



**Anti-foundationalism on hiatus:  
Laclau's political theory**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I ask whether Laclau's political theory contains any type of foundationalism. I construct a matrix of foundations differentiating between epistemological and socio-political foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. Thereafter, I describe Laclau's works in detail in order to later compare this with the fields in the matrix. My findings are that there are indeed foundational elements of Laclau's works, especially the constitutive lack, and the seeming supremacy of radical democracy. These are types of socio-political foundationalism. Ultimately, I describe anti-foundationalism as external and internal to Laclau's political theory, but the borders of the theory are foundational. In other words, there exists a founding moment of his theory, making his main assumptions non-questionable. I do not interpret this result as a call for logical coherence, but rather as a sign of a characteristic of anti-foundationalist political theories in general.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Change is ubiquitous, so too in International Relations. From having been a field largely dominated by Foreign Policy and military affairs, we have now moved on to a more inclusive approach, encompassing new areas such as culture, identity, and difference. Many have greeted this change, claiming that it has been a necessary adaptation to a more inclusive world-view, coloured by globalization and tolerance. This change has its roots in a progressing scepticism towards old “truths”.

The notion that the European national welfare state is the rational and correct way of governing a society has been questioned, and criticism has risen towards those voices claiming the supremacy of Western rationalism. This has been a long and arduous development, oftentimes incited by an incapability of reconciling with inequality and suppression throughout the world. This development has often been connected with Critical theory, and the post-Marxist field (Brown 1994:214).

In my view, many beneficial outcomes have arisen due to this “new” approach to the study of the international society. But, as so often in academia, the influences to change one's outlook have come from elsewhere. Political theorists have turned to philosophy to make sense of the world. One of the strands having had a tremendous impact on the field is the string of thoughts of post-structuralism.

Post-structuralism is not a well-defined and confined object, but rather a polymorphous congregation of thinkers, each and every one having his or her own take on philosophy. What could be said to unite these thinkers, however, is that the ground assumptions of epistemology are different, and that this influences the social and the political. The idea is that we have no foundation to stand on when making statements about the world.

Several IR scholars, like James Der Derian (1989) and Roxanne Lynn Doty (1997), have adopted this view. They claim that the very foundations of International Relations look distinctively different from those of other IR theories, such as liberalism and realism. Liberalism and realism, which have little in common, still share something quite important: a clear foundation. In post-structural theory, we focus on anti-foundationalism. However, this has not been transition without struggle. Post-structural IR theories have suffered through a lot of criticisms because of the adherence to anti-foundationalism. Some say that their basis for analysis is shaky, and that no scientific work could be performed without clear

foundations. Another critique has been that they are neglecting “real” issues of power and the market (Lazarus 1991), while others say that their analysis does not provide us with a ground for critique and that a post-structural analysis cannot recommend political action (Norris 1990).

Then why are foundations relevant at all? Could we not merely perform analysis based on a theory of our interest and leave foundations behind? I believe that foundations play a great role in our analyses, sometimes perhaps unconsciously so. When analyzing conflicts, we base our assumptions on something. We believe that we can have knowledge about the world, and that our analyses will increase this knowledge. If we perform a normative study, then we might even be influenced by normative foundations. If we believe in human rights, that there are inherent rights for every human being from birth, then we analyse, for instance, humanitarian intervention differently than someone who does not adhere to human rights. A foundationalist might think that we have universal human rights, whereas an anti-foundationalist might disagree. If we are looking at multiculturalism, we might grant rights to particular groups referring to that they all have their own rights to independence, and that there is no common denominator for us all; there is no common foundation. Then again, not all cultural behaviours are allowed in every state; you might not be able to perform female circumcision on your daughter when the state in question refers to a universal right against suffering.

When adopting the views of anti-foundationalism into international political theory, questions like the one above, and many more, arise. Can we perceive a society where we have no foundations, no common denominator? In addition to this, how can we ever justify one political action over another if we have no common idea of what is desirable? All of these are highly relevant for both political theory and International Relations, and all relate to whether we think that there are foundations or not. In my view, this is a question in need of more discussion: How do foundations influence our analyses? For me, the most interesting aspect of the problem is the paradoxical statement of an anti-foundationalist political theory. If there is no foundation whatsoever, then how are we able to make statements about politics in the first place? How can we perceive a moment of absence of foundations, but still make claims about politics, the very idea of struggling for one’s own view of how society *should* be?

My claim is that there might exist moments where an anti-foundationalist political theory is not purely anti-foundational. How can a theory that relies upon the uncertainty of the social

say anything about politics? This is something puzzling. I will therefore investigate how anti-foundationalism and political theory work together.

**Research question**

With this in mind, I will present my research question. The starting point is the criticism launched against anti-foundational and post-structural political theory. How is it possible to have a political theory, which tries to justify certain forms of government in the absence of a foundation? Since I believe that IR theory could also be regarded as international political theory, I turn to political theory proper. Therefore, I formulate my research question as follows:

*How can we understand anti-foundationalism within political theory?*

This research question, however, is in need of specification. Until now, I have been talking about post-structuralism as a field, and not of specific thinkers. It would of course be ideal if I could perform an analysis encompassing all those thinkers ever associated with post-structuralism. However, since this is a Master’s thesis, I have chosen to specialise. I have chosen to take one thinker as a representative for anti-foundationalist political theory, and this is Ernesto Laclau. Laclau, being a renowned scholar, has taken up the prestigious task of uniting anti-foundationalism with political theory (Critchley – Marchart 2004). His works have become widely known as the theory best succeeding to do so, and I therefore consider them to be appropriate for this analysis. I do not adhere to any kind of generalizability in this case, but I am more concerned with showing that this *problematique* exists in political theory at all than with making sweeping statements about the whole field. To illustrate how I perceive the field as of now, I have constructed a matrix of foundations (see below). Since we have several terms and concepts in this question, I want to distinguish between different fields in order to clarify my aim.

	<b>Foundationalism</b>	<b>Anti-foundationalism</b>
<b>Epistemological</b>	Epistemological foundationalism	Epistemological anti-foundationalism
<b>Socio-political</b>	Socio-political foundationalism	Socio-political anti-foundationalism



We can think of anti-foundationalism and foundationalism working in two different dimensions. The first one I call the epistemological dimension, and it refers to the nature of knowledge, and possible limitations for human knowledge. There, the two strands of foundationalism and anti-foundationalism are quite distinct and well discussed; however, there is also another dimension, namely that of social and political theory. These are, in a sense, elongations of the epistemological dimension, but have also specific characteristics. Here, we do not merely talk of the nature of knowledge, but of how statements and ideas can, or cannot, justify different forms of government. Some would perhaps refer to this as normative political theory, a phrase that I find somewhat problematic, as the anti-foundational social theorist would not argue that normative justification is possible. I will hereafter refer to this field as the socio-political since we are talking about those social and political phenomena that can either support or undermine foundationalism.

In this paper, I will discuss the field of socio-political anti-foundationalism, and the puzzle that it presents. I am interested in how this theory works, and if there are any implications in or obstructions to uniting anti-foundationalism and political theory. The other fields serve as an analytical framework, as to put the object of study in a context. I have, as I said above, chosen Laclau as an example of socio-political anti-foundationalism, and this is where he and many of his interpreters place him (Butler – Laclau – Žižek 2000; Grebe 2009; Norris 2006, Inston 2009). I question this placement based on the puzzle of an anti-foundationalist political theory in general, and wonder if there can be a purely anti-foundational political theory? Therefore, my more specific research question will be:

*Is Laclau's political theory purely anti-foundational?*

I will argue that Laclau, although saying that he is an anti-foundationalist, has constructed a political theory not entirely freed from foundationalist traits. I believe that his argument can also be subject to the same type of criticism he tries to launch against essentialists; that there is an unquestionable foundation. This is quite interesting, since Laclau, in many regards, is the very height of anti-foundationalism. I will also argue that the belief that Laclau is an anti-foundationalist is due to there being different kinds of foundationalism, as depicted in the matrix above. I will show that Laclau is influenced by the epistemological anti-foundationalism, but that in the end when it comes to the socio-political dimension, there are foundationalist moments.

I believe this realization can shed light on possible contradictions within anti-foundationalist theory; some parts do contain foundationalist elements, but some do not. This is also highly relevant for anti-foundationalist *international* political theory and post-structuralism. If we admit that there are several types of foundations, the previous stalemate between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism could be resolved, and we could have a more transparent and pragmatic view on foundations. I would not refer to myself as being a pragmatist, but I still claim that not admitting to incoherence does not favour anti-foundationalist political theory.

### **Outline**

In the following paragraphs, I will outline the structure of my paper, and describe my plan for answering my research question.

In Chapter 2, I will create an analytical framework. Since I want to show that some of Laclau's arguments are in fact more foundational than anti-foundational, I will clearly define what these concepts mean to me, and how they have been defined in the literature. I will also define the distinction between the epistemological and the socio-political. Laclau himself argues that he is an anti-foundationalist political theorist. Therefore, I will spend extra time describing what form anti-foundationalism assumes in this context by going back to the most prominent socio-political anti-foundationalist concepts, like deconstruction and genealogy. This will later be used to see if Laclau follows the anti-foundationalist stream, and how he follows or departs from the main anti-foundationalist assumptions. The chapter will be concluded with the matrix describing the different versions of foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, and also standard characteristics of each field.

In Chapter 3, I will focus on how Laclau is part of the anti-foundationalist political field in the matrix. I will present a thorough recapitulation of Laclau's argument, where I focus on how he presents himself as an anti-foundationalist, and, most importantly, what it is that makes him distinct from other post-structural thinkers. The Chapter will be concluded with how Laclau places himself in the matrix, namely in the anti-foundationalist political field, and the reasons for this placement.

Chapter 4 is where my argument and critique will be presented. Based on the categories that I have developed in Chapter 2, I will analyse whether it is justified to call Laclau an anti-foundationalist or not. My criticism will argue that there are such elements in Laclau's work which are more semblances of a foundationalist understanding of political theory than an anti-

foundationalist one. I will also argue that it is important to notice how foundationalism looks different for epistemology and social/political theory, and that this is especially valid for Laclau's works. The chapter will conclude with a revised version of the matrix where I question Laclau's placement in the anti-foundationalist political field, and place him in both the anti-foundationalist and foundationalist socio-political field.

Chapter 5 is my concluding chapter. This will contain a repetition of the main points of my argument. In addition to this, I will also connect to the discussion above on post-structuralism in IR and political theory. The most important discussion here is the answer to the research question, which is by no means given. I will deliberate on both the yes- as well as the no-side, to finally conclude that if we are going to have an anti-foundationalist political theory, anti-foundationalism will always be external to the political.

Ultimately, I will discuss how my findings affect the current debate, and what we can learn from it. I will also give suggestions for further research on the topic.

## II. SKETCHING FOUNDATIONALISM AND ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM

This is a paper that circulates around and focuses on foundations, and more specifically, their absence and presence in political theory. Hence I feel it is necessary to further describe what I mean by foundations, and how they can be criticized. How can we perceive foundations, and what are the arguments for and against them? This chapter aims at elaborating on different strands of foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, as they are presented in a more epistemic context as well as in a more social and political context.

My research question is how anti-foundationalism works in political theory, with a special focus on Ernesto Laclau. Based on the matrix presented in the Introduction, I will construct this chapter as follows:

I will start out by describing foundationalism in epistemological terms, and thereafter its opposite epistemological anti-foundationalism. This is the first dimension, and serves as an introduction to how foundations in work. However, since I am interested in how anti-foundationalism works in political theory, I will describe it and foundationalism from a socio-political perspective.

I find this division relevant; there is a sharp difference between being an anti-foundationalist in epistemology, and being so in social and political theory. In my opinion, we can have a discussion on foundations that refers to the idea and nature of knowledge, the epistemological. However, there is also a more socio-political dimension to foundations. Here, I refer to justifications of a political system, or of a moral theory. I will elaborate on this below.

First, I will explain what foundationalism is on an epistemological level. We will deal with questions regarding knowledge in general, and how foundationalists argue that sooner or later, we come to a point where we cannot question the content of our knowledge any more. We have reached a foundation. On the other hand, epistemological anti-foundationalists argue that such a moment never comes, that we have some sort of infinite regression, and that knowledge is never fixed, but always fluid.

In the socio-political dimension, I first deal with those thinkers employing foundationalism in political theory. They argue that we have to base our analysis off of some kind of unquestionable statement, like the equality of men, or human nature. In opposition to that, we have the socio-political anti-foundationalists who argue that such statements about social life

are inane, due to our epistemological constraints, which also affect the socio-political. We should realize the contingency of the social, and this can take several expressions. Since Laclau places himself in this field, I will devote more time and space to this topic, to better make sense of his claims. Even though Laclau relies on his own merits, it is inescapable that he is influenced by other writers. As for Laclau, one could probably not say that he is a part of a conformist, ideological group, but this field, by some referred to as post-structuralism, is a heterogeneous corpus, with no clear-cut or well-defined agenda. Nonetheless, I find it relevant to employ this structure, since we can find some basic common denominators, which facilitate my analysis.

I will go through the different fields one by one (epistemological foundationalism, epistemological anti-foundationalism, socio-political foundationalism, and socio-political anti-foundationalism) describing their main characteristics, and the main thinkers representing them. At the end of this chapter, I will present a more elaborate version of the matrix. This will serve as a starting point for my analysis of his works.

### **Epistemological foundationalism**

When we speak about epistemology, we normally refer to that field of philosophy, where we talk about the nature of knowledge (Truncellito 2007). How can we determine when we know, and when we fail to know, something? There is also the dimension of knowledge in relation to the human being; can a human know anything at all, and is knowledge external or internal to human thought (Truncellito 2007)? I will not deal with all of these questions here, but rather focus on the nature of knowledge, and the place of foundations in relations to knowledge. This is relevant since anti-foundationalism has a very strong connection to what knowledge is, as we shall see below.

Let us start with epistemological foundationalism. This could be said to be:

“...a view concerning the structure of the system of justified belief possessed by a given individual.” (Alston 1992:144).

This means that we have a certain view on how a higher level of abstraction of knowledge is constituted, and that this higher level of abstraction is justified, which indicates that it is something given. Also, according to Alston, we can distinguish between mediate and immediate justification (indirect and direct) (Alston 1992:144). The mediate justification means that an opinion or knowledge is justified by reference to an adequate belief. On the

other hand, an immediate justification requires no reference to another belief, but is, so-to-speak, “self-justified”. This means that we need no other explanation or addition to the statement already made, and the statement itself is justified by its own content. In this discussion, we can say that foundationalism refers to those immediate justifications. We cannot get any further in trying to justifying something by referring to something else, but we only refer to what we find to be an immediate belief, in need of no further justification (Alston 1992:144). To further explain this, we will use the idea of the regress argument. If we have a mediately justified belief, say  $p$ , this belief is justified by reference to immediately justified beliefs, say  $q$  and  $r$ . Then, how are  $q$  and  $r$  justified? Let us say that they are based on another immediately justified belief, say  $s$ . Then, what if  $s$ , in turn, is only a mediate justification, and we would have to refer to another, *immediate*, justification in order to justify  $s$ ? This chain of justifications could go on forever, and we could even end up in a circular argument. We would have nothing but mediately justified beliefs, and never reach any true justification. To avoid this, we imagine that the justifications are all branches of a large tree. Sooner or later, all the branches can be traced down to the stem, which represents our immediate justification, something which is self-justified (Alston 1992:145, Jamieson 1991:481). These immediate justified beliefs signify our foundations.

There are many different opinions on how these foundations or self-justified beliefs come about, and what different forms they might assume. These could be propositions that are self-evident, which by just experiencing them requires no further justification (Alston 1992:145). But we can also discern propositions that are self-warranted, which means that they are beliefs “acquired by a reliable belief-forming process that does not take other beliefs as inputs” (BonJour 1985:95, see also BonJour - Sosa 2003). If we assume that a belief is self-justified in some way, then this belief is true just in the mere virtue of its content.

We can also sketch foundations by describing what constraints they might encounter. A common condition for a foundation is immunity (epistemic immunities) from error (infallibility), refutation (incorrigibility), or doubt (indubitability). These categories are derived from Descartes, who claimed that knowledge must be based on cognitions of the truth meeting the above-mentioned criteria (Alston 1992:146). Hence, foundations can never be proven wrong, and no reasonable doubt can be raised on its validity.

Assuming that these foundations do exist, there are different ways in which we can reach them or derive other statements from them. These discussions include the never-ending

schism between induction and deduction, and I could not do them justice here. Having described the main characteristics of epistemological foundationalism; we reach an end in our justifications, they are *immediate*, we now move on to the opposite of that, epistemological anti-foundationalism.

### **Epistemological anti-foundationalism**

In philosophy, foundationalism has been criticized in several ways. The critiques entail both the claim that immediate justification exists, and that all statements are somehow connected to these justifications (Alston 1992:147). The former is the most interesting for this analysis, and is directed towards the very notion that we can have anything that is given. I will not delve too deep into this, but I will recapitulate the most important views of Wilfrid Sellars, one of the most influential critics of foundationalism.

For Sellars, as for many others, there is a sharp difference between things that we *observe*, and therefore regard as given, and things that we *infer*, and also regard as given. If there were only one kind, this discussion would have been inane. For Sellars, there has been no philosopher (this was in 1963), who had not worked around something given. Sellars thought it to be problematic that any kind of empirical knowledge would rest on any kind of foundation (Rosenberg 1992:470). The very idea that individuals have some kind of “privileged access” to their own inner thoughts seems unlikely to Sellars, who argues that even though we might think that we are seeing something, which is true, this is by no means an immediate justification of that experience (Rosenberg 1992:470).

“The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.” (Sellars 1963:169)

By this argument, we cannot differentiate an “experience” from a pure epistemic perception, which can be falsifiable. Our notion of experience consequently encompasses both an epistemic appraisal (I *perceive* this as such-and-such) and a judgement (something *is* such-and-such). When we perceive something, this is not merely an influx of experience, but it is also an active categorization of impressions, which can never be entirely freed from normative grounds (Rosenberg 1992:470).

“For we now recognize that instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of things, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it.” (Sellars 1963:176)

Then how would we make the world work? How could we ever understand one another? According to Sellars, this happens since we assume that there is some kind of inter-subjectivity. Just seeing or experiencing something does not give ground for epistemic justification (Rosenberg 1992:470). If we were to claim that something is indeed foundational, we would have to say that the claim made about the state of things is independent from any other kind of claim, that it is non-inferential. We cannot rely solely on our experience to believe that we know something, since this can prove us wrong in the end. The human experience does not provide “truth”, and cannot be epistemically justified.

This fallacy of the human experience has been described as the Sellarsian dilemma. The dilemma deals with this very notion; if what we perceive can be referred to as something epistemically justified (Poston 2010). For instance, if I look at a golf course, foundationalists would claim that the notion “green” that I perceive is something that cannot be mistaken, and is beyond any rational doubt. This is a given, something which Sellars wants to object to. Instead, we should think of this as “assertive representational content” (Poston 2010). Representational content can consist of hopes, fears, or beliefs. I could believe, hope, or fear that it is raining, for instance. An assertive representational belief, on the other hand, is when this hope, fear, or belief is presented to be true, when it might actually be false (Poston 2010). Examples of this can be optical illusions, for instance the Müller-Lyer illusion, where our eyes trick us into believing that two lines are of unequal length, when they in fact are exactly equal.

The main argument of the Dilemma is that experience is never enough as a justification for immediate beliefs. If we agree that the assertive representational belief exists, a statement about the world could either have such an assertive function, or it could lack it. If it lacks it, then we obviously do not have that much inclination to hold that statement for true. However, even if we do have an assertive representational belief, this would, according to Sellars, also require additional justification for it to be regarded as true, since our senses and experiences are insufficient for acting as immediate beliefs (Poston 2010).



Up until now we have been discussing the mere epistemic notion of foundations. Now we will transit into the socio-political realm, where we will discuss how these notions presented above can express themselves in society. The socio-political dimension is highly influenced by the different epistemological assumptions, but also focuses on moral and political justification, not only justification of knowledge.

### **Socio-political foundationalism**

For many, political theory is strongly connected to moral theory. Therefore, I shall first to describe foundationalism in moral terms, and continue with a more political perspective.

If we would have a self-justifying foundational moral theory, this would have to be based on such statements, which we consider to be common sense. Human beings have a hard time believing that there is no external world; therefore, it must be a true statement (Jamieson 1991:481). Even though we might say that there are foundations that are self-justifying, such as the self-evident statement: Ravens are ravens (which, if not true, would destroy our whole sense of logic), we might want to elaborate on this for a moral theory (Jamieson 1991:481). That ravens are indeed ravens is not very conducive to evaluate our conduct from a moral yardstick. This means that for a foundationalist moral theory, we must go further than just what is self-evident (ravens are ravens) or what is self-justifying (it is true because we cannot believe otherwise). Then, there must be truths, or immediate beliefs, lying outside the scope of self-evident, or self-justifying. If we would agree that such beliefs exist, how would we recognize them (Jamieson 1991:481)? These difficulties proved to be quite challenging for foundationalism in ethics, especially since the criticism put forward by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958) and Willard Van Orman Quine (1951).

Historically, many political theorists have relied on some type of foundation. In a sense, justifications in political theory have attempted to be more than just normative statements (Herzog 1985:9). Political theorists strive for epistemic justification as well, and consider themselves to operate at a higher level of abstraction than ordinary politicians. Still, the question remains on how these justifications about political life can be made.

That there exist shared communities of moral views is not a very controversial statement. The difficulties begin when we try to argue that those moral views in question are actually the *right* and the *good*. In connection to the discussion above I should mention that the foundationalist view on the matter is that such justification is possible. There is an end to the

regression, and we can reach a stop in our moral reasoning. This is different from Sellars, who would of course argue that such an enterprise is vain and inane.

The fact remains, nonetheless, that we do have a large share of political theory revolving around moral justification. In a political discussion, there is a possibility to reach a point where you say: Yes, I am convinced by this argument, since it is morally justified. This justification, however, is not a simple, easy process. There is no formula to use, but we can give a couple of examples. We know how it might look in mathematics and logic.

“It is difficult to imagine a more compelling justification: one must grant the premises, and, unless one is willing to dispute the laws of logic, one must grant what follows deductively.” (Herzog 1985:19)

If we follow this manner, we might want to justify a political redistributive action by referring, for instance, to the superiority of equality. Since redistribution is said to increase equality, this could serve as a justification for our claim (Herzog 1985:19). The issue with this procedure is that it is a mere syllogism. Just because I want to justify my claim based on equality does not mean that equality as a norm provides a sufficient or valid justification (Herzog 1985:19). However, for foundationalist political theorists, this is the case. The moral claim, or the normative statement, can be self-evident, like a geometric proof (Herzog 1985:20). The question is then if a political, normative statement is functionally the same as a geometric proof. According to foundationalists, justification can be based on axiomatic premises.

Therefore, political foundationalist theories are those recognizing justification as “grounded on principles that are: 1. Undeniable and immune to revision and 2. Located outside society and politics.” (Herzog 1985:20). The first category refers to classical foundationalist views, that the experiences and beliefs beyond rational doubt are also true. The second one is more a question related to politics. We have seen various attempts at explaining the “indubitable societal principles” with such things as human nature, language, theology, rationality etc. (Herzog 1985:20).

To illustrate this argument about finite regression in the political sphere, I will recapitulate the arguments of some thinkers, arguments, which are strongly connected with a moral or political foundationalism.

We can start with Hobbes, a grand name within political theory. Hobbes belongs to a group of moral scepticists, and at first sight he could be taken as an advocate of the differentiated society, whom recognizes conflict and disagreement (Herzog 1985:218). So why then should he be considered a foundationalist? The foundation lies in how we can justify political authority. Hobbes argues that even though we might live in a world of segregation and inequality, society must, and should still be, based on a sole principle. Even if there is no moral foundation, there shall still be a political foundation. This political foundation is grounded in the assumption of human nature. In Hobbes' view, humans are weak and needy, and it therefore needs to be governed by an authority. This is a non-questionable statement. We do not have the capacity to govern ourselves entirely, and herein lies the justification for external authority. If we would not have such an authority, we would be subject to the state of nature, a worst-case scenario according to Hobbes (Hobbes 1994, cf. Williams 2005). Hence, the sovereign can justify power exertion and unequal relations by referring to the terrible state of nature. In that sense, it becomes the *right* to have a sovereign and to obey him/her. However, not only does the sovereign have a right to fulfil the social contract, but there is also a personal interest from the individual who obeys it. We, as rational individuals, see the benefit from living in a society and away from human nature, and this also justifies authority (Hobbes 1994, cf. Williams 2005).

Another example of the founding principle of politics is John Locke's social contract. Locke developed, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a theory of how society is constituted. This is mostly presented in his later works, as can be read in his Two Treatises (Locke 1988). In the Lockean State, we have citizens who are reasonable, and reason gives each individual respect for the freedom of others, since we seek peace and welfare (Herzog 1985:107). This transforms into a respect for the law. We all want to consent to the law; we want to give our own power to become the power of the state, so as to live in peace and order. Every individual therefore consents to the law, because we realize the mutual gain (Moseley 2005). The justification of government, of authority, is thus that the people actively consent to it, and it is therefore regarded as just and right. In this case, the foundational principle of politics is that government is just when agreed upon by the people. In that situation, we also reach the end of a discussion of what is just and what is not, and this can therefore be regarded as a foundationalist political theory.

The reason for taking up these specific examples is that I want to illustrate that I do not define foundationalism within political theory as being a part of one essential moral framework. Foundationalism consists of making non-questionable statements about the nature of politics

and the social, statements that are treated as axioms and givens. As we can see with Hobbes and Locke, they have different assumptions (individual reason, human nature, etc.), which provide the grounds for their analyses. Without these unquestionable statements, the analysis falls. It is also these unquestionable statements that give ground for justification. Since we can conclude something about the social, we can also advise one specific form of government. This is the political theory justification. The focus differs from the epistemological perspective since political theory focuses on the social, and tries to find explanations and patterns in politics and social life. These patterns are, for some, as we have seen, the root of knowledge, the starting point for analysis. This can be human nature, as for Hobbes, or the consensual social contract, as for Locke. In the next part, I will focus on how the anti-foundationalists respond to the foundationalist views regarding the social and the political.

### **Socio-political anti-foundationalism**

This is the main focus of this chapter, following my research question. This is where Laclau wants to place himself, and I therefore find it important to discuss this perspective more in-depth. Here, I will describe the main objections to foundationalism within social theory, which number quite a few. Some would like to call this field post-structuralism, a term that I find somewhat difficult, since the field itself is quite diverse, and many of the thinkers within it would strongly object to such a label. Nonetheless, this chapter will describe those concepts most influential in the general debate, give a brief introduction to the most significant thinkers, as well as build a ground for a continued analysis of the Laclaudian works.

One could envision this part being built chronologically, but since I want to tell a story not about how these thoughts have developed over time, but rather how they relate to each other, I have decided to work conceptually. One could say that anti-foundationalism finds many ways to express itself and has many different facets. Therefore, I could not merely describe anti-foundationalism, but it is necessary to differentiate between the concepts. When looking at the general debate, one can discern certain elements emerging repeatedly. I have, in reading the literature, finally settled on three of those concepts, namely: language, history/knowledge/power, and politics. I believe that these concepts, in different ways, contribute to making post-structuralism what it is today, and that they each constitute an argument supporting the claim that foundationalism does not work. Each one of them gives numerous reasons and explanations as to why it would be vain to employ a foundationalist perspective, but in doing so, they are most diverse and disparate.

To make sense of this, I will present them individually, but I kindly ask the reader to look at their individual arguments as a part of the greater whole, which is anti-foundationalism. Later on, we will focus on my main field of interest, the political side of anti-foundationalism, but to get a better idea of what it is in general, I consider it worthwhile to present the lines of thought lying close to it, since they are inter-related. The presentations will by no means be exhaustive, but will rather cover those points relevant for my analysis.

### *Language*

From my perspective, this discussion starts in language. The reason for this is that I perceive language as being quite close to epistemology, since language and knowledge have quite close bonds. Language seems to me to be the connection between knowledge and the social, which is why I start from here. I will describe the new streams of thought on language, which emanated from a questioning of the classical foundationalist camp. I will discuss both Wittgenstein and Saussure, as prominent figures in this debate, so as to later move on to deconstruction, one of the most well known anti-foundationalist concepts. What all of these have in common, is that they see language as a sign of anti-foundationalism.

Saussure's groundbreaking view on linguistics became one of the main determinants of the post-structural field, in addition to the late Wittgenstein. In many regards, their argument is the same: the variability of language. Then, what was the novelty of Saussure's theory? In his book *Course in General linguistics* (1983, compiled of lectures held between 1906 and 1911), he lays the foundations of his theory. I will discuss some of his central assumptions.

When we talk about language, and language use, we concern ourselves with linguistic signs (Saussure 1983:66). The word tree is connected to the idea of the tree, and the sign is therefore the relation between a sound's pattern and its concept. When I utter the word "tree", I also think of and refer to a large plant. The sound pattern and the concept are equivalent to the signal and the signification, respectively.

Then we can ask ourselves: How does this relation come about? Why is it that I make this sound's pattern, "tree," when I think of this very concept, the large plant? The main argument of Saussure is that the sign is arbitrary (Saussure 1983:67). There is no special reason to why we should make this very specific sound's pattern in relation to a special concept. One can naturally argue against this by saying that onomatopoeic words and exclamations would have a natural connection to their significations. This, says Saussure, is not a valid argument, since,

for example, German dogs say wauwau, while French dogs say ouaoua. There is no reason to believe that dogs speak different languages in different countries (Saussure 1983:69).

If we assume that there exists no predetermined or natural connection between signal and signification, does this mean that every individual in every moment makes a conscious and free decision on what signal to use for each signification. No, says Saussure, individuals do not have that kind of power. Languages are not something, which exist independently of their users, and they can be transformed by one individual. In this sense, languages are historical.

When we use a sign, this sign is always influenced by prior use (Saussure 1983:72). We cannot know of a language freed from already existent language use. This constitutes the invariability of languages; we, as individuals, have limited freedom when it comes to our language use. In the total arbitrariness of the relation between sound, pattern, and concept, there is still a determining factor: tradition. We are bound by the history of language in our own use.

“Ultimately there is a connexion between these two opposing factors: the arbitrary convention which allows free choice, and the passage of time, which fixes that choice. It is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary.” (Saussure 1983:74)

This could be taken as a strong proof of the limited choice of the individual. If there is only a language structure, which refers to a linguistic community, then are individuals powerless? What I have said above refers to invariability, but that does not mean that we cannot allow for variability in the system. Obviously, languages are not static and do change over time. Even though we are constantly influenced by the past, we still have the possibility to break with it. Change can occur because of the relationship with the past, “Infidelity to the past is the only relative. That is how it comes about that the principle of change is based on the principle of continuity” (Saussure 1983:75).

Change itself consists of a change in the relation between signal and signification. We have new connections between sound patterns and concepts. This change knows no theoretical limits. Any sound can be connected to any concept. But, as mentioned above, change is always influenced by the past, and therefore, even though the theoretical possibility of change

is unlimited, we do not have language revolutions. Language change is gradual and does not abruptly cut off the past, since it is unable to.

One can be fooled into thinking that change is driven by an agent, an individual. This, however, is a dangerous conclusion, since a language never exists solely for an individual, but always as a social community. A change in language takes place within the linguistic community, and is thus a social act (Saussure 1983:77). Change is therefore determined by two factors: time and social integration, both intrinsic characteristics of language.

Saussure was a structural linguist, but on the more pragmatic end, we have Ludwig Wittgenstein and his ideas on language, language games, and rules. He places a large emphasis on how we create conventions in language, but this was based on views similar to Saussure's. Conventions cannot be created without a certain amount of fluidity in language, and why would we need conventions if signals and significations were essential? This follows Wittgenstein's later writings, first and foremost his *Philosophical Investigations* (1958). Language games provides a view of language different to the one earlier held, by opening up for a fluidity and non-static condition in our language use. This use is ever changing, but not completely chaotic. When using language, human beings rely on linguistic building blocks in order to communicate and convey ideas. The only reason that this system is working is because we have conventions guiding our language use; we are rule-followers when it comes to communication. This by no means indicates any kind of essentialism in these rules. The rules are man-made, and neither can we identify an essential game nor entirely define one.

The main point with Wittgenstein's argument is the opposition to scientific generality (Wittgenstein 1958). We cannot know the essential meaning of one word; we can only map the resembling characteristics by using other words. If we have a concept or an idea, this is not bound to one certain term, but the idea changes itself as the use of it differs over time and space. This also means that we cannot put boundaries on words and concepts. They are never fixed, but can change into different forms. These forms are, however, guided by the patterns in usage, without which communication would be impossible.

Jean-François Lyotard took up both of these ontological and epistemological ideas, based on Saussure and Wittgenstein, and he also coined the term post-modernism in *The Post-modern Condition – A report on Knowledge* (Lyotard 1984, cf. Aylesworth 2005). This very simple, but nonetheless powerful, theory of Wittgenstein's would then come to influence the whole

field of post-modernism, and how we look at text and language, and what roles they play in society.

Saussure is, as mentioned above, a structural linguist. These thoughts have later been developed into a more post-structural way of thinking, merged together with the thoughts of Wittgenstein and Lyotard. One of the key terms for post-structuralist and anti-foundationalist analysis is deconstruction, a term we hear constantly in post-structural analysis. But, what does it mean, and how can we make use of it? Deconstruction can be seen as an instance of anti-foundationalism, and is for many the height of post-structuralism. For Jacques Derrida, whom many connect with the concept of deconstruction, we can find many thoughts similar to other anti-foundationalist thinkers, and a development of Saussure's structural linguistics.

All of these thoughts mentioned above have strongly influenced Jacques Derrida in his works. Like Saussure, Derrida is also highly sceptical towards any kind of concentrated or essential meaning in signifiers. He even takes the discussion one step further in saying that not only is the signifier context-dependent, but that the context itself is not tangibly defined. According to Derrida, we cannot ever determine what a context really is; there is no rigorous or scientific concept of context (Derrida 1988:3). Where Saussure might claim that context actually does exist, and that it is vital for linguistic analysis, Derrida denies our understanding of context and claims that it is always non-saturated (Derrida 1988:3).

It is commonly claimed that, in communication, there is a possibility of representation. If I write a letter to someone else, which I probably do because this person is not here to experience what I experience, and I want to transmit those thoughts and events, then in doing so, I trust that I am able to communicate this knowledge to my friend, through, in this case, writing. This assumption is crucial for me; that the representation (my words) really can signify an ideal content (my experience). What I might not consider is the legitimate absence of the receiver of the message. This is what Derrida calls *arche-writing*, and refers not to the mere common sense of writing, but more to the very concept that we can transmit something without the spoken word. What we witness here is that the experience perceived by me cannot, and will not, be the same when the receiver reads my message (Reynolds 2002). When my friend reads my letter, he or she, will not experience those exact same thoughts I had when I wrote it. Meaning is thus never present.

Then how is this relevant to anti-foundationalism? Some might argue that, certainly, even if we might have difficulties in keeping text and context identical, does this eliminate the



possibility of finite regression? How severe is it that we might not be able to have a “pure” representation? Derrida would say that, of course, not everything is language, not everything is linguistics, but the very symptoms we encounter from differing temporal conditions (text/context) are signs of the absence of essential meaning. And if this is absent, then regression is not finite.

Derrida’s own master example of this is *différance*. This very term signifies how the written is sometimes prior to the spoken. If you consider the two French words *différence* and *différance*, there is no audible difference. In this case, the written is necessary for the spoken. This also means that there can be no essential spoken word, if ambiguities like this one can be discovered (Reynolds 2002, Derrida 1978). This disturbs the logic that one sign, one utterance, would be representative of one meaning. And if we start this thought, we could soon develop it into saying that the ambiguities of an utterance or a sign might never stop, that it is a quest *ad infinitum*, without foundations, or finite regression (Reynolds 2002). This is what I earlier referred to as infinite regression, as described by epistemological anti-foundationalists.

These insights, that writing is as important as the spoken word, and that “pure” representation in writing is impossible, justify deconstruction (see below). In this situation we are talking about arche-writing, the very situation that we have a disparity between the moment described and that meaning conveyed in writing or communication. The two combined, that writing is as important as speech and that writing never has an essential representation, is the main argument for deconstruction.

Then what exactly is a deconstructive strategy? Deconstruction aims at questioning those “fixed” meanings in society. What it does not do is to suggest meanings on its own; it works solely towards questioning existing ones (Reynolds 2002). Derrida insists that deconstruction is the theory that says nothing, however complicated that might be. Here we can also see the strong stance against foundationalism; Derrida would rather remain silent than propose a structuring foundational theory of society.

Nonetheless, the practice of deconstruction, and the recognition of its existence, means that we have no literal meaning of texts (Reynolds 2002). The practice contains opening up texts, which might seem very fixed, to alternative meanings, meanings perhaps usually repressed. In that sense, Derrida does not want to be read literally either; that would thwart his argument (Reynolds 2002).

To conclude; language is a multi-faceted tool for anti-foundationalists in pointing to the contingency of social relations, and the uncertainty of social practice. However, this is but one dimension, and we can further build on this argument of contingency to get closer to the social, and most of all, the political. Therefore, I will now continue with the dimension of history/knowledge/power.

### *History/knowledge/power*

Although language has a tremendous impact on social theory, it is not the only example of an anti-foundationalist societal driving force. When we consider socio-political anti-foundationalism, I also find that the argument regarding the role of history and power is very important in understanding how anti-foundationalism expresses itself in social relations. In this part, we will consider how the very fact that knowledge based on historical experiences is neither essential nor universal, and how this plays out in the socio-political dimension. We will discuss the argument put forward by Michel Foucault, who was very influenced by Nietzsche, claiming that the undecidability of power and origin highly affect social relations, and that these are undeterminable.

Foucault's contributions to philosophy in the 1970's were truly groundbreaking, and he changed the conditions for societal analysis in numerous ways (Kelly 2010). One of the most defining thoughts of Foucault's is that of how knowledge governs society, and how this knowledge is created. He has also written extensively on how power structures related to the creation of knowledge define society, but for my analysis, the main point is that of the nature of knowledge and power, and their undefinable condition.

To start from the beginning, we can state that, for Foucault, there is no external position of certainty, there is no point from which we can objectively analyze the world, but we are always an integral part of that analysis (Foucault 2001, Rabinow 1991:4). Nor can we claim to know of any universal truths, an epistemological consequence of what is stated above. What we can discern is knowledge in different contexts. Foucault is not a structuralist saying that the individual is a powerless creature following the pre-destined motions of a never-ending flow, but rather that we are subjects constantly subject to power exertions in forms of knowledge (Rabinow 1991:7). In this sense the subject is of course the actor and the motor of change, but the subject is also always the object and the passive receiver of change. Nevertheless, the individual cannot escape knowledge and cannot become immune to those power exertions (Gutting 2011).

Then, how are we to understand the different flows of power? Who governs: the individual or the structure? Foucault would answer: no one. There is no general theory in Foucault's work which gives us a meta-understanding of the world. The only thing is that we do have patterns in how knowledge is produced. This is not total chaos, but knowledge production has a direction. How we perceive reality and history is not predetermined, but nor is it contingent. This is where Foucault's concept of genealogy enters. Genealogy represents the selection of knowledge over time (Foucault 1991a:77). This is by no means to claim that knowledge has a linear development; on the contrary, genealogy allows for very non-linear and illogical conclusions and connections, so as to keep a certain power structure (Foucault 1991a:78). Foucault's argument here is that in analysing history, we might search for origins, but what we actually find is the complete opposite: dissension and disparity (Foucault 1991a:79). To make sense of the world, new forms of knowledge are paired with already-existent ones to reproduce already-prevalent opinions or ideas. Genealogy attempts to illuminate those linear connections and provide a critique of this linearity. The method of doing this is to point out the singularity of moments. There is no evolution in our human mind, we can have different roles in different moments, and genealogy will help us to discover these (Foucault 1991a:76).

The goal of Genealogy is not to find the origins of our beings. This, however, has been a long-sought-after piece of knowledge. From where do we have our morals, from where do they emanate? On this question, Foucault is heavily influenced by Nietzsche. Nietzsche was fascinated by the term *Ursprung*, our foundations; the essence of the human being. In religious texts, and in philosophy, this had been the centre of attention for centuries (Foucault 1991a:78). What genealogy claims, on the other hand, is the absence of such an essence, or that such an essence is created (Foucault 1991a:78). The essence is born – by chance, which means that the *Ursprung*, or *Herkunft*, is not something, which can be discovered or revealed. The thought that we can reveal essential truths is a fabrication, and reason is a fabricated tool for such an endeavour (Foucault 1991a:78). So, even though we might search for patterns and linear developments, what genealogy brings to our attention is the knowledge of their absence and the presence of disparity (Foucault 1991a:79). It is by no means certain that things are truer in their original version. Therefore, the quest for the original version does not lead to enlightenment.

“We wished to awaken the feeling of man's sovereignty by showing his divine birth: this path is now forbidden, since a monkey stands at the entrance.” (Nietzsche Dawn, no. 49, in Foucault 1991a:79)

Then, what is truth? Truth is a mere reflection of a discourse of what is true. It is something, which has been regarded to be true for so long that we can no longer question its correctness. Hence, genealogy is not a quest for truth, and it is not a quest for an origin. Rather, it is the quest for accidents, for chance, and for challenges to the “truth”.

“The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.” (Foucault 1991a:82)

Still, the greatness of Foucault does not merely lie in the ambition to disarm absolute knowledge, but also in the connections to the functions of society. We can still discern an emergence of social order. Domination is a strong characteristic of this order. We can see the domination of some men over others, of some individuals over others. We can see the ranking of values into good and evil, and we can see the emergence of liberty versus oppression (Foucault 1991a:85). These characteristics attempt at fixation. They have been engraved into history through rituals and heritages. History is not an example of how conflicts attempt to solve different dominations and reach compromises, but rather the constant birth of new dominations (Foucault 1991a:85).

Then, how can these dominations express themselves? For Foucault, this is a question of power. Power is an intricate concept, as mentioned above. Where is power? How is it exerted? These are questions not easily dealt with. Foucault rejects the thought of a simple definition of the ruling class; those who are dominated are obviously not in power (Kritzmann 1988:101, Foucault 1991b). Instead, Foucault thinks of power in ways not done before. Who makes decisions for me? Who is preventing me from doing X and telling me to do Y? Neither can we make a sharp division between *who* governs and *how* they do it. To merely analyze formal decision-makers and decision-making is not enough to reach a good understanding of power structures.

One example is imprisonment, as described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* (Foucault 1995). Why is it that imprisonment is regarded as a legitimate practice, when it has such severe consequences for the individual? This practice became common in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when governing individuals in this very physical way grew tremendously popular (Kritzmann 1988:104). This was represented not only by the prison, but also by boarding schools, great workshops and other physical environments where the

activities of the individual were constantly supervised (Kritzmann 1988:105). These practices are all forms of power. They are all expressions of how individuals are subject to practices that are not questioned in any way. In that sense, power is not only exerted by politicians, but present everywhere in society, and represented by the absence of critique against its practices.

In this sense, power is not only the physical practice of an institution over the individual. Power is also closely connected to knowledge itself (Kritzmann 1988:106). In fact, for Foucault there is no line where power starts and knowledge ends. Science in-and-of-itself is an instance of power. It can govern what you say, and most of all, whether you will be taken seriously or not. Science has its own well-defined practices, which pushes people to follow its rules. Additionally, science produces truths. Truths, which, as mentioned above are by no means “true” in that precise sense of the word, but rather a produced understanding freed from criticism (Kritzmann 1988:106).

Foucault has also written extensively on how power is exerted in different ways. I believe that this is an interesting and relevant topic, since power, and the indeterminacy of history/knowledge/power, are of course highly relevant in social relations. Up until now we have talked about these concepts on a very theoretical level, but they also have practical relevance. We can take the example of governmentality. How can we analyse different forms of governments and power exertions, and, is it not true that we live in a democratic society where we govern ourselves? And if we are subject to power exertions, how come these are considered legitimate and accepted by the governed?

Historically, we have seen different forms of legitimate power exertions. We can go back to the Machiavellian Prince, a form of government whose legitimacy was based on the sole fact that it managed to uphold itself (Foucault 1994:90). The common good is being considered as the population abiding to the rules of the government. At a later stage, in modern society, these thoughts are being revised. No longer do we merely rely on the god-given legitimacy of the prince, but now, we introduce the thought of the “art of government”. A state or a society can be governed in such a way that the welfare of the population increases, and we could reach other goals except for the survival of the sovereign. The wellbeing of the people becomes an important factor in how to govern a state.

However, by introducing the well being of the population and citizens of the state, we also open up for a new form of governance. No longer is it irrelevant how the individuals lead their personal lives, but this becomes a concern for the government as well. In order to reach

the highest welfare point (which often-times is defined in economic terms), we have to make sure that the population acts in a way conducive to this specific end. According to Foucault, we are now witnessing the birth of everyday politics (Foucault 1994:92). There was an entirely new need to make sure that the single citizen was indeed doing his or her duty to the state.

To ensure such behaviour, a new version of power exertion was inevitable. Power became capillary, in the sense that it is a bottom-up phenomenon, and not just something imposed from above. If we want citizens to act in a certain way in many, many small situations, a very effective way of doing this is to influence their ways of thinking, their own mentalities (Foucault 1994:100). To do this, power expresses itself in two ways: technologies of domination and technologies of the self. The subject is not only governed by external or physical forces, but governance and power exertions also come from within, from rules the subjects impose on themselves.

”I think that if one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, he has to take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self. Let’s say: he has to take into account the interaction between those two types of techniques – techniques of domination and techniques of the self. He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think government. Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself.” (Foucault 1994:103-4).

In this sense, we can see how the indeterminacy of the social can result in power relations, power games, and special productions of knowledge, and these are forces that strengthen the

anti-foundationalist argument. It follows the same line of argument as for language, but also incorporates how this transfers into social power relations. In the next part we will delve even deeper into the social when talking about the anti-foundational aspect of politics.

### *Politics*

Politics, and the political, being the main focus of this paper, deserves a long and elaborate account; however, here, I will merely give you a short introduction. We will focus on the political anti-foundationalism thoroughly in Chapter 3, since this is what Laclau's works are about. In this part, we will discuss how Jacques Rancière, just like Foucault and Derrida, has taken up a strong position against the "foundations" of politics. This category is, in a sense, more focused on social relations.

With Rancière, our starting point is politics (Rancière 1999), and in order to have politics, we need a social space which is not fixed. Rancière observes that we have conflict and differences in society, which are not benefited by democracy as such. Rather, we have come to a point where democracy might constitute harm for itself. He puts emphasis on that very problem dealt with in political theory for centuries: how can we have a functioning democratic society consisting of individuals with a free will, and still uphold law and order? Freedom is, according to Rancière, a key element in a vital democracy, but only to a certain extent.

One important note to make is that democracy is by no means politics (Rancière 2006:33). For Rancière, politics is represented by the opposite to a "divine" or given government; that we are governed without questioning the legitimacy of the ruler. Politics is exactly that questioning. Now, by employing democracy, do we automatically reach a stage of politics where we have critique of the government? In Rancière's view, there are several issues with the democratic, societal, model. First of all, he considers it to be the empire of nothing (Rancière 2006:34). And, if that statement is true, we also have several implications following. If there is no empire, no responsible statesman, then how do we reach politics?

Rancière borrows lines of argument from Plato. For Plato, democracy is the "rule of the abstract law" (Rancière 2006:35). Since there is no specific governor that makes the laws, laws are considered to be universal. The law is not just applicable for one ruling agent and one ruled, but for all ruling agents, and all people being ruled. However; Plato questions

whether or not it is really the idea itself being followed in a democracy, and if Man does not use this towards his own ends (Rancière 2006:35).

In return, Rancière wants to offer an alternative viewpoint. The most defining characteristic of democracy is rather that it does enhance “politics”, that the very absence of a ruler, the empire of nothing, is the reason to why it can constitute a good government (Rancière 2006:38). In a modern society, we have a principle of equality. All men and women are equal. Then again, we have a factual situation of governors and governed. This, however, does not mean that there is a pre-destined way describing whom this should be, merely that there are such relations. Then, when the action itself is preformed, this also becomes the legitimizing factor. In succeeding to govern someone else, I also gain the legitimacy of doing so. If I manage to win an election, and manage to rule the country, this naturally creates legitimacy for this action.

If we compare this with more non-democratic forms of governance, we can see that there can be several paths to legitimacy. We could have parents governing their children with the argument that they are older and wiser; we could have the stronger having power over the weaker. Additionally, we could have the authority of those wiser over those more ignorant. Here comes the argument of Plato’s philosopher kings who were considered more entitled to govern because of their higher abilities (Rancière 2006:40). This last dimension of authority is special in the sense that it is not evident. It is (almost) always evident that your parents are your parents. It is always evident that the son of the king inherits the crown because of his blood. It is not evident, however, who is the smartest or most intellectual of the competitors for power.

Another reason has to be mentioned here, which is a continuation of the philosopher kings argument. In a democracy, we try to judge who is the best (among equals) to govern. But since the fact remains, that it is a man or woman among equals, the reasons to why this person would be more well suited for the task is not obvious. This is where democracy radically differs from other forms of government, and this is also where politics begins (Rancière 2006:40).

Then, why is this a problem? The problem is named legitimacy. If I have no special reason more than that of a conviction that I am better suited to govern than to be governed, then why is my governing a legitimate enterprise, and how can this be assured? Democracy is so constructed that anyone can govern, but are they ever entitled to do so? If we are equals, then



why should anyone govern? And if we are not, then why do we need democracy? Herein lie both the beauty and the danger of a democratic society. The political, the actual discussion, is dependent on an absence of titles to govern. Democracy can therefore at the same time be considered the most illegitimate and the most legitimate form of government. This, as we can see, is clearly unequal to a foundationalist view on politics, where we can have a founding principle of legitimacy, as for Hobbes or Locke. This principle is absent for Rancière. This discussion of how anti-foundationalism is expressed in politics will continue in Chapter 3.

### **A matrix of foundations**

In this first part of the paper, I have aimed at introducing the concept of foundations and how they are interpreted in the literature. For me, the most important insight so far is that we do not only have one type of foundationalism, but that it can actually be divided into several dimensions. When we talk about epistemic foundations, actual knowledge as such is at stake. Is there any type of truth out there, and if so, how can we be aware of it? We have seen that epistemological foundationalists argue that there is an end to justification; there are immediate beliefs. Anti-foundationalists, on the other hand, claim that there is no such thing as a non-questionable statement, and that regression is infinite.

On the other hand, we also have a different type of foundation, which is more connected to social and political theory. In this socio-political dimension, we also have sharp differences between the strands. The foundationalist political theorists, like Hobbes and Locke, employ one founding justifying principle of political life, while the anti-foundationalists negate the possibility of any such principle. I have argued that we can place the post-structuralist thinkers in the fourth field. They focus on how different aspects of the social strengthen the anti-foundationalist track. These aspects can be language, history/knowledge/power, and politics. In the language part, we have seen that the theories of Wittgenstein, Saussure, and Derrida have questioned the more foundationalist understanding of how we express ourselves and how this can affect our social life. In the section on History/knowledge/power, I have discussed Foucault's texts on why power relations are, by nature, indeterminable, and how this is yet another argument for the anti-foundationalist agenda. For an illustration, consider Table 1. There, we can see how anti-foundationalist arguments differ from the foundationalist in an epistemological dimension.

The socio-political dimension is the most important one in this paper. In describing the political side of anti-foundationalism, I have merely given a brief introduction, thereafter focusing mostly on the absence of a title to govern as described by Jacques Rancière. I will properly introduce the works of Laclau, which is the most prominent political anti-foundationalist theorist, how his opinions relate to the matrix in general and to his fellow post-structuralists, in Chapter 3. However, language and time/power are not irrelevant to politics. As we will learn, they are tightly intertwined, and Laclau has been strongly influenced by the thought presented in this chapter as socio-political anti-foundationalism, and this is also my main reason for presenting them here.

*Table 2: A matrix of foundations*

	<b>Foundationalism</b>	<b>Anti-foundationalism</b>
<b>Epistemological</b>	Immediate epistemic justification possible Finite regression	Infinite regress argument Sellarsian dilemma Assertive representational content
<b>Socio-political</b>	Immediate normative justification possible There are normative grounds, on which we can build social theory (eg. Individual reason, equality of men, state of nature).	Expressions of counter-forces to foundationalism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Language</li> <li>- Time/power</li> <li>- <b>Politics</b></li> </ul>

### III. LACLAU AND THE POLITICAL

We now move on to the recapitulation of the works of Ernesto Laclau. Many have regarded Laclau as the most influential post-structuralist writer in political theory. I am one of those admitting to his great contribution to the field, regardless of whatever critique I might have for special aspects of his works. In this chapter, I will recapitulate his main argument. This will be done without any interest in criticism or analysis; it serves merely as a description. Laclau has produced many articles and books, and I have made a selection from these, based on what will be relevant for this study.

All of this is done as an example of the fourth field in the foundational matrix. Laclau would, himself, describe his work as a sign of the many forces working against foundationalism, though, when other forces resisting foundationalism focus on aspects such as language or power, Laclau has pointed to forces prevalent in the field of the political. What the political means is of course not a simple topic. Many times, it is confused with politics, which is not the intended meaning here. Laclau, along with myself in this paper, treat the political as that struggle for power and the discussion following from it. I will return to this question below.

A few notes before we begin. I have made a selection of topics and concepts from the very extensive writings of Ernesto Laclau. Some might have comments on the selection; I can only say that my intention has been to illuminate a certain perspective on Laclau's work, that of foundations. In doing so I might have left out some aspects many regard as very important for Laclau, but these have then not been crucial for making this analysis. For instance, I do not focus on the origins of Marxism. Even though Marxism has exerted a huge amount of pressure within the post-structural arena, the origins and developments of Marxism are not vital to this analysis, primarily because I want to talk about foundations in general, not necessarily Marxist ones.

The outline of this chapter will be as follows: First, I will give an introduction to Laclau's life and background in general, and then swiftly move on to how, together, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe broke new grounds for post-Marxist analysis. After this, we will delve deeper into how Laclau has been influenced by post-structuralism in general, and specifically focus on language and its uncertainty. Thereafter, we will consider these post-structural standpoints applied on both identity and society. This will then transit into Laclau's theory of hegemony and the concept of radical democracy. At last, we will consider the matrix anew, and see how Laclau's work is placed in the fourth field.

In this chapter, I also want to keep a constant eye on how Laclau's aim at anti-foundationalism differs from those other thinkers presented in Chapter 2. I wish to accentuate those differences since it is very important to understand how specifically the political can be an expression of the anti-foundationalist argument.

### *Background*

Ernesto Laclau is a world renowned academic. He has held positions and lectures in almost every continent. He grew up in Buenos Aires in the 1940's, and was a member of the Socialist Party there, and later also a member of their splinter group, the Socialist Party of the National left (Critchley - Marchart 2004:2). The political climate was rough since Argentina experienced a *coupe d'état* in 1966. This, says Laclau, was his first lesson of antagonism, a concept we will return to later on. During this time, he was the editor of the socialist magazine, *Lucha Obrera*. Even though this was 20 years before the publication of his magnum opus, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001 (1985) with Chantal Mouffe), one could already discern the future Laclau was talking about: the "hegemonization of democratic tasks" (Critchley – Marchart 2004:2). This could of course be seen as a sign of the good, old Marxist economic reductionism, but Laclau moved on from this. Seeing how the Argentinian response to Communism fell out, he concluded "political alliances have to be constructed not along class lines but beyond class lines in a constant effort to hegemonize a larger universal task" (Critchley – Marchart 2004:3). This was the beginning of the abandonment of class and economic reductionism. This brief overview of Laclau's life serves to put what I'm going to say in a context, and we will now move on to how his works started a new era in post-Marxist analysis.

### *Breaking off from Marxism*

The novelty of Laclau (and Mouffe), what made them distinct from other left writers, was the rejection of essentialism presented in their magnum opus *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001, 1985). When describing the political field, they based their analysis on a new approach, which was quite different from that of Marx, or other, later Marxist theorists (Dallmayr 2004:36, Smith 1998:55). According to Laclau and Mouffe, the main flaw within Marxist theory is that it does not encompass all the different interests of the oppressed (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:viii). Their view is that although the Marxist agenda might have enjoyed a golden age in the 1960's, it stagnated in the 70's. Upon the arrival of the neoliberal agenda during the 80's, the left and Marxist theories found themselves at the end of the road, without

possibility for further expansion (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:viii). Some would perhaps explain this stagnation with the ineptness of the Marxist theory itself, but Laclau and Mouffe found the case to be quite different.

The main pathology (not in the Marxist sense) of the theory of the left was to be found in its philosophical foundations. While the Marxist and Gramscian approaches were founded on a Husserlian conception of “sedimentation” and “reactivation”, Laclau and Mouffe had a different standpoint.

“Sedimented theoretical categories are those which conceal the acts of their original institution, while the reactivating moment makes those acts visible again. For us – as opposed to Husserl – that reactivation had to show the original contingency of the synthesis that the Marxian categories attempted to establish.” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:viii)

Even though Husserl influenced Laclau and Mouffe, they also disagreed with him, as shown above. Nonetheless, they still use this distinction to position themselves in relation to Marxism, where the political, in the Laclaudian sense, was not prevalent at all; the class struggle enjoyed a monopoly in describing how reactivation was *supposed* be achieved.

In opposition to this, Laclau and Mouffe aimed at uncovering the covered, and advocated the recognition of contingency in doing so. They also reject the Hegelian notion of a totality. This is not the place to recapitulate all of Hegel’s argument, but I will merely touch upon those dimensions in which Laclau and Mouffe differ from him, and how this is relevant.

Laclau and Mouffe reject Hegel’s argument of the existence of a totality, reachable only through the “cunning of reason”. This is, to the authors, “the highest moment of German Romanticism” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:94), since it has the idealist notion of an obscured, but nonetheless reachable, totality. At the same time, they agree with Hegel on some points. I would like to argue that the master question for Laclau and Mouffe is that of unity and fragmentation. How can we say that there is something called society, some unifying principle, if there is no universal ordering principle? Hegel would say that we cannot put the finger on a certain mechanism, or imagine a utopia of this ordered society, but we still have our reason, and this will help us in socializing the world. Hegel does recognize differences and plurality in the world, but still claims that they can be overcome by the cunning of reason (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:95). On the other hand, Hegel also has another dimension: the totality

also contains the “seeds of its dissolution” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:95). The totality can also act “as midwife for a theory of hegemony, opening reflection up to the flux of contingent and not purely logical (or essential) relationships” (Dallmayr 2004:43).

To make sense of this, I would say that Laclau and Mouffe say that there is no totality, no universal ordering principle that can be reached through rational thinking. Nonetheless, they do agree that the world itself opens up for a contingent set of actions. This statement is strongly influenced by what has been stated in Chapter 2, on language and history. Laclau and Mouffe also admit that there are strong connections between their own theory and the linguist theories of Saussure, Wittgenstein and Derrida. We will return to all of the new concepts mentioned above, to hegemony, antagonism and how the political connects with the social. First, however, we will take a closer look at how language and post-structuralism have influenced Laclau’s works.

### **The linguist heritage**

I would say that, to a great extent, the theory of Laclau is a linguistic theory, with language as its main object of analysis, but in the end, it completely integrates this linguist approach into an analysis of the political. Influential sources for Laclau are the linguists, in particular: Derrida, Saussure, and Wittgenstein. As mentioned above, Laclau goes a little further than merely analysing language. He also takes this as a basis for his later argument.

If we recall the discussion on how language is non-fixed, as mentioned in Chapter 2, this serves as the starting point for Laclau’s analysis. The second point would be that since we have non-fixation, there are always forces aiming at fixation, which constitute a discourse, similar to Foucault’s argument. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), there is nothing outside of the discursive field, and everything that we can perceive of is a discursive building block, like in the Wittgensteinian language games. Every time we are using or being subject to one of the blocks, this is what Laclau refers to as an *articulation*. Articulation is a central theme and indicates the ever-changing nature of language.

An articulation aims at transforming an *element* (a concept/word/sign without a fixed meaning) into a *moment* (a concept/word/sign with a fixed meaning). The main argument, however, is that this transformation is never fully complete. If we had a system of only moments, this would indicate a totality, where we had a definition for everything (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:107). This means that every moment is relational to each other. And, if every concept is relational, this means that it has a fixed position among its fellow concepts. Since

Laclau adheres to non-fixity, this is impossible. Foucault, along with his notion of discourse, heavily influences this. As we have seen in Chapter 2, Foucault argues that discourse is that very regularity in dispersion, which comes about when we have our everyday articulations. The regularity referred to is that we have patterns in how we relate to different concepts, although these patterns are always subject to change. For this to be possible, articulation indicates that a certain signifier is connected with a certain signified. Those connections are subject to change in a post-structuralist perspective, as presented by Foucault (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:105).

Laclau and Mouffe reject this, and state that the relational character is a proof of the necessity of the moments. It then becomes a totality, a system where every element has become a moment. They also reject the distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive, as mentioned above. There is nothing outside the discursive field. We cannot discern any difference between the “practical” and the “mental”; they are both part of the same discursive field (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:109). But what does the discursive field look like? In the field, we have discourses. Discourses aim at making elements into moments, constructing a *sutured* totality (Laclau - Mouffe 2001:110). This articulatory practice of the discourses is only possible because we do not have a totality. All concepts/words/signs are not totally defined in relation to other concepts/words/signs, and this enables the discourse to articulate them in different directions. The discourse thus incarnates a “regularity in dispersion” which is in line with the Foucauldian notion of the word (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:106).

Laclau is also inspired by the Derridian notion of representation, or rather, the lack thereof. As we discussed in Chapter 2, representation, or arche-writing, is something, which is impossible, and there will always be a gap between the representation and what is to be represented (Laclau 1996a:49). Derrida speaks of this mostly in linguist terms, but for Laclau, the difficulties of representation heavily influence identity questions and social patterns as well.

What we have said so far might indicate that we live in total chaos without an ordering principle. Laclau and Mouffe explain the fact that we still have social order with the possibility of partial fixation. It is obviously not the case that we live in total disarray, with no means of communication or agreement. Here, they introduce the Lacanian term “points de capiton” (for a more elaborate introduction to Lacan, see Rabaté 2003), which are called nodal points by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau - Mouffe 2001:112). For them, it is quite obvious

that these partial fixations exist, or else the very change of meaning for a concept/word/sign would be impossible, since there would be nothing to move from or to. This is what discourse tries to create, a making-sense of the world. If they cannot, then:

“... a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic.” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:112)

What we have seen so far is that Laclau is departing from a purely Marxist theory, and seems influenced by the prominent post-structuralist, anti-foundationalist thinkers. All of these statements are quite in line with how an anti-foundationalist, like Derrida or Foucault, considers social patterns. However, the argument continues, and Laclau positions himself as a distinct version of an anti-foundationalist discourse.

### **The impossibility of identity**

Like I mentioned above, the question of representation also transfers into how we perceive identity. If we take the difficulty of representation and apply it to how we think of identity, we can see that, if we have a representation of identity, we probably have it because of the absence of the one being represented (Laclau 1999:155). We then encounter the same type of difficulty with identities as we did with meaning for Derrida (see Chapter 2). If I am absent, and I want someone to represent my thoughts and wills in my place, then I am in need of the representation. And, if I am in need of representation, this means that my identity is not complete, and I need to be supplemented by the representation itself (Laclau 1996a:49). Thus, the role of representation cannot be neutral, since there will be some kind of contribution from the representation to the identity being represented.

Let us consider an example where we have a congregation of farmers in a local community. They are concerned about an agricultural tax, which prevents foreign agricultural products from being price competitive. They elect a representative. The issue is that when this representative goes to parliament, he or she will not only talk about this agricultural tax, but about budget deliberations and other non-agricultural issues. This is quite necessary, or else the representative will not be able to seem like a trustworthy deliberator, and decrease his/her chances of getting support for the agricultural tax. The farmers will all of a sudden have an opinion on all these non-agricultural matters, without necessarily having spoken to their representative about it.



“So, in some sense, by producing a discourse of articulation the representative is having an effect on the represented themselves because at the end of the process the represented will have a more complex identity.” (Laclau 1999:156)

This means that the complete definition of identities is impossible; we cannot have identities of necessary character. Nonetheless, the issue of representation is a mere beginning of how we can understand identity questions in Laclau’s work.

Another very important concept for Laclau is antagonism. Antagonism is the very notion that identity is also subject to contingency. This concept is also very influenced by Lacan’s constitutive lack (Rabaté 2003). To be able to talk about politics and the political, we want to be able to visualize a political actor, or at least some kind of agency. This, according to Laclau, is a difficult enterprise. If we agree with his argument that language is contingent and always subject to change, then this also shapes our notion of the political actor.

When we first consider antagonism, we might think that it is merely an opposing actor, or force. To Laclau, however, it is not as simple. To be able to do this, we need a clear-cut understanding of exactly what a political is. To be able to say that I am a political actor, how can I know what this idea of me as a political actor actually entails? Perhaps I want to identify myself in relation to other political actors. I can then say that I am actor B, and I am different from actor A. Then, this naturally supposes that I can conceive both of myself, in my entirety, and of actor B, in his/her entirety. Another possible scenario could be that I say that I am different from actor A, and that this would be definition enough (Laclau – Mouffe 1985:122). Here we could think of the difference between A and B as either a real opposition (A – B), or a contradiction (A – not A). However, for Laclau and Mouffe, antagonism is none of the above. Antagonism is not real opposition; if we imagine two cars crashing into one another, there is nothing antagonistic about it (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:123). That would be the physical version of opposition; a more social version of opposition could be when a policeman hits a protester. This is irrelevant for antagonism, since we would then have to assume two full entities, which is impossible in our post-structuralist world, because of the uncertainty of relations between concepts.

On the other hand, we have contradiction. This is also refused by Laclau and Mouffe, who argue that all people, on some level, take part in belief systems that are contradictory, but that this does not necessarily imply antagonism (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:124). Then, what is

antagonism? What opposition and contradiction share is an objective relation that we can know of what A and B consist. We assume fully comprehensible identities. Laclau and Mouffe argue that when it comes to antagonism, we do not assume that we can fully comprehend any identity. Rather, antagonism is that very force that prevents us from doing so (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:125). They say that we can imagine the presence of “the Other”. The other is something, which works within my identity, and prevents me from fully realizing myself. For instance:

“It is because a physical force *is* a physical force that another identical and countervailing force leads to rest; in contrast it is because a peasant *cannot be* a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from his land.” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:125, emphasis in the original)

This functions only because we adopt an anti-foundationalist view on language. If we do not have any objective relation between words and concepts, and we cannot have a “true” representation, we also create an empty space of identity that is up for grabs. This empty space can be colonized by the antagonist, and as such prevent us from accessing it. Thus, our identity is never fully realized, but always colonized by the Antagonist. One should remember, however, that the antagonizing force is not fully present either, and also subject to change.

“...Its objective being is a symbol of my non-being and, in this way, it is overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent its being fixed as full positivity.” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:125)

As such, antagonism illuminates the limits of objectivity. This, as I mentioned above, is based on an understanding of language where difference itself, and relational linguistics are something that is non-essential and contingent. This is also why it is quite difficult to capture antagonism in words. According to Laclau, discourses aim at fixating those things subverted by antagonism, and I therefore think one could perceive of antagonism as being prior to discourse. We also have to remember that the whole notion of antagonism rests on contingency. Without contingency, without any type of chance of change, then antagonism could not exist. Perceiving that things could be different, that the antagonist threatens us in our existence, we have to have a space where we are not in charge of ourselves. But then, is this part governed by any other rationality? No, says Laclau, the very reason that we cannot

govern ourselves is that we cannot understand any type of rationality connected with the antagonist (Marchart 2007:141).

“If negativity is radical and the outcome of the struggle not predetermined, the contingency of the identity of the two antagonistic forces is also radical and the conditions of existence of both must be themselves contingent.” (Laclau 1990:20).

Here we should also note that contingency does not mean that everything is chaos, or that everything happens by chance. Rather, it means that matters are not fixated in regards to both identities and the relations between them.

As we have just seen, Laclau takes on the arguments made by other post-structuralists, and develops them as to also be applicable in a more social context. Contingency and uncertainty is not only relevant for linguistics, but also for identity and representation, which we have seen in the constitutive lack and antagonism. This will be more elaborated below.

### **The impossibility of society**

Even though identity questions, as such, are very interesting, Laclau still presents himself as a political theorist. Then, how can we connect the anti-foundationalist claim with any notion of politics or the political? When discussing these, sometimes quite complex, theories, we have seen that the discussion oscillates between the political, politics, society and the social. I therefore find it quite necessary to present a more rigorous conceptual definition, or else interpretation and analysis will be impeded. In what follows, we will discuss some of Laclau’s definitions and understandings of these previously mentioned concepts, which we might connote to other definitions.

Since this whole chapter circulates around an anti-foundationalist version of politics, we have to possess a clear understanding of what this is. For Laclau, his theory starts in this very discussion; how can we distinguish the political and politics from the social and society? In one of his very early articles “The impossibility of Society” (Laclau 1983, see also Marchart 2007), he discusses how our previous understanding of the concepts might be misguided and misinformed. Starting out with the most basic anti-foundational claims that society can never be fully constituted, that is, we can never fully apprehend or conceive of what society in its totality is, he argues against the usefulness of the concept of society, and advocates the concept of the social, which he finds more appropriate.

“I understand ‘society’ to mean simply the possibility of closure of all social meaning around a matrix which can explain all its partial processes. That would be, for instance, the position of classical structuralism. On the other hand, if one takes a more post-structuralist position – the impossibility of closing any context and among them the social context as a unified whole – what you have are marginal processes which constantly disrupt meaning and do not lead to the closure of society around a single matrix. When we have the social defined in this sense as something which creates meaning but which makes closure impossible, I tended to speak of “the social” instead of “society”. (Laclau 1999:146)

We can see from this quote how Laclau positions himself in relation to other post-structuralists. He does agree with Derrida and Foucault on the contingency of the social, and also on the limits of our understanding of the matter. Then again, he parts ways with them by arguing for the primacy of the political. According to Laclau, the social, as we know it, is in a crisis, which is especially evident through the economic reductionism of Marxism. We cannot perceive society as a totality, with essential class systems, as an explanation to social relations (Laclau 1983, see also discussion below).

If we briefly assume that society is impossible, we can perceive the social as something, which constitutes the social practices between humans. Then, is this something worthwhile analysing? According to Laclau, the social is an expression that we can perceive, and this is of course important, but, what is even more important is how these social practices come about, how they can change. This is where the political enters the scene. The political is the very change of social practice, and the expression of the fact that change is possible.

“The way I am presenting the argument is that we live in a world of sedimented social practices. The moment of reactivation consists not in going to an original founding moment, as in Husserl, but to an original contingent decision through which the social was instituted. This moment of the institution of the social through contingent decisions is what I call ‘the political’.” (Laclau 1999:146)

To clarify, sedimentation is the term used by Husserl for expressing how we, in our social relations, develop certain patterns and routines, and that we thereby forget our origins

(Marchart 2007:139). This is also what I mentioned above when describing how Laclau positioned himself in relation to classical Marxism. To have sedimented social practices means that we do not question those patterns in our everyday life, and that this aims at fixating meaning. However, we should not forget that, for Laclau, meaning is always just partly fixated, and that the social is just a chimera trying to cover up the political. The political, in turn, represents the reactivation of different meanings and of conflict over the social. This is represented by the term antagonism, as mentioned above. Antagonism is also relevant for the social. It does not only apply to the individual level, but also to social relations. As we said before, if we have a non-sutured notion of society, we also have an empty space where society is nothing. This is the expression of antagonism on a social level, and therefore antagonism is not really internal to society, but rather external. It is the very expression of how society can never fully realize itself. For Laclau, antagonism is a central thought, and it reoccurs in many of his works.

Nonetheless, to capture the basic understanding of the theory, we can say that “where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations become fully visible, constitutes the field of the political” (Laclau 1990:35). This is an important distinction, and it also justifies for Laclau why we should analyse the political and not the social. For Laclau, all social relations and expressions emanate from the political, and the political thus becomes his *prima philosophia* (although in an anti-foundationalist sense). Since I have now distinguished between the political and the social, we can now continue to delve deeper into Laclau’s theory, and see how his understanding of anti-foundationalism transfers into the political. The fact that we have antagonisms becomes the very constitutive factor for the political; it illustrates the struggle for fully constituting oneself and for reactivating sedimented issues.

As we have seen from this discussion, the anti-foundationalist take on language has vast consequences for the political in Laclau’s works. The anti-foundationalist connections are strong, and we can see great how the characteristics presented in Chapter 2 have influenced Laclau. Nonetheless, he differs from those views by introducing this into the political, and making the political another expression of anti-foundationalism. The epistemological impediments constitute society in a profound way. The social is an attempt to fixate the political field, but fixation is never possible. We will return to this topic later, and especially focus on how antagonism can affect the political field, when discussing the concept of Hegemony.

## **Hegemony and social antagonism**

Based on the considerations presented above, Laclau continues his argument by presenting the concept of hegemony. When describing hegemony, I would like to start out in a situation where we have several actors: one oppressing actor, and several smaller actors fighting against oppression. Hegemony is that very notion, which transforms the struggles of the smaller actors from a fight for their own particular claim into a fight for a “universal claim”, (Laclau 1996b:40). We can compare this with, for instance, ethnic groups struggling for their own independence, and that this is, by the ruling government, classified as a general threat to the nation-state itself. Let us imagine that we have several such groups, all with different claims and wishes. What happens then, according to Laclau, is that the different claims are grouped together as a general opposition to the system, which he calls the logic of equivalence. They are no longer only struggling for their own sake; in addition, they become a part of a chain of equivalence, which is striving to heave the oppression.

What happens next is interesting. According to Laclau, this grouping of interests can have the consequence that the original causes; the original particularity of the small actor is diminished (Laclau 1996b:41). In that sense, they transform into merely being an oppressed mass, a chain of equivalently oppressed actors, even though their initial causes might have been vastly different. The oppressive power will then not just represent the singular oppressions of the small actors, but will rather

“...express pure anti-community, pure evil and negation. The community created by this equivalential expansion will be, thus, the pure idea of a communitarian fullness which is absent – as a result of the repressive power.” (Laclau 1996b:42)

This could be said to be the first step in the hegemonic operation. Next, we can see that the collective of small actors are, in opposition to the repressive force, constituting an “absent fullness”, they are representing that which is negated by the repressor. Nonetheless, we cannot know what this fullness is. Since all of the differences among the small actors have been negated, there is nothing to represent the wishes or claims of the particular needs. Let us say that we cannot perceive this; there is no way of uniting the thought of the chain of equivalence with the logic of internal difference. Still, there is representation. We can still think of this group of equivalently oppressed small actors, but this representation is not a “pure” reflection of what they are. Instead, we can see that the representation is just one

component from within the chain of equivalence, and the small actors are not rightly represented. There is one problem here. Laclau asks himself why it is that some of these representations, for instance that all oppressed groups are poor, weak or feminine, gain universal status (Laclau 1996b:42)? It is not the case that all the oppressed actors in the world have one thing in common, for instance belonging to the working class, but still, we have these very sedimented notions that this is actually the case. This is puzzling; if none of these characteristics is predetermined to fill this empty signifier, how come some, rather than others, do?

Laclau's answer to this question is that we have an "unevenness of the social" (Laclau 1996b:43). This means that, even though we tend to equalize the small actors, they are in fact different, which is based on an essentially non-egalitarian logic. Laclau compares this with Hobbes, who, in order to make his state of nature possible, had to assume equality among men. Laclau, on the other hand, says that the particular struggles of the small actors are not equal in their capabilities, and they never will be. He does not, however, want to be associated with more traditional trails of thought, arguing that we have structural inequalities. Laclau could admit that there is inequality, but this is not predetermined. Rather, the process of who is more or less powerful is contingent.

Then we find ourselves in a situation where one particular interest lends its particular content to the representation of the whole chain of equivalence. This is what Laclau calls the hegemonic relationship (Laclau 1996b:43). Thereby, this specific interest claims to be the interest of all the particulars; *it strives to be universal* (Laclau 2001:12). If we compare this with real life, we can see that the quest for order is something, which makes hegemony possible. Order in itself is, for Laclau, also an empty signifier. Our main concern is the presence or absence of order, as opposed to the content of this specific order. This is very important, and this is why empty signifiers matter to politics. If we have a societal situation, and it is not predetermined who or what is going to govern the situation, then we can have different political forces striving to fill the empty signifier. They want to reach a position in which their particular want represent the total constitutive lack of all the particular wants; "to hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function" (Laclau 1996b:44).

In other words, since we have this constitutive lack, since we cannot govern all of our identity, we also make room for someone to try and represent this absence; this is hegemony.

Hegemony can also be attributed to such terms as revolution, liberation, or unity; they are all aspects of the same phenomenon.

“Any term which, in a certain political context becomes the signifier of the lack, plays the same role. Politics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers.” (Laclau 1996b:44).

What is important to understand here is that hegemony is fluid. It is constantly moving and transforming, and is by no means given beforehand. Hegemony has its own logic and is not predetermined in any way (Laclau 2000:283).

Laclau makes the example of a worker’s struggle. The worker could then succeed in making this particular claim a “universal” claim for liberty. That specific claim and struggle of the worker gets to represent liberation in general. What happens next is that this struggle for liberation is, because it is supposed to represent all liberation, emptied of its content, so as to fit all struggles. What we witness, then, is the success of hegemony, diminishing the initial struggle and claim of the worker.

To make the concept of hegemony more clear, and to elaborate on the concept of the subject discussed above, we return to social antagonism. When we talk about how the identity of a subject is repressed, then what do we refer to? For Laclau, this is not as straightforward. First of all, we have to state that the subject is never fully realised. In *Hegemony and Socialist strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe basically equated antagonism with dislocation, and connected it with the underlying reason for the impossibility of society. This meant that:

“...antagonisms are not internal but external to the social; or rather they constitute the limits of society, the latter’s impossibility of fully constituting itself.” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:125).

This was, however, revised, since in 1990, Laclau describes social antagonism as a “discursive response to the dislocation of social order” (Laclau 1990:17). This means that social antagonism is not, as before, the reason for the impossibility of society, but it is more of an outside, which negates the inside. This means that our identity, our claims and struggles, are never objective. We can never say: This is our claim, and nothing else. It is never fully defined. What happens is that there is a negating force, the antagonistic force, which prevents us from fully realizing ourselves. Social antagonism can have a two-fold result. In one way, it



prevents us from reaching our full identity, but in another, we have one identity because of social antagonism. We can compare this with the case of the repression of black people in South Africa. On one hand, the repression was a negation of the identity of black people, since they were limited in several ways. On another, this repression and antagonism also created unity among black people to fight the repression, and their lack of identity became an identity in itself (Torfing 1999:131). This is hegemony; equating the interests of blacks, Hispanics, or any other ethnic group searching for liberty, as to later empty their interests of content.

There are many other interesting examples of hegemony, when something is missing and a particular tries to represent the missing content, presented by Laclau (1999:135). For instance: In the immediate post-war period in Italy, there was a general sentiment that the Fascists had succeeded with the revolution that the Communists had failed to perform. This is of course quite surprising, since the claims of the Communists are quite different from those of the Fascists. The reason for this was that, at that time, revolution for the Italian people simply meant to re-found the Italian state, but who did it and how was not important. This meant that revolution represented a fullness of society, but right then, the fullness was lacking. Then this could be taken up by any particular: the Communists or the Fascists, and they could perform the hegemonic operation.

Summa: Because of the impossibility of identity and society, the constitutive lack and antagonism, there is a possibility for hegemony. Since we have a non-sutured social space, the antagonist can colonize this, and in the hegemonic operation, this can change our claim, and therefore prevent us from realizing ourselves. Here, Laclau has done a very impressive and influential job in connecting political theory with anti-foundationalism. The theory of hegemony is very political, and applicable to many different situations of oppression etc. However, it does not end here, but I would like to continue talking about Laclau's views on especially emancipation, since this is a central theme in Marxist theory, and has also followed into Laclau's own works. Emancipation is also very interesting for this paper, since we are then deeply entwined with political matters.

### **Universality and emancipation**

Now, having explained Laclau's view on hegemony, and how the very presence of empty signifiers matter, I think it is important to note that this theory looks quite different in practice than the thoughts of other post-structuralists. If we, for instance, consider the concept of

emancipation, central in Marxist theory, Laclau has developed his very own view on this matter.

In the *Emancipation(s)*, a collection of essays written by Laclau in the 90's, we can follow his thoughts on how the subject operates in relation to the world. First of all, Laclau states that emancipation does look different from before. For him, emancipation is something a state or situation where we have “no room for any relation of either power or representation” (Laclau 1996b:1). In other words, there is no external power governing us. This, however, has transformed over time. Through the transition from essentialism into a more-uncertain view on the political, we can also allow for more forms of emancipation. For Laclau, there are several forms of emancipation, and I will look closer at a few of them.

On one hand, we can conceive emancipation as something, which indicates a total break from what has been going on before. We have no relation to what has been going on before, and we have broken completely free from those forces preventing us from being what we really are (Laclau 1996b:2). Laclau calls this form dichotomous emancipation. Later on, we will also connect this with “pure” particularity. On the other hand, we can have a form of emancipation where we make a change, which is still based on the situation that we had before. We are then breaking off from the past, but what we are transforming into is influenced by what we are breaking off from (Laclau 1996b:4). Here, we could perceive some kind of universal present, something which follows our social order from one version to another. Now, why is this important? Laclau wants to argue that none of these forms of emancipation are viable since both of them are logical contradictions.

I will not recapitulate all of the argument here but focus on how emancipation, as described by the Enlightenment philosophers, has a hard time making sense. This is what Laclau refers to as a grounded emancipation. During the Enlightenment, emancipation, as well as many other aspects of social life, became subject to rationalization. This means that there is a rational way of doing things, and rationality is something that we can conceive, which makes it a universal claim (Laclau 1996b:4). Concerning a rational break from the past:

“The difficulty, however, is that if the founding act of a truly rational society is conceived as the victory over the irrational forces of the past – forces which have no common measure with the victorious new social order – the founding act itself cannot be rational but is itself utterly contingent and depends on a relation of power. In that case, the

emancipated social order also becomes purely contingent and cannot be considered as the liberation of any true human essence.” (Laclau 1996b:4)

The quote above illustrates how neither the ground version of emancipation, nor the dichotomous one, is compatible with the notion of an essential rationality. This leads us to consider how this incompatibility can affect our understanding of the particular and the universal, and how these constitute our society. Historically, we can say that these two versions of emancipation, dichotomous and ground, have represented two non-conciliatory poles; the ground version advocating the objectivity of the social, and the dichotomous version wanting to show the inevitable chasm of emancipation (Laclau 1996b:5).

However, this historical gap between these views is also the reason to why we have a discourse on emancipation in the first place. Laclau argues that in order to understand emancipation, we have to make use of both of these perspectives. As of now, there are great difficulties in making sense of the social by referring to just one of them.

Let us discuss the question of why these extreme positions of emancipation are impossible. Laclau pairs the two forms, ground and dichotomy, with the concepts of universalism and particularism, respectively (Laclau 1996b:8). In a situation where we would embrace the ground perspective, we would say that there is one rational way of doing things, and that this way is objectively conceivable. This would result in a dangerous position where we would allow for one uniform, cohesive understanding of rationality and emancipation, and this could be seen as similar to Jürgen Habermas’ notion of how consensus is reachable. Such an understanding would, in this case, signify a eurocentric rationality imposed on the rest of the world (Critchley – Marchart 2004:6).

The dichotomy perspective, on the other hand, would be just as great a folly. Imagine a society, which believes that it can entirely enclose itself from its environment. This could be an ethnic group or a political system thinking that complete particular models are possible, for example. According to Laclau, the completely particular situation is just as essential as any universalism. For something to be particular, it necessarily follows that:

“Particularism is an essentially relational concept: something is particular in relation to other particularities and the ensemble of them presupposes a social totality within which they are constituted.”  
(Laclau 1996b:13)

The above illustrates Laclau’s take on why neither universalism nor particularism in their pure forms are suitable for social analysis. Then, the question of what we should do instead occurs naturally. For Laclau, the most important insight lies in the fact that we cannot perceive particularism without universalism, and that universalism is impossible. Hence, the two are mutually dependent instead of mutually exclusive. Even describing them as mutually dependent could be a risky endeavour, since that would assume two confined entities compared with one another, which is the case here. Instead, we have an attempt at a universal expressing itself through the particular (Laclau 1996b:14).

Based on this, Laclau draws a few conclusions:

1. “That the universal has no content of its own, but is an absent fullness, or, rather, the signifier of fullness as such, of the very idea of fullness;
2. the universal can only emerge out of the particular, because it is only the negation of a *particular* content that transforms that content in the symbol of a universality transcending it;
3. since, however, the universal – taken by itself – is an empty signifier, *what* particular content is going to symbolize the latter is something which cannot be determined either by an analysis of the particular itself or of the universal. The relations between the two depends on the context of the antagonism and it is, in the strict sense of the term, a hegemonic operation.” (Laclau 1996b:15)

Below, I will elaborate on how hegemony and antagonism are connected with this topic, but for now, let us focus on what this view on universality and particularity means for emancipation. To reach emancipation, which could be referred to as a political and social action, we are dependent on having a universal, but this universal is an empty signifier. As such, Laclau really does away with foundations, but nonetheless admits that the notion of a foundation, or a universal, is a necessity for society (Critchley – Marchart 2004:7, Marchart 2004). For Laclau, extreme particularism would be just as fatal for society as universalism, since it would create a Hobbesian war of all against all. Therefore, in order to be able to create

a functioning society, the universal, as a notion, must be present. Particular forces will always strive to make their particular the universal, but this will never succeed since the epistemological difficulties mentioned above prevents the universal from being entirely fixed, but we can only achieve partial fixation.

In this aspect, Laclau is not a clear follower of the other post-structuralist arguments presented in Chapter 2. They are oftentimes paired with particularism, which is quite justified given the prominence of contextualism. Laclau, on the other hand, breaks away from this. He argues that for us to be able to understand the social, we must consider the political as a third way between universalism and particularism. For him, the hegemonic struggle represents that there is a constant process in which the particular tries to define itself as a universal, even though a complete particular and a complete universal cannot exist (Laclau 1999:133).

### **Radical democracy**

What I have described above can still be regarded as the more theoretical side to Laclau's argument. This is, however, not the entire picture. From the deliberations and discussions above, Laclau also continues into the more empirical world, and how politics is to be understood today. This is represented by radical democracy, which I will describe below.

First, let us return to the basic understanding of what democracy is. If we recall the argument of Jacques Rancière in Chapter 2, we could understand democracy as the absence of a title to govern, a situation which differs from other forms of government, but also embodies a special form of political theory, where we have no fundamental justification of governance to rely on. In a democracy, you are not better or worse suited to be a governor than the person next to you (Rancière 2006).

This whole notion of democracy is based on equality. For us to be able to have this open field of governance, we have to admit that we are equal before the system. If we do not believe that there is one person by birth destined to govern us all, then we need a different kind of system to make this decision. This system includes decision and deliberation. Laclau refers to, for instance, a Habermasian understanding of consensus and democracy, a theory which is based on (at least potential) equal opportunity to take part in public deliberation (Laclau 2004:296).

This is where the main argument of radical democracy lies. If we take the discussions described above into account, decision and deliberation are only possible if you have a full

identity. Therefore, our notion of democracy cannot circulate around public deliberations between equals, but it must recognize the constitutive lack both in society and in individuals.

The initial concept of radical democracy was described in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but the implication relying heavily on that specific conjecture is that the book is co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, who, in this regard, has a very different standpoint. There, the concept of radical democracy emanates from the recognition of incommensurability between socialism and democracy. The main revelation in this argument is that, even though the liberal democratic system attempts (or aspires) to provide a common discourse for emancipation, this has failed. Resistance against oppression is not graspable in its entirety, but it can always change (Laclau – Mouffe 2001:152).

The whole concept of radical democracy rests on the existence of a social field constituted by hegemony, and that we have realized that we cannot live in a world that is either entirely universal or entirely particular. The discussion on present forms of government and governance rise again when Laclau opposes the Enlightenment universality, but also the post-modern context dependence. Since Laclau, as described above, would like to suggest a middle way, this is radical democracy. He thinks it is “urgent that progressive intellectuals understand the logic of hegemony and the nature of the hegemonic struggle” (Laclau 1999:130). One important point is that the present state of affairs is not correct, or at least not the descriptions of it.

“Once you have a society in which you have a multiplicity of cultures, demands, interests, and so on, how do you combine them in a way that is compatible with the defense of their particularity? This is the problem of democracy today, so in some sense we are the antipodes of the classical theory of democracy.” (Laclau 1999:143)

In Laclau’s later works we can imagine radical democracy being a political regime, a political actor, or perhaps a plurality of actors? For Laclau, it would be quite unlikely that radical democracy would be all of this at once. If we consider democracy a political regime (which is quite common), we can see it as different institutions guaranteeing certain values and freedoms (universal suffrage, freedom of expression etc.). This is a common notion of democracy, but it has been criticized for being overly formal. Its democratic character emanates from the universal application of those values, but does the formal perspective really suffice to ensure their implementation? Just because we have a formal idea of freedom

and equality for all, this does not necessarily mean that it is actually the case. In that sense, the liberal democratic framework does not have to entail freedom and equality for all, but rather, most of the time; it functions with freedom and equality for some (Laclau 2005:259).

We can also conceive of democracy as a populist version. Then we would not only consider the procedural rules, but also the very actor that constitutes democracy, namely the people. The people are not only the ones that are represented in the electoral process, but also refers to those groups who are being denied universal rights, as advocated in a liberal democracy. With the popular notion, we widen the scope to include the “underdogs”, those excluded from democratic practices (Laclau 2005:259). But, for Laclau, these two versions of democracy are not sufficient to understand politics today. We also have to include the plural dimension.

In the plural dimension we find traces of the discussions on emancipation and difference above. We have seen how the hegemonic practices equated the needs and claims of the underdog. The plural version recognizes that the claims of the suppressed groups are indeed different, and only because of the empty signifiers do we think that their claim is in any way uniform. Radicalization of democracy can thus also be pluralism, which is necessary since a populist democracy does not guarantee the reflection of all democratic demands. This is also why we cannot have only one democratic revolution; however, we have numerous democratic revolutions, since the needs and claims of suppressed groups cannot be assumed within one sole understanding (Laclau 2005:260); we question universalization as presented by populist and liberal democracies. The issue with a pure pluralist perspective is that society as such becomes impossible. We cannot build a societal structure based solely on pluralism, since society needs some kind of common symbolic framework to function (Laclau 2005:261).

Then, with three dimensions of radicalization, have we covered radical democracy? We can start out by saying that none of these versions of democracy work merely on their own. We will have the issues of exclusion in a liberal democracy, of non-differentiation in a populist democracy, and of a lack of unity in the pluralist democracy. However, Laclau also says that these versions cannot work together, that they are incompatible. This incompatibility should nonetheless not be regarded as an insurmountable obstacle. Rather, it is this incompatibility that signifies the core of radical democracy.

“But it is precisely the impossibility of this subsumption that requires that the interaction between them is conceived as a *political* articulation and not as a *logical* mediation. *The undecidable character*

*of this interaction, the impossibility of conceptually mastering the contingent forms in which it crystallises, is exactly what we call radical democracy.”* (Laclau 2005:261, emphasis in the original)

For Laclau, the democratic revolution is going to be neither a liberal nor a pluralist one. Rather, it will be “based on the expansion of the logic of equality” (Laclau 1999:16). No longer should equality just regard citizenship or public relations, but also gender, ethnicity, etc. This is not done in a more classical notion of democracy, and it is something which Laclau calls for. However, we should remember that the democratic struggle, per se, is not universal. Laclau would never say that; this is what women/gays/ethnic minorities should strive for. We have to allow for a variety of interests.

An important point is that Laclau argues that democracy does not necessarily have to follow deconstruction of hegemony. However, if we start with democracy, then recognizing hegemonic relations will help us radicalize our democratic form of governance (Laclau 1996a:59). In other words:

“If the fullness of the community had found its *true* body, no democratic competition between forces attempting to incarnate that fullness would be possible” (Laclau 1996a:59, emphasis in the original).

This is a very important note. Here, Laclau links democracy with the very impossibility of society, saying that it is an expression of how we can never fully realize ourselves. This will thusly be a never-ending process, the democratic struggle.

“Undecidability and decision are the names of that ineradicable and constitutive tension which makes possible a *political* society.” (Laclau 1996a:59, emphasis in the original)

Bringing the threads together, there are, according to Laclau several issues with the present notion of democracy. If we consider a universal, populist, liberal version, this will fail to include people in its endeavour. If we, on the other hand, would aim for a pluralist, particularist democracy, this would end in the failure of the social, since there would be no common notion of society. Rather, for Laclau, the beauty with democracy, and then radical democracy, is the ability to recognize the tension in the social. This is also why democracy is possible in the first place; it is not predestined what the arrangements should be. That this



tension exists in the first place is due to hegemony and the constitutive lack of the social. And since these are inescapable, democracy should also account for these tensions. It is important to remember, however, that Laclau does not wish to provide a recipe of how this democratic revolution might look; this is impossible in itself. Laclau's outlook on democracy is thus not a pessimistic one. He does not agree with, for instance, Lyotard, about the postmodern death of democracy (Lyotard 1984).

### **Placement in the matrix**

In this chapter, I have presented the main thoughts and arguments of Ernesto Laclau. I started out by describing his connections to the linguists, and why language is so important to Laclau. It is indeed important, but for Laclau, the uncertainty of language serves mostly as a starting point for his further analysis. With a firm footing there, he moves on to how these uncertainties affect both individual identities, as well as society in general. For Laclau, there is an inherent constitutive lack in us and in society, which opens up a field for colonization. This field can indeed be taken over by an antagonist. What can happen then, is that the antagonist is a part of us, and changes our claims and wishes, oftentimes without anyone being aware of what is occurring. This is a hegemonic relation, when a particular claim tries to become a false universal. This transfers into the social and because of this immanent antagonistic presence; the social is only an attempt to hide the tension within the political. Because of this, we can neither have a universalistic nor a particularistic view on the political. We must realize that the particular interest is colonized by hegemony attempting to transform into a universal. This has vast implications for democracy, which has historically relied on a universal. According to Laclau, this has been in the wrong since the very possibility of democracy lies in the fact that we do not have a predestined governor. Radical democracy, on the other hand, admits to this schism or tension, and can get closer to the core of what democracy really means. Laclau, and many others interpret all of what has been presented above, interpreted as an anti-foundational political theory.

Table 3: Laclau's placement in the matrix.

	<b>Foundationalism</b>	<b>Anti-foundationalism</b>
<b>Epistemological</b>	Immediate epistemic justification possible Finite regression	Infinite regress argument Sellarsian dilemma Assertive representational content
<b>Socio-political</b>	Immediate normative justification possible There are normative grounds, on which we can build social theory (eg. Individual reason, equality of men, state of nature).	Expressions of counter-forces to foundationalism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Language</li> <li>- History/power</li> <li>- <b>Politics</b></li> <li>- <b>Laclau</b></li> </ul>

LACLAU:

- The linguist heritage
- Impossibility of Identity
- Impossibility of Society
- Hegemony
- Emancipation and universality
- **Radical democracy**

#### IV. CRITIQUE

In this chapter, I will consider and discuss the view of Laclau as he is presented in Chapter 3. What we have seen so far is a mere description and recapitulation of his argument, without any attempt at analysis. Therefore, I will now give my own opinion on how and if we can regard Laclau as an anti-foundationalist political theorist.

My goal is to return to the matrix. Laclau and many of his interpreters (Butler – Laclau – Žižek 2000; Grebe 2009; Norris 2006, Inston 2009) and followers place his argument in the anti-foundationalist political field. They argue, as we have seen in Chapter 3, that it is highly possible to both unite these two strands of thinking and to apply anti-foundationalist thought to political theory. In many aspects, I am very fond of this idea. I believe it to be natural regarding the pluralist and diverse world we encounter every day. Nonetheless, I see several difficulties in such enterprises, and we will talk about those in this chapter.

I will argue that I do not see it as abundantly clear that Laclau should be placed in the socio-political anti-foundationalist field. Based on the information presented in Chapter 3, I will go over Laclau's argument and its different parts, and discuss whether or not they can be regarded as anti-foundationalist or not. This will be done with reference to the categories presented in Chapter 2, about foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. My first point will be that there is a dualism present in Laclau's line of thought, something which I think is important to illuminate. My second point will be that this dualism can be largely explained with the two different dimensions in my matrix, the epistemological and the socio-political. I will also discuss what this dualism might mean to the theory in general, and if any changes are possible or desirable.

The structure will be similar to that of Chapter 3. I will first discuss the linguist heritage, and the difficulties of a pure identity, and the notion of society. Thereafter, I will focus on the political consequences of such an approach in discussing emancipation, universality, and, not to mention, hegemony.

The chapter will be concluded with a return to the matrix, and see if the placement of Laclau in the fourth field, socio-political anti-foundationalism, still holds.

### **Anti-foundational characteristics**

To start from the beginning, from my perspective, there are quite a few “truly” anti-foundational traits of Laclau’s argument. If we consider the characteristics of anti-foundationalism presented in Chapter 2, we concluded that this means having no “end point” in your analysis, no statements that are non-questionable. This is what we consider anti-foundationalism on an epistemological level, whereas on the socio-political level, we say that these epistemological impediments do not allow for essentialist statements about the social, and that we can see several expressions of the fluidity of social and political relations, for instance: in how language works, and how power relations are influenced by our selective idea of history. All these ideas aim at describing how it is inane to search for any totalizing, founding principles about the social and the political, and we can never justify any special political or social systems.

In many regards, Laclau follows this argument. He is strongly influenced by the post-structuralist argument that language is fluid, and that we cannot have any relational idea of concepts or words. We can see this in many of his works. His idea that we are in an ever-changing transition from elements to moments, and that this transition can never be fully complete is exactly in line with an anti-foundationalist argument. Laclau also follows the general post-structuralist trend in assuming the concept of discourse, and that this is also a sign of fluidity of social relations.

Another typically anti-foundationalist idea is that of representation. The claim that we can never have a “true” representation of either a word, concept, or identity, is very anti-foundationalist, in my opinion. However, these descriptions are quite similar to those thoughts presented by Derrida and Foucault. Foucault has, as we saw in Chapter 2, written extensively on discourse and power, and Derrida on language, deconstruction, and representation. There is more to Laclau’s anti-foundationalist argument than merely these classical post-structuralist ideas.

What is special for Laclau is that he takes these ideas of the fluidity of language and identity, and transfers them into the political realm. As I discussed in Chapter 3, on the primacy of the political over the social, he regards the uncertainty of language as an indication of how the political and social are constituted. In his view, the idea that we have uncertainty in our identities opens possibilities for the political in the first place, and the social is merely the sedimented stage of the political.

The anti-foundationalism also follows into the view on identity, antagonism, constitutive lack, choice and power exertion. For Laclau, since he argues for the concept of Antagonism, the anti-foundationalism of language has large consequences for the human being. Since there is no way that we can control ourselves entirely, or even conceive of our identity entirely, we are also subject to a constitutive lack. This lack, in turn, opens up for hegemony.

Hegemony, being the central term for Laclau, can also be interpreted as anti-foundationalist, and this is also his own account of it. Since this concept is also based on the incapability of fully realizing ourselves, we could consider it to be of an anti-foundationalist character. It does take into consideration that we have a anti-foundational outlook on the political. The concept of hegemony has been very crucial in placing Laclau in the anti-foundationalist camp within political theory. Here, we see a reason for why we might have those power relations and patterns that we do experience, but that these, as a matter of fact, are of an anti-foundationalist character. We can see that we have an unevenness of the social, but this is merely because we cannot perceive of an evenness of the social, in which everything would be relational, and there would not really be any type of conflict.

The concept of hegemony is also anti-foundationalist in that sense that it allows for all different interpretations of what a democratic or anti-oppression struggle might contain. Since we have empty signifiers in those parts of our claims that we cannot govern ourselves, and that we are subject to occupation by the antagonistic forces, we cannot at first say what the struggle will concern. This is of course vastly different from foundationalist political theories, where we can justify the existence of some authority based on some claim inherent in all human beings, or through some homogeneity in human reasoning (Cf. Hobbes and Locke Chapter 2).

For Laclau, it is quite different. He does not admit to any kind of essentialist claim about the democratic struggle. The interests and wills of the particular group are subject to change, and are, in addition, always subject to some antagonistic force. The very action in trying to describe a claim of a particular group in its totality is impossible. Now, having described how Laclau's theory can be interpreted as anti-foundational, I will move on to my main point in this paper: if there are elements in Laclau's theory that can be regarded as foundational.

## **Foundational characteristics**

Even though Laclau would probably never agree to it, I will argue that there are some foundationalist traits to his argument, especially the political parts of it. As I have said above, many of the parts are clearly anti-foundationalist, and this discussion of foundational elements is not a clear-cut case. If we want to look for any foundationalist characteristics in Laclau's work, let me return to the definition I presented in Chapter 2. There, I said that socio-political foundationalism incorporates some kind of unquestionable statement to give justification for a specific form of government or political action. In this sense we have two steps of a political justification: 1. The axioms and givens, and 2. These axioms and givens justify a special form of government. The axioms and givens also have to be located outside society and politics (Herzog 1985:20). So, for Laclau's theory to be politically foundationalist, he would have to express both of these dimensions.

### *Axioms and givens: The constitutive lack*

Let us start with the first one, the axioms and givens. Many have criticized Laclau's argument, and Andrew Robinson (2005) presents one of the critiques launched against him. Robinson is mostly concerned with how Lacanian political theory works. As we have said, Lacan is indeed an influence for Laclau, although their arguments are not identical. Nonetheless, in my view, the critique presented by Robinson against Lacan is also applicable for Laclau.

Robinson's main argument is that the constitutive lack, the fact that we can never fully realize ourselves, is treated as an essential ontology. We cannot really perceive Laclau's theory without the constitutive lack. For Robinson, the constitutive lack embodies an ontological claim, and also operates as a normative claim (Robinson 2005:1). His main argument is that social relations are always affected by antagonism, and that this is something inescapable. If so, then how is this different from any other political theory? For example, what of one calling upon the reducible presence of individual reason? Robinson claims that there is a resemblance between the concept of myth and that of constitutive lack. He argues that none of the anti-foundationalist political theorists can get away from the constitutive lack, and hence, this is not endorsing contingency, but merely presenting a new form of essentialism.

In many regards I agree with Robinson's critique, and I would like to elaborate on his point. In my view, another, similar, concern with Laclau's theory is something, which I would like to call the Urge. The urge is represented by the longing of Man not to be oppressed. The urge

is present in several parts of Laclau's argument, and is treated as a statement, which is unquestionable. I will discuss below if the nature of the Urge would suffice as a foundation, and also give examples of how this Urge expresses itself in Laclau's work.

For me, Laclau's theory would not work without the assumption of the Urge. Take, for instance, hegemony. In the concept of hegemony, we envision a situation where we have an interest from the antagonistic force of not letting the claims of the particular interest group to be heard or realized. For this to be a struggle in the first place, there has to be an assumption that this situation is undesirable. Without any type of desire for freedom, there would be no struggle.

The same goes for the concept of Antagonism. As described in Chapter 3, there would be no political scene at all without Antagonism. This is a crucial point for Laclau; that because of our constitutive lack, we have a political field, then, since political theory is dealing with how this political field should be handled, we can easily limit our analysis to those situations where we have antagonism and, ultimately, hegemony. Then, there are certain characteristics of this situation which are not left up for discussion.

“It is true that this is unavoidable in any antagonistic struggle; but if, at the same time, dichotomization is not truly radical – and as we have just seen in cannot be so – then the identity of the oppressive forces has to be in some way inscribed in the identity searching for emancipation.” (Laclau 1996b:17)

The mere fact that identity is described as a constitutive lack indicates that there could have been something else. Time and again, we hear of antagonism as something that prevents us from being ourselves, which really gives us the impression that we want to have control over ourselves, and not be occupied by some other force.

Laclau would probably say that, from the particular interest group, there are no essential claims. Well, there might be claims, but these claims are not representative of any type of true identity. Nonetheless, I would like to argue that, even if we do away with an essential identity, there could still be a claim, however non-essential it may be. And as a matter of fact, without the claim itself, there can be no theory of hegemony at all. So, what we do not deconstruct in this analysis is the very fact that there is a claim at all. There are several examples of this assumption in Laclau's analysis, where the presence of hegemony is not questioned.

“This understanding of hegemonic struggle as an *on-going and never-ending* process offers a cogent critique of the liberal dream of a fully reconciled society from which “all antagonism and power relations would have been eliminated”.” (Laclau 1999:132, emphasis added)

“Undecidability and decision are the names of that ineradicable and constitutive tension which makes possible a *political* society.” (Laclau 1996a:59, emphasis in the original)

In this quote, I think that it is quite obvious that the struggle is an assumption that we cannot do away with. One can also make different interpretations of it. In reading Laclau in general, there are also traces of a general resistance towards oppression. Even though Laclau would never say that we could live in a completely free society (he in fact argues the exact opposite), we still have an urge for living in a free society. In this discussion, his version of emancipation is highly interesting.

Emancipation, in my view, is just a reiteration of what was said above. Even though Laclau reaches a point in his analysis where it becomes impossible to conceive emancipation as we have before, there are still remnants of this “old-fashioned” thinking in his own works.

Laclau argues that we cannot have universalism, since this was a sign of eurocentrism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is certainly in line with the anti-foundationalist agenda. Then, he turns to particularism, which, in his eyes, is as bad as universalism since it assumes a total refrain from a society. Instead, we should imagine emancipation as something being not particular, nor universal, but always striving to be universal. This strive is again represented by hegemony, where the claims of the logic of equivalence tries to establish universality, where there is none.

What interests me with emancipation is that Laclau argues that we have to realize that there is no such thing as a universal, but neither is there a particular. The issue with this is that, for me, there are universals in Laclau’s analysis, namely the urge. If we would consider the Urge to be a Laclaudian universal, something, which only aspires at universality, then I do not understand how his theory would work. If we would think that the strife against oppression was only contingent and not a given, we could not argue that hegemony exists. For hegemony to exist, there has to be some kind of idea that things would be different, and this is something, which we cannot take for granted. And if we cannot take it for granted, then



Hegemony might be something, which exists only temporarily. Laclau does of course admit that Hegemony itself is not essential, but can we question the very presence of Hegemony? That it might not exist? In my understanding of Laclau's work, the answer is no. In his idea, hegemony is something never-ending and ongoing. Additionally, if we were to admit that there were situations without hegemony, these would be classified as apolitical. However, this would indicate that "the fullness of the community had found its *true* body" (Laclau 1996a:59), something that is impossible to Laclau, as we have seen in Chapter 3, on the impossibility of identity.

Nonetheless, there are several issues with the approach presented by Robinson, as well as with simply saying that Laclau is a foundationalist. In my view, it is necessary to distinguish between what I have previously referred to as epistemological and socio-political anti-foundationalism. Obviously, Robinson is bothered by the fact that the anti-foundationalist political theorists claim that there is no foundation, no root of the tree of knowledge, but they are still able to present their take on political theory. I have great sympathies with such an annoyance, but I believe that there is more to the story. Based on what we have said above about anti-foundationalist characteristics of Laclau's work, I find it hard to say that he would be an epistemological foundationalist. However, when discussing social and political relations, it is not abundantly clear that Laclau should be regarded as an anti-foundationalist.

Above, I have argued that there are factors in Laclau's argument, which we cannot do away with, axioms and givens. I interpret his work as being dependent on the constitutive lack, and on the urge against oppression and towards emancipation. These match with both of the criteria for a foundationalist statement, unquestionable and outside society and politics. The second criteria can of course be discussed, but if we would use Laclau's own definition of the political, we could say that hegemony and the constitutive lack as such are not subject to political debate. However, as we have said above, this is only the first step. The second step is that these axioms and givens about the state of things should justify one form of government or political action. Therefore, I now move on to Laclau's concept of Radical democracy.

### *Justification and Radical democracy*

The assumption of the ever-present hegemonic struggle also transfers into the more-practice-oriented ways of thinking about the political. As we have seen in previous chapters, Laclau has given us the alternative of radical democracy to succeed liberal and pluralist versions, as being the "real" interpretation of politics. In fact, democracy, and radical democracy, is the

only way we can perceive the hegemonic struggle. It is because of the constitutive lack that we have the political at all, and democracy is the very expression of this.

“If the fullness of the community had found its *true* body, no democratic competition between forces attempting to incarnate that fullness would be possible.” (Laclau 1996a:59, emphasis in the original)

This is an area where several thinkers have launched critique against Laclau, saying that there is a normative argument in his work giving special prominence to radical democracy.

One of these thinkers is Simon Critchley, who is very sceptical towards Laclau’s claim that his theory would be non-ethical. Critchley has written extensively on Laclau’s works, and on ethics in post-modernism in general. In Critchley’s view, there are both descriptive and normative claims in Laclau’s works. For instance, we have a description of democracy as sole the form of notion of government being explicitly hegemonic. Since all social relations are hegemonic, democracy is that form of government which admits to hegemony and reflects the contingency of the social (Critchley 2004a:115). What Critchley then attacks is what the difference is between hegemony and democratic hegemony. Since there, according to Critchley, is a political optimism, rather than pessimism, in Laclau’s work, there should be some kind of understanding of what political action “should” be (Critchley 2004a:116). Critchley asks why,

“if all decisions are political, then in virtue of what is there a difference between democratizing and non-democratizing decisions?”  
(Critchley 2004a:116)

Critchley says that there are two ways out of this question, both which are uncomfortable for Laclau. One answer is of course that democracy is more inclusive, egalitarian, etcetera. This is not really the answer Laclau gives, and this would mean readily admitting to a normative content. However, if one, like Laclau, answers that radical democracy, and democracy in general, is just a descriptive fact, then the criticism embedded in the theory of hegemony risks losing its edge. If there is no vital difference, then why should we criticize non-democratic societies, and why should radical democracy be mentioned?

David Howarth is also in agreement with Simon Critchley. He claims that in *Hegemony and Socialist strategy* (2001), as Laclau and Mouffe seek to incorporate contingency into radical

democracy, “the clear line between description and explanation, on the one hand, and normative evaluation, critique, and justification, on the other, is blurred” (Howarth 2004:270).

We might argue that Laclau’s argument is vitally different from that of foundational political theorists, since his claims are not essential moral claims. There, I would again like to refer to Simon Critchley (2004b; 1998), who argues that Laclau’s arguments are indeed normative, even though Laclau claims that this is irrelevant.

However, for Laclau, there is a distinction between what the normative and the ethical. His own theory cannot, he says, be strictly factual, since everything we say is part of a discursive interpretation, and to say that any statement is only empiric is just as bad as the Sellarsian myth of the given (see chapter 2; Laclau 2000). In other words, there are normative statements. However, this does not mean that Laclau thinks that his argument is foundational. For him, there is a sharp division between the normative and the ethical, in which the normative is compatible with anti-foundationalism, since this particular, just like any other statement, is a part of a discourse. The ethical, as an imperative, is not something that he advocates in his works (Laclau 2000:294). One could compare this with the analogy of form/content. It seems that Laclau understands the ethical as being a mere form that you can fill with normative content. This normative content, as such, is nonetheless not universal, but subject to the same constraints as the rest of his theory. So, in Laclau’s sense, there is no need to be afraid that his works would be normative, they indeed are, and this is not an issue.

However, one could question his distinction between the normative and the ethical. Simon Critchley has raised the question of the democratic society, and radical democracy, in relation to this distinction. Critchley asks, whether the ethical, since it could be compared to a hegemonizing universal, is present in all societies, or just in democratic ones? Based on Laclau’s assertion that democracy is the only type of government that recognizes the political, and thus hegemony, this is a fair question. If the answer is yes, the ethical is present in all societies then what use is there to speak of it at all, if there is no distinction in reality? If the answer would be no, on the other hand, the ethical is only present in democratic societies, we could sincerely question the alleged neutrality of the ethical (Critchley 2004a:121). This would then mean that a democratic society, again, gets primacy over non-democratic societies, which could hardly be considered a value-neutral statement, even on the ethical level.

There are also other difficulties with the ethical/normative distinction made by Laclau. He seems eager to deconstruct and question ethical statements, saying that there can be no “true” ethical content. The problem would then be that there is no corresponding practice for what he calls normative/descriptive statement. The critique waged against any universal ethical content, does not come up at all when discussing Laclau’s “descriptive” statements (Critchley 2004a:119).

I absolutely agree with Critchley and Howarth on these points. In my view, there is indeed a prominence of radical democracy argued by Laclau. If we take my previous argument into account, that the hegemonic struggle is ever-present, we can consider this to be the unquestionable statement that our justification rests upon. It is true that this statement refers to anti-foundationalism, but when put into practice, it gains the status of a foundationalist tool being able to justify a certain form of social relations: namely, radical democracy.

For me, there is an outspoken justification for radical democracy, and this is that radical democracy reflects the political nature of the hegemonic struggle. This is indeed why radical democracy could be, and is, considered superior to other forms of democracy, or rather, other forms of democracy are not really democracy, since they fail to recognize this condition for the political: hegemony and the constitutive lack. It does not require a specific content, but what it must do, which is the reason that liberal and pluralist democracies are not sufficient, is to manage to acknowledge the hegemonic struggle. In other words, we could consider radical democracy to be normatively justified, and a preferred mode of governance, since it does give room for such an uncertainty. In that sense, we are dealing with a political theory based on the very uncertainty of the nature of identity and society, but the result can still be regarded as a theory, which openly calls for the recognition of uncertainty and advocates a political climate doing the same. Is that much different from other, more foundationalist political theories?

In my opinion, it is not. I think that the anti-foundationalist political theory presented by Laclau only manages to be anti-foundational in certain dimensions. We could think of it as a three-step process. First, we have the epistemological approach negating any type of true knowledge. In the third step, we have radical democracy, which allows for all pluralist interests, and does not have any essentialist content. However, step 2 is a hiatus<sup>1</sup> in the anti-foundationalist triumph. For Laclau’s theory to be able to be political at all, he needs a

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<sup>1</sup> Hiatus: According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this indicates a „step wanting in a chain of proof; a gap in reasoning or evidence“ when discussing matters of logic (OED 2011).

moment where some statements are not questioned. There must be a moment when hegemony is not questioned, when the constitutive lack is not questioned. If so, then we can move on to an anti-foundationalist version of the political, and claim there is no need for foundations. In this sense, anti-foundationalism can be external and internal to Laclau's political theory, but it can never constitute its borders.

Then again, could we say that Laclau is of the exact same kind as, for instance, Hobbes and Locke? Is all of his theory to be deemed foundational because of the foundational hiatus? This is a difficult question. I believe that it is not possible to say that Laclau is either or. Rather, I want to iterate what I said above, that anti-foundationalism is external and internal to his argument. The argument is anti-foundational in the epistemological sense, and also when it comes to specific political action. However, the interpretation of the situation, the inescapable nature of the constitutive lack in the political, and the statement that only radical democracy accounts for the lack, indicates foundationalist characteristics. He is not foundational all the way, like Hobbes or Locke, but neither is he anti-foundational all the way. The attempted distinction between particular normative content and the ethical form is, as for Critchley, not valid for me either. I do not believe that the normative/descriptive should be exempt from critique and I do not think that Laclau's ethical is disjoint from normative content, since that would make the point of ethical analysis quite meaningless. If it is not, then Laclau's normative content can be transferred into an ethical imperative, which could then in turn justify specific forms of government, not unlike classical foundationalist political theories.

### **A revised placement**

In my opinion, the debate on Laclau, political theory and anti-foundationalism has been largely focused on whether or not Laclau is anti-foundational. I see this as problematic, since we can discern several dimensions within his argument. As I have described above, Laclau expresses very strong anti-foundational views in most of his works, this cannot be denied. On an epistemological level I therefore find it quite meaningless to argue that Laclau would be a foundationalist. What I have depicted above indicates that Laclau has a firm conviction in saying that knowledge and the nature of knowledge are neither essentialist nor foundationalist. Here, his argument is also in line with the post-structuralists and their understanding of how the uncertainty of knowledge shapes our world. These are, for me, expressions of an anti-foundational epistemology, since they do not say that there would be any kind of non-questionable statements, axioms. However, this is only valid when it comes to knowledge as such, and how anti-foundationalism expresses itself through the

impossibilities of identity and society. After that, Laclau departs from the socio-political anti-foundationalists described in Chapter 2.

However, for Laclau to be foundationalist, we would ideally want a claim referring to non-questionable givens and axioms, which would in turn justify one or another kind of governance. I see this as being both valid and invalid for Laclau. As I have mentioned above, I interpret Laclau's works as having so-called non-deconstructables, axioms and givens with which we cannot argue. Among these are the presence of the constitutive lack (however contradictory that might sound), and hegemony. However, these statements as such do not alone signify a foundational political theory. For me, this happens when these statements justify a specific form of government. This is also what happens when Laclau advocates and describes radical democracy. Then enters the caveat that radical democracy is not a specific form of government, and cannot justify or advocate any specific political action. Nonetheless, this absence of advocating a specific form of political action is superior.

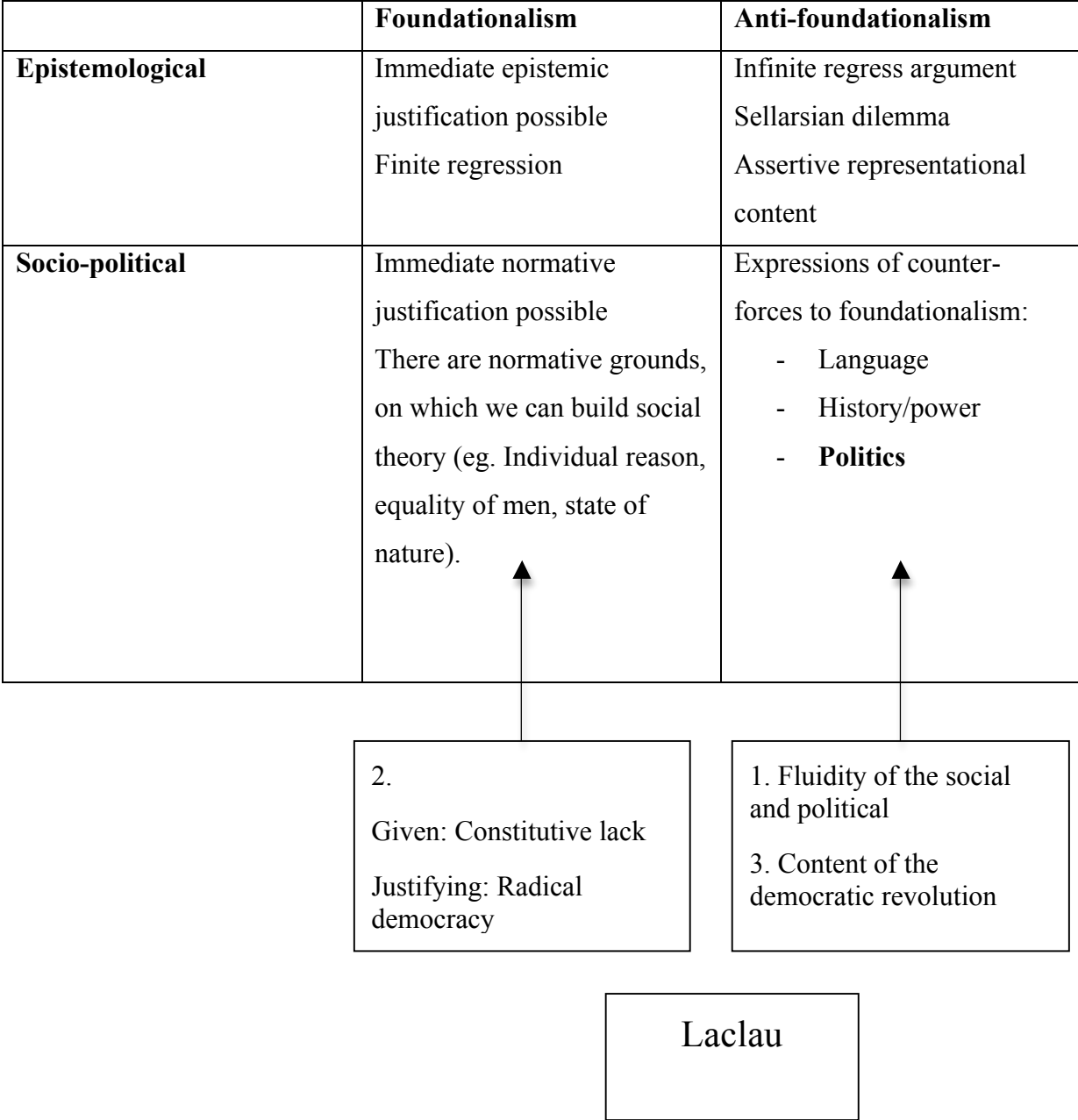
Therefore, I return to my three-step model to make sense of the foundations of anti-foundationalism. Radical democracy sets the scene for any type of government, and is in-and-of-itself based on claims of uncertainty. Nonetheless, for one short moment, it stops being anti-foundationalist, or else it would make its own existence impossible. Thus, I make the following points on Laclau's works.

1. The epistemological basis is *anti-foundational*. The ties are strong to the classical anti-foundationalist views on language etc. for instance the constitutive lack.
2. The description and institution of Laclau's theory is *foundational*. The constitutive lack is treated as a *given*, which *justifies* those forms of democracy recognizing the constitutive lack, and its consequences, hegemony and social antagonism. There is supremacy of this recognition, in opposition to not doing so. This represents a foundational hiatus in Laclau's theory.
3. The content of radical democracy is *anti-foundational*. Radical democracy cannot govern specific democratic revolutions, but admits to the anti-foundationalist epistemological constraints. However, the blueprint of radical democracy is always contingent upon the conditions set in step 2. Still, I regard step 3 anti-foundational.

With this, I return to the matrix below. Based on what I have said above, I place Laclau in both the foundationalist and anti-foundationalist socio-political field. When it comes to

epistemology, I also believe that Laclau is more anti-foundational than foundational, and this partly transfers into his socio-political views.

Table 4: A revised placement of Laclau



## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have built the argument that it is not abundantly clear that the works of Ernesto Laclau are anti-foundationalist; in fact, they are at times foundational. In this concluding chapter, I will make a brief recapitulation of the different parts of my argument. Thereafter, I will return to the discussion started in the introduction, namely what these findings can mean to the IR discipline, and why it is important for us to study foundations at all. I will also make some remarks on how this problem might be viewed in the future.

To make sense of anti-foundationalism and foundationalism, I constructed a matrix in Chapter 2. The matrix aims at distinguishing between what I call epistemological and socio-political foundationalism, and anti-foundationalism. The reason for constructing this matrix was that I argue that one can be an anti-foundationalist in one respect, but not in the other. To illustrate this, I gave examples from the literature on the different characteristics of prominent thinkers within each field: the possibility of finite regression for epistemological foundationalists, and the epistemological anti-foundationalists denying the very same possibility; how socio-political foundationalists use axioms and givens to justify certain political actions, and how socio-political anti-foundationalists deny any possibility for such axioms for social and political theory. Since Laclau positions himself in the field of anti-foundationalist political theory, I put extra emphasis on making this field clear. What we could see from the matrix is that Laclau does differ from many other anti-foundationalists in that he puts politics and the political as the main focus of analysis. Where Derrida focuses on language and Foucault on power, Laclau has a clear political profile. This is also the reason for why this paper is mainly focused on his works.

In Chapter 3, I described the argument of Laclau. We could see how he is strongly influenced by the “classical” anti-foundationalist arguments, but how he develops this into the realm of the political. The impossibilities of identity (the constitutive lack and antagonism) transfers into impossibilities of society. However, the argument continues onto hegemony and universalism, where we learn that there are forces always trying to utilize the empty space in the interest of making their particular a “false” universal. This is an omnipresent state. In response to this, Laclau describes a radicalization of democracy. His claim is that those notions of democracy now employed fail to understand this tension brought about by the constitutive lack. Liberal democracies, as well as pluralist democracies, are not “democratic” in the sense that they do not reflect the absence of a title to govern. Rather, a democracy is



built on that there is hegemony, for if we did not have antagonistic relations, there would be no need for a democratic struggle.

Laclau's arguments are analyzed in Chapter 4. I go back to the matrix and wonder if Laclau should be considered a foundationalist or anti-foundationalist political theorist. First, I can most certainly understand those arguing for the indubitability of him being anti-foundationalist. However, when I consider the foundational political theories anew, I discover that there are some similarities between them and Laclau's political theory. If we return to the definition of a foundational political theory, we see that there should be givens and axioms that justify a specific form of government. In my analysis of Laclau's work, I conclude that both are, to some extent, present in his theory. He treats the constitutive lack, and the urge against suppression, as a given without which his theory would not work. Next, I, by referring to the critique put forward by Simon Critchley, conclude that these givens also justify that form of democracy that recognizes the political nature of the social. Even though Laclau denies that there would be any kind of ethical imperative in his works, I still argue that one can interpret his views as such, since I do not agree with his division between the normative and the ethical. I argue that this is not a clear-cut case of a foundational political theory. Even though we have this founding moment, the content of Laclau's theory is anti-foundational, and so are the epistemological approaches adopted in it, and I express this by constructing a 3-step model for Laclau's theory. In this we can see that his epistemological assumptions as well as the content of radical democracy is anti-foundational, but that the founding of the theory is foundational, since it builds on axioms that are not up for discussion, and these in turn justify radical democracy.

There are several ways in which this research could be continued. Mostly, I consider three paths into further analysis, which also constitute improvements upon the present one:

1. I believe that the discussion of the ethical could be further elaborated. Laclau has, in later years, begun developing his notion of the ethical even further. This is not covered in depth in this analysis, but I believe that one could add another dimension to the matrix, namely the ethical. It would be interesting to make comparisons between ethical foundations and Laclau's argument, and to develop a clear framework for such an analysis. Critchley has also written extensively on the matter, where he argues that Laclau should adopt a primordial ethical experience, *à la* Levinas, in order to cover what Critchley calls the normative deficit in Laclau's theory (Critchley 2004a; 2004b).

This would of course be interesting, but is it necessarily compatible with anti-foundationalism as such?

2. Second, it would be interesting to perform this type of analysis for other thinkers placed in the anti-foundationalist political field. Even though Laclau is very prominent therein, I think that including names like Rancière, Mouffe, *et alteri* would benefit analysis and make the argument stronger (provided the same results were found). As of now, the conclusions drawn are only valid for Laclau, even though I suspect that similar results would be found within the works of other anti-foundationalist political theorists.
3. In continuation from the previous point, in a future study, one might more clearly separate between the social and the political. As of now, these are merged together, not providing the desired conceptual clarity. I see prominent differences between the more social anti-foundationalists (Derrida, Foucault), since they provide critique, but they do not talk about specific definition of, for instance, democracy. Nor can I discern any strong arguments for a specific form of political action. I believe this difference to be crucial, since it might be possible that any political anti-foundationalist theory has this difficulty, and I would therefore suggest the political and the social be separate.

Now, how is this relevant to political theory in general, and to international political theory in particular? The results of this paper are only valid for Laclau, but I still think that one can have a more general discussion on a more abstract level. If we were to say that anti-foundationalist political theory is foundational in its instituting moment, then much of the paradox of an anti-foundationalist political theory would be resolved. I believe that the three-step model constructed for Laclau would also benefit other anti-foundationalist analyses. If we can admit to some foundational element, we can also have a higher validity for anti-foundational claims in other aspects of our arguments; if we admit to the hiatus in anti-foundationalism, we can justify certain forms of political action adhering to anti-foundationalism, which in turn would strengthen the anti-foundationalist stand. The puzzle, how we can argue for an anti-foundationalist take on politics, would then be explained by the founding axioms; the supremacy of recognizing how anti-foundationalism is expressed in politics; the supremacy of realizing the limits of our own understanding.

Now, some might argue that there is no such middle path. Can we really pick and choose our foundations just like that? In my understanding, we have two paths to go down: First, we could deny the possibility of ever mixing foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. If so, then a purely anti-foundationalist political theory would not exist, as I have argued in this paper for Laclau's political theory. A purely anti-foundationalist political theory would then consist of nonsensical statements, since we could never justify anything, not even our own descriptions. On the other hand, if we were to allow for the mixing of the different strands, we would have a working theory, albeit inconsistent with itself. In the end, this thesis has been on foundations in political theory. The conclusion of this paper, that Laclau's political theory is not purely anti-foundational, affects how we might look upon his works. I do not believe that these findings necessarily need to hurt his argument; rather, they have potential for strengthen it, if we are honest with where we are foundational, and when we are not.

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## Declaration of original work

I hereby certify that this is my own work and that I am the sole author of this dissertation. I have made use only of those sources listed in the bibliography.

Bremen 4 July 2011

Emmy Eklundh