

FIGURING THE UNIVERSAL: BUILDING POLITICS IN GLOBALITY

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BUILDING POLITICS IN GLOBALITY

By

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## Figuring the Universal: Building Politics in Globality

This thesis evaluates the inadequacy of a contemporary and dominant concept of politics in/for modernity as a means by which to characterize the transformations of power/sovereignty associated with globalization, and locates a potential to broaden the concept of the political in the form of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek's *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. While critics of this text have bemoaned its reiterative insistence on the irreducible differences separating the three theorists' projects, and have attempted to unify them, I suggest that the text's most significant contribution toward reformulating a useful and nuanced political concept stems from its insistently heterodox approach to the subject.

Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* provides a paradigmatic articulation of modern politics. Schmitt's work, however, with its underlying assumption of a characterizable and stable friend/enemy delineation, proves inadequate as a tool by which to understand a contemporary/postmodern/globalizing proliferation of potential points of perpetually unstable identification. Drawing on implications of Foucault's notion of biopower and Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, I suggest several ways in which Schmitt's concept was from its inception inadequate.

In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* Butler, Žižek and Laclau theorize an emancipatory political project, one which might address some of the all too visible shortcomings of Schmitt's concept. Focusing my analysis on each theorists' work as demonstrating an important and necessarily discrete singularity, I work to demonstrate that a productive rearticulation of the concept of the political, one adequate to the rapidly transforming conditions of globalization, may well lie in appreciating the inevitability of contingency and in learning to embrace difference.

My sincerest thanks to Imre, whose time, patience and seemingly boundless energy have contributed to every stage of this work. As well, love and a heartfelt thank you to Emily, who arrived with me at this project, and who shared with me each complication, each crisis, and each triumph along the way.

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## Chapter 1 – Globalization and Politics

Globalization refers to a range of the effects resulting from an ongoing transition from a modern system of national capital to a contemporary and arguably postmodern pervasive and increasingly-dominant global capital. Globalization is therefore characterized partially by the diminishing hegemony of modern nation-states. Under globalization, a politics based on nation-states and national identities realizes structural limits resulting from its emergence within a context/horizon limited by what Ernesto Laclau calls finitude, which is to suggest that the theorization of politics in modernity could not hope to account for the emergence of events and effects shaping and inflecting politics under the unforeseeable and unimaginable conditions of globalization. The very concept of the political is in crisis. Modern notions of citizenship, sovereignty, identity and representation fail to account for, or refer adequately to, the increasingly hegemonic power of deterritorialized capital. Decreasing state hegemony, with its accompanying proliferation of social and cultural identities competing for dominance, helps to demonstrate the immediacy of this crisis.

In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek debate the terms or conditions under which a radical rearticulation of emancipatory politics might be formulated. If, as Giorgio Agamben suggests in *Homo Sacer*, globalization

demonstrates painfully and repeatedly the limit of a modern notion of sovereignty, renders clear a structurally unassailable gap separating humanity from its claim to the sovereign and universal emancipation at the foundation of Enlightenment philosophy and the project of modernity (as manifested in various declarations of universal human rights, emancipation, suffrage, etc), and demonstrates the closure (if not the failure of) any emancipatory potential in a modern/contemporary concept of the political, then where should a rearticulation of the political begin? If emancipation(s) remain a goal, then locating its limits under modernity seems a productive place from which to begin.

In *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt articulates a concept fairly clearly incapable of accounting for instabilities/hybridities arising as a result of a contemporary and ongoing transition from national- to global capital. Giorgio Agamben, in reiterating and expanding from Foucault's notion of the modern biopolitical subject, demonstrates that the failure or limit-point of a Schmittian concept of the political in fact lies in its failure to account for the necessary gap separating subject from identity. If sovereignty rests in all 'People', but no individual can identify completely with that 'People', then sovereignty becomes irrevocably separated from each individual. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* rearticulates a non-appropriative, thus necessarily contingent, universality, a tool by which representation becomes imaginable in a global context. It is instructive to examine how Butler, Žižek, and Laclau's discussion provides an innovative and useful template by which to figure the productive, while nevertheless



contingent, implications of each contributor's articulation of a universality adequate to the specific requirements of their individual theoretical projects. Butler, Žižek, and Laclau share a commitment to a notion of universality that "is not a static presumption, not an a priori given, and that ought instead to be understood as a process or condition irreducible to any of its determinate modes of appearance"(3). Politics is not a thing, but a process. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* suggests a non-appropriative and sensitive approach to figuring the heteroglot, unfixable and unstable, the shifting and temporal elements of processes such as representation or identification workable and useful. The differentially established particularities of Butler, Žižek and Laclau's articulations are an important element of the text's productive implications. Negative differentiation need not constitute exclusion; in fact, it insists on a type of collectivity that might provide the space for a (radical) rearticulation or reconceptualization of politics.

Discourses of globalization describe a transformation of the relationship between people/citizens/subjects and their experience of space and sociality. This transformation necessitates a reexamination of politics, since it significantly shifts the context within which politics can be discussed. For some, globalization represents simply the impending (and conclusive!) hegemonic domination of a liberal democratic political model, and the inarguable demolition of all capital's opponents/naysayers. The ongoing theorization of a 'third way' articulates this assumption, and represents a theoretical acceptance of capital and the economy as

a precondition of any politics. This explanation ignores, however, the unavoidable and relatively clear ways by which the enumeration of any politics is inseparable, unspeakable, and especially unimaginable, apart from its delineation of allowable or possible identities in relation to spatio-geographical and social context. The 'third way' functions within an imaginary structured around an acceptance of capitalist/liberal economics. This privileging of the economic sphere limits the possible range of political renegotiations/rearticulations in important (and perhaps inadequately acknowledged) ways. While such a 'third way' may appear accommodationist, by rearranging a Right/Left political model into a unified model, it actually relocates a Right economic political model as a structure overarching and delimiting Leftist social democracy. The conditions within which the contemporary liberal democratic political model appears to function, the specific conditions in which it is able to maintain the appearance of flourishing, are shifted. Given an increasing recognition of the pervasive instability of essentialist identificatory projects, a useful and justifiable rearticulation of politics must, rather than reiterating or renegotiating essentialist claims, examine the ways in which contingency is a necessary and productive element of any broad-based emancipatory political project.

If globalization is suggestive of a social and political shift following the culmination or closure of a modern liberal democratic project (the point at which it reaches its structural limit), perhaps this completion makes available the space in which a radically transformed political potential emerges. If, on the other hand,

the conditions enabling the emergence of a liberal democratic politics are merely shifted, then the notion of the political must be re-assessed and re-figured in light of this shifting context. Each of these possible interpretations of the emergence of globalization demands a substantial re-examination and rearticulation of both the concept of the political and the structural delineation of the space in which it functions.

In *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt demonstrates a link between the political and the modern state:

According to modern linguistic usage, the state is the political status of an organized people in an enclosed territorial unit. [ . . . ] It may be left open what the state is in its essence – a machine or an organism, a person or an institution, a society or a community, an enterprise or a beehive, or perhaps even a basic procedural order. [ . . . ]

In its literal sense and in its historical appearance the state is a specific entity of a people. Vis-à-vis the many conceivable kinds of entities, it is in the decisive case the ultimate authority. All characteristics of this image of entity and people receive their meaning from the further distinctive trait of the political and become incomprehensible when the nature of the political is misunderstood. (Schmitt 19-20)

This notion of the political is not strictly reliant upon the geographical or territorial state unit. Nonetheless, Schmitt's understanding of the political insists on a body of people organized around what he terms the state "in its essence,"

some thing (focal point) around which a body of people can identify. In order for politics to function, this state (in whatever form it takes) must exercise sovereign authority, it must play a hegemonic role. Furthermore, Schmitt's concept assumes that the "specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy"(26). For Schmitt, the functioning of politics hinges purely on the possibility of assessing and enforcing this friend/enemy distinction, and the modern nation state represents a social or collective functioning of that identification and the actions following from that identification.

Writing between the World Wars, and gesturing toward the League of Nations and similar efforts to construct multi- or supra-national agreements, Schmitt attempts to demonstrate how such international alliances work within the limits of his notion of the political. "A league of nations which is not universal can only be politically significant when it represents a potential or actual alliance"(56-7). In the following passage, however, Schmitt clearly delineates the limit-point restricting his concept of the political:

Were a world state to embrace the entire globe and humanity, then it would be no political entity and could only be loosely called a state. If, in fact, all humanity and the entire world were to become a unified entity based exclusively on economics and on technically regulating traffic, then it still would not be more of a social entity than a social entity of tenants in a tenement house, customers purchasing gas from the same utility

company, or passengers traveling on the same bus. An interest group concerned exclusively with economics of traffic cannot become more than that, in the absence of an adversary. (57)

If identification becomes impossible, the political ceases to function. As a tool by which to assess the contemporary political horizon, Schmitt's articulation of politics falls victim to what might be described as a postmodern crisis of identification, as a proliferation of potential identities, or as an unrestricted and unrestrictable tendency toward the hybridization of identities. An uncontrollable proliferation of possible subject positions or identifications, one which renders dysfunctional the notion of an unchallenged single-state hegemony, suggests that within today's expanded political horizon, with its illimitable range of potential points of identification, the functional and descriptive limits of Schmitt's notion of the political has been surpassed. At what point does Schmitt's articulation of the political fail? Where can the inescapable limit of his notion of the political be located, and what renegotiations does that culmination demand?

In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben reexamines the functioning of politics in modernity. Where Schmitt's focus rests on the concept of the political in modernity, Agamben traces the genealogy of a problematic notion of sovereignty to demonstrate that notion's limit firmly within modernity. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt refers to the formula by which states ensure their ability to maintain internal peace through the declaration of domestic enemies. Agamben's work, in contrast, examines in detail the ways by which sovereignty functions,

arguing that modern state sovereignty reaches its limit with sovereign power effectively rendering all life *homo sacer*, sacred life, life which can be taken but cannot be sacrificed. Agamben's text, reworking and expanding from Foucault's observations on the emergence in modernity of a biopolitical valorization of life, shows how the project of modern state sovereignty culminates in the concentration camp.

Foucault's concepts of biopower and biopolitics describe an evolution in the way sovereignty manages its traditional power over life and death. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sovereign's power "to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death"(Foucault 138). Foucault recognizes the emergence of this transformation in the exercise of sovereign power over life, over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as inextricably linked to the development of both (but separately) capitalism and modern liberal democratic state power:

If the development of the great instruments of the state, as *institutions* of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations, the rudiments of anatomo- and bio-politics, created in the eighteenth century as *techniques* of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions [ . . . ], operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them. They also acted as factors of segregation and social hierarchization, exerting their influence on the respective forces of both these movements, guaranteeing

relations of domination and effects of hegemony. The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of application. (141)

The link between capital and political power is important, since it illustrates a foundational link between the economic- and politically-oriented exercise of power in a manner Schmitt rejects, but which seems critical for any examination of the conditions surrounding globalization, in which the inexorable expansion of capital has clearly overshadowed a Schmittian notion of sovereignty's capability to harness bio-power to its productive, political, and inevitably identificatory intentions. Foucault pronounces a society's "threshold of modernity" as the point at which "the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies"(143). In other words, the threshold of modernity occurs when survival, and not the Schmittian sovereign identification, becomes the focus of politics. If Foucault is accurate, then Schmitt's notion of the political is inadequate; while Schmitt observes the structures limiting representation, Foucault points out that these structures of representability in fact characterize a modern society's conditions of existence or survival.

Foucault suggests that biopower is the tool by which the institutions of modern society (the modern states) manage their productive forces. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben points out that, although the management of biopolitical

resources and production shapes modern society, this relation between resources and society cannot and will not limit the functioning of sovereignty. While for Foucault the emergence of biopolitics seems conditioned by relatively recently emerging technologies or productive potentialities, for Agamben the sovereign right to foster or disallow life is the product of a much longer tradition, an extension of Schmitt's originary paradox of sovereignty, whereby the sovereign "is, at the same time, both outside and inside the juridical order" (*Homo Sacer* 15). The sovereign articulates the rule of law through announcing and enforcing its own position of exception. The claim to sovereignty is based on the sovereign's recognition of its own exceptionality, "not the chaos that precedes order but rather the situation that results from its suspension" (18). The claim to sovereignty is the originary exception enabling the emergence of an order. When Schmitt refers to the sovereign right to declare an internal enemy, he means to demonstrate how the sovereign always reserves the right to enforce a friend/enemy distinction, and thereby to maintain the integrity of the sovereign political space. Maintaining the consistency of that space, however, is problematic.

For Schmitt, a specifically *political* sovereignty is the modern state's mode of operation. This political sovereignty is necessarily hegemonic, and takes precedence over such other and discrete spheres as the religious, cultural, legal, scientific and economic, all of which he sees inflected by the properly political interests of the sovereign body. Schmitt's sense of the political demands an unconditional privileging of the sovereign's right and power to distinguish



between friend and enemy, a distinction he stresses is not metaphorical, but based on the potential for real conflict at any time. He refuses to recognize the necessarily reciprocating interactions between what he calls the political thesis and its religious, cultural, economic, legal and scientific antitheses. Each of these ostensibly separate theses is hegemonically inflected by the sovereign and its unifying political identification (again, that between friend and enemy).

By contrast, Foucault rejects Schmitt's clear hierarchized arrangement of politics and economy. Foucault recognizes the emergence of biopower in the exercise of a sovereign power that can not be seen as distinct from political or economic spheres. For Foucault, shifting and expanding modes of production/economy are as much a condition of modernity as is the state. Agamben points out that "[in] particular, the development and triumph of capitalism would not have been possible [ . . . ] without the disciplinary control achieved by the new bio-power, which through a series of appropriate technologies, so to speak created the 'docile bodies,' [the biopolitical subjects] that it required" (*Homo Sacer* 3). The modern state could not emerge and flourish in the manner it does without the building block, the producing unit, provided by the biopolitical subject. Agamben's comment illustrates the connection he sees between Schmitt's and Foucault's projects: Foucault's articulation of the biopolitical subject, and its emergence concurrent with that of the modern state, provides a model by which the modern sovereign state's inherent structural limit can be recognized and delineated (figured).

*Homo Sacer* expands from Foucault's project by locating the limit of a Schmittian modern sovereignty in the concentration camp, or demonstrates the camps as an inevitable potentiality under Schmitt's notion. Agamben's text, however, also explicitly redefines the fundamental categories that are thought to underlie politics. "The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, inclusion/exclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion"( 8). This relocation allows for a more-or-less Schmittian notion of sovereignty, one formulated in the context of a dominant hegemonic control by modern sovereign states, to be reexamined in view of diminishing nation-state hegemony, and refocused on the broader manifestations and implications of sovereignty

Agamben, after pronouncing the camps and the totalitarian state the "exemplary places of modern sovereignty"( *Homo Sacer* 4), that is to say the locations at which the sovereign's absolute power over bare life is rendered explicit, goes on to demonstrate the inscription of a notion of bare life inseparable from the articulation of politics under globalization. A focus on bare life, on banning individuals or segments of humanity from citizenship and thus the proper sphere of the political, reintroduces a problem of identification with respect to sovereignty that can no longer be stably explained through Schmitt's insistence on the friend/enemy distinction. "When one looks closely, even what Marx called

‘class conflict,’ which occupies such a central place in his thought – though it remains substantially undefined – is nothing other than the civil war that divides every people and that will come to an end only when, in the classless society or the messianic kingdom, People and people will coincide and there will no longer be, strictly speaking, any people”(*Homo Sacer* 178). Agamben labels this seemingly irreconcilable division between people and People the fundamental biopolitical fracture. Until the French Revolution, the biopolitical fracture could be seen as an effect of a concurrently functioning social fracture, between the Roman *populus* and *plebs* or medieval Florence’s *popolo minuto* and *popolo grasso*, for example. With the French Revolution’s claims to universal enfranchisement, biopolitical inequalities become increasingly apparent. “But starting with the French Revolution, when [the People] becomes the sole depositary of sovereignty, the people is transformed into an embarrassing presence, and misery and exclusion appear for the first time as an altogether intolerable scandal”(179). The People become an impossible identificatory goal.

Increasing awareness of misery and exclusion motivates a modern project aimed at universal reconciliation, at the proposition of an all-encompassing unified People. “In this sense, our age is nothing but the implacable and methodical attempt to overcome the division dividing the people, to eliminate radically the people that is excluded. This attempt brings together, according to different modalities and horizons, Right and Left, capitalist countries and socialist countries, which are united in the project – which is in the last analysis futile but

which has been partially realized in all industrialized countries – of producing a single and undivided people”(*Homo Sacer* 179).

The twentieth century provides numerous and cataclysmic examples of a Schmittian approach to re-unification through genocide. Nazi and Stalinist genocides, as well as more recent nationalizing projects of ethnic cleansing/purification in Rwanda and Yugoslavia amongst others, demonstrate precisely a drive toward the creation of an unified people through the sovereign’s power over inclusion/exclusion, to both (as Schmitt pointed out) declare the internal enemy (revoking citizenship, and thereby rendering the enemy *homo sacer*), and exercise sovereign power over that enemy’s bare life. Agamben focuses on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust as demonstration of an obscene excess inherent to a modern sovereign state-based notion of the political. Further, and critically for my project here, Agamben demonstrates the continuing resonance of a notion of the political that permitted (perhaps even rendered inevitable or demanded, as its logical and systematic outcome) events such as the Holocaust and Stalinist genocides. Despite the apparently decreasing sovereign power afforded nation-states and the increasingly pervasive power of global capital, contemporary circumstances in Israel, Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Middle East demonstrate the continuing functioning of a Schmittian model for politics. This politics is constructed around a drive toward unification (or the achievement of a unified identity) through exclusion and eradication of the other.

For Agamben, “[the] correct question to pose concerning the horrors committed in the camps is [ . . . ] not the hypocritical one of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against human beings. It would be more honest and, above all, more useful to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime. (At this point everything had truly become possible)” (*Homo Sacer* 171). In *Homo Sacer* Agamben addresses this question by reiterating the role exclusion plays in the emergence of political sovereignty. Sovereignty is constituted through an originary exclusion. That exclusion underlies every exercise of power stemming from sovereignty. Schmitt’s articulation of the political seems to assume that the process of identification can be somehow related to geography, whether manifested in the form of village, town, city, state or nation. Agamben demonstrates the logical outcome of such an articulation of the political for a contemporary world, a world in which both migrations and shifting maps make a geographically oriented identity unworkable.

Schmitt’s reference to sovereign power over the enemy within attempts to broaden his thesis, to provide it with the means by which to function without its implicit orientation toward the nation-state in its application of the sovereign distinction. Schmitt offers a qualification concerning the enemy within intended to reinforce his notion of the political. Rather, however, his qualification establishes the limit of his notion: “The enemy is not merely any competitor or

just any partner of a conflict in general. [ . . . ] An enemy exist only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship”(28). In this statement, Schmitt prefigures the potential for a biopolitically justified/motivated action such as genocide to occur. Schmitt’s flaw here, however, is twofold. First, the notion of cohesive collective identity (whether in the form of friend or enemy) with which he works is inadequate. When he chides that “Love your enemies”(Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27), [certainly] does not mean that one should love and support the enemies of one’s own people”(29), Schmitt demonstrates his understanding of identification as reified, an unjustifiable and incompatible statement amidst the proliferating hybridities of globalization. Identity is unfixable and inherently unachievable. Second, he fails to acknowledge the implications of an illimitable and abstracted sovereign right of exclusion. Today’s ‘post-politics’ is always already implied in the project of modernity. The modern project of emancipation, ostensibly extending universal sovereignty, performs the opposite action; sovereignty is removed from its former exclusive but concrete seat and relocated in an abstracted and reified position of unachievable universality. The privilege of citizenship masks a pervasive underlying biopolitical subjectivity.

How might a new approach to politics begin, given the fundamental instability and proliferation characterizing contemporary articulations of

identity/identification? If sovereignty is held by the people, but no individual can successfully or completely identify with that people, then where is sovereignty practically located? If, as Žižek suggests, contemporary sovereignty potentially excludes every individual, would this circumstance not accomplish a sort of universality, albeit not that which the project of modernity set out to accomplish? Žižek points out that Agamben's text puts into question the very notion of democracy, a question which, interestingly and tellingly, Schmitt elides in his articulation of the political.

In his essay "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment," Paolo Virno points out that "today's productive revolution exploits, as its most valuable resource, everything that the project of 'modernization' counted among its effects: uncertain expectations, contingent arrangements, fragile identities, and changing values"(Virno 14). If Schmitt theorizes a politics in and for modernity, and modernization refers to the processes enabling and furthering such a project of modernity, then a fascinating dialectical situation emerges: the very phenomena associated with the emergence of modernity (and a modern politics) are the same as those which, in contemporary society, surpass the limit of a notion of politics conceived in relation to those phenomena. What circumstances precede or enable the effects Virno recognizes, and how might an understanding of these circumstances enable the theorization of a politics beyond modernity, of a politics which might surpass the limit of modernity? While addressing this question, is it possible to reorient this potential politics in such a way as to re-prioritize or re-

focus upon the project of universal enfranchisement, the potential for which Agamben both locates and negates in the relocation or universalization of sovereignty with the emergence of modernity?

The destabilizing effects of modernization are to a large degree a result of evolution and extension of communications technologies. In *Networking the World*, Armand Mattelart points out that, contrary to popular opinion supposing ‘globalization’ as a recent emergence, revolution in means and speed of communication have played an important role in modernity from its beginnings in the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution transformed the modes of production and transportation of goods. At the same time, and perhaps more profoundly, emerging technologies transformed the speed of production and communications, both within and across national and other geographical boundaries, undermining the structuring role such boundaries traditionally perform. In *Politics of the Very Worst*, Paul Virilio observes that “the Industrial Revolution dominates the very term transportation revolution, whereas in [his] opinion the latter is more important by virtue of its sociopolitical, geopolitical and geostrategic consequences”(17). The Industrial Revolution’s dominant position in our contemporary political imaginary provides evidence of the economy’s hegemonic position in modern discourses of power.

Although Schmitt’s notion of the political functions around the sovereign decision, classical economics suggests a rather different model. Adam Smith sees emerging technologies as tools enabling the development of a cosmopolitan



market “expected to abolish hostile forces that brought nations into conflict and to rid the world of old military societies”(Mattelart 5). This imagined abolition of hostile forces furthers the liberal Enlightenment project of universal enfranchisement, but just as clearly conflicts with the fundamental antagonistic movement underlying Schmitt’s theory. Communication technologies expanded rapidly through the nineteenth century, and certainly played a role, both in the growth of national and linguistic identities, and in the territorial consolidation or nation building based around these identities. As such, new communications demonstrate a powerful collectivizing force, although a force apparently conflicting with Smith’s cosmopolitan vision. Conversely, however, broad access to communication and information make clear the constitutive impossibility, the failure, of any project of normative identification, of a substantively constituted identity. The very tools by which broadened collective social identities are formed provide the key to their undoing. This paradox comprises the constitutive impossibility with which a radicalization of the political must engage, and which it must exceed. If a process of representation/identification is ongoing, unfixable, contingent, then how can it be characterized productively and non-appropriatively for an emancipatory politics?

Néstor García Canclini states that “*Modern identities were territorial and almost always monolingistic*. They were imposed by subordinating regions and ethnicities within more or less arbitrarily delimited spaces”(29). Emerging communications technologies enable the establishment of collectively or

nationally oriented identities, but they also enable cultural, social and political domination on a previously unimaginable scale. By contrast, “*postmodern identities are transterritorial and multilinguistic*. They are structured less by the logic of the state than by that of the markets. Instead of basing themselves on oral and written communications that circulated in personalized spaces, characterized by close interaction, these identities take shape in relation to the industrial production of culture, its communications technology, and the differentiated and segmented consumption of commodities”(29). Canclini’s observations are useful, but require elaboration. Where Canclini reiterates a notion of temporal transition from modernity into post-modernity, it is important to recognize that these two characterizations of identity are the two aspects of a double-motion inherent to modernity, and therefore present throughout modernity. Increased communication enables collective identification, or the imposition of hegemonic social and cultural identities on an ever-broadening scale; however, and at the same time, increased communication engenders an awareness of difference, otherness, alterity, and therefore an increased awareness of potential points of identification.

Proliferating points of identification, and an accompanying and increasingly evident impossibility of the complete interpellation of any particular identity, engender hybridization, which in turn cannot fail to undermine the coherence and function of an identity-oriented politics. The uncontrollable proliferation of identities, national, gender, racial and hybrid, destabilizes the notion of a universal identification, and therefore renders problematic any project

of democracy – this is tyranny”(17). This interplay between power and speed gestures toward a temporal limit of democracy. If politics (and thus its species, democracy) is a process, how can this process function instantaneously? Does instantaneity negate the political? Does rendering time as a succession of moments, what Franco Piperno calls “a notion of time that ends up being unrepresentable for the human condition, anthropologically understood” (Piperno 124), rule out the functioning of any politics? The answer to these questions must be “No,” but they do render a particular current and dominant notion of politics problematic by their gesture toward the instantaneous progression of time, their suggestion that time can be broken up into of a succession of infinitesimally small units or moments. At the same time, however, the articulation of time as a progression or series of moments helps to clarify the inherent inadequacy of any project of identification or representation. Identity exists in synchronically or instantaneously ‘fixed’ figures, while any project of identification is a process which can never be adequately figured.

Another worrying by-product of rapidly increasing speed is its tendency to shrink the world. “Behind globalization there is something developing that Foucault analyzed for the eighteenth century: *the great confinement*. This great confinement is before us. It resides in this absence of geographical space and this absence of delay in communication which determined human freedom. Remember that one of the most important liberties is the freedom to move”(Virilio 56). Virilio’s concerns of a general or pervasive virtual

disconnection from the world culminate in his suggestion that we will soon experience an end of the world. His prediction is not for an absolute or concrete end, however, but an end to the human experience of the world as finite. “The Earth will still have a circumference of 40,000 kilometers, but it will not be traveled anymore”(59). Virilio, then, predicts the need for a properly messianic “return to the physical, to matter – the signs of a rematerialization of the body and of the world”(49). Contact with the world is of critical importance, and movement in the world demonstrates a resistance to the tyrannical power of speed.

The moment a society focuses on achieving speed in production a political shift takes place, from geopolitics to chronopolitics. This shift is, once again, suggestive of an inherent double-motion underlying modernity. Technology developed in the interests of a chronopolitical drive seems, for a time, to reinforce the hegemony of a geopolitical imperative. As the chronopolitical technologies develop, however, their destabilizing, even undermining, effects on a geopolitical paradigm become evident. Ultimately, chronopolitics cannot develop beyond a fixed point without challenging and surpassing geopolitical limits. Free trade, and unrestricted production cannot function under a geopolitical paradigm, whereas reified territorial identities cannot maintain their integrity under a chronopolitical order. Virilio points to the space race of the 1960s as a symptom of a system sensing the approach of constraining limits, geopolitics attempting to surpass global or planetary limits. The space race, misdirected as it might seem as an attempt to address looming political closure, gestures toward an institutional

recognition of the real need for meaningful engagement with the failing and inadequate structure of the geopolitical. The space race, however, also demonstrates a misunderstanding of the nature of political structures. Space cannot expand politics, since politics is structured in the imaginary. The crisis of which the space race is a symptom requires a reexamination of the structuration of the political in the imaginary.

Virilio locates the potential for a critical rematerialization of politics in the figure of the city. "Losing the city, we have lost everything. Recovering the city, we will have gained everything. If there is a solution possible today, it lies in reorganizing the place of communal life. [ . . . ] Working on the city, we will work on politics as well. In a way, this is a regression, since the word politics comes from *polis*, 'city.' We crashed into the wall, and we are now returning to the city"(52). Virilio seeks a way by which to locate the political in the material, a way by which to relocate or rearticulate a practical and identifiable political body. If citizenship in a nation may be denied or revoked in the name of a sovereign power, perhaps residency, or presence, would be enough to qualify for citizenship in the city. Virilio sees the city governed by two rules: first, the perseverance of site, anchoring the city to its geography, and second, that the more the populating site expands the more the populating unit falls apart (63); the larger the collectivity, the more prone it is to spontaneous internal subdivision. This rudimentary articulation of political space is rooted in a devotion to community or collectivity, to relocating the space in which communal life might flourish.

A general accident has already occurred, although perhaps not in the dialectical fashion Virilio prophesies. Modern politics (as this has typically been rendered) and capital are essentially incompatible, a circumstance Foucault gestured toward in his articulation of biopolitics, and one that Agamben demonstrates compellingly in *Homo Sacer*. Modernity cannot realistically be understood as a unified and evolving project. Modernity, rather, represents two competing projects, which demand, on political and biopolitical levels, two discrete paradigmatic subjects. Virilio's geopolitics and chronopolitics gesture toward these two mutually exclusive projects, and as a broadening range of theorists demonstrate, neither of these projects requires a fundamental commitment to democracy, or a commitment to a project of universal emancipation. The general accident lies not in the inevitable inadequacy of a Schmittian notion of modern politics, despite that politics' crisis in light of uncontrollably proliferating identities. The general accident is not located in globalizing capital's disconnect from materiality, a self-destructive disconnect that Virilio articulates well.

The widely overlooked general accident takes place with the inappropriate, inaccurate, and unethical conflation of these two disparate modern projects of nationalist/identity politics and capital. The identifiable citizen, or national subject, is the object of a modern nationalism, and the fundamental building block upon which a modern politics is articulated. By contrast, globalizing capital, characterized by ever-accelerating modes of production,

requires a biopolitical subject. Under capital production is the overarching ideal, and the biopolitical subject, or the subject characterized in terms of its ability to produce, is the object of this biopolitics. The accident lies at a moment of superimposition, when an apparently unified political/biopolitical object is posited as the focus of artificially combined identity-based and capitalist political models. The resulting hybrid situation produces an identity-based politics with a biopolitical subject. Sovereignty is located in the people, yet sovereign power maintains an inherent power of exclusion over citizens. When excluded by the sovereign, the citizen becomes a biopolitical unit, merely a producing machine, with none of the rights of sovereignty implied in the original transposition (marking the threshold of modernity) of sovereign power from the sovereign's body into the citizens. The result is an unidentified (and unidentifiable) sovereign body wielding absolute power over disenfranchised biopolitical subjects.

The project of modern politics, originally aimed at universal emancipation or enfranchisement, then, is an inadequate, fundamentally corrupted, or broken project, depending on when this unobserved "accidental" conflation of nation and capital occurred. Agamben locates the limit of a politics polluted by biopolitics in the concentration camp, an unparalleled example of sovereign power over the biopolitical subject, and a prescient figure for the shape of contemporary politics. When the camps were dismantled their ethos escaped, and a hegemonic biopolitical subjectivity continues to dominate the contemporary political environment. Refugees, immigrants, criminals and citizens are

increasingly blatantly relegated biopolitical entities with no right to or implication in sovereign power.

Politics, since the rise of modernity and the relocation of sovereignty in the people, has been a project of universalization, a project aimed at establishing and extending rights to humanity. The nation-state has been modernity's primary vehicle toward this end. In his introduction to *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, Pheng Cheah points out that "contemporary critics of nationalism regard it as a particularistic mode of consciousness or even a private ethnic identity that disguises itself as a universalism"(21). Further, the very concept of universality has been widely rejected as an inherently imperialistic or colonial enterprise, useless in postmodern conditions of proliferating identities and hybridities. *Cosmopolitics* examines cosmopolitanism as an "intellectual ethic [sic] or political project that can better express or embody genuine universalism"(21). In his response to *Cosmopolitics*, James Clifford puts forward democratic socialism as naming "a hegemonic project most likely to negotiate the sometimes contradictory goals of social/economic equality and national, regional, cultural, gender, racial, and sexual diversity. Any dream of *transcending* such differences in a revolutionary synthesis has been pretty thoroughly discredited by the history of divisions on the left.[ . . . ] Thus if we must work *through and among* differences of culture and identity, it is all the more critical to recognize, and mobilize, nonuniversalist cosmopolitanisms, with their abilities to translate



different histories, to cross narrow identities, to lend themselves to others' projects"(368).

As Cheah points out, the concept of universality has been widely rejected in critical discourses examining the postmodern proliferation of identities and hybridity. A critical insistence on the inevitable failure of any project of identification is general. However, if (as Virilio proposes) the space race misidentifies the horizon in which geopolitics must be negotiated, I would posit that the simple superimposition of what I have been calling a modern concept of the political onto conditions of globalization similarly inadequately locates the failure or limiting point inherent to that concept. As I hope I have demonstrated, the failure of a modern notion of the political encompasses far more than an inadequacy of the nation-state as vehicle. Likewise, Clifford is partially right. We must indeed work through and among differences. Clifford also, however, demonstrates a failure to recognize both the necessity for a rearticulation of the concept of the political and with it an instrumental renegotiation of universality. Democratic socialism may indeed contain a radical emancipatory potential. That potential, however, is unrecognizable, cannot be established, until the structures governing the emergence of politics are rearticulated in a manner acknowledging significantly and substantially shifted conditions of emergence. Universalism is unavoidable in the articulation of any emancipatory political project; however, that is in no way to suggest a reversion to failed invocations of that universality.

Amongst the contributors to *Cosmopolitics*, Gayatri Spivak acknowledges the unavoidability of the notion of universality. “It is my conviction,” she suggests, “that the internationality of ecological justice *in that impossible, undivided world of which one must dream, in view of the impossibility of which one must work, obsessively, cannot be reached* [ . . . ]”(340 italics mine). For Spivak, universality involves a careful and dedicated commitment to acknowledging and gesturing toward impossibility, to the inadequacy of discourse, to the failures of communication, representation, identification. Critically, this impossibility is engaged by an ongoing commitment, ‘obsessively’ as she suggests, to figure and refigure that impossibility, to learn about it. “This learning can only be attempted, through the supplementation of collective effort by love”(340). Spivak reworks the notion of communication to suggest that recognizing the failure inherent to any project of translation, and dialogue, indeed any communication, marks not failure, but an ongoing commitment to the process itself.

Spivak’s focus on the process of communication might productively re-infect the undermining function of a ‘history of divisions,’ which Clifford observes discrediting attempts by the Left at transcendent revolutionary syntheses. Perhaps divisions are a necessary and vital element of any project of Left politics. Perhaps these divisions merely acknowledge and specify the contingent nature of the various political claims they are intended to substantiate. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* demonstrates a commitment to an ongoing and reiterative

process of communication similar to that which Spivak envisions. Differences are not negated; rather, they are specified and elaborated. Clarity of meaning is each contributor's goal, and as such each contributor locates their own project in its specificity, a specificity which can only be strengthened by its negative differentiation from the other contributors' projects.

The Left is a heterogeneous collectivity, and a politics in globalization must be a heterogeneous space. In the next section of my thesis I examine *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* as suggestive of the productive political potential of reinforcing and broadening Left unity (collectivity) through the reiterative and rigorous expression of particularity.

## Chapter 2 – Articulating Productive Contingency

Postmodern critiques of politics in modernity undermine the stability of a notion of identification upon which a Schmittian concept of the political is built. By doing so, such critiques demonstrate an incommensurability between the ongoing “project of modernity” and its foundational and ostensibly emancipatory aims. Sovereignty’s modern relocation, from the figure of the individual leader into the people as a collective unity, fails to account for or refigure adequately the identity of a sovereign people appropriate to its intended project of universal emancipation. Globalization, characterized by diminishing sovereignty of nation-states and a proliferation of possible identificatory locations, renders increasingly clearly the inadequacy, failure, or inherent limit of this modern project.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben demonstrates what might be considered a logical conclusion of this modern relocation of sovereignty. With the rise of modernity, sovereignty shifts from an identifiable figure into a tendentially empty and artificial collective unity, one with which no individual member of that collective can wholly identify, and thus one by which no individual can be completely represented. This suggests that a modernity so conceived might be seen ultimately (and, ironically, by/from its very inception) to negate/nullify, rather than to extend universally, the foundational sovereign exception enabling the emergence of a politics. An exception fails with its universal application; this

point cannot help but emphasize the conceptual complexity (inadequacy) of any attempt to universalize sovereignty.

In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek summarizes Agamben's position: "[Agamben's] point is [ . . . ] that in today's 'post-politics,' the very democratic public space is a mask concealing the fact that, ultimately, we are all *Homo sacer*"(100). Žižek points out the direct political implications of this conclusion by the example of Alfredo Stroessner's authoritarian regime in Paraguay, a regime which maintained power by the declaration of a perpetual state of emergency and ongoing suspension of Paraguay's Constitution. In a fascinating inversion of more typical implementations of modern sovereignty, Stroessner suspended the state of emergency for a single day every four years, on which elections were held; this reversal demonstrates the potential misappropriation of modern sovereignty, given the inadequate analytical and political tools by which to reconcile sovereign identity with a notion of the people. Žižek sees in *Homo Sacer* an assertion of the closure of modernity, the culmination of modern politics, and the demand for the articulation of an emancipatory post-political project. For Žižek, the closure of modern politics provides a messianic opening, one suggestive of a profoundly and radically productive opportunity.

*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* explores the implications of this closure of modern politics with an eye to its necessary rearticulation in the form of an emancipatory democratic politics, a politics capable of addressing the crisis

of identity which renders a Schmittian notion of politics unstable and inoperable. While it represents three divergent and in some important ways irreconcilable theoretical commitments, its overarching goal (as part of Verso's Phronesis series) is a revitalization of politics through "dialogue among all those who assert the need to redefine the Left/Right distinction which constitutes the crucial dynamic of modern democracy instead of relinquishing it"(inside leaf). A commitment to reaffirming the Left/Right distinction might seem a rather limited focus within a broader project to rearticulate politics, but this is not so. The apparent dissolution of a Left/Right distinction is symptomatic of a more general failure of identification intimately and centrally associated with a postmodern proliferation and destabilization of identities and identification. Politics requires/demands identification, and *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* explores how politics might take into account an undeniable incommensurability between identity and identification, between individual and collective identities, and between particularity and universality. Most immediately, this text addresses/renegeates from, and responds to, closures inherent to the theorization of a Third Way and an increasing hegemonic neoliberal political paradigm, both symptoms of the failed enlightenment project of universal emancipation. On another level, *CHU* locates the failure of identification in an incommensurable gap characteristic of the relationship between language and the things it seeks to describe. Locating the discursive implications of this linguistic/semiotic disconnection helps clarify and elaborate the relationship between discourse and

processes of identification necessarily shaped by the limitations of linguistic systems.

Thirdly, and as one inevitable and important outcome of the text's dialogical form, *CHU* is suggestive of the productive potential enabled by specific attention to the particular and singular nature of each contributor's broader theoretical commitments. Butler, Žižek and Laclau's debate demonstrates a type of commitment to particularity, to a reiterative accumulation, specification, and evolution of meaning, and to an ongoing attempt at meaningful communication and interaction. Their genuine and rigorous dialogues demonstrate qualities Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests – in *Death of a Discipline* – are central to any ethical engagement, any genuine attempt at the expression of difference.

Beginning with an examination of each contributor's location and articulation of universality, and paying careful attention to the specificity of the precisely located political projects furthered through each contributor's articulation of universality, I will examine the formal implications of their interaction. In examining the implications of these dialogues, I do not focus my attention on the details of their disagreements with a mind to privileging one or another contributor. Rather, it is my intention to tease out the productive potential, to examine the text's construction of discursive breadth, which is articulated in part by the rigorous process of negative differentiation exemplified by contributors' crucial divergences, their reiteratively reinforced differences.

Butler's articulation of universality begins from an exposition of Hegel's, although she immediately qualifies that derivation as complicated by Hegel's multiple and apparently inconsistent invocations of that notion. Hegel first identifies the combined product, form and character of thought as an "abstract universal," then "proceeds to disaggregate and revise his definition, noting that '*thinking*, as an activity, is the *active* universal', while the deed, its product, 'what is brought forth, is precisely the universal'. Thus he offers three different names for a universality that he simultaneously identifies as singular and insists upon as various" (Butler 16). Hegel also presents the Kantian notions of the 'I' and communality as forms of universality. This complex articulation of multiple and competing abstract and concrete universalities, that is, universalities which can be demonstrated as attached to specific substantive content and those severed from any particular content, serves to illustrate another concern underlying each contributor's articulation of universality. "Hegel pursues this line in relation to empirical and moral judgements, showing how, in each instance when the universal is conceived as a feature of thought, it is by definition separated from the world it seeks to know. [ . . . ] The things themselves are not germane to the problem of knowledge, and thinking becomes not only abstract but self-referential. To the extent that the universality of thought guarantees freedom, freedom is defined precisely over and against all exterior influences" (17). This clear transcendental delineation between form and content is problematic if the notion of universality is to prove useful as a tool for analysis in politics. Butler,



Žižek and Laclau each clearly prioritize a connection to materiality in their articulations of universality. Completely severing a notion of universality from its connection to concrete materiality negates its usefulness for any emancipatory democratic project, since the political usefulness of any notion of universality resides in its attention to the specific contextually delineated representations and interactions of difference. Butler, Žižek and Laclau overcome this clear separation between form and substance through invoking the notion of contingent universalities, or universalities that can not be articulated outside of their connection to a specific project.

Hegel's rearticulations of universality do in fact offer an attempt to overcome the limited political/practical usefulness of a Kantian formalism that demands the separation of all concrete content from an abstracted and transcendent notion of universality. A purely formal universality lacks the concrete connection that might enable its attachment to political projects. By way of introducing Hegel's discrete articulations of universality, and by contrasting these articulations against Kant's formal approach, Butler demonstrates and reinforces the need for a necessary suppleness in the articulation of a politically viable universality. Although articulations of universality often tend toward formalism (as Butler suggests her own, Žižek and Laclau's often do), Butler's exposition of Hegel's multiple articulations of universality is meant rhetorically to highlight a recognition of the necessarily contingent and multiple natures of universality. Universality can not be usefully separated from an attachment to the

concrete, and it will always be inflected by that connection. It is in the service of such reiterative and contingently negotiated universalities that the authors of *CHU* invoke the notion of quasi-transcendence, which renders the use of semi-formal approaches to the delineation of a term such as universality coherent for use in theorizing politics. While a notion of universality holds a relatively formal place in any identificatory project, that formal place must be constituted differently in each case, as it is inflected by its connection to different/unique/singular particular content.

Hegel's shifting and case-specific invocations of universality also gesture toward another of *CHU*'s overarching concerns: the function of language as a signifying tool. An insistence that any notion must be anchored in some form of attachment to the concrete demands an inquiry into the adequacy of or fundamental limitations structuring the process of linguistic signification. How does language reinforce and/or divorce any discourse from its object? How should the ineradicable gap separating signifier from signified be understood, and how can it then be understood to inflect any articulation of politics? *CHU* provides a uniquely productive exploration of these issues, since Butler, Žižek and Laclau make frequent and extensive reference to, and each base their discrete projects heavily upon, specific elements of their colleagues' theoretical projects. A Laclauian articulation of hegemony is a central element of each contributor's political project, although that notion is subjected to various critiques in various contributions. A Butlerian notion of the function of performativity in (political)

identification is both central to, and located/inflected differently in, each theorist's work. Žižek works extensively with a Lacanian psychoanalytic model, elements of which are both heavily influential in and contentious to Butler's and Laclau's work. *CHU* provides a space in which each contributor can articulate the specific ways by which particular theoretical tools and ideas fit into their theoretical methodologies. The evident fact that the three contributors inflect their use of various theoretical tools to suit the specific contextual requirements of their projects demonstrates the ineradicable functioning of a fundamental semiotic instability. As *CHU* helps to illustrate, the clear articulation of a critical methodology can only develop through a careful and reiterative articulation, one which never abandons the task of clarification and specification in an ongoing commitment to a process of meaningful and genuine expression. Interpretation/inflection is unavoidable, and the only way to avoid the misinterpretation (or mistranslation) of (the signifiers for) terms or ideas is through an ongoing process of elaboration/specification. In *CHU*, Butler, Žižek and Laclau demonstrate that, through attention to specificity, linguistic/semiotic instability holds the potential to broaden discourse. Carefully elaborated upon, an unavoidable (and contextually dependent) contingency expands the justifiable implications and utility of various methodological tools.

A commitment to materiality is central to each contributor's work. Divergent understandings of the nature of the connection between language and its object lend specificity to each theorist's project, and the volume's triangulated

critiques aid in the elaboration and clarification of each contributor's articulation of an emancipatory political project. The ways in which each theorist privileges particular representations of materiality, and perhaps even more the specification of points of divergence with respect to each articulation of a radical politics, reinforce and expand upon the world-view or context from which each theorist's emancipatory political articulation emerges.

For Butler the notion of universality is inseparable from the question of representability. "Those who are dispossessed or remain unrepresented by the general will or the universal do not rise to the level of the recognizably human within its terms"(23). Further, the question of representability is inextricable from an examination of the impacts of the positing function of language. Language can never be uninflected, always brings with it an excess of meaning; it cannot be definitively dissociated from inherent, if shifting, cultural and social inflections. Butler's notion of universality is derived in conjunction with her understanding of performativity. While much of Butler's work on performativity takes gender for its object, her work clearly extends the implications of gender performativity into a broader social, cultural and political context. As she writes,

[ . . . ] any effort to establish universality as transcendent of cultural norms seems impossible. [While] Hegel clearly understands customary practice, the ethical order and the nation as simple unities, it does not follow that the universality which crosses cultures or emerges out of culturally heterogeneous nations must therefore transcend culture itself. In fact, if

Hegel's notion of universality is to prove good under conditions of hybrid cultures and vacillating national boundaries, it will have to become a universality forged through the work of cultural translation. And it will not be possible to set the boundaries of the cultures in question, as if one culture's notion of universality could be translated into another's. Cultures are not bounded entities; the mode of their exchange is, in fact, constitutive of their identity. If we are to begin to rethink universality in terms of this constitutive act of cultural translation, [ . . . ] then neither a presumption of linguistic or cognitive commonness nor a teleological postulate of an ultimate fusion of all cultural horizons will be a possible route for the universal claim. (20-21)

This passage suggests Butler's theoretical focus on articulating a political process constructed around a nuanced recognition of the possibilities and the impossibilities of intercultural translation. It also suggests the central importance of a notion of non-essential and unfixable identity for Butler's project, both notions which reinforce her commitment to the articulation of performativity.

Performativity describes the mechanism or process by which identification takes place, but also describes the ways by which the repetitive or reiterative process of identification renders the constitutive instability of terms of identity obvious: "If 'women' within political discourse can never fully describe that which it names, that is neither because the category simply refers without describing nor because 'women' are the lost referent, that which 'does not exist,'

but because the term marks a dense intersection of social relations that cannot be summarized through the terms of identity. The term will gain and lose stability to the extent that it remains differentiated and that differentiation serves political goals”(*Bodies* 218). Butler uses performativity as a tool by which to demonstrate the instability of all identity, an instability located in and guaranteed by the culturally specific inflection of any attempted identification, and by doing so she works to broaden the political and linguistic space within which a proliferating range of potential locations of identification become expressible.

Performativity brings to politics the potential recognition that “what one takes to be a political signifier is itself the sedimentation of prior signifiers, the effect of their reworking, such that a signifier is political to the extent that it implicitly cites the prior instances of itself, drawing the phantasmatic promise of those prior signifiers, reworking them into the production and promise of ‘the new,’ a ‘new’ that is itself only established through recourse to those embedded conventions, past conventions, that have conventionally been invested with the political power to signify the future”(220). This passage helps to illustrate the reiterative constitution of identity. Identity is figural, which is to suggest that it functions as an instant in an ongoing project of identification. Identity also holds, for Butler, an attachment to materiality, but an attachment that can not play a fixed role in the ongoing process of identification. Identification is the process by which a subject lays claim to identity, and critically, identification can never completely realize identity. This failure might be variously characterized:

identification might, as a temporal process, one always in motion through time, be seen inevitably to fail in any attempt to fix or halt its motion in a particular momentary or synchronic or figural identity; identification might be seen to fail as a result of the inadequacy of language as a semiotic tool, similar to the Lacanian bar separating the symbolizable subject from the Real; finally, as suggested in the above quote, any performative assumption of identity might be seen implicitly to recognize its contingent articulation, one which it is only possible to understand as a particular instance in a necessarily reiterative process of constitution. An emancipatory political project is one focused on broadening the space in which identification takes place, one which destabilizes the repressive and dominating tendencies of a politics of essentialist identities. “That there can be no final or complete inclusivity is thus a function of the complexity and historicity of a social field that can never be summarized by any given description, and that, for democratic reasons, ought never to be” (*Bodies* 221). That there can be no final or complete inclusivity demands the recognition of an incomplete universality, one that creates the space in which translative claims to contingent universality might flourish.

Butler works within a notion of political space as hegemonically structured space. Within that hegemonic context, her notion of performativity is a model by which to understand and enable the emancipation of proliferating points of identification, a proliferation of the positions from which the struggle for hegemony takes place. Identification is a necessary prerequisite without which

politics cannot function; however, for that politics to demonstrate a broad emancipatory potential, a politics must recognize the inadequacy of – and the violence necessitated by – any attempt to maintain reified or static figures of identity. For Butler universality may be figurable, but it is also necessarily performatively constructed. Politics is about competing representations of, or claims to, universality, and her particular approach to an emancipatory politics prioritizes an ongoing process of intercultural translation intended to destabilize any notion of fixed or fixable identity, and to undermine the discursive exclusion of alterity.

For Laclau a political universality is always a hegemonic universality, his understanding of which is derived from an expansion on Marx and Gramsci: “universal emancipation is achieved only through its transient identification with the aims of a particular social sector – which means that it is a *contingent* universality constitutively requiring political mediation and relations of representation. It is the deepening of this [ . . . ] view of emancipation and its generalization to the whole of politics in the modern age that constitutes Gramsci’s achievement”(51). Laclau’s political project involves the extension of a Gramscian notion of counter-hegemonic politics for use in a globalizing world. Laclau’s project focuses not on recognizing and differentiating between designations of identity such as “classes, ethnic groups, and so on, which are at best transient points of stabilization. The really important task is to understand the logics of their constitution and dissolution, as well as the formal determinations of



the spaces in which they interrelate”(51). Laclau delineates four dimensions of the hegemonic relation, which help to demonstrate his articulation of universality:

- 1) Unevenness of power is constitutive of hegemony.
- 2) There is hegemony only if the dichotomy universality/particularity is superseded; universality exists only incarnated in – and subverting – some particularity but, conversely, no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalizing effects.
- 3) Hegemony requires the production of tendentially empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former.
- 4) The terrain in which hegemony expands is that of the generalization of the relations of representation as condition of the constitution of a social order. (54-57)

His elaboration of the conditions under which hegemony functions emphasizes the priority Laclau attributes to the notion. A contingently negotiated universality is a necessary element of hegemony; however it is just one element of an articulation of hegemony in which Laclau locates the potential for an emancipatory democratic politics. Hegemony offers an explication of how particularities compete for the contingently constituted and tendentially empty space of the political universality. “*The universal is an empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness,*

*produces a series of crucial effects in the structuration/destructuration of social relations”*(58).

The necessary failure of any process of identification plays an important role in Laclau’s articulation of hegemony, since it is this very failure that structures the particular’s failed claim to universality. Laclau characterizes the particular’s failed claim to identity as a lack, and proceeds to describe the relationship between particular and universal in terms drawn from Lacan. “The ultimate point which makes an exchange between Lacanian theory and the hegemonic approach to politics possible and fruitful is that in both cases, any kind of unfixity, tropic displacement, and so on, is organized around an original lack which, while it imposes an extra duty on all processes of representation [ . . . ] also, as this dual task cannot but ultimately fail in achieving the suture it attempts, opens the way to a series of indefinite substitutions which are the very ground of a radical historicism”(71). It is in this series of indefinite substitutions, and the radical historicism they enable, that the emancipatory potential of hegemony theory is found. A perpetual potential for the resignification of the place of universality creates the political space to which an emancipatory politics may lay claim.

Laclau locates hegemony’s critical connection to materiality, and his necessary rejection of transcendentalism (as well as his justification for a notion of quasi-transcendentalism), in the unstable relationship between the ethical and the normative. The ethical is constituted by an attachment to and tendency toward an

unachievable pure identification with the normative. “It is this incommensurability which is the source of the unevenness between discourses, of a moment of *investment* which is not dictated by the nature of the object and which, as a result, redefines the terms of the relationship between what *is* and what *ought* to be (between ontology and ethics): ontology is ethical through and through, inasmuch as any description depends on the presence (through its absence) of a fullness which, while it is the condition of any description, makes any *pure* description utterly impossible”(81). Although, strictly speaking, ontology always represents an impossible fullness, it is an ethically necessary impossible fullness. Without ontology, ethics (and the political) becomes unthinkable. The perpetual renegotiation of this relationship between ethical and normative is the process hegemonic politics describes. An emancipatory politics works toward the project of realizing society as an impossible fullness, a state realizing the unachievable enlightenment project of universal emancipation; an ethical approach to this emancipatory project demands the perpetual awareness of the inadequacy of any particular/normative universal identity. Any claim to identity is an attempted claim to universality, and the relationship articulated through hegemony describes the interaction of competing articulations for the position of hegemonic universality. Thus, for Laclau, both the ethical (and its commitment to (an impossible) materiality), and an emancipatory politics, can arise only through a commitment to the antagonistic renegotiation of finally unfixable hegemonic claims.

The hegemonic interaction of normative (particularistic) and ethical (universalistic) claims functions according to a performative process much like the one by which Butler posits the perpetual shifts and accruals of meaning constitutive of identity. However, where Butler is primarily interested in demonstrating the instrumental emancipatory potential stemming from the destabilization of traditional forms of identity (hence her location of the universal in a project of translation), Laclau focuses on the dynamics by which particular claims compete for the position of hegemonic universal. Butler studies the formation of identity, while Laclau examines the way by which identity functions in a political relation, that is, how politics is informed and might be transformed through the inscription of particular claims to hegemonic universality. Another way by which to figure the inflection of these different focal points lies in Butler's insistence on the potentially limitless proliferation of points of identity, whereas hegemony demonstrates the competitive processes by which society achieves and perpetually renegotiates a politically practicable, if ultimately impossible, universalist or communitarian identity. Laclau writes that "[if] decisions are contingent displacements within contextual communitarian orders, they can show their verisimilitude to people living inside those orders, but not to somebody conceived as a pure mind outside *any* order"(85). The ultimate inaccessibility of ethical identification, its apparently transcendent but nonetheless real claim to a hegemonic universality, can not negate the political function of that ethical identification for the communal body. Whereas Butler focuses on the

uncontrollable proliferation of potential points of identification, Laclau recognizes and explores the political as the process of (necessarily incomplete) collective identification.

While hegemony requires a performatively constituted understanding of identity, it must also articulate and justify the processes of common or collective identification and representation within which hegemonic competition takes place. In his second contribution to *CHU*, Laclau provides examples of functioning hegemony and gestures toward the role it may play in an emancipatory political project. To demonstrate the function of necessarily empty claims to universality Laclau refers to his own experiences as a young activist:

I remember that during my years of activism in the student movement in Argentina, the division between Right and Left in the student body became evident in terms of attitudes toward concrete demands (hours when the library was going to be open, the price of tickets in the students' restaurant, etc.). For some, a mobilization which attained its immediate aims should finish there, while for those of us who were more militant, the question was how to keep the mobilization going, which was possible only in so far as we had historical aims – aims that we knew the system could not satisfy. In some sense our worst enemies were those university administrators who offered concrete solutions to the problems we were posing – not, obviously, in the sense that we dismissed these solutions, but in that the important thing, for us, was to see those partial victories as

mere episodes in a protracted war of position tending towards more global aims. (209)

The hegemonic usefulness of any claim to universality is undermined by a movement toward the resolution of that claim in terms of its particularity. The political usefulness of such claims is based in their fundamentally antagonistic relationship to an other position, and that other position nullifies or defeats the hegemonic potential of any claim by demonstrating the concrete particularity of that claim. In other words, the only way a claim maintains its hegemonic potential is by “being *something other* than itself”(209-10). A claim’s political potential rests in its non-coincidence with itself. More than this, however, the political potential of a particular claim resides in its “own particularity as a moment or link in a chain of equivalences that transcends and, in this way, universalizes it”(210). Concretely addressing a claim revokes its claim to universality, a claim without which political representation cannot function.

In another example, Laclau refers to the regular historical occurrence of food riots in France. It was only in the context of a particular set of social and historical circumstances that these riots achieved a type of universality, when “they could become a link in the more universalistic discourse of the *philosophes* that they became a force for systemic change”(210). It is only within a particular articulation of a social imaginary that hegemonic claims can succeed; it is, therefore, the project of political theorists to expand the social imaginary, and to thereby expand the potential points from which hegemonic positions can be

challenged. The process by which any particular poses a claim to universality is necessarily one of representation. “In the conditions of interconnection which exist in a globalized world, it is only through relations of representation that universality is achievable”(212). The promise of an emancipatory politics resides in expanding the potential sites of representational claims to universality, and this expansion must take place in the social imaginary. The terms within which the struggle for political hegemony take place require expansion, an expansion which can emerge only through a comprehensive understanding of the structures limiting political discourse.

Slavoj Žižek begins his contribution to *CHU* with a strong statement of solidarity with Butler and Laclau’s theoretical and social commitments. Žižek points out how Butler’s notion of the “fundamental *reflexivity* of human desire, and the notion (concomitant to the first one, although developed later) of ‘passionate attachments’, of traumatic fixations that are unavoidable and, simultaneously, inadmissible”(90-1), enrich understanding of the constitution and proliferation of a process of identification. Similarly, Žižek praises Laclau’s notion of “*antagonism* as fundamentally different from the logic of symbolic/structural difference, and the concomitant notion of hegemonic struggle for filling out the empty place of universality as necessary/impossible”(91) as an extraordinarily productive tool by which to articulate the functioning of politics. Žižek’s own focus, which is clarified by reference back to his colleague’s work, articulates the inescapable presence of structural preconceptions limiting the

potential for a rearticulation of an emancipatory political project. Žižek's project, then, is a messianic one, gesturing toward a necessary completion or closure of a hegemonic liberal democratic political paradigm, and demanding a radical break from and rearticulation of modern politics in view of that closure. For Žižek, a radical emancipatory politics can only be articulated through a recognition that Capital itself is merely the currently dominant claimant to hegemonic universality.

Žižek's notion of the radical political act is laid out against Laclau's notion of postmodern hegemony, since "[hegemony] does *not* in fact repoliticize capitalism, because *the very notion and form of the 'political' within which it operates [remains] grounded in the 'depoliticization' of the economy*"(98):

If we are to play the postmodern game of plurality of political subjectivizations, it is formally necessary that we do *not* ask certain questions (about how to subvert capitalism as such, about the constitutive limits of political democracy and/or the democratic state as such . . .). So, again, apropos of Laclau's obvious counter-argument that the Political, for him, is not a specific social domain but the very set of contingent decisions that ground the Social, I would answer that the postmodern emergence of new multiple political subjectivities certainly does *not* reach this radical level of the political act proper.(98-9)

If Laclau accepts the terms of a capitalist notion of politics which excludes the sphere of economics, then any shift or expansion of the social imaginary aimed at



expanding the terms available to politics must remain constrained by that exclusion. If the sphere of economics is accepted as a structure preceding or overarching politics, politics can not renegotiate its relation with economics. Politics takes place 'under' conditions dictated by economics, conditions which negate what Žižek sees a necessary radicalization of the political. (Laclau defends his position by reference to the need to artificially limit the terms of discourse in the interest of utilitarianism. This provides his justification for a quasi-transcendental category, as artificial, yet necessary, structures by which politics becomes workable.)

Hegemony functions as a result of the constitutive gap separating any particular thing from its claim to universality. Žižek suggests that hegemony theory must account for the impacts this universal failure of identification holds for hegemony theory itself. Ultimately, a "justified rejection of the fullness of post-revolutionary Society does *not* justify the conclusion that we have to renounce any project of global social transformation, and limit ourselves to partial problems to be solved: the jump from a critique of the 'metaphysics of presence' to anti-utopian 'reformist' gradualist politics is an illegitimate short circuit"(101).

Žižek's critique of Butler observes similar disavowed assumptions at work in her notion of a performatively constituted process of identification. While performativity provides a productive elaboration of the gap separating the process of identification from reified identity and demonstrates the slippage inherent in any reiterative process of identification, it fails to adequately acknowledge the

broader, and perhaps less obviously emancipatory, implications of performative identification. If the obscene underside of Laclau's hegemony can be characterized as its refusal to challenge (or recognize) capital's very hegemonic claim to universality, the obscene underside of Butler's notion of performative identification can be located in its structurally necessary failure to identify accurately and adequately the inevitable presence of disidentification.

To maintain its universal claim, a hegemonic universality relies on a disavowal of the practices by which it enforces that hegemony. The hegemonic claim effectively abandons its claim to universality with a confession of these disavowed practices. Since an ideological edifice's consistency rests in its claim to universal applicability, and explicit recognition of the disavowed renders the *struggle* underlying that 'claim' to universality clear, any 'official' recognition of the disavowed is tantamount to a recognition of the particularity of that hegemonic claim. Disavowal, it would seem, is a necessary element of identification, and Žižek labels this necessary disavowal the "*ideological practice of disidentification*"(103):

That is to say, one should turn around the standard notion of ideology as providing a firm identification to its subjects, constraining them to their 'social roles': what if, on a different – but no less irrevocable and structurally necessary – level, ideology is effective precisely by constructing a space of *false identification*, of false distance towards the actual co-ordinates of those subjects' social existence?(103)

This question demonstrates a troubling contingency in the location of the gap structuring performative identification. If identification can be demonstrated a tool of ideology, or as one of the processes by which an ideological claim maintains its appearance of universal consistency, does this undermine the radical political potential Butler suggests in performativity? Is it possible or viable to relocate performativity as an ideological apparatus of instrumental identification and disidentification? These questions might be seen to suggest Butler's inadequate elaboration of a performative relation to materiality, her failure to theorize what Laclau refers to as an ethical link and what Žižek himself speaks of in terms of the radical act. To demonstrate disidentification, Žižek points out the functioning of "mystification operative in the perverse 'just playing' of cyberspace": the liberating articulations of identity enabled by virtual reality – "sadistic, 'perverse', and so on"(103) – which are inadmissible in intersubjective reality are doubled. "[The] much-celebrated playing with multiple, shifting personas (freely constructed identities) tends to obfuscate (and thus falsely liberate us from) the constraints of social space in which our existence is trapped"(103). The emancipatory potential of unfixable identity is undermined by the possibility that the very instability is a characteristic of the functioning of a particular ideology.

Žižek's expansion on the implications of performativity leads into a broader critique of historicism and a tendency to rely on the delineation of quasi-transcendental categories, a critique he poses as equally applicable to both Laclau

and Butler's projects. Critiques enabled by performativity and hegemony theories describe the functioning and location of universality in a given and particular historical context. "This identification of the particular content that hegemonizes the universal form is, however, only half the story; its other, crucial half consists in asking a much more difficult supplementary question about the *emergence of the very form of universality*"(105). It is via this element of his critique that Žižek introduces his theoretical allegiance to a Lacanian psychoanalytic model. Butler and Laclau can each be demonstrated as guilty of constructing their projects around a formalistic universality, a universality constructed on but separate from particular content, a 'quasi-transcendental' attribution of essentialist formalism. Performativity articulates the process of identification in a nuanced fashion, but fails to account for the historically contingent implications of performative identity. How have the political implications of a theory of performativity shifted with transitions from the premodern through to the modern, and on into postmodernity? Likewise, hegemony provides a model by which to understand the competition constitutive of political universalities, yet it fails to address the contingent manner by which hegemonic universalities inflect or effect various historical political constellations. Performativity and hegemony, then, each rely on an identification of the very space of universality with particular (quasi-transcendental) structural characteristics, characteristics Žižek suggests reiterate the very attempts at essentialist identifications they seem simultaneously to undermine. The limits of performativity and hegemony theories help to illustrate a

distinction between historicity and historicism: “*historicism* deals with the endless play of substitutions within the same fundamental field of (im)possibility, while *historicity* proper makes thematic different structural principles of this very (im)possibility”(112). Coherency in historicism relies on what Butler and Laclau describe as the quasi-transcendental qualities of performativity and hegemony respectively.

Žižek locates the potential for a radical political project in challenging the overarching structuring effects of historicity, in understanding and surpassing the structuring principles of a particular socio-historical constellation, in the instability that underlies every attempt to locate a quasi-transcendent space. By demonstrating the limits of Butler and Laclau’s theoretical models, Žižek delineates the ‘external’ space in which radicality operates, and the *a prioristic* formalistic structuring principles it must exceed. The ‘Real’ represents symbolization’s point of failure, and describes a space similar to the gap Butler and Laclau rely on to illustrate the incommensurability between identification and identity, particularity and universality. Žižek, however, elaborates on the structuring function of the gap he refers to as the Real: “the Lacanian Real is strictly *internal* to the Symbolic: it is nothing but its inherent limitation, the impossibility of the Symbolic fully to ‘become itself’ ”(120). Performativity and hegemony theories are anchored in positive and particular symbolic content, and as located in the symbolic, their implications are restricted or delimited by their attachment to the Real, an attachment which restricts their radical potential, since

that potential relies on a rejection of the symbolic constellation the emancipatory act attempts to transform.

The interaction of Symbolic and the Real produces a radically productive paradox: “the Real as external, excluded from the Symbolic, is in fact a symbolic determination – what eludes symbolization is precisely the Real as the *inherent point of failure* of symbolization. [ . . . ] Precisely because of this internality of the Real to the Symbolic, it is possible to touch the Real through the Symbolic. [ . . . . ] An act does not simply occur *within* the given horizon of what appears to be ‘possible’ – it redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be ‘impossible’, yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility)”(121). The act, then, holds the potential to shift the very constellation of the symbolic structure (and Real) against which it is articulated:

[An] authentic act is not simply external with regard to the hegemonic symbolic field disturbed by it: an act is an act only *with regard to* some symbolic field, as an intervention into it. That is to say: a symbolic field is always and by definition in itself ‘decentred’, structured around a central void/impossibility (a personal life-narrative, say is a *bricolage* of ultimately failed attempts to come to terms with some trauma; a social edifice is an ultimately failed attempt to displace/obfuscate its constitutive antagonism); and an act disturbs the symbolic field into which it intervenes not out of nowhere, but precisely *from the standpoint of this*

*inherent impossibility, stumbling block, which is its hidden, disavowed structuring principle.* In contrast to this authentic act which intervenes in the constitutive void, point of failure – or what Alain Badiou has called the ‘symptomal torsion’ of a given constellation – the inauthentic act legitimizes itself through reference to the point of substantial fullness of a given constellation (on the political terrain: Race, True Religion, Nation . . .): it aims precisely at obliterating the last traces of the ‘symptomal torsion’ which disturbs the balance of that constellation.(125)

The final step in Žižek’s articulation of a radical emancipatory political project, gestured toward by the differentiation between authentic and inauthentic or pseudo acts, reiterates and elaborates on his commitment to materiality and an ethical theory derived from the necessary failure of the symbolic. “Psychoanalysis is aware of a whole series of ‘false acts’: psychotic-paranoiac violent *passage à l’acte*, hysterical acting out, obsessional self-hindering, perverse self-instrumentalization – all these acts are not simply wrong according to some external standards, they are *immanently wrong*, since they can be properly grasped only as reactions to some disavowed trauma that they displace, repress, and so on”(126). Political acts can be figured in a similar manner: the authentic act must traverse the fantasy, must acknowledge the immanent failure of any attempt to locate social antagonism in positive content:

What we are tempted to say is that the Nazi anti-Semitic violence was ‘false’ in the same way: all the shattering impact of this large-scale

frenetic activity was fundamentally ‘misdirected’, it was a kind of gigantic *passage à l’acte* betraying an inability to confront the real kernel of the trauma (the social antagonism). So what we are claiming is that anti-Semitic violence, say, is not only ‘factually wrong’ (Jews are ‘not really like that’, exploiting us and organizing a universal plot) and/or ‘morally wrong’ (unacceptable in terms of elementary standards of decency, etc.) but also ‘untrue’ in the sense of an inauthenticity which is simultaneously epistemological and ethical, just as an obsessional who reacts to his disavowed sexual fixations by engaging in compulsive defence rituals acts in an inauthentic way. (126)

The authentic act must recognize any symbolic attempt to characterize social antagonism through particular content as an immanently inadequate effort to render a particular symbolic constellation coherent, to (re)locate the social antagonism that always blocks the process of symbolic identification from its culmination in identity.

For Žižek, the radical act is qualified by two features: it must ‘perform the impossible,’ and thereby retroactively rearticulate the very symbolic conditions from which it emerged, and second, it must ‘traverse the fantasy’ of the symbolic constellation from which it emerges, the fantastic disavowal by which the ideological edifice maintains its coherence and disavows the Real. The symbolic/symbolizable structures the discourses available to a given socio-historical constellation of community. As such, notions of identity, representation,



and politics must be limited by the terms available within a given symbolic constellation. Žižek concludes his first essay by demonstrating a widely accepted philosophical inauthenticity with respect to the political. “The ‘return to ethics’ in today’s political philosophy shamefully exploits the horrors of Gulag or Holocaust as the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious radical engagement. In this way, conformist liberal scoundrels can find hypocritical satisfaction in their defence of the existing order: they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so on, but every attempt to change things is denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable [ . . . ]”(127). This approach to politics stems from an implicit and untenable acceptance of the consistency of the current socio-historical symbolic constellation, and acceptance of the ethical viability of a modern liberal democratic political model.

*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* presents three rearticulations of the sphere of politics in an effort to relocate and revitalize points of resistance to an increasingly monolithic liberal democratic paradigm. At the same time, it reexamines the necessary but problematic notion of universality associated with the appropriative and imperialistic tendencies of modern European projects of colonization. Butler, Laclau and Žižek present several discrete levels at which the notion of contingent universality functions in politics, and certainly demonstrate that the notion of politics cannot function without some concept of universality. By contrast to Schmitt’s univocally universalistic notion of politics in modernity, a politics clearly inadequate to furthering the enlightenment project of universal

emancipation, and a politics inadequate to the theorization of a globalizing space and proliferating identities, *CHU* demonstrates a multivocal, collective, and communitarian approach to the theorization of politics. In my next chapter I will examine criticism of *CHU*, and suggest that such criticism tends to overlook the most productive implications of the text's dialogues.

## Chapter 3-1 – Limits and Quasi-transcendentals – Immanence through conflation?

In his essay “A Thinking Relationship,” Alberto Moreiras questions how, in *CHU*, Butler, Žižek and Laclau’s conceptualizations of universality relate mutually, and ponders the political productivity of their mutual subversion:

Is Žižek’s notion of the authentic act sufficiently similar to Laclau’s notion of decision and to Butler’s notion of cultural translation? No, in the sense that their relative identity is interrupted by the deadlock that prevents any manner of their response to the question they ask of one another, the question as to the end of subalternity, which is another way of asking about the full reconciliation of the social. But yes, because that very deadlock, the fissure or constitutive gap in their thinking, which their thinking thematizes, enables them to articulate their thinking in an antagonistic chain of equivalence or, indeed through translative performativity. [ . . . ] The book is internally blocked, as it cannot offer a response, beyond the question itself, to the question it elicits. (101-2)

Moreiras poses difficult and valuable questions; however, after acknowledging that his elaboration of the contained deadlock is an inadequate response to the text, he suggests that *CHU* “comes down to a question about the relationship of thinking, and the relation of thinking to politics”(102). His responses to this question, however, fail to acknowledge the text’s most innovative and provocative

implications for an overarching project to revitalize Left political discourse, a productive potential carried in its commitment to the accurate and non-generalized representation of each contributors' position, a commitment which is maintained and reinforced through the text's reiterative dialogical form.

Moreiras approaches *CHU* from a number of perspectives, with the overall intention of doing "something more than [to] summarize the constitutive (im)possibility of the book whose impact prompts these pages"(102). First, he offers the notion of "passible remainder" as a potential link between Butler's, Žižek's and Laclau's projects. Second, Moreiras revisits Schmitt's concept of the political as "the field of division between friend and enemy, to which [he adds] the thought of the nonfriend as passible remainder"(102). Third comes a 'direct' engagement with Butler, Žižek and Laclau's methods, and in his last section he "[retakes] the themes of the hegemony/subalternity relation, nonphilocentric politics, the passible remainder, and the play between the philosophical concept and the 'plane of immanence' that inscribes it"(102).

"[The] passible remainder is what eludes both life and death in any struggle between the two; in other words, it is that by which and through which any struggle between life and death, as well as any political struggle, happens. [ . . . ] It is pure irreducibility, the heterogeneity that rests or resists as passivity, that is as the potentiality of something (yet) happening, of an event. To anticipate a formulation: the passible remainder is the 'plane of immanence' of quasi-transcendentality"(103). Moreiras' introduction of this term, and particularly his

suggestion that it might characterize (locate) an overarching plane of immanence present in Butler, Žižek and Laclau's projects, makes clear his intention to uncover and theorize a space common to the text's three discrete articulations. What, specifically, is the passible remainder? Is it different from the Real? Is it similar to a Derridan *différance*? Is it similar to the hegemonic relation by which Laclau characterizes political struggle? Is it another name for a tendentially empty universal? Does this passible remainder credibly fulfill an unavoidable and critical aporia in *CHU*'s dialogue, one which undermines the project's intentions? I am suspicious, rather, that this passible remainder is a non-specific attempt to demonstrate an unsuggested theoretical convergence, one which does not substantially further or share *CHU*'s work.

In addressing the implications of globalization for Schmitt's concept of the political, Moreiras reiterates and further articulates his term:

The passible remainder, in the context of the division of the political field between friends and enemies, occupies the nonplace of the nonfriend – that which does not enter the sovereign relation but in relation to which any sovereign relation becomes possible. In the context of the division between absolute and relational sovereignty (and [Moreiras claims] that this latter division is the founding relation of the principle of hegemony in modernity), the passible remainder occupies the nonplace of subalternity – that is, that which can only experience the hegemonic articulation as domination and which is therefore beyond hegemony. To

think politically the relation of that which has no relation is to think deconstruction and subalternity as mutually supplementary instances. It is not a thinking of exclusion or of inclusion; it is not a thinking of translation but, rather, a thinking of the untranslatable excess; it is not a thinking of hegemony or of counterhegemony, although it can only think out of hegemony, because it thinks the modalities of presence and absence of everything that any given hegemonic articulation must erase in order to constitute itself as such; it is not a thinking of the friend or of the enemy but, rather, an a-philocentric thinking, indifferent to community, affirmative of everything that community elides. It is a thinking of the neutral and obscure war, capable, perhaps, of restoring the political against the political understood as the contemporary dispensation of sovereignty. *For all of that, Hegemony, Contingency, Universality [sic] is remarkably helpful, as we will now see. (108-109 my italics)*

To the extent that Butler provides an insightful exploration of the gap constitutive of and necessarily figuring in the inherently unstable process of identification, I agree that *CHU* is remarkably helpful. Likewise, to the extent that Laclau explores the implications of a competitive hegemonic relation he sees structuring all political decisions, and to the extent that Žižek articulates a radical challenge to historicity by locating the Real firmly within an unfixable Symbolic, *CHU* provides a useful and productive elaboration of several spaces potentially open to re-politicization. Unfortunately, I do not see the usefulness, with respect to *CHU*'s

particular political project (“formulating a new vision for the Left in terms of radical and plural democracy”(CHU inside leaf)), of the passible remainder.

Rather, the passible remainder seems potentially to undo or gloss over the nuanced and specific articulations Butler, Žižek, and Laclau provide.

Schmitt’s concept of the political figures the functioning of sovereignty in a specifically modern socio-historical context. For Schmitt, identity is constructed on the fundamental opposition between friend and enemy, and the perpetual ensuing threat of violence. As such, his concept of the political can work only in a recognition of perpetual and constituting antagonism/violence, an antagonism which explicitly excludes the possibility of any universalizing project of emancipation and perhaps, too, best excluded from any attempt to rearticulate a politics in/for globality. Moreiras suggests that “[if] humanity assumes the condition of the sovereign, then sovereignty stops being relational and becomes absolute”(106). This absolute sovereignty negates the very political relation Schmitt describes. How, though, can humanity assume the condition of sovereign? If there is one thing Butler, Žižek and Laclau agree on, it is the inevitably incomplete constitution of identity; would not the location of sovereignty in humanity require the realization of a universal identity? This very failure of identification is of primary importance to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of *homo sacer*, since it is the inherent inadequacy of any claim to sovereignty which ultimately excludes all humanity from sovereignty. In this sense, then, Agamben and Moreiras agree: a Schmittian concept of the political has (by its founding

gesture, always already) reached (established) its limit point or closure.

Surpassing this limit demands a renegotiation of the concept of antagonism, a renegotiation capable of recognizing the potential existence of competing but not mutually exclusive positions, an antagonism between what Schmitt might call friends, in which the potential for real violence is *not* always present.

Leo Strauss points out that “Schmitt undertakes the critique of liberalism in a liberal world”( *Concept of the Political* 107), and that he therefore necessarily fails to surpass the ‘systematics of liberal thought.’ Moreiras suggests that “[completing] Schmitt’s critique means restoring the political, now as a relationless relation in times of tendentially accomplished globalization”(“A Thinking Relationship” 107). If Schmitt’s critique of liberalism ultimately succeeds rather to *characterize* politics under a liberal paradigm, and if Agamben’s suggestion that the relegation of all subjects to *homo sacer* represents a point of culmination or closure of that modern paradigm is accepted, might it not be most productive to pursue a radical break from that specific concept of politics? This is to suggest that perhaps Agamben should be seen to complete Schmitt’s critique, not so much by exceeding some systematics of liberal thought, but by demonstrating the limit, the point that such a systematics cannot, in its specific form, surpass. Perhaps a post-modern or globalizing politics must depart (systematically) from the potential characterized by that Schmittian modern paradigm.



Agamben demonstrates the derivation of power over life as a juridical concept in the power of life afforded fathers over male sons in Roman law. “In Roman law, *vita* (life) is not a juridical concept, but rather indicates the simple fact of living or a particular way of life. There is only one case in which the term *life* acquires a juridical meaning that transforms it into a veritable *terminus technicus*, and that is in the expression *vitae necisque potestas*, which designates the *pater*’s power of life and death over the male son. [ . . . ] But what is valid for the *pater*’s right of life and death is even more valid for sovereign power (*imperium*), of which the former constitutes the originary cell” (“Form of Life” 152). The modern notion of sovereign power over life and death is a generalization of the terms of this originary juridical exception. The father’s power is extended first to the sovereign figure, then with the transition into modernity into a reified collective humanity as sovereign body. Simultaneously, the power over the life and death *specifically* over the male son becomes a more general sovereign power over the life and death of *every* subject or citizen. “Thus, in the Hobbesian foundation of sovereignty, life in the state of nature is defined only by its being unconditionally exposed to a death threat (the limitless right of everybody over everything) and political life – that is, the life that unfolds under the protection of the Leviathan – is nothing but this very same life always exposed to a threat that now rests exclusively in the hands of the sovereign”(152).

In Schmitt, the sovereign’s claim expresses itself by its capacity to defend the body over which its sovereignty is exercised against an identifiable enemy.

Although the hegemony of the modern nation-state tends to obscure the fact, the universalizing project of enlightenment humanism effectively, if paradoxically, removes the rationale by which the notion of sovereignty justifies its claim. With no identifiable enemy, the sovereign claim to power over life and death, that is over both social forms of life and bare life itself, loses its meaning. Schmitt also, however, points out that every political entity, every sovereign body, provides itself with the terms by which to recognize an internal enemy. “Whether the form is sharper or milder, explicit or implicit, whether ostracism, expulsion, proscription, or outlawry are provided for in special laws or in explicit or general descriptions, the aim is always the same, namely to declare an enemy”(Schmitt 47). The process by which the internal enemy is exposed produces a state of civil war; if Schmitt’s concept of the political is to prove at all useful as a tool by which to examine contemporary politics, it is only by reference to this state of civil war. Under conditions of globalization it is only the internal enemy that can be identified, and as such the only possible war is an internal or civil war, one which demonstrates the dissolution of the state as a cohesive and functioning political entity. The state without an external enemy against which it can differentiate itself must nonetheless produce an enemy. With the turn inward, the political functioning of the state is disrupted, and with the internal enemy being the only possible enemy in globality, Schmitt’s notion of the political is self-negated: every instance of sovereign decision disrupts or suspends political order. “Should that [friend/enemy] opposition erase itself, and war likewise,” Derrida

comments, “the regime called ‘politics’ loses its borders or its specificity” (*Politics of Friendship* 85).

Moreiras suggests that by supplementing the political with the passible remainder, Schmitt’s concept may enable us to “think politically the relation of that which has no relation”(108). Does supplementing Schmitt’s work further a project to restore the political? It is more productive, I would suggest, to allow Schmitt’s concept of the political its specificity. This is the project Agamben undertakes in *Homo Sacer*, demonstrating the culmination of Schmitt’s notion, and rendering clearly its particular inherent limits. Making clear the limit of a particular concept locates the threshold that a radical engagement with that concept must surpass. Schmitt’s concept is shaped by a particular socio-historical constellation. Rather than work toward translating that concept for use in a substantially transformed socio-historical constellation, it is more responsible, more ethical, to use it as a figure for reference, a failed (completed) project which may, nonetheless, provide productive insights for a project necessarily surpassing the limit of a preceding model. If, as Žižek proposes, an “act must be conceived of against the background of the distinction between the mere endeavor to ‘solve a variety of partial problems’ within a given field and the more radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of [a field]”(CHU 121), Moreiras’ passible remainder is an incomplete effort only at the first, less radical, element of an authentic act. If Moreiras’ project does blur the boundaries separating Butler, Žižek and Laclau’s projects through reinforcing untenable equivalences, it at the

same time diminishes the clear usefulness of each project. Moreiras provides an overarching or quasi-transcendent category which can only serve to limit the projects it embraces.

Moreiras comes closest to recognizing the more positive implications of *CHU* in his suggestion that Butler, Žižek and Laclau's main conceptual machines "[set] forth the possibility of a politics of respectively, historicism, historicity, and the state of history"(102). The critical gesture here, and one Moreiras spends the greater part of his essay undoing, comes with the express recognition that *CHU* contains three substantially different articulations, three discretely inflected emancipatory political visions. Each of the three projects, although they demonstrate overlapping 'theoretical allegiances,' derives from and is inflected by an understanding of theoretical roots and commitments specific to (and carefully articulated with respect to) each of the interlocutors particular interests:

Laclau, who continues to situate himself in the Gramscian tradition [ . . . ] [draws] his tools from an intellectual spectrum from Derrida and Lacan to Wittgenstein. Whereas Žižek most emphatically makes use of Lacanian theory to address [the category of antagonism], especially through recourse to 'the Real', he also makes use of Hegel, and offers reasons for eschewing the Derridan framework. Butler may be said to make use of a different Hegel, emphasizing the possibilities of negation in his work, along with Foucault and some Derrida, to consider what remains unrealizable in the discursive constitution of the subject. (*CHU* 2)

Moreiras proposes to “consider Butler’s translative performativity a call for a politics of radical historicism within the total terms of Hegemony, to consider Žižek’s notion of the authentic act an opening into a politics of historicity, and to borrow Giorgio Agamben’s notion of a ‘state of history’ to describe Laclauian politics”(123). In this statement, he recognizes three projects theorizing different spaces with respect to an overarching commitment to materiality. As I have repeatedly suggested, I find Moreiras’ quasi-transcendental notion of the passible remainder an inadequate tool by which to bridge the overarching implications of Butler, Žižek and Laclau’s dialogues. Moreiras searches for (or superimposes) a univocal consistency underlying the project: “to ground this philosophical relation as relation or, in other words, to ascertain the possibility of a common silent affirmation reciprocally linking personalistic and intensive features, the plane of insistence and the plane of consistency, we must find its plane of immanence”(127). *CHU* does not contain a unitary/univocal articulation of its relation to immanence. Of course it doesn’t. If any project of identification is bound to fail, what would be the theoretical or practical (praxical) value of articulating a necessarily inadequate univocal relation to immanence? If, as Moreiras suggests, “[quasi-transcendentality] does not refuse or replace the plane of immanence but constitutes it in its specificity”(127), it is seemingly indicated to recognize, in *CHU*, three discrete articulations of specifically constituted relations to immanence. The imposition of a unifying quasi-transcendental category, while not necessarily ‘wrong,’ can only achieve its

unifying intention by a blurring or suspension of the specificity of each articulations' relation to a plane of immanence.

When Moreiras states that the passible remainder “is in no way intended to one-up or improve on the political thinking of Butler, Laclau, and Žižek [ . . . ] [and that it] is more a matter of articulating their common plane of immanence by exposing their personal thoughts to their mutual relationship”(128), he seems disingenuous. How is this attempt to theorize a unity or equivalence between seemingly incommensurably distinct articulations not a demonstration of theoretical one-upmanship? *CHU*'s three contributors are “committed to radical forms of democracy that seek to understand the processes of representation by which political articulation proceeds, the problem of identification – and its necessary failures – by which political mobilization takes place, the question of the future as it emerges for theoretical frameworks that insist upon the productive force of the negative”( *CHU* 4). Emancipatory political projects are necessarily located and articulated in a relation to universality. This relation can be considered only by necessarily inadequate/partial projects of inquiry, projects that will always remain inadequate due to the limiting effects of representation, limiting effects which, however, must be contingently understood. Butler, Žižek and Laclau's reliance upon (or inability to transcend the use of) quasi-transcendental categories necessarily reiterates the representational limitations structuring their articulations.

## Chapter 3-2 – Politics of Plurality

In the incoercible differance the here-now unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely [*justement*], and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in *imminence and in urgency*: even if it moves toward what remains to come, there is the *pledge* [gage] (promise, engagement, injunction and response to the injunction, and so forth). The pledge is given here and now, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it. It thus responds without delay to the demand of justice. The latter by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional.

No differance without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now. (*Specters of Marx* 31)

How best to characterize the productivity of Butler, Laclau and Žižek's *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*? In his essay on the text, Simon Jarvis expresses his concern that "the writers of these dialogues disagree about much. If we knew what they shared, we should know more about what in their view is the Left"(3). Perhaps, however, Jarvis approaches the text backwards. Perhaps an examination of differences provides a key to the innovative rearticulation of the field of Left politics the text undertakes. Jarvis is certainly accurate in his observation that the contained dialogues do much to formulate and clarify the unavoidable differences stemming from each of the interlocutors' contributions. Jarvis locates the text's central agreement around "an idea that is subtle, of uncertain meaning, full of political resonance, difficult in the extreme to keep hold of, and whose consequences are hard to accurately delimit"(3). For Jarvis, the text's central inquiry is directed toward the potential political implications of a

reclaiming or rearticulation of a notion of universality. Jarvis' focus on the text's discrete mutually and reiteratively exclusive articulations of universality provides him with cause for concern.

What, however, if the text's most profound, if unexpected, implications stem from the very exclusive/particular/discrete/specifically inflected, negatively articulated, competing evocations of universality and their necessary place in political discourse(s)? What if the incommensurabilities described, clarified and reiterated throughout the text are an effort to compensate or accommodate for the necessary multiplicity or heterogeneity (heterogeneous experience/expression) of the sphere of politics? If contingency plays a necessary role in the constitution of any possible universality, are not multiple and contingent articulations of that universality a predictable and indicated outcome? Is not demonstrating the demand and possibility for this political plurivocity one of the primary functions of Butler, Žižek and Laclau's text? By way of contrast to Jarvis, concerned by the text's plurivocal approach to its subject, and Moreiras, whose critique attempts to encompass *CHU*'s differences within a broader quasi-transcendent category by which to demonstrate an overarching unity of purpose (I find this univocalizing approach disturbingly imperialistic/appropriative, counterproductive, theoretically regressive), I locate a more productive approach to the text in an examination of the specific political potential characterized by each contributor's articulation in its particularity. If political space is always constituted around an antagonism, and if politics involves hegemonic struggle over a multitude of issues, does it not



follow that the necessary and necessarily contingent place of universality should be articulated differently depending on the particular requirements of the struggle at hand?

What are the specific and irreducible political implications of Laclau, Butler and Žižek's projects? In response to this question, I must explore each contributor's work for its particular productivity, a productivity directly enabled by each articulated universality in its singularity. In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulates a methodological framework by which to approach the project of ethical reading/translation. While her project is directed specifically toward the field of Comparative Literature, her methodology is the product of an ongoing commitment to enabling the discursive presence of alterity, or subalternity, in discourse. In light of an increasingly dominant (and globalizing) liberal-democratic paradigm (which renders a traditional Leftist perspective subaltern), and as a result of a deepening crisis of identification in the Left (by which I mean to suggest an ongoing slippage from the relatively stable points of identity (such as class) around which the socialist democratic Left traditionally identifies), Spivak's methodology lends itself to a reading of *CHU* in direct and practical ways. While Spivak's figural approach to translation is a useful tool by which to examine *CHU*, it is important (to me) to avoid positing her project as yet another quasi-transcendental 'justification' for that text. Spivak's project does not provide a 'necessary' or 'structuring' framework by which to draw meaning from Butler, Žižek and Laclau's work. Rather, it gestures toward

the productive potential characterized by each of the contained projects in their specificity. This focus on the genuine apprehension of specificity in turn provides a useful tool by which to evaluate significant implications of what Moreiras labels 'a thinking relationship.'

Next, I will reexamine each contributor's commitment to materiality and to a rearticulation of the connectedness of their political projects to those notions of materiality. I will touch on the implications for materiality of each contributor's variously constituted (and apparently unavoidable) quasi-transcendentalism, and examine the relationship between quasi-transcendentalism, universalism, and the political. While each contributor expresses a suspicion of quasi-transcendental categories, the inescapable presence of these categories in the articulation of political claims might be seen as an effect of the specificity of each articulation. As such, does this inescapable quasi-transcendental structure limit, or does it delineate the implications of, a particular articulation?

Spivak's ethical approach to translation insists upon a committed attention to particularity. "What I am proposing," she suggests, "is not a politicization of [Comparative Lit.]. We are *in* politics. I am proposing an attempt to depoliticize in order to move away from a politics of hostility, fear, and half solutions"(4). *Death of a Discipline* vouches for her "longstanding sense that the logical consequences of our loosely defined discipline were, surely, to include the open-ended possibility of studying all literatures, with linguistic rigor and historical savvy. A level playing field, so to speak"(5). The new field, Spivak suggests,

“would work to make the traditional linguistic sophistication of Comparative Literature supplement Area Studies (and history, anthropology, political theory, and sociology) by approaching the language of the other not only as a ‘field’ language. [ . . . ] Indeed, [she] is inviting the kind of language training that would disclose the irreducible hybridity of all languages”(9) – the irreducible vitality of all languages; the irreducibility of the processes underlying and inflecting, transforming, destabilizing, all language.

The irreducible hybridity of language, and the ethical necessity of working to recognize those hybridities, demands a process-oriented approach to translation, and an approach which recognizes its own perpetual state of non-completion. Hybridity is unfixable; how, then, should it be studied? Spivak invokes, through Derrida, the notion of *teleopoiesis*, of ongoing imaginative (re)making: “[The philosophers of the future] already exist, something like the Messiah (for the teleiopoiesis [*sic*] we are speaking of is a messianic structure) whom someone addresses, here and now, to inquire when he will come. We are not yet among these philosophers of the future, we who are calling them and calling them the philosophers of the future, but we are in advance their friends and, in this gesture of the call, we establish ourselves as their heralds and precursors [ . . . ] This is perhaps the ‘community of those without community’”(Politics of Friendship 37). *Teleopoiesis* is ongoing. It is perpetual re-imagining. Yet it gestures toward the notions of collectivity and community, even community to come. How can the necessary work of translation, of an

ethical approach to the analysis of a collectivity be undertaken? Spivak proposes the figure. Analysis can focus on the figure as a momentary or flitting constellation. For Spivak, every act of reading is necessarily a process of translation, the process of evaluating a figured collectivity in its specificity and idiomaticity, and the unending process of re-figuring and re-reading. “The ghost dance does not succeed. It can only ever be a productive supplement, interrupting the necessary march of generalization in ‘the crossing of borders’ so that it remembers its limits”(Death 52). Spivak’s focus on the figure is one of the more radical elements of her project, since it insists on the instability of meaning: “[If the] logic of noncontradiction requires that what is irreducible is truth, not figure”(22), a focus on figure allows for a recharacterization of contradiction as undecidability or contingency, the momentary at best determinability of meaning. Laclau, in his first contribution to *CHU*, suggests the role played by a similar emphasis against truth for his political project: “The importance of this dissociation of truth from meaning for hegemonic analysis is that it enables us to break with the dependence on the signified to which a rationalist conception of politics would otherwise have confined us”(69).

A Hegelian notion of universality provides one of the most frequently contested figures in *CHU*. Initially, and as I have previously suggested, Butler presents a sampling of the different ways Hegel himself figures universality:

In Hegel’s Lesser Logic, Part One of his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), he links the reformulation of universality

with his critique of formalism. When he introduces the identification of universality with abstract thought in the section entitled 'Preliminary Conceptions' (paras 19-83), he proceeds by way of several revisions of the notion of universality itself. At first he refers to the product, the form, and the character of thought together as universal [ . . . ] He then proceeds to disaggregate and revise his definition, noting that '*thinking*, as an *activity*, is the *active* universal', and the deed, its product, 'what is brought forth is precisely the universal (para 20) [ . . . ] He adds to this set of revisions the notion that the subject, which operates through the pronomial 'I', is also the universal, so that 'I' is but another synonym and specification of universality itself [ . . . ] communality is one more form – although an external one – of universality [ . . . ]. (CHU 15-16)

Butler demonstrates that Hegel's notion of universality is not fixed, that he in fact uses it to show how, "in each instance when the universal is conceived as a feature of thought, it is by definition separated from the world it seeks to know"(17). In fact, Hegel uses multiple figurations of the notion of universality to demonstrate his conclusion that "not only is the thinking self fundamentally related to what it seeks to know, but the formal self loses its 'formalism' once it is understood that the production and exclusion of the 'concrete' is a necessary precondition for the fabrication of the formal. Conversely, the concrete cannot be 'had' on its own, and it is equally vain to disavow the act of cognition that delivers the concrete to the human mind as an object of knowledge"(18). This

explicit recognition of the role individual cognition plays in the mediation, the representation, by which any understanding of a concept (such as universality) is possible, gestures toward a recognition of the role contingency plays in the representation of such concepts. Contingency is an unavoidable effect of the process of symbolization. “In other words, it is not possible to cull ‘the theory of universality’ from [Hegel’s] text and offer it in discrete and plain propositions, because the notion is developed through a reiterative textual strategy. Not only does universality undergo revision in time, but its successive revisions and dissolutions are essential to what it ‘is’”(24).

Hegel’s ongoing reiterative refiguration of universality gestures by a sort of parallelism toward the productive potential of the reiterative form of Butler, Žižek and Laclau’s dialogues. By insisting on the limited usefulness of anything approaching a formally abstract concept, Hegel’s exposition of universality also makes a claim for the utility, if only momentary, of quasi-transcendent categories. Full transcendence could be possible (and useful) only with the possibility of a clear separation between empirical and transcendent spheres, between content and form. The connection to materiality, or empiricist link, is a necessary element in the constitution of an ethical politics; therefore, pure formalism can be of no use in the articulation or figuration of political projects. Hegel suggests that abstract universality is achieved through the separation of all particular content from the universal. His own articulation, on the contrary, is figural and concrete, which is to suggest that its articulation and demonstration relies on figuring the necessary,

if inadequate, connection of each concrete universality by reference to its particular contents. It is only by the figuration of the universal 'root' in particularity that any specific project can be articulated with respect to 'concrete' reality.

Butler locates the promise of universality in the figure of a "universality forged through the work of cultural translation"(20), and her contributions to *CHU* demonstrate a commitment to the reiterative articulation of how this work of cultural translation expands the space available to political discourse, thereby furthering the political potential for (universal) emancipation.

For Žižek, Hegel's concrete universality provides the tool by which to demonstrate the spaces in which the concrete universal notion of democracy undermine or destabilize an abstract notion of the same concept:

So the point is that [ . . . ]we are dealing with the multitude of configurations of the democratic society, and these configurations form a kind of Hegelian 'concrete universality' – that is to say, we are not dealing simply with different subspecies of the genus of Democracy, but with a series of breaks which affect the very universal notion of Democracy: these subspecies (early Lockean liberal democracy, 'totalitarian' democracy . . .) in a way explicate ('posit', are generated by) the inherent tension of the very universal notion of political Democracy. Furthermore, this tension is not simply internal/inherent to the notion of Democracy, but is defined by the way Democracy relates to its Other: not only its political

Other – non-Democracy in its various guises – but primarily that which the very definition of *political* democracy tends to exclude as ‘non-political’ (private life and economy in classical liberalism, etc.) While [Žižek] fully endorses the well-known thesis that the very gesture of drawing a clear line of distinction between the Political and the non-Political, of positing some domains (economy, private intimacy, art . . .) as ‘apolitical’, is a political gesture *par excellence*, [he] is also tempted to turn it around: what if the political gesture *par excellence*, at its purest, is precisely the gesture of separating the Political from the non-Political, of excluding some domains from the Political? (94-95)

For Žižek, the radical contingency of the tendentially empty space constituting the figuration (and refiguration) of the concrete universality of politics creates the space of possibility for any radicalizing project. Laclau figures the notion of universality with which he works against what he sees as a [Hegelian] quasi-transcendent overarching contingency. He insists on an impossible/uncrossable barrier between the particular claim and its universalization:

Let us assume that I participate in a demonstration for *particular* aims, in a strike for a rise in wages, in a factory occupation for improvements in working conditions. All these demands can be seen as aiming at particular targets which, once achieved, put an end to the movement. But they can be seen in a different way: what the demands aim for is not actually their



*concretely* specified targets: these are only the contingent occasion of achieving (in a partial way) something that utterly transcends them: the fullness of society as an impossible object which – through its very impossibility – becomes thoroughly ethical. The ethical dimension is what persists in a chain of successive events in so far as the latter are seen as something which is split from their own particularity from the very beginning. Only if I live an action as incarnating an impossible fullness transcending it does the investment become an *ethical* investment; but only if the materiality of the investment is not fully absorbed by the *act* of investment as such – if the distance between the ontic and the ontological, between *investing* (the ethical) and that in which one invests (the normative order) is never filled – can we have hegemony and politics (but, I would argue, also ethics). (84)

In this passage Laclau declares his commitment against a pervasive overarching (quasi-transcendental) contingency which Žižek insists upon. Simultaneously, Laclau locates his notion of universality concretely within in the scope of his project to articulate the conditions within which hegemony, and thus politics, function. This articulation of universality as instrumental in articulating hegemony is also inflected in a substantially different manner from that by which Butler figures her project of translation. *CHU* renders clear the process of reiterative negative differentiation by which each of the contributors locates the specificity of their particular project.

How, though, can Spivak's approach to reading for the irreducibility of figures demonstrate the overarching implications of the text as figured collectivity? How can the notion of the irreducible figure be rendered useful and productive for (and beyond) a thoughtful and nuanced reading of *CHU*? Spivak acknowledges (the inescapable) articulation of a quasi-transcendent category overarching her own reading/translative practices: "I have, perhaps foolishly, attempted to open the structure of an impossible social justice glimpsed through remote and secret encounters with singular figures; to bear witness to the specificity of language, theme, and history as well as to supplement hegemonic notions of a hybrid global culture with this experience of an impossible global justice" (*Imaginary Maps* 197). Here, again, the articulation of an overarching (if impossible) global justice. Spivak, just as Butler, Laclau and Žižek, cannot articulate a system without a gesture toward, the incorporation of, a notion of universality (or is it a universalizing notion?). Spivak provides " 'love' (a simple name for ethical responsibility-in-singularity)" (200), as an access-point to her reading practice. In her essay "Cultural Talks in the Hot Peace," Spivak expands this notion of love and ethical singularity:

[ . . . ] What deserves the name of love is an effort – over which one has no control yet at which one must not strain – that is slow, attentive on both sides [ . . . ], mind changing on both sides, at the possibility of an unascertainable ethical singularity that is not ever a sustainable condition. The necessary collective efforts are to change laws, relations of

production, systems of education, and health care. But without the mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact, nothing will stick.

One word on ethical singularity, not a fancy name for mass contact, or for engagement with the common sense of the people. It is something that may be described by way of the following situation, as long as we keep in mind that we are (a) phenomenalizing figures and (b) *not* speaking of radical alterity.

We all know that when we engage profoundly with *one* person, the responses – the answers – come from both sides. Let us call this responsibility. And “answer”ability or accountability. We also know, and if we don’t we have been unfortunate, that in such engagements, we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing. Yet on both sides, there is always a sense that something has not gone across. This is what we call the secret, not something that one wants to conceal, but something that one wants desperately to reveal in this relationship of singularity and responsibility and accountability. (340)

For Spivak, the place of communication enabled through love is ultimately an unapproachable and secret place. Love allows for a recognition that intercultural (and inter-discursive) communication cannot be reduced to equivalences. Ethical communication, an inescapable process in every genuine engagement, works through an ongoing commitment to recognizing differences, and in the certainty that it is impossible to adequately capture those differences.

Analysis focused on the figure allows for the articulation of a momentary/synchronic/instantaneous degree of systemic consistency. Privileging the figure also acknowledges inherent limits to the perpetually ongoing process of analysis. The work of analysis is never complete. Every figure represents a collectivity, the productive ethical implications of which rest in an explicit recognition of its temporary nature. The work of analysis is repetitive, reiterative, insists on its process-, rather than project-oriented nature. Love acknowledges the unknowable without ever abandoning the effort to communicate it.

Communication, like love, is a constitutively incomplete and evolving project. Love motivates communication. Communication works through a repetition of figures. Each repetition alters the figure it describes, articulating an increasingly specific but perpetually shifting/shifted focus for communication. Effective communication is about recognizing the productive potential of difference, of incommensurability, the expansion or broadening of meaning made possible only through a reiterative process *not* focused on demonstrating equivalences. Conversation is about approaching specificity, but the implications of that specificity must not be generalized beyond the (figural) context in which they are articulated.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe provide a useful elaboration of the difference between articulation and discourse. An articulation is “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice”(105), while a discourse

is “the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice [ . . . ]. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, [they] call *moments*”(105). In a statement demonstrating similarities with Spivak’s project, Mouffe and Laclau go on to point out that “if contingency and articulation are possible, this is because no discursive formation is a sutured totality and the transformation of the elements into moments is never complete”(106-107). There is an inescapable (essential) non-meeting between discourse and that which it seeks to represent. Again using terms that resonate with Spivak’s, Laclau and Mouffe move on to point out that their “analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. It affirms a) that every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence; and b) that any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning”(107). The Spivakian figure is similar to Laclau and Mouffe’s moment, in that neither figure nor moment can claim adequately to capture the ongoing unity or totality of the discourse of which it is a part. The totality of the discourse, in Laclau and Mouffe, as the adequate expression of alterity for Spivak, is impossible. The moment and figure are, nonetheless, necessary elements for the ongoing non-totalizing process of articulation. Discourse in its totality is unavailable or inaccessible, however it can be gestured toward in productive ways through the process of articulation. Similarly, identity

is inaccessible, unachievable. The process of figural identification, however, provides a useful and sensitive tool by which to examine the shifting and dynamic relations between collectivities.

As I have earlier suggested, Butler introduces the notion of universality into *CHU* through a carefully figurative elaboration of Hegel's articulation of the notion. Butler's demonstration of the reiterative development and evolution of the notion in Hegel's work functions in a couple of ways. First, it demonstrates Butler's attention to detail; her own theoretical project works out of an awareness of the contingent originary articulations of the notion she explores. Butler works from a notion of universality derived from a particular Hegelian figuration of universality; it is crucial to recognize her projects claim to *a* universality, rather than *the* universality. Second, if Hegel is justified/justifiable in approaching elements of his philosophical projects through variously figured and at times incompatible articulations of a notion, is there any reason why Butler, Žižek, and Laclau should not undertake a similarly multi-faceted project?

Butler outlines her commitment to articulating a universality productive for broadening the potential for meaningful communication between communities, and for expanding the range of representable subject positions within a dominant discourse. Enabling a proliferation of the available positions from which claims to universality might be stated is her primary interest. Laclau articulates an empty universality, over which various representative competitive claims vie for hegemony. Laclau is primarily focused on describing the context

within which universality plays a role in shaping the way politics functions. Žižek enlists universality in a project intended to undermine and destabilize the notion of a reified politics, to demonstrate the self-canceling closure which is the inescapable dialectical obverse of the concept of the political. If the notion of contingency (or the contingency of notion) is accepted, is there any reason to expect three discrete theoretical projects to work with a single notion of universality? Although the answer to this question is, I think, a fairly clear “No, of course their articulations of the notion should not be identical,” what should the reader make of all the quibbling, the argument, the nitpicking over the particular notion of universality that comprises the majority of each of the interlocutors contributions to this text?

How do Butler, Žižek and Laclau frame their relationship? “[They] are all three committed to radical forms of democracy that seek to understand the processes of representation by which political articulation proceeds, the problem of identification – and its necessary failures – by which political mobilization takes place, the question of the future as it emerges for theoretical frameworks that insist upon the productive force of the negative”(CHU 4). Radical forms of democracy should be examined as figures. Each contributor’s particular radicalization of the potential characterized in the concept of the political undergoes a process of specification and reactive evolution as the text progresses. CHU demonstrates the very processes of representation by which political articulation proceeds: by the productive forces of the negative. Not only does each

contributor fall back upon elements of their colleagues' work as a means by which to articulate their own project in its specificity, but the reiterative process of negative differentiation is, in each contributor's case, located and articulated against their mutual and specific disagreements. As Žižek points out, however, his difference with his two colleagues' positions "is more difficult than it may appear: any direct attempt to formulate it via a comparison between our respective positions somehow misses the point"(91). Further down on the same page Žižek speaks more directly to where this point might be located:

Another introductory remark: it is quite probable that a counterclaim could sometimes be made that in my dialogue with Butler and Laclau I am not actually arguing against their position but against a watered-down popular version which they would also oppose. In such cases I plead guilty in advance, emphasizing two points: first – probably to a much greater degree than I am aware – my dialogue with them relies on shared presuppositions, so that my critical remarks are rather to be perceived as desperate attempts to clarify *my own* position via its clear delimitation; secondly, my aim – and, as I am sure, the aim of all three of us – is not to score narcissistic points against others, but – to risk an old-fashioned expression – to struggle with the Thing itself which is at stake, namely, the (im)possibilities of radical political thought and practice today. (91)

The (im)possibilities of radical political thought, and they are most certainly plural, can only be accurately and progressively articulated through an



ongoing and reiterative process of negative differentiation. *CHU*'s dialogical form demonstrates each contributor's commitment to engage with the specific elements of their colleagues' projects that demonstrate the specific difference of that project from their own. In any event, *CHU* provides a useful delineation of each contributor's position with respect to radicalizing politics. A more significant realization is that each articulation is specifically laid out by reference to its difference from others (might this be seen to articulate the functioning of a mutually acknowledged subalternity?). Most important, while none of the contributors' concede any element of their project, each remains committed to the ongoing clarification of their articulation, the ongoing effort to share/communicate the specificity of their project with/to their colleagues. Performativity theory is not a *fait accompli*, a complete and wholly unified model. Neither can hegemony theory posit its referenceless and totalizing ability to characterize all political relations. Even Žižek's demands for a radical messianic break can only be articulated by reference to others' political projects.

To return now, however briefly, to identification's necessary failure to successfully and completely interpellate any identity, a failure that provides a necessary grounding point for each contributor's political articulation. Spivak provides a framework for reading which acknowledges the inevitable limits structuring communication. While there are, no doubt, significant differences between the process of identification by which an individual/citizen/subject undertakes identification and the process by which a concept identifies with its

'thing,' each process is necessarily restricted in its adequate expression by a properly linguistic limit. Although this limit, which might be seen ultimately to cripple any linguistic endeavour, can not rule out the ultimate incommensurability between any communication and its intention, Spivak proposes a means by which to (temporarily/momentarily/instantaneously) overcome/surpass this limit. In the final section of this thesis I return to explore the productive implications of *CHU*'s dialogue with respect to some of the conditions constitutive of globalization. Is a 'politics of plurality,' a genuine and committed dialogue between figured singularities, a practical/useful way by which to approach and re-evaluate the concept of the political as it is renegotiated in conditions of emerging globalization?

## Conclusion

Language is an inherently unstable medium. As such, the expression of any concept must be perpetually renegotiated to reflect the shifting conditions of its emergence. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* demonstrates several levels at which the ongoing and reiterative process of delineating contextually specific political projects must be understood, and also reinforces an awareness of the limitations structuring the applicability of any sufficiently specific conceptual articulation. Alberto Moreiras proposes “to consider Butler’s translative performativity a call for a politics of radical historicism within the total terms of Hegemony, to consider Žižek’s notion of the authentic act an opening into a politics of historicity, and to borrow Giorgio Agamben’s notion of a ‘state of history’ to describe Laclauian politics”(“A Thinking Relationship” 123), and he seems to locate a crisis of the concept of the political in the clearly and reiteratively established specificity separating each contributor’s political articulation from those of their colleagues. Moreiras’ response to what he views as a crisis takes the form of the ‘passible remainder,’ by which he means to iterate a unity underlying Butler, Žižek and Laclau’s projects, and through which he attempts to pinpoint a necessarily singular ‘plane of immanence’ within which an overarching Left politics might emerge. The most significant flaw in Moreiras effort lies in this attempt to unify, to explicate the implications of, each of the

text's contained articulations of universality into a singular and all-encompassing narrative. If such a unified narrative was the contributors' intention, then the text would have been published in a more traditional collaborative form, with each of the contributor's names attached to a text in which their particular contributions were undifferentiated/unlabelled/unified.

I prefer, using something like a Spivakian reading, to see *CHU* as suggestive of a new model by which to explore the heterogeneous implications of politics, a new model by which to understand the shifting (globalizing) conditions within which any claim to ethical politics must emerge. 'Within' is perhaps the key word in this last sentence, since it always remains impossible to conceive of a concept of the political without implicit limits. This condition of finitude, one apparently restricting any conceivable political articulation, is suggestive of a constitutive paradox hindering the expression of one valid and univocal universality, and can be seen as a stumbling block upon which projects of Enlightenment humanism and traditional Left politics fail.

*CHU* does, however, demonstrate a fundamental collective commitment, and that commitment takes the form of an ongoing and overarching ethical connection to materiality. I would like to insist, against Moreiras and others, that *CHU*'s articulation of specific differences, its recognition of irreconcilable antagonism, the very differential specificity constituting Butler, Žižek and Laclau's political projects, simultaneously broadens the space within which Left dialogue emerges and embraces the vital competitive and argumentative form in

which that dialogue takes place. *CHU* approaches its stated project, “to redefine the Left/Right distinction – which constitutes the crucial dynamic of modern democracy” (*CHU* leaf), through the demonstration of a type of solidarity that might accurately be conceived as an unfixated collectivity. Since a substantial segment of the text is devoted to exploring the problematic nature of identification and representation, it seems necessary to explore how the three contributors imagine their mutual relationship, and how this relationship recognizes or reconstitutes (represents) a viable Left politics

Speaking of the Italian workers’ movement over the last quarter of a century, Marco Revelli points out a paradox: “[the] working class – the factor par excellence for contestation of the existing order of things – seems to have adopted as its principal weapon practices of preservation of the status quo, staticness, rigidity, and *resistance*, while, on the other hand, change proteiformity, and speed – the grand myths of modernity – have to all intents and purposes become the attributes of capital [ . . . ]. In short, the essence of the ‘movement’ seems to have been *immobility*” (“Worker Identity in the Factory Desert” 113), an insistence upon a fixed identification with the homogenizing notion of ‘the worker. By contrast, Revelli gestures toward a much richer reading of the factory as socio-political context:

Here too we have a wide-ranging series of life experiences, coming from the most diverse social origins, and all flowing together into one single point: the factory of the early 1970s, the place that laid the basis not only

for political meaning, but also for underlying motivations, shared values, and the ability to read society and orient one's life. At the moment the workers entered the factory, the Babel of languages and different ways of experiencing life became somehow composed, taking on a choral dimension, and becoming to all intents and purposes a collective culture.

(116)

The labour crisis in Italy during the early 1980s functioned around the suppression of this diversely constituted collectivity, on an implicit acceptance or assumption (on the parts of both labour and capital) of the worker as a homogeneous entity dissociated from the specific material conditions of its constituent singularities. "This [Workers'] project was defeated – precisely – by a process that was equal and contrary; it was defeated by a radical metamorphosis of capital, which belied its nature as concrete and 'static' (as an ensemble means of production) and reposed itself as money and abstract knowledge"(119). This example concretely demonstrates the failure of constituted identity for emancipatory politics. The workers' domination by hegemonic capital stems, in this case, from their failure to think process, their inability to recognize the unavoidably, the materially, shifting nature of their collective identity.

While momentary fixity is a condition structuring and inherent to all use of language, the bleeding of this fixity backwards through the symbolizing process, from signifier back toward the signified, is unjustifiable. This fixity or reification is a function of the symbolizing process itself. Although failure of

representation is to some degree an unavoidable element of discourse, it must be recognized and accounted for as such. Representation as a necessarily signifying process can only approach, and never successfully capture, the thing it describes. Under debate in *CHU* is the characterization of the gap separating any thing from its symbolization (or representation), and the ways by which a necessary connection to material conditions can be acknowledged and substantiated for Left politics.

In his essay “Unrepresentable Citizenship,” Augusto Illuminati gestures toward a utopic reconception of the political, one which “would involve a refusal of representation,” a reinscription of the material into the political in which “the not-yet-represented (which searches in lobbyist fashion for representation) and the radical refusal of representation [coexist]”(168), a politics in which dominated and dominant elements of society continually renegotiate their representational presence. Illuminati proposes a principle of community which “distributes singular beings, that is, finite beings, like others among themselves. Politics in a strong sense is the trace of the ecstatic communication of singularities, wherein their being-common manifests itself in an appearing together, in reciprocal exposition. The community is not the collective sum or preliminary essence of individuals, but the communication of singular separated beings that only by means of the community exist as such; it is a being *in* common and not a *common being*”(172). While I find Illuminati’s broader notion of a non-representational politics problematically utopic, his exploration of community does provide a

useful step toward the notion of collectivity at work in *CHU*: “Community is a community of others, their being-together more than relating to each other: ‘being-together is alterity,’ the arrival of the new, the heterogeneous in time and space”(173). Considered in conjunction with the claimed failure of representation, this notion of community excludes any concept of the political symbolizable in language. Failure is the inevitable outcome of using a fixed or instantial (figural) system of representation to articulate an uncontrollable temporal instability, a shifting constitution. Language is static, while the singularities it describes can never cease in their temporal transformation.

If, as I would suggest is the case in *CHU*, the process of representation is focused on the elaboration of singularity and particularity, on the specific articulation of the discrete singularities comprising a collectivity, representation inevitably still fails. How significant, though, is this failure? Does it really negate the functioning of the political? Or does it in fact constitute a politics? Returning for a moment to Revelli’s location of the failure of Italian labour, is that failure not precisely located in an abstraction of individual’s material conditions, and is that abstraction not enabled through inattention to specificity? Perhaps a reiterative insistence on the particularity of specific connections to materiality is a critical element of an emancipatory politics. A potentially emancipatory, if necessarily imperfect, politics is expressible through a commitment to the genuine appreciation of singularities within non-reified collectivities. It is with the acceptance of fixity that this emancipatory potential breaks down.



In his second contribution to *CHU*, Laclau lays down a compelling argument for representation in politics:

Why is a relation of representation necessary in the first place? As I have argued in other works, because at a certain point decisions are going to be taken which affect the interests of somebody who is materially absent from it. And, as I have also argued, representation is always a double movement from represented to representative and from representative to represented – this latter movement again allows us to see the emergence of a process of universalization. [ . . . ] The relation of representation [ . . . ] becomes a vehicle of universalization and, as universalization is a precondition of emancipation, it can also become a road to the latter. In the conditions of interconnection which exist in a globalized world, it is only through relations of representation that universality is achievable.

(212)

This brief explication of the function of representation is useful, but overstates his case. For Laclau, (hegemonic) politics is the process by which various representations vie for universality. Although this last passage is perhaps consistent logically, it fails to acknowledge adequately a perpetual linguistic/symbolic instability, an instability which guarantees the perpetual inadequacy of representation (and thus the ongoing usefulness of the concept of hegemonic politics), and which in effect rules out the achievability of universality he suggests. If universality is achievable (it's not, and does not need to be to be

useful and productive), then it is achievable only within a characterizable finitude. Unfortunately, although each of the contributors to *CHU* would agree to a type of finitude as necessarily following from materialism, this statement of achievable universality is symbolizable only in language, a tool which is tremendously productive through its flexibility (instability), and at the same time inadequate as a result of its instability (flexibility). Laclau himself captures the essence of this instability: “Only if I fully accept the contingency and historicity of my system of categories, but renounce any attempt to grasp the meaning of its historical variation conceptually, can I start finding a way out of [the false alternative ‘ahistorical transcendentalism/radical historicism’]. Obviously this solution does not suppress the duality transcendentalism/historicism, but at least it introduces a certain *souplesse*, and multiplies the language games that it is possible to play within it”(201). Finite knowledge is knowledge which reflexively acknowledges its inescapable contingency and historicity. Combined with the previous passage, this passage clarifies the degree to which universality is achievable: only on a contextually contingent basis. Notions of contingency and historicity, then, lend a particular kind of characterizable and politically useful specificity to the unstable process of symbolization, and thereby expand the limits of the political/representational imaginary.

In “Weak Thought between Being and Difference,” Adelino Zanini reformulates the modern conditions in which hegemony functions:

Any philosophical project that has sought some form of human liberation from limitation has had to confront a double crisis: on one hand, the ungovernability of the object that it helped to create, and on the other hand, the insubordination of the subjects that often have anticipated its development. Thus the more the modern condition has expressed a high level of socialization and rationalization, the more it has generated 'sites' of difference, which have withered not due to any conditions but due to relations – not with respect to the power that constitutes them, but with respect to the power that dominates them. On the other hand, then, in this residual formation and this multiplication of powers, the completion of the cycle is transformed into a continual deferral. The modern is a constant residue of being, and difference expresses power and generates history as residue. (53)

Difference expresses power. Any emancipatory project, then, must realize power through enabling the expression of difference. Zanini recognizes the promise of difference in a Heideggerian understanding of “the ontological difference between being and the existent. Being is not; it occurs, temporally. Toward being we grasp a recognition that is always a leave-taking. [ . . . ] There is no presence to being, but only a remembrance. Thinking being is thinking the canon, not the exception or the illumination”(55). The expression of difference must surpass the artifact that is 'being,' and strive instead to enable the expression of the existent, the exception. If, as Butler suggests, a politically viable universality will have to be

approached through a project of intercultural translation, the notion of translation requires some expansion. How can universality (paradoxically) function in the expression of difference? Is it possible to reformulate universality without an accompanying assumption of equivalence? An understanding of the implications of performativity, which is very much a theory intended to articulate linguistic/symbolic connections (and disconnections) between being and the existent, between the 'canonical' rule and its unpredictable and myriad potential exceptions, helps to expand the seeming paradox. Performativity gestures toward the ways in which "we are fundamentally dependent on language to say and understand what is true, and that the truth of what is said (or represented in any number of ways) is not separable from the saying [ . . . ] [Critically, however, language] will not only build the truth that it conveys, but it will also convey a different truth from the one that was intended, and this will be a truth about language, its unsurpassability in politics"(279). This observation imparts an exceptional quality (which Zanini suggests is constitutive of difference in the existent) to linguistic expression. Performativity theory suggests that language cannot help but express difference, and elaborates on the ways in which this occurs. If any expression inevitably invokes incommensurable difference, then I would like to reformulate Butler's suggestion that if "universality is to prove good under conditions of hybrid cultures and vacillating national boundaries, it will have to become a universality forged through the work of cultural translation"(CHU 20). Rather, universality must be forged through an ongoing

commitment to the work of pursuing *communication* between cultures.

Translation, it seems to me, implies commensurability and a definite project, while communication suggests a two way dialogue. Although material finitude must be accepted, it is at the same time crucial to perpetually acknowledge the inadequacy of its symbolization.

For Butler, an emancipatory politics requires a broadening of the potential sites of identification from which representational political claims can be spoken. Her project demands a renegotiation of the terms of inclusivity/exclusivity structuring politics, one which recognizes the inevitable shifting or transformation underlying every expression of identity. According to Schmitt's concept, political difference is manifested in the friend/enemy distinction. If difference is as omnipresent as performativity theory suggests, then Schmitt's binary is useless: existence (as opposed to being) can be expressed only through acknowledging difference.

This very recognition provides a ground for the mantra Derrida works through in his *Politics of Friendship*:

‘ “Friends, there are no friends!” cried the dying sage;

“Enemies, there is no enemy” shouts the living fool that I am.’

A moment ago, we were saying that I can call the enemy. The friend too. Theoretically, I can talk to both. But between talking *to them* and speaking *of them* there is a world of difference. In the apostrophe, there are first of all the friends *to whom* the dying sage was talking, and

the enemies *whom* the living fool addresses. This is in each case the first part of the sentence, the vocative moment of the interjection. Then come the friends and enemies – the second part of the sentence – *of whom* the sage and the fool speak, *on the subject* of whom they pronounce a verdict. On the subject of whom something is said in the form of assertion, predication, judgement [sic]. And as if by chance, from the moment they are spoken of instead of being spoken *to*, it is to say that they are no longer, or not yet, there: it is to register their absence, to *record* [*constater*] after having *called*. [ . . . ] One speaks *of them* only in their absence, and *concerning* their absence. (172-3)

Butler's project expands the potential for a politics of presence through shifting/ broadening the terms within which alterity/difference is representable. Meaningful communication, and thus meaningful representation, can be achieved only through a process of speaking to, and not speaking of, an other. For Butler, an ethical politics can be negotiated only with the inclusion of alterity, only when the imaginary is capable of acknowledging alterity without reifying it in an exterior and discrete space. Alterity must be representable, and representation is undertaken through language; however, Butler suggests, "language will not be the empty vessel through which [transparent reality] will be conveyed"(CHU 279). Language is always imbued with excess meaning, meaning which unavoidably inflects representation. It is this very excessive quality of representation that necessitates the Spivakian/Derridan commitment to *teleopoiesis*, to reading and to

knowing through an ongoing (and perpetually inadequate/incomplete) process of creative re-imagining (refiguration); only by such a commitment can politics accommodate (embrace/recognize/know) the universality of difference.

The current crisis of Left politics, its increasingly dominated manifestation in a contemporary hegemonic liberal-democratic political model, can be located in its inability/incapacity to register the transforming/globalizing conditions of its existence. Any politics comprises a non-delimitable series of what Laclau terms hegemonic competitions, which is to suggest that the very terms within which political discourse functions are unavoidably renegotiated to account for shifts which take place not in material conditions, but in the representation or symbolization of those conditions. In his initial contribution to the text, Žižek examines the assumptions underlying politics: “My claim is thus that when Butler speaks of the unending political process of renegotiating the inclusions/exclusions of the predominant ideological universal notions, or when Laclau proposes his model of the unending struggle for hegemony, *the ‘universal’ status of this very model is problematic*: are they providing the *formal* co-ordinates of *every* ideological structure or *today’s* (‘postmodern’) *specific* political practice which is emerging after the retreat of the classical Left” (106)?

A key recognition for the dialogues in *CHU* resides in rendering clearly (and systematically) the implications of contingency. To this end, Žižek insists against a passage to ‘true insight’; his particular location of universality in the ineffable gap separating the symbolic from the Real, and his insistence on

locating the Real within the symbolic, demand a perpetual reflexivity, by which various articulations address the conditions of their emergence. Radicality can be achieved (limits surpassed) only through such a heightened reflexivity, and the authentic act accrues its radicalizing potential only through a retroactive recognition of the limit it exceeds. Put another way, radical political promise demands a recognition of the meta-discursive structures limiting the current figuration of the symbolizable. Žižek warns against the mere substitution of one essentialism for another, and locates the critical vitality of any articulation in an awareness of the conditions of its emergence.

Globalization is characterized by movement. The increasing ease and speed with which populations, corporations and information move render the characteristic problems of reified representation apparent. An increasingly hegemonic economy, and a seemingly illimitable proliferation of identities undermine the consistency of a static Schmittian concept of the political. In fact, the movement and instabilities associated with globalization illustrate the formal inadequacy of Schmitt's concept. Not only is his concept an inadequate means by which to characterize contemporary politics, but it *was always already inadequate*, even as a model by which to understand the limits of the modern politics it sought to characterize. If, as Agamben suggests, the limit of Schmitt's concept can be located in the concentration camp and the universalization of biopolitical subjectivity, and if the originary emergence of this limit can be traced back precisely to the 'modern' relocation of sovereignty from the figure of the



monarch into the People, is it possible to locate the failure of this politics in its originary figuration? The failure of modern politics, as figured by Schmitt, can be partially located in the failed project to universalize sovereignty; further, however, this failure also demonstrates an inadequately articulated understanding of the contingent function of universality in relation with politics. The modern relocation of sovereignty should be characterized more accurately as the abstraction of sovereignty, of its break from any meaningful connection to the material conditions of its emergence. The universal People (a singularity), as the location of sovereignty, is irrevocably non-identifiable with the people (a shifting collectivity).

How, though, are the implications of this paradigmatic failure of identification taken into account in a process of renegotiating and rearticulating politics? *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* explores this question in several ways. It is absolutely the case that each of the contributors addresses a particular register of the gap separating signifier from signified, representation from represented, identification from identity. The exploration of the gap separating language from its object (or politics from materiality) is crucial.

More importantly, however, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* gestures toward (figures) a model for a necessarily process-oriented and plurivocal politics of presence, a politics in which each contributor demonstrates a commitment to meaningful and ongoing communication with their colleagues. Is dialogue a crucial element of this work? *CHU's* multiple dialogues (which I

would insist should be considered dialogues and not tri-alogues) demonstrate each contributor's three part commitment to the project. Butler, Laclau and Žižek are all prolific authors, and each has published extensively on the progression/evolution of their individual theoretical projects. The first and most obvious element of *CHU*'s project involves the reiteration and clarification of the specific nature of each contributor's articulation of potentially emancipatory politics. As I have suggested however, each individual project can be examined in much more depth in other texts. Not only does each contributor specify the particularity of their own project by way of differentiating it from those of their colleagues', but each acknowledges the particular inflection of theoretical/philosophical tools underlying their individual efforts. Fascinatingly, the three contributors work with (and rely upon) re-inflected or specifically nuanced aspects of their colleagues' methodologies, which marks unavoidably the presence of contingency in the theoretical application of concepts. A second commitment each author brings to this project can be located in the genuine and engaged two-way communication that characterizes the text's debates. Despite readily (increasingly) evident incompatibilities (incompatibilities which *CHU* cannot fail to emphasize), each author works incessantly to further clarify their methods in response to colleagues' queries and criticisms. These dialogues do a great deal to pinpoint the crucial differences separating each project.

A third aspect of each contributor's commitment to the project is demonstrated by their proximity, and this sharing of space marks the text's most

productive and truly political gesture. If a contemporary crisis of Left politics can be associated with the Left's inflexibility, its inability to account for the instability of traditional and fixed reference points, *CHU* responds by embracing difference, by rearticulating the relation between difference and exclusion in a manner that can only broaden Left discourse. While each contributor maintains a specific and carefully articulated ethical commitment to materiality, each also acknowledges the instrumental instability of the relation between language and its object; contingency is a political tool.

Globalization demands an increasingly adaptable politics, a politics of presence and a politics capable of recognizing quickly and radically transforming collectivities (national, ethnic, racial, class, gender). *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* provides a model for a process by which difference can be simultaneously acknowledged and examined in a respectful and supportive (and rigorously critical) environment, a model which explicitly demonstrates that the recognition of differences need not rule out (in fact demands) the figuration of productive, genuinely plurivocal, transformative, and vital collectivities. Non-differentiated co-authorship is increasingly common, and demonstrates a positive commitment to a communitarian/collectivity oriented sensibility. Texts such as Giovanna Borradori's *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (billed as "in many ways the first real engagement between Derrida and Habermas" (leaf), too, gesture toward a potential productivity through presence, a collectivity-oriented sensibility, albeit one

mediated (screened?) by Borradori. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*'s particular contribution to revitalizing political process lies precisely in its (unmediated) engagement with the presence of difference, in each contributor's willingness and commitment to sharing particularity, to and emphatically embracing their simultaneous singularity and/in collectivity.

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