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POPULISM WITHOUT ADJECTIVES, OR, POLITICS BETWEEN HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT
Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective, written by the duo of Argentine philosophers Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia, is an audacious, lucid, and urgent book. It is also a text traversed by an unresolved tension between two approaches: a first, ontological approach, indebted not only to Martin Heidegger's thinking of ontological difference but also to the mobilisation of this difference in political theory in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Jorge Alemán; and a radically different, historical or conjunctural approach, for which the authors find inspiration in the evidential or indexical paradigm of Carlo Ginzburg. This review discusses the advantages and shortcomings of these two approaches, reading Biglieri and Cadahia's book, as it were, against itself.

KEYWORDS
Populism, ontology, post-foundationalism, evidential paradigm

Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective, written by the duo of Argentine philosophers Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia, is an audacious, lucid, and urgent book. Its audacity depends on the clarity of its proposals and the force of the conviction with which the authors commit themselves to their ideas. Its lucidity, which is palpable on every page, is the result of an effort in conceptual clarification that in my eyes is unparalleled in contemporary political theory. And its urgency, which is equally clear, speaks to us about the need to imagine an alternative to the nightmare that we are currently living on a global scale with the resurgence of the extreme right, the climate crisis, and the general collapse of the people's trust in our democratic institutions.

The book avoids the facile jargon of today's theoretical consensus. It is committed to explaining the reasons for a militant practice nourished by the ideas of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Jorge Alemán, but also by the living struggles of 'actually existing politics', above all in Latin America as an alternative site from where to produce theory, different from the European perspective of critics of populism such as Mauricio Lazzarato, Eric Fassin or Slavoj Žižek. As the authors explain from the very start of their introduction, 'this book is an avowedly militant one in which we embrace our political position as a way of taking responsibility for our own subjective involvement' (Biglieri and Cadahia, 2021: xxii). In this sense, we are in the presence of a rigorously honest book.

At the heart of the book sits an obscure secret: the secret of the power of the people, or of the plebs. As Biglieri and Cadahia explain in the first essay, this power constitutes the secret nucleus of all politics, or even of the political, since it is impossible to think the political without putting into play the power of antagonism at a collective level. Now, contrary to the arguments of someone like Mouffe, the authors do not believe in the conceptual usefulness of the opposition between right-wing and left-wing populisms. It is precisely due to the confusion between these two categories that critics like Žižek reject the emancipatory nature of populism and instead prefer to label it fascist, racist, or xenophobic in principle. For Biglieri and Cadahia, on the contrary, it would be better to reserve the name 'populism', without attributes, for the collective and constitutively emancipatory dimension of the power of the people, whereas the identitarian, reactionary, sexist, and racist forms of populism, which are ubiquitous today from Brazil to the United States, would be better treated as neoliberal versions of fascism. As the authors write in the second essay: 'Let's just say 'populism' as a synonym for left-wing populisms or inclusionary populisms without having to apologize, without having to clarify with adjectives. We will leave the rest for neofascism or post-fascism' (40).

A major part of the book's argument revolves around what the authors call the 'ontological dimension' of populism, for which they adopt a point of view that Laclau had inaugurated in the chapter 'Towards a Theory of Populism' in his *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (Laclau, 1977), and culminating in the great summary that is his last book, *On Populist Reason*, which intends 'to grant populism the dignity of a theory and to turn it into a political ontology for theorizing political articulations in general' (Biglieri and Cadahia, 2021: 5). In this sense, the authors distinguish three levels or three points of view on the subject of populism: the mediatic (generally pejorative), the empirical (or the historiography of concrete cases), and the ontological (or the theory of the political based on the being of the social as constitutive lack). It is on this third and last level that the authors situate the originality of their proposal:

> Now, it is within the third line of enquiry – the constitutive dimension of the political – that the pejorative interpretation of populism begins to be undermined and the foundations will be laid to think about its ontological dimension, i.e. to what extent populism becomes a logic constitutive of the political itself – not a deviation from it – and how this logic articulates material forms of social being. (11)

The authors do not want to limit themselves to studying 'populism as a merely conjunctural strategy', but instead they agree with Laclau, insofar as 'the importance of his work on populism can be summarized in how he managed to grant populism the status of a political category in its own right' (13-14).

To continue the debate that is their book, this is where I would like to introduce a first series of questions for my two friends: Where does this need come from to give populism a theoretical and ontological 'status' in its own right? Why does populism acquire the 'dignity' of the concept only through an ontology of the political? What is, finally, ontology, if not, as I will try to show with the words of the authors themselves, a partial sedimentation of the history of a long series of existing politics?

To understand the problem, it is useful to go back to a forceful statement in the book's first chapter:

> It is feasible to say that a particular political articulation can be disarticulated, a specific people and its leader can be defeated politically, but populism as an ontology of the political is ineradicable. That is, in an ontic sense, and as an articulation linked to a specific form of political expression in a specific context, populism can come to an end, but, in a fundamental sense, linked to the very ontology of the political, populism is simply ineliminable (17).

This use of the ontico-ontological difference based on Martin Heidegger's thinking, which will have been familiar to readers of Laclau and several of his disciples such as Oliver Marchart, appears to me to be profoundly problematic – even, I must confess, contrary to my own principles and convictions. Therefore, I find myself in a paradoxical situation as a reader: politically, I am in complete agreement on nearly every point with the authors; but theoretically or philosophically, I am a bit perplexed, because I cannot bring myself to endorse the argument about the need to project the debate onto the level of an ontology of the political.

I fully understand the reasoning behind this argument, which the authors make explicit throughout their book. They wish to give populism the dignity of an ontological concept to save it from its detractors, by discussing as equals with their European counterparts. The defense of populism as such, without the need to add any adjectives or attributes to convince its European critics, in this sense requires an ontological outlook. Conversely, only an ontology of the political will allow us to salvage populism from its right-wing or fascist stigmata. This double aim already was part of Laclau's original

project: 'De-stigmatizing populism within the theoretical field means simultaneously transforming the way the ontological dimension of the political is understood' (17). However, as Wendy Brown also suggests in the criticism she formulates in her 'Foreword' to Biglieri and Cadahia's book, there also exists the risk that by rejecting the tension between right-wing populisms and left-wing populisms we end up with an overly clean theoretical definition of populism, in a kind of continuous stipulation freed of all the dregs of the historical, the conjunctural, or the strategic, that is, a populism purified of everything merely 'ontic', to use the Heideggerian lexicon.

Now what exactly defines the ontological dimension that in this reading would reveal itself in a privileged, if not unique, sense in populism as such, without attributes? In the authors' account, this depends on the recognition of a constitutive lack at the heart of the social, as a lack of being:

> This new way of reading the being of the social helps us understand that the political is nothing more than working through the constitutive negativity of that lack – a way of working on the social through a logic articulating this constitutive lack. What political theories, currents, and traditions cannot tolerate is not the deviation that populism engenders, but the ontological indeterminacy into which it throws us (18-19).

For my part, I believe that this ontological indeterminacy implies a strange formalism, no matter how deconstructed or postfoundational the authors make it out to be, in which what is lacking or what functions as an absent cause is precisely the power of the people. But, conversely, this power obtains its dignity only when in its thought in its ontological dimension, defined as constitutive lack or fracture. We find ourselves before a kind of structural ontologisation, or before an ontological type of structuralism, which precisely insofar as it is based on a lack of foundation can also be considered a form of poststructuralism.

This is not just a question of nomenclature. Even if they had accepted to speak of right-wing and left-wing populisms, instead of proposing an opposition between populism as such and neofascism, the authors still would have kept defining the difference between these two positions in terms of the ontological lack on which the political is based: this lack is negated or disavowed in neoliberal fascism and fully recognised only in the populism that they defend in their book. In whatever terminology we adopt to talk about populism as such or emancipatory populism, in its 'ontologised' version of the political, the 'failure' or 'flaw' of really existing politics seem all too easily inverted, as if this were the moment of revelation not of a contingent lack (in a misguided form of concrete politics) but the constitutive lack of the being of politics (the lack that is the void around which the essence of the political is articulated).

Time and again, ontology acquires a heuristic value by being revelatory of (the lack of) a secret, or of an (absence of) essence. In this way, far from constituting an obstacle,

the impossibility likewise may convert itself in a paradoxical condition of possibility. It is almost as if the necessary failure at the heart of the political were to serve as the guarantee of populism's success, at least ontologically speaking:

> Thus, the secret of the constitutive uncertainty and indeterminacy of being that Laclau's populism reveals, and which is symbolized in the heart of the political field, can be read today as the unconfessed inverse of those who needed to declare its death. What many could not bear was precisely the paradoxical nature of political work that populism revealed – namely, the impossibility of the social as a condition of possibility for political praxis, a praxis far removed from rational procedure and normativity and closer to the plebeian forms through which Latin America has built the social from the political. The ontological dimension that Laclau opens up, then, frees us from the stigma associated with the "failed" character of Latin American politics, and offers us the possibility of discovering in that failure not a deviation to correct but an ontological indeterminacy to work through (19).

The effects of such an argument (which the authors share with many other postfoundational political theories) turn out to be doubly problematic. On the one hand, in the passage from the ontic to the ontological, or from politics to the political, the failure or fissure of a concrete politics turns – as if by a magician's trick – into a kind of promising condition of possibility. On the other hand, from the perspective of ontology, any consideration not worthy of being ontologised for this same reason runs the risk of being dismissed as 'merely' political, conjunctural or strategic, since it does not reach deeply enough into the ground or essence of the political. Thus, in the beginning of the second essay, the authors state that 'populism cannot be limited to a mere political strategy, but that it must be understood in its ineradicably ontological dimension' (20). And they immediately add: 'For this reason, in this essay we will explore in greater detail the difficulties of maintaining only the strategic dimension of populism, i.e. all that is lost by subjecting it to a merely conjunctural plane, and even more so when the conjuncture in question responds to a European script' (20, translation modified).

It seems, therefore, that the point of the debate is missed no sooner than it is phrased in terms of a hierarchical difference in which the European scripts, instead of being refuted on their own terms, are relegated to the 'merely' strategic or conjunctural, whereas only an ontological point of view, inspired by Laclau's work from Latin America as its locus of enunciation, would allow us to reach the conceptual 'dignity' of the political. But would it not be more effective to show that the European critics are downright mistaken in their judgments about populism, without having to invoke the hierarchy of the ontic (including the difference between left and right) and the ontological (the logic of the political based in an ineliminable, originary, and absolutely prior antagonism, before all such differences)?

And yet, there are other instances in Biglieri and Cadahia's book where they go in the opposite direction, contrary to the ontologisation as the destigmatisation of populism 'as such' or 'without attributes'. And if a first series of arguments in this regard is still ambiguous in terms of their possible use as self-criticisms, in the final chapters of the book the authors openly choose a plebeian, situated, or 'dirty' approach to politics, which runs counter to their own ontologising tendencies.

As an example of an ambiguous argument that could be read as a self-criticism, in the second essay it is interesting to see how in order to avoid falling in the same trap as intellectuals such as Lazzarato, Fassin or Žižek, who generalise the European situation is if it were the only legitimate way of – pejoratively – interpreting the experience of populism, Biglieri and Cadahia invite us to 'pay attention to how actually existing political struggles work' (28). Such a reading of the struggles in the streets and public squares of Latin America would allow us to move beyond the formal critique of populism, when the Slovenian thinker for example opposes the pure self-relating negativity that *is* the subject as such to the populist displacement of this negativity onto some excluded other: 'Along these lines, Žižek suggests that such an operation would be an externalization of our own self-negativity, since we would be projecting onto the other the fracture or lack that is within ourselves' (27, translation modified). On this topic, the authors formulate an objection to Žižek that we could equally apply to them: 'When Žižek counterposes the figure of self-negativity as something prior to the struggle against an adversary, he is also setting out from a positivized way of theorizing antagonism – namely, our self-negativity' (28, translation modified). Does not the same apply to the authors' own argument, when they articulate a whole ontology of the political based on the prior nucleus of a constitutive, structural, and ineradicable lack at the heart of the social?

We can find confirmation of this ambiguity when we observe how the authors support the notion of a constitutive lack or gap in the case of the work of the Argentine thinker and psychoanalyst Jorge Alemán, when the latter argues that capitalism 'attacks precisely what is proper to the subject – namely, its constitutive flaw, the flaw that functions as the condition of possibility for the subject to exist through it' (32). Once again, moreover, this constitutive flaw, lack or dislocation according to the authors must be interpreted on two different levels or dimensions – the sociohistorical dimension and the structural-ontological one – which should not be confused, even though under neoliberal capitalism they are in fact dangerously close to being flattened out into a single plane: 'While these two dimensions (ontological and socio-historical) appear as mixed, they follow different logics. The first implies an ineliminable dependency, whereas the second is a socio-historical construct susceptible to transformations' (33). Here, the authors seem to be defending an argument from Alemán that they had previously

rejected in the case of Žižek. Based on an ambiguous mixture of elements of Derridean deconstruction (in the case of Laclau and Mouffe) with elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis (in the case of Žižek and Alemán), this argument consists in taking for granted a fundamental distinction between an ontic lack or gap (a flaw that is conjunctural and thus can be overcome) and the ontological lack or gap (a flaw that is structural, constitutive, and therefore ineradicable). Finally, could we not say the same thing about the use of this argument in *Seven Essays on Populism* as what the authors write about Eric Fassin, another European critic of populism, namely, that in their display of an ontology of the constitutive lack of the political there is 'a sort of essentialism and a fixation' (29)?

For my part, I do not think that actual politics need 'the dignity of a theory' or 'the status of a political category in its own right' through an ontology of the political. Terms such as 'dignity' and 'right', moreover, belong in their turn to historically specific and concrete forms of politics. What we should interrogate, rather, is not only where this relatively recent need comes from to give all existing politics the categorial apparatus of an ontology but also to what extent such an ontologisation in the name of radical theory often ends up closing the path toward understanding the actual possibilities of effective practice, which rarely will be up to par with the radical philosophical theory.

As far as the first of these questions is concerned, I would say that political ontology today offers the royal road to a certain philosophy of defeat. To turn the failures from the past into the irrefutable expressions of a constitutive failure or flaw in our very own being allows the defeated to participate in a kind of ontological transfiguration of the status quo. This is what I suggested earlier by talking about the success of failure. And it has a long trajectory in the post-Marxist Left, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall. It finds its most systematic expression in the debates between Judith Butler, Laclau and Žižek, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, a book in which the formulas are legion about the inevitable failure of any representation of the totality, or about the radical impossibility of a complete suture of the social in a transparent society. This unbreakable faith in the necessity of failure or the impossibility of society, not as a defect, a failure, or a shortcoming but as a condition of possibility and even as a promise, also permeates many pages of *Seven Essays on Populism*.

As for the negative effects of this ontologisation for actual politics, I think it is useful to recall a basic question raised first by Gilles Deleuze and soon thereafter by the Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chaui about Baruch Spinoza: Why did this Dutch philosopher decide to give his great treatise of ontology the title of *Ethics*? The reason for this is both simple and persuasive: because questions about being are always questions about ways of acting and being acted upon. The same, however, cannot be said about

the inverse operation. If it is always useful and persuasive to treat ontology under the title of an *Ethics* or a *Politics*, inversely ethical and political questions cannot and should not be reduced to a treatise in *Ontology*. And in many cases the ontologisation of the political, if it clearly serves the philosophers, leads rather to the blocking of concrete processes of politics.

I would even go one step further to state that there is no such thing as an ontology except as the sedimentation of concrete historical and political practices, whose operative categories can become elevated to the abstract dignity of the concept only based on a constitutive forgetting of this prior anchoring in such practices. Due to the distance between the unblemished purity of the concept and the dirty empirical nature of the ontic, this ontologisation always runs the risk of falling in the trap of a certain moralism, which ends up defending a must-be in the name of that which supposedly always already is.

Here we touch upon a sensitive point that has to do with the difference in professional formation of philosophers as opposed to those who, like me, are formed in a strange mixture of literary or cultural criticism and critical theory. However, while both are philosophers of international fame, the authors of *Seven Essays on Populism* also do not rest on their laurels, glorifying the dignity of the concept of the political based on the constitutive lack or gap in the logics of articulation of emancipatory populism. On the contrary, especially in the last chapters of their book, they repeatedly declare themselves opposed to any attempt to purify their conceptual oppositions through a gesture of absolute positivisation that would leave the terms used in a relation of strict exteriority.

In the fourth essay, 'Profaning the Public: The Plebeian Dimension of Republican Populism', they convincingly show that there is no a priori exteriority between the populist interruption or decision, on the one hand, and the consolidation of the republican institutions, on the other: 'As a result, establishing an external relationship between the decision and the institutions a priori does not help us understand the real link between the two' (62). Taken to its ultimate consequences, such an articulation between the moment of disruption (the ruptural or destituent moment) and the moment of institutionality (or the republican moment) also could lead us to reject any relation of sharp exteriority or hierarchical subordination between the ontic and the ontological.

Instead of pursuing this path, however, the authors once more mobilise the ontological difference to defend their argument in favor of a populist or plebeian republicanism:

> Most ontic studies of populism are more interested in determining the "populist content" of particular historical experiences in their political conjunctures than in examining the assumptions on which theories of populism are based. The problem is that this

> approach combines the descriptive and the normative levels in a confused way (Ionescu and Gellner, 1970), attempting to study "concrete" examples of populism in order to determine, on the *level of the given*, a series of characteristics that should be *normatively* applicable to all cases. (63)

I would say that perhaps things become much worse when it is not 'the given' but 'being' that serves as the fundamental presupposition of one's normative framework. The authors also have faith in a fact of absolute authority, except that in their case it is an ontological guarantee: the fact of an incalculable excess within the political character of the institutions. Based on their own arguments, though, they could have come to a radical questioning of this presupposition, too.

Similarly, the authors argue, 'we could say that there exists a tension within studies on republicanism that rests on a bifurcation between a liberal and a popular republicanism' (68); and later they repeat: 'But, above all, there is a clear need to distinguish between two kinds of republic: an oligarchic and aristocratic republic versus a democratic and plebeian one' (70). Now, if in this sense a scholar like Julia Bertomeu is right, so that 'it is difficult to speak of republicanism "plain and simple"' (70, in the original Spanish the authors use the expression '*a secas*'), I think we are justified in wondering why the authors think that in the case of their object of study it is in fact possible to speak about a populism 'plain and simple', without apologies (95, again *a secas* in Spanish). And the same question comes up in relation to the use of attributes to corroborate the fact that, following José Carlos Mariátegui (whose *Seven Essays of Interpretation of Peruvian Reality* obviously receives a homage in the title of the book of our authors), 'in contrast to reactionary or identitarian nationalisms, it is possible to discover affirmative (or national-popular) nationalisms capable of giving shape to a local subject that can contribute to universal emancipation' (91). Why would we not be able to draw the same conclusion about populism 'as such' or 'plain and simple' as what the authors here affirm about republicanism and nationalism?

In the fifth essay from which I just quoted, 'Toward an Internationalist Populism', Biglieri and Cadahia with good reason denounce the illusions of autonomism, technocracy, and liberalism. Their argument in this regard is as clear as it is convincing:

> In all these cases, the same symptom operates: namely, the belief that there is a kind of order beyond the decisional instance – i.e. an order that depends not on the singular corporality of the one making a decision, but on an abstract force operating outside of any singularity (78-79).

After which the authors immediately offer the following detailed explanation as to why such approaches in their eyes are mistaken:

> The problem with these beliefs is that they seem to share the same ontology: the existence of a non-contingent order, an order that exists outside of our here-and-now, so that any singular incarnation – any corporality that takes up that order – does nothing but contaminate it, betray it, and stain the purity of its origin (79).

However, this same belief in the existence of a non-contingent order, an order outside our here and now, is operative in the idea of an absolute ontological presupposition, based on the 'constitutive lack' or 'structural dehiscence' of society (according to Laclau) or of the subject (according to Alemán), which the authors adopt in other parts of their book. Would it not be worth reconsidering the priority of the contingent, the here and now of our singular corporeality, outside of any ontological presupposition that political philosophy would take for granted?

In the sixth essay, 'The Absent Cause of Populist Militancy', the authors provide us with more elements for a critique of political ontology when, quoting their friend and fellow traveler Gloria Perelló, they recall that Laclau and Mouffe 'argued that contingency permeates the real of necessity, and that the latter can no longer be understood as an underlying principle dictating the structuring of social identities' (103). But could we not say the same thing about the thinking of the ontological difference according to Heidegger? The ontic, too, permeates the sphere of ontology, just as the latter can no longer be thought of as a set of underlying principles that would dictate the structure of sociohistorical identities.

The danger with this argument about the contingent articulation of politics around an ontological antagonism or dislocation is that this last presupposition quickly starts to function as an absolute guarantee that contradicts the very premises of the postfoundational theory. If this is what must be avoided at all costs according to the authors, perhaps we should similarly question their dependence on the hierarchies of the ontological difference:

> When we argue that radical contingency implies traversing necessity, we return to the idea that sedimentation never manages to fully domesticate reactivation and, vice versa, that reactivation never means the complete *tabula rasa* elimination of sedimented practices. Every political intervention – no matter how radically innovative – always takes place on an established hegemonic terrain (111).

Precisely at this point of their book, Biglieri and Cadahia begin to hedge closer to an impure theory of actual politics, more attuned to the partial sedimentations of the history of struggles than to its purely ontological postulates:

> When we say that no intervention takes place as a pure act that creates something new and uncontaminated, we are ultimately saying that any irruption of the subject and new subjectivity thereby created intervenes on already partially sedimented terrains. Hence,

> also the tension between its antagonistic power and its limits, because what would it be like to intervene politically from a pure and uncontaminated exteriority? (111-112).

And when, following Laclau in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), the authors add in a note 'we can equate the notions of necessity and sedimentation and argue that the latter is nothing more than an always partial and failed attempt to limit reactivation' (142 n. 7), can we likewise conclude that ontology is nothing more than a series of partial sedimentations of the historical real? Unless we take this to be a purely theoretical discovery, due to the genius of Heidegger or Laclau, one day we will have to explain, for example, why the 'absent cause' has become a key term for defining the postfoundational terrain of politics today, precisely at the time when capitalism appears to be completely dominant across the global landscape.

It is in the seventh and final chapter, 'We Populists are Feminists', where Biglieri and Cadahia no longer participate in the philosophies of defeat that always ends up ontologising the given. On the contrary, instead of finding inspiration (via Laclau or Alemán) in the Heideggerian thinking of the ontico-ontological difference, here they present themselves as the feminist followers of the evidential (or indexical) paradigm of the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, insofar as 'he is referring to a conjectural, plebeian knowledge that neither seeks nor offers a finished picture of reality – one based on the sensory experience that sets different planes of what we have come to call the human into motion'; they add: 'But we can also see that there is something plebeian and feminine operating in this form of knowledge, a way of inhabiting not knowing, conjectures, and uncertainty that fosters a series of sensory connections still to be explored in all their radicalism' (119). Personally and methodologically, I find myself much more in agreement with this uncertain, tentative, and conjectural kind of knowledge, bordering upon nonknowledge, than with the certainties of a postfoundational political ontology.

Furthermore, it turns out that this preference is not just a matter of personal taste but corresponds perhaps to an effect of sexual difference, if we understand the masculine and the feminine as ways of positioning oneself with regard to desire and not as fixed identities established once and for all by nature. In fact, in a kind of sexual differentiation to the second degree, these two ways of understanding sexual difference could well be associated with the masculine and the feminine.

> ... one that assumes the existence of two completely separate sexes, as if the identity of each sex had its own self-determined existence. Thus, the elimination of one (the masculine) means the freedom of the other (the feminine). The other view focuses instead on the problem of love (between feminine and masculine) and invites us to interrogate the classic "masculine" dichotomy of the feminine and the masculine. Or, in other words, it helps us understand that it is the masculine locus of enunciation that has tended to create a totalizing and biologistic (positivized) separation between the two sexes. (125, translation

> modified to keep 'masculine' and 'feminine' instead of 'male' and 'female' where the Spanish has *masculino* and *femenino*)

Is it then a coincidence if the ontological discourse appears in the context of a fairly homogeneous, 'masculine' (or even 'male') frame of reference? Or if in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* Laclau decides to situate himself firmly on the side of Žižek, to argue in favor of an 'ahistorical', properly ontological kernel of historicity itself, as opposed to the alleged 'historicism' and 'culturalism' that both thinkers attribute to Butler? This is because, due to a kind of structural deformation, the discourse of political ontology only with great difficulty can give itself the luxury of listening to the voice that comes to it from the other – feminine or nonbinary– side of desire:

> From this other side of desire, then, feminine and masculine are not understood as a simple "opposition" – typical of masculine discourse – but as selves contaminated from within by the other of the self, whose perseverance continues to work on and shape the feminine and the masculine on the basis of difference and processes of identification not idealized by the masculine perspective (126).

Once again, this argument could be applied to the contamination between the political categories put into play in *Seven Essays on Populism*. In this sense, I believe that Biglieri and Cadahia's book brings out the secret of a surplus in the social, regardless of its exact name, whether it is called the people, the popular, the plebeian, or still otherwise. This surplus or excess, so often vilified by the elites in power, but also by the organic intellectuals of the status quo, is what is mobilised in populist politics. But in that case, I do not think that we can purify the emancipatory kind of politics as populism 'plain and simple' or 'properly speaking', while reducing the right-wing populisms that are xenophobic, racist, sexist, and transphobic as mere neoliberal 'fascism'. Populism, too, is the terrain of 'a self contaminated from within by the other of itself" (*un sí mismo contaminado desde dentro por lo otro de sí*), as the authors write so eloquently about the 'opposition' between the masculine and the feminine.

Methodologically, we can conclude that a sharp opposition between the ontic and the ontological corresponds to a 'masculine' point of view that we will have to overcome. And we should understand how the categories of political philosophy, far from having to derive their 'dignity' from the discourse of ontology, are always determined by the ontic contents that the theorists seek to think through those categories. Referring to another work written in collaboration, this time between Biglieri and Perelló, we can argue that 'the socio-historical order informs those categories through which we theorize the ontological' and that 'since theoretical categories are produced in a specific socio-historic context, they cannot escape it', that is to say, 'these categories are "contaminated" with ontic content because that is the only way they can be inscribed within the dominant discourse of the time' (126-127). Finally, with these explanations about

the inevitable contamination between the ontic and the ontological, we come back full circle to the issue of the profound honesty of the authors of *Seven Essays on Populism*. Thus, in a long endnote to their final essay, they add an observation that should alert us against any attempt to distance ourselves from the actual struggles in the name of an ontological theory – no matter how sophisticated – of the being of the political:

> Moreover, we would add, sophisticated debates often occur within academia that wind up distancing themselves from the sphere of concrete political struggles, and the terms that these same struggles use to express their discontent and to seek social transformation. [...] this attitude of renouncing certain words can lead to a kind of naïve voluntarism of naming – as if, by naming things differently, we were already creating the new and pushing back oppressive logics – that, paradoxically, reactivates the worst remnants of the omnipotence of theories of consciousness. (146 n. 1).

And promptly they make clear everything that this position, anchored in the contingency of historical struggles and their effective truth, can contribute to a critique of political ontology, based on the purity of being:

> Perhaps the problem lies in believing that the name exhausts our entire identity, and that once we name things differently it is possible to recuperate the purity of one's being. Perhaps the secret of emancipation is not so much about assigning the "correct name" as it is about theoretical movements that support our contaminated and non-totalizing use of words to name the world. (146 n. 1)

In this sense, it matters but little whether we decide to name the thing populism 'plain and simple' or 'left populism', as opposed to 'right-wing populism' or neoliberal 'fascism'. What matters, and therein lies the intellectual force of Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia's book, is to understand the movements of thought that propitiates the contaminated use of our words to name our world in its struggles, its defeats, and occasionally, in its victories as well, such as the ones that we were able to witness in the last few months in Latin America.

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