these two dimensions—universality and particularity, which I think we will discuss later—come together through these particular mechanisms.

Q. Literacy theorists associated with what is often called “liberatory learning” contend that literacy is a key element in the emancipation of oppressed groups. Many feminists agree; for example, Donna Haraway commented in a recent *JAC* interview that “you can’t talk about the history of contemporary liberation struggles without talking about . . . literacy projects.” What do you believe is the role of literacy projects in struggles against oppression?

A. As far as I understand the concept, the question of the role of a literacy project conceived in the broad sense would be close to what Foucault called a “proliferation of discourses.” In a situation in which emancipatory struggles start, there is always a whole transformation at the discursive level: you know how to handle a set of situations to which you didn’t have access before. So discourses against oppression (if we understand by that the notion of literacy in its widest sense) are absolutely essential for any struggle against oppression. And here I would like to add something. In general, situations of oppression are not situations in which the oppressed immediately recognize themselves as such. They are situations in which in some sense the identity of the oppressed breaks up and in which precisely these tools of liberation struggle—discourses—are not present. At the moment in which they start being present, we are in a situation in which oppression begins to be radically a question and in which different outcomes are possible. For example, in many areas of the Third World, you do not find class interests in the classical sense because class interests were conceived as constituted around positions in the production process. What you find in many places in the Third World is that people don’t have a precise insertion in the production process because there is a wide situation of social marginality. When you have a situation of social marginality, the idea of an interest given by your objective insertion in the relations of production simply does not work.

I remember, for instance, that in the 1930s in the middle of the world economic crisis, Trotsky wrote that if unemployment were to continue at the present level, we would no longer be able to conceive the unemployed in terms of the Marxian category of an

industrial reserve army; and if this were so, the whole Marxian theory of the classes would have to be rethought because the category of classes would not embrace everything that had to be embraced in order to conceptualize oppression. In this situation, you often find that populist discourses emerge. Many times at the level of national politics people start acquiring a sense of identity, and you find that they have to reconstruct at the political level through these discourses (which would be new forms of literacy in the broad sense that we are defining it) an identity which does not emerge spontaneously at the level of civil society. This is why I think there was a shift in my conception about this matter. When Chantal Mouffe and I wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we were still arguing that the moment of the dislocation of social relations, the moment which constitutes the limit of the objectivity of social relations, is given by antagonism. Later on I came to think that this was not enough because constructing a social dislocation—an antagonism—is already a discursive response. You construct the Other who dislocates your identity as an enemy, but there are alternative forms. For instance, people can say that this is the expression of the wrath of God, that this is an expression of our sins and that we have to prepare for the day of atonement. So, there is already a discursive organization in constructing somebody as an enemy which involves a whole technology of power in the mobilization of the oppressed. That is why in *New Reflections* I have insisted on the primary character of dislocation rather than antagonism.

- Q. You also say in *New Reflections* that “There is democracy as long as there is the possibility of unlimited questioning.” And in the “Politics and the Limits of Modernity,” you write, “The sense of an intellectual intervention emerges only when it is possible to reconstitute the system of questions that it seeks to answer.” Your focus on questioning should be of particular interest to liberatory teachers, whose pedagogical problem arguably is to teach students to recognize and ask questions that produce an intellectual intervention in a given historico-discursive formation. The question of course is *how* to do this, how to convey to students the sense of the vital importance of questions and questioning.
- A. Paulo Freire would have good answers to this question, but I’m not really the person to answer it. However, what I would like to elaborate on for a moment is the strong distinction—question and

answer. The point is: is there any question that is not already in some sense an answer to what it is posing? I think questions do not operate as purely neutral, leaving the field of the answer entirely open; rather, questions operate in the sense of narrowing the field of the answer. So questioning is already the first step in the organization of a discursive field. If we are speaking about literacy in the wide sense, as in the previous question, in that case, to create a culture of questions is absolutely important and is perhaps what distinguishes a dogmatic education or a dogmatic approach to any kind of social practice from a position which is not dogmatic, which is open. It cannot be totally open because in that case there would be no questions either. But it cannot be entirely closed either. So, I would see the whole complex of the relationship question/answer as a continuum in which there are different levels of closedness. This is important for democratic theory because questions can close a certain field, but they can also constitute a community which poses itself a set of problems while at the same time maintaining relatively open the fields of the answers. A community in which there is no community of questions is not a community at all.

Q. You have defined *hegemony* as a “logic of articulation” and *articulation* as “a political construction from dissimilar elements.” You’ve also said that “articulation cannot just be conceived as the linkage of dissimilar and fully constituted elements.” For instance, your own work takes “the best fragments” of Marxist theory and links them with useful elements from postmodern theory to intervene productively in the present theoretical and political situation. As a discursive practice, articulation is of potential use to those of us who study the liberatory possibilities of literacy and writing. What do you see as the role of the concept of articulation for a theory of writing?

A. Articulation is a category which started being important for this type of analysis only with Althusserianism. Before that we had only heard of articulated lorries. It became a theoretically relevant question precisely because Althusser was trying to think a combination of elements that according to classical Marxist theory were uncombinable because they belong to different stages of social evolution. For instance, the notion of the articulation of the modes of production became very much in use in the 1960s in order to define situations in the Third World where you have an

incorporation into a world economy of modes of production which were not capitalist and which, however, were integrated within the structure of world capitalism. The way I have developed the notion of articulation in relation to hegemony is the following: as you very well point out here, we cannot conceive of articulation as the linkage of similar and fully constituted elements, precisely because if the elements were fully constituted, the articulation would not play any kind of a grounding role. If you want to conceive of articulation, you can go for instance to the Saussurian model. In the Saussurian model, as far as language is a system of difference, this means, on the one hand, that the social totality in some sense is presupposed by the signifying totality, let's say. The signifying totality is presupposed by any single act of signification but at the same time is exposed to new elements because new elements are going to produce a new articulation of everything that was within the structure. So, articulation in this sense became the basic category of social analysis as far as all social practices are signifying practices. When I say that I take the best fragments of Marxist theory, what I'm saying is that by these fragments' entering into articulatory practices with other elements, they are transforming their nature. There is a set of categories that still can be there but which, however, play a completely different role than they play in classical Marxism. Now, when you ask me about the concept of articulation in a theory of writing, what are you aiming at?

- Q. We are curious about the potential for using, either explicitly or implicitly, the concept of articulation in teaching students to think through writing, to think in the process of writing. There is an unfolding of thought in the process of writing. Thinking and writing are quite interconnected, and you're in many ways talking about a way of thinking. So, we're interested in the possibilities of using the concept of articulation to describe how we go about putting together elements of different theories, different discourses, to then produce some kind of intellectual intervention. This is particularly relevant, for example, in trying to help graduate students become good thinkers so that they can produce first-rate work that is not just a simple recombination of other people's ideas, but that is the kind of combination that actually produces a significant intellectual intervention.

A. I wonder if the most relevant concept for that purpose would not be inscription. That is, any writing is a process of inscription. By “inscription” I mean a process in which through putting two things together, the nature of these two things is in some way modified. For instance, you were speaking about graduate students. I have long experience as a Ph.D. supervisor. One of the most difficult problems that I have found is that students sometimes establish a radical separation between case study and theoretical framework. With such separation you are in a situation in which the theoretical chapter could be identical in all the dissertations and the case study is the only thing that changes from one to the other, which means that the two things have not been articulated at all. Coming back to the Saussurian example that I was giving before, if language is by definition a system of difference and by extension any signifying structure is like that, then the incorporation of new elements has to modify all the elements of the whole. In theoretical discourses, this means that there is no case study which should not modify the theory as well. If articulation is defined in this sense, the conclusion is that through each case study—in fact, the ideology of the case study has to be broken—the theory itself has to be in some sense modified, modified not in the sense of putting it outside, but modified simply in showing theoretical aspects through a new light; and at the same time, the case study (which is comparatively more easy) can be inscribed within a theory. The moment of inscription operates in two ways. My experience is that this is one of the most difficult things for graduate students to learn how to do. But it makes the whole difference between a purely scholarly exercise—scholarly in the bad sense of the term, of simply showing that you have understood a theory in an effort to be able to competently apply it to some case—and to enter into a process in which the theory illuminates the case and the case illuminates the theory. I think that the whole distinction between empirical and theoretical research has to be put, from this point of view, into question. And from this point of view, the category of articulation can help us think about the matter.

Q. Your work is a critique on the one hand of the postmodern position that privileges pure contextualism (what you call “particularism”) and that historicizes the concept of the universal, and on the other hand, of the Enlightenment position that privileges

universalism and seeks to transcend all particularisms. You attempt to forge a third way, a dialectic that demonstrates the relational interdependence of the universal and the particular. What are the theoretical and political exigencies that compel you to make this move?

- A. In the first place, I think that pure particularism is impossible because each pure particularity has to define itself by its differences with other particularities, and the system of these particularities necessarily reconstructs a certain universality—and the worst form of universality, universality conceived as a ground. This is the first theoretical difficulty. A political difficulty is that I don't think pure particularism can do the job because what would be the particularism of a certain community? If this community is a particular one, this means that it does not overlap exactly with the global community conceived as a whole. In that case, it's going to experience a set of pressures from outside itself. If you have national, racial, ethnic, or cultural minorities, one of their requests in order to assert their particularism would be the right of these communities to assert their identity. If you assert the right of a whole community to defend its own identity, what you are asserting is a principle that is not quite context bound.

There is a strong tendency toward contextualization in contemporary politics and in contemporary theory, but the consequence of this movement toward contextualization is that there is a different movement, a movement toward decontextualization. For instance, a discourse of rights is going to be a decontextualizing discourse because as far as it is not a purely xenophobic discourse it will have to assert itself in terms of some universality. Now, what is wrong with the idea of universality in the classical sense? That it gave to universality a content which can be specified in absolutely positive terms—man is a rational animal, and so on—and in this sense it gave to it a content which in the last analysis was always particular and was associated with the tradition of a certain culture. For example, democracy as it was conceived from the eighteenth century on was based on a discourse of equalization. The universalism of the French Revolution led in that direction. Marxism—because Marx thought, as I said before, that there was an increasing homogenization of social structure—tended to move toward a discourse of universality that was incompatible with difference, which in fact eliminated differences. Today, the

problem of democracy is the opposite. Once you have a society in which you have a multiplicity of cultures, demands, interests, and so on, how do you combine them in a way that is compatible with the defense of their particularity? This is the problem of democracy today, so in some sense we are in the antipodes of the classical theory of democracy.

Now, what I have tried to do, especially in the essays collected in *Emancipation(s)*, is to rescue a notion of universality which is not restricted to an a priori given content and which is given by the notion of hegemony. I used the notion of empty signifier (which is developed especially in the essay I like most in that volume, “Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?”) to try to develop precisely this argument. If we go back to what I was saying before about hegemony, you can immediately see the connection. If the systematicity of the system—the totality, what would constitute the moment of universalization—is something which is both impossible and necessary, it will need to have access in some way to representation. But the means of representation are going to be constitutively inadequate because they can only be specific particularities. Now, with hegemony, the relationship by which at some point a certain particularity assumes this function of universal representation involves a moment of universality, a universality, however, deprived of any kind of positive content—this is the difference with the Habermasian notion of universality. But my argument is that this leads to a more radical kind of democratic politics, because if the moment of universality had a content given a priori once and for all, no dialogical process would be possible; things would have been decided from the very beginning. If, on the other hand, this element of universality is going to be necessary but does not have a content of its own and it’s only given in a transient way by the particular social force, in that case hegemonic rearticulations are always possible, and this incompleteness of society is what keeps the possibility of a democratic exchange constantly open.

- Q. The body of your work suggests the possibility of deepening the project of radical democracy through its articulation with poststructuralism, specifically deconstruction. How might deconstruction become central to a theory of politics? We can anticipate how you might answer given what you’ve just said about the particular and universal.

A. I think that deconstruction is basically a theory about the decision taken in an undecidable terrain. For instance, in *Speech and Phenomena* Derrida shows in what way the articulation between knowledge and meaning in Husserl does not lead necessarily to the subordination of meaning to knowledge. Husserl, in fact, emancipates the two dimensions and shows that they can go in completely different directions. Once you have a radical undecidability in the relationship between these two dimensions, he says, Husserl makes an ethico-theoretical decision, which is to subordinate one to the other in a new sense. But the contingency of these decisions always remains there. For instance, he says that Joyce took exactly the opposite direction from Husserl. If you have undecidability in this radical sense, and, on the other hand, you have the need for a decision (for instance, Derrida insists in his later works that there is an urgency in a decision; I would say that a decision is something one has to make too soon), in that sense, the decision is going to produce some kind of articulation between two elements which is not required at the level of the structure. This is very close to hegemonic articulation in the sense that I was referring to before.

Q. You've said that your preference is for a "liberal-democratic-socialist society," and you often differentiate your vision of a radical democracy from both classical liberal democracy and from the neoconservative effort to redeploy liberal political theory for its own ends. What are the crucial differences between your radicalized notion of democracy and these others?

A. The classical liberal notion of democracy was limited to a particular sphere: the sphere of citizenship, the public space of citizenship. Liberals say that in the private sphere people can be as different from each other as they want but that they are equal within the public sphere. Because there is in classical liberalism an assertion of both equality at one level and inequality at another level, the degree of democratization to which this theory can reach is a limited one. That is why I insist on the notion of democratic revolution, which is based on some of the points that Claude Lefort developed but that Tocqueville formulated originally. The argument of Tocqueville was that once people accept the principle of equality in some sphere, they will not accept being equal in one sphere and unequal in a different one; they will try to be equal in all spheres. My notion of democratic revolution is

based in the expansion of this logic of equality from the public sphere of citizenship to different spheres—for instance, in socialist discourses in the nineteenth century to the economic sphere, and in this century to the equality between sexes, people of different sexual orientations, races, ethnic groups, and so on. Once you assert the principle of equality in all its dimensions, you are erasing the distinction between a public sphere and a private sphere. For example, some women say that “the personal is political”; what they are saying is that the logic of equality expands to a sphere from which it had been originally excluded. Well, classical liberal thought is very much based on this differentiation between public and private spaces and in that sense cannot advance very much in the direction of radical democracy. The neoconservative offensive is even clearer from this point of view: in the private sphere, only individuals can exist. But in the neoconservative offensive, the logic of equality plays practically no role at all. So this would basically be the difference between the two notions of democracy.

Q. In an attempt to devise an anti-foundational epistemology, many postmodern thinkers have focused on knowledge as radically contingent, local, and contextualized. Many rhetorical theorists, in fact, are fully committed to a neopragmatic notion that all knowledge is radically contextual and, thus, rhetorical. You caution, however, that this approach does not fully consider the limitations of “context” itself. How might we continue to understand the centrality of context while remaining aware of its limitations?

A. Let me say first that I would agree that knowledge is radically contingent, local, and contextualized; so I would accept that view. The difficulty, however, starts when one tries to define what a context is. Derrida is right in saying that defining the limits of context is one of the most difficult things you can do. The point is that in spite of the contextual specificity of every context there are logics of relative universalization operating within them. For instance, I spoke earlier about the discourses of rights. If you have discourses about human rights, in a very ultimate sense, these are contextual rights because they depend on people believing a set of key things about human beings which since the eighteenth century have been expanding more and more. So you have a very radical and generalized context. This is obviously not the

localized context people are thinking about when they make certain radically postmodern types of assertions. If contexts have within themselves this tendency toward decontextualization through universalization, in an ultimate ontological sense, context is always dominant but its dimensions are changing all the time. I think that what we have is simply a relative universalization of values. The point is that in the current debate the whole discussion has gone in the direction of putting into question the essentialist notion of universality, of asserting pure contextualized particularity. But for the reason I've mentioned, this is not without any difficulties either. So, I think we have to operate on the two levels: to accept radical contextualization, but to show how in any context there is something going beyond the context itself. Here, what I've called "the logic of equivalence" is very important in order to universalize some values. For instance, you can say that women had to fight for their rights as women, Chicanos had to fight for their rights as Chicanos, and so on. But can they fight for their rights without entering into some equivalential logic which puts their struggle together with the struggle of other people and in this sense produces a certain relative universalization of value? I don't think this is possible. They have to operate at the same level—at the level of contextualization on the one hand and at the level of this weakened form of the universalization of values on the other. What I deny to classical universalism is its assertion, not this relative and weakened universalization through equivalence. What I deny is that there is something which is universal per se and which does not depend on contextual interaction in order to create its relative universalities.

Q. Since the early 1980s, the concept of "the social" has become increasingly central to composition scholarship as theorists have interrogated the connections between rhetoric and epistemology. The social is also an important element in your own thinking. For example, you distinguish your view of the social from what might be called a common-sense definition of society, "an ensemble of *physically* existing agents who live within a given territory." Such an unnuanced perspective is not uncommon in composition theory. How might we in composition more productively think the social, especially in relation to the political?

A. Let me answer the point concerning the relationship between the social and the political, and you can draw your own conclusions

about composition. The notion of the social in my work has been presented in terms of two counterpositions. One is the relationship between the social and the political, the other the distinction between the social and society. Let's start with this last distinction. I understand "society" to mean simply the possibility of closure of all social meaning around a matrix which can explain all its partial processes. That would be, for instance, the position of classical structuralism. On the other hand, if one takes a more poststructuralist position—the impossibility of closing any context and among them the societal context as a unified whole—what you have are marginal processes which constantly disrupt meaning and do not lead to the closure of society around a single matrix. When we have the social defined in this sense as something which creates meaning but which makes closure impossible, I tended to speak of "the social" instead of "society." That was an early distinction. For example, that is precisely the argument which is being presented in the article on the impossibility of society.

I think the second distinction—the distinction between the social and the political—is more relevant. And that is connected with the distinction between sedimentation and reactivation, a distinction that comes from Husserl. Husserl said that the original acts of the production of meaning by a transcendental subject are acts which in social practice become repetitious and forget the moment of their original institution. For him, reactivation was to go back to this original institution through which sedimented meaning was constituted. The difference is that for Husserl this moment of reactivation consists in going back to an original institution which constituted the object and which had a positive content and character. The way I am presenting the argument is that we live in a world of sedimented social practices. The moment of reactivation consists not in going to an original founding moment, as in Husserl, but to an original contingent decision through which the social was instituted. This moment of the institution of the social through contingent decisions is what I call "the political."

In some sense, we are living in a world in which "the social" explains eighty percent of our social practices, while there are areas of undecidability in which acts of institution of a political nature are required. For example, if you live in a period of relative

social stability, you are going to have that the social expands at the expense of the political. If you are living in an organic crisis period, in the Gramscian sense, obviously many more areas of social life are susceptible to political construction. The way I see the history of social theory is that up to the end of the seventeenth century the threatened European communities which had emerged from the wars of religion were very conscious of the problem of the political nature of the social link. For instance, Hobbes would be a typical example. And so, political philosophy occupied a central role. In contrast, what happened from the eighteenth century onward was an increasing confidence of society in its ability of self-regulation. From the invisible hand of Adam Smith to sociology in the nineteenth century, there is a progressive abandonment of the perspective of political analysis, of political philosophy, and an increasing sociologization of the categories of social analysis. I think that today we are in some sense returning to a consideration of the political nature of the social precisely because people have less confidence in the mechanism of self-reproduction. For example, in conditions of globalization you always need to produce political forms of rearticulation in order to make society work to some extent. So, probably today we are in a process in which the political is returning—to use an expression of Chantal’s—to occupy a more central role in the understanding of social mechanisms.

Q. In “Community and Its Paradoxes,” you state, “I am very much in favour of reintroducing the dimension of violence within reform. A world in which reform takes place without violence is not a world in which I would like to live.” In fact, you claim that “the existence of violence and antagonisms is the very condition of a free society.” In what ways is violence constitutive of the social? What limitations, if any, would you place on the use of violence?

A. This is related to an argument that I present in *New Reflections* in my letter to Aletta Norval. The argument that I pose is essentially that the possibility of a free society depends on the existence of relations of power. The argument is approximately the following. What is taking a decision? Taking a decision can follow either of two mechanisms. If I have to take a decision, I am confronted with a set of alternatives, but the determination of which is the best alternative is an algorithmic one; in that case, there is one and

only one possible choice between the alternatives. In that case, I am not deciding anything; the structure has taken the decision for me. So, in what case do I really have a choice? It is when the field of decision is indeterminate. That is, the decision can be mine only in so far as the structure does not determine which is the good solution. But this means that taking a decision is to some extent to operate arbitrarily. Now, when we pass from individual to collective decisions, one group of people will prefer one decision, and another group will prefer a different one. The result of this is that as there is no ultimate algorithm which can arbitrate between them, the mechanism by which one decision is imposed at the expense of the others is going to involve power in some sense, even in the limited sense of winning an election. People will have things imposed on them that they do not want. In this sense, taking decisions and establishing relations of power necessarily go together. I would argue that this is not bad. This is violence, power, but it's not bad. Why? Because the other alternative would be that all decisions are algorithmic, and in that case we would have no freedom at all. The only thing we would have is the Spinozian freedom of being conscious of necessity. And I would not like to live in that society because it is a society from which freedom would have been totally eliminated. This is the paradox of freedom: in order to have freedom you have to institute the other of freedom, which is power. You can destroy some forms of power, but the destruction of these forms of power would involve establishing new relations of power of a different kind.

In what sense would unrestricted freedom be possible? My answer is that it is not possible because unrestricted freedom would be the same thing as a complete lack of freedom. You can only free some things by unfreeing some others, and in this sense power and hegemony are constitutive of social relations. At some point, for instance, you want to free women from oppression, but freeing women from oppression will mean establishing relations of power over people who oppose this process of freedom. The whole argument is against the idea of a reconciled society from which all antagonism and power relations would have been eliminated.

Q. Would you not put limitations on the violence that is constitutive of freedom?

- A. I think I would put limitations on it, but I cannot determine these limitations except by conceiving a certain context. In some contexts I would be perfectly happy to incur an act of terrorism to destroy a very oppressive regime; in other contexts, no. The terrorism that the resistance in France used in the Second World War—destroying railway stations, for example—is a kind of terrorism in a particular context that I'm perfectly prepared to subscribe to. So the problem of the limitation of violence cannot be solved on the basis of a blueprint determining in a rationalistic way what kind of violence is good and what is bad. That depends.
- Q. One could argue that the debate about multiculturalism in the U.S. is stalled precisely by a politics of recognition and an imperative to celebrate difference. You assert in "Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject" that a politics of pure difference is "the route to self-apartheid." What do you see as the dangers of the construction of political identities exclusively through a logic of difference?
- A. I want to stress this point: the danger implicit in any kind of social relation—in any kind of antagonistic struggle, let's say—is that if only the particularity of the struggle is recognized without entering into relations of solidarity with other groups and engaging in wider struggles at the level of society, then the group will be totally enclosed in its particularized demands and its actions will have no hegemonic consequences at the wider level. Let me give you an example. There were some discussions in Britain after the Labour Party victory about how black people should operate in relation to the Labour victory. There were some positions arguing that from the point of view of black interests it is the same thing whether the conservatives or Labour had won the election. Labour had made very few pronouncements in defense of black demands. Some people argued in those terms; other people within the black communities argued in a way more sympathetic to a Labour victory. Now, what would be a position of pure particularism? A position of pure particularism would be to say that our interests to be defended are exclusively black ones and that the libertarian spirit which for a few weeks dominated British society after the election is something from which we have to keep totally apart. Now, what is relevant is the whole distinction—that, for instance, Gramsci made—between a corporative defense of an interest and a hegemonic attitude. A hegemonic

policy is one which tries to present particular interests as necessary to carry out a wider social aim.

To explain this point, I used in one of my works the example of Mary Wollstonecraft. The rights of man and citizens excluded women, but her attitude was not to say that because the rights of man and citizens are purely male interests, we won't have anything to do with them. She says, instead, that if the rights of man and citizens are not extended to women, there is an internal limitation which prevents the extension of the democratic revolution in a variety of dimensions. As another example, the defense of black interests in America took place following the Second World War on a very comprehensive basis. The blacks had a discourse which was not a purely particularized discourse, but a discourse which defended civil liberties, civil rights in a much wider sense, in spite of the fact that the reaction of the white establishment, even the liberal white establishment, to the assertion of these rights was rather timid—to put it mildly, no? I remember a black activist of the 1930s (I don't remember his name) who said something like, “The most sympathetic president that I have found to black causes in America was Franklin Roosevelt, and all the concessions I got from him were at gunpoint.”

So, these two dimensions are constantly present. I'm very much in favor of multiculturalism. In fact, I think multiculturalism has been one of the great developments in American politics over the last decades. What I'm concerned about, however, is to find the means by which pure particularism can be overcome by a more comprehensive type of discourse. I'm not saying that pure particularism is necessarily predominating, but definitely it is a danger which is potentially there, as it is in any group that starts having at the same time to assert its own identity and to inscribe its own identity in wider causes at the level of national politics.

Q. In your Preface to Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, you suggest that “the Lacanian concept of enjoyment, *jouissance*, . . . enables us to understand the logic of exclusion operating in discourses such as racism.” This is a provocative statement, one that alludes to what might be at work affectively in the perpetuation of racist practices. Would you further describe the relationship you see between *jouissance* and racism?

A. I'm simply summarizing an argument of Žižek's. What it basically comes down to is the fact that enjoyment is very much

linked to the practice of exclusion. For example, if I am in a situation in which I feel vulnerable, weak, I project onto some particular Other the source of my own limitations—the Black, the Jew, the Bosnian, whatever group that can be seen as the symbol of what is lacking in my situation. The whole structure of enjoyment, which certainly is more complicated in Lacan than that, turns around this double relationship in which the Other is the negative mirror of my own lack. This is approximately what the argument is about.

Q. In a recent *JAC* interview, African-American feminist bell hooks suggests that if we are ever to understand the dynamics of race so as to move toward a truly anti-racist society, whites are going to have to begin to interrogate “whiteness.” What she is suggesting is the necessity of understanding the *relational* character of racial identities. Given your interest in the making of political identities, what steps do you recommend we take to initiate such an interrogation?

A. I’m very much in agreement with bell hooks’ assertion. When one is thinking about black identities or white identities, one is not thinking two separate things; one is thinking in discourses which constitute whiteness through the exclusion of blackness and through the exclusion of many other things. Because whiteness is a comprehensive category, you will exclude homosexuals and many others who function in your discourse as the Other. In that case, it is not possible to destabilize this form of discrimination without at the same time destabilizing the category of whiteness which constitutes the hard core of positivity against which these discourses operate. So, I agree very much with that assertion because otherwise we would have the simplistic idea that you can simply incorporate rights or the defense of a set of groups without modifying the very identity of the groups which have represented the point of view of the oppressor. It is not simply a matter of extending to other groups something which belongs to the dominant group; it’s that the process of this extension destabilizes the very categories of the dominant groups as such.

Q. You occasionally refer to the work of Homi Bhabha and particularly his notion of hybridization. Do you find the work of postcolonial theorists generally useful in your efforts to theorize the discursive conditions of possibility for the emergence of new political identities? It seems related to what you were just saying.

A. Yes, very much so. I find the work not only of Homi but also of Gayatri Spivak to be very relevant to this point of view. The category of hybridization shows its potential precisely by pointing out those fields of ambiguity that I was describing before. What does hybridization mean? Simply that I cannot enclose myself in a pure identity of the oppressed. What I was saying before about the oppressor also relates to the identity of the oppressed. The oppressed also constitute their identity by denying the identity of the oppressor. But the process of advancing the claims against a system of oppression destabilizes both the identity of the oppressor and the identity of the oppressed. And here is where hybridization becomes necessary, becomes important. In the process of advancing its claims, the oppressed will have to negotiate within institutions, for instance. Once you negotiate within institutions, you are going to find the very ambiguities which are inherent in any institutional struggle. The more successful a group is in asserting its claim, the more this success will involve participating in a variety of institutions' relations of power and so on, which are going to put into question the original demand. At the same time, these institutions have a structure of their own. This structure can among other things produce a co-optation of the original group, so that there is a limitation of the radicalism of the original demands. On the other hand, if they continue in a purely anti-institutional struggle, they do not advance hegemonically in society at all. All kinds of hegemonic struggle always take place by negotiating between these two mutual impossibilities. Each one of these two logics of social action, if it is taken unilaterally, leads to social immobility, either by a pure segregationism in a purely anti-institutional struggle or through integration into institutions. It is only by combining the two in a pragmatic way that some kind of global advances of particular causes are made possible.

But here also the system of alliances is important because it is only on the basis of large varieties of social demands of oppressed groups that success in this hegemonic offensive becomes possible. For instance, I heard in America some years ago people saying that liberalism as a system is absolutely dead; no radical democratic struggle is possible within a liberal framework. This, I think, is pure defeatism because, in that case, if you don't want to influence institutions to change, what is the meaning of orga-

nizing a march in Washington in order to defend the right to choose and so on? You are constantly trying to modify liberal institutions by operating within the framework of these liberal institutions. I understand a discourse that is an *alternative* to operating within a liberal framework—for example, if somebody says I have a Leninist theory about the seizure of power—because in that case all your logic of political action is different. But if you don't have any kind of alternative logic and you operate in a purely ad hoc way without broad hegemonic objectives in mind, probably your action is going to be limited as well. So, here I think it is necessary to differentiate between liberalism—in the sense that I spoke about earlier, as different from a project of radical democracy—and operating within an institutional liberal framework, because what is at issue is to radicalize liberalism beyond the limits which were established by classical liberalism.

Q. In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* you state, “Destroying the hierarchies on which sexual or racial discrimination is based will, at some point, always require the construction of other exclusions for collective identities to be able to emerge.” Certainly you don't mean to suggest that the struggle against racism and sexism is futile. How then, are we to decide which exclusions are to be accepted, tolerated, and viewed as supportive of a radical democratic project?

A. My answer would be the same as my earlier answer about contextualization. Definitely, if you are struggling against racism and sexism, you are going to exclude from your project some people who are defending, for instance, traditional values; you are going to exclude the moral majority, the Ku Klux Klan, and similar groups. So asserting a radical democratic project will include these types of exclusion. For example, you might exclude people who defend “the right to life” while you are defending certain values, but this is in the nature of social antagonism. Now, what groups have to be excluded from a radical democratic project depends on how a society is structured. How a project of this kind will advance in a country like Argentina or Italy or America is going to be completely different. For instance, I don't know to what extent the advancement of democratic causes in many countries of the Islamic world would involve the same type of exclusion that we would have in an American context today. Certainly, the relationship between democratic demands and

Islamism presents a very complicated set of issues because many causes that we would recognize as valid in the Islamic context—for example, in the struggle against the Iranian regime—will have to accept at the same time the Islamic constitution of subjects in many other respects with distinctions and causes that we would not accept in the Anglo-Saxon world today.

Q. But apart from the particular context, there's no sort of mechanism for how to determine what's to be tolerated?

A. Only the kind of relative universalized value that I was speaking about earlier. Today, for instance, discourses about national self-determination are discourses which have won an almost universal acceptance from the international point of view, so there you have a certain universality of values which on the basis of being put in equivalential exchange acquire this status. I'm not saying that everything is rigidly contextual from society to society, but the instances of the creation of hegemonic fronts around the radicalization of democracy in particular historical contexts are going to be different from each other. However, I think the argument has to go more and more in the direction of having as many universal values, conceived in this particular sense, as possible. But we cannot go beyond that. Even some of *them* are complicated. For instance, what about the right of national self-determination? What if a country is committing genocide inside its limits? Has the international community the right to intervene or not? You see how contextualized even a principle like that is?

Q. In "Power and Representation," you discuss the complex dynamics of political representation, saying that "the identity of the represented is transformed and enlarged through the process of representation." You also say that the "representative *inscribes* an interest in a complex reality different from that in which the interest was originally formulated and, in doing so, he or she constructs and transforms that interest." Given this view of the transformative nature of representation, what are the consequences for a truly workable representative democracy?

A. The argument is more or less the following: why is a relation of representation needed in the first place? Simply because a decision affecting your own interests is going to be taken in a place from which you are materially absent. In that case, it's inherent in the nature of any representation that the process is going to be a two-way process. Let's take a simple case that I

once used in a talk. Let's suppose that you have farmers in a locality and that the only thing the farmers are concerned about is the maintenance of a tax against the import of agricultural products. Let's say they choose a representative to parliament. The representative to parliament cannot simply go and say, "I represent the farmers and so I'll vote in that direction." He or she has to construct an argument to convince other sectors different from the farmers. The representative will have to speak about the effects on industry, the national interest, and so on. This type of discourse cannot be simply derived from the interest of the farmers; it has to articulate the interest of the farmers to other things going on in the national community. So, in some sense, by producing a discourse of articulation the representative is having an effect on the represented themselves because at the end of the process the represented will have a more complex identity, a political identity more incorporated into the national community, than at the starting point when the represented had a very narrow interest. (Of course, there are cases in which the representative can betray the represented, but these are banal, no?) When this process takes place, there is a circulation of discourses in this community by which a certain universality is created because at the end of the day the farmers of these localities will have not only a discourse about taxes on agricultural products but will have a discourse about the development of the national economy, threats, and so on which will transform them into a more complex political people. In this sense, the process is a two-way process from represented to representative and from representative to represented; but, at the same time, the identity of both is constantly changing in the process.

Now, there *are* situations—for instance, cases of total marginality—in which people are totally dispossessed of any identification with an interest and the discourse of the representative is very important at the beginning in order to give them some sense of identity that they otherwise lack. But I'd say that this overwhelming influence of the representative is the most democratic thing that can happen in that particular context because thanks to those new discourses, these masses are launched into political action and mobilization, and in the process of this incorporation they develop more complex discourses of their own. The whole Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual was based exactly on this notion.

Q. In *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* you say that both in advanced industrial societies and in Third World countries the fragmentation of social identities leads to a situation “in which the most difficult thing is how to constitute an *interest* and a *will* to be represented in the political system.” The task of political leaders “consists, quite frequently, of providing the marginalized masses with a *language* out of which it becomes possible for them to reconstitute a political identity and a political will.” Given, as you say, that “the relation representative/represented has to be privileged as the very condition of a democratic participation and mobilization,” how does a member of a dominant group undertake the work of representing members of a minority group in an ethical and politically progressive way?

A. Personally, I don’t think this representing is done by a member of the dominant group.

Q. Not at all?

A. No, unless there is a split in the dominant group, something like that. For instance, if you have a dominant group in the south of Italy which is very closely connected to the Mafia, and you have a local lawyer who starts agitating against the Mafia and trying to mobilize the unions and a variety of other groups, the discourse of this mobilization is probably produced, initially at least, by this lawyer. But this lawyer is not part of the dominant group; he or she is somebody who is trying to confront the dominant group. What *can* happen, however (and this is probably the central meaning of your question), is that if you have totally unarticulated masses whose level of political discursivity is low in this situation of marginalization, the task of starting to organize them can be initiated not only by progressive politicians but also by the church, by reactionary politicians, by fascists—and this actually happens all the time. But this is exactly where hegemonic struggle lies. The reason why there is this struggle between groups operating in that direction is that this original lack cannot a priori be identified with any positive content. For instance, in the south of Italy communist lawyers played this role of mass organization in the first decades after the Second World War simply by saying, “Well, here the working classes are weak, so we cannot base the party on union activity as in the north. But here we can make sure that the premises of the party and the unions, even if they are weak, are the rallying points of a set of struggles—struggle against the Mafia,

struggle for school cooperatives, and so on.” In that sense, they articulated a variety of causes, but this was a hegemonic decision that was in no way predetermined to be taken by the communists. In some other localities, Christian democratic lawyers played a similar organizing role.

- Q. Compositionists often deploy the terms *subject* and *subject position* but tend to make these terms synonymous. You provide us with a more nuanced political vocabulary by making a distinction between the two. At stake in this distinction is the possibility of social agency. How might we rethink these categories?
- A. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Chantal and I reduce—I think incorrectly—the problem of the subject to the problem of subject position. The problem of subject positions can be retrieved by a structuralist discourse very easily because you can say that subject positions are objective positions within the structure and that what you have to do is to describe the structure as a comprehensive whole; in that case, the problem of the subject is reduced to positioning it within the structure. For example, the notion of interpellation in the Althusserian approach led to some extent to the idea that we recruit subjects into the structure in this way. That is the point where Slavoj Žižek criticized our position in one of the first reviews of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It was published in a journal of the Lacanians in Paris. It was a very positive, favorable, and interesting review, but the criticism was that we were confusing subject with subject position, while subject in the Lacanian sense would always be the subject of the lack—that is, not a point within the structure, but a point of a lack from which the logic of identification starts. This later became very important for how I developed my argument about empty signifiers. If the only thing we had was subject position, the very logic of identification, which involves the place of lack (the failure of the fullness), would have been unthinkable. So, today I distinguish between subject and subject positions in this sense. Subject positions are part of the symbolic, but the realm of subjectivity is not exhausted in the symbolic; otherwise, we would have simple identity and no process of identification. This is the main change that has taken place.
- Q. We’d like to ask a related question. Throughout your discussions of the constitution of subjectivity, you shift the focus from “identity” to “acts of identification.” At one point you say that

we cannot “give clear criteria for choosing that with which to identify.” This move from “identity” to “identification” is part of the anti-essentialist mode of theorizing that you’re committed to. What’s striking about this view of subjectivity is that it seems to suggest that essentialism and identity politics should be reconceived as an effort to provide both the content and the criteria for choosing (perhaps more accurately, for regulating) acts of identification. Do you agree?

- A. Obviously, identity politics today is a very wide field. I don’t think one can say that identity politics and essentialism, for example, are the same kind of thing. Identity politics has helped very much to expand the notion of subjectivity, and in this sense it has also helped to break with essentialism in many directions. There can be, however, a form of identity politics that tends to be a rigid essentialism, and any kind of identity can lead to that—working class identity could lead to that; liberalism in terms of individualism could lead to that—so there is no discourse which is immune to essentializing tendencies. But first I would like to put into question the rationalism of the notion of “criteria for choosing” because it’s not that somebody constitutes one’s own identity by choosing this or that. Identity construction is a far more complicated process, and anybody familiar with psychoanalytic literature knows the set of things that are involved in it. What I would try to say are two things. First, the distinction between identity and identification is central. If one could have identity without requiring acts of identification, one would be entirely at the symbolic level, in Lacanian terms, and the dimension of the real, which is absolutely central and which requires constant acts of reidentification, would not be possible. Second, acts of identification—when they take place—are not acts in which people choose to be this or that because of some set of reasons. The process is much less automatic than that. What I have is an original lack. This original lack requires acts of identification. These acts of identification depend on many things—among other things, availability. For example, I mentioned earlier that if you lack fullness, a discourse which attempts to fill this lack, if it is the only available discourse which tries these functions, will tend to be accepted, and when the identificatory acts have taken place it is very difficult to move away from them. But as far as the question is concerned, I would say yes. If we have

an essentialism which tries to provide a priori both the content and the criteria of choosing, that would be something which would be incompatible with the notion of identification that I'm developing. But I want to stress that this affects not only identity politics but any kind of politics.

Q. Your work on hegemony suggests that it is *urgent* for progressive intellectuals—who must operate in the vacuum created by the collapse of Marxism and the redrawing of geo-political arrangements—to understand the logic of hegemony and develop our own hegemonic strategies. What shape would you like to see these strategies take?

A. I see the development of a theory of hegemony as a precondition for any kind of strategic thinking, having to combine various tasks, all of which would involve the expansion of rhetoric and rhetorical argumentation. In the first place, I see that we need to have some sort of combination of what I would call various branches, various kinds of poststructuralist theory—and not only poststructuralism; for instance, the Wittgensteinian approach is very important to this matter. Deconstruction provides us with a discourse concerning the deepening of the logic of undecidability, which, for the reasons I mentioned earlier, becomes central. Lacanian theory provides us with a logic of the lack, the logic of the signifier, which is also a discourse of enormous importance. I am very much against attempts of simply opposing deconstruction to Lacanian theory. The two can be productively combined in a variety of ways. And I think that the whole conception of a microphysics of power can be complementary to this effort. One should not dismiss the work of Foucault (or, for the matter, of Deleuze and Guattari) too easily, as some people tend to do. So what we have is a very complicated discourse which has to combine traditions of thought that began from very different starting points but that are all converging on political analysis. And the analysis of the complexity of present day society has to go together with an analysis of the proliferation of the places of enunciation. For instance, if a study in terms of places of enunciation were made, we would see that the transformation of politics over the last thirty or forty or fifty years—let's say, since the end of the Second World War—has multiplied the places from which politically consequential enunciation is possible. This is linked, at the same time, to the disintegration of classical forms

of social aggregation.

Once you have this multiplication of the places of enunciation, you also have a proliferation of rhetorical devices; given that we are dealing with a process of argumentation and that this process of argumentation has to operate at a plurality of levels, we are in a situation in which social theory has to advance in the direction of generalized rhetorics. This means, also, that thought has to be more strategic; it has to emphasize the strategic dimension to some extent (but only to some extent) at the expense of the structural dimensions. A structural analysis tries to define matrixes of the constitution of all possible variations of meaning, while strategic thought tries to see constant displacements of meaning in a regulated way, but the very regulation is something that is submitted to the very process of a displacement. So, this is to some extent the kind of theoretical activity toward which the possibility of formulating a theory of politics oriented in a radical sense has to move.

Q. To so many people in the U.S., this will be counterintuitive because we are taught to think of freedom as a state we achieve, just as we are taught to desire a harmonious society where power is equally distributed or eliminated altogether. Specifically how do we effect such a monumental conceptual change in people's thinking about freedom?

A. Writing, giving talks. Academics are also part of the real world and their influence should not be undervalued. There are many intermediate areas—some forms of journalism, some other forms of the circulation of ideas—in which it is important to engage oneself. Also, intellectual developments themselves have produced a set of historical effects—the development of Milton Friedman's theory, for example—without which the history of the last few years would have been different. Thatcherism, for example, would not have developed the way it did. I think it is important that intellectuals not only produce high theory but that they also write in ways that are accessible to a wider public. It's very important to develop this intermediate area of discourse. In fact, many people are writing in these ways. This is not to say that abstract theory doesn't have its own role to play, but it's not the only kind of discourse to which we have to devote our time.

Q. Because you are attempting to think a unique radical project, one that avoids the debilitating particularism of postmodern thought

and the idealistic universalism of Habermasian and other liberal projects, many theorists are likely to misunderstand or take issue with your work. Are there any specific misunderstandings that you'd like to address at this time?

- A. Well, there have been several misunderstandings: some of them are just quizzical; some of them are more important. Among the quizzical ones, let me just mention one. I wrote an article about the impossibility of society, meaning that society cannot be sutured in certain ways. A few years later, Margaret Thatcher said that society does not exist, meaning obviously something completely different, meaning that for her only individuals exist. Some people in a certainly not innocent way tried to confuse the two statements. For example, Terry Eagleton wrote in his book on ideology about the theory of the nonexistence of society developed by Margaret Thatcher and Ernesto Laclau.

Apart from such malevolent attempts at conflation, there are other misunderstandings that are more important. First, from the Marxian side. I've never tried to simply put aside Marxism as something that had to be abandoned. What I tried to do is to operate deconstructively within Marxian categories in order to present a discourse which certainly goes beyond Marxism but which nourished itself from Marxism as one of its roots. Now, many orthodox people didn't take that lightly, and they accused me of being some kind of renegade. Another misunderstanding—one that is perhaps more important—is that my intermediate position (which is not intermediate actually but is something which tries to go beyond the two extremes) concerning universalism and particularism has also presented some difficulty. For instance, people coming from the Habermasian camp thought that my discourse should be identified with pure particularism, which is not the case. And some people have seen the attempt to introduce this universalistic function, in the way I have described, as an attempt to criticize the discourses of the new social movements, which is the last thing I was trying to do because, as I said, for me multiculturalism is one absolutely progressive phenomenon.

Finally, there is a discussion going on—but here I do not know if these are misunderstandings or simply ambiguities in my analysis—that has produced very different readings. For example, Slavoj Žižek has always insisted that I was developing a

basically Lacanian approach without formally using Lacanian language. He insisted that the categories of antagonism and hegemony were a rediscovery of the Lacanian “real.” There are other theoretical approaches which on the contrary are very positive about my work, but they don’t like the Lacanian appropriation. This is probably a debate that is going to go on in the near future. I have received some pieces that try to enter into this argument, and I simply reserve my final opinion for when I can read all this literature.

Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 17 of *JAC* was awarded to Bruce McComiskey for “Social-Process Rhetorical Inquiry: Cultural Studies Methodologies for Critical Writing about Advertisements.” Honorable Mention was awarded to Pamela Gilbert for “Meditations upon Hypertext: A Rhetorethics for Cyborgs.”

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Professor Kinneavy at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Chicago.