


10-2012

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Leonard (2012) "Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 2, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.2.1.1042>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol2/iss1/9>

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Review

Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left

Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. Verso: London and New York, 2000. 329pp.

Leonard Harris^{*}

Three concepts occupy each author: universal features of human nature, hegemonic social conditions, and social identities considered as universal kinds. The authors present their individual views and note where they are in agreement and address differences. The result is an intellectual conversation among the authors that takes the reader through fascinating ideas and distinctions; ideas and distinctions that have continued to occupy the authors since the publication of their conversation.

Universality, for all three, “is not a static presumption, nor an *apriori* given, and that it ought instead to be understood as a process or condition irreducible to any of its determinate modes of appearance.” Usually authors present a set of binaries, such as social identities as natural vs. identity as constructed or standpoint epistemology vs. absolutist epistemology. They then proceed to show how each position fails to capture important features of its opposition. Butler proceeds in a very different way. Butler posits the incomplete social subject: “You call me this, but what I am eludes the semantic reach of any such linguistic effort to capture me.” There is no cohesion of particulars creating an abstract universal subject with an undifferentiated identity; no final end to the “I” that

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we construct which matches a pure uncomplicated singularity. At the same time, hegemonic and hierarchical structures are not fixed. We are, in effect, constantly confronted with a world in flux. “I,” in effect, is never identical to my complex being and hierarchies are experienced within a particular location making “universal experience” itself a misnomer and a static human nature a philosophers illusion. Butler does not take the common naturalist approach of listing common features of alleged human nature such as the existence of desire, use of language or common social needs and then contending that some set of these features is invariably universal and thereby necessary. Rather, Butler's approach to each feature of ‘universality’ is to consider its possible complexity and transgressions.

Laclau interrogates the idea that universality must necessary be a function of ahistorical essentialism. Laclau considers the possibility of conceiving of universality (of nature, condition and identity) as a process or an on-going becoming rather than an ahistorical given that we have discovered. Laclau wants to avoid radical historicism, particularism, and relativism as well as a transcendentalism and absolutist views of the universal. A search for concepts avoids the problems with the way these ideas fail—they are too narrow—is recommended. Laclau does not offer a final solution to the pitfalls of relativism vs. absolution but leaves open discourse. However, his picture of social identity is one of an “empty but ineradicable place.” That is, it elides toward being universal (common), but never achieves the goal; simultaneously, its instability is sacrificed to be an actor. Empty signifiers (particulars) are nonetheless actors. That is, as Laclau puts it, “the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former.”

Whether or not a subject can be effective if the subject sees itself as ironic is of particular interest to Žižek. The situation that he considers is this: can a subject that defines itself as ironic be an effective social actor? In addition, Žižek considers the social position of the ironic subject as a subject which is both outside the norm (because the norm is that most people have a stable identity) but simultaneously the ironic subject is establishing a new norm. Can a subject that knowingly represents ‘universal’ positions as opaque and knowingly creates new norms that it wants knowingly to eventually negate as oppressive have the kind of certitude needed to be an effective social actor?

Žižek departs from Butler and Laclau by promoting global social change and rejecting the idea that we should focus on local and partial social solutions. That is, the

recognition that human nature is not static, that identities are not universal unchanging givens and that social conditions (including the character of hegemony) are variegated does not warrant an inference justifying the loss of hope for global, albeit, universal social change.

This, in my view, is where the rubber meets the road.

If considering the character of contingency, hegemony and universality is intended to tell us something about the epistemic condition of having invariably contingent identities and natures, while simultaneously telling us we are ensnared in the need to represent social standpoints as worthy of warrant (partial or universal), it is not unreasonable to evaluate the practical implications of these views. The implication for Butler and Laclau is standpoint left critique; the implication for Žižek is to maintain a search for universal (as in global) social transformations that negate the existence of capitalism because it is a prime source of human misery.

There are numerous discussions of Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, and Derrida by all three authors. However, it is fairly clear that differing interpretations of their ideas does not situate the primary source of the disagreement between the authors. That disagreement is a function of, arguably, primal beliefs about Lenin's "What Should be Done" in relationship to what we should do about the kind of hope we should have for the future and the kind of agency we should warrant. Should we hope for global change and warrant social activism intended to create that change or should we hope for change within particular terrains of struggle against variegated forms of hegemony and eschew activism that intends to transform the globe?

The promoting of a 'conversation' by *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* as a way to present common orientations and express differences is a welcomed approach. The 'conversation' approach stands against the adversarial tradition of didactic argument, counter argument and belittling of the 'other' as irrational, unenlightened and deeply misguided. However, the authors proceed as if the readers are experts on Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, and Derrida and interested in their relatively unimportant disagreements about them. Because of this, the book often reads as if the authors intend to talk to themselves in a way that ignores the reading audience.

The book opens up questions that require serious consideration but Žižek never presents a substantive picture of what a future 'utopia' should look like and Butler and Laclau assume that working against hegemony in particular battles is somehow

meaningful given that even hegemony is not universally experienced by persons with different identities. In addition, the subject posited by Butler and Laclau, it seems to me, borders on being disingenuous if it is in the constant position of demanding we act as if some principle or social solution is warranted while simultaneously contending that our actions mislead us to think that our actions are worthy of being treated as if it were universal. What kind of emancipation is it that leaves the subject as insecure as it was before emancipation? Žižek's subject seems committed to a future and a form of social activism that requires the kind of certitude he also warns against.

Readers of this work will have an appreciation of an earnest intellectual discussion of universality and also what Butler, Laclau, and Žižek have continued to interrogate.