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This Disagreement is Not One: The  
Populisms of Laclau, Ranciere, and  
Arditi

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# This Disagreement is Not One: The Populisms of Laclau, Rancière & Arditì

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Books Reviewed:

1. Benjamin Arditì (2007). *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. ISBN: 978-0-7486-2511-6.
2. Ernesto Laclau (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso. ISBN: 1-85984-651-3.
3. Jacques Rancière (2006). *Hatred of Democracy*. London: Verso. ISBN: 1-84467-098-8

Consider this disagreement. First, Ernesto Laclau, the arch-theorist of culture and politics as hegemony, has taken to arguing that all politics is basically populism (Laclau 2005). Second, Jacques Rancière has recently declared that populism is nothing more than ‘the convenient name under which is dissimulated [...] the difficulty [of] government’: ‘The hope is that under this name they will be able to lump together every form of dissent in relation to the prevailing consensus, whether it involves democratic affirmation or religious and racial fanaticism’ (Rancière 2007: 80). In other words, for Rancière, ‘populism’, here, is really just a pejorative term for a situation in which a people will not will not be governed ‘properly’, without division or remainder. Third, however, Benjamin Arditì’s new book *both* takes issue with Laclau’s reduction of all species of politics to populism *and* uses a strongly Rancière-informed perspective to dissect and determine more precisely what the enigmatic phenomenon ‘populism’ actually is. This is an interesting disagreement indeed.

Now, according to Rancière’s already classic and seminal book of political theory, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1998), a disagreement is:

a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand

the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. (Rancière 1998: x)

So, are our three theorists in a state of disagreement? Why, for Laclau, is all politics basically populism, while for Rancière all politics is essentially an eruption of democracy, the disturbance caused when a group demand a 'recount', or demand that their card which says they are entitled to a share of the equality that everyone is said to hold in common be acknowledged? And how can Arditì take issue with Laclau's conclusions whilst using Rancièrian insights to develop an account of populism that Andreas Kalyvas on the dust-jacket calls 'brilliant'?

Let us take these texts in reverse chronological order, and begin with the apparent articulating link between Laclau and Rancière: Arditì's new book, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (2007). The orientation of this book is made clear from the beginning, through a discussion of Freud's oxymoronic term 'foreign internal territory'. Freud used this term to 'describe the relation between the repressed and the ego' (Arditì 2007: 3), and Arditì takes the impetus behind this idea into the sphere of political theory in order to develop a concept of what he calls the 'internal periphery'. Internal peripheries are the paradoxical 'edges' evoked in the book's title. Thus, the 'edges' of liberalism, the 'edges' of politics, in other words, are not to be thought of as residing at some distance, a long way away from a 'centre'. On the contrary, argues Arditì, the 'edge', the 'limit', the 'periphery', in this sense is 'a region where the distinction between inside and outside is a matter of dispute and cannot be thought outside a polemic. To speak of politics on the edges of liberalism is to speak of the internal periphery of liberalism' (3-4).

In Arditì's focus on the political importance of *polemic* and *disagreement*, we may already detect Rancière's influence. Similarly, in the emphasis on the undecidability of distinctions between inside and outside, we can discern the influence of Derridean deconstruction. But also here are the seeds (or spores) of a strong reference to Deleuzian and Guattarian thinking. All of which (and more) Arditì briskly, concisely and adroitly elaborates, in a tightly structured interrogation of the key concepts of contemporary political thought: difference, populism, agitation and revolution. The examples and case studies he places under the microscope

range from the ancient to the modern, and from the popular to the unpopular faces of populism, as well as from classical to parliamentary to postmodern and cultural politics. The lenses used to inspect and explore politics at the heart and on the edges of liberalism are derived and developed from many philosophical, theoretical and practical thinkers of politics and the political, from Marx and Gramsci to Laclau, from Hardt and Negri to Žižek, and beyond. Each chapter of *Politics at the Edges of Liberalism* is an amplification of the significance of the concept of ‘internal periphery’ for the thinking of difference (Chapter 1), populism (Chapters 2 and 3), agitation (Chapter 4) and revolution (Chapter 5). However, although it is also developed from a rethinking of the ‘symptom’ as a tool for political analysis, perhaps the royal road to grasping Arditì’s concept of the internal periphery is via Rancière’s concept of disagreement.

For Rancière, ‘disagreement’ is the political concept *par excellence*. It must, argues Rancière, be stringently distinguished from notions such as *difference* and the Lyotardian *differend* (Lyotard 1988). This is because, although for Lyotard, ‘differend’ names conflict which cannot be ‘resolved’ *as such* (a wrong which cannot be righted for both parties, and over which no internal or external agency can adjudicate with legitimacy), to Rancière’s mind ‘each party’s difference from itself as well as of the differend [is] the very structure of community’ (Rancière 1998: 18). So, a differend is always only an ‘ontic’, legalistic, or in Rancière’s terms ‘police’ problem. This refers to one of Rancière’s sharpest contributions to political theory: his conceptualisation of politics, which is most akin to what other political philosophers would call ‘the political’. As Chantal Mouffe explains, in Continental-based forms political theory, a distinction is normally drawn between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’:

If we wanted to express such a distinction in a philosophical way, we could, borrowing the vocabulary of Heidegger, say that politics refers to the ‘ontic’ level while ‘the political’ has to do with the ‘ontological’ one. This means that the ontic has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which society is instituted (Mouffe 2005: 8-9)

However, Rancière effectively dismisses this distinction, and argues instead that the most relevant distinction to be made is that *politics is rare*, while *what is common is police* (Rancière

1998: 17, 139). By police, what Rancière refers to is work and actions which protect the status quo. What is normally thought of as *politics* is in Rancière's terms most often *policing*. Ironically, the best example of this police work is the administrative tinkering of politicians' 'political' actions. So, what for Rancière is politics? On the one hand, 'Politics, in its specificity, is rare. It is always local and occasional' (1998: 139). But on the other and at the same time, it always reflects a social convulsion, a social conflict around a wider dispute:

So nothing is political in itself. But anything may become political if it gives rise to a meeting of these two logics [*police* logic, which is opposed to *egalitarian/political* logic]. The same thing – an election, a strike, a demonstration – can give rise to politics or not give rise to politics. A strike is not political when it calls for reforms rather than a better deal or when it attacks the relationships of authority rather than the inadequacy of wages. It is political when it reconfigures the relationships that determine the workplace in its relation to the community. The domestic household has been turned into a political space not through the simple fact that power relationships are at work in it but because it was the subject of an argument in a dispute over the capacity of women in the community. (Rancière 1998: 32-33)

Now, *Disagreement* was written as a book of political philosophy and it made reference chiefly to classical philosophy. *Hatred of Democracy* is effectively Rancière pointing out that *Disagreement* was not just about the ancients. Rather, Rancière emphasises in *Hatred of Democracy*, it is 'about' *me and you* and it refers very much to *now*. Consider one of today's European polemics and social conflicts: asylum. Do *you* stand on the side of *equality* or on the side of the *police*?

I say 'European'. But of course asylum is extra-European, intra-European, infra-European, simultaneously-pro-and-anti-European, local and global. This is precisely the point. It activates an *internal periphery*. This is an undecidable internal periphery until it is variously 'decided' and 'redecided' through what Arditì calls 'polemicization'. Polemicization refers to the process by which political arguments and disputes lead to transformations that reconfigure, redistribute, reinstitute, and 'redraw the lines' of the community (Arditi and Valentine 1999; Arditì 2007; Rancière 1998; 2006). And, as Derrida taught us, the 'lines' that

draw up any order are neither simply internal nor simply external but both internal and external (Derrida 1987). Politics is 'at' and 'about' the edges, but these edges are internal and at the heart of.

So, Rancière's notion of disagreement refers to an internal periphery, a site of antagonism around a word or concept. For Rancière, that word is equality:

Nothing is political in itself for the political only happens by means of a principle that does not belong to it: equality. The status of this 'principle' needs to be specified. Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it... (1998: 33)

Both Arditì and Laclau could agree with this. In *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau argues that the fundamental term of political ontology is *the demand* (Laclau 2005: 224). This is because, as Laclau has argued since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), one should not confuse politics with essentialised or fetishised 'positions' (such as 'class'). There are myriad types of 'politics', they argue: politics can occur whenever an antagonism flares up, and this may come from any area of culture and society – sex, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, environment, and who knows where else. And this is not just from contradictions in the forces and relations of production. What is key here is the ineradicability of *antagonism*. As Laclau explains in *Emancipation(s)* (1996): 'Between two incompatible discourses, each of them constituting the pole of an antagonism between them, there is no common measure, and the strict moment of the clash between them cannot be explained in objective terms' (Laclau 1996: 3-4).

Since *Hegemony*, Laclau and Mouffe have followed Claude Lefort in identifying the birth of the modern form of politics in the 'democratic revolution', or the birth of the perspective in which 'power' is seen as an empty place that anyone can fight for. Translated into Rancière's terms, this is the recognition of everyone's fundamental equality. So, in *On Populist Reason*, Laclau clarifies his agreements with Rancière: for Laclau, as for Rancière, the key political element is the demand – for *equality*, or for *justice*. But the very conclusion of *On Populist*

*Reason* – the very end of a final chapter in which Laclau spells out his agreements and disagreements with other key theorists (Žižek, Hardt and Negri, Rancière) – concludes with a twofold disagreement. On the one hand, says Laclau, Rancière’s conception of ‘emptiness’ is problematic, because it leads him into an overly optimistic faith in *the people’s* democratic tendencies. Yet what is to prevent the people from sliding into fascism? (246). And on the other hand – because of a couple of mentions of Marx in Rancière’s work – Laclau chooses to read Rancière’s discussion of ‘the proletariat’ as if Rancière were some kind of undeconstructed Marxist who just cannot get over it and cannot let go of ‘class’! Laclau says: ‘I do not see the point of talking about class struggle simply to add that it is the struggle of classes that are not classes’ (247). But, in an uncharacteristic and – as Bill says of Pei Mai in *Kill Bill Volume 2* – ‘in an act of almost unfathomable generosity’, Laclau gives ‘the slightest nod’ to Rancière, by adding: ‘The incipient movement, in Gramsci, from “classes” to “collective wills” needs to be completed. Only then can the potential consequences of Rancière’s fruitful analysis be fully drawn (248-9).

But I would suggest that it may be *Laclauian* theory that ‘needs to be completed’. Otherwise, it remains what Iain Hamilton Grant has recently called ‘ontologically parochial’ (Hamilton Grant 2007) – a contingent *description* of a contingent state of affairs, rather than an *analytical* theory of the political as the occasional eruption of democratic disorder in always oligarchical social arrangements (Rancière 2006). But Laclau really does think that his political theory is complete. As he claims in a recent essay: ‘I think [...] that hegemony as form – that is, as an ontological category – is perfectly theorized in my work’ (Laclau 2004: 322). And what is this ‘perfect’ theorization? For Laclau, it is the perfection of politics ‘conceived as hegemony’ (2004: 326). Thus, for Laclau, *all* politics is *hegemonic* politics (and nothing other), and hegemony is *utterly* contingent, hence irreducibly populist.

But Arditì and Rancière beg to differ. As we have seen, Rancière apparently dismisses populism. But Arditì examines the key theorisations of populism, and concludes instead that populism is *a spectre of democracy*, and an *internal periphery of democratic politics*. Despite its elusiveness (46), Arditì argues, populism does have specific features. In one regard, it is a mode of representation (direct address and interpellation of ‘we, the people’ by a charismatic

leader), whose conditions of possibility are those of the media age (60). But it is also a *symptom* of democratic politics (74), *and* the constitutive underside of democracy (81).

To this, Rancière's apparent disagreement is really an *addition*. What he adds to the theory of society as politically instituted is the important reminder that those in all types of power will do everything they can to avoid politics, to expel it from the city, and to police their order:

We do not live in democracies. Neither, as certain authors assert – because they think we are all subjected to a biopolitical government law of exception – do we live in camps. We live in States of oligarchic law, in other words, in States where the power of the oligarchy is limited by a dual recognition of popular sovereignty and individual liberties. [...] These freedoms were not the gifts of oligarchs. They were won through democratic action and are only ever guaranteed through such action. The 'rights of man' and of the citizen' are the rights of those who make them a reality. (Rancière 2006: 73-74)

The key point about Rancière's dismissal of 'populism' is that his recent book is an intervention into a polemical wider discourse about democracy *per se*; to point out the equivocations, amphibologies and conflations of those oligarchs or their agents who demonstrably hate democracy and refer to it pejoratively as 'populism' because it threatens their order. Arditi's examination of the concept is orientated to establish more precisely the mechanisms of any political change. While Laclau's theorisation of populism is designed to flesh out his deconstructed theory of politics as hegemonic articulation. Each adds a lot to the understanding of the other. The question is which one is to be understood in the terms of which other.

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