

## Contributions to analyze social identifications from the theory of hegemony

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the topic of identifications in Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony, focusing on the crosses between the leader and the function of Lacan's object a. Based on a reading of *On populist reason*, the paper proposes an innovative typology with three modes of social identification for discourse analysis: direct identification with the political leader; indirect identification around the leader mediated through a partial object that becomes an empty signifier and function by a nodal point; and the identification with certain values, principles, demands or shared ideals by the group or organization that function as objects cause of desire. In the second part, it deploys some useful theoretical-methodological tools to deepen and strengthen the social investigation of contemporary sociopolitical identities and processes from the political theory of discourse.

**Key words:** identifications, political leader, object a, demand, theory of populism.

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza la cuestión de las identificaciones en la teoría de la hegemonía de Ernesto Laclau, centrándose en los cruces entre el líder y la función del objeto a de Lacan. A partir de una lectura de *La razón populista*, el trabajo propone una tipología innovadora basada en tres modos de identificación social para el análisis del discurso: la identificación directa con la figura del líder político; la identificación indirecta en torno al líder mediada a través de un objeto parcial que se convierte en significante vacío y ocupa el rol de punto nodal; y la identificación con ciertos valores, principios, demandas o ideales compartidos por el grupo u organización que funcionan como objetos a causa de deseo. En la segunda parte, se despliegan algunas herramientas teórico-metodológicas útiles para profundizar y fortalecer la investigación social de identidades y procesos sociopolíticos contemporáneos desde la teoría política del discurso.

**Palabras clave:** identificaciones sociales, líder político, punto nodal, demanda, teoría del populismo.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The present work sets out to analyze the issue of social identifications in the discursive theory of hegemony of Laclau. Particularly, it focuses on analyzing the crosses between the leader and the function of Lacan's *objet petit a* in the theory of populism. In this way, it is expected to contribute to make the discursive analysis of identities and contemporary political and social processes complex and stronger from a Laclau-based viewpoint. How does Laclau approach the topic of identification in *On populist reason*? What is the role of the populist leader? And, how does it cross with the concept of *objet petit a* in affective bonding? What are the contributions in *On populist reason* to strengthen the study of social identifications in the dynamics of hegemonic operation?

To answer these questions, the text is structured in two sections. In the first, the issue of identifications in Laclau's theory of discourse is analyzed, emphasizing the specification on the roles of the leader, demands and function of *objet petit a* in *On populist reason*. In the second section, a typology with three identification modes for sociopolitical analysis is put forward. Some historic examples are resorted to showing the functioning of the theoretical apparatus in political dynamics, while some analytical tools useful for social research are applied.

## The issue of identifications in Laclau's theory of hegemony

Laclau mentions the concept of identification in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* for the first time. At this stage, influenced by Lacan and Derrida, the Argentine political theorist relates the subject with an "act of identification" which occurs in the sphere of a "structural flaw" (Laclau, 1993: 60, 76 and *ff.*). In *Minding the gap* (coauthored with Lilian Zac), Laclau defines subject as "subject of the flaw" and states that this subject is capable

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of performing “acts of identification” (Laclau and Zac, 2002: 12 and *ss.*). Moreover, in “*Deconstrucción, pragmatismo, hegemonía*” [Deconstruction, pragmatism and hegemony], Laclau characterizes the subject as an “agent of decision” and capable of “generating identifications” in the sphere of a “failed structural identity” (Laclau, 1998: 114 and *ff.*). In this context, he stated “we do not have identities merely, but else, identification” (Laclau, 2003: 63).

However, it was just over his last phase –which begins with the publication of *On populist reason* (OPR, henceforward)– that Laclau deepened into the crosses with psychoanalysis and the specific approach to social identifications from a postfoundational standpoint (Merlin, 2015; Ipar, 2020). In this text, Laclau (2005) approached the relationship between hegemony, identifications and the role of the leader, for which he was the target of criticisms due to the simplifications, inaccuracies, ambiguities and inconsistencies regarding the concepts of *objet petit a*, people, demands and heterogeneity, his relegation of institutional aspects and his tendency to reduce the plural nature of hegemonic operation to the figure of the populist leader (Aboy Carlés, 2005; Barros, 2009 and 2018; Retamozo, 2009, 2017 and 2021; Ardití, 2010; Gutiérrez Vera, 2011; Sosa, 2011; Fair, 2019a and 2019b; De Cleen and Glynos, 2021).

In the context of these critiques, Emilio De Ípola (2009), one of Laclau’s main readers, objected his forgetting of Freud’s contributions from other social texts that allow making links between the leader and the “primitive horde” complex. Laclau did not address the critiques; nevertheless, we find some fragments in OPR in which Laclau performs a critical rereading of Freud’s social texts and undertook disquisitions that contribute to make the contributions by De Ípola complex, in the fashion of Lacan. These contributions refer, on one side, to the central function of *objet petit a* and of the demands in social identification; on the other, to the distinction of various identification modes, which express by means of a continuum of gradients in political dynamics.

### ***On populist reason and the distinction between two models of political identification***

In OPR, Laclau (2005) made some relevant theoretical contributions to the study of identifications in hegemonic operation. In chapter 1, after going through the concept of identification in the pioneering works of Le Bon, Taine, Tarde and McDougall, Laclau includes a section entitled “The Freudian breakthrough” (Laclau, 2005: 75). On the basis of *Group Psychology and the*

*Analysis of the Ego*, Laclau states that Freud (1973) analyzes the “emotional bonds” from the model of “identifications” and supports that identification is “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person” (Laclau, 2005: 54).<sup>2</sup> TN Following Laclau, the “climax” of Freudian interpretation is “a characterization of group formation in terms of equivalential attachments forged between people as a result of their common love for a leader who takes the place of the “ideal ego” (Laclau, 2005: 80). The conclusion for this argumentation is that “Society would be conceived as a homogenous mass whose coherence would be exclusively assured by the presence of the leader” (Laclau, 2005: 80). However, Laclau points out that this interpretation is “excessive”, as the “the unilateral emphasis on the relationship with the leader simply ignores all the place in Freud’s texts where different social arrangements are suggested as actual possibilities” (Laclau, 2005: 57).

According to Laclau, there is an “opposition between two models of alternative social grouping”. In the “libidinal tie with the leader” (Laclau, 2005: 57). In the second, the unit is “through organization, society acquires the characteristics of the individual.” (Laclau, 2005: 58). Then he states that these two examples “are they social logics which, to various extents, enter into the constitution of all social groups” (Laclau, 2005: 58).

Then, Laclau makes a new contribution that we consider fundamental for social research. He states that the completely organized group and the absolute identification with the leader are two “impossible” extremes and that these two social logics articulate one another through a continuum in political dynamics:

In my view, the fully organized group and the purely narcissistic leader are simply the *reductio ad absurdum* —that is, impossible— extremes of a continuum in which the two social logics are articulated in various ways (Laclau, 2005: 58).

Then, Laclau retakes some examples in which Freud analyzes such “combination” and which allows stating that:

First, that ‘something in common’ which makes the identification between members of the group possible cannot consist exclusively in love for the leader, but in some positive feature that both leader and led share (Laclau, 2005: 59).

In the final part of OPR, Laclau states that from such “alternative system”, the issue of populism may be approached (Laclau, 2005: 57), even though this implies going beyond Freud to “appeal to a plurality of intellectual traditions” (Laclau, 2005: 64).

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2 TN Quotations were taken from “On populist reason”, Verso, London, 2005.

The following chapter, Laclau recovers the two identification modalities of the group and points out at the organization that assumes that all the individuals' functions and eliminate the leader is "impossible". However, in the same way, "its antipode, a durable group whose only libidinal tie is love for the leader, is equally impossible" (Laclau, 2005: 82).

In this way, Laclau offered a dual possibility for political analysis. On one side, he stated that the leader is a condition of possibility for the unity of the group, therefore, of the hegemony. In this sense, "the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality [—and here I agree with Freud— ] is inherent to the formation of a 'people.'" (Laclau, 2005: 100). Though, at once he clarified "the extreme form of singularity is an individuality" (Laclau, 2005: 100).

However, Laclau also contested Freud because of the supposed centrality of the leader as an axis for identification. According to Laclau, even if love for the leader is a central element to build any political link:

I think Freud **moves too quickly** from pointing to love of the leader as a central condition for **consolidating** the social bond to asserting that it is the **origin** of that bond (Laclau, 2005: 82; underlining and bold are mine).

According to Laclau (2005: 83), this interpretation is "insufficient" and has to be completed with Freud's references to "differentiated grade" (Laclau, 2005: 83). In this way, Laclau opens the possibility to approach a second alternative, in which identification is not focused on the almost hypnotic figure of the leader, but in its function of social order. Here, the leader represents a sort of "ultimate" articulator of the group, which consolidates elements scattered in the signifier chain. Hence, the leader is not the necessary origin of the social link, it works nevertheless as its final articulator.

These contributions allow analyzing various forms of social identification in political dynamics by means of a continuum of relative gradients. On one side, there would be an extreme case based on the direct identification with the leader of the figure as a significant master. On the other, there would be a social identification opposed to the previous, focused on organization (i.e., a political party) or in a unifying political idea (for instance, the idea of socialism), with no political leadership. Between these extremes, there is a continuum of intermediate options.

## **The extreme historic example of the final Perón in *On populist reason***

In OPR, Laclau underscored some historic examples with implications for the approach of social identification modes and particularly to study the role of populist leaderships. In “The return of Perón”, the Argentine historian retook the example of Perón in 1973, when the populist leader return from his enforced exile to Spain to unify the fragmented Peronist movement (Laclau, 2005: 214 and *ff.*).

From contributions from a classical text by Sigal and Verón (2003) and a work by Castagnola (2000), Laclau points out the particular historical creation of the Peronist movement with the senior leader in exile (1955-1973) and in particular “the very conditions of enunciation of Perón’s discourse from exile”. These enunciative conditions of Perón’s discourse were based on the dissemination of a “multiplicity of meanings” and “deliberately ambiguous”, targeted to the left and right of the Peronist movement, in order to ensure its “infallibility” (Laclau, 2005: 215-216).

The particular characteristics of Perón’s discourse abroad (in a context of political violence and stark social polarization) allowed him to show the existence of a signifier (Perón himself) who, in the conjuncture, became “entirely empty” (Laclau, 2005: 217). In this way, all the particular elements of the equivalence chain gathered around the figure of the popular leader. Though, as indicated by Laclau, the previous conjuncture before the return of Perón from his exile was an “extreme” situation in which the love for the father is the only social bond. This makes it that under these circumstances the unity of the people is fragile and feeble. Moreover, the absence of institutional regularity can only generate “fleeting” popular identities:

To go back to Freud: this would be the extreme situation in which love for the father is the only link between the brothers. The political consequence is that the unity of a ‘people’ constituted this way is extremely fragile. On the one hand, the potential antagonism between contradictory demands can break out at any moment; on the other, a love for the leader which does not crystallize in any form of institutional regularity—in psychoanalytic terms: an ego ideal which is not partially internalized by ordinary egos— can result only in fleeting popular identities. (Laclau, 2005: 270; underlining and bold are mine).

Laclau’s conceptual precisions above are relevant, as they allow going beyond the direct identification with the hypnotic figure of the populist leader, to underscore the importance of the forms of institutional sedimentation.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Underlining is mine.

## Laclau's critique of Freud and the influence of Lacan's theory

We have reviewed the concept of identification in Freud, which meant an “advance” in the face of previous political psychology analyses. However, in OPR Laclau states that Freud took a mainly genetic approach to his object of study, and needs to reformulate his theory so that it is a useful tool for sociological analysis:

Freud, as a result of the psychoanalytic framework within which he constructs his theory, has a predominantly genetic approach to the object of his study. Therefore **his categories obviously require a structural reformulation if they are going to be useful as tools of socio-political analysis** (Laclau, 2005: 63, underlining and bold are mine).

In point of fact, as pointed out by psychoanalyst Nora Merlin (2015), the Freudian conception of the identification of the masses with the leader as ideal of the ego in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* does not represent a discourse mode of social bond, nor does it imply a political construction, as it presupposes the existence of a passive, servile, uniform and featureless mass, religiously blinded by its fanatical adoration of the leader:

This phenomenon does not become a discursive modality of social bond, but it may be described as a whole of serialized, featureless people unified by their identification with and obedience to the leader. The subjects in the mass are passive, servile and influenced, their impoverished ego revitalizes the old moralizing and predestined rhetoric. Freud saw in mass psychology, the flock, the collective fascination, a preface to totalitarianism. Can it be thought as political construction? The answer is no because a formation exclusively supported on love necessarily leads to religion, in which the leader is an image-idol to be worshiped. We already demonstrated that love always blinds and tends to pacify relationships, overlooking conflict or disagreement. Therefore, this conception is opposed to politics (Merlin, 2015: 45-46).

Laclau himself states that OPR shall not be considered a “Freudian venture”. Conversely, in order to research current political and social phenomena and processes, one has to go beyond Freud and articulate different intellectual traditions:

Although I take Freud as my point of departure, this book should not be conceived as a ‘Freudian’ venture. There are many issues that Freud did not engage with, and many avenues, quite important for our purposes, which he did not follow. So my research has to appeal to a plurality of intellectual traditions (Laclau, 2005: 63; underlining and bold are mine).

To this call to go *beyond* Freud and structurally reformulate his contribution for sociopolitical analysis, Laclau answers from a Lacanian framework.

From the start, Political Discourse Theory was heavily influenced by the contributions from Lacan's psychoanalysis. In addition to the discursive conception of the social, we find almost mirroring concurrences in the analysis of chains of equivalence ("signifying chains"), which join around a central signifier ("love") which acts as *point of capiton* (nodal points). All these concepts refer to elements underlined by Lacan (2006) in his Seminar XVII. Laclau also mentions other Lacanian concepts in his body of work, as the primacy of the signifier over the signified (S/s), the suture, the impossibility of society (analogous to "no intercourse"), the enjoyment, the imaginary and dislocation (analogous to Lacan's concept of the Actual), and also shares with Lacan the conception of subject as a lack. However, while Lacan emphasizes in the imaginary aspect of the social link, Laclau focused on its symbolical aspects and put other key concepts of Lacan's theory aside such as fantasies, symptom, the theory of four discourses and the Borromean rings, and underdeveloped others such as enjoyment and affective dimension (Stavrakakis, 2010; Gutiérrez Vera, 2011; Sosa, 2011; Fair, 2019c).

### **The ontological function of object a and its homology with the hegemonic relationship**

In his final stage, which starts with OPR, Laclau deepened into the crosses with concepts from Lacan's theory. After underscoring Lacan's contributions on the "emancipation of the order of the signifier" in the face of the signified, in this text Laclau (2005: 104) points out "It is only with the Lacanian approach that we have a real breakthrough: the identity and unity of the object result from the very operation of naming" (underlining is mine).

In the context of the primacy of the signifying order in the discursive construction of the social bond, Laclau underscored the central role of *point de capiton* in Lacan in social unification. According to the Argentinean political theoretician: "It is clear that, without nodal points, there would be no configuration at all"<sup>4</sup> (Laclau, 2005: 136). In the same way, in the case of "popular identities", nodal points are required to generate an "equivalential identification": "This is exactly what we have seen in the case of popular identities: without the quilting point of an equivalential identification, democratic equivalences would remain merely virtual" (Laclau, 2005: 105).

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4 Referring to the function the analyst as a Subject supposed Knowledge in Seminario 11, Lacan (1987: 276) exemplifies with the following phrase: "I love something in you more than you do, the petit objet a".

At this point, from contributions by Žižek (1992), in OPR, Laclau (2005: 102) emphasized the role of “nomination”, that is to say, the discursive evocation that retroactively creates social reality. Following Lacan, he stated that “naming’ can have the retroactive effect I have described”. Laclau (2005: 110) defined this moment of nomination as “radical investiture”, which made him underscore the centrality of the “affective dimension” (Laclau, 2005: 110) and, in particular, the “emotional populism attachments” (Laclau, 2005: 110).

Then, Laclau took contributions by Copjec (1995 and 2003) from the field of psychoanalysis and translated them into political analysis to underline his main “discovery”: the central role of Lacan’s object a in hegemonic operation (Laclau, 2005: 111 and *ff.*).

To sum up, the concept of object a (*objet petit a*) is one of the main original contributions from Lacan’s theory (Rabinovich, 2003: 18). Let us remember that for Lacan every subject represents a “divided” subject, “crossed” (\$) by the effect of language (Lacan, 1987: 207). The function of these metonymic objects is to “cover the “gap that is the inaugural division of the subject” (Lacan, 1987: 278). Object a, always with unavoidable certain loss as a product of the symbolic castration and loss of the primordial order (Mother), becomes as the object of desire for the subject. This is because it manages to replace, imaginarily, “the object of lack”, which at first is the figure of mother, and more specifically, the breasts, regardless of the very image of the mother (Lacan, 1987: 205-206, 264-266; 2006: 13; 2008). That is to say, *petit* objects represent partial objects dressed as objects of cause of desire, as long as they enable accessing the impossible “sexual intercourse” and ghostly fill structural lacks. Functioning as containers for an absence, in Seminar XVII, Lacan (1990: 123) points out that in the sublimation mechanism, objects are raised to the “dignity of the Thing”

As indicated by Gutiérrez Vera (2011), objects a are relevant for sociopolitical analysis, as around this signifier, master, identifications crystalize:

For Lacan, such is the orthopedic function of *objet petit a* – at once the object that causes the desire and the object of desire – which comes to bridge this gap, the unbearable incomplete condition (unwholly) of the political and society “system”, elevating an unessential particularity to the category of its own unifying element. Around this “master”, “hegemonic signifier” or “quilting point” crystalize the identification that make political interpellation effective” (Gutiérrez Vera, 2011: 160).

Lacan's concept of *objet petit a* is moreover fundamental to defocus the role of the leader of the primal horde in Freud's theory and valorize the maternal function. Conversely, in the Freudian conception, where mass identification focuses on the almost hypnotic figure of the leader (either religious, political and military), Lacan focuses on a second possibility, which relates identification with a particular feature of the object.

As indicated in *Seminar IX: Identification* (Lacan, 1961-1962), in *Seminar XI*, Lacan states that the subject identification may be set up both in the function of the leader as ideal of the ego (I), as a privileged object which "drive turns around". This privileged object which works as a support is the object a (Lacan, 1987: 264-266). In this case, identification is not established with the leader as an "ideal ego" shared by the mass and that offers security and represses the instincts. Conversely, it crosses the "primary narcissistic identification" to produce an identification with a "privileged object", which Lacan defines as "object a" (Lacan, 1987: 265).

In Seminar XVII, *The other side of psychoanalysis*, Lacan (2006) contested the "mythical" construction of the "Oedipus complex" and the theory of Father of the horde by Freud from reading *Group psychology*. In this text, Lacan "refers Oedipus and Moses and demonstrates the inconsistency of these two figures together" (Laurent, 1992: 13). Lacan states that the father is "castrated" by the signifier order and restates that the leader does not represent the master signifier (S1) which works as a *punto de capiton*, which cushions the signifier chain (S2). As he states, "the place of the agent, whatever it is, is not merely that of the signifier Master does not always correspond to the figure of the leader.

Lacan warns about the possibility of identification mediated by some feature of the object, either a feature of the leader (Lacan even refers Hitler's mustache to explain the identification with his figure in Nazism), or any particular aspects that generalizes affective bonds (such as the cathexis transference by means of the "alleged knowledge", which is key to explain the analyst's symbolical efficacy)<sup>5</sup>. He also refers the enjoyment linked to the consumption of gadgets, in the sense of the goods offered by the Capitalist Discourse as desirers and turned into objects cause of desire, in a drive logic that traps the subjects (Lacan, 2006).

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5 In this sense, Ramírez (2012) refers to the excess of order of the Real which for Lacan characterized object a. However, in OPR, Laclau underscores this constitutive "excess" in the field of representation, from the existence at the same time internal and external to the symbolic of an "Real heterogenous" that interrupts it, assimilating Marx's notion of Lumpenproletariat. In this regard see Barros (2009).

As underscored by a number of authors, Lacan's interpretation of *objet petit a* as a construction of the signifier order that metonymically replaces the primordial object of desire (the Thing, as lost) and imaginarily fills the constitutive division of the subject, contests the centrality of Freud's leader of the horde and allows analyzing various modes of social identification that go beyond the hypnotic identification of the mass with the figure of Father-Leader (Laurent, 1992: 37-38; Rabinovich, 2003; Stavrakakis, 2007 and 2010).

Following a similar logic, in OPR, Laclau (2005) affirms that "Lacan radicalizes Freud's thinking", since for him, "the lost Thing is not an impossibility of thought, but a void of Being". In this way, the Thing ceases being "inaccessible". Unlike Freud, for Lacan there exists the possibility of a partial recovery of the "enjoyment" of the Thing (the Mother), which "is not lost" as "traces of it remain in the partial objects" (Laclau, 2005: 112). In this way, the mythical enjoyment of the thing may be accessed by means of objects *a* (as partial objects). According to Laclau:

If, however, *jouissance* is not lost, this is because traces of it remain in the partial objects. The nature of these traces, however, must be carefully explored, because they no longer follow the noumenon/phenomenal representation schema. **The partial object becomes itself a totality; it becomes the structuring principle of the whole scene** (Laclau, 2005: 113; underlining and bold are mine).

Laclau (2005: 146) distinguishes that in Lacan the partial object "is not a part of a whole but a part which is the whole". In this manner, in the drive it is the partial object (as with the mothers' breasts regarding the mother) that assumes the form of incommensurable totality:

In this way, the partial object ceases to be a partiality evoking a totality, and becomes —using our earlier terminology— the name of that totality. Lacan breaks with the notion of a mother/child dyad by adding a third component, detached from the mother: the breast —properly speaking, the object of the drive (Laclau, 2005: 114; underlining is mine).

In these contributions, Laclau finds a homology with the Lacanian theory to analyze popular identities:

The mythical wholeness of the mother/child dyad corresponds to the unachieved fullness evoked —as its opposite— by the dislocations brought about by the unfulfilled demands. **The aspiration to that fullness or wholeness** does not, however, simply disappear; **it is transferred to partial objects** which are the objects of the drives. **In political terms, that is exactly what I have called a hegemonic relation: a certain particularity which assumes the role of an impossible universality** (Laclau, 2005: 114; underlining and bold are mine).

The original “discovery” put forward by Laclau (2005) in OPR states that, from the field of political theory, there is an identity relationship at ontological level between the logic of displacement from object *a* (breasts as partial object) to the Thing (the mother’s mythical enjoyment) by Lacan and the logic of particular-universal logic of displacement that characterizes hegemonic operation. In his own words:

With the fullness of the primordial mother being a purely mythical object, there is no achievable jouissance except through radical investment in an *objet petit a*. Thus *objet petit a* becomes the primary ontological category. But the same discovery (not merely an analogous one) is made if we start from the angle of political theory. No social fullness is achievable except through hegemony; and hegemony is nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us because it is purely mythical (in our terms: it is merely the positive reverse of a situation experienced as ‘deficient being’). **The logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical** (Laclau, 2005: 115-116; underlining and bold are mine).

In Laclau’s Lacanian reading, the logic of displacement from the particular to the universal that characterizes *objet petit a* with the Thing (Mother, as something forbidden) is “identical” to the particular-universal (tendential) displacement mode of the empty signifier in the hegemonic operation. As the empty signifier in the hegemonic operation, *objet a* represents a particular form, though symbolically assumes the role of universality. This universalization is illusory, for it implies the dream of embodying a mother/child “mythical totality” (the impossible access to Mother-Thing), or its political counterpart, the dream of a “entirely reconciled society” (Laclau, 2005: 116). According to Laclau (2005: 115): “With this we reach a full explanation of what radical investment means: making an object the embodiment of a mythical fullness. Affect (that it, enjoyment) is the very essence of investment” (underlining is mine).

In like manner, in *Debates y combates* [Debates and combats], Laclau (2008) retakes the homology in OPR between the tendential displacement of the empty signifier in the hegemonic relationship and the partial object raised to the “dignity of the Thing” of Lacan’s theory:

I have tried to demonstrate in *On populist reason* how the logic of hegemony and that of the *objet petit a* largely overlap, and both refer to a **fundamental ontological relationship in which fullness can only be touched by means of an investment on a partial object; which is not a partiality inside the totality, but a partiality that is totality** [...] what is relevant for our topic is that fullness –the Freudian Thing– is unattainable; it is only a retrospective illusion that is substituted with partial objects that embody that impossible totality. In words by Lacan: sublimation is to raise an

object to the dignity of the Thing. As I have tried to demonstrate, **the hegemonic relation reproduces all those structural moments**: a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality that always moves away (Laclau, 2008: 20; underlining and bold are mine).

In his final works, Laclau repeated once again this homology between the logic of (tendential) displacement of the hegemony and the logic of *objet petit a*:

This process by means of which identities stop being purely immanent to a system and need an identification with a point that transcends such system which is the same as: when a particularity becomes the name of the absent universality – which is what we call hegemony. Its logic is identical to that of *objet petit a* (Laclau, 2014: 86; underlining is mine).

Whether this homology is fulfilled,<sup>6</sup> from Lacan's standpoint it is used for showing that the dynamic of displacement from the particular to the universal never stops representing a particularity. Hence, only a particular element may ghostly suppose access to full universality.

The relevance of these specifications for Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) is that they allow making complex certain simplified interpretation of the relationship between the political leader and their adherents, in Lacanian key. This reductionist interpretation ignores the existence of other possible forms of social identification that go *beyond* the hypnotic link Leader-Father / mass, as initially stated by Lacan (1961-1962, 2006 and 2008) and retrieved by Laclau himself.

In point of fact, we have found a scanty known passage in OPR, in which Laclau refers the possibility that in the discourse of publicity of goods such as Marlboro or Coca Cola work as “nodal fixation points” and, in this way, imaginarily adopt the representation of an incommensurable universality:

We have stated that the totalization of the popular field —the discursive crystallization of the moment fullness / empty— can only take place if a partial content adopts the representation of universality that is incommensurable with it [...]. **Marlboro and coke may work as points of nodal fixation in the publicity images, and in this way, the signifiers of a certain totalization**, but still are the particular entities, Marlboro and Coke, which perform this role (Laclau, 2005: 137; underlining and bold are mine).

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<sup>6</sup> For Lacan, it characterizes the *objet petit a*. However, in OPR, Laclau (2005) distinguishes this constitutive “excess” in the field of representation, from the existence, at once external and internal of the symbolical of an “actual heterogenous” which interrupts it, assimilating the notion of Marx's lumpenproletariat. In this regard, see Barros (2009).

As noticed, in the example of the publicity discourse, the populist leader is not present as source of identification, but the images of goods are the ones that become nodal points.

### **The role of demands in populist identification**

Another innovation put forward by Laclau in OPR, in Lacanian key, is the emphasis in the role of demand in the discursive construction of the social bond. In this work, Laclau affirms that the analysis of populism has to start from the notion of demand as the minimal unit of political analysis:<sup>7</sup>

If we want to gauge the specificity of a populist articulatory practice, we have to isolate units smaller than the group, and to determine the kind of unity that populism brings about. The smallest unit from which we will start corresponds to the category of ‘social demand’ (Laclau, 2005: 98).

According to Laclau, for populism to exist, isolated demands (defined as “democratic” demands) have to enter an equivalent relationship with one another (defined as “popular” demands) and build a discursive border that tends to divide the social space in two dichotomic fields: “plebs” (in the sense of “those below”) and “power” (Laclau, 2005: 74 and *ff.*).

What we are interested in underscoring is the use Laclau makes of the notion of demand to analyze affect in popular identities. We have noticed that Laclau emphasizes the ontological role of *objet petit a*. According to Laclau (2005: 152), “*objets petit a* presuppose a differential cathexis, and it is this cathexis that we call affect”. At this point, Laclau puts forward a fundamental “structural sequence” to “correctly focus the issue of popular identities”.

First we have the moment of the mythical fullness for which we search in vain: the restoration of the mother/child unity or, in political terms, the fully reconciled society. Then we have the partialization of the drives: the plurality of *objets petit a* which, at some point, embody that ultimately unachievable fullness (Laclau, 2005: 119).

However, the embodiment of absent fullness requires an embodying entity to acquire a cathectic investment:

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<sup>7</sup> This conception of demand as minimal unit for political analysis generated critiques from the specialized bibliography, as it seems to presuppose a demand prior to the subject (De Ípola, 2009), does not distinguish between the concepts of demand and necessity (Gutiérrez Vera, 2011) and leaves aside his historic and social production, that is to say, struggles that make sense of certain situations and social relationships, which on their own depend on previous experiences partly sedimented (Retamozo, 2017 and 2021).

Embodying something can only mean giving a name to what is being embodied; but, since what is embodied is an impossible fullness, something which has no independent consistency of its own, the 'embodying' entity becomes the full object of the cathectic investment (Laclau, 2005: 119).

Here, Laclau once again makes a homology with Lacanian concepts in a political analysis key. Though, this time, the homology is established between the partial object that is raised to the dignity of the Thing and the metonymic displacement from the democratic demand to the popular demand and its conversion into nodal sublimation point that acquires the value of breast, in the hegemonic operation:

In psychoanalytic terms: while desire knows no satisfaction, and lives only by reproducing itself through a succession of objects, the drive can find satisfaction, but this is achievable only by 'sublimating' an object, raising it to the dignity of the Thing. Let us translate this into political language: a certain demand, which was perhaps at the beginning only one among many, acquires at some point an unexpected centrality, and becomes the name of something exceeding it, of something which it cannot control by itself but which, however, becomes a 'destiny' from which it cannot escape. When a democratic demand has gone through this process, it becomes a 'popular' one. But this is not achievable in terms of its own initial, material particularity. It has to become a nodal point of sublimation; it has to acquire a 'breast value'. It is only then that the 'name' becomes detached from the 'concept', the signifier from the signified. Without this detachment, there would be no populism (Laclau, 2005: 119; underlining and bold are mine).

As noticed, in this last quotation Laclau focuses on demand as a partial object source of identification, decentering the figure of leader.

Laclau himself illustrates with some historic examples. One of them is the demand for solidarity in Poland (Laclau, 2005). As he summarizes in an article published in 2006, in journal *Cuadernos del Cendes*:

Let us take an example I used at various moments in *On populist reason: Solidarnosc* [Solidaridad] in Poland. This was a society where a plurality of demands frustrated by an oppressive regime had created a spontaneous equivalence among them, which had to be expressed by means of some sort of symbolic unit [...] [In this context] Solidarity demands turned into the symbol of a longer chain of demands whose unstable equivalence on that symbol will construct a broader popular identity (Laclau, 2006b, s/p).

This example is a particular demand, Solidarity, which he condensed in a long equivalence chain and it became the political dynamic in the nodal point of the symbolical identification of the group.

## Changes in Lacan's discursive theory of populism

As noted in chapter one in OPR, Laclau puts forward two extreme ways of social identification and then he adds a gradual continuum of intermediate options, from the mediating concept of the *objet a*. However, there is a problem in this scheme, since as we notice in various passages of OPR (and later texts), Laclau defines *objet a* as homologous to the particular-universal change of the empty signifier in the hegemonic operation and as an ontological element to grasp popular identifications. In this way, and as in previous works, the individual figure of the leader is excluded from the scheme, replacing the empty signifier with Lacan's *objet petit a*.

In point of fact, in a passage from OPR, Laclau himself states: "There is no populism without affective investment in a partial object" (Laclau, 2005: 116). But then he links partial objects with "aims, figures, symbols" that "are so cathected that they become the name of its absence"<sup>8</sup> (Laclau, 2005: 117). In this case, Laclau changes between identification with certain "figures" or "symbols" (ideas, collective values) which (as breast and mother) mediate between the part and the whole. The problem is that Laclau mistakes the primordial signifier that acquires the "value of breast" with the very breast, that is, the primordial object of desire with the object cathected as a because-of-desire object. This is contrasted with the contributions from the discursive role of demand (as a concept different to primary need) which we previously reviewed.

Furthermore, in the usual study of Laclau's scheme, it would seem that cathetical linking only takes place in populist discourses. However, in OPR, Laclau underscores the overall importance of affection and cathetical linking in the construction of hegemonies, beyond the populist processes. In his own words:

The complexes which we call 'discursive or hegemonic formations,' which articulate differential and equivalential logics, would be unintelligible without the affective component [...]. So we can conclude that any social whole results from an indissociable articulation between signifying and affective dimensions (Laclau, 2005: 111; underlining mine).

These considerations invite to suppose that the affective dimension, being constitutive, is also present in "institutionalist" or "administrativist" identities, that is to say, those in which the differential and managerial satisfaction of needs prevails (Laclau, 2005). Laclau mentions as an example of this sort of administrativist discourse, the phrase by Saint Simon of going

8 Underlining is mine.

from the governing of men to managing *things*. Additionally, the analysis of this sort of managerial political discourses contributes to prevent the usual problem of “reification” of populism as only possible form of politics and its strong opposition to “anti-populism” (De Cleen and Glynos, 2021: 3-4 and ff.). In this way, the analysis of affection and cathexial linkages may be approached as sociopolitical phenomena and processes not necessarily considered populist.

### **Contributions to analyze identification in politics from the discourse theory: three forms of social identification**

From the analytic distinction proposed by Laclau in OPR between the extreme example of direct identification with the leader and the opposed extreme example of the identification with the organization, the contributions from the ontological centrality of *objet a* as mediating concept and the defocusing of the narcissistic figure of leader, we propose a typology with three social identification modalities to study the hegemonic operation:

**Direct identification with the political leader figure:** identification is almost hypnotically established with the leader as Signifier Master (S1), whose figure summarizes and symbolically represents various meanings, social demands and subjects, and provides a determinate group or organization with imaginary cohesion. For example, the figure of Perón when he returned from the exile in 1973, as analyzed by Sigal and Verón (2003).

**Indirect identification around the leader mediated from a partial object that becomes an empty signifier and takes the role of nodal point:** identification is established as mediated by certain particular features, demands, values, mandates, principles or ideas shared by a determinate group, organization or community, which surpass the figure of the leader and embody social fullness. For example, popular identification with the demand from *Solidarity* in Poland that Laclau analyzed (2005 and 2006b), which later condensed in the figure of Walesa. In this line, Muñoz (2016) analyzed the process by means of which, in Bolivia, the indigenous-farmer movement took up the demand for “water and decorous life”. This particular demand later turned into the platform for other social demands, in the context of the plundering of natural resources of the Nation and to recover the sovereignty of peoples, and in this way, it became an empty signifier. Finally, Coca-leaf and farmer unions politically articulated as a people and became the State by means of their identification and adhesion to the figure of Evo Morales.

**Identification with certain values or ideas shared by the group or organization that work as objects because of desire:** identification is established around certain partial objects (values, principles, demands or ideas shared by a certain groups, community or social organization) that work as *objets a* and are cathected because of desire, by imaginarily filling in the gap. For instance, the function of the nodal fixation of the images of Marlboro or Coca-Cola publicity that Laclau (2005) mentions. In this line, Stavrakakis (2010: 255-283) analyzed the discourses of publicity and its consumerism mandates in current capitalism as an object because of the desire that promises to suppress the lack and becomes enjoyment. Furthermore, Martínez (2018) found in the shout: “¡Ni Una Menos!” [Not one (woman) less] a particular content that managed to articulate a myriad of social demands and turned into the nodal point of popular identification of the feminist movement, in present-day Argentina.

By going from particular sociopolitical processes, historic variations may appear in the modes and intensities of identification, which include from an increasing logic of institutionalization and sedimentation of partial objects, up to their entire disestablishment. An instance of this is the case of the economic stability ensured by the Convertibility plan in Argentina. Under conditions of inflationary control, economic expansion and boom of popular credit, as of 1991, the “1 to 1” stability became a nodal fixation point and was key to produce popular identification, secure the neoliberal order and reelect in the first round Peronist leader Carlos Menem in 1995. In 1999, with the election of radical leader Fernando De la Rúa, the Convertibility system strengthened, lasting beyond their various political managers up to its demise in 2001 (Fair, 2008, 2019c).

### **Methodological tools to research social identifications from the Political Discourse Theory**

There exist different alternatives to analyze social identifications from the Political Discourse Theory (PDT). These options can be neither *a priori* established nor in a strict manner, since they depend on the elected topic, goals, questions, and hypotheses of each research work. In any case, in order to avoid the danger of “everything goes” mentioned by Howarth and Glynos (2007), some basic methodologic patterns and regulations (though contingent), together with the onto-epistemological suppositions that define Laclau’s theory of hegemony (discursive over-determination, contingency and radical historicity and constitutive negativity), the *Wittgensteinian* use

of theory as a “toolbox” and the centrality of the concept of articulation (Buenfil Burgos, 2019).

Considering that for PDT, every identification is built in the context of a “relative structuralism where these processes appear” (Barros, 2013: 45), a starting point for the political-discursive analysis is in the importance of correctly contextualizing and historicizing the object of study. As pointed out by Laclau (2005: 14), the identification of the “privileged” signifiers that summarize the signification field presupposes a “contextual history”. In this sense, to analyze a recent social identification phenomenon, adding to the study of the specific conjuncture, certain historic-discursive transformations partially structured over time must be considered. Among them, neoliberal capitalism, economic globalization, expansion of communication media and electronic technologies, crises of political representativity, and the increasing appearance of new social movements, with its effects of increasing the commoditization of the social, the mediatization of the political, the planetary interconnection, individualization and fragmentation of the social structure and identities, and spatial segregation, in parallel with new emerging forms political socialization, popular organization and collective linking. The use of specialized bibliography allows conceptualizing these partially sedimented historic phenomena.

Complementary theoretical tools can also be utilized. For example, from Lacan’s thesis of the decline of the father figure and its later denouncing of fraud of Freud’s paternal authority (Lacan, 2006 and 2008), which made Lacan underscore father is another signifier (Laurent, 1992), the transformations in the traditional forms of exercising authority and phenomena such as the political representativity of the leaders can be studied. This contesting of patriarchal power is powered by the recent advances of the role of women and feminist movements, however, also with the displacements of the Neoliberal Capitalist Discourse (Fair, 2019c) and the so-called postmodern order. These historic transformations promote a sort of structuring of the social bond less conservative and more liberal than the Victorian and restrictive moral of Freud’s time, which focused on strict obligation and strong reactions of the superego. Under new historic circumstances, the mercantile fetish-objects disseminated as social imperatives by the Capitalist Discourse can be understood as *objets petit a* w} Furthermore, Lacan’s conception of demand as a *desire for recognition* (Rabinovich, 2003), and its relationship with enjoyment (*jouissance*), allows approaching from the discourse the subjective perception of social recognition of those “dispossessed” (Rancière, 1996) for certain privileged

demands attributed to popular leaderships and contributes to understand the libidinal effect invested on leaders. This from the analysis of their interpellations, symbolical gestures and public policies of historic redressing, dignification and egalitarian recognition (Barros, 2009 and 2013; Aibar, 2013).

As pointed out by Martín Retamozo (2009), the centrality acquired by the concept of demand in Laclau's theory is also key to analyze the identification processes from the voice of social movements, at the time these are social demands that start from "lack" and appear in the public space by means of collective actions that remain in time and entail identity processes. From PDT, the analysis of demands cannot be thought independently from language, as this appears in a situation as a demand-desire (Retamozo, 2009). At once, it presupposes that the study of the social conditions of production, which implies enquiring on the historicity of demands and its partial sedimentation, their organization modes and collective action, and symbolical struggles to provide certain situations with meaning and determinate social relationships with structure (Retamozo, 2021).

Lacan's conception of demand as desire for recognition, together with the notion of "theft of enjoyment" (Žižek, 1992; Stavrakakis, 2010), can also contribute to analyze the recent forms of social identification around right-wing leaderships, which includes antiauthoritarian, reactionary, and fundamentalist discourses (right-wing populists) and technocratic-managerial discourses (*administrativist*). These emerging political discourses can be understood as ideological variations taken by the Master Discourse in present capitalism, which generate forms of social identification by means of the essentialization and stigmatization of alterity and the construction of scapegoats (homosexuals, empowered women, public employees, Jews, immigrants, foreigners, the poor) that express deep hatred for the enjoyment of the Other (Fair, 2021). For example, Lindsay Pérez Huber (2016) found in Donald Trump a racist-nativist discourse that (re)produced dominant perceptions sedimented on undocumented Latin American migrants, color people and Islamic terrorism as "invaders" and "dangerous criminals" who threatened the American lifestyle to justify their social exclusion, explain the economic crisis and make America great again.

As regards research techniques to analyze social identification in the dynamic of hegemonic operation, which should be focusing on qualitative techniques, as they allow approaching the affective components through the word (Boito, Gandía and Scribano, 2008: 230). Among the various techniques that may be used from PDT we have: analysis of official presidential

discourses, semi-structured interviews, focus and discussion groups, participant observation, press archives and other documents and content analysis of social media. It is also possible to combine various qualitative techniques. For example, Schuttenberg (2013) reconstructed the historic trajectories and analyzed the forms of political identification of Movimiento Evita, Movimiento Libres del Sur and Movimiento de Unidad Popular (Argentina), from documents and semi-structured interviews with leaders of the three organizations. The interviews and documental analysis enabled the author to identify the nuclei where the meanings of their “national-popular” identities sedimented over stages prior to 2003 and how they were resignified in the context of Kirchner administration (Schuttenberg, 2013).

As for the methodological strategies, the discourse researcher can focus on the dimension of hegemonic construction and situationally examine the interpellations built by determinate actors of power with high performative force (for example, the president), with the goal of producing identifications or ensuring social bonds (Fair, 2021). A useful option is to link the presidential interpellations with the legitimation strategies of the main governmental policies.

Another useful option to analyze the construction of political identifications is related with the study of affectivity markers in texts. From the contributions from linguistics to discourse studies, Adriana Bolívar (2016) distinguishes various sorts of affectivity in political discourse: *declared*, when the politician expresses what they feel (for example, I feel / am very excited); *implied* or *indirect*, when they express what they feel such as concern or love; *narrated*, when they tell their experiences in life; *induced*, when words by the leader produces hope or fear (from promises or threats); *evoked*, when words allude a shared history (we are the children of Bolívar, we are warriors); and, *imagined*, when a hypothetical future world is presented (if they win they will destabilize). By means of an interactional (relational) and contextualized analysis, a continuum of intensities of positive affectivity can be identified in the texts.

The analysis of political discourse can also focus on the dimension of *hegemonic efficacy* to study the performative effects of the dominant interpellations on agents located in the role of the questioned (for example, the impact of presidential discourse on social movement referents). In this line, the researcher can analyze metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches and cathecreses –as well as positive valence adjectives– which the interpellated agents build to express sentiments of attachments or affective bonding on determinate ideas, demands, values and/or public authority figures (Fair,

2021). From there, it should be detectable in the texts of key signifier chains and nodal points that condensate social identifications from a relational analysis. For a research work in Latin America, other relevant indicator is the result of popular votes, mainly presidential elections.

For the specific analysis of identifications around the partial object, the discourse analyst may focus on equivalence chains attached to certain key signifiers that invest on the political dynamic as objects because of desire, as they imaginarily fill the gap and suture the community order. To ponder social identifications from the political discourse, a researcher may produce a qualitative scale of scalar characteristics of gradual opposition, which support on a relationship of gradualities between an intermediate term, on one side, and its degree of surpassing (for better or worse), on the other (Ducrot and Todorov, 1981). Then, they may attribute, by means of a descending continuum of intensities, differential degrees of affective attachment among the interpellated actors.

Finally, it is important to underscore that from onto-epistemological presuppositions of the Political Discourse Theory, the study of these forms of identification is always the product of an interpretative and attributive approach by the analyst.

## Conclusions

In this work we analyze the issue of identifications in Laclau's hegemony theory, focusing on the crosses between the leader and function of Lacan's *objet a* in the theory of populism. By means of a thorough read of *On populist reason*, we produced an innovative typology with three forms of social identification for the discursive analysis of hegemonic operation: direct identification with the political leader; indirect identification with the leader mediated from certain partial objects that turn into empty signifiers and take the role of nodal points; and identification with a demand, ideal or value shared by the group or organizations that work as object because of desire.

In the first case, identification is almost hypnotically established around the leader, whose figure summarizes and represents multiple meanings and social subjects. In the second case, identification is defined in an internal way, mediated from certain ideas or collective values, social demands or specific features that surpass the figure of the leader and embody social fullness. In the third case, identification establishes with certain partial objects (values, principles, demands or ideas shared by the group) that work as *objets a* and are

invested because of desire. By moving from the study of particular, political and social processes, we distinguish there may be different historic variations in the modes and gradual intensities of identification, which are included from a logic of increasing institutionalization and sedimentation up to its total disestablishment.

In the final part of the article, we proposed some theoretical-methodological tools useful to research social identification processes in the political dynamic, by means of a contextualized, interpretative, and attributive analysis. From unfolding this analytical proposal, we intend to contribute to deepen and strengthen the discursive analysis of contemporary sociopolitical identities and processes from the theory of hegemony.

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