Theories and Methodologies

The "Lost Cause" of Cultural Studies: Laclau after Hall

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As many before us have observed, history is always constructed toward the present. We imagine the past and tell the story of our becoming in ways designed to levy certain claims on today over others, or to make our proposals about tomorrow more persuasive. We are clear, therefore, that our brief contribution to this forum on Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture strives to bring to the fore aspects of the conjunctural moment of 1983 that might ignite new possibilities for our current predicament, forty years on. Today's conjuncture is very different, so our historical analysis must be precise for the evaluation to be informative. We single out Ernesto Laclau's and Stuart Hall's contributions to that august gathering to ask questions about the study of power relative to the dramatic changes across the intervening period. While it might seem odd to pair a thinker known for his theoretical skepticism with a thinker noted for his theoretical abstraction, Laclau and Hall frequently interacted with each other, generating insights that might help elucidate an elided facet of the 1983 event: the afterlife of the FBI's counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO).[1] Thinking about state violence, we ask how one might interpret Hall's prominence in the study of race and difference across the ensuing interval while Laclau's insights have been neglected by comparison.[2] Although both thinkers contested the identity politics of the late twentieth century, the elevation of Hall's ideas in cultural studies came at the expense of Laclau's. This state of affairs is not about the individual thinkers but rather about how the changes to capital and culture in this period have favored and twisted certain ideas over others. The following reflections are meant to honor the 1983 gathering by offering a modest riposte to these developments.

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In "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists," Hall lays out in detail the shifting political economy of Britain in the 1970s and 1980s that produced Thatcherism. Very similar changes occurred in the United States, but the main omission from Hall's account of this conjunctural moment is the naked use of state violence that shaped how these transformations in the state-corporate nexus are understood and incorporated into the consciousness of the average American or Briton. In both the United Kingdom and in the United States this means thinking about this period in terms of MI5, MI6, the FBI, the CIA, and more. COINTELPRO in the United States, and to a lesser extent Roy Jenkins's Black Power Desk in the United Kingdom, are by now well known, at least by leftist academics (Churchill and Wall; Bin Wahad et al.; Field). Why they continue to fall out of the conversation about the forces that shaped the decentralization of repression along with the decomposition of the industrial working classes during this era escapes us. Staying with Hall's "Toad," we might say the problem is partly a paradigmatic one in that Marxist analysis views violence in terms of the relations of capitalist development, not in terms of the gratuitous violence of seizure, terror, and punishment (see Robinson). It is not that Karl Marx failed to grasp the importance of slavery for the development of capitalism, but rather that he did not understand its importance for the development of the modern episteme. The same observations apply to Hall and many of the others in attendance at the 1983 conference. COINTELPRO is the gratuitous antiblack violence of slavery reworked for a different conjuncture, and therefore, by our estimation, it shapes knowledge production at the time and of the time. Our point is not that COINTELPRO, or any other discrete policy or state agency, is epistemologically significant, but rather that it is indicative of how antiblack violence founds and shapes the modern episteme.

COINTELPRO facilitated the criminalization of political action for the dawning of a newly multicultural democracy—not just for black communities but for everyone. It also secured the criminalization of racial blackness all over again. Not only did the increased state surveillance and interference, conjoined with the multiscalar coordination and professionalization of law enforcement, effectively bring an end to the civil rights, antiwar, and anticolonial struggles, they paved the way for mass incarceration, the curtailment of social welfare, and the deindustrialization analyzed by Hall. The prison and medical industrial complexes, together, have been an astoundingly effective demonstration of Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony in which coercion is needed to produce consent. But these complexes also present an analysis of the state-corporate nexus in the neoliberal era that is only belatedly becoming recognized in terms of "state making as organized crime" and "elite capture" (Tilly; Taiwo), wherein racial identity produces neither generalizable experience nor solidarity in the face of antiblack violence and capital's juggernaut (Woods). In our view, it is part of the conceits of cultural studies that these developments in power are not diligently connected to the essential thuggery of a slaveholding society with its requisite underlying corruption of civil society.

You would think Hall and the others in attendance would have recognized the pattern of state violence opening new territory for capitalism. This itinerary pursued several routes during the conjuncture of 1983, each arriving at the same destination. The Vietnam War was less the last hurrah of a decadent imperial order and more about checking the strength of global labor (Boggs). For the first time since the world wars, Vietnam ensured that servicemen and -women would return home to find their position dramatically immiserated in relation to capital. The illicit activities of COINTELPRO were routinized in this period and finally became legit with the Patriot Act after September 11, 2001 (Khaki). Vietnam also marked the hegemony of the state-corporate nexus that people experience as health care, law and order, personal and public security, and expanding service sector employment despite the profound upheavals in the political economy identified by Hall destabilizing communities across the United States and Britain during this time.

As this process unfolded in the 1980s, Hall was asserting his commitment to Marxism as "a living theory, an open-ended project of critical thought,

without guarantees, from the many other academically closed discourses that presently struggle to hegemonize the intellectual world" ("Toad" 56). From the benefit of historical reflection forty years on, this position appears as unjustified and taken for granted as the other "closed discourses" discounted by Hall, and can no longer be sustained. Instead of accurately discerning and effectively contesting the process of violent accumulation and manipulation, much of the academy and society have assimilated themselves to it by retreating further into the sanctuary of identity even though working lives have become more and more distanced from what now appears to have been a very brief moment of industrial working-class formation. The acute alienation and social isolation of the post-civil-rights-era transformations Hall describes are in fact constitutive to the construction of Western civilization's slaveholding hierarchies. This is why fascist eruptions throughout the globe are not departures from an otherwise civilized democratic milieu, but rather are merely evidence of the nature of modern society, as Aimé Césaire and other decolonized voices asserted long ago. Identities of all kinds can be easily accommodated, corrupted, and manipulated, whereas antiviolence cannot. That is why the state and capital worked hard to divert the black freedom movement away, for example, from antilynching and toward antisegregation (see *We Charge Genocide*). Identities introduce the (false) unities and (hollow) connections for which people are desperate and easily corrupted—as Elaine Brown showed with the war on crime in *The Condemnation of Little B*. Why people fall for these identities is complex: they do not want to be killed, firstly, and they do want institutional access to improve their lives, build and hold on to pensions, leave their children better off, work less dangerous jobs, and pay their debts. The explanation for this cannot hinge solely on a Gramscian analysis of hegemony and the various related readings for which Hall is credited (Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance"). Lacanian psychoanalysis, for instance, could contribute important insights here, despite Hall's dismissing it as ill equipped and stating that the "level of abstraction at which the theory is operating (even if it were correct) is largely incommensurable with the nature of the object it is being wheeled in to explain" ("Toad" 50–51). One might see this as Hall's preference for one kind of abstraction over another, a preference that reflects his disciplinary and institutional formation.

It is at this point where Laclau's theory of hegemony looms large. Laclau offers some of the theoretical elements necessary to understand the hegemony of race discourse after COINTELPRO. Hall certainly did not trigger the current decadent impotence of leftist cultural studies and the academy writ large (Marxists, radicals, progressives, abolitionists, and Afropessimists included), but from the vantage point of historical reflection it does seem clear to us that Laclau's emphasis on antagonism has been marginalized because it is not as easily assimilable into this new war of position wherein identity serves a crucial policing function from within the actual antagonism necessary for transformation. To be clear, this is an indictment not of Hall so much as it is of the post-civil-rights and post-COINTELPRO culture of politics out of which our contemporary racial discourse arose. In "Metaphor and Social Antagonisms," Laclau says very little about metaphors other than to warn against their tendency to become sticky in their transition from a fortuitous articulation to essentialist belonging. Identitarianism is what happens when people hold on to the metaphor as if it were real (both negatively and positively). The antagonism that Laclau gestures to in his lecture illustrates how identity emerges from the failure of relationality between signs and what they signify. Hall also understands identity as something that becomes fixed and totalizing, a hegemonic articulation that through the process of becoming full travels through time and space (Hall, *Stuart Hall: Race*). This fixity, Laclau explains, undermines the possibility for true antagonism so vital for transilience. That is, Laclau's move, one that is often crowded out by the academy's preference for an adulterated version of Hall, is to displace an already preconceived historical subject, to disrupt so-called timeless identitarian dispositions, for an "objective being is overflowed by a meaning that fails to be fixed, to have a full presence"—as in an identity (Laclau, "Metaphor" 256).

Antagonism is conjunctural in the Gramscian sense of a distilled moment in the array of forces. This moment appears to simplify the social space, to transfix what is fluid into discrete material positions; in fact, this is the only moment when society approaches a transcendental signifier, but never realizes it because society does not exist, as Laclau puts it (254–55). Since there is no society, there can be no fixed relationship between signifier and signified. In a way, Laclau gestures to Frantz Fanon in that attention to the ontological as an open signifier can in fact make new "frontiers" rather than merely add content to the world in its current formation. Laclau brings forward a generative tension between the ontic and ontological, allowing readers to move from the ontic through the return of the ontological, to the necessity of what is ethical. More pointedly, his musings allow readers to close in on the idea that shifts from the who of blackness to the what of blackness to the necessity of blackness (see Saucier). Although it would not be for another decade that Hall would advance a similar argument in print ("What?"), he cites Laclau's formulation during the lectures he delivered at the Teaching Institute in 1983.

> [I]t is precisely because "black" is the term which connotes the most despised, the dispossessed, the unenlightened, the uncivilized, the uncultivated, the scheming, the incompetent, that it can be contested, transformed, and invested with a positive ideological value. . . . To use the terminology of Laclau (1977), the term, despite its powerful resonances, has no necessary "class belongingness." It has been deeply inserted in the past into the discourses of racial distinction and abuse. It was, for long, apparently chained into place in the discourses and practices of social and economic exploitation. ("Ideology" 152)[3]

Hall follows Laclau here in noting that precisely where and when identity appears to cohere most cogently is in fact the ghost of identity, an apparition of a departed presence that never was. Advancements under the mantle of identity are akin to so many naked emperors, with no constituents cheering them on except those in their imagination.

Identity clearly serves interests of power—not only structurally but individually as well, as attested by the rise of various identity-based constituent blocs to claim, wield, and defend power in the academy. These are not social forces in dialectical struggle, however, no matter how put upon or disrespected by colleagues or by the university people may feel at times; they are individuals accessing entrenched power for themselves under the guise of redistribution. Laclau's call for flexibility against fixity amplifies the well-established but equally well-neglected dialectic. Laclau writes that "the order of society is the unstable order of a system of differences which is always threatened from the outside. Neither the difference nor the space can be ultimately sutured" ("Metaphor" 254). In his evocation of the dynamic relation between internal contradictions and external forces, Laclau amplifies the first precept of dialectical thought. As Mao Tse-tung puts it in his classic essay "On Contradiction," external forces "are the condition of change and internal causes are the basis of change, and . . . external causes become operative through internal causes" (89). Laclau's notion of antagonism as "the experience of the limits of any possible objectivity" also resonates with Mao's explication of antagonism (Laclau, "Metaphor" 256). Mao gives the example of a bomb, "a single entity in which opposites coexist in given conditions" (Mao 123). This coexistence is temporary. When a new condition is introduced—an ignition, in the case of the bomb—the unity of opposites dissolves and the explosion occurs. In other words, struggle drives the dialectic.

For Laclau, the ignition of the bomb is the limits of language that fail to get at the distinction between metaphor (presence) and metonymy (absence) and how they correspond to the ways "differences are made to collapse by creating chains of equivalences" ("Metaphor" 256). What Laclau begins to develop in "Metaphor" are his concerns about the indexing of metaphor over metonymic positions and vice versa, resulting in a facile understanding of hegemony. Laclau's notion of "two paratactic successions of opposed equivalences" (256), then, is like Mao's exploding bomb. Suppression of the dialectic requires quarantining the antagonism, the radical withdrawal of a signifier that makes the subject legible and obtainable. This happens in several ways,

but always with the consequence that without struggle the antagonism necessary to advance the dialectic is lost, leaving only a bomb that festers and will not properly explode and discourse that loses track of its metaphoric and metonymic dimensions, treating them as objective reality that fixes meaning in ways that thwart, by definition, a rearticulation of the relations of difference. Put differently, Laclau's antagonism, amplifying that which has been intrinsic to dialectical thought across the eras, is the antithesis of control, and in this way it exposes how today's reliance on identity is a fetish, designed to mystify its role in the overdetermined process of social control and auto-oppression. Identitarianism is the absence of thought; reasoning that has become "hardened into a system" (Hall, "On Postmodernism" 56). As Mao explains, identity is not static or abstract; rather, it is a conditional moment in the material struggle between opposites. Since "contradictory aspects in every process exclude each other, struggle with each other, and are in opposition to each other . . . *without exception* . . . there is an utter lack of identity or unity" (118; emphasis added). Identity is thus approached but never realized and is always contingent upon a rigorous examination of the universal and the particular in each circumstance. To either malign or align with a position, idea, or institution without this examination of the tension intrinsic to difference at every level of the social world, every single time, you are acting based on how someone or something else wants you to think.

Hall's argument for hegemony is in sync with Laclau, who points out that "[h]egemonic relations depend upon the fact that the meaning of each element in a social system is not definitely fixed" ("Metaphor" 254). They cannot be sutured. Intellectual analyses are part of this hegemonic struggle; they are of a place and time, and the failure of the academy has been to confuse the contradictory tendencies that mark all things in the universe with the particular nature of a thing that differentiates it from other things (Mao 97). For instance, Hall's argument in the classic *Policing the Crisis* (1978) is a rigorous analysis of hegemonic struggle in a particular historical conjuncture, and this study maps all over COINTELPRO and the rise of the prison industrial complex in the United States (Hall et al.). While Hall says this was a moment, however, the academy nonetheless holds on and fixes the metaphors and metonymies, thereby defusing the antagonism in the present. One of the consequences of this breakdown in the dialectic, and a form of mastery over the discursive terrain, is that black social movement is rarely ever remembered for its structural analysis, but instead mostly for its performance of a militant or resistant blackness, ossified as a resistant idiomatic identity for all time. The result is that culture is then completely cut from the "frontier internal to the societal effect" (Laclau, "Metaphor" 256).

A related development in the study of antiblack racism has been the argument that slavery effectively canceled the dialectical relationship between human subjects and their others. Referred to as "Afropessimism," advancing a metacritique on the foundational principles of Western thought, and drawing authority from Fanon's earliest work, this approach argues that antiblackness aborts the customary process of psychosocial development whereby human beings come to know themselves and thus come to knowledge about what it means to exist as human by way of recognizing another person (Wilderson). Fanon famously asserts that black people have "no ontological resistance" in the eyes of white people, meaning that the material and discursive conditions of slavery and colonialism are such that black people come to experience their being in relation to a master race, but that the same process does not obtain in the other direction (Fanon 90). Black people learn that they are an inferior species of humanity in relation to white people, but white people do not learn that the master status they claim for themselves is due to their slaving and colonizing practices. White people are the other for black people, in other words, but black people do not serve as the other for white people. Instead, the master class of white people disavows this dialectic. For this reason, white people do not actually need to possess objectified others to assert their master status; likewise, forfeiture of their human property does not injure their claim to mastery. Antiblack violence thus attempts to corrupt the intrinsic reciprocity in

humanity into a parasitism that operates as the antithesis of relationality, albeit one with a disavowed synthesis.

The disavowal of dialectical relations, however, does not mean that there is no dialectic between white and black. Displacing the dialectical relation underwriting all human interaction, including and especially that of master-slave, white-black, and colonizer-colonized, Afropessimist scholarship on "race" can create the impression that antiblackness is an intrinsic feature of human society, and that the resolution is beyond one's capacity to imagine, let alone realize. The effect is to draw moral authority to one of the supposedly immutable positions signified in racial discourse and away from the other positions. This approach has garnered more than its fair share of criticism, but ironically Hall is frequently invoked to censure the way Afropessimism displaces hegemonic struggle in its conception of structural positionality, while at the same time Afropessimism's critics link Hall to the fluidity of identity, not to the conjunctural forces of social space. Afropessimism appears to be igniting the antagonism but in fact it is defusing it, and the response from critical race and ethnic studies quarters has been further disabling in their reassertion of an analysis of "race" on an individual level. Laclau lends some clarity on the matter: reading Laclau with Hall clarifies how both approaches, both Afropessimist and those critical of Afropessimism, desire a solid relationship between signifier and signified when there simply is no such thing.

Bringing Laclau back into the conversation might counteract the problems with using Hall in cultural studies against his own conception of hegemonic struggle. To put it plainly, Laclau helps us reread Hall in ways that are more honest, helping shift the focus away from merely descriptive accounts of the race concept. When "black freedom" was on the lips of COINTELPRO's targets, it was understood that pairing, in Laclau's words, the "precise contents of" freedom with the "undefined positive value" of the term *black* begets the "incarnation" of new subjects ("Politics" 243). Following COINTELPRO, however, "hegemony" is articulated differently, with "black" as a precise identity and freedom as undefined (that is, private property rights and the like). The quarantining of concepts is a matter not just of sneaky state agencies opportunistically maneuvering in the shadows of the 1983 gathering, but of scholars themselves. How else have scholars and critics lost the cause of cultural studies where something like blackness becomes nothing but the precise cultural content for identity, rather than a void (Laclau's absence and presence) of an undefined positive value? Identity emerges as a form of social control that widens the gaping disconnect between financial capital and productive labor, underscoring the irrelevance of identity for contesting inequality, dispossession, and violence of all kinds today.

While recent scholarship on "race" aims at sketching a larger framework than "society" by trying to bring into view the epistemological and ontological structures created by slaveholding, Laclau may in fact provide a more accurate and precise meta-analytic frame. The process of modern scientific inquiry remains incomplete, but it nonetheless stands as historical confirmation of how the truth of the dialectical method stems from the necessity to approach social life holistically. Bringing together the ontic and the ontological, the abstract and the lived experience, or the metaphor and metonymy invites the reconstruction of conceptual norms. The point is that a recursive account of Hall and Laclau can induce a transformation in the cause and purpose of cultural studies. In the end, while there is nothing to guarantee, we are taking Hall's advice in doing a "detour" ("Cultural Studies" 281–82) through Laclau's concepts, which allows us to construct "new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation" (*Stuart Hall: Representation*, 00:46:43).

Notes

1. COINTELPRO began in the 1930s with the purpose of monitoring and controlling organized labor and the Communist Party USA. During the civil rights era, its main targets were the black freedom movement, followed by the American Indian Movement, anti–Vietnam War mobilizing, and other struggles of the time such as the Chicano movement and the United Farm

Workers. COINTELPRO tactics were numerous, including surveillance, intimidation, agent saboteurs, popular misinformation, incarceration, and assassination.

2. We acknowledge that Laclau is arguably one of the most important political theorists of the late twentieth century. However, his interventions within cultural studies, especially those dealing with identity, are less straightforward than Hall's meditations.

3. Hall is citing Laclau's book *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* from 1977).

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