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The Flesh, which is not One: Meditations on Multiplicity and its Populist Arrest

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Abstract

By tracing the political resonances of the concept of the ‘real’ in its different theorizations -particularly in relation to singularity and border, and its opposite, multiplicity and entanglement- in this paper we highlight the existing relation between epistemological frameworks and political imaginaries or regimes/horizons. In order to do undertake this task, we offer a critical conceptual triangulation between Chantal Mouffe’s account of the current ‘populist moment’, and the theorization of the real in the work of Jacques Lacan and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. By mobilizing a dialogue between psychoanalysis and (post)phenomenological thinking, we suggest that if the real is not conceptualized as an ontological negativity that the empty signifier needs to tame, but as an aesthetic, embedded and embodied experience of multiplicity, we can think beyond the logics of antagonistic antagonism and instead embrace the ethos of fleshy relationality that informs our co-dependence, precarity and vulnerability.

Introduction

In *For a Left Populism* (2018) Chantal Mouffe rightly claims that we live a “populist moment”. In her view, this moment is characterized by “the emergence of manifold resistances against a politico-economic system that is increasingly

perceived as being controlled by privileged elites who are deaf to the demands of other groups in society” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 18). Her program is to capture this unrest and re-articulate the emergence of ‘the people’ from within a leftist imaginary. Distancing ourselves from those institutional analyses that focus on the supposed ‘failure’ of political institutions to absorb unfulfilled demands (Muller, 2017; Mudder & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; 2017), in what follows we would like to pursue a different line of argument. Our claim is that rather than showing a failure, populism shows the ‘success’ of a particular type of epistemology. As we know, the Brexit vote aimed primarily to eliminate free movement from Europe to the UK. In the same way, Trump promised and delivered open repression of migrants arriving to the USA/Mexico border. Austria’s plans to ‘clamp down’ on refugees and the refusal of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland to set refugee quotas, are also examples of a staging of a populist, antagonistic logic. Indeed it is fair to say that we today live ‘inside’ a grammar where material and symbolic borders, and the exclusion they secure, are seen as preconditions for the formation of collective meanings, national/ethnic identity formation, and guaranteeing social order. We will call this grammar the epistemology of the ‘One’, whose roots are embedded in Kantian-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Contemporary social and political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have mobilized these populist premises while deploying Lacanian psychoanalysis to understand the inescapable nature of social antagonism and the relation between social order and enjoyment (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). Throughout their work, they argue against notions

of ‘the common’ or ‘multiplicity’, asserting the need to acknowledge negativity and social antagonism, as they exist “in the hegemonic nature of the social order” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 55). By doing so, and by embracing a version of the real as dichotomist negativity, we would like to argue, they have reduced the space of multiplicity and indeterminacy to a dichotomy of Schmittean friend/enemy antagonism (Arato, 2013).

Our critique of this epistemology of the ‘One’ and its populist arrest will be guided by a close look at Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theorizing of the ‘flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964a; 1964b; 1968). As we will see in what follows, in his account, the ‘real’ of intersubjectivity is defined as a plural intercorporeal field of intertwined ‘visible-seers’ that are *of* the world as much as *in* the world, and that are of the same ‘element’—flesh—of the other visible-seers that populate it; visible-seers that are open to the others, to the world, and to the visible and the invisible as well as to the others that see and perceive as much as they do. We claim that this portrait of an intercorporeal and open multiplicity could inspire the rethinking of social and psychoanalytic concepts that, in their conventional understanding, tend to affirm singularity and repression. This irreducibly plural and intercorporeal relationality (Butler, 2015) of the social world does not match well with the simplified—i.e. dichotomized—view of the relational field of political identities that Laclau and Mouffe offer. Without wanting to reduce complex and diverse political scenarios to single conceptual categories, our aim in this paper is to highlight the existing relation between epistemological frameworks and political imaginaries or regimes/horizons. More specifically, we would like to trace the political resonances of the concept of the ‘real’ in its different theorizations, particularly in relation to singularity and border or

frontier (as central in contemporary populists discourses), and its opposite, multiplicity and entanglement, that see populism or any nominalist project that aims at 'conceptual singularity', as the cancellation of heterogeneity (Palacios, 2019). In our view, both, key sociological and psychoanalytic concepts have been complicit in the theorizing of alterity and multiplicity as threatening: Durkheim's inaugural lectures on the sacred and the profane and the need to evacuate anomie from social life and Freud's theorizing of narcissism and the splitting of the Ego are good examples of how these disciplines have contributed to the strengthening of an ontology that erects a barrier between the self and the other, while simultaneously fostering an epistemology based on subject/object dualisms (Palacios, 2004; Palacios, 2019; Chritchley 1998; Butler, 2006).

In order to do undertake this task, we will attempt a critical conceptual triangulation between the way in which the current 'populist moment' is accounted for by Mouffe, and the theorization of the real in the work of Jacques Lacan and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Our aim is to scrutinize the theoretical and political implications of an understanding of the relational dimension of subjectivities, taking into account the differences introduced by assuming the social to be 'One' or to be irreducibly multiple, even irreducible to the antagonist relation—or agonist, in its more recent formulation in Mouffe's work. By mobilizing a dialogue between psychoanalysis and (post)phenomenological thinking, we would like to suggest that if the real is conceptualized not as an ontological negativity that the empty signifier needs to tame, but as an aesthetic, embedded and embodied experience of multiplicity, then we can move on to think the social and the possibilities of critique, from a very different angle.

1. Mouffe and the 'Populist Frontier'

In what aspires to be a political intervention, Mouffe's recent *For a Left Populism*, invites us to "seize this opportunity" offered by what she calls the "populist moment" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 1). She insists that the contemporary political scenario reminds her of what motivated her and Laclau to write *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985. Back then, she states, the left—still caught in class essentialisms—was not able to be receptive to the demands of second wave feminists and anti-racist struggles, among others. Through a Gramscian-inspired reading of post-structuralism, Laclau and Mouffe sought to rethink the socialist project in terms of the "radicalization of democracy." (Mouffe, 2018, p. 2). This project, "consisted in the establishment of a 'chain of equivalencies' articulating the demands of the working class with those of the new movements in order to construct a 'common will' aiming at the creation of what Gramsci called an 'expansive hegemony'" (p. 2). This expansive hegemony, Mouffe warns us, would never achieve a "fully liberated society" (p. 3) insofar as there would always be antagonisms, struggles and a partial opaqueness to the social. Without going into details here, let us remember that the theory of hegemony and antagonism introduced by Laclau and Mouffe in the mid-eighties followed a strict Lacanian logic. As Žižek commented: "In short, Laclau and Mouffe have, so to speak, reinvented the Lacanian notion of the Real as impossible; they have made it useful as a tool for social and ideological analysis" (Žižek, 1990, p. 249). Indeed, in his *On Populist Reason*, Laclau claims: "The logic of the *object petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are identical" (Laclau, 2005, p. 116). And he continues: "In political terms, that is

exactly what I have called a hegemonic relation: a certain particularity which assumes the role of an impossible universality” (Ibid, p. 115). Furthermore, Laclau claims that Lacan’s *object-a* is a key element in a social ontology as the whole is always going to be embodied by the part. This is the role of ‘the people’: to become the absent fullness of society. What this means is that according to Laclau and Mouffe society (as well as meaning, subjectivity and order) can only exist within a (constructed) totality with clear borders. Or to put it differently, their work confronts us with an ‘ontological’ dimension of the social characterized by an intrinsic and unavoidable lack and an ‘ontic’ expression of this ontology. Whereas the first refers to the realm of the political (or ontological) the second addresses the realm of politics (the contingent or ontic) that consists in the permanent creation of provisional hegemonic closures that cover (discursively and affectively) this antagonistic gap.

Following closely Laclau’s definition of populism Mouffe affirms that society is always divided and discursively constructed through hegemonic practices, (Ibid, p. 10), and that in order to “seize this opportunity it is vital to acknowledge that politics is by nature partisan and that it requires the construction of a frontier between ‘we’ and ‘they’” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 85). Aligning herself with Schmitt, Mouffe acknowledges the tension between a liberal grammar in its reference to universality, and the grammar of equality, which requires the construction of the people and the tracing of a frontier between a “we” and a “they” (Ibid, p. 15). In the current context, Mouffe argues that in order to deepen democracy “it is necessary to establish a left populist political frontier” (Ibid, p. 5) between ‘the people’ and ‘the oligarchy’. She continues “in recreating political frontiers, the

'populist movement' points to a 'return of the political' after years of post-politics" (Ibid, p. 6). Mouffe argues for the need to provide a different vocabulary where popular demands can be articulated from an egalitarian perspective, and by doing so, create a different political frontier: "in a different vocabulary and directed towards another adversary" (Ibid, p.23).

Going back to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe explains that for relations of subordination to be transformed into sites of antagonism "one needs the presence of a discursive exterior" (i.e. the 'real') from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted (Ibid, p. 44). Furthermore, according to her, the new hegemonic articulation must be secured around key symbolic signifiers (or nodal points) that will secure a common sense and provide a normative framework to the given society. A left populist hegemony would thus consist of the creation of a "new historical bloc based on a different articulation between the constitutive political principles of the liberal-democratic regime and the socioeconomic practices in which they are institutionalized. (...) its objective is the construction of a collective will, a 'people' apt to bring about a new hegemonic formation" (Ibid, p. 45). This populist hegemony – or a populist chain of equivalencies – means that each particular demand is split: "on the one hand it is its own particularized self; on the other it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of the other's demands" (Ibid, p. 63). The necessity of the drawing of the political frontier becomes clear: the 'we' and the 'they' is decisive for the construction of a 'people'.

In clarifying the implications of her position, Mouffe states that "Laclau defines populism as a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the 'underdog'

against 'those in power.' It is not an ideology and cannot be attributed a specific programmatic content. Nor is it a political regime. It is a way of doing politics that can take various ideological forms according to both time and place, and is compatible with a variety of institutional frameworks" (Mouffe, p. 10-11, 2018). Populism is not a political regime, Mouffe says. As we have argued elsewhere, however, a political regime, or a regime of politics, could be understood as a structuring horizon or imaginary rather than as a self-contained political system or social formation (Plot, 2014: pp. 1-19; Plot, 2018.) Political regimes coexist and are in permanent conflict with each other. They sometimes hegemonize, sometimes see themselves subordinated to the dominant presence of alternative regimes. They are indeed ways 'of doing politics' and 'cannot be attributed a specific programmatic content,' as Mouffe puts it. So our point is that populism should indeed be understood as a regime in this sense, as a way of doing politics, and this is in partial agreement with Laclau and Mouffe. However, and this is what we ask, what kind of way is this way of doing politics? What are its implications? If populism is a way of doing politics, does it mean that there are alternative ways as well or is it the *only* way of doing politics? If there are other ways, what is it that makes them differ from each other? More importantly for this article, what is the epistemology upon which the notion of the antagonistic 'political' is based on?

2. The Epistemology of the 'One': Lacan against the phenomenologists

As we will see in the following two sections, the real, or what seems to escape symbolic determination, can be thought of in various ways. In our paper, and

given our interest in studying the epistemology of populism, we are focusing particularly on a debate between Lacan and Merleau Ponty. Interestingly, for Lacan the real is that which by 'not being there' allows for phenomenological experience to take place. For Merleau Ponty, on the other hand, the real is thought of as a 'fleshy being-with'. While the first definition stresses exclusion, interruption and void, the second establishes an infinite web of mutual belonging and dependency. If the first has inspired the thinking of political antagonism and fantasy, the latter rather forces us to think of assemblages and irreducible multiplicities.

While it is not the intention of this section of the paper to give a comprehensive account of the relation between Lacanian psychoanalysis and phenomenology, a quick look at the reversal of the phenomenological experience as formulated by Lacan in opposition to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty will be helpful to the development of our argument.

Although phenomenologists in the twentieth century were seeking to supersede Husserlian metaphysics by grounding notions such as *dasein* and the *flesh* of the social and move away from any form of subjective transcendentalism, Lacan, while getting inspiration from these ideas (Lacan, 1998,) was also quick to critique them from a Kantian/Freudian perspective. By doing this, he re-inserted a type of transcendentalism—that was already on its way out in the late Merleau-Ponty—back into the phenomenological picture. Indeed Lacan states that he will put phenomenology upside-down, as the object, for him, is neither the empirical object that we experienced through our senses (i.e., the object of desire), nor the Husserlian transcendental *noema*. Instead, Lacan affirms, object *a* is that which by 'not being there' allows the phenomenological experience to

take place: desire and knowledge are possible only because of the exclusion of the 'real'. The work of Lacan that has inspired and enraged feminists (Mitchell and Rose, 1982; Grosz 1990; Kristeva, 1980; Copjec, 1994, 2004; Irigaray, 1993; Ettinger, 2006) has also been read from continental philosophy quarters. In this context, his work has been considered to follow a Hegelian phenomenological path, while largely focusing on the struggle for recognition as presented in the master/slave dialectic. Authors such as Peter Dewis and Malcom Bowie, according to Eyers (2012), helped to create a scholarly climate for Lacan's reception that "foregrounded the influence of post-Kantian European philosophy at least on a par [?] with that of Freud" (Eyers, 2012, p. 6).

The reinsertion of Kantian language in Lacan's theorizing (and in Mouffe and Laclau) is not only relevant from the perspective of the history of ideas. Indeed, it is our contention that various epistemologies of the real are directly related to critical approaches to the social and associated to various political projects. This is a conceptual crossroads where phenomenology and psychoanalysis face each other and the character of that encounter can open or close radically alternative political horizons. Although feminists were quick to react against Freud's and Lacan's theorization of the signifier of the phallus as granting meaning to the otherwise undifferentiated mother-child relation, post colonial and race theorists have made a stronger argument by showing the relation between the Kantian definition of negativity (threat) and the very basis for the foundation of modernity. For example, in his last book *Stolen Life* (2018), Moten claims that it is precisely 'blackness' that stands as the outer marker of humanity and that race becomes the ground upon which critical philosophy is built. That is, the thinking of negativity—the thingliness, the non-human, the

non- meaningful, the non-purposeful and without desire for freedom—was established in the philosophy of the enlightenment (and later Freud’s writing) as the “generative flesh” (Moten, 2018) against which white “coherence” (masculinity) could become into existence.

As it is well documented (Smith and Woodruff Smith 2006; Rockmore 2011), Husserl had taken the Kantian idiom of transcendental idealism as a way to give account for the conditions of knowledge formation and consciousness. At the same time, he suggested that only by bracketing the world around us (epoché) and turning our attention to the very structure of the phenomenological experience, was it possible to discern how consciousness was always about something—i.e. that consciousness had intentionality. Heidegger disagreed with this transcendentalism and Husserl’s method of bracketing. Instead, in his *Being and Time* (1927), and through the study of a particular ‘being’, he explored the meaning of Being the human subject (*Da-sein*). By scrutinizing the features of *Dasein* and particularly its temporality, Heidegger expected to know the meaning of Being as such. As an historical entity, Heidegger argued, *Dasein* is immersed in the world and is itself part of the world and, as such, has a beginning and an end. This historicity, according to Heidegger, was accompanied with an experience of ‘thrownness’ that refers to the projection of *Dasein*: Sheehan (1999) explains that *Dasein* (being-there) is ‘always already “standing out beyond” immediate contact with entities in such a way as to disclose the being/significance of those entities (...) As transcendence, human being is a “thrown projection”: thrust into responsibility for its own existence as a field of possibilities (thrownness) and thereby able to disclose and understand entities in terms of those same possibilities (projection).

In his late writings, Heidegger introduced the notion of *ereignis*, translated first as 'enowning' and afterwards as the 'event of appropriation'. This is central for our argument, as Lacan and Merleau Ponty will also define a space of concealment (invisibility in Merleau Ponty; lack in Lacan) as allowing for the moment of appearance. *Ereignis*, in Heidegger's philosophy refers to the *tertium quid* which allows Being and Logos to meet in the 'clearing' of *aletheia* (truth). This *tertium quid* in its essence remains concealed for things to be set forth into presence, and it refers not to a particular historical event but to the presupposition of all human events¹.

In Lacan's 'object *a*' it is possible to clearly see this argumentative homology: "The object *a* is precisely that part of the loss that one cannot see in the mirror, the part of the subject that has no mirror reflection, the non-specular. The mirror in the most elementary way already implies the split between the imaginary and the real: one can only have access to imaginary reality, to the world one can recognize oneself in and familiarize oneself with, on the condition of the loss, the 'falling out' of the object *a*. It is this loss of the object *a* that opens 'objective' reality, the possibility of the subject-object relations, but since its loss is the condition of any knowledge of 'objective' reality, it cannot become itself an object of knowledge" (Dolar, 1991, p. 13). But if for Heidegger that space of not-being opens the possibility of authenticity, in the case of Lacan this space confronts us instead with the real of the death drive and *jouissance*. In Lacan's words: "I challenge whichever philosopher to account now for the relation that is between the emergence of the signifier and the way *jouissance* relates to being.

¹ For a more detailed reading of the relation between Heidegger and Lacan see M. Palacios's (2013) chapter on "Death, Anxiety and the Vicissitudes of Action", in her *Radical Sociality. On Disobedience, Violence and Belonging*.

[...] No philosophy, I say, meets us here today. The wretched aborted freaks of philosophy which we drag behind us from the beginning of the last [19th] century as the habits that are falling apart, are nothing but a way to frisk rather than to confront this question which is the only question about truth and which is called, and named by Freud, the death drive, the primordial masochism of *jouissance*. [...] All philosophical speech escapes and withdraws here” (Lacan quoted by Žižek, 2008, p. 7).

It is crucial to remember that according to Lacan’s theory of subject formation, the subject *emerges* in the field of the Other under the signifying operation of the signifier of the ‘One’: ‘[T]here is no conceivable appearance of a subject as such except from the primary introduction of a signifier, and from the simplest signifier which is called the unary trait’ (Lacan, 1962-63, p. 22). As the signifier that represents the subject is in the field of the Other, Lacan talks about a primal alienation—or lack—as constitutive of subjectivity. This lack, as Lacan explains, is experienced as desire and framed by fantasy. ‘It is even qua thus marked by finiteness that for us, as subjects of the unconscious, our lack can be desire, finite desire, indefinite in appearance, since the lack, always involving some void, can be filled in several ways’ (Ibid, p. 26). Lacan is clear in affirming that the only truth (a truth that cannot appear phenomenologically as it’s repression is the very condition for the possibility of the phenomenological experience) is that of the death drive. From that very same perspective, he reads Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of perception, and most poignantly, while critiquing his theorization of the gaze, Lacan also insinuates that Merleau-Ponty was onto something else when thinking of invisibility.

Lacan indeed occupied himself with Merleau-Ponty at length in his Seminar XI (1998) where he claims that the gaze is neither imaginary nor symbolic but actually closer to the real as an object of the scopical drive. As Shepherdson (1997) writes, “In short, in the experience of the gaze, it is the subject who identifies with the object that would make the Other complete, fading or vanishing in a sacrificial movement of identification” (p. 84).

3. The Flesh and its Multiplicity

This simplified relationality in which the same and the other are seen as mutually exclusive and as resulting from a process of nominalization of multiplicity is neither the only way of understanding the real nor the only way of accounting for intersubjective relations. As we suggested at the beginning of the article, in political theorizations of this antagonistic logic (such as in Schmitt, and Laclau and Mouffe, for example), the precondition for the unity of a political entity involves the identification of a constitutive exterior. The political might indeed imply negativity—i.e. have a diacritical logic—but this negativity would be viewed very differently if instead of conceiving it as binary, confrontational and mutually exclusive, we were to understand it as plural, dis-centering and intertwined. The latter was precisely the form of relationality, and even way of doing politics, put forward by Merleau-Ponty’s (1973) theorization of flesh.

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” belongs to his late work and is at the center of three emblematic texts of the period, two of them published by him while still alive and the third one published posthumously, edited and supervised by Claude Lefort. The texts published in his lifetime in which the notion of flesh plays a central role are the Preface to *Signs* (1964a), originally

released in French in 1960, and *Eye and Mind* (1964b). Finally, the most important elaboration of the notion of flesh appears in an unfinished manuscript, the one on which Merleau-Ponty was working at the time of his premature death in 1961. The title finally given to the unfinished text—*The Visible and the Invisible* (1968)—was chosen by Lefort from a few other possible options. “Introduction to the Visible and the Invisible” was to be the introductory chapter of a much larger project, which at the time of Merleau-Ponty’s death was titled “The Origin of Truth.”

As we have already suggested, Merleau-Ponty’s death was sudden and unexpected. In *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, a long essay written right after Merleau-Ponty died, and subtitled “History of a friendship”, Jean-Paul Sartre, says: “There is no doubt about it. His readers may know him. He ‘met them in his works.’ Each time I become his reader, I shall get to know him—and myself—better. One hundred fifty pages of his future book are saved from oblivion, and then there is also ‘Eye and Mind,’ which says it all, providing one can decipher it.” (Sartre 1998: 621). And “decipher” is indeed the right word, for *Eye and Mind* is a condensed, carefully crafted hieroglyphic. The hieroglyphic is organized in five sections in which Merleau-Ponty carefully interrogates our being flesh and our being *of* the flesh of the world. He contrasts science and painting, suggesting that “science manipulates things” and therefore “gives up living in them.” (1993, p. 121). What art, especially painting, interrogates, on the other hand, is the enigma of vision, that kind of “delirium” in which I can be where I am not; the enigma of depth, that of a being in layers, or of the flesh of the world. “[W]e cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint,” he says. “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these

transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body... the body which is an intertwining of vision and movement” (Ibid, p. 123-4). The enigma of vision is thus the enigma of the body and of its movement. What vision teaches us immediately is what characterizes the body most: I want to be there and, without knowing how, there I am. That is the delirium of vision and of painting, of the moving body in its gaze—to be at-a-distance (Ibid, p. 127). Which is the enigma of all flesh: its radiation beyond itself. (Ibid, p. 145). And the working of this dialogical “system” of intertwinings between vision, the body, the voice, and the world is what configures a flesh of bodies, of collective “bodies” and of the world, a flesh that is not One but plural, incommensurably pluri-perspectival and pluri-dimensional, because it is made of layers and of crisscrossings of visions and visibles that could never be grasped as a totalized whole.

Such is the hieroglyphic appearance of the notion of flesh in *Eye and Mind*, which is different to the way in which the concept was introduced in the Preface to *Signs*. In the latter, the texture of the flesh of the world, its intercorporeity and plurality, gets more explicitly theorized. “Take [the] others,” Merleau-Ponty says, “at the moment they appear in the world’s flesh.” They “are not fictions with which I might people my desert—offspring of my spirit and forever unactualized possibilities—but my twins or the flesh of my flesh. Certainly I do not live their life; they are definitively absent from me and I from them. But that distance becomes a strange proximity as soon as one comes back home to the perceptible world, since the perceptible is precisely that which can haunt more than one body without budging from its place” (1964a, p. 15). To which he later adds: “Everything rests upon the insurpassable richness, the miraculous multiplication of perceptible being, which gives the same things the

power to be things for more than one perceiver, and makes some of the things—human and animal bodies—have not only hidden faces but an ‘other side,’ a perceiving side.” (Ibid, p. 16) This having both a perceivable—I indeed perceive them—and a perceiving side—they indeed seem capable of perceiving what I perceive and even to perceive myself perceiving the same things they perceive—is what makes them flesh, the element that “has no name in any philosophy” and that “brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being”. This system of mirrors, of perceived-perceivers, or of sensible-sentients—as he calls them in *The Visible and the Invisible*—is a system of two-dimensional (Ibid, p. 136), reversible beings, beings with style, therefore of bringing new meanings and events into the world, into a world that is also flesh—since flesh is the element of both bodies as well as that of inter-bodies, of the intercorporeal.

As we said above, however, it is in the unfinished introduction to what was going to be called “The Origin of Truth” that Merleau-Ponty offers his richer treatment of the concept of flesh. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty, repeating a gesture characteristic of his style of thought, starts once again from the beginning, from the evidence of there being something, from what he calls the “perceptual faith”, our un-doubtful experience of a world about us. Perceptual faith precedes doubts, it is primordial: I do not doubt the existence of the world due to the fact that it is indeed myself who perceives it. This faith does not lack justification, since there is a constitutive irreducibility of the plurality of perceptions—of other perceived-perceivers—that populate and cohabit with me that “miraculous multiplication of perceptible being” that Merleau-Ponty talks about in *Signs*. Here, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he says: “the thing perceived by the other is doubled: there is *the one he perceives*, God knows where, and

there is the one I see, outside of his body, and which I call the true thing—as he calls true thing the table *he sees* and consigns to the category of appearances the one I see.” (1968: p. 9-10) What is then the thing that both my perception and that of the other open to? An imperialistic subjectivism would call “true” my perception and “false” the other’s”: The “imperialism” of “my thing.” But this imperialism does not last long, since in actuality “I believe in the other” (Ibid, p. 10) since I have faith in it in the same way I have faith in the existence of the world we both perceive.

“Faith” is thus for Merleau-Ponty the concept that grasps our “initial openness upon the world.” Faith, “not knowledge, since the world is here not separated from our hold on it, since, rather than affirmed, it is taken for granted, rather than disclosed, it is non-dissimulated, non-refuted” (Ibid, p. 28). The philosopher must reject both mere “knowledge” and mere “description,” he or she “must, in a word, *reflect*.” Reflection “saves us” from empiricism, says Merleau-Ponty, but it does so by naively turning the incarnate subject into a transcendental subject and reality into ideality (Ibid, p. 29). The philosophy of reflection has a point in what it denies—an “exterior relationship between a world in itself and myself” (Ibid, p. 32).

Very different from the blindness of the Lacanian death drive, in this case Merleau Ponty stresses the the plurality of perspectives, the plurality of reflections. It is thus that Merleau-Ponty states the plurality of flesh, since the flesh of the world is a being which has “several entries” (Ibid, p. 90): “we are catching sight of the necessity of another operation besides the conversion to reflection, more fundamental than it, of a sort of *hyper-reflection* (*sur-réflexion*)

that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account” (Ibid, p. 38). Hyper-reflection must “plunge into the world instead of surveying it” (Ibid, p. 38-9), it must plunge in the plurality of the intercorporeal intertwining of perceived-perceivers that the world understood as flesh is.

In our view, theorizing the multiplicity and generativity that characterizes the real of intercorporeal flesh of the world is crucial in the critique of the populist-antagonistic logic described earlier. The flesh, indeed, is not One. Moreover, the flesh is neither one nor two, but infinite. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, this alternative vision is presented in critical dialogue with Sartre, to whom Merleau-Ponty says: what if “instead of the other and me being two parallel For Itselfs each on his own stricken with the same mortal evil... we be some for the others a system of For Itselfs, sensitive to one another, such that the one knows the other not only in what he suffers from him, but more generally as a witness, who can be challenged because he is also himself accused, because he is not a pure gaze upon pure being any more than I am, because his views and my own are in advance inserted into a system of partial perspectives, referred to one same world in which we coexist and where our views intersect. For the other to be truly the other, it does not suffice and it is not necessary that he be a scourge, the continued threat of an absolute reversal of pro and con... It is necessary and it suffices that he have the power to decenter me, to oppose his centering to my own...” (Ibid, p. 82).

Furthermore, the social space, a plural, reversible space of individual and collective beings equally reversible—both perceiving and perceived—does not need an “ontology” such as the one postulated by Mouffe following Lacan. This plural/infinite space of the flesh of the world is not necessarily harmonic and

consensual. In fact, it could hardly be so, since the relationality proper of this encounter of dis-centering perspectives is radically destabilizing. But this flesh, that is not One, does not need to be a dichotomist space of mutually exclusive 'identities' either. The 'internal frontiers' are also many and, being many, they are not only frontiers but also bridges, and not only frontiers and bridges but also invisible networks and force lines that make up the unstable equilibrium the social flesh is.

4. Closing Remarks: From Populist Nominalization towards an Aesthetic Matrix of Fleshy Multiplicity

In describing the radicality of Merleau-Ponty's final project, Bruce Young states: "My use of the phrase 'ontological matrix' is not mere jargon. Merleau-Ponty does not offer a new theory, a new ontology, within the traditional matrix, that is, within the network of basic presuppositions we have inherited from our cultural traditions about what otherness, sameness, subjecthood and so on are. Rather, as he stresses from the very first page of his last and tragically uncompleted work, he is out to question these root presuppositions themselves. [And this] transition to a radically new ontological matrix is... a practical matter, a whole new way of relating in practice to otherness..." (Young: 86-7). In agreement with Young, but avoiding any claim to ontology, we would like to suggest the need to rethink the social and the political from an embodied and embedded –aesthetic- logic, one that produces sensual knowledges and that does not aim at conceptual/political totalization.

As we saw above, Merleau-Ponty's notion of a plural flesh offers an alternative path to the one advanced by the late Laclau and Mouffe and is the one that Judith Butler (2015a), for example, has found appealing in her recent attempts to theorize a model for a radical, social and plural democracy (2015b). In her recent works, Butler has devoted a significant part of her writing to challenging those either/or models of mutually exclusive identities that could too easily lead to a politics of violence. This "hyper-reflective" position of a plural and conflicting social world offers an alternative theory of radical democracy where the no closure attempts to resolve enigma of the built-in decentering of the plurality of perspectives Merleau-Ponty's attributes to the intercorporeal world of flesh. In her words: "Merleau-Ponty's enormously provocative final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, contains within it some of the most beautiful writing we have from him, a writing that not only is about vision and touch, but that seeks, in its own rhythms and openness, to cast language in the mold of the relations he attempts to describe. I would wager that this chapter [The Intertwining-the Chiasm] is the most important work for most feminists [...] because it attempts in a certain way to offer an alternative to the erotics of simple mastery. It makes thinking passionate, because it overcomes, in its language and in its argument, the distinction between a subject who sees and one who is seen, a subject who touches and one who is touched. It does not, however, overcome the distinction by collapsing it" (2015: 51). The distinction between subjects—or between subject positions, we could also say, using the post-structuralist language of Laclau and Mouffe's earlier work—of course remains, but it remains in the form of a relationality that goes beyond the mutually negating logic of the friend-enemy distinction. Following, or rather in

dialogue with, Merleau-Ponty, for Butler, the social field is a field of alterity, of a precedence of the “other” over the “I”, but of an indeterminate precedence that does not *cause* the “I” but rather inaugurates it. And this inauguration is performed in such a way that establishes an ethos of mutually instituting *and* decentering subjectivities in a world of irreducible plurality. Other authors have also contributed to this search for a different “way of doing politics” implicit in Merleau-Ponty’s theorizing of the flesh of the bodies and of the flesh of the world (Plot, 2014), most notably Claude Lefort’s philosophy of the political as the question of forms of society and the idea of democracy as a society without a body (1991). By describing democracy as a society without a body, what Lefort was doing was to offer a phenomenology of a form of society in which no-body, no entity, and no subject, individual or collective, is capable of “embodying” power—thus power, in a democratic society, is and remains an “empty place”. In his view, in the democratic form of society, no actor can claim to be entitled to rule, simply because the social flesh is not a determined body, with its organs and its naturally defined hierarchies. Democracy is a society without a body because it institutes the type of social field that is now also being theorized by Butler: one of an unstable equilibrium (Plot, 2014, p. 33) of mutually decentering and instituting subjectivities with no end in sight.

We hope that the connections between different theorizations of the real, and the alternative political imaginaries they inspire, are becoming more evident at this point. In our view, it is pertinent to say that both accounts give certain accounts of ‘excess’. In the first framework (Lacanian,) excess has to be excluded and the act of exclusion, concealed. This is theorized as the condition sine-qua-non for the emergence of meaning and subjectivity, as well as social order. In

political terms, this foundational 'lack' has inspired the thinking of totalizing hegemonic articulatory practices (such as elaborated in the work of Laclau and Mouffe) in their construction of a provisional 'wholeness' that precisely attempt to cover that inaugural lack. As explained above, this is achieved through the establishment of an antagonistic frontier between a 'we' and a 'they'. As the studies of fantasy—or the libidinal counterpart of hegemony—allow us to see (Yegenoglou, 2008; Glynos and Stravakakis, 2008; Palacios, 2009; 2013; Weisband, 2018), antagonism is not only about 'meaning' but is also about desire; that is, excluded others are not only perceived as a threat to the stability of identity, but also as a threat to the possibility of enjoyment. Hortense Spillers, in thinking about the status of black bodies in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, has provided a useful way of thinking about this problem with her notion of 'pornotrope': "(1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality, (2) at the same time –in stunning contradiction – the captive body is reduced to a thing, becoming a being for the captor; (3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of otherness; (4) as a category of 'otherness', the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness'" (Spillers, 2003, p. 206).

This antagonistic grammar does not characterize the post-phenomenological view of excess. In this case, excess offers instead a solid platform for the thinking about forms of vulnerability, precarity, and co-dependence. As the flesh escapes the traditional dualistic epistemological distinctions – where elements are perceived in their 'separatedness' –we are forced to think of assemblages,

networks, of visible and invisible elements, human and not human, interacting and affecting each other. Furthermore, the flesh of the world in its multiplicity and infinity does not need (as in the previous account) and cannot be reduced to any form of totalizing/singularization. In this sense, it could be argued that the flesh offers a radical ethical notion of relationality from which the unevenness of power can be deconstructed, and as such, we would like to situate this ethical-aesthetic matrix within contemporary critical theory. If some authors such as Butler or Lefort commit to a decentered notion of democracy, it is also worth mentioning here the striking commonalities between the notion of the flesh and some promising accounts in feminist science and technology studies, new materialities and queer affect, as well as in the field of critical race studies. All of them, even with different emphasis and agendas, stress the irreducibility of heterogeneity and the relational and generative force of the thingly-being-with (Barad, 2007; Muñoz, 1997; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015; Moten, 2018; Musser, 2018).

It is from this relational ethos that we would like to (re)think the political. Remaining within the language of Merleau-Ponty, our goal is to be able to think, for example, about how the above discussed concepts of 'faith' and 'visibility/invisibility' need to be deconstructed and critiqued precisely vis a vis the ethics of the plural assemblages of the flesh (Wilderson, 2010; Moten, 2018; Musser; 2018). At the same time, it is these notions that might allow us to rethink the psychoanalytic singular notion of the unconscious, and further encourage the (re)thinking of a 'decentered' unconscious linked precisely to those spaces of opacity, erasure and invisibility characteristic of the social understood as flesh. It is beyond the scope of this paper to further elaborate on

this. Nevertheless, it is our contention that different forms of desire are to be imagined and remembered, once we situate ourselves in this aesthetic matrix of a plural flesh. In this sense, we would like to claim the centrality of the erotics in the workings of the flesh. An erotics not bound to anxiety and antagonism (and its ‘porno-trope’ as elaborated by Spillers), but to the ethics of eros and mutuality.

Although certainly none of these notions of the real find closure in a particular or definite political project, it is fair to acknowledge that they do inform alternative political horizons while giving an account of a ‘not-being-there’ and a ‘fleshy-being-with’ counterpart. In our view, to think of these epistemologies and the political horizons they inspire has urgent practical implications. We do need to find a different—which, as suggested, we would like to call “aesthetic” (Plot 2014; Palacios, 2013)—matrix for a plural, radical, and critical politics from the one accepted as unavoidable by Mouffe—a fellow traveler in the project of a radical and social democracy. If deprived of its fascination with the populist “way of doing politics” and its Schmittean ontology of the political, it looks to us to be a welcome reaction to a contemporary “moment” that worries—and excites—us all.

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