Time, Desire, Politics: A Reply to Ernesto Laclau

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A REPLY TO ERNESTO LACLAU

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A great merit of Ernesto Laclau's work has always been its commitment to the exigencies of articulating a coherent philosophical theory of the political. Beginning in the groundbreaking book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* coauthored with Chantal Mouffe, Laclau has carefully developed the philosophical prerequisites for the logic of hegemony and the notion of radical democracy. Although Laclau is primarily regarded as a political theorist, his work addresses fundamental ontological questions that are at the core of contemporary philosophy. Accordingly, Laclau has been concerned not only with the internal coherence of his own theory but also with demonstrating its force in a confrontation with rival paradigms, including the ones proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou.[1] One can only regret that these thinkers rarely, if ever, have responded to Laclau's criticisms, since the latter demands cogent philosophical *argumentation* concerning the stakes of a given theory. To allow oneself to be engaged by Laclau is not only to be summoned to debate; it is also to be forced to return to the basics of logical deduction and conceptual clarity to articulate one's position.

It is in this spirit of philosophical argumentation that I approach Laclau's work in the final chapter of *Radical Atheism*. While I recognize and seek to further Laclau's important contribution to a deconstructive thinking of the political, I put pressure on the Lacanian notion of desire that informs his theory of hegemony. Specifically, I argue that the model of desire adopted by Laclau generates a number of contradictions in his discourse, which are better addressed by the notion of desire that I elaborate on the basis of Derrida's work. In responding to my criticisms, Laclau takes me to task for having failed to deconstruct a traditional oppositional thinking, both in the register of ontology and in the register of desire. This is helpful because it recalls that the stakes of our debate go far beyond a preference for Lacan or Derrida and extend to basic presuppositions. Thus, I will first respond to Laclau's critique of my overall arguments, showing the precise points at which he has misconstrued my position and reconstructing the logic at work. I will then return to the challenge I pose to Laclau in *Radical Atheism,* arguing that his response evades the core of my critique and pressing home the stakes of this evasion for our general debate.

Let me begin, then, with the register of ontology. According to Laclau, my notion of finitude is established "through purely empirical, common sense allusions, and at the conceptual level it is barren, because it only manages to think its logical antithesis with infinitude" [185]. Thus, I would have neglected the task of accounting for how "finitudes as such are constituted" [185] in favor of an empiricism that cannot bear the weight of my philosophical arguments. In fact, however, my account of finitude is emphatically *not* empirical but deduces the notion of finitude from the transcendental constitution of time. To be finite is not merely to be limited by something else but to be limited in oneself and to pass over into nonbeing by virtue of one's own being. The finite is not only open to the

1. See the following essays by Laclau: "Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?" (on Hardt and Negri), "Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?" (on Agamben), and "An Ethics of Militant Engagement" (on Badiou).

possibility of being negated by another; it is also subjected to the *necessity* of negating itself in ceasing to be. As Hegel puts it in the *Science of Logic,* in what is arguably the best definition of finitude ever given: "The finite not only alters, like something in general, but it *ceases to be*; and its ceasing to be is not merely a possibility, so that it could be without ceasing to be, but the being as such of finite things is to have the germ of decease as their being-within-self: the hour of their birth is the hour of their death" [129].

Now, the structure of temporality is precisely what accounts for the inherent negativity of being. For one moment to be succeeded by another—which is the minimal condition for temporality—it cannot *first* be present in itself and *then* cease to be. An indivisible moment could never cease to be and give way to another moment, since what is indivisible cannot be altered. The succession of time requires not only that each moment is negated by another moment, but also that ceasing to be is at work from the beginning. The root of self-negation is therefore to be found in the constitution of time. In order to be temporal, the moment must negate itself and pass away in its very event. If the moment did not negate itself there would be no time, only a presence forever remaining the same.[2]

To elucidate the negativity of temporal finitude is far from sufficient, however. As I explain in *Radical Atheism,* to simply advocate the endless divisibility of temporal finitude would amount to an irresponsible empiricism that cannot account for how identity is possible [25–26, cf. 70–71]. Indeed, the difference of temporal finitude could not even be marked without a synthesis that relates the past to the future and thus posits an identity over time. The crucial question, then, is how to account for the synthesis of time without anchoring it in an instance that itself is exempt from the condition of temporality. I answer this question through an elaborate account of the *tracing* of time. Given that the temporal moment passes away as soon as it comes to be, it must be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The very concept of duration presupposes that something remains across an interval of time and only that which is spatial can remain. Spatiality is thus the condition for the synthesis of time, since it enables the tracing of relations between past and future. The spatiality of the trace, however, is itself a temporal notion. Without temporalization it would be impossible for a trace to *remain* across time or to relate the past to the future. This is crucial for the deconstructive account of the constitution of finitude. If spatialization makes the synthesis of time *possible,* the temporalization of space makes it *impossible* for the synthesis to be grounded in an indivisible instance. Rather, the synthesis is always a trace of the past that is left *for the future* and thus essentially exposed to that which may erase it.

Given this account of temporal finitude—which I develop at length in *Radical Atheism*—we can see why it is not a matter of simply positing finitude as the logical antithesis of infinity. The finite is not only that which ceases to be but also that which poses a resistance to its own passing away. The minimal form of such resistance is tracing of time, which inscribes what happens as a spatial trace that remains. This tracing of time is the

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2. *I am aware, of course, that Hegel is not explicitly addressing the problem of time in the sections on finitude in the* Logic. *As Stephen Houlgate emphasizes in commenting on these sections, "being has not yet proven itself to involve time and will not do so until we reach the philosophy of nature. Finitude is made necessary, therefore, not by temporality but by the* logical *structure of something—the fact that a determinate thing's being necessarily passes over into its nonbeing" [374]. I would argue, however, that the very notion of passing over into nonbeing—as well as Hegel's related notion of "ceasing to be" (*vergehen*)—is unthinkable without the minimal temporalization of succession. As Hegel makes clear in the* Philosophy of Nature, *time is the immediate self-negation of the now, and without such negativity there can be no "passing away" or "ceasing to be."*

movement of *survival* that transcends a particular moment of finitude and yet is bound to finitude as a general condition. If something survives it is never present in itself; it is already marked by the destruction of a past that is no longer while remaining for a future that is not yet.

The movement to transcend finitude—to survive—is thus not oriented toward a positive infinity beyond finitude. Rather, the movement to transcend finitude belongs to the constitution of finitude itself. To once again quote Hegel's *Science of Logic*: "Finite things *are,* but their relation to themselves is that they are *negatively* self-related and in this very self-relation send themselves away beyond themselves, beyond their being. They *are,* but the truth of this being is their *end*" [129]. To be finite, then, is not to be oriented toward one's end but to *postpone* that end—to send oneself beyond oneself in order to remain. The finite is *not* identical to the negation of being but consists in resisting and opposing its own ceasing to be. What I call "infinite finitude" spells out that such finitude is not a negative limitation; it is rather the condition of possibility for any form of survival. The reason why finitude does not ever reach the consummation of positive infinity is not because it is an unattainable Idea, but because finitude is not oriented toward consummation in the first place.

Let me further clarify this argument by moving to the opposition between mortality and immortality. Laclau here repeats his charge that I have failed to deconstruct the opposition in question. According to Laclau, I reduce mortality "to its ontic, evental nature, whose being is reduced to a simple negation of eternity. This does not look very much like a deconstructive operation but, rather, like a dialectical reversal. The *only* content of the mortal would consist in the pure and simple negation of immortality. Needless to say, this operation leaves the category of immortality intact, as that which is excluded. The conceptual content of 'mortality' is reduced to being the pure and simple reversal of 'immortality'" [181]. This assertion clearly shows that Laclau has not understood my logic of survival. At no point do I reduce the conceptual content of mortality to a simple reversal or negation of immortality. Rather, I demonstrate that mortality presupposes the structure of survival. Far from leaving the category of immortality intact, the logic of survival allows us to see that what has been *called* a desire for immortality is in fact a desire for survival, so the opposition between mortality and immortality is deconstructed from within.

An instructive example is Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium,* which is the most canonical source for the conception of desire as a desire for immortality. When Diotima sets out to prove her thesis that all creatures are driven by the "passion for immortality" [208b], her examples are rather of mortal survival. According to Diotima, the desire to have children, to be famous, or to be commemorated is an expression of the desire for immortality. If we follow her own description, however, none of these achievements have immortality as their aim. To live on thanks to one's children or one's reputation is not to be exempt from death; it is to live on for a future that may come to eradicate the memory of oneself. The children that bear one's traces, the admirers that remember one, or the monuments that commemorate one are themselves destructible and offer no safe haven from oblivion. If one desires to have children or to be remembered, one does not desire to be immortal but to survive: to live on as a mortal being for other mortal beings. Furthermore, the investment in survival is what gives rise to the purported desire for immortality. If one were not invested in the survival of mortal life, there would be no desire to save anything from death, since only mortal life can be threatened by death. The state of immortality, however, cannot answer to the survival that is desired, since immortality would put an end to mortal life. Hence, the so-called desire for immortality is in fact a desire for survival.

The above argument is the key to radical atheism. Radical atheism seeks to demonstrate that the finitude of survival is not a lack of being that we desire to overcome. Rather, finitude precipitates desire in the first place. It is *because* things can be lost, because they have not always been here and will not always be here, that we care about them. If things were fully present in themselves, if they were not haunted by what has been lost in the past and what may be lost in the future, there would be no reason to care about them, since nothing could happen to them. The investment in survival that is coextensive with care is the condition for every positive and every negative affective response. Contrary to what Laclau holds in his response [182], I am not claiming that temporal finitude is desirable as such but that it is the condition for both the desirable *and* the undesirable. Without the investment in survival there would be no compassion and love (since one would not be committed to anything) but there would also be no resentment and hate (since one would not be threatened by anything).

When Laclau reconstructs my notion of desire, however, he makes no mention of the constitutive investment in survival that on my account is at the root of all care and engagement (whether positive or negative). This is a striking omission not only because the constitutive investment in survival is the key to my argument, without which radical atheism makes no sense, but also because it is at the center of my critique of Laclau. The latter targets his premise that finitude should be understood in terms of an ontological "lack." Although Laclau does not think that there is anything beyond the infinite finitude of time, he maintains that finitude is experienced as a lack in the register of desire. As he asserts: "finitude involves the experience of fullness, of the sublime, as that which is radically lacking . . . so the life of the individual will be the vain search for a fullness from which he/she is going to be systematically deprived" ["On the Names of God" 260–61]. As in traditional metaphysics, finitude is here understood as the lack of fullness, as the absence of a desired positive infinity. Consequently, it is Laclau (rather than myself) who reduces finitude to the negative counterpart of positive infinity and leaves the latter category intact, as that which is desired but excluded. The fact that Laclau does not believe that there exists any fullness beyond finitude does not affect the assumption with which I take issue, namely, that we *desire* a fullness beyond finitude.

It is here that the debate with psychoanalysis becomes central. As Laclau perceptively points out, my argument runs counter to the psychoanalytic idea of the death drive. For Laclau, to question the idea of the death drive is clearly a doomed project that I would do well to avoid, but in fact I have taken on that very project in a subsequent essay on deconstruction and psychoanalysis, where I further develop the idea of a constitutive drive for survival.[3] The basic argument is articulated in *Radical Atheism,* but it is worth spelling it out in the Freudian terms evoked by Laclau, since they serve to elucidate the general stakes of our debate.

According to Freud, the death drive is "beyond the pleasure principle" but if we follow his own reasoning we can see that they amount to the same. For Freud, to be alive is by definition an experience of "unpleasure," since life is driven by an excitation that prevents the organism from coming to rest and compels it to survive in a state of tension.

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3. See Martin Hägglund, "Chronolibidinal Reading: Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis," where I propose to rethink the constitution of the libidinal economy on the basis of the drive for survival. Arguing against the notion of the death drive in Freud and Lacan, I seek to demonstrate that the drive for survival allows for a better account of phenomena such as mourning, trauma, and repetition compulsion. Laclau emphasizes that Derrida "most certainly" [184] would not have accompanied me in questioning the death drive. Presumably, Laclau refers to the fact that Derrida sometimes invokes the notion of the death drive with apparent approval. I argue, however, that insofar as Derrida aligns his arguments with the logic of the death drive he is mistaken to do so. Rather, his deconstructive reading of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," most notably in The Post Card, *should be understood in terms of the logic of survival. See Hägglund, "Chronolibidinal Reading," in particular 20–25, 33–36.*

The aim of the pleasure principle, however, is to discharge the tension of life in favor of a complete release that would allow the organism to rest in peace. The aim of the pleasure principle is thus inseparable from the aim of what Freud calls the death drive. The death drive seeks to restore the living organism to a supposed primordial state of total equilibrium, which is exactly the aim of the pleasure principle. As Freud himself points out, the pleasure principle operates in accordance with "the most universal endeavor of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world" [18: 62], which is to say that it operates in accordance with the death drive.

By the same token, however, the death drive cannot explain the phenomena that call into question the pleasure principle and that are the theme of Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." These phenomena comprise the compulsion to repeat traumatic events, as well as masochistic self-destruction and sadistic aggression. Their common denominator is that they contradict the pleasure principle by not seeking to reduce tension. On the contrary, the experience of pain (whether traumatic, masochistic, or sadistic) *increases* tension, so the compulsion to repeat or provoke painful experiences cannot be explained by a principle that dictates that we seek to eliminate tension. Consequently, it cannot be explained by the death drive. If the compulsion to repeat or provoke pain calls into question the pleasure principle, it necessarily calls into question the death drive, since the latter two are based on the same axiom. This logical fact undermines the very reason for introducing the death drive in the first place. If the pleasure principle and the death drive are based on the same axiom, the death drive cannot account for what is "beyond the pleasure principle."[4]

Thus, I argue that it is the *drive for survival* rather than the death drive that calls into question the pleasure principle and accounts for why one can be driven to repeat experiences that are charged with unpleasure. Freud's two famous examples (the compulsion to return to traumatic events in nightmares and the child's game that stages the event of the mother's disappearance) show that one can be driven to repeat destructive experiences, but they do not show that the drive is oriented toward the absolute quietude of death. On the contrary, both the traumatic nightmares and the child's game exhibit a drive to survive despite the unpleasure that is inherent in living on. Through the nightmares, the psyche is trying to process what has happened to it by establishing a bond to the traumatic event, and through his game the child is trying to come to terms with the experience of being dependent on an other who may be lost. However adequate or inadequate, successful or unsuccessful, these strategies arise in response to the experience of temporal finitude and are driven by a desire to survive. Indeed, if one were not driven to live on as finite there

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4. The upshot of this argument is that one must develop a conception of pleasure that is not based on the axiom that an increase of tension is unpleasurable and a decrease of tension is pleasurable. As Freud points out in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," if *we adopt the former axiom, the pleasure principle "would be entirely in the service of the death drives, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state" [19: 160]. However, Freud himself goes on to argue that "such a view cannot be correct," since "it cannot be doubted that there are pleasurable tensions and unpleasurable relaxations of tension" [19: 160]. Pleasure and unpleasure are therefore not a matter of quantitative relations whose ideal point would be the elimination of tension in complete equilibrium. Rather, Freud speculates that pleasure is a matter of "the* rhythm, *the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus" [19: 160]. The same line of thought can be found in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," where Freud suggests that the experience of pleasure depends on "the amount of increase or diminution in the quantity of excitation* in a given period of time*" [18: 8, cf. 63]. Following these remarks, I seek to develop a temporalized conception of pleasure, where pleasure is not oriented toward absolute repose. If pleasure is a matter of rhythm and periodicity, it depends on an interval of time, which divides the very experience of presence from its inception and entails that unpleasure is intrinsic to pleasure as such. See Hägglund, "Chronolibidinal Reading."*

would be no reason to try to cope with what has happened and to establish libidinal bonds. Even when the desire for a finite being is negated (as when the child stages a negation of the mutable mother) the negation itself testifies to a prior attachment and is performed in order *to enable the child to survive* beyond the loss of the mother.

To be clear, I am not arguing that self-destruction, aggression, or other negative phenomena are derivative in relation to a positive affirmation of life. On the contrary, the drive for survival accounts for both the impetus to preserve and the impetus to destroy, so any dualistic opposition between a life drive and a death drive is untenable. The crucial point, however, is that affectivity in general presupposes the *investment* in survival. If one is not invested in survival—be it of oneself or another—one does not care about what happens. And if one does not care about what happens, one is neither affected nor susceptible to any affective response. Consequently, I am not arguing that it is impossible to desire death but that the desire for death presupposes the investment in survival. Even the most suicidal desire to end all survival presupposes such an investment, for at least two reasons. First, if one were not invested in survival, one would not experience any suffering that could motivate suicide, since one would not care about what *has happened* or *is happening* to one. Second, if one were not invested in survival one would not care to end all survival, since one would not care about what *will happen* to one. The investment in survival is not only the source of all joy in life but also the source of all suffering in life. The response to the condition of survival can therefore not be given in advance and may be resentful just as well as passionate.

Returning to Laclau, it is precisely the notion of investment—and specifically his notion of *radical investment*—that is at the heart of our debate. Laclau defines radical investment as the operation whereby a particular finite object becomes "the embodiment of a fullness totally transcending it" ["Glimpsing the Future" 287]. For Laclau, such radical investment is of structural importance. Given that a particular finite object cannot answer to what we really desire (in accordance with the notion of an ontological "lack"), it must be regarded as the incarnation of fullness in order to become an object of libidinal investment. Accordingly, there can be no political struggle without a radical investment in a particular content or a particular body, which allows it to take on a hegemonic function. As Laclau maintains, "hegemony is nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us" [*On Populist Reason* 116].

In *Radical Atheism,* I demonstrate in detail how the notion of radical investment gives rise to a set of contradictions in Laclau's texts. In his response, Laclau evades this demonstration and instead focuses on a question of foundation that is not pertinent to my argument. I am well aware that for Laclau there are no ultimate foundations and that the notion of radical investment makes no appeal to such foundations. My critique, however, focuses on the problems that are generated by Laclau's premise that there is a constitutive desire for fullness. On the one hand, Laclau emphasizes that the structure of radical investment requires the belief that a given hegemonic body incarnates the fullness of society. On the other hand, Laclau emphasizes that no hegemonic body can answer to the fullness that is desired, which remains "an absent fullness that no concrete social order can achieve" [*Emancipation(s)* 72]. The first question that arises, then, is how the structure described by Laclau cannot lead to disappointment and resignation, since what we desire will always evade us and the social order we seek can never be achieved. In order to counter this objection, Laclau maintains that for the one who is radically invested there is no gap between the hegemonic body and the fullness that evades it. For the radical investor the hegemonic body is *all there is,* since it has become "the ultimate historical horizon, which cannot be split into its two dimensions, universal and particular" [*On Populist Reason* 226]. By the same token, however, the structure of radical investment is inseparable from the structure that Laclau himself elsewhere calls totalitarian. According to Laclau, totalitarianism is characterized by the identification of justice with "what a certain society considers as just at some point in time" ["Ethics, Normativity" 182]. To make a radical investment is precisely to perform such an identification, where a particular content is equated with the fullness of absolute justice. If the hegemonic body is *all there is* for the radical investor, he or she will not be able to see that it contains elements of injustice and is in need of negotiation.

Laclau maintains that, in contrast to totalitarianism, democracy recognizes that a given hegemonic body never can incarnate the fullness of society but of necessity is open to contestation and transformation. In Laclau's words, democracy hinges on "the institutionalization of its own openness and, in that sense, the injunction to identify with its ultimate impossibility" ["Structure, History, and the Political" 199]. Given that democracy explicitly presents the impossibility of fullness, however, we are back to the problem of disappointment and resignation with which we began. To make a radical investment, I have to believe that the object of my engagement incarnates the fullness of society, whereas democracy repudiates the belief that anything can incarnate the fullness of society. Consequently, if the condition for the commitment to a hegemonic body is that one identifies it as the site of fullness (radical investment), one can never be committed to a democratic body *as democratic*. Indeed, the democratic insistence that fullness is impossible can only be a source of resignation for the radical investor. Given that democracy cannot be the state of fullness that is desired there is no reason to defend it, and given that democracy cannot even in principle lead to the state of fullness that is desired there is no reason to struggle for it.

The problem, then, is that Laclau's notion of radical investment is incompatible with the investment in democracy. If one desires democracy one cannot desire an absolute fullness, since even the ideal state of democracy is temporal and alterable. The investment in democracy thus hinges on the recognition that the impossibility of absolute fullness is *not* a negative limitation, not an ontological lack, but the possibility of the temporal being we desire.

It should be said that there is a facile solution to this problem, which I think Laclau is right not to opt for, but which is worth recounting since it pervasive in much contemporary thought. The solution in question would be to distinguish between a "bad" totalitarian desire that is incapable of embracing contingency or affirming finitude, and a "good" democratic desire that is capable of doing so. In *Radical Atheism,* I explicitly argue against this solution. My point is not to deny the differences between democracy and totalitarianism or the urgency of deciding between them; I am only stressing that these matters cannot be settled on the basis of an opposition between a desire that is inherently democratic and a desire that is inherently totalitarian. To maintain such an opposition would be to depoliticize the difference between democracy and totalitarianism. There would be a criterion for decision that is not liable to political manipulation and hence exempt from the need for political scrutiny. The deconstructive point is rather that every desire is essentially corruptible and cannot be immune from becoming totalitarian.

Laclau himself takes us a long way toward such a politicization of desire. For Laclau, the same structure of radical investment is operative whether we are struggling for democracy or totalitarianism. I am not questioning this structural homology or that a libidinal investment in a hegemonic body is required in both cases. What I am questioning is rather the nature of the investment itself. For Laclau, both democratic and totalitarian struggles are driven by the desire for fullness, whereas I argue that they are driven by the desire for survival. Even the most totalitarian regime presupposes an investment in the survival, rather than the supposed fullness, of its hegemonic body. If it were not invested in survival, it would never feel threatened and exercise repressive power against perceived enemies, since it would never care about what may happen to its finite body.

However oppressive a totalitarian regime may be, it is not guided by an idea of absolute fullness; it is necessarily committed to a future that divides its power and may undermine it, since the same future gives it the chance to live on. Inversely, the investment in survival can never lead to a stance that "fully accepts our own mortality and contingency," as Laclau misleadingly glosses my position [180]. To be invested in survival is not to accept but to *resist* death and contingency, while being bound to their power from within. Thus, even the most democratic regime must erect violent borders and maintain principles that resist their own contingency. However open a democratic regime may be, it can only operate by closing down certain possibilities in favor of others. Such discrimination is not a failure of actual democracies to be ideal democracies, but a condition for the survival of any democracy.

The difference at stake here can helpfully be understood in terms of my distinction between traditional and radical atheism.[5] Laclau's avowal that there is no fullness of being remains bound to a traditional atheism, since he does not question that we *desire* the fullness of being. It is here particularly instructive to consider the work of Joan Copjec, which is central to Laclau's theorization of desire and to which he appeals in order to answer my objections. According to Copjec, libidinal objects are "representatives" of an immortal life that has been lost [52], but the status of this lost immortality is unclear. On the one hand, Copjec asserts that the self-sufficiency of immortal life is a myth of something that never existed. On the other hand, she asserts that "immortal, indestructible life has been subtracted from us" [52] and that "the body and satisfaction have lost the support of the organic body and the noumenal Thing" [37], which implies that there once was an immortal life or a noumenal Thing. Copjec's contradictory assertions culminate when she writes that "pure and total self-sufficiency does not now and never did exist (or: there is no original plenum), yet something nevertheless remains of that never-existing, mythical time and self-sufficiency" [52]. One is thus left to wonder how something can remain from what never existed. Laclau avoids this inconsistency by strictly maintaining that the fullness of being is nothing but a retrospective illusion and that it transcends anything that can be accomplished to such an extent that it cannot even be gradually approached as a regulative ideal. Yet these caveats do not affect the premise with which I take issue, namely, that there is an operative desire for absolute fullness. Even though Laclau is well aware that absolute fullness is inseparable from absolute emptiness, he maintains that the investment in a particular political struggle is motivated by the belief that it embodies an absolute fullness.

In contrast, I argue that the investment in a particular political struggle is motivated by a sense of its precarious finitude and a concomitant investment in its survival. The investment in survival is the condition not only for concern with one's own wellbeing but also for all concern with questions of justice that transcend oneself. If one were not invested in the survival of someone or something, there would be nothing that compelled one to fight for the memory of the past or for a better future. Indeed, without the investment in survival one would never be engaged by the question of justice, since one would not care about anything that has happened or anything that may happen.

This radical atheist perspective allows for not only a critique of religion but also a critique of traditional critiques of religion. Rather than a priori dismissing political struggles that are fought in the name of religious ideals as deluded, the logic of radical atheism allows us to see that these struggles, too, proceed from an investment in survival. Consequently, one cannot rely on an opposition between those who have an enlightened

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5. For a further discussion of this distinction, where I differentiate between three forms of traditional atheism—melancholic atheism, pragmatic atheism, and therapeutic atheism—see Hägglund, "The Challenge of Radical Atheism."

democratic desire for finite survival and those who remain in the thrall of a fundamentalist desire for fullness. Such an opposition is not only theoretically untenable but also gives way to a political paternalism, where one assumes that a secular struggle is always preferable over one pursued in the name of religion. In fact, however, there are any number of situations where the given infrastructure of a society makes religious discourse the most powerful tool for mobilizing a hegemonic struggle against injustice (one thinks of the American civil rights movement, for example). It follows that one may have good reasons to support a certain religious phantasm in order to support the survival and the appeal to justice of a certain community. Moreover, if we argue that social struggles are not in fact concerned with the religious end they profess but rather with material injustice—that is, if we politicize social struggles—we presuppose the radical atheist conception of desire, according to which the struggle for justice is not concerned with an absent fullness but rather with survival.

Whether a given struggle for survival should be supported or resisted is a different question and one that only can be settled through an engagement in hegemonic politics rather than by virtue of philosophical principle. No one has taught us this lesson better than Ernesto Laclau. My intervention in *Radical Atheism* does not seek to replace his approach to politics, but to demonstrate by way of an immanent critique that it requires a different conception of desire. Similarly, my recent intervention with regard to psychoanalysis does not seek to repudiate its legacy but to show that the notion of a drive for survival allows for a better account of the constitution of the libidinal economy than the death drive posited by Freud and Lacan. Deconstruction is thus not a self-determined operation, since it depends on the context in which it intervenes and the terms it engages. The difference that deconstruction makes is nevertheless essential, I maintain, since it transforms our basic conceptions of time, finitude, and desire.

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