Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject

The question of the relationship (complementarity? tension? mutual exclusion?) between universalism and particularism occupies a central place on the current political and theoretical agenda. Universal values are seen either as dead or—at the very least—as threatened. What is more important, the positive character of those values is no longer taken for granted. On the one hand, under the banner of multiculturalism, the classical values of the Enlightenment are under fire, and considered as little more than the cultural preserve of Western imperialism. On the other hand, the whole debate concerning the end of modernity, the assault on foundationalism in its various expressions, has tended to establish an essential link between the obsolete notion of a ground of history and society, and the *actual contents* which, from the Enlightenment onwards, have played that role of ground. It is important, however, to realize that these two debates have not advanced along symmetrical lines, that argumentative strategies have tended to move from one to the other in unexpected ways, and that many apparently paradoxical combinations have been shown to be possible. Thus, the so-called postmodern approaches can be seen as weakening the imperialist foundationalism of

Western Enlightenment and opening the way to a more democratic cultural pluralism; but they can also be perceived as underpinning a notion of "weak" identity which is incompatible with the strong cultural attachments required by a "politics of authenticity." And universal values can be seen as a strong assertion of the "ethnia of the West" (as in the later Husserl), but also as a way of fostering—at least tendentially—an attitude of respect and tolerance vis-à-vis cultural diversity.

It would certainly be a mistake to think that concepts such as "universal" and "particular" have exactly the same meaning in both debates; but it would also be mistaken to assume that the continuous interaction of both debates has had no effect on the central categories of each. This interaction has given way to ambiguities and displacements of meaning which are—I think—the source of a certain political productivity. It is to these displacements and interactions that I want to refer in this essay. My question, put in its simplest terms is the following: What happens with the categories of "universal" and "particular" once they become tools in the language games that shape contemporary politics? What is performed through them? What displacements of meaning are at the root of their current political productivity?

Multiculturalism

Let us take both debates successively and see the points in which each cuts across the central categories of the other. Multiculturalism, first. The question can be formulated in these terms: is a pure culture of difference possible, a pure particularism which does away entirely with any kind of universal principle? There are various reasons to doubt that this is possible. In the first place, to assert a purely separate and differential identity is to assert that this identity is constituted *through* cultural pluralism and difference. The reference to the other is very much present as constitutive of my own identity. There is no way that a particular group living in a wider community can live a monadic existence—on the contrary, part of the definition of its own identity is the construction of a complex and elaborated system of relations with other groups. And these relations will have to be regulated by norms and principles which transcend the particularism of *any* group. To assert, for instance, the right of all ethnic groups to cultural autonomy is to make an argumentative claim which can only be justified on universal grounds. The assertion of one's own particularity requires the appeal of something transcending it.

The more particular a group is, the less it will be able to control the global communitarian terrain within which it operates, and the more universally grounded will have to be the justification of its claims.

But there is another reason why a politics of pure difference would be self-defeating. To assert one's own *differential* identity involves, as we have just argued, the inclusion in that identity of the other, as that from whom one delimits oneself. But it is easy to see that a fully achieved differential identity would involve the sanctioning of the existing status quo in the relation between groups. For an identity which is purely differential vis-à-vis other groups has to assert the identity of the other at the same time as its own and, as a result, cannot have identity claims in relation to those other groups. Let us suppose that a group *has* such claims—for instance, the demand for equal opportunities in employment and education, or even the right to have confessional schools. As far as these are claims presented as rights that I share as a member of the community with all other groups, they presuppose that I am not simply different from the others but, in some fundamental respects, equal to them. If it is asserted that all particular groups have the right to the respect of their own particularity, this means that they are equal to each other in some ways. Only in a situation in which all groups were different from each other and in which none of them wanted to be anything other than what they are, the pure logic of difference would exclusively govern the relations between groups. In all other scenarios the logic of difference will be interrupted by a logic of equivalence and equality. It is not for nothing that a pure logic of difference—the notion of separate developments—lies at the root of apartheid.

This is the reason why the struggle of *any* group that attempts to assert its own identity against a hostile environment is always confronted by two opposite but symmetrical dangers for which there is no logical solution, no square circle—only precarious and contingent attempts of mediation. If the group tries to assert its identity *as it is at that moment*, as its location within the community at large is defined by the system of exclusions dictated by the dominant groups, it condemns itself to a perpetually marginalized and ghettoized existence. Its cultural values can be easily retrieved as "folklore" by the establishment. If, on the other hand, it struggles to change its location within the community and to break with its situation of marginalization, it has to engage in a plurality of political initiatives which take it beyond the limits defining its present identity—for instance, struggles within the existing institutions.

As these institutions are, however, ideologically and culturally moulded by the dominant groups, the danger is that the differential identity of the struggling group will be lost. Whether the new groups will manage to transform the institutions, or whether the logic of the institutions will manage to dilute—via cooptation—the identity of those groups is something which, of course, cannot be decided beforehand and depends on a hegemonic struggle. But what is certain is that there is no major historical change in which the identity of *all* intervening forces is not transformed. There is no possibility of victory in terms of an *already acquired* cultural authenticity. The increasing awareness of this fact explains the centrality of the concept of "hybridization" in contemporary debates.

If we look for an example of the early emergence of this alternative in European history, we can refer to the opposition between social-democrats and revolutionary syndicalists in the decades preceding the First World War. The classical Marxist solution to the problem of the disadjustment between the particularism of the working class and the universality of the task of socialist transformation had been the assumption of an increasing simplification of the social structure under capitalism: as a result, the working class as a homogeneous subject would embrace the vast majority of the population and could take up the task of universal transformation. With this type of prognostic discredited at the turn of the century, two possible solutions remained open: either to accept a dispersion of democratic struggles only loosely unified by a semi-corporative working class, or to foster a politics of pure identity by a working class unified through revolutionary violence. The first road led to what has been depicted as social-democratic integration: the working class was coopted by a State in whose management it participated but whose mechanisms it could not master. The second road led to working class segregationism through violence and the rejection of all participation in democratic institutions. It is important to realize that the myth of the general strike in Sorel was not a device to keep a purely working-class identity as a condition for a revolutionary victory. As the revolutionary strike was a regulatory idea rather than an actual possible event, it was not a real strategy for the seizure of power: its function was exhausted in being a mechanism endlessly recreating the workers' separate identity. In the option between a politics of identity and the transformation of the relations of force between groups, Sorelianism can be seen as an extreme form of unilateralization of the first alternative.

If we renounce, however, to a unilateral solution, then the

tension between these two contradictory extremes cannot be eradicated: it is there to stay, and the strategic calculation can only consist of the pragmatic negotiation between them. Hybridization is not a marginal phenomenon but the very terrain in which contemporary political identities are constructed. Let us just consider a formula such as "strategic essentialism" which has been much used lately. For a variety of reasons, I am not entirely satisfied with it, but it has the advantage of bringing to the fore the antinomic alternatives to which we have been referring and the need for a politically negotiated equilibrium between them. "Essentialism" alludes to a strong identity politics, without which there can be no bases for political calculation and action. But that essentialism is only strategic—i.e., it points out, at the very moment of its constitution, to its own contingency and its own limits.

This contingency is central to understanding what is perhaps the most prominent feature of contemporary politics: the full recognition of the limited and fragmented character of its historical agents. Modernity started with the aspiration to a limitless historical actor, who would be able to ensure the fullness of a perfectly instituted social order. Whatever the road leading to that fullness—an "invisible hand" which would hold together a multiplicity of disperse individual wills, or a universal class who would ensure a transparent and rational system of social relations—it always implied that the agents of that historical transformation would be able to overcome all particularism and all limitation and bring about a society reconciled with itself. This is what, for modernity, true universality meant. The starting point of contemporary social and political struggles is, on the contrary, the strong assertion of their particularity, the conviction that none of them is capable, on its own, of bringing about the fullness of the community. But precisely because of that, as we have seen, this particularity cannot be constructed through a pure "politics of difference" but has to appeal, as the very condition of its own assertion, to universal principles. The question that at this point arises is to what extent this universality is the same as the universality of modernity, to what extent the very idea of a fullness of society experiences, in this changed political and intellectual climate, a radical mutation that—while maintaining the double reference to the universal and the particular—entirely transforms the logic of their articulation. Before answering this question, however, we have to move to our second debate, that related to the critique of foundationalism.

Contexts and the Critique of Foundationalism

Let us start our discussion with a very common proposition: that there is no truth or value independent of a context, that the validity of any statement is only contextually determined. In one sense, of course, this proposition is uncontroversial and a necessary corollary of the critique of foundationalism. To pass from it to assert the incommensurability of context and to draw from there an argument in defense of cultural pluralism seems to be only a logical move, and I am certainly not prepared to argue otherwise. There is, however, one difficulty that this whole reasoning does not contemplate, and it is the following: how to determine the limits of a context? Let us accept that all identity is a differential identity. In that case two consequences follow: (1) that as in a Saussurean system each identity is what it is only through its differences with all the others; (2) that the context has to be a closed one—if all identities depend on the differential *system*, unless the latter defines its own limits, no identity would be finally constituted. But nothing is more difficult—from a logical point of view—than defining those limits. If we had a foundational perspective we could appeal to an ultimate ground which would be the source of all differences; but if we are dealing with a true pluralism of differences, if the differences are *constitutive*, we cannot go, in the search for the systematic limits that define a context, beyond the differences themselves. Now, the only way of defining a context is, as we said, through its limits, and the only way of defining those limits is to point out what is beyond them. But what is beyond the limits can only be other differences, and in that case—given the constitutive character of all differences—it is impossible to establish whether these new differences are internal or external to the context. The very possibility of a limit and, *ergo*, a context, is thus jeopardized.

As I have argued elsewhere ("Why"), the only way out of this difficulty is to postulate a beyond which is not one more difference but something which poses a threat (i.e. negates) to all the differences within that context—or, better, that the context constitutes itself as such through the act of exclusion of something alien, of a radical otherness. Now, this possibility has three consequences which are capital for our argument.

1. The first is that antagonism and exclusion are constitutive of all identity. Without limits through which a (non-dialectical) negativity is constructed we would have an indefinite disper-

sion of differences whose absence of systematic limits would make any differential identity impossible. But this very function of constituting differential identities through antagonistic limits is what, at the same time, destabilizes and subverts those differences. For if the limit puts an equal threat to all the differences, it makes them all equivalent to each other, interchangeable with each other as far as the limit is concerned. This already announces the possibility of a relative universalization through equivalential logics, which is not incompatible with a differential particularism, but is required by the very logic of the latter.

2. The system is what is required for the differential identities to be constituted, but the only thing—exclusion—which can constitute the system and thus make possible those identities, is also what subverts them. (In deconstructive terms: the conditions of possibility of the system are also its conditions of impossibility). Contexts have to be internally subverted in order to become possible. The system (as in Jacques Lacan's object *petit a*) is that which the very logic of the context requires but which is however impossible. It is present, if you want, through its absence. But this means two things. First, that all differential identity will be constitutively split; it will be the crossing point between the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence. This will introduce into it a radical undecidability. Second, that although the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence. Again, we see here announcing itself an intimate connection between the universal and the particular which does not consist, however, in the subsumption of the latter in the former.

3. Finally, if that impossible object—the system—cannot be represented but needs, however, to show itself within the field of representation, the means of that representation will be constitutively inadequate. Only the particulars are such means. As a result the systematicity of the system, the moment of its impossible totalization, will be symbolized by particulars which contingently assume such a representative function.

This means, first, that the particularity of the particular is subverted by this function of representing the universal, but second, that a certain particular, by making of its own particularity the signifying body of a universal representation comes to occupy—within the system of differences as a whole—a hegemonic role. This anticipates our main conclusion: in a society (and this is finally the case of *any* society) in which its fullness—the moment of its universality—is unachievable, the relation between the universal and the particular is a hegemonic relation.

Let us see in more detail the logic of that relation. I will take as an example the "universalization" of the popular symbols of Peronism in the Argentina of the 1960s and 1970s. After the coup of 1955 which overthrew the Peronist regime, Argentina entered a period of institutional instability which lasted for over 20 years. Peronism and other popular organizations were proscribed, and the succession of military governments and fraudulent civilian regimes which occupied the government were clearly incapable of meeting the popular demands of the masses through the existing institutional channels. So, there was a succession of regimes less and less representative and an accumulation of unfulfilled democratic demands. These demands were certainly particular ones and came from very different groups. The fact that all of them were rejected by the dominant regimes established an increasing relation of equivalence between them. This equivalence, it is important to realize, did not express any essential a priori unity. On the contrary, its only ground was the rejection of all those demands by successive regimes. In terms of our previous terminology, their unification within a context or system of differences was the pure result of all of them being antagonized by the dominant sectors.

Now, as we have seen, this contextual unification of a system of differences can only take place at the price of weakening the purely differential identities, through the operation of a logic of equivalence which introduces a dimension of relative universality. In our example, people felt that through the differential particularity of their demands—housing, union rights, level of wages, protection of national industry, etc.—something equally present in all of them was expressed, which was the opposition to the regime. It is important to realize that this dimension of universality was not at odds with the particularism of the demands—or

even of the groups entering into the equivalential relation—but grew out of it. A certain more universal perspective, which developed out of the inscription of particular demands in a wider popular language of resistance, was the result of the expansion of the equivalential logic. A pure particularism of the demands of the groups, which had entirely avoided the equivalential logic, would have been possible only if the regime had succeeded in dealing separately with the particular demands and had absorbed them in a "transformistic" way. But in any process of hegemonic decline, this transformistic absorption becomes impossible and the equivalential logics interrupt the pure particularism of the individual democratic demands.

As we can see, this dimension of universality reached through equivalence is very different from the universality which results from an underlying essence or an unconditioned a priori principle. It is not either a regulative idea—empirically unreachable but with an unequivocal teleological content—because it cannot exist apart from the system of equivalences from which it proceeds. But this has important consequences for both the content and the function of that universality. We have seen before that the moment of totalization or universalization of the community—the moment of its fullness—is an impossible object which can only acquire a discursive presence through a particular content which divests itself of its particularity in order to represent that fullness. To return to our Argentinean example, this was precisely the role that, in the 1960s and 70s, was played by the popular symbols of Peronism. As I said earlier, the country had entered into a rapid process of de-institutionalization, so the equivalential logics could operate freely. The Peronist movement itself lacked a real organization and was rather a series of symbols and a loose language unifying a variety of political initiatives. Finally, Peron himself was in exile in Madrid, intervening only in a distant way in his movement's actions, being very careful not to take any definitive stand in the factional struggles within Peronism. In those circumstances, he was in the ideal conditions to become the "empty signifier" incarnating the moment of universality in the chain of equivalences which unified the popular camp. And the ulterior destiny of Peronism in the 1970s clearly illustrates the essential ambiguity inherent in any hegemonic process: on the one hand, the fact that the symbols of a particular group assume at some point a function of universal representation gives certainly a hegemonic power to that group; but, on the other hand, the fact that that function of universal

representation has been acquired at the price of weakening the differential particularism of the original identity, leads necessarily to the conclusion that this hegemony is going to be precarious and threatened. The wild logic of emptying the signifiers of universality through the expansion of the equivalential chains means that no fixing and particular limitation of the sliding of the signified under the signifier is going to be permanently assured. This is what happened to Peronism after the electoral victory of 1973 and Peron's return to Argentina. Peron was no longer an empty signifier but the President of the country, who had to carry out concrete politics. Yet the chains of equivalences constructed by the different factions of his movements had gone beyond any possibility of control—not even by Peron himself. The result was the bloody process which led to the military dictatorship in 1976.

The Dialectics of Universality

The previous developments lead us to the following conclusion: the dimension of universality—resulting from the incompletion of all differential identities—cannot be eliminated as far as a community is not entirely homogeneous (if it *were* homogeneous, what would disappear is not only universality but also the very distinction universality/particularity). This dimension is, however, just an empty place unifying a set of equivalential demands. We have to determine the nature of this place both in terms of its contents and of its function. As far as the content is concerned it does not have a content of its own but just that which is given to it by a transient articulation of equivalential demands. There is a paradox implicit in the formulation of universal principles, which is that all of them have to present themselves as valid without exception, while, even its own terms, this universality can be easily questioned and can never be actually maintained. Let us take a universal principle such as the right of nations to self-determination. As a universal right, it claims to be valid in any circumstance. Let us suppose now that within a nation genocidal practices are taking place: in that case has the international community the duty to intervene, or is the principle of self-determination an unconditionally valid one? The paradox is that while the principle has to be formulated as universally valid, there will always be exceptions to that universal validity. But perhaps the paradox proceeds from believing that this universality has a content of its own, whose logical implications can be analytically deduced, without realizing that its only function—within a particular

language game—is to make discursively possible a chain of equivalential effects, but without pretending that this universality can operate beyond the context of its emergence. There are innumerable contexts in which the principle of national self-determination is a perfectly valid way of totalizing and universalizing a historical experience.

But in that case, if we always know beforehand that no universalization will live up to its task, if it will always fail to deliver the goods, why does the equivalential aggregation have to express itself through the universal? The answer is to be found in what we said before about the formal structure on which the aggregation depends. The "something identical" shared by all the terms of the equivalential chain—that which makes the equivalence possible—cannot be something positive (i.e. one more difference which could be defined in its particularity), but proceeds from the unifying effects that the external threat puts to an otherwise perfectly heterogeneous set of differences (particularities). The "something identical" can only be the pure, abstract, absent fullness of the community, which lacks, as we have seen, any direct form of representation and expresses itself through the equivalence of the differential terms. But, in that case, it is essential that the chain of equivalences remains open: otherwise its closure could only be the result of one more difference specifiable in its particularity and we would not be confronted with the fullness of the community as an absence. The open character of the chain means that what is expressed through it has to be universal and not particular. Now, this universality needs—for its expression—to be incarnated in something essentially incommensurable with it: a particularity (as in our example of the right to national self-determination). This is the source of the tension and ambiguities surrounding all these so-called "universal" principles: all of them *have* to be formulated as limitless principles, expressing a universality transcending them; but they all, for essential reasons, sooner or later become entangled in their own contextual particularism and are incapable of fulfilling their universal function.

As far as the function (as different from the content) of the "universal" is concerned, we have said enough to make clear what it consists of: it is exhausted in introducing chains of equivalence in an otherwise purely differential world. This is the moment of hegemonic aggregation and articulation and can operate in two ways. The first is to inscribe particular identities and demands as links in a wider chain of equivalences, thereby giving each of them a "relative" universalization. If, for instance, feminist demands enter into chains of equivalence with

those of black groups, ethnic minorities, civil rights activist, etc., they acquire a more global perspective than in the case where they remain restricted to their own particularism. The second is to give a particular demand a function of universal representation—that is, to give it the value of a horizon giving coherence to the chain of equivalences and, at the same time, keeping it indefinitely open. To give just a few examples: the socialization of the means of production was not considered as a narrow demand concerning the economy but as the "name" for a wide variety of equivalential effects irradiating over the whole society. The introduction of a market economy played a similar role in Eastern Europe after 1989. The return of Peron, in our Argentinean example, was also conceived in the early 70s as the prelude to a much wider historical transformation. Which particular demand, or sets of demands, are going to play this function of universal representation is something which cannot be determined by a priori reasons (if we could do so, this would mean that there is something in the particularity of the demand which predetermined it to fulfil that role, and that would be in contradiction of our whole argument).

We can now return to the two debates which were the starting point of our reflection. As we can see there are several points in which they interact and in which parallelism can be detected. We have said enough about multiculturalism for our argument concerning the limits of particularism to be clear. A *pure* particularistic stand is self-defeating because it has to provide a ground for the constitution of the differences *as* differences, and such a ground can only be a new version of an essentialist universalism. (If we have a *system* of differences A/B/C, etc., we have to account for this systemic dimension and that leads us straight into the discourse of the ground. If we have a plurality of *separate* elements A, B, C, etc., which do not constitute a system, we still have to account for this separation—to be separated is also a form of relation between objects—and we are again entangled as Leibnitz knew well, in the positing of a ground. The pre-established harmony of the monads is as essential a ground as the Spinozean totality.) So, the only way out of this dilemma is to maintain the dimension of universality but to propose a different form of its articulation with the particular. This is what we have tried to provide in the preceding pages through the notion of the universal as an empty but ineradicable place.

It is important, however, to realize that this type of articulation would be theoretically unthinkable if we did not introduce into the picture some of the central tenets of the contemporary critique of foundationalism

(it would be unthinkable, for instance, in a Habermasian perspective). If meaning is fixed beforehand either, in a strong sense, by a radical ground (a position that less and less people would sustain today) or, in a weaker version, through the regulative principle of an undistorted communication, the very possibility of the ground as an empty place which is politically and contingently filled by a variety of social forces disappears. Differences would not be constitutive because something previous to their play *already* fixes the limit of their possible variation and establishes an external tribunal to *judge* them. Only the critique of a universality which is determined in all its essential dimensions by the metaphysics of presence opens the way for a *theoretical* apprehension of the notion of "articulation" that we are trying to elaborate—as different from a purely impressionistic apprehension, in terms of a discourse structured through concepts which are perfectly incompatible with it. (We always have to remember Pascal's critique of those who think that they are already converted because they have just started thinking of getting converted.)

But if the debate concerning multiculturalism can draw clear advantages from the contemporary critique of foundationalism (broadly speaking, the whole range of intellectual developments embraced by labels such as "postmodernism" and "post-structuralism"), these advantages also work in the opposite direction. For the requirements of a politics based on a universality compatible with an increasing expansion of cultural differences, are clearly incompatible with some versions of postmodernism—particularly those which conclude from the critique of foundationalism that there is an implosion of all meaning and the entry into a world of "simulation" (Baudrillard). I don't think that this is a conclusion which follows at all. As we have argued, the impossibility of a universal ground does not eliminate its need: it just transforms the ground into an empty place which can partially be filled in a variety of ways (the strategies of this filling is what politics is about). Let us go back for a moment to the question of contextualization. If we could have a "saturated" context we would indeed be confronted with a plurality of incommensurable spaces without any possible tribunal deciding between them. But, as we have seen, any such saturated context is impossible. Yet, the conclusion which follows from this verification is not that there is a formless dispersion of meaning without any possible kind of even a relative articulation but, rather, that whatever plays such an articulating role is not predetermined to it by the form of the dispersion as such. This means first that all articulation is contingent and,

second, that the articulating moment as such is always going to be an empty place—the various attempts at filling it being transient and submitted to contestation. As a result, at any historical moment, whatever dispersion of differences exists in society is going to be submitted to contradictory processes of contextualization and de-contextualization. For instance, those discourses attempting to close a context around certain principles or values, will be confronted and limited by discourses of *rights*, which try to limit the closure of any context. This is what makes so unconvincing the attempts by contemporary neo-Aristotelians such as McIntyre at accepting only the contextualizing dimension and closing society around a substantive vision of the common good. Contemporary social and political struggles open, I think, the strategies at filling the empty place of the common good. The ontological implications of the thought accompanying these "filling" strategies clarifies, in turn, the horizon of possibilities opened by the anti-foundationalist critique. It is to these strategic logics that I want to devote the rest of this essay.

Ruling and Universality: Four Moments

We can start with some conclusions which could easily be derived from our previous analysis concerning the status of the universal. The first is that if the place of the universal is an empty one and there is no a priori reason for it not to be filled by *any* content, if the forces which fill that place are constitutively split between the concrete politics that they advocate and the ability of those politics to fill the empty place, the political language of any society whose degree of institutionalization has, to some extent, been shaken or undermined, will also be split. Let us just take a term such as "order" (social order). What are the conditions of its universalization? Simply, that the experience of a radical disorder makes *any* order preferable to the continuity of disorder. The experience of a lack, of an absence of fullness in social relations, transforms "order" into the signifier of an absent fullness. This explains the split we were referring to: any concrete politics, if it is capable of bringing about social order, will be judged not only according to its merits in the abstract, independently of any circumstance, but mainly in terms of that ability to bring about "order"—a name for the absent fullness of society. ("Change," "revolution," "unity of the people," etc. are other signifiers which have historically played the same role.) As for essential reasons we have pointed out that fullness of society is unreachable, this

split in the identity of political agents is an absolutely constitutive "ontological difference"—in a sense not entirely unrelated to Martin Heidegger's use of this expression. The universal is certainly empty and can only be filled, in different contexts, by concrete particulars. But, at the same time, it is absolutely essential for any kind of *political* interaction, for if the latter took place without universal reference, there would be no political interaction at all: we would only have either a complementarity of differences which would be totally non-antagonistic, or a totally antagonistic one, one where differences entirely lack any commensurability, and whose only possible resolution is the mutual destruction of the adversaries.

Now, it is our contention that politico-philosophical reflection since the ancient world has been largely conscious of this constitutive split, and has tried to provide various ways of dealing with it. These ways follow one or the other of the logical possibilities pointed out in the previous analysis. To suggest how this took place we will briefly refer to four moments in the politico-philosophical tradition of the West in which images of the ruler have emerged which combine in different ways universality and particularity. We will successively refer to Plato's philosopher-king, to Hobbes's sovereign, to Hegel's hereditary monarch, and to Gramsci's hegemonic class.

In Plato the situation is unambiguous. There is no possible tension or antagonism between the universal and the particular. Far from being an empty place, the universal is the location of all possible meaning, and it absorbs within itself the particular. Now, there is for him, however, only *one* articulation of the particularities which actualize the essential form of the community. The universal is not "filled" from outside, but is the fullness of its own origin and expresses itself in all aspects of social organization. There can be here no "ontological difference" between the fullness of the community and its actual political and social arrangements. Only *one* kind of social arrangement, which extends itself to the most minute aspects of social life, is compatible with what the community in its last instance is. Other forms of social organization can, of course, factually exist, but they do not have the status of alternative forms among which one has to choose according to the circumstances. They are just degenerate forms, pure corruption of being, derived from the obfuscation of the mind. As far as there is true knowledge only one particular form of social organization realizes the universal. And if ruling is a matter of knowledge and not of prudence,

only the bearer of that knowledge, the philosopher, has the right to rule. Ergo: a philosopher-king.

In Hobbes we are apparently in the antipodes of Plato. Far from being the sovereign who has the knowledge of what the community is, before any political decision, his decisions are the only source of the social order. Hobbes is well aware of what we have called the "ontological difference." As far as the anarchy of the state of nature threatens society with radical disorder, the unification of the will of the community in the will of the ruler (or rather, the will of the ruler as the only unified will that the community can have) will count as far as it imposes order, whatever the contents of the latter could be. Any order will be better than radical disorder. There is here something close to a complete indifference to the *content* of the social order imposed by the ruler, and an exclusive concentration on the *function* of the latter: ensuring order as such. "Order" becomes certainly an empty place, but there is in Hobbes no hegemonic theory about the transient forms of its filling: the sovereign, the "mortall God," fill the empty place once and forever.

So, Plato and Hobbes are apparently at the antipodes of the theoretical spectrum. For Plato, the universal is the *only* full place; for Hobbes, it is an absolutely empty place which has to be filled by the will of the sovereign. But if we look more closely at the matter, we will see that this difference between them is overshadowed by what they actually share, which is not to allow the particular any dynamics of its own vis-à-vis the full/empty place of the universal. In the first case the particular has to actualize in its own body a universality transcending it; in the second case equally, although by artificial means, a particular has detached itself from the realm of particularities and has become the unchallengeable Law of the community.

For Hegel, the problem is posed in different terms. Since for him the particularism of each stage of social organization is *aufgehoben* at a higher level, the problem of the incommensurability between particular content and universal function cannot actually arise. But the problem of the empty place emerges in relation to the moment in which the community has to *signify* itself as a totality—i.e the moment of its *individuality*. This signification is obtained, as we know, through the constitutional monarch, whose physical body represents a rational totality absolutely dissimilar to that body. (This representation, in Hegel, of something which has no content of its own through something else which is its exact reverse has been very often stressed by Slavoj Žižek, who has contributed

several other examples such as the assertion, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that "the Spirit is a bone.") But this relation by which a physical body, in its pure alienation of any spiritual content, can represent this last content, entirely depends on the community having reached, through successive sublation of its partial contents, the highest form of rationality achievable in its own sphere. For such a fully rational community no *content* can be added and it only remains, as a requirement for its completion, *the signification of the achievement of that functional rationality*. Because of that, the rational monarch cannot be an elected monarch: he has to be a hereditary one. If he were elected, *reasons* would have to be given for that election, and this process of argumentation would mean that the rationality of society would have not been achieved independently of the monarch, and that the latter would have to play a greater role than a pure function of ceremonial representation.

Finally Gramsci. The hegemonic class can only become such by linking a particular content to a universality transcending it. If we say—as Gramsci did—that the task of the Italian working class is to fulfil the tasks of national unification that the Italian people had posed to itself since the time of Machiavelli and, in this way, to complete the historical project of the *Risorgimento*, we have a double order of reference. On the one hand, a concrete political programme—that of the workers—as different from those of other political forces; but, on the other hand, that programme—i.e. that set of demands and political proposals—is presented as a historical vehicle for a task transcending it: the unity of the Italian nation. Now, if this "unity of the Italian nation" was a concrete content, specifiable in a particular context, it could not be something which extended over a period of centuries and that different historical forces could bring about. If this, however *can* happen, it is because "unity of the Italian nation" is just the name or the symbol of a lack. Precisely because it is a *constitutive* lack, there is no content which is a priori destined to fill it, and it is open to the most diverse articulations. But this means that the "good" articulation, the one that would finally suture the link between universal task and concrete historical forces will never be found, and that all partial victory will always take place against the background of an ultimate and unsurpassable impossibility.

Viewed from this perspective the Gramscian project can be seen as a double displacement, vis-à-vis Hegel and vis-à-vis Hobbes. In one sense it is more Hobbesian than Hegelian, because, as society and State are less self-structured than in Hegel, they require a dimension of

political constitution in which the representation of the unity of the community is not separated from its construction. There is a remainder of particularity which cannot be eliminated from the representation of that unity (unity = individuality in the Hegelian sense). The presence of this remainder is what is specific to the hegemonic relation. The hegemonic class is somewhere in between the Hegelian monarch and the Leviathan. But it can equally be said that Gramsci is more Hegelian than Hobbesian, in the sense that the political moment in his analysis presupposes an image of social crises which is far less radical than in Hobbes. Gramsci's "organic crises" fall far short, in terms of their degrees of social structuration, from the Hobbesian state of nature. In some senses, the succession of hegemonic regimes can be seen as a series of "partial covenants"—partial because, as society is more structured than in Hobbes, people have more conditions to enter into the political covenant; but partial also because, as the result of that, they also have more reason to substitute the sovereign.

These last points allow us to go back to our earlier discussion concerning contemporary particularistic struggles and to inscribe it within the politico-philosophical tradition. In the same way that we have presented Gramsci's problematic through the displacements that he introduces vis-à-vis the two approaches that we have symbolized in Hobbes and Hegel, we could present the political alternatives open to multicultural struggles through similar displacements vis-à-vis Gramsci's approach. The first and most obvious displacement is to conceive a society which is more particularistic and fragmented and less amenable than Gramsci's to enter into unified hegemonic articulations. The second is that the loci from which the articulation takes place—for Gramsci they were locations such as the Party, or the State (in an expanded sense)—are going to be also more plural and less likely to generate a chain of totalizing effects. What we have called the remainder of particularism inherent in any hegemonic centrality grows thicker but also more plural. Now, this has mixed effects from the viewpoint of a democratic politics. Let us imagine a jacobinic scenario. The public sphere is one, the place of power is one but empty, and a plurality of political forces can occupy the latter. In one sense we can say that this is an ideal situation for democracy, because the place of power is empty and we can conceive the democratic process as a partial articulation of the empty universality of the community and the particularism of the transient political forces incarnating it. This is true, but precisely because the universal place is empty, it can be

occupied by *any* force, not necessarily democratic. As is well-known, this is one of the roots of contemporary totalitarianism (Lefort).

If, on the contrary, the place of power is not unique, the remainder, as we said, will be weightier, and the possibility of constructing a common public sphere through a series of equivalential effects cutting across communities will be clearly less. This has ambiguous results. On the one hand, communities are certainly more protected in the sense that a jacobinic totalitarianism is less likely. But, on the other hand, for reasons that have been pointed out earlier, this also favors the maintenance of the status quo. We can perfectly well imagine a modified Hobbesian scenario in which the Law respects communities—no longer individuals—in their private sphere, while the main decisions concerning the future of the community as a whole are the preserve of a neo-Leviathan— for instance a quasi-omnipotent technocracy. To realize that this is not at all an unrealistic scenario, we only have to think of Samuel Huntington and, more generally, of contemporary corporatist approaches.

The other alternative is more complex but it is the only one, I think, compatible with a true democratic politics. It wholly accepts the plural and fragmented nature of contemporary societies, but, instead of remaining in this particularistic moment, it tries to inscribe this plurality in equivalential logics which make possible the construction of new public spheres. Difference and particularisms are the necessary starting point, but out of it, it is possible to open the way to a relative universalization of values which can be the basis for a popular hegemony. This universalization and its open character certainly condemns all identity to an unavoidable hybridization, but hybridization does not necessarily mean decline through a loss of identity: it can also mean empowering existing identities through the opening of new possibilities. Only a conservative identity, closed on itself, could experience hybridization as a loss. But this democratico-hegemonic possibility has to recognize the constitutive contextualized/decontextualized terrain of its constitution and fully take advantage of the political possibilities that this undecidability opens.

All this finally amounts to saying is that the particular can only fully realize itself if it constantly keeps open, and constantly redefines, its relation to the universal.

Works Cited   Laclau, Ernesto. "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" *The Lesser Evil and the Greater Good.* Ed. Jeffrey Weeks. London: Rivers Oram, 1994.