

POST-FOUNDATIONALISM OF LACLAU AND OAKESHOTT: POLITICS OF FAITH, SCEPTICISM AND POPULISM

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Abstract: *This article critically engages with Laclauian theory of populism by utilizing Michael Oakeshott's theory of politics. It argues that both build their works on similar post-foundationalist premises, accepting once the impossibility of a final ground of society as well as the possibility of its contingent political foundations. It then shows that both scholars conceptualise politics residing on a continuum between what they consider as two theoretical extremes: politics of faith and scepticism for Oakeshott, pure populism and pure institutionalism for Laclau. In terms of the ways in which they operate, functions they fulfil, and effects they have on politics, these extremes overlap with one another to such an extent that they can be considered as near synonyms. This synonymy serves as a fertile ground to spread the seeds of a reconsideration of Laclau's account of populism. Utilizing Fieschi and Heywood's concept of entrepreneurial populism, the article briefly problematizes his account and calls attention to this particular species of populism gaining increasing popularity in contemporary politics. It is every bit of populist in its modus operandi yet neither subverts the status quo nor aims to reconstruct a new one, but simply plays it.*

Keywords: Ernesto Laclau; Michael Oakeshott; populism; post-foundationalism.

At first sight, it seems like there could be no more contrasting intellectual stances than of Michael Oakeshott and Ernesto Laclau. While Oakeshott is hailed as a 'brilliant disciple of Burke' (Kirk 1952, 416), 'right-wing guru' who articulated best 'the real philosophical foundations of Mrs Thatcher's policies' (Riley 1992), and despised by leftist intellectuals as a 'crypto-fascist' (Anderson 1992) for evincing 'consistent hostility to most of the central features of modern social democratic politics' (Horton 2005, 24),¹ Laclau is counted among the few contemporary intellectual pioneers of post-Marxist tradition offering a renewed ontology for the emancipatory projects of the left after the end of Cold War (Torfing 1999; Critchley and Marchart 2004; Marchart 2007). Thus unsurprisingly, in what seems to be the only work engaging in a direct, if rather brief, comparison of the two, Stuart Isaacs concludes that, despite a few parallels at certain levels, there lays 'an ocean between' their thoughts (2006, 193).

¹ For other, more scholarly critics of his "conservatism", see Farr 1998; Devigne 1994; Abel 2010. This view, however, has long been called into question by many commentators, so much so that he has been considered even as a 'theorist of contingency and pluralism' (Gerencser 2000, 2). See also Rayner 1985; Rorty 1989; Mouffe 1992; and Soininen 2005. This alternative view of Oakeshott is touched upon more in detail below.

Contrary to Isaacs, the initial argument of this article is that, in fact, both Laclau and Oakeshott build their works on similar post-foundationalist premises, accepting once the impossibility of a final ground of society as well as the possibility of its contingent political foundations (Marchant 2007). Although this is more apparent and, thus, gained more intellectual approval in Laclau's case, even the most unorthodox readers of Oakeshott consider him at best as an anti- and not post-foundationalist thinker (cf. Rayner 1985; Rorty 1989; Soinin 2005).² Building upon this fundamental parallel between the two, this article also shows that both scholars conceptualise political practices residing on a continuum between what they consider as two theoretical extremes: *politics of faith* vs. *politics of scepticism* (Oakeshott 1996) and *pure populism* vs. *pure institutionalism* (Laclau 2005a, 2005b). Though neither can exist in purity, or alone, what makes politics not only possible but also contingent for both scholars is simultaneous presence of both extremes at varying degrees and tension between them. It is the intention of this paper to show that in terms of the ways in which they operate, functions they fulfil, and effects they have on politics, these extremes overlap with one another to such an extent that they can be considered as near synonyms: politics of faith with pure populism, politics of scepticism with pure institutionalism.

And finally, this synonymy serves as a fertile ground to spread the seeds of a reconsideration of Laclau's account of populism as consisting in the subversion of status quo and radical reconstruction of a new order (2005a, 122-123, 177-178; 2005b, 47-48). Utilizing Fieschi and Heywood's concept of 'entrepreneurial populism', this paper briefly problematizes his account in such a way that it calls attention to this particular species of populism gaining increasing popularity in contemporary politics (2004). It is every bit of populist in its modus operandi yet neither subverts the status quo nor aims to reconstruct a new one, but simply *plays* it.

1. Concordia Discors: Faithful Populism vs. Sceptical Institutionalism

Notwithstanding the obvious differences between Laclau and Oakeshott in terms of where their hearths lie on the political spectrum, the commonalities between their takes on "society" are striking and, to the knowledge of this author, have gone mostly unnoticed.³ There is a fruitful comparison to be made here, for this serves as an opening point to see the parallels between their corresponding reflections on the politics as residing on a continuum between two extremes.

1.1 Contingency, Impossibility, and Necessity

One comes across with Laclau's post-foundational take on society frequently in the form of a single, provocative statement: 'society does not exist'. It is his critique of the Marxist structuralism which lays out the path leading to this conclusion most clearly and provides a formulation of 'Laclauian enterprise *in nuce*' (Marchant 2007, 136).⁴ Envisioning society as a structural totality formed by an economic base and an ideological superstructure, structuralist model, Laclau asserts, assigns an 'essential' status to society with a positivity of its own, whose modus operandi can be 'recognized' behind the superficial empirical variations of social life, if only with the help of a particular set of analytical tools. Considered as such,

² Though Marchant, in his very brief account of Oakeshott, claims that he cannot be categorized as an anti-foundationalist thinker and even hints towards the possibility of considering him as a post-foundationalist, he does not offer any discussion to examine this inclination (2007, 3-15).

³ With the exceptions of Isaacs (2006) and Marchant (2007), both of which are discussed in more detail below.

⁴ To be sure, Laclau does not consider Marxist structuralist model as the only one attaining a closed social totality as a possibility. By claiming that 'society is an impossible object of analysis, he [Laclau] seeks to exclude essentialist, objectivist, and topographical conceptions of social relations (whether put forward by positivists, materialists, or realists)' (Howarth 2000, 113).

society operates as a 'founding totality' upon which knowledge of all its partial processes can be grounded (Laclau 1990, 90). Laclauian objection to the society-as-totality is based on a linguistically informed argument for, what he calls, the 'infinite of the social', which is the idea that 'any system of meaning is contingent, contextual, and relational', and is always surrounded by an ineradicable 'excess of meaning' that it is unable to master (Laclau 1990, 90; Howarth 2004, 266). Hence, for Laclau, "society" as an intelligible and unified whole providing exhaustive patterns of relationality between all social meanings does not and cannot exist.

Oakeshott too approaches the term society with extreme caution. And like Laclau, details of his take on it are fleshed out in the course of a more general critique, a critique of human sciences and education. In *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott proposes his 'own version of the hermeneutic criterion' to define human sciences as exclusively concerned with investigation of meanings that are attributed to intelligent human conducts, and making 'interpretive inquiries concerned with the meanings, intentions, and contexts that make an individual practice or performance what it is' (Oakeshott 1975, 23-24; Nardin 2001, 128-129). Oakeshott's use of human rather than social sciences stems from his conviction that the latter conceives of society as a 'totality of human relationships', a 'system to be understood in terms of its regularities or its causal conditions' (1975, 24). Although he considers this society-as-totality being prevalent in most approaches to "social" sciences, Oakeshott, like Laclau, finds its clearest expression in structuralism:

[T]his "system" is said to have a "structure" which contains and displays functional relationships between its parts and properties. And change in this structure (so called "social change") is understood to be a process analogous to the metabolic or evolutionary change of biological organisms. [...] In the more sophisticated versions, the explanatory "laws" are the alleged psychological or bio-evolutionary "laws" or causal conditions said to be postulated in the correlations of characteristics (Oakeshott 1975, 24-25).

Oakeshott bases his objection to a structured society on similar grounds with Laclau. The problem with this model, for him, is that it mistakes the 'contingent relationships' emerging from intelligent human conduct as 'causal or systematic connections' among 'components of an unspecified, unconditional interdependence', and consequently lumps them under the misnomer of 'something called a "society" or "Society"' (Oakeshott 1989, 34-35). For Oakeshott, as Nardin observes, 'there is no such thing as a social relationship that is not a relationship of a specific kind' (Nardin 2001, 125). 'Human conduct is continuously and decisively "social" only in respect of agents being associated in terms of their understanding and enjoyment of specific practices' (Oakeshott 1975, 87).

Many students of Oakeshott agree that the significance he assigns to the contingency of the social relationship brings him closer to anti-foundationalism (cf. Rorty 1989; Soininen 2005; Isaacs 2006). Nonetheless, as Oliver Marchart points out, what specifically makes Laclauian enterprise *post-* rather than anti-foundationalist is its verdict that the ultimate impossibility of the social to suture itself into a closed totality is a 'productive one' (2007, 136). The residual 'excess of meaning' that is bound to remain out of any "social" not only makes it impossible to reach an ultimate fixation of meaning, it also paves the way for an 'infinite play of differences' which Laclau calls the discursive. Understood as such, the "social" is an attempt to create, however temporarily, a finite order, a hegemonic discourse within this infinitude, striving to 'proceed to a relative fixation of the social through the institution of *nodal points*'

(Laclau 1990, 90-91). As the privileged condensations of meaning, these points partially fix the identities of chains of signifiers and, consequently, make it possible to form a temporarily stable discourse around themselves. Reaching such relative fixations is not only possible but necessary, for we need a stable system of meaning so that we can avoid getting lost in a 'psychotic' discourse where there is no fixed meaning at all (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112-113; Laclau 2005a, 70-71).

Oakeshott too employs the term *nodal points* and does so in quite the similar manner during the course of his discussion on morality, invoking an analogy between language and morality which is also extended into politics later on. I think it is precisely here one finds how close his ontology gets to *post-* rather than anti-foundationalism and, consequently, to Laclau's. In every occasion of human conduct, Oakeshott asserts, there is a 'vernacular language' of self-enactment, enabling its users not only to understand one another, but also to modify this language continuously and trespass its established limits so that they can 'explore relationships far more varied and interesting than those it has a name for' or its established patterns would 'allow' (1975, 63). Because it is a historical construct under constant change depending on the ways in which its users, who are also in constant permutation, deem necessary or plausible to employ, one cannot expect to find stability even in its main features. 'Its abstract nouns (right and wrong, proper and improper, obligation, due-ness, fairness, respect, justice, etc.), when they appear, are faded metaphors, and it is only the uneducated who insist that each must have a single unequivocal meaning indifferent to context' (Oakeshott 1975, 63). Politics is no different than morality in this respect, for it too functions on an infinite field of discursivity where reaching a final ground is impossible:

"Fascism" is not less multiple than "democracy" or than "government" itself. We do not possess a "scientific" political language in which each expression has a fixed, simple and universally recognized meaning; we have only a living, popular language, at the mercy of use and circumstance in which each expression is susceptible of many interpretations, none of which is without force or significance (Oakeshott 1996, 9, 21).

Because of this, Oakeshott insists, no such language 'can ever be perfectly responsive to the demands made upon it'. It is 'never fixed or finished' and, thus, can be recognised as nothing but 'its vicissitudes' (1975, 64). Or, to phrase it in Laclauian terms, it cannot suture itself into a closed totality because of a perpetual excess of meaning. Nevertheless, for him, just as for Laclau, this *impossibility* does not change the fact that it is still *necessary* to reach a relative fixation of meaning. For its speakers to have an idea of 'what, on earth, they have come to understand themselves to be' and avoid getting lost in a psychotic universe, as Laclau would have put, it needs a 'settled character' in terms of which it 'articulates relationships, responsibilities, duties, etc., recognizable' by its speakers (Oakeshott 1975, 64).

Oakeshott argues that this is achieved through the 'rules of conduct' that help to keep a language in shape by providing a 'basic vocabulary and some elementary constructions' familiar to all. He suggests imagining those rules (which also include duties, principles, dogmas and like) as '*nodal points*' where practices are articulated in such a way that they turn upon themselves 'in a vertiginous movement', lose their 'characteristic expansiveness' and eventually 'become steadier in ceasing to be adventurous' (1975, 66-68). In other words, these rules qua '*nodal points*' help instituting a settled language, however temporarily, through a privileging of certain meanings of practices while excluding others. Although the potential for different meanings is as present as always, a successful "settling" of language creates a terrain where the trails of that potential do not prove immediately visible because 'certain concepts

become exaggerated and mistaken for the whole of the language themselves' (Isaacs 2006, 170-171).

This, of course, largely corresponds to what Laclau, following Husserl, calls the process of 'sedimentation' which consists in forgetting the contingent origins of 'sedimented practices' that make up the field of "the social" and mistaking them as mere objective presences (Laclau 1990, 34-35). The "political", on the other hand, 'requires a reactivation of the contingent moment of foundation' of those practices, 'thus disclosing the potential for different constructions' (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 116). But according to Laclau, this reactivation cannot be 'unmediated', that is, it is impossible to achieve a totally political institution of the social. For the social relations to exist there needs to be at least a minimal distance between the political and the social where some routinized practices are already present: 'any political construction takes place against the background of a range of sedimented practices' (Laclau 1990, 35). Following Laclau, Marchant argues that 'traditions are nothing but such routinized practices' which, one may add, the political reactivation process has to take as its background (Marchant 2007, 139). And as Chantal Mouffe notes, Oakeshott is fully aware of this central role traditions play for the political processes which, for him, have no other ground but those already existing traditions to rely on as its starting point (1993, 16-17). Politics consists in the modification of those routinized practices by digging down to their origins to find not only their *raison d'être*, but also what those practices conceal, i.e. those options excluded in their original institution:

Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community. [...] This activity, then, springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but *from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves*. And the form it takes, because it can take no other, is the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing *what is intimated in them*. The arrangements which constitute a society capable of political activity, whether these are customs or institutions or laws or diplomatic decisions, are at once coherent and incoherent; they compose a pattern and at the same time they intimate a sympathy for what does not fully appear. *Political activity is the exploration of that sympathy*; and consequently, relevant political reasoning will be convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognizing it (Oakeshott 1991, 56-57, emphasis added).

1.2 Swinging on a Continuum

For Oakeshott, then, politics, like any human conduct, has the form of a vernacular language functioning on the infinite field of discursivity where no meaning is ultimately fixed. This 'ambiguity of our political vocabulary', as he calls it in his posthumously published *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, is not something one should be regretful of but embrace, since it provides a set of peaceful tools for clash of differences that would otherwise take a violent form, 'like a veil which softens the edges and moderates the differences for what it at once hides and reveals' (Oakeshott 1996, 21).⁵ He claims that this ambiguity is

⁵ Although this work could not be dated exactly, it appears to have been written in the early 1950s. Its editor, Timothy Fuller, thinks that it is completed probably in 1952 (Oakeshott 1996, ix).

reflected in political activity as well as our understanding of this activity in such a way that throughout the modernity politics has been fluctuating on a continuum between two poles: 'the politics of faith' and 'the politics of scepticism'.

It is possible to consider these poles (which Oakeshott originally calls 'styles') as *discourses* in Laclauian terminology insofar as, like Benjamin Arditi notes, the two are in a continuous struggle for domination over the terms of our political vocabulary, exerting their articulatory influences over the ways in which politics at any given moment is arranged and it is this struggle that accounts for the ultimate contingency of these arrangements (Arditi 2007, 45; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105-110). Oakeshott claims that the two constitute the horizons of politics as its ideal extremes, providing once 'the limits and the impetus' of political movement. Rather than being possible edges which politics may occasionally reach but cannot pass, he conceives them as the opposite 'charges' of a single activity, politics, affecting the whole range of its movement by exerting their 'pull' simultaneously but in opposite directions. Any particular form of modern politics has been the resultant of a discordant harmony of both and not merely the consequence of one. Although Oakeshott pinpoints a few notable occasions when 'one or other has swung particularly close to its theoretic extreme',⁶ he maintains that neither of these 'logical opposites' can exist in purity but in varying degrees of mixture, for each has an inherent tendency to turn into its own 'nemesis' and 'abolish politics' if unchecked by the other (Oakeshott 1996, 21-22, 30, 91-94).

Quite a similar depiction of politics can be observed in Laclau as well, who conceptualizes it as 'operating at the diverse points of a continuum' between two theoretical extremes: 'institutionalist' and 'populist' discourses (Laclau 2005b, 45). He argues that, as '*reductio ad absurdum*' points of logical impossibilities, these discourses constitute the unreachable poles of politics, whose concurrent presence and tension are nonetheless prerequisites of the very existence of politics and its movement on that continuum (2005b, 46). Their '[t]ension and reflection can be contingently combined in unstable equilibria, but neither is entirely able to eliminate the other' (Laclau 2005a, 120). At one impossible end there is pure populism, which is a discourse dominated only by a 'logic of equivalence', requiring complete collapse of all social differences into a singular identity and consequently leaving no space for their differential particularities (2005a, 82). Laclau employs the Freudian notion of a group whose only libidinal tie is love for the purely narcissistic leader as an example of this impossibly pure presence of logic of equivalence, where the group members, placing the leader into the place of their ego ideal, reach a point of complete 'identification' with one another that results in a total consumption of their particular egos (2005a, 52-60). On a macro-political level, this means that pure populism conceives the society as a homogeneous whole whose coherence would be exclusively assured by the presence of a frontier dividing it into two camps, like in the utopian discourse of various millenarian movements. The world here, Laclau maintains, is so infinitely separated between a movement and its negative reverse 'incarnating evil' that there exists no difference within those camps. Each and every element constituting them becomes identical with one another, bearing no particularity of their own (2005b, 46; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 129-130).⁷

This largely corresponds to Oakeshott's politics of faith, or faithful discourse, where he even invokes the same example of millenarians as a 'special class' in its ranks (Oakeshott

⁶ 17th century English Presbyterian party, as well as socialist and communist movements of late 19th and early 20th century are prime examples for Oakeshott where political activity is pulled closest to its "faithful" extreme, albeit not being entirely free of scepticism (1996, 59-61, 66).

⁷ Of course, since it functions as a limit concept, a logical impossibility for Laclau, this imaginary situation where a purely populist discourse operates could never be attained. In fact, he presents a deeper examination of the same example of millenarian revolt in *On Populist Reason* to show, if put in practice, how it actually would play out and concludes that at least a minimal contamination by the other pole is inevitable (2005a, 120-121).

1996, 25). Politics here is understood in a ‘Pelagian’ way as a matter of ‘achieving salvation in this world’ through human effort, capable of bringing about some sort of ‘perfection’ if granted total control and power aimed at one direction (1996, 23-24). For Oakeshott, the key component of perfection here is its being ‘directed to a single, exclusive goal’, and not ‘whether it is believed that this will take a long time, may never be finally achieved or is to some degree indeterminate’ (Horton 2005, 25-26; Oakeshott, 1996, 26). Dominated by what he calls the ‘logic of perfection’, a purely faithful discourse defines all social actors and every manner of their activity from the perspective of one goal. Just like pure populism for Laclau, it ‘abolishes politics’ by transforming the identity of those actors and activities in such a way that they are amassed under two homogeneous yet infinitely separated camps where they completely lose their ‘distinct and independent’ characters and become ‘indistinct components of a single pattern’: ones that are ‘*eo ipso* agents’ of that goal and other ‘illegitimate’ ones (Oakeshott 1996, 93-94).

At the opposite end of Laclauian political continuum resides an equally impossible discourse of pure institutionalism, which is exclusively dominated by a ‘logic of difference’ that emphasizes only the disparities between particularities and therefore eliminates any ground for their partial identification with each other (Laclau 2005a, 62-63; 2005b, 45). A “politics” dominated only by the institutionalist discourse would reduce it to the level of ‘administration’. Laclau argues time and again that it would liken those in the ‘myths of the totally reconciled society’, such as Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, where the particular elements constituting a society are absorbed into the system in a completely individual manner and transformed into ‘objective differences’ with absolutely nothing in common but their existence under one ‘singularity’. As the ‘positive nature of all its terms’ is established within an infinitely static structure, which Laclau calls ‘pure spatiality’, there would be absolutely no ground for ‘dislocation’, hence for politics (2005a, 62-63, 100; 1990, 69-72; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 130).

This second impossible extreme, in turn, corresponds to the politics of scepticism, or sceptical discourse, in Oakeshott who, as an admirer of Hobbes, once again employs the same example as Laclau while fleshing out how such a discourse would play out if it could operate alone (Oakeshott 1996, 75-76). In fact, Oakeshott sees this particular discourse so close to the one operating in the ‘mythical’ universe of *Leviathan* that he describes it almost in the same terms he used earlier in a review of the book: establishing a ‘superficial peace and orderliness’ in a world where ‘there is no place for perfection’ (2000, 162).⁸ Sceptical discourse, for him, attaches politics no overriding goal like the ‘pursuit of perfection’ but to keep peace and maintain a ‘superficial order’ so that its subjects, who share with one another nothing more than living under one order, can freely attend their individual matters. It ascribes utmost importance to the rule of law as the only way of maintaining order and, accordingly, understands politics as a ‘judicial’ activity responsible exclusively with ‘exact’ implementation of that rule (Oakeshott 1996, 32-33; Corey 2006, 165). This means that such a discourse, in its pure form, reduces politics to – what Oakeshott calls – a repetitive ‘play’, to an activity that is pursued for its own sake, ‘just to keep things going’. Similar to pure institutionalism for Laclau, it presupposes a completely ‘static society’ and gives into the ‘political quietism’, a situation where ‘there can be no emergency’ requiring even the slightest change within the established order (Oakeshott 1996, 27, 107-108, 110-113).

For both Laclau and Oakeshott, then, politics is conceived as residing on a continuum between these two opposite poles of logical impossibilities: a purely *faithful* or *populist* discourse dividing society into two antagonistic camps where the identities of all elements are

⁸ The piece referred here is *Leviathan: A Myth*, which had been originally delivered by Oakeshott as a radio talk in 1947 (Oakeshott 2000, x).

collapsed into one that is exclusively determined by the nature of the dividing line; and a purely *sceptical* or *institutionalist* one maintaining a completely stable order where all its elements have eternally fixed and completely differential identities. Neither can exist in purity, for they are 'self-destructive' when left alone and bring the 'end of politics'. It is rather that political arrangements always contain both of them and the exact point politics is set on its continuum at any given moment depends on the rate at which these two impossible discourses blend. However, consistent to their shared post-foundationalism, both Laclau and Oakeshott reject the possibility of ever arriving at some sort of *stable* point of equilibrium and instead favour the idea of a constantly shifting balance, which is at once the source of ultimate contingency as well as of relative stability of every political arrangement (Oakeshott 1996, 121-123; Laclau 2005a, 120, 200; Laclau 2005b, 46).

The reason why such a comparison of Laclau and Oakeshott has been undertaken up to this point is not only to attract attention to the remarkable extent of similarities between their ideas. Although it is clearly a very significant point – one that has received regrettably little attention especially for Oakeshott's account as a post-foundationalist thinker – it is not the whole thing. Bringing together the impossible poles of politics as they are theorized in their corresponding frameworks may also be useful in discerning a certain problematic in Laclauian concept of populism.

2. Entrepreneurial Populism: A Case for Sceptical Populism?

Within the bidimensional depiction of politics presented above, it is possible to see the reason behind Laclau's controversial claim that equalizes populism with politics: the ineradicable presence of populism in politics stems from the impossibility of reaching the *reductio ad absurdum* point where the populist discourse is entirely absent, i.e. a pure institutionalism. There is always an excess of meaning that destabilizes its 'coincidence with the limits of community'. This is why, Laclau insists, 'there is no political intervention which is not populist to some extent' and, thus, the question is not if, but 'to what degree' populism is present in a given discourse (2005a, 81, 154; 2005b, 45).

But this is not all what populism is about for Laclau. He also assigns it an inherent quality of *subverting the status quo* with the purpose of *radically reconstructing* a new one. And this movement from a mere subversion to radical reconstruction is also 'a matter of degree' for Laclau (2005a, 122-123, 177-178). It seems like an implicit assumption is at work here: the more "radical" a discourse is vis-à-vis the status quo, the more populist it will be. This suspicion gains considerable credibility when Laclau tells us that 'the degree of populism' of a movement or ideology depends on its distance from other political alternatives present in a community. In order to be considered as populist 'in a particularly clear way', he concludes, it needs to propose 'a radical alternative, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges' (2005b, 47).⁹

If this is the case, then it appears like Laclau presupposes that for a discourse (movement, ideology etc.) to be perceived as unequivocally populist, it must embrace a certain understanding of politics which takes it not only as a matter of utmost importance ('society's future hinges on it!'), but also as a proper tool capable of bringing about some sort of substantial changes. This, as discussed above apropos Oakeshott, is identical to claim that for a given discourse to be considered unequivocally populist, it must be resultant of a combination where politics of faith more or less predominates over that of scepticism.¹⁰

⁹ Laclau also includes those discourses which defend the status quo 'against potential alternatives' within his general picture of politics, but not necessarily in populism (2005b, 47-48).

¹⁰ Incidentally, this is exactly what Margaret Canovan has suggested when she introduced Oakeshott's model to the discussion on populism for the first time. Populism, for her, is a primarily faithful discourse, functioning as a

Conceived as such, a populist discourse must perceive itself as having involved into an activity that is not merely a repetitive play pursued just to keep things going, but a serious business capable of producing real change, for better or worse.

However, what if there is a particular discourse out there whose populist credentials are ‘shown in a particularly clear way’, but it nonetheless considers itself involved in a play, a not-so-serious activity that is ultimately inconsequential and pursued just for the sake of enjoyment received during the course of the act? A *predominantly sceptical yet still populist* discourse, which neither subverts the existing order nor attempts to radically reconstruct a new one, but simply *plays* it?

This is precisely what Fieschi and Heywood coin as the ‘entrepreneurial populism’ (2004). They claim that populism of this sort, with its strategy focused exclusively on playing the existing system by exploiting its weakened functioning, does not fit into the traditional depiction of populism as anti-system, for it does not attempt to challenge the system at all. Neither does it defend it. Fieschi and Heywood consider Berlusconi and his *Forza Italia* as the foremost representative of this sort of populism. They argue that his popular appeal stems from having ‘done well by the system’ and being seen as ready to apply his ‘street-smarts’ to what is perceived as a system so deeply corrupted that it is considered ‘beyond rehabilitation’ (Fieschi and Heywood 2004, 299-302). The reasoning behind such support is: ‘although the system may be corrupt, the appropriate response is to vote for someone who can play this system to the mutual advantage of voter and candidate since he has proven his worth by prospering within it’ (2004, 303). Openly embracing the sceptical view that politics does not and cannot bring about any substantial change, an entrepreneurial populist proposes to put his immoral credentials into use in order to abuse the status quo. As Fieschi and Heywood assert, what this sceptical discourse receives, in turn, is essentially a *cynical* support insofar as, although their clientele do not trust the entrepreneurial populists nor the political system, they act as if they did because ‘there is something to be gained from that engagement—even if that gain is a perverse by-product’ of the system’s irreparable corruptness (2004, 293).

In fact, Laclau seems to be well aware of this entrepreneurial populist phenomenon, as it is apparent in his discussion of Adhemar de Barros, a corrupt Brazilian politician from 1950s, who had the campaign motto “he steals, but he keeps things going” and sought support by offering political favours in exchange of votes (2005a, 122). According to Laclau, what accounts for the presence of populism in this case is Barros’s challenge to ‘business as usual’, like the figure of ‘bandit’ inspiring awe and attraction simply because he is ‘outside the legal system’ and defies it. Insofar as there are ‘raw anti-status-quo feelings’ present in any society, Laclau maintains that one should ‘intuitively perceive’ figures like Barros as populist regardless of the ‘reasons’ for their challenge and ‘forms’ in which they articulate those anti-status-quo feelings (2005a, 123).

The problem here seems to be twofold. First, it is not immediately clear in what sense Barros’s clientelist strategy of political bribery constitutes a challenge to a deeply tarnished system, like in early 1950s Brazil, where political corruption was exceedingly present to the point of being the norm rather than the exception (Whitehead 2002; Skidmore 2007). His position seems to liken more of an “honest crook”, so to speak, who proposes to put his immoral credentials into use in order to abuse an irreparably broken system currently managed by other, equally immoral yet dishonest crooks. Also, even if one accepts he poses a challenge to the system, the idea of attributing the populist dimension of a discourse exclusively to its anti-status-quo disposition and, thus, equalizing populism with banditry brings about the familiar risk of entirely losing its conceptual particularity (Stavrakakis 2004).

corrective whenever politics in a given society swings particularly close to its sceptical extreme (Canovan 1999). See also Arditi (2007, 44-53).

For then populism would be indistinguishable from practically any sort of rebellious discourse, be it obscure vigilantism or fundamentalist terrorism.

3. Conclusion

It is only in terms of their politico-ideological reputations and scholarly traditions they have given birth to, one may agree with Isaacs' conclusion that an ocean lies between Laclau and Oakeshott. When it comes to their theory of the political, however, a completely different picture emerges. Both thinkers conceptualize the social as an inherently contingent system of meaning whose institution always leaves some residue outside. It is this 'excess of meaning', what Oakeshott calls 'intimations' that are present but do not fully appear in social arrangements, which constitutes the ground for the political reactivation. Therefore, what Marchant puts forward regarding Laclauian theory holds true also for Oakeshott: the social and the political are 'two sides of the same coin'. The social *is* the political, only in a 'sleeping mode' where the political nature of its instituting moment is forgotten but can be reactivated at any time, turning what is considered as mundane practices of a social order into political manifestations (Marchant 2007, 147-8). Politics, on the other hand, consists of the set of practices and institutions through which this order is established as a result of discursive struggles between competing discourses. Both Laclau and Oakeshott consider it as constantly swinging on a continuum between two opposing yet impossible discourses whose presence and tension is nevertheless constitutive of politics: institutional/sceptical and populist/faithful ones.

This profound similarity between Laclau and Oakeshott brings us to the crux of our conclusion, which largely supports Marchant's reservations against what he calls the 'emancipatory apriorism' prevalent within the post-foundational framework of left Heideggerianism (2007, 156-9). Utilizing, however briefly, the example of Oakeshott, he shows that it is equally possible to picture a politics based on post-foundationalism which is not necessarily radical or emancipatory but rather sceptical and conservative. It would be self-contradictory to presuppose a particular ontic politics corresponding to post-foundationalist ontology: 'to elaborate an explicitly leftist version of post-foundational thought is in itself a political decision' (Marchant 2007, 3-4). Such an 'emancipatory apriorism' seems to be most apparent in Laclau's assimilation of populism with politics *tout court*, assigning it an apriori tendency to 'subvert the status quo' and 'radically reconstruct' a new one. But as the case of entrepreneurial populism exhibits, it is just as possible to come up with a populist discourse which does not necessarily subvert the status quo nor aims to radically reconstruct a new one, but simply plays it.

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