PART ONE: CRITIQUE
CHAPTER 1

ARGENTINA, 1972: CULTURAL STUDIES AND POPULISM

The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence. It follows, incidentally, that any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of “legitimating discourses,” which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies.

--Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice

En la Argentina todos los hombres son lo que son pero rara vez son lo que parecen. A nuestro país no se lo puede conocer a través de los poderes visibles sino de las fuentes--siempre disimuladas y subterráneas--que alimentan esos poderes.

--Tomás Eloy Martínez, La novela de Perón

Hegemony theory has become the ubiquitous common sense of cultural studies. This first chapter is a critique of both by means of an examination of their shared populism. After defining and historicizing the field, I embark on a close reading of the Argentine theorist Ernesto Laclau, whose version of hegemony theory is the most fully developed and influential for cultural studies. Laclau’s definition of hegemony is embedded in a series of reflections on populism, especially in his earliest book, Politics and Ideology in
Marxist Theory, and in his latest, On Populist Reason, I trace the development of Laclau’s theory, showing how from the start it simply mimics the logic of populism. Laclau sets out to differentiate between a left populism and a populism of the right, a distinction that would be essential for cultural studies to make good on its political pretensions, but ultimately he fails to establish such a difference, even to his own satisfaction. I then move to the relationship between populism and the state, and show, again through a reading of Laclau, how hegemony theory and cultural studies alike repeat the populist sleight of hand in which a purported anti-institutionalism in fact enables the state apparently to disappear. Hegemony stands in for politics, and screens off the ways in which states anchor social order through habituation, under the cover of a fictional social contract. Throughout, in counterpoint, I offer an alternative account of the Argentine Peronism from which Laclau’s theory stems.

Defining Cultural Studies

Cultural studies resists definition. As Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg state in the introduction to their landmark collection Cultural Studies, “it is probably impossible to agree on any essential definition or unique narrative of cultural studies.” Cultural studies is, they continue, “a diverse and often contentious exercise, encompassing different positions and trajectories in specific contexts, addressing many questions, drawing nourishment from multiple roots, and shaping itself within different institutions and locations.” But cultural studies’ fluidity, they argue, is also its strength. Indeed, flaunted and celebrated in their description, its diversity is portrayed as essential: “Cultural studies needs to remain open to unexpected, unimagined, even uninvited possibilities. No one can hope to control these developments” (emphasis
added). Though they claim that cultural studies “cannot be just anything,” by stressing its uncontrolled mutability, Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg forestall efforts to define or delimit the enterprise that they are introducing.¹

Resistance to definition, however, is itself a defining trait: cultural studies is defined first of all by its mutability. This in turn accounts for a second characteristic: though it may not be pinned down by any one “unique narrative,” cultural studies is indeed narrated; it is a repertory of stories. In the words of Stuart Hall, a key player in the field’s development, “cultural studies is a discursive formation” that “has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories.” Moreover, Hall observes that telling the tale of cultural studies often involves “speaking autobiographically,” not so much to assume the authority of experience, as to invoke the inconstancy of memory and anecdotalism. “I’m going to tell you about my own take,” Hall recounts, “not because it is the truth or the only way of telling the story. I myself have told it many other ways before; and I intend to tell it in a different way later.”² As Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg put it, cultural studies is “constantly writing and rewriting its own history in order to make sense of itself, constructing and reconstructing itself in response to new challenges.” They claim that this means that “cultural studies is always contextual,” but it is better described as always contextualized.³ Cultural studies’ characteristic diversity demands metanarratives through which the story of its resistance to definition can be repeatedly replayed, re-emphasized, and redefined. For Richard Johnson, formerly the Director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, “cultural studies should be recurrently reinvented.”⁴ By definition, then, the metanarratives of cultural studies have always to be declared incomplete: they imply ever new narratives, and the possibility that everything about the story they tell can be rewritten. Everything, that is, except its infinite openness to rewriting. So Nelson, Treichler, and
Grossberg can confidently predict the unpredictable: “It is fair to say, then, that the future of cultural studies will include rereadings of its past that we cannot yet anticipate.”

One story told about cultural studies begins in 1950s Britain, and with the literary critic Richard Hoggart, the historian E. P. Thompson, and, above all, the critic and theorist Raymond Williams. Emerging from the British “New Left,” the publication of Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* in 1957, Williams’s *Culture and Society* in 1958, and then Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963 collectively heralded a new set of intellectual and political concerns. These authors broke from the condemnation of mass culture prevalent in literary studies, from a focus on the economic or on the elite in history, as well as from the orthodoxies of any established political party. Their small group of intellectuals and critics believed that “any political project for socialism had to connect with immediate experience or lived ‘culture’ of ordinary people whose action ought to count in politics.”

Putting culture and “ordinary people” at the center of political concerns, Hoggart, Thompson, and Williams proposed an expanded definition of culture (no longer simply high culture) as well as an expanded conception of politics (no longer simply formal politics). Culture is a “whole way of life,” Williams argued; it is also a “whole way of struggle,” responded Thompson.

Many early cultural studies practitioners were located at the margins of established institutions; discussion took place in new journals such as the *Universities and Left Review*. But in 1964 Hoggart founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, giving cultural studies an institutional base. The Centre, from 1968 under Stuart Hall’s directorship, trained a generation of graduate students and led cultural studies in new directions, especially in its heyday in the 1970s.
For instance, students undertook ethnographic accounts of popular and working class culture (such as Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labor*). The Centre pioneered studies of the mass media. There was increased attention to race and gender. Continental theory had a significant impact: first the work of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, disseminated through the *New Left Review* and the film studies journal *Screen*, changed and to some extent split the field; then, from the mid 1970s, readings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci had a decisive influence on Hall and the Centre. The late 1970s “*Screen* / Centre debate” pitted a psychoanalytic and poststructuralist “screen theory” against the Centre’s Gramscian and ethnographic “culturalism.”

By the 1980s, cultural studies was flourishing. Hall moved to the Open University, his work on Thatcherism, and then the politics of post-Fordism and postmodernism, reaching out to new, non-academic audiences. Cultural studies’ founders, such as Williams and Thompson, were now well-known. The Centre’s work attracted growing interest, and its former students were making a name for themselves in their own right. Interest came particularly from the USA: in the 1980s, cultural studies crossed the Atlantic. With its popularization and Americanization, much of its specific political context and rationale was lost. Also with its massification, the field became attractive to publishers, who put out increasing numbers of cultural studies texts, a far cry from the Birmingham Centre’s mimeographed working papers. This success caused some anguish, for instance for Hall who warned of the “danger in the institutionalization of cultural studies in this highly rarified and enormously elaborated and well-funded professional world of American academic life.” But if cultural studies became less immediately political in its discussions of postmodern culture and readings of Madonna or Rambo, it did give more formalist or ludic approaches to culture a critical edge that they had lacked. Talk of class and socialism may not have translated
easily to US environs. But the Gramscian concept of hegemony, especially as retheorized in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Social Strategy*, certainly did. American cultural studies soon spoke the vocabulary of power in terms of hegemony and counter-hegemony, resistance, transgression, and subversion.

Cultural studies is now global. Beyond the US, it spawned a distinctive strain early on in Australia, then also in other Anglophone countries. The late 1990s saw a *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, major international conferences of cultural studies in places such as Finland, and soon an *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and an “International Association of Cultural Studies.” There are journals or edited collections of Spanish Cultural Studies, French Cultural Studies, Latin American Cultural Studies, and more. And while the fervor of the mid 1990s may now have died down, if anything this is further evidence of institutional success: academic job adverts ask for expertise in cultural studies almost as a matter of course. The vocabulary of cultural studies has found a place in disciplines from literary studies to sociology, art history to anthropology. Cultural studies has even had its effects in the public sphere, not least thanks to a generation of undergraduate students who took up work in the media and advertising. The British art theorist Adrian Rifkin gives the example of the children’s television program *Teletubbies*, which he tells us is made by “people one had taught or had been friends of people one had taught or whatever. . . . One of the great achievements of cultural studies, if you like, is *Teletubbies*.”

It is easy to lament the decline and banalization of cultural studies: from *The Making of the English Working Class* to the making of *Teletubbies*. But a populist championing of the “ordinary” has always been at its heart. This embrace of the everyday has gone hand in hand with a characteristically populist suspicion of the academic institution. Richard Johnson, who took over at the Birmingham Centre after
Hall’s departure, recalls that “In CCCS, a distance from the academy was often linked with an affinity for other forms of knowledge and culture, especially with popular or ‘commonsense’ forms.”\(^\text{11}\) If there is any consistent thread in the history of cultural studies, it is its populist impulse. It is thanks to this populism that cultural studies has been so flexible, so hard to pin down, and therefore also so successful. Its populism has also helped provide cultural studies, even at its most celebrated, with an aura of embattled rebelliousness. In this chapter I examine the populism of cultural studies, and its effects. Through a critical reading of Ernesto Laclau’s influential work, I focus on the relation between hegemony theory and populism. And I show how the favored political conceit of a struggle for hegemony, far from being a mark of radicalism, in fact ensures that cultural studies remains blind to its own limitations and renders its purported anti-institutionalism vapid.

A specifically Latin American cultural studies is now in vogue, although still controversial. There is a Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies and there are various Centers and graduate programs in the subject, such as at the University of Manchester. Representative samples of the field include Mabel Moráña’s collection Nuevas perspectivas desde/sobre América Latina and Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo’s The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader. Here, concepts and references derived from US and UK cultural studies (and also from continental theory and postcolonial theory such as subaltern studies) meet a tradition of Latin American writing on culture that could be traced through figures such as Octavio Paz, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Angel Rama, and Roberto Schwarz or, earlier, José Carlos Mariátegui, José Enrique Rodó, and Domingo Sarmiento. This mixture is in some ways natural: cultural studies and the Latin American tradition of cultural reflection overlap in that both employ expanded conceptions of culture and politics. Cultural studies’ concern with hegemony resonates powerfully in a Latin American context where politics and culture have long been obviously intertwined. On the other hand, Latin American thought has also been preoccupied with issues less prominent within cultural studies, above all the question of national or regional identity. Moreover,
most Latin American intellectuals explicitly repudiate populism. This is the basis on which the Argentine Beatriz Sarlo, for instance, whom others often associate with cultural studies, in fact disowns it as a “neopopulism seduced by the charms of industrial culture.” But it is the provenance of cultural studies, the narrative that locates its origin in Europe or North America, that has raised most hackles. As the literary and political theorist Alberto Moreiras observes, resistance to cultural studies is framed as “a defense of the national or the regional order against an interference that could only be understood as neocolonial, since it emanated from a transnational space that was hegemonized by the US metropole.” What matters for its critics is not what cultural studies is, but where it comes from and its institutional implications. This explains the counter-intuitive fact that so many of those opposing cultural studies have been “intellectuals whose credentials as thinkers in the tradition of cultural studies are impeccable.” Moreover, and despite explicit repudiation, their resistance often repeats populist gestures, albeit in the service of what Moreiras terms “a sort of antipopulist populism” whose trait is a nostalgic investment in a long lost “national-populist state.” In short, the premise of Latin American resistance to cultural studies is a defense of national and regional tradition against unfamiliar and exotic imports, and a rejection of the metropolitan academy in favor of a broader range of writers and thinkers, that therefore ironically mimics cultural studies’ own valorization of the everyday and suspicion of the academic. No wonder the debate exhibits so much “babelic confusion.”

Latin American cultural studies can and should be the site of a more substantial encounter between the cultural studies tradition and a Latin Americanism that poses new challenges to that tradition. Latin American cultural studies should prompt a crisis and critique of both Latin Americanism and cultural studies. Such a Latin American cultural studies still has to be constructed. Moreiras’s work is one of the few indications of what such a double critique would involve; this book aims to be another.

Mutable and narrated, cultural studies is above all articulated. Hence its affinity with the theory of hegemony, which can be defined as at root a theory of articulation and its political effects. Articulation is both connection and discursive expression: articulated literally means “jointed” (as in an articulated lorry or truck), but it has come to mean “pronounced distinctly,” “uttered,” or “expressed in words.” Cultural studies
mutates precisely because its elements are constantly connected in new ways and to new positions and experiences; it establishes a sense of continuity as its various disjoint histories are narrated and so discursively expressed. It is no surprise, then, that cultural studies should so successfully endure, spread, and replicate: cultural studies is the very picture of hegemony itself. As the theorist and philosopher Simon Critchley explains, “the key term in the theory of hegemony . . . is the notion of hegemonic articulation.”

Hegemony, too, is “conjunctural,” in Grossberg’s words, a “struggle to articulate,” and “a matter of articulated relations” that “is never securely achieved.” Hegemony theory is concerned with the ways in which such discursive articulations bind, however tenuously, discrete units to form an ordered social whole. Hence critic Jennifer Daryl Slack’s concise definition of hegemony as “a process by which a hegemonic class articulates (or co-ordinates) the interests of social groups such that those groups actively ‘consent’ to their subordinated status.” Hegemony is a process of articulation, and cultural studies, narrativized as an articulated project, mimics the process by which hegemony is achieved, as cultural studies itself understands it. Cultural studies is itself, then, a “re-articulation of articulation,” a kind of second-order hegemony.

Cultural studies’ mimicry of the workings of hegemony is no accident: its practitioners often express their rueful admiration for the hegemonic projects they aim to contest. Cultural studies manifests an ambivalent regard for the successes and attractions of the modern and postmodern culture industries. The cultural studies critic is often dancing in spite of him or herself. Grossberg takes to task “critics [who] often ignore popular culture’s immediacy, its physicality, and its fun: its very popularity.” Cultural studies wants to be like the customary objects of its critique: it wants to be popular, as they are; it seeks to become hegemonic. Some critics introduce a concept of “counter-hegemony” to suggest that the hegemony that cultural studies (or the left)
desires is distinct from the hegemony it opposes. Richard Johnson, for instance, conjures up the notion of a “political, critical, or revolutionary consciousness or counter-hegemony, a universal or expansive opposition by which subordinated majorities transform the social order.” Johnson invokes Gramsci, but in fact the Italian theorist never uses the term “counter-hegemony.” There is no counter-hegemony, opposed to hegemony; it is but another version of hegemony, another appeal to the popular.

However much cultural studies envies and mimics the hegemony that it claims to oppose, Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg insist that it is a political enterprise as well as an intellectual one, and that it is located firmly on the left. They quote approvingly media critic James Carey’s judgment that cultural studies leads “to a revolutionary line of political action or, at the least, a major project of social reconstruction.” For a disenchanted, post-Marxist West, cultural studies inherits Marxism’s position as social conscience of the academy, and as inspiration for struggles beyond it. Yet cultural studies rejects Marxism’s focus on the working class, and on the whole gives up on revolution in favor of Carey’s “social reconstruction.” The turn from Marxism is more pronounced now that cultural studies has become (itself) popular, and as it has become institutionalized especially in the United States. Cultural studies is therefore post-Marxist in two senses: it draws on Marxist categories (ideology, commodification) and theorists (Gramsci, Althusser); but it also replaces Marxism as the academy’s pre-eminent radical theoretical and critical perspective. Populism replaces Marxism, as though one were the natural continuation of the other.

Alongside a critique of cultural studies and hegemony theory, in which I emphasize their shared populism, in this chapter I examine what is perhaps the most successful populist movement of all time: Peronism. There have been few if any political movements with more popular appeal. For over half a
century, Peronism dominated Argentine political and cultural life; arguably, it still does. Its founders, Juan and Evita Perón, continued to exert enormous influence even long after their deaths, in 1974 and 1952 respectively. Indeed, especially in Evita’s case, but also during Juan Perón’s long exile from 1955 to 1973, their cultural importance was only accentuated by physical absence. Yet Peronism remains in many ways an enigma, a phenomenon hard to pin down. As historian Robert Crassweller states of Perón himself, “the parade of Peróns is endless.” Crassweller adds that “one is tempted to conclude that . . . he was many persons—and therefore none.” Likewise the movement he founded: Peronism has been variously located across the political spectrum, from fascism to revolutionary socialism; Peronism’s economic policies have included both classic protectionism and (with Carlos Menem, Argentina’s president from 1989 to 1999) market-driven neoliberalism. In tune with this mutability, Peronism has been endlessly narrated, in a plethora of styles and hues, from Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares’s “La fiesta del monstruo” to Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s internationally successful musical Evita.

There is no single good history of Peronism. A decent introduction is in Luis Alberto Romero’s A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century, while the best source for Perón’s first presidency is probably Félix Luna’s three-volume Perón y su tiempo. An army colonel, Perón came to prominence as Secretary of Labor in the military government of 1943 to 1945, a position from which he cultivated the unions and the workers’ movement. Forced to resign and arrested in early October 1945 by an army leadership concerned about his growing popularity, Perón was freed after a multitudinous demonstration in his favor, on October 17. But this demonstration did more than just free Perón; it is Peronism’s founding moment and, in Romero’s words, “inaugurated a new way of participating in politics through social mobilization.” In power, after elections in 1946 which Perón won handsomely, Peronism was characterized by assiduous cultivation of its popular base, often through mass rallies and the rituals of mobilization, but also through policies directed at ensuring full employment and an improved standard of living for the regime’s working class base. Perón’s (second) wife, María Eva Duarte, or Evita, became the movement’s figurehead and mediator. Evita was adored by a working class who identified with her “plebeian voice,” but vilified by a “polite society” for whom she symbolized all that was barbarous in “the regime’s demagogic excesses.” Evita died, young, of ovarian cancer in 1952. Amid escalating conflicts with the Church and the Army, Perón was
overthrown and exiled in 1955. For almost two decades, successive governments (military and civil) attempted to extirpate his memory from Argentine political culture. But Peronism’s social base remained strong, and in fact expanded in the late 1960s as a generation of young radicals pursued revolutionary third-worldism in its name. Faced with growing social tensions, the rise of armed groups, and economic crisis, the government of General Alejandro Lanusse called for elections in 1973 and lifted proscriptions on political activity, paving the way for Perón’s triumphant return. Perón’s second presidency, however, was a failure. After a brief truce, violence flared up again and the Peronist movement started to tear itself apart. Perón died in 1974 and his third wife, Isabel, became president. But she failed to curb the crisis, and was deposed in the 1976 coup that ushered in a murderous military regime that would last until 1983. The first post-dictatorship government was led by the Radical Party, but Peronism returned to power, albeit in rather different form, with the neoliberal president Carlos Menem from 1989 to 1999, and with a succession of administrations from 2001. As of 2009, Argentina’s current president is also a Peronist: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

Peronism, too, is the very picture of hegemony. Its long-lasting ability to secure popular consent contrasts starkly with the coercion employed by Argentina’s various military regimes. More than that: Peronism is the model for hegemony in that Ernesto Laclau’s theorization of the concept of hegemony emerges from his analysis of Peronism. As Simon Critchley acknowledges, “Ernesto in English sounds like high theory. But Ernesto’s theory is highly dependent upon the dynamics of populism in a South American context, obviously in Argentina—of which he has a perfect intuitive understanding.” Given the importance of the concept of hegemony, above all Laclau’s formulation, for cultural studies, a detour through Peronism maps out what I have elsewhere called a “secret history of cultural studies.”

Reaching out to the global periphery but touching at the very heart of cultural studies, this secret history reframes hegemony theory. Yet in this chapter I also question the extent to which the theory explains even Peronism. Critchley’s comment that Laclau’s is an “intuitive understanding” of populism already indicates another approach. Instead of seeing it as a matter of hegemonic articulation, Peronism’s hold is better attributed to the way it organizes intuition, instinct, and affect. Rather than an articulate appeal to ideology, Peronism is better understood as the institutional inculcation of habit.
Cultural studies, hegemony, populism: these are slippery terms. But they are slippery in similar ways and for similar reasons. They are also circular: cultural studies turns to hegemony theory so as to secure its sense of radicalism, and so to ward off the accusation of populism; but it occludes the fact that its theory of hegemony is premised on populism. Cultural studies has been elaborated around a populist desire (and a populist anxiety) that is at times repressed, at times expressed, but seldom theorized. Any theory of populism has been blocked by cultural studies’ own populist impulses. In the rest of this chapter, by means of a close reading of Ernesto Laclau’s theory of hegemony, I pursue the question of cultural studies’ populism, to pin down both populism and cultural studies. Laclau articulates the problem and challenge for cultural studies: to produce a theory and critique of populism; and to distinguish its political impulse and strategies from those managed by the state, by constituted power. I argue, however, that in the end Laclau, too, elides the question of the state, falling into the populist trap of substituting culture for the state, and hegemony for any other conception of politics.

Jim McGuigan, one of the few critics to consider the relation between cultural studies and populism, argues that “a non-populist cultural studies is very nearly a contradiction in terms: it is an academic game which might do better calling itself something else.” He suggests that “the field of study is unintelligible without recognition of its populist impulses.” But a consideration of the consequences of cultural studies’ populism does more than merely explain an academic movement that happens to be currently in vogue. It is also a step towards investigating the structure of the social field, and the relation between culture and politics more generally. For while cultural studies has become the vehicle for intellectuals looking to reinvent a certain image of the left, oppositional and engaged, its populist inclinations afford it little
purchase against a new right, one of whose defining characteristics is often a rejuvenated populism. My argument, then, is in some ways superficially similar to that of postcolonial theorist Timothy Brennan in *Wars of Position:* that left and right are increasingly blurred following what he terms the “turn” to theory of the late 1970s (when Laclau began his theoretical career with *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*). But where Brennan sees an anarchist anti-statism among today’s leftist intellectuals, I argue that in fact they occlude the state, take it for granted in typical populist fashion. Indeed, my reading of Brennan’s case studies would argue that the right is aware that hegemony is not at issue; the left has been losing the culture wars because it is not yet posthegemonic. The left believes its own rhetoric; the right does not. Cultural studies emerged in the shadow of first Macmillan and then the ascendancy of Thatcher and Reagan: is it but a reflex of their populist discourse, or can it provide a critique of its own conditions of production? I have argued elsewhere that a truly unpopular cultural studies would need to take account of the perspective of the multitude, which I develop further in this book’s final chapter.  

Populism is always a pleasing gesture, and so a temptation. But if those currently involved in cultural studies would resist that temptation, they may have to think seriously, as McGuigan suggests, of abandoning cultural studies as it is presently constituted. Cultural studies’ theory of hegemony offers ever more critical targets and ammunition in the field of culture, but it fails to note the systemic relations between culture and the state, between ideologies and their “corresponding institutional mechanisms” in social theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase. It misses the extent to which culture itself operates as a screen, a fetishized substitute, for the political logic of command. It passes over the ways in which power is entrenched as an affective relation, or as habit. Partaking in rather than criticizing a fetishism of culture, cultural studies is
oblivious to, and even helps to hide, an expansion of political and state command. In the end, both the political populism of the right and the academic populism of the left perform the same function: they uphold a fiction of hegemony that perpetuates the dream of a harmonious social compact.

A Progressive Project: Populism

“Populism,” writes political scientist Paul Taggart, “is ubiquitous in modern politics. . . . it permeates representative politics as a potential force.” The “irony,” he continues, is that “the impulse for populism comes from frustration with representative politics.” Indeed, Taggart locates this frustration at the heart of the matter: “At its root, populism, as a set of ideas, has a fundamental ambivalence about politics, especially representative politics. . . . Populism is reluctantly political.” Populism is therefore a political antipolitics, or a politics expressed in anti-political ways. Social theorists Yves Mény and Yves Surel describe this anti-political negation that emerges from the heart of the political as “the pathology of democracy.” Yet they hesitate over whether populism is disease, symptom, or cure, for at the same time they describe it as “one possible reaction to the malfunctioning of the political system.” Populism arises from a dissatisfaction with existing politics, but also as an attempt to fix its representational failures. Hence Mény and Surel define populism in terms of three successive rhetorical moves: first, it demarcates a fundamental cleavage between “the top and the bottom, the rich and the poor, the rulers and the ruled,” in short, between “the good, wide, and simple people” and “the corrupt, incompetent, and interlocking elites”; second, “elites are accused of abusing their position of power instead of acting in conformity with the interests of the people as a whole”; and third, populism then insists that “the primacy of
the people has to be restored.” Direct democracy is encouraged: “The ideal populist political system comes close, at least on paper, to a ‘pure’ democratic regime where the people are given the first and final word.” So populism combines: a framework emphasizing an over-riding distinction between people and elite; an analysis that presents this distinction as antagonism, rather than mere difference; and a gesture of solidarity with the people, against the elite.

Mény and Surel, like Taggart, stress populism’s complexity and contradictions; they are disquieted by its premises as much as by its effects. By contrast, Jeffrey Bell, a critic rather more in sympathy with populism’s claims, is refreshingly succinct: “Populism,” he tells us, “is optimism about people’s ability to make decisions about their lives.” Expressed like this, populism is simply a matter of common sense, and of faith in the common sense of others. What cultural studies scholar could disagree? Yet the simplicity of Bell’s definition obscures the real difficulty of locating populism on the political spectrum. It so happens that Bell’s book is a polemic against the “liberal elites” who, he claims, have made “relativism the core of American moral culture.” Hence Bell praises Ronald Reagan’s presidency, for its steadfast anti-communism, its fiscal conservatism, and Supreme Court appointments that enabled “the restoration of popular control over community standards.” Bell locates himself firmly on the neoconservative right; cultural studies by contrast overwhelmingly locates itself on the left. But there is not much distance between Bell’s optimistic confidence in the people’s ability to decide, and Raymond Williams’s declaration that his working-class “family and family friends” possessed “as much natural fineness of feeling, as much quick discrimination, as much clear grasp of ideas within the range of experience as I have found anywhere.” Williams shared few, if any, of Bell’s specific political positions, but populism blurs such distinctions.
Latin America is the great cradle of political populism. What political historian Jorge Castañeda describes as Latin America’s “populist epoch” dates from the 1920s or 1930s (Perú’s APRA party was founded in 1924; Gertulio Vargas acceded to the Brazilian presidency in 1930) to the 1970s, when it was curtailed by the rise of military dictatorships. Postdictatorship leaders, however, have often also been cast in (neo)populist mold, from Menem in Argentina to Perú’s Alán García or even Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. More broadly, Michael Conniff argues that “in the long view” of the region’s politics, “populists were the most characteristic leaders” of the twentieth century. “Populism,” social theorist Alain Touraine suggests, “has always been the great Latin American temptation.” Touraine argues that this is because it “represent[s] a desire for change within continuity, without the violent rupture that both socialist and capitalist processes of industrialization experienced.” An additional attraction is that populism purports to solve the problem of national identity, while leaving that identity inchoate and somehow beyond representation. Identity has been a central post-independence political and philosophical concern for the region: Latin American cultural roots are variously European, indigenous, and African, and the vast majority of its inhabitants are mixed or “mestizos” of one sort or another, while they have at different times been under the sway of Spanish, Portuguese, French, British, and now US political and cultural influence. Seeking to resolve this complex and contradictory hybridity, it is small surprise that Latin America has been a laboratory for the most significant experiments in populism. Populism promises simple answers to simple questions of allegiance and belonging: are you with the people, or with the elite?

Peronism follows the classic dualist model described by the Spanish political scientist Sagrario Torres Ballesteros when she argues that “what matters” in populism “is the confrontation between the ‘people’ and the ‘anti-people,’ the struggle between ‘poor and rich,’ ‘exploiters and exploited.’ . . . All populist rhetoric revolves around the ‘people/anti-people’ antagonism.” Hence Peronism, according to the movement’s “Twenty Truths” promulgated in 1950, “is essentially popular. Any political lobby is anti-people, and as such not Peronist.” For Peronism, the anti-people was at first “the communist camp and red socialism.” Increasingly, however, it was also defined in terms of imperialism and its oligarchical agents within Argentina, the “enemies of the people.” Perón warns against the “traitors and foreign agents” who thrive “wherever there is colonization.” Describing the military regime that
had overthrown him, Perón says that “this is the treacherous gang; none of them give a damn about the country. . . . The People are Olympian in their scorn for each and every one of these vermin, who are a scourge on the country.” The anti-people had sold the country and its economic assets to foreign interests, and ensured the destruction of national industry “to serve foreign interests and to fulfill debts incurred to those who financed the revolution,” primarily (Perón asserts) British capital. By contrast, “counterpoised to all the powers of the anti-fatherland is the true Argentine People.” Perón continually returns to the theme. In 1972, shortly before his return to the country, he is still denouncing “foreign agents within Argentine society,” that is, “the bad Argentines themselves who join forces with imperialism to defend their own shameful interests to the detriment of the Nation they claim to serve.” Theirs is a “power usurped from the People” and their deceit a “fraud against the People.” But the repression that the people and the unions have to endure has been “a real test” that has, Perón argues, “proved that they possess the virtues required of men who struggle for their real liberation.”

In Peronism, the people’s ultimate identification is with the movement itself. Solidarity is the ultimate value: “For a Peronist there can be nothing better than another Peronist.” “True patriotism,” Perón assures his followers, “is love of the community.” This is “a community characterized by justice and solidarity, in which every individual can count on the help that others are able to provide, and support them in turn in their times of misfortune.” In this community, all differences melt away: “For Peronism, there is only one class of men: those who work. . . . In the New Argentina the only ones to be privileged are the children.” This is an organic, organized community whose appeal is to an affect that can do without either ideology or discourse. As true patriotism is “a kind of love,” according to Perón, “either you feel it or you don’t. . . . So there will be no need for speeches, symbols, or ceremonies.” This affect then induces Peronist habits: “When this community is in danger, there will be nobody who does not feel the inclination and the need to defend it against its enemies external or internal.” In short, “egoism does not exist” for a Peronist. The individual is dissolved into a crowd in which all are the same, united in a common movement, finding his “historic destiny by way of the State, to which he belongs.” Identification with the movement becomes, in populism, identification with constituted power.
For McGuigan, what he calls “cultural populism” is “the intellectual assumption . . . that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a capital C.”\(^{51}\) There is no doubt that cultural studies is populist in this sense. Cultural studies, first, expands the terrain of investigation from the elite culture characteristic of the literature departments from which it generally emerged. Second, this shift is driven by the desire to validate non-elite cultural forms, and so to underline the worth of the “ordinary.” “Culture is ordinary,” declared Raymond Williams in 1958, “that is the first fact.” Culture is not, then, the exclusive preserve of a minority; it is not what the nineteenth-century poet and critic Matthew Arnold defined as the “best which has been thought and said.”\(^{52}\)

Cultural studies breaks open the canon, and is as happy to discuss jazz as to analyze Shakespeare. For Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, writing as early as 1964, jazz was “popular in the sense of being of the people.” As a consequence, “the jazz ethos” was “tolerant and non-conformist,” associated with “lively, radical and creative groups of young people [who] in quite different cultures have, during the short period of its history, found in it a common, international language.”\(^{53}\) Some critics took to studying jazz alongside Shakespeare.\(^{54}\) More often, and as media scholar John Hartley comments “despite misgivings about commercial or mass culture,” cultural studies has looked “for Shakespearian quality in the works--and the audiences--of popular culture.”\(^{55}\) Cultural studies returns the concept of culture to the people, and enthusiastically champions this broader conception of culture against the notion of culture as a minority pursuit of the “cultured.”

Cultural studies is also populist in a stricter sense. Most of its practitioners regard their vocation as being in some way political, and see the movement to open or break traditional canons as of more than merely academic interest. The shift to
something closer to an anthropological definition of culture is envisaged as a blow (however small) against an elite that has monopolized our conception of culture in the West and gained undue power in the process. This is a theme that unites cultural studies scholars of all generations and on both sides of the Atlantic. In Williams’s foundational *Culture and Society*, “the development of the idea of culture has, throughout, been a criticism of what has been called the bourgeois idea of society.”

For the doyen of US cultural studies, Grossberg, what matters are “the ways in which popular culture and daily life can become the battlegrounds for real struggles over power [and] also how they are articulated to broader struggles in the social formation.”

And perhaps most emphatically of all, Stuart Hall famously declared that popular culture was “one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.” Cultural studies paints itself as an oppositional practice, driven by a democratizing impulse. It shares this impulse with the parallel moves on the part of feminist, African American, and Latino/a scholars (among others) who study “minority” cultural production as a means to open up the academy, and by extension also other institutions (museums, publishing houses, and so on) that consecrate and conserve culture, welcoming voices that have hitherto been excluded and unheard. But if identity politics argues for the specific history and experience of particular groups (women, African Americans, Latinos/as), cultural studies has a broader remit. Above and beyond identity or even class, cultural studies declares its solidarity with the people.

So beyond its choice of popular texts and practices to study, and its oppositional stance towards elite definitions of culture, even towards dominant culture as a whole, cultural studies is also an affirmative politics of solidarity with the “people.” This solidarity is often aesthetic, as in Grossberg’s emphasis on the “fun” of popular
But it is just as often explicitly political. For Williams, solidarity is a value found in and vital to the “common culture” that he claims is latent in working class experience. “The idea of community” developed by the working class is itself an “idea of solidarity.” A culture in common,” Williams argues, “will be a very complex organization, requiring continual adjustment and redrawing. At root, the feeling of solidarity is the only conceivable element of stabilization in so difficult an organization.” More recently, the Birmingham Centre graduate and critical race theorist Paul Gilroy likewise finds “spontaneous tolerance and openness” to be the hallmarks of “the underworld of Britain’s convivial culture” and the basis for a possible “cosmopolitan solidarity.” But solidarity is not simply a goal for cultural studies. In ethnographic works, it is premise and method, as the boys who are Paul Willis’s subjects tell him “you were someone to pour our hearts out to . . . . Anything that happened you’d understand. . . . You listen to us, you want to know what we’ve got to say.” And solidarity is also motivation: as Hall describes the aim of the Birmingham Centre, “we were trying to find an institutional practice in cultural studies that might produce an organic intellectual,” which meant producing intellectuals aligned “with an emerging historic movement.”

From Williams to Hall, to Willis, Gilroy, and Grossberg, then, cultural studies goes further than McGuigan’s merely “cultural” populism. From Williams’s argument for a “common culture” premised on “the idea of solidarity” going beyond both “mass” and “class,” to Hall’s commitment that cultural studies should be “transmitting [its] ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class,” to Grossberg’s call “to construct a ‘we’ which can represent and speak for and across different identities and groups, a collective identity which transcends differences”: the populism of cultural studies is also
insistently political, and consistently the very image of classical political populism.\(^{64}\) Grossberg even suggests that “perhaps the Left needs to be less suspicious of the media’s power to construct charismatic leaders who can call forth and mobilize those affectively charged places that will pull people out of their everyday lives.”\(^{65}\) Like classical populism, the political project of cultural studies resides in its attempt to construct a popular cross-class alliance against an illegitimate elite. Cultural studies takes as its task the identification and encouragement of popular resistance and mobilization from below, bringing together the disparate identities and ideological elements (for Grossberg, also affective investments) that constitute the people, and honing their antagonism towards dominant ideology.

The conditions were ripe for cultural studies to take on populism as its guiding spirit. Laclau argues that “the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse which is in turn part of a more general social crisis.”\(^{66}\) Such was indeed the context for the emergence of cultural studies. Cultural studies first arose in the wake of the left’s defeats and the post-1956 discrediting of Marxism, on the one hand, and in a climate of anxiety over Britain’s de-industrialization and loss of Empire on the other. For Hall, cultural studies’ conditions of possibility were the post-war “manifest break-up of traditional culture” and “the cultural impact of the long-delayed entry of the United Kingdom into the modern world.”\(^{67}\) The subsequent institutional expansion of cultural studies came during the generalized climate of crisis (oil crisis, currency crisis, debt crisis, unemployment crisis) of the 1970s and the early 80s, for which the ideological discourses then current could provide neither explanation nor answer. Finally, cultural studies achieved global reach in the shadow of the end of the Cold War and in the vacuum left by the collapse of the ideological dichotomy between Communism and Western liberalism. Repeatedly, however, cultural studies
has been confronted, and indeed outplayed, by the success of populist projects articulated by the right: the neopopulism of Blair and then Bush in the late 1990s and, especially, after 2001; but, before that, what Hall called the “authoritarian populism” of Thatcher and Reagan.

Peronism anticipates the “Third Way” politics of New Labour. Indeed, however much it is premised on an over-riding binary distinction between people and anti-people, populism generally presents itself as beyond such dichotomies. Peronism, for instance, gathered up a series of referents, such as the poor (the so-called descamisados), workers, youth, and women, each of which is defined by opposition (to the rich, the bourgeois, the old, the male). But these referents only became the “people” as they were then articulated into a system of equivalences with Peronism, a term otherwise outside of referential discourse: Peronism referred to no one single thing, but to the conjunction of many referents, what Laclau and Mouffe term a “chain of equivalence.” Beyond any single binary opposition (though present in them all), because its own articulations were contingent rather than necessary, Peronism could position itself as a third term or horizon to all such either/or logic. This then was the Peronist “Third Position,” expressed in slogans that followed the rhythm of “neither/nor, but,” such as “Neither Nazis nor fascists--Peronists” or “Neither Yankees nor Marxists--Peronists.” Laclau terms this process “the social production of ‘empty signifiers,’” whereby one term, here “Peronism,” defined in its relation to a chain of equivalences among a set of disparate terms, appears to transcend and so establish itself outside of the signifying system itself. Laclau argues that particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, from his Madrid exile, Perón, “careful not to take any definitive stand . . . was in ideal conditions to become the ‘empty signifier’ incarnating the moment of universality in the chain of equivalences which unified the popular camp.”

In exile, Perón shifted positions constantly, according to circumstance. The enemies of the people took ever different form, depending on who was listening. The substance of Peronism itself became indeterminate, though it retained the same referent both in Perón’s own name and charisma, and in the notion of an ideal, unbroken movement towards an un-named historical destiny (and Perón’s ever-imminent personal return). Equivocation could be presented as constancy. Peronism was therefore available as the legitimation and support for multiple political inflections from the far right (Perón’s
fascist elements), through reformism, to the revolutionary left (the Peronist Youth and its armed groups). The fact that anyone could be part of the coalition meant also that no-one was essential to it. As to whether Peronism was a movement of the left or of the right: it was both. (And it was neither.) Peronism’s ambiguity was further accentuated by the fact that the figure of Evita was also available as a second pole for identification: from the guerrilla version of Evita as rebellious incarnation of the Peronist left, as in the chant “if Evita lived, she would be a Montonero!” to her right-wing portrayal as the image of fidelity and subservience to patriarchy. The Evita who “renounced all ambitions and all pretensions to bureaucratic office and institutionalized power,”71 and so opposed all constituted power, was counterpoised to the Evita who was the eternal president’s eternal wife, and so that power’s buttress.

The height of Peronist hegemony could only come while Perón himself was out of power; in this sense, hegemony and power are opposed rather than mutually reinforcing. Perón’s exile enabled unrecognized complicity between those making opportunistic use of Perón and those whom Perón manipulated to maintain his own authority. In the early seventies, Perón endlessly played off the Peronist Youth (and associated guerrilla movements) against the trades union stalwarts and vice versa. In 1972 and early 1973 Peronism’s hegemony was almost complete: Perón’s absence allowed for multiple identifications and for the movement to fabricate an image of the Argentine people as whole, homogenous, and united. But only in exile could Perón maintain his position as empty signifier. On his arrival home it became evident that, in Laclau’s words, “the chains of equivalences constructed by the different factions of his movements had gone beyond any possibility of control--even by Perón himself.”72 The day of his return to the country, on June 20, 1973, as he was due to land at Buenos Aires’s Ezeiza airport, up to four million people came out to greet him. In the tumult, violence erupted between sections of the Peronist left and the Peronist right. Young militants were cut down by gunfire directed by the union old guard. Peronism’s field of open interpretation had reached its limit. After an uneasy co-existence, during which the left refused to believe that their leader could betray them, Perón himself finally condemned the Peronist Youth at a mass rally they had organized for May 1, 1974, expelling those who, it turned out, had only been contingently incorporated.73 But they could still appeal to (the ghost of) Evita. Tomás Eloy Martínez’s La novela de Perón centers around the massacre at Ezeiza, and is a study of Peronism as both an open field of identification and affiliation, and a
decisively violent moment of closure. The massacre as Perón re-entered Argentine history reveals the state violence that ends interpretation and establishes the anti-people once more. Perón’s return meant the return of history to Peronism, the fragmentation of hegemony with the need to re-establish a state.

Throughout, Peronism flirted with what Moreiras defines as “the death of politics”: politics, he argues, is “the negotiation of difference”; yet Peronism annulled difference, at the same time as it also asserted differences so radical that they were non-negotiable. Cultural theorist John Frow’s critique of Laclau’s valorization of populism is based on a similar premise, that its organizing “structure of feeling” . . . [is] the building of a space of equivalences held together by the absolute otherness of the opponent; the repression of difference; the politics of the Imaginary.” Populism claims to renovate politics, but in fact it destroys it. Likewise, hegemony is at best a distraction from the political, when it is not simply a renunciation; at worst, it screens it off, rendering it entirely opaque. The violence that is all too often politics’ hard truth then comes as a terrible surprise.

Populism allows, indeed encourages, a slippage between left and right, freedom and discipline, openness and closure. The challenge for any putatively progressive populism, such as cultural studies would like to be, is to distinguish itself from the populism of the right. Absent such a differentiation, populism is always liable to lose its progressive impetus. This is the trajectory literary and cultural theorist Catherine Belsey foresees for cultural studies, as she fears that its “great strength” has come “to seem like a constraint. The strength was its popularising impulse; that impulse is now in danger of settling down as populism; and, as we in the UK found out in the Thatcher years, populism can too easily turn into conservatism.” But, as I have been arguing, cultural studies has always been populist. Hall admits that even the British New Left of the 1950s was already populist in what he calls “the ‘Narodnik’ sense of ‘going to the people’ and in terms of what they / we might become.” The New Left’s populism turned particularly around the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which Hall describes as “a popular movement with a clear radical thrust and an implicit ‘anti-
capitalist’ content . . . but lacking a clear class composition and appealing to people across the clear-cut lines of traditional class identity or organizational loyalties.” Hall insists, however, on a distinction between this populism and “the Thatcherite sense of massaging popular consent by cynical appeals to what the people are said by their betters to want.”

Again, as with Belsey, the reference to Thatcherism: it is not that cultural studies suddenly became populist; rather, Thatcherism served as a warning of populism’s potential dangers. Yet Hall’s own work elsewhere shows that Thatcherism was rather more than the “massaging [of] popular consent”; he here falls back on a logic of false consciousness that cultural studies otherwise repudiates. Such an easy distinction hardly resolves the question of what a Narodnik “going to the people” might entail; indeed, this has been an ongoing anxiety for cultural studies.

Cultural studies has always been at least half-aware of its own populist impulses; and if it were not, there have been plenty of critics to remind it. In response, there have been various attempts to formulate a distinction between the populism of cultural studies and other populisms. Cultural theorist Ken Hirschkop, for instance, defends what he terms Williams’s “complex populism” against “a simple populism, of the kind now habitually resisted,” but without explaining what makes the one complex, and the other simple, except for the observation that Williams shuns “the notion of a ‘national’ interest.” Yet nationalism is hardly the defining feature of right populism, and has in any case arguably been embraced, however ambivalently, by cultural studies scholars such as Gilroy with his celebration of “Britain’s convivial culture.” McGuigan, on the other hand, defends a “critical populism” against “an uncritical populist drift in the study of popular culture.” A critical populism, he claims rather vaguely, would arise from a “greater dialogue between mainstream cultural studies . . . and the political economy of culture.” Sociologist Ben Agger, meanwhile, insists that cultural studies
does not go far enough, and argues for “the real populism of a modernist cultural theory that recognizes the colonization of popular culture by elitist imperatives of control and consumption.” Yet there has never been any shortage of conservatives who would happily go along with Agger’s crusade: among the modernists, the likes of T. S. Eliot, for instance.

It is Stuart Hall whose response to the triumph of right-wing populism is the most illuminating. Hall saw in Thatcherism a crystallization of the problems of cultural studies. He realized that cultural studies’ established theories could not account for Thatcherite populist success, while the right was stealing a march on both cultural studies and the left. Cultural studies, which had attempted to address the failure of prior left projects for radical change, was now faced with a successful hegemonic shift engineered by the right and, after 1979, from a position of state power. As Hall put the problem in the mid 1980s, Thatcherism had “set out to and has effectively become a populist political force, enlisting popular consent among significant sections of the dominated classes.” It had done so “through a combination of the imposition of social discipline from above . . . and of populist mobilization from below.” The right was proving far more successful on what this new left considered its own natural terrain. Thatcherism had succeeded where the Birmingham Centre had failed: “We never connected with that rising historic movement,” Hall conceded by the 1990s, but Thatcher did. Above all, Thatcherism presented a theoretical as well as a political challenge, demonstrating as far as Hall was concerned the need to turn to hegemony as the key notion for any understanding of power. Indeed, “Thatcherism gives you a better understanding of what the struggle for hegemony is about than almost anything one has seen in the politics on the left.” Thatcherism was authoritarian, yes; but it was also
and most importantly hegemonic. More: it offered the clearest model of a successful hegemonic project.

No wonder Hall suggests that “make no mistake, a tiny bit of all of us is also somewhere inside the Thatcherite project.” Thatcherism interpellated cultural studies twice over: first, by appealing to a sense of antagonism against the status quo; and second, by offering a paradigm of hegemony achieved. No wonder also that Laclau’s work on Peronism (which most attracted Hall) and his later work with Mouffe (which fed the translation of cultural studies to the United States) seemed so useful, defining as it did the stakes of a left populism and refining the theoretical analysis of hegemony. Laclau too, after all, was intent on defining and reclaiming a left populism in the face of a seductive but intimidating political counter-example. But as cultural studies followed Laclau on the path of hegemony theory, Hall’s focus on the state could be forgotten (eventually, even by Hall himself) along with his argument that “the moment of the passage of power into the State and its condensation there into a definite system of rule is a critical historical moment, representing a distinct phase.” An exclusive concern with culture soon masked any interest in the state, in what a populism in waiting (such as cultural studies) could learn from a populism in power (such as Thatcherism).

A Theory of Hegemony: Laclau

Since the late 1970s, hegemony has been the master trope of cultural studies. In Subculture, which theorist Fredric Jameson notes is probably cultural studies’ single most influential text, Birmingham Centre graduate Dick Hebdige states simply that the “theory of hegemony . . . provides the most adequate account of how dominance is sustained in advanced capitalist societies.” Or as Simon Critchley argues, “hegemony
is the logic of the political, it’s what is at the heart of the political, because that is the way power is organised.” Critchley locates hegemony also at cultural studies’ heart: “Cultural studies is a political project. The political project turns around the use of the category of hegemony.” Hegemony was, furthermore, the cornerstone of post-Birmingham cultural studies’ pedagogic project, the key concept for Open University course U203, on “Popular Culture,” written by Tony Bennett, Stuart Hall, and Paul Willis among others. 5,000 students took this course between 1982 and 1987, and David Harris argues it “had as great an influence as the Birmingham Centre.” Harris describes the cynical epiphany of the cultural studies student who discovers “with relief that ‘hegemony can explain everything.’” For Hall it was an “enormously productive” concept. The theory of hegemony resolved the tensions that had plagued cultural studies during the 1970s, and prepared the way for the field’s dramatic 1980s expansion.

Cultural studies’ embrace of hegemony theory is usually described as a “turn to Gramsci” that ended a ten-year engagement with Althusser. In Chantal Mouffe’s words, “if the ‘60s had been the era of Althusserianism, the ‘70s was the era of Gramscianism.” And it is true that Gramsci was crucial as Hall and others at the Birmingham Centre tried to get to grips with the rise of Thatcherism, and to transcend the debate between “culturalism” (à la Williams and Thompson) and “structuralism” that had polarized the field by the late 1970s. In his 1980 article “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” Hall argued that “the line in Cultural Studies which has attempted to think forwards from the best elements in the structuralist and culturalist enterprises” was one that had picked up on “some of the concepts elaborated in Gramsci’s work.” The idea of hegemony was, as it were, in the air; it had been invoked by Althusser and, separately, already been introduced to cultural studies by Williams (in his 1973 “Base
and Superstructure in Marxist Theory”). But the version of the concept that Hall championed was not Williams’s; nor was it exactly Gramsci’s. Mouffe herself, with her 1979 collection Gramsci and Marxist Theory, was, as Brennan observes, key in packaging Gramsci for cultural studies. But even before that, it was her partner who was more influential still. As media theorist Colin Sparks notes of Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism, “the theoretical point of reference which Hall used to argue for this position is explicitly drawn from Laclau. It is his notion of hegemony and of the construction of ‘the people’ which, with some small reservations, Hall employs throughout his work in the 1980s” (emphasis added).  

Laclau’s version of hegemony is the single most influential formulation for the development of cultural studies. Laclau’s hegemony theory is also, by some distance, the most fully developed and the least reliant on some vague “common sense.” Hegemony is the focus of his and Chantal Mouffe’s best-selling 1985 work Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, a book that “triggered a series of significant transformations of both political and theoretical debates on the left” and “place[d] Gramsci at the center of American and British cultural theory.” However, in what follows I focus mainly on Laclau’s first book, published in 1977 and now long out of print, Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory, because this is the text that particularly influenced Hall, and which shaped the direction of cultural studies. Even in the mid 1980s, Hall insisted “I still prefer Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory to Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.” Moreover, Politics and Ideology also offers a theory of populism and attempts, more thoroughly than any cultural studies text, to resolve the dilemma of how to distinguish between a populism of the left and a populism of the right, and so to legitimate left populism as a political practice. Ultimately, Laclau’s project is a defense of populism; his is a theory of hegemony (and of politics) that is modeled on populism, as is now
once more visible with the more recent (2005) publication of *On Populist Reason*. Hegemony, cultural studies, populism: these three slippery terms meet at the nexus that is Laclau’s theory of hegemony. Given the intimate relationship between populism and cultural studies, it is no wonder that cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie should suggest that Laclau provides the field’s “theoretical underpinning.”

Any analysis that relies upon the concept of hegemony inevitably partakes of a populist politics. Hegemony shares with populism (and indeed, politics itself in Laclau’s analysis) the fact that it is predicated on the constitution of popular subjects. As I argue in what follows, Laclau’s initial concern as he refines his concept of hegemony is to differentiate between left and right populism; in his work subsequent to *Politics and Ideology*, however, he abandons that attempt and ends up validating populism as a whole, at first implicitly and later explicitly. But from the very outset his analysis is so bound up in its object that it is in no position to offer a critique. Most seriously, like populism Laclau’s theory of hegemony evades the question of the role of the state: the state is both present and absent, fetishized and ignored. In Laclau, this evasion is possible in part thanks to his conflation of the difference between linguistic and non-linguistic elements of what he declares is an all-embracing “discourse.” Substituting hegemony for politics, and silent about institutional power, the theory of hegemony effectively becomes an anti-politics.

Latin Americanists and cultural theorists alike often forget Laclau’s Argentine origins. Yet he himself states that “the years of political struggle in the Argentina of the 1960s” remain his primary context and point of reference. “When today I read *Of Grammatology, S/Z* or the *Écrits* of Lacan,” he claimed in 1990, “the examples which always spring to mind are not from philosophical and literary texts; they are from a discussion in an Argentinian trade union, a clash of opposing slogans at a demonstration, or a debate during a party congress.” In the same interview, Laclau recalls his political
past, first as a member of the Partido Socialista Argentino, then later with the nationalist Partido Socialista de la Izquierda Nacional, a party that entered into a strategic alliance with Peronism on the basis that populism had started an anti-imperialist revolution under “bourgeois banners.” An analysis of Peronism grounds Laclau’s theory in Politics and Ideology, but he returns to the example of Peronism elsewhere, too, for instance in Emancipation(s), and most recently and most emphatically in On Populist Reason. It should be obvious, therefore, that any discussion of Laclau’s concept of hegemony, let alone his theorization of populism, ought to set it beside a critical examination of the Peronism from which it springs. Yet in Critchley and Marchant’s Laclau: A Critical Reader, beyond an invocation of Argentina in the introduction’s opening pages, and Marchant’s brief quotation of the passage I have just cited, not one of the contributors mentions Latin America, let alone Peronism or Perón. Even Marchant moves quickly on: “In his political biography, it may have been the experience of demonstrations and party congresses which taught Laclau his ‘first lesson in hegemony,’ but in his intellectual biography it was of course Gramsci’s work that provided him with the means to articulate his practical experience” (emphasis added). 99 Meanwhile, only one of the fifteen essays even so much as cites Politics and Ideology.

Argentina is the bedrock of Laclau’s theorization of hegemony. Where Gramsci had been prompted by his experience and observation of Italy, particularly underdeveloped Southern Italy, and so the European semi-periphery, Laclau’s thought comes from an engagement with Argentina’s complex place in the global system. In the early twentieth century, thanks to nascent industrialization, profitable agro-export, and the impact of mass immigration from Europe, Argentina’s economic and social standing was similar and indeed in some respects superior to that of European countries such as Italy (from which many of its immigrants had in fact come), Belgium, or Norway. Despite their country’s long-term economic decline over the twentieth century, Argentines have often felt themselves closer to Europe and North America than to their Latin American neighbors. In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Laclau and Mouffe appear to exclude “the periphery of the capitalist world” from their analysis, because there the constitution of popular subject positions predominates over what they call democratic struggles. They seem to assert, in short, that hegemony and populism and mutually exclusive. But their claim that it is in the metropolis where hegemony is the order of the day, while in the periphery more archaic populist logics predominate, is rather undermined by their observations on
the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganism, formations that are both populist and apparently hegemonic, and also firmly located in the “First World.” Indeed, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy’s disdain for populism is an aberration. In Laclau’s On Populist Reason, populism is very explicitly the model for hegemony: the periphery is therefore implicitly the guardian of the political, and the danger now is that in the metropolis “the Third Way and the ‘radical centre’” may be “substituting administration for politics” and so eliminating possibilities for hegemonic articulation.

Mapping hegemony theory back on to an analysis of Argentine history is no simple matter, not only because of the changes within that society since the 1940s, but also because Laclau’s views about the geopolitics of hegemony theory have wavered over the past thirty years. But the exercise is worthwhile because Laclau’s own procedure is often to treat individual case studies with extreme brevity, offering at most a page or two on (say) Chartism in Britain or the fate of Kemalism in Turkey. It is worth seeing whether or not his theory of hegemony can be put to a more sustained examination of what, in Peronist Argentina, should be its favored territory. My aim is to show that hegemony theory fails even in its best-case scenario.

Hegemony theory is intended as a response to the failure of determinism: the fact that what classical Marxism terms an ideological superstructure does not, at least in any simple way, reflect an economic base; that however much change might be to their benefit, it is only in extremis that people rise up against a system that oppresses them; and that society somehow coheres, despite its internal contradictions. In Laclau and Mouffe’s words, the genealogy of the concept of hegemony is “an expansion of what we could provisionally call a ‘logic of the contingent,’” from Luxemburg and Lenin to Sorel and Gramsci. The theory of hegemony aims to understand and account for contingency, and so takes its distance from reductionist explanations. Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe argue, shows the way towards a fully developed theory of hegemony, in that he demonstrates the contingent and constructed nature of any “historical bloc” that unites different interests and so constitutes a hegemonic formation. But he did not go far
enough, they argue, in that he believed that there was a “single unifying principle in every hegemonic formation, and [that] this can only be a fundamental class.”

Laclau and Mouffe lay siege to what they term “the last redoubt of essentialism: the economy.” *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* goes beyond Gramsci (and Marxism), to argue that it is not the economy (or indeed any other external principle) that determines political subjectivity; it is “the logic of hegemony” itself, as “a logic of articulation and contingency” that “come[s] to determine the very identity of the hegemonic subjects.” Hegemony arises from the contingent articulation of discursive elements (both linguistic and non-linguistic) according to the twin principles of equivalence and difference. Specifically, a successful hegemonic project presents a variety of different elements as equivalent in their mutual antagonism towards some other element or elements. A hegemonic formation consists in the articulation of a historical bloc whose unity is not pre-given, but constituted in and through the very process of its articulation on an “antagonistic terrain.” What needs stressing is that this definition of hegemony arises directly, in Laclau’s case, from a consideration of populism. For populism refutes class reductionism; populism constructs novel political subjectivities; and populism, too, articulates the social field around a fundamental antagonism. These are the issues that Laclau addresses in *Politics and Ideology*, laying the ground for his later work with Mouffe on hegemony, in which populism as such fades into the background.

First, populism demands a theory of contingency, as in populism the links between political ideologies and economic interest are clearly broken. We understand why the rich might vote for the right, or the poor commit to the left, but puzzle over why rich and poor should come together to support populist movements whose policies may lie either on the right or on the left. As Laclau explains, “it is easy to see,
then, why a conception that makes class reduction the ultimate source of intelligibility of any problem has met with particular difficulties in the analysis of populism.”

Populism illustrates the error of traditional Marxism’s class essentialism. For populism has no necessary class basis: left movements such as Maoism and right movements such as Nazism (not to mention formations such as Peronism that contain both left and right elements) all exhibit populist features. This, then, makes for “the impossibility of linking the strictly populist element to the class nature of a determinate movement,” and prevents any simple evaluation of populist movements according to their class orientation. More recently, Laclau has observed that populism is also “the locus of a theoretical stumbling block” for political theory in general. As there is no single set of features (either ideological elements or class components) common to the variety of movements that have been labeled populist, the term has been denigrated, and essentially abandoned, for its irreducible “vagueness” or “imprecision.” But “vagueness” is just another indication of the contingency that has to be explained, rather than condemned or ignored. Hegemony theory promises such an explanation.

Second, populism constructs novel political identities. If analysis of populism cannot fall back on an appeal to preconstituted identities, such as classes, it must consider the ways in which identities are created through populist discourse itself. The “people,” for Laclau, is a political subject constructed in and through populism, rather than a subject that pre-exists and expresses itself through populist politics. The process by which such subjectivities are produced is what Laclau terms “articulation.” I have already noted that articulation is key to the concept of hegemony (and also to cultural studies), but what is important here is the way in which Laclau develops the idea by working through a theory of populism. If “ideological and political levels” cannot be reduced to “relations of production” (and ideological positions cannot simply be
inferred from economic interests), then they must, Laclau says, be articulated. Thus “classes exist at the ideological and political level in a process of articulation and not of reduction.” Through articulation, diverse ideological contents (which have no necessary class basis) are drawn together in the service of class interest to form what is, already in *Politics and Ideology*, termed a hegemonic formation: “The dominant class exerts its hegemony” first and foremost “through the articulation into its class discourse of non-class contradictions and interpellations.”

Laclau later abandons what is here still the trace of economic determination (for which “relations of production maintain the role of determination in the last instance”), leaving only the contingent articulation of discrete elements in a “chain of equivalence.” But the logic of hegemony is in place: the articulation of discursive elements, substituting equivalence for heterogeneity, so that a social subject emerges as their unifying principle; all this is already present in Laclau’s early work on populism.

Third, we have already seen that antagonism is central to populism. *Politics and Ideology* outlines two fundamental principles of social antagonism: one sets classes against each other and is determined by the mode of economic production; the other arises from “the complex of political and ideological relations of domination constituting a determinate social formation.” It is this second antagonism that sets the “people” against the “power bloc,” the division around which populism revolves. Like class conflict, it too has to be articulated; it is not simply expressed, but is constructed discursively. Populism accentuates the conflict between people and power bloc, presenting “popular interpellations . . . in the form of antagonism and not just difference.” As opposed to transformism, in which a dominant class neutralizes dissident popular elements, accommodating at least some of their demands, populism polarizes the social field. Thus “populism starts at the point where popular-democratic
elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc.” Subsequently, Laclau and Mouffe drop any notion of a fundamental class antagonism, and indeed abandon the notion of any pre-existing antagonisms at all (“any position in a system of differences . . . can become the locus of an antagonism”). Moreover, they argue that transformism, a characteristic of developed societies, merely “displace[s] the frontier of antagonism to the periphery of the social.” Most recently, however, Laclau returns to the fundamental difference between hegemony, whose logic is now explicitly populist, and what he now terms “administration,” which he sees as effectively anti-political: he warns against “Third Way” attempts “at substituting administration for politics.” “The political operation par excellence,” he claims, “is always going to be the construction of a ‘people’” (emphasis added) in that “constructing a ‘people’ also involves constructing the frontier which the ‘people’ presupposes” and so initiates “a new hegemonic game.” Again, “the construction of the ‘people’ is the political act par excellence--as opposed to pure administration” because the former articulates antagonism, while the latter dissolves it. As Laclau has developed his theory of hegemony, it has become more rather than less populist.

Contingency, articulation, and antagonism: these are the lessons Laclau draws from his analysis of populism; he then applies them to his developing theory of hegemony. Indeed, even Laclau’s initial description of populism as “the presentation of popular-democratic interpellations as a synthetic-antagonistic complex with regard to the dominant ideology” could already equally be a definition of hegemony. Populism and hegemony are, for Laclau, essentially the same. And now he claims that “populist reason” is “political reason tout court.” Or as he puts it elsewhere, “does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative.” Populism is hegemony is politics!
Laclau’s analysis of Peronism in *Politics and Ideology* is surprisingly brief. He spends more time on the liberal order that preceded Perón’s rise to power than on Peronism itself, which he sees as in effect a re-articulation of the elements that had condensed in oligarchical liberalism between the 1860s and the 1920s. Initially, the nineteenth-century oligarchy’s “ideological hegemony over the rest of the country was minimal” and it resorted to force to ensure its dominance. Gradually, however, liberalism neutralized the threats posed variously by the Radical Party, right-wing nationalism, and the working class, by articulating some of their demands in concert with the liberals’ own political agenda. The success of this project was curtailed only in the 1930s, as the world depression caused a “crisis of transformism” such that “the oligarchy could no longer tolerate the generous redistributive policies characteristic of the Radical governments, and had to ban the middle classes from access to political power.” This led to a “scission between liberalism and democracy,” which Perón exploited by re-articulating the same basic components that had characterized liberal hegemony, but now in the service of anti-oligarchical populism. Peronism took pre-existing demands for democracy, industrialism, nationalism, and anti-imperialism, highlighted “their potential antagonism” towards liberalism, and encouraged the emergence of a “new historical subject,” the people, opposed to the oligarchy. For Laclau, it was the “attempt to distinguish between liberal ideological forms and real democracy” that “dominated the whole of Peronist discourse.” Like all populisms, Peronism promised to reform a corrupt political system. However, anti-liberal antagonism had to be confined “within limits imposed by the class project that defined the regime.” Peronism’s popular-democratic elements could not be fully expressed, at least while Perón remained in power. After the regime’s fall in 1955, these limits were breached, “popular ideology became increasingly anti-liberal, and in the most radicalized sectors increasingly fused with socialism.” Peronism could now take the form of a specifically left populism. Upon Perón’s return to power, “successive attempts to turn the clock back and to articulate popular-democratic ideology in a form assimilable by the bourgeoisie all failed” and “the regime of Isabel Perón collapsed into repressive chaos.”

Laclau has in fact little to say about Peronism’s “class project.” Despite having shown how Argentina’s nineteenth-century oligarchs took on the mantle of liberalism, and so having demonstrated the contingency of the relationship between ideology and class, once he moves to a discussion of
Peronism itself he treats liberalism as though it were simply inherently bourgeois. As class does not really enter into his discussion, Laclau’s later abandonment of the notion of a fundamental class antagonism does not really alter his analysis, except in so far as he therefore also jettisons the attempt to locate Peronism on the political spectrum of left versus right. In his brief discussion of Peronism in *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau shifts from a focus on Perón’s rise in the 1940s to analysis of the “universalization of [Peronism’s] popular symbols” during the 1960s and 1970s, now however without claiming any fusion between populism and socialism. Rather, his interest is in how Peronism exemplifies the logic of the “empty signifier,” that is, the tendential emptying and transcendence of one element within a given signifying chain. That element was Perón himself, during his exile, who became “the ‘empty signifier’ incarnating the moment of universality in the chain of equivalences which unified the popular camp.” But, again, the collapse once Perón returns to power in 1973: the chain of equivalences breaks down; hence “the bloody process which led to the military dictatorship in 1976.”

In this shift in focus from 1940s and 1950s (when Perón was in power) to the 1960s and 1970s, Laclau also therefore occludes the role of the state in Peronist politics, implying that populist hegemony (and so perhaps hegemony per se) is necessarily anti-institutional, perhaps also necessarily imaginary, shipwrecked on the assumption of state power.

In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau does revisit Perón’s first administration, but only to describe its logic as what he now terms precisely “administration” (and had previously called transformism), rather than hegemony. Laclau argues that by the 1950s Peronism was hardly populist at all, as it tried “to overcome the dichotomic division of the political spectrum through the creation of a fully integrated differential space.” “The image of the ‘organized community’” replaced the figure of the *descamisado*, and “the need to stabilize the revolutionary process becomes a leitmotiv of Peronist discourse.” Following Perón’s downfall, this call for restraint failed, and what Laclau terms “the new Argentinian populism” emerged. Earlier, Laclau had described this phenomenon as a fusion of populism and socialism; now he describes it as promoting an “anti-system popular and national identity,” encouraged by the deliberate ambiguity of Perón’s “multilayered” messages, which “allow[ed] for endless interpretations and reinterpretations.” Hence, once more, “the demand for Perón’s return to Argentina became an empty signifier unifying an expanding popular camp.” Peronism was now “dangerously bordering” on the possibility of its “tendentially empty signifier becom[ing] entirely empty.” This would be something
like an absolute hegemony, for which any link, however contradictory, could be added to the
equivalential chain; but it was also extremely precarious. Laclau then replays the familiar story of
Peronism’s inability “to hegemonize the totality of his movement” once in power, and the chaos and
collapse that ensued.118

By focusing on this “new Argentinian populism” of the 1960s and 1970s, and emphasizing its
incompatibility with state power, Laclau neglects his own observation that Peronism also had “a strong
statist component.”119 He has to split the “new” Peronism from the Peronism that had been in power for
a decade. It is as though only the late Peronism were hegemonic, or indeed populist. But in fact the
early Peronism never really disappeared: that Peronism had built or dramatically reshaped institutions
(the Evita Perón Foundation, the Trades Union Federation [CGT]) whose impact endured for decades,
habituating a generation of working-class Argentines to the feeling that they belonged to a Peronist
project that almost preceded politics. Laclau’s suggestion that Peronist love did not “crystallize in any
institutional regularity” takes the movement’s splits (for instance between the Montoneros and the
CGT) as reason not merely to pass over the existence of Peronist institutions, but also to imply that
Peronism and institutionalization were somehow radically incompatible.120 This position repeats that of
the radical Peronists of the 1960s (when Laclau was himself a militant), who were so brutally proven
wrong by Perón and the movement old guard after 1973. Indeed, there is arguably no institution in
Argentina so durable as the Peronist party apparatus itself, which continues on into the present,
however much its ideology has changed in the meantime. Rather than ignoring the state, then, we need
to acknowledge that Peronism was always, from its inception, split in ways that hegemony theory is
unable to grasp. I have stressed the importance of habit and habituation for the Peronist movement; in
my last chapter, I return to the split within Peronism, its double register, which I explain in terms of a
tension between popular form and the formless constituent power of the multitude that gives it life.

Populism, for Laclau, infuses all political processes, and indeed comes to be
identified with “political reason tout court.” As such, it can no longer be denigrated or
ignored. But how then to distinguish between populisms? What differentiates a
populism of the left from a populism of the right? Which is also to ask how left
hegemony differs from right hegemony, the hegemony of the dominant from the
hegemony of the dominated (or the would-be dominant). In *Politics and Ideology*, the key is class. The contradiction between people and power bloc is ancillary to the contradiction between classes. Together they make up the “double articulation of political discourse,” and both need to be specified to describe adequately any given political formation. But as social formations are ultimately subordinate to the mode of production, class is paramount. There can be a populism of the left and of the right in that the antagonism between people and power bloc can be articulated by either the dominant or the dominated class. There is therefore both “a populism of the dominant classes and a populism of the dominated classes.” In the former, the dominant class articulates populist (popular-democratic) demands; in the latter, it is the dominated. Differences between populisms, from fascism to Maoism, depend on their ultimate class articulation.

Though class politics is the priority, Laclau argues that populism is more than a necessary inconvenience. It is also a positive goal: “The struggle of the working class for its hegemony is an effort to achieve the maximum possible fusion between popular-democratic ideology and socialist ideology.” The working class becomes hegemonic by being also populist. Populism, precisely because it is hegemony itself, is no impurity or deviation from socialism. Far from it: “A ‘socialist populism’ is not the most backward form of working class ideology but the most advanced--the moment when the working class has succeeded in condensing the ensemble of democratic ideology in a determinate social formation within its own ideology.” In that hegemony is the aim of any left movement, populism must be its ultimate destination: “In socialism, therefore, coincide the highest form of ‘populism’ and the resolution of the ultimate and most radical of class conflicts.” Populism fully stands in for hegemony. Thus in *Politics and Ideology*, Laclau validates the populist character of contemporary social movements.
while providing, with his appeal to class as the ultimate principle, a means to distinguish between populisms. This would appear to be the theory of hegemony that cultural studies demands: a theory that could simultaneously validate and criticize its populist impulses on the basis of theoretical analysis beyond the domain of popular culture itself. No wonder it was taken up so eagerly by Hall and others at the end of the 1970s.

With *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, however, in line with and influencing shifts within cultural studies during the 1980s, Laclau and Mouffe reject the idea that class struggle determines the form of hegemonic articulations. The emergence of the so-called “new social movements,” from feminism to environmentalism or queer activism, expresses “that rapid diffusion of social conflictuality to more and more numerous relations which is characteristic today of advanced industrial societies.” I will discuss the new social movements in the context of civil society theory in my next chapter; here, it is sufficient to note that Laclau and Mouffe argue that society is now riven by multiple antagonisms, and that any of the new subjectivities that arise as a result may determine the “nodal point” of a hegemonic bloc. In Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism, class is deprived of any epistemological or ontological privilege. The totality of social struggles is then the struggle for radical democracy that, they argue, constitutes the ever-expanding horizon of politics. As a hegemonic project expands to articulate the demands of more social groups, and as social differentiation produces and abstracts more such groups and demands, it necessarily becomes more democratic. The criterion by which to judge hegemonic articulations (which are progressive, and which reactionary) becomes therefore their potential to expand the logic of the social, to achieve “a maximum autonomization of spheres on the basis of the generalization of the equivalential-egalitarian logic.” Purportedly this struggle for what Laclau and Mouffe
term “radical and plural democracy” thus “finds within itself the principle of its own validity,” but it easily slides into a celebration of the diversity that is (they themselves argue) an inevitable consequence of modernization. Hegemony comes to the fore as modernization brings about a more differentiated society: “The hegemonic form of politics only becomes dominant at the beginning of modern times” and subsequently, inevitably, undergoes a “constant expansion,” tending to approximate the social totality. As Critchley observes, there is therefore a normative (and political) deficit in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony: by stating “in a quasi-functionalist manner that ‘the democratic revolution’ and ‘radical democracy’ are descriptions of a fact, . . . one risks collapsing any critical difference between the theory of hegemony and social reality which this theory purports to describe.” Hegemony theory therefore “risks identification and complicity with the dislocatory logic of contemporary capitalist societies.” This is precisely the risk that cultural studies runs.

In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Laclau and Mouffe banish populism to the premodern backwaters of European feudalism and the global periphery. But the most cursory glance reveals that Peronism (in power and out) expanded the logic of the social, and so advanced radical democracy in their terms. Peronism’s success depended upon its power to cultivate the new subjectivities thrown up in Argentina’s rapid early twentieth-century modernization. A good example is the way in which it encouraged women to become political actors: Perón’s government expanded the electoral franchise to women, in 1947; Evita herself was of course a key political figure; and more generally, as historian Daniel James comments, “during the crucial decade from 1945 to 1955 Peronism, through its political and cultural institutions, both mobilized and legitimized women as actors within a newly enlarged public sphere.” It is then no great surprise that, with Isabel Perón, Peronism should have given us the Americas’ first woman president (and now, with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the first country in the hemisphere to have had two women heads of state). Moreover, especially through Evita’s welfare policies, Peronism also validated daily life as a legitimate arena for political demands, confounding
liberalism’s conception of public (masculine) citizenship. In this as in other examples (such as the student movement in the 1960s), far from being hostile to the new social movements, Peronism nurtured and encouraged them. Even today, as Argentine historian Javier Auyero reveals, the memory of Peronism continues to resonate powerfully through the “problem-solving networks” of contemporary shantytown politics.¹²⁸ In practice at least, the Peronist masses were never as homogenized or dedifferentiated as Laclau and Mouffe might imagine: arguably Peronism constructed and articulated a whole series of new social actors in precisely the radical democratic manner that Laclau and Mouffe envisage. In line with their conception of a radical democracy, Peronism emphasized the openness of the social, while maintaining the constitutive antagonisms of populism. More to the point, however, Peronism constituted the ground of (particularly working class) Argentine politics. It shaped an incorporated common sense or habitus from which political identities could emerge, but also against which politics itself could be assessed. In Auyero’s words, Peronism “remains the standard against which a government and its representatives and policies are judged.”¹²⁹

In his most recent work, and now more explicitly than ever identifying populism with hegemony, Laclau raises again the problem of its ambivalence. He refers to the “entirely opposite political signs” of distinct populist movements, but provides no grounds for such a classification, for distinguishing between left and right.¹³⁰ How after all do such signs differ from the signs deployed by and in political discourse itself? If these signs are indeed part of the discourse articulated by populist movements, then their meaning is surely dependent on their articulation, and cannot be determined in advance by any political calculation: Laclau would be the first to argue that the political valence of a given statement or demand is determined only by the hegemonic structure within which it is articulated. If, by contrast, they are some type of meta-sign transcending the political, then they are illegitimate impositions supplementing the theory, a matter perhaps of common sense: of course we know that (say) Mao was on the left and Hitler on the right. But that begs the question of more difficult populist
movements, such as Peronism. Hence Laclau can only distinguish between left and right by abandoning his theory of hegemony and appealing to an extra-theoretical common sense; from within the theory itself, he is condemned to repeat the populist gesture that blurs all such distinctions.

Ultimately, Laclau’s political project is undermined by his portrayal of society as an all-encompassing discursive web, the meaning of whose terms (because they are always meaningful, representational) is dependent upon the various struggles and articulations that constitute it. Labeling fascism “right-wing” or Maoism “left-wing” has no special weight, except in so far as such labels are articulated as part of a hegemonic project that itself determines their value. In the end, Laclau gives up: he resorts to warning against the danger that hegemony might come to an end, replaced either by administration, and so absolute integration, or by the millenarianism of absolute rupture. But both extremes, he also claims, are “actually unreachable.” As such, it is hardly worth warning against them; the theory’s political import disappears. At this stage, a cultural studies that views its mission as political might be tempted to salvage the concept of hegemony by returning to what Laclau had abandoned in his shift from the Marxist populism of Politics and Ideology to the post-Marxism of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy and then the conflation of populism with politics of On Populist Reason. This would entail returning either to class struggle or to the antagonism between people and power bloc; to a Marxist essentialism or to a more thoroughgoing and more combative populism. In the following section, I examine these options, and consider Laclau’s approach to populism’s supposed anti-institutionalism, its denunciations of the state.
The state is the unacknowledged center of Laclau’s theory of hegemony. In *On Populist Reason*, he defines “social demands” as the “smallest unit” of political analysis. But these demands are addressed to some pre-existent structure, an “institutional system,” “the dominant system,” or an “institutional order,” that is presupposed in and through their articulation. These “democratic demands” are “formulated to the system by an underdog of sorts.” Laclau’s examples of such institutional systems include the “local authorities” from which people might seek a resolution to housing problems or, elsewhere, the “city hall” that could improve transport networks. His historical case studies all involve nation states. If “a demand is always addressed to someone,” that “someone” is always, for Laclau, an institution already in a position to respond. Indeed, the demand itself recognizes the constituted power of the system that is addressed: “The very fact that a request takes place shows that the decisory power of the higher instance is not put into question.” But nor does Laclau himself ever question the power of the state as “higher instance”; he, too, insists that social demands can be satisfied, and satisfied fully. He takes the state for granted, and never interrogates its power.

When a demand is satisfied, it disappears: it “ceases to be a demand.” When it remains unsatisfied, however, it gains “discursive presence.” Unmet demands engender the people and power bloc as partners in an antagonistic relation: they accumulate and an equivalential relationship is established between them; “they start, at a very incipient level, to constitute the ‘people’ as a potential historical actor.” Thus emerges “an internal antagonistic frontier separating the ‘people’ from power.” But this antagonism also displaces the object of its address. When “an extensive series of social
demands” remain unfulfilled, these “popular demands are less and less sustained by a pre-existing differential framework: they have, to a large extent, to construct a new one.” Hence, “the identity of the enemy also depends increasingly on a process of political construction.” That enemy may be given any of a number of names, such as “the ‘regime,’ the ‘oligarchy,’ the ‘dominant groups,’ and so on.” And as Laclau points out, names retrospectively constitute their referents: “The name becomes the ground of the thing.”

But what is important is the displacement, by which a discursive antagonism replaces an institutional relation. The enemy constituted through populist discourse stands in for the state itself.

At the same time, the populist leader, or rather the tendentially empty signifier that is populist articulation’s nodal point, comes to incarnate the sovereign. First the leader is identified with the group: “The equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader.” The more successful this process, the more the populist leader can claim to represent the social whole, the “populus.” Of course, in that a populist movement emerges in opposition to the state, this constitution of a “signifying totality” has to be distinguished from “actual ruling”: the latter would require institutional power, the power to satisfy or deny social demands. But to the extent that a hegemonic project can persuasively claim to represent a “people,” its leader can claim to embody the popular sovereignty denied by an illegitimately dominant “enemy.” Indeed, for Laclau, it is the logic of populism, with its production of empty signifiers, that constructs sovereignty itself, defined as the “void [that] points to the absent fullness of the community.”

The principle of populism’s transcendent “empty universality” is also the principle that forms sovereign power. And on this basis, the populist leader demands that his
sovereignty be recognized, that he correct the system’s representational deficit and assume the mantle of the state.

These, then, are populism’s characteristic moves regarding the state. First, it displaces the state through the construction of a discursive antagonist. In the process, institutional power, the power to grant or deny demands, is replaced by an image of power, projected onto an enemy declared illegitimate; the stakes of the political game become representational legitimacy, rather than the satisfaction of demands. Second, the populist leader assumes representational transcendence, and demands the right to be named sovereign and so, in turn, to take the place of the state. All this is accomplished by means of a sleight of hand that substitutes hegemony for other forms of politics, and sovereignty for any other conception of power. Hence populism can gain institutional power while still maintaining an anti-institutional critique directed at the forever displaced objects of its antagonistic discourse. But instead of offering a critique of this process, Laclau mirrors it, accepting that hegemony is indeed politics tout court. As I will show, this is true even in Politics and Ideology, despite its ostensible Marxism and anti-statism.

In Politics and Ideology, Laclau invokes a number of different names to describe the dominant pole in a given social formation. Most often it is the “power bloc” (sometimes “the power bloc as a whole”), but not always. Compare the following three descriptions of the same basic antagonism: “the ‘people’/power bloc confrontation . . . a synthetic-antagonistic complex with regard to the dominant ideology . . . antagonism towards the State” (emphasis added). For good measure, in this brief passage Laclau also refers to “an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc” (emphasis added).139 He is indifferent as to whether the dominant pole is a bloc, an ideology, the state, or some combination of the three; these names are for all intents the
same. Further on, with a single phrase he naturalizes the articulation that treats these
terms as if they were equivalent: “To the extent,” Laclau argues, “that popular
resistance exerts itself against a power external and opposed to ‘the people,’ that is to
say, against the very form of the State, the resolution of ‘the people’/power bloc
contradiction can only consist in the suppression of the State as an antagonistic force
with respect to the people.” To say “a power external and opposed to ‘the people’” is
also “to say . . . the very form of the State,” which is also to say “the State as an
antagonistic force.”

Laclau constructs a veritable chain of equivalences with the state, displacing its
properties on to a series of other names: the form of the state is equated with the state;
the state with an antagonistic force; the state with the power bloc; the power bloc with
“a power external and opposed to ‘the people.’” His indifference to names is not
inconsequential: it enables Laclau to justify populism in this text, as we have seen, by
claiming that “in socialism . . . coincide the highest form of ‘populism’ and the
resolution of the ultimate and most radical of class conflicts.” For it is because its “class
interests” lead it to the suppression of the State as an antagonistic force” that the working
class is “the only social sector which can aspire to the full development of ‘the
people’/power bloc contradiction, that is to say, to the highest and most radical form of
populism.” Again, “that is to say.” Again, the slip between “the State as an
antagonistic force” and the “power bloc.” And so the final equivalence: “The highest
and most radical form of populism” is socialism.

Laclau had embarked on his discussion of populism in Politics and Ideology by
stressingly the distinction between class struggles and popular struggles. Here, however,
the two coincide. Laclau had also been at pains to refute the class reductionist argument
that classes are simply represented at the cultural or political levels, but suddenly the
proletariat’s objective “class interests” are now directly identified with the antagonism between people and power bloc. Laclau had distinguished between discursive articulations of a vague external power (the oligarchy, traitors and foreign agents), and opposition to the very form of the state (if this is indeed the essence of socialism): indeed, distinguishing between power bloc and state enabled his distinction between right and left populisms, in that left and right would construct distinct images of power, in line with their differing articulations of class antagonism. Yet he now annuls these differences and ascribes a single essence to populism: populism is essentially “against the very form of the State” in so far as it is “against a power external and opposed to ‘the people.’” This identification of power bloc with state should be interrogated by any critical analysis of populism, not assumed by the casual phrase “that is to say” that takes for granted the equivalences populism itself establishes.

In his early, Marxist phase, then, Laclau argues for a socialist populism through a double equivocation conflating the double antagonism that, he himself argues, structures social totality: first he identifies socialism with antagonism towards the (very form of the) state; second he claims that populism is also inevitably against the state. He can then claim that the two are (in their highest forms) one, despite his initial descriptions of socialism as a class antagonism and populism as an antagonism toward the power bloc. Laclau’s argument is simply and unreflectively populist, again according to his own definitions. For Laclau has shown how populism mobilizes anti-statist sentiment, only to demobilize this social energy by presenting the abstract figure of the power bloc as the object of this conflict, substituting discursive antagonism for anti-authoritarian struggle. Laclau repeats this move in his slip between power bloc and state, his substitution of the “form of the State” for state structures. He confuses what political theorist Philip Abrams terms the “idea of the state” with the “state structure”
The various institutions that compose the state are conflated with the image of its sovereignty. Or as John Frow puts it, “what is at stake [for Laclau] is not directly the power bloc but rather a particular discursive representation of the power bloc.” And as Frow goes on to argue, the result is a characteristically populist “drastic simplification of the political space.”

In practice, Laclau’s own analysis of Peronism ultimately depends on a consideration of state structures and state power: Peronism’s distinguishing feature turns out to be a form of neutralization that “consisted essentially in allowing the persistence of various ‘elites’ which based their support of the regime upon antagonistic articulating projects, and in confirming State power as a mediating force between them.” It is the state, then, that anchors the populist project. Institutional mediation compensates for unresolved discursive tensions and fissures. Indeed, rather than being a “starting point for a scientific study of political ideologies,” as he claims in Politics and Ideology, Laclau’s analysis of Peronism might direct renewed attention to the ways in which social order in fact is secured beneath discourse, and despite the manifest failure of hegemonic projects. We need to address the inarticulacy of power, its direct application on bodies through habit and affect. For finally even Laclau has to concede that the Peronist state “coalesced very few ideological symbols” and relied on structural mechanisms instead. Peronism resists the ideological analysis that hegemony theory asserts: Laclau argues that its “renowned ideological poverty and lack of official doctrine” can only be explained “by this mediating character of the State and Perón himself.” I will argue in my final chapter that what is going on here is the conversion of constituent into constituted power that constructs the illusion of mediation.

The importance of the state to Peronism is so obvious as hardly to require mention, were it not for Laclau’s contention of populism’s essential anti-statism. The Argentine sociologist Guido Di Tella, for example, is one of many to observe how in Perón’s first administration “the State increased its role substantially” in the economy, in line with its policy of Import Substitution Industrialization. The sociologist and historian Juan José Sebreli emphasizes Peronism’s subordination of legislative and judicial power to the state and, in similar vein, Luis Alberto Romero describes the state under Perón in
terms of “a restructuring of democratic institutions and a subordination of constitutional powers to the executive branch, where the leader resided.” The Peronist state absorbed and ignored ideological contradictions, becoming “a mixed brew of everything that took Perón’s fancy, a capacious cauldron to which he always added his personal seasoning regardless of previous ideological commitments, and unconcerned about any contradictions between words and actions.” It was thanks to its capaciousness and expansiveness, and despite its authoritarian tendencies, that the Peronist state could also encourage a “highly vigorous democratizing movement,” coordinating a “singular form of democracy” by mobilizing civil society as an extension of state logic. Peronist society as a whole was organized around and permeated by a state that was increasingly biopolitical in its constant presence in everyday life. The sociologists Juan Carlos Portantiero and Emilio de Ipola therefore describe Peronism in terms of its coordinated “state fetishism.” As I discuss below, cultural critic John Kraniauskas adds to this observation with his discussion of Evita’s specifically fetishized role. Elsewhere, de Ipola’s critique of Laclau argues that the state not only mediates discursive claims, but also secures ground won apparently through hegemonic struggle. “After his electoral triumph,” de Ipola points out, “Perón had not only implanted his hegemony in the field of the popular: he then controlled also the material means to maintain and consolidate that hegemony.” De Ipola’s conclusion stresses the “link between the relations of power, crystallized in apparatuses, hierarchies, and practices that legitimate or disqualify social actors, allowing them to speak or reducing them to silence, and the relation between the discourses themselves.” But Laclau consistently conflates apparatuses and discourses, presenting an expanded concept of discourse that fails to distinguish between signifying and asignifying elements.

Many critics have denounced Laclau and Mouffe’s abandonment of class and their denial of economic determination. But the problem with Laclau’s position appears equally in his earliest work, which does indeed argue for the priority of class and the fundamental importance of the economy. The flaw in hegemony theory is not so much its underestimation of the economy; it is that it substitutes culture for state, ideological representations for institutions, discourse for habit. Hegemony theory is a conceptualization of politics as populism that never escapes its own populist grounds,
and so is destined to repeat a characteristic sleight of hand, “that is to say,” that gives us a series of displacements effected through a chain of assumed equivalence. This same sleight of hand now marks cultural studies, undermining its potential for critical analysis. The dream of abstracting some radical impulse from populism’s anti-authoritarian and rebellious sentiments is shipwrecked on the fact that, under the guise of subversion, populist movements only ever construct and consolidate sovereignty, authorizing a people whose rebelliousness never rises above sentimentality.

Populism, as exemplified by classical political movements such as Peronism and contemporary intellectual tendencies such as cultural studies, and as theorized by Laclau, entails a systematic set of substitutions. It presents us with people instead of classes (or multitude), gestures instead of analysis (or struggle), morality instead of politics (or ethics), sentiment instead of affect (or habit), socialized identities instead of social forces (or preindividual singularities), transcendence instead of immanence (or quasi-causes), unity instead of multiplicity (or contingency), the body of the sovereign instead of the power of the state (or constituent power). As John Kraniauskas observes of such populist moves, quoting Freud on fetishism, in each case “something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor.”

Through these serried substitutions, populism constructs a drastically simplified image of social space. What has been substituted is quickly forgotten, erasing also the process that has constructed this falsely simplified scenario of easy dichotomies, crystal-clear antagonisms, and well-worn assumptions. It is true that these disavowals conserve some remainder of what has gone, but theoretical analysis must move beyond the mere examination of such symptoms, which is all that cultural studies and hegemony theory can provide.
Above all, populism presents us with hegemony instead of any other conception of politics, and portrays the state’s expansiveness as though it were cultural subversion or a flourishing civility. In the name of a purported counter-hegemony of anti-authoritarian sentiment, populism’s self-erasing state logic permeates and coordinates everyday life. In a relatively early article tracing Marxist theories of the state, Laclau himself equivocates on this point. He notes that state logic has come to organize society as a whole: “The form of the state defines the basic articulations of a society and not solely the limited field of a political superstructure”; but he immediately disavows this insight by claiming that “political struggle has passed now to extend to the totality of civil society.” This only repeats the populist substitution: the state is conflated with civil society, political struggle with sovereign command. Hegemony theory can only glimpse and then foreclose the state. So long, therefore, as political analysis remains confined to the theory of hegemony, as is contemporary cultural studies, it will remain confined to a logic of populism unable either to differentiate itself from the populism of the right or even to recognize and so criticize the transformations and substitutions that populism demands and entails. Yet it will be anxiously haunted by the reminders of what has been lost: the traces of the state; subaltern excess. Rather than fixating on discursive articulations within civil society (a concept I examine in more detail in the next chapter), we might do better to re-examine the differential inter-imbrication of culture and state. Or rather, we might again see the state as what has to be explained, in its dependence on but distinction from the affective performativity and cultural habit that sustain it.
Beyond Cultural Studies: Habit

Populism structures both hegemony theory and cultural studies. Indeed, it gives cultural studies what little coherence and consistency the discipline has. The attractions and seductions of this populism are clear: it provides a broad terrain of activity and analysis, expanding the sphere of politics from the formal arena of debate and policy-making to the swathe of everyday practices that constitute culture. Populism promises to open up another front for a politicized undertaking that has lost its way with the decline of Marxism. It seems to ring true in a context in which the cultural economy is taken as seriously as any other sector of the economy, in which the sound bite dominates as traditional political allegiances wither, in which the media are more extensive and more influential than ever, in which subjectivity is molded ever more by taste and consumption, in short in which, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “‘culture’ has become a veritable ‘second nature.’” At the same time, in this same context, populism is also a source of anxiety and uncertainty. Its uselessness as a political compass is evident as soon as one withdraws from the passion and fervor that the populist impulse itself inspires. After all, is not the anti-globalization critique of Americanism, along the lines of the French activist Jose Bové’s campaign against McDonalds, as populist as the celebration of US popular culture and taste upon which so much of McDonalds’ own image and advertising depend?

One response might be to argue that populism is less compass than weathervane: simply a more or less neutral reflex, an inevitable accompaniment to political activity. In some ways, this is Laclau’s position: politics is inconceivable without populism; so although populism has no pre-determined political valence, it should be welcomed
rather than denigrated. What would be important therefore would be to differentiate between populisms, between populism as a progressive project and populism as the ground for conservative reaction. There are, however, two problems with this position: first, as I have shown, the difficulty of resolving to any satisfaction how to distinguish between left and right populism; and second, more importantly, that populism itself does political work. By presenting hegemony as the only conceivable form of politics, populism helps conceal other modes of political command or struggle. It enables a series of substitutions that fetishize culture at the expense of the institutional, and establish transcendence and sovereignty in place of immanent processes or micropolitical struggles. Populism simplifies the double register through which the social coheres, obscuring the mechanisms by which transcendence is produced from immanence, subjective emotion from impersonal affect, signifying discourse from asignifying habit, people from multitude, and constituted from constituent power, precisely because it is one of those mechanisms. The task of posthegemony theory is to uncover what has been obscured in these substitutions, and to outline the means by which their suppression has been achieved, enforced, naturalized, and legitimated. In sum, social order has to be disarticulated, to reveal both its mute underside and the process by which it has been ventriloquized, made to speak but in another’s voice.

Above all, hegemony theory presents social order as the result of either coercion or consent. Dominance is achieved, it suggests, either by imposition from above or through agreement from below. People are either overpowered by a transcendent state, or they willingly subscribe to a dominant ideology. But pure coercion is unthinkable, so hegemony theory posits that there is always at least a residue of willed acquiescence. People stick together, forming societies and submitting to their laws, because in one way or another they think the same things, in the same ways. Hence the culturalism of
cultural studies: communities achieve consistency and coherence through a shared set of beliefs and ideologies. Hegemony theory is the last gasp of the contractualism that has justified the bounded forms of modern social formations at least since the sixteenth century. However modified, it is still a rationalism: people give up their consent because it seems reasonable to do so, given what they know and believe (even if those beliefs are themselves ideological or irrational). But this dichotomy between coercion and consent is a debilitating simplification.

Ask a populist subject “why?” and a response is seldom forthcoming. Peronism reveals the ways in which populist politics are in fact structured by habit, rather than belief. So in [Resistance and Integration](#), Daniel James reports that he “was constantly struck by the seemingly unquestioning identification, particularly amongst militants, of working-class activism, resistance and organization with being a Peronist.” Peronism, he continues, “seems to have become almost an accepted part of working-class ‘common sense’ in the 1955-73 period.” James shows Peronism’s lack of any persistent ideological affiliations, and so refutes the “pervasive form of explanation . . . which has emphasised the continued adherence of workers to populist ideology.” Workers’ identification with Peronism was fluid, mutable, and inarticulate, especially during Perón’s long exile: “Peronism had become by the late 1950s a sort of protean, malleable commonplace of working-class identification.” James therefore turns our attention from ideological interpellations to “the ontological status of the working class,” picking up on Raymond Williams’s notoriously underdeveloped concept of “structures of feeling” and Pierre Bourdieu’s concern with the structuring of “private experience” through an embodied habitus.

James’s subsequent book, *Doña María’s Story*, continues this focus on Peronism’s embodiment in the Argentine working class, examining the physical monuments and architecture of the working-class town of Berisso, and so the unspoken political geography of a “profoundly Peronist place.” He analyzes the testimony of Peronist activism as a performance whose “final coherence” is at best “elusive,” showing how it is elaborated around an affective kernel of “ultimately indigestible feelings” that can never fully be narrativized, that “must simply remain in tense coexistence within the story” told about it. Peronism’s structure of feeling is in tension with the ideological articulation that its
hegemonic project imposes. Peronism attempted to resolve this tension through a “melodramatic fix” that would harness the energy of plebeian affect to reinforce its characteristically populist dualisms.\textsuperscript{158} We see the same narrative appropriation of habit and affect in Auyero’s \textit{Poor People’s Politics}, for which Peronism is embodied as a performance that is “taken for granted, unreflective, and outside the realm of discursive consciousness.” Peronism’s affective register, its adherents’ surrender to an “imaginary ‘bond of love,’” is only later overcoded by ideology.\textsuperscript{159} Contemporary shantytown activists’ political practice is a mode of “performing Evita” that faithfully mimics Eva Perón’s own role within Peronist dramaturgy. Or consider Kraniauskas’s description of Evita as fetish, “the paradoxical structure of Peronism’s political negation of modernity--simultaneously mobilizing and demobilizing the working class and women--is written right into her body, which itself becomes literally ‘seized by meaning’ and by a love that is not, quite, patriotic.”\textsuperscript{160} Seized by meaning and seized by love: this is populism’s double register.
Peronism employed imagery, technology, and dramaturgy to demarcate its proper spheres of social, symbolic, and physical space. Its paradigmatic orchestration of a primal populist scene took place in Buenos Aires’s central square, the Plaza de Mayo, in front of the presidential palace or “Casa Rosada” from whose balcony Evita and Juan addressed the masses below. In its rallies, Peronism staged the social collectivity, the people in its positivity, as presumed subjects and objects of a mutual and reflecting gaze between leader and mass. It was Evita’s image above all, on the balcony of with “her arms . . . always raised, encouragingly, in a gesture of love,”¹⁶¹ that, as historian Julie Taylor suggests, “functioned as intermediary between Perón and his people, between governmental machinery and governed masses.”¹⁶² For Kraniauskas, as Evita mobilized and organized popular affect, she “invades the political space of the state” and becomes a “hybrid figure, emerging at the interface of the cultural and the political, where the logics of education and entertainment fold into the logic of the State, making the latter a peculiar kind of stage and of Eva Perón herself, a peculiar kind of fetish.” The Peronist regime referred its followers back to the October 17, 1945 demonstration that founded its power, rewrote its plot by constructing Evita as its central organizing principle, and engrained that version of that mythic event into their bodies. In the process, Kraniauskas notes, the state disappears as “(a conservative military) anxiety produces a substitution . . . through disavowal (the containment of working-class and female ‘barbarism’).”¹⁶³ Kraniauskas comments that it is when Evita becomes embalmed body that her functionality is perfected; but alive, Evita was already half cadaver. See the famous image of the last October 17 celebration that she attended, in 1951: Evita was by then almost completely incapacitated by cancer; Perón is seen behind her, supporting her dying body but also sheltering behind it. Historian Mariano Plotkin’s analysis of the annual celebrations and recreations of October 17, as well as the regime’s similar use of May Day parades, concludes that “toward the end of Perón’s regime . . . May Day and the Seventeenth of October were no longer popular festivals, but highly ritualized celebrations organized entirely by the state.”¹⁶⁴ Both present and absent in these performances, propping up and protected by its fetishized substitute, the Peronist state produced its people and, reciprocally, its own sovereignty which was then encrusted within the habit of being Peronist. In my final chapter I will return to this scene, to uncover the constituent power of the multitude that underlies it. For ultimately, the Peronist state revealed itself to be remarkably fragile, for
all the technological apparatus it employed to sustain the fetish. In one of Evita’s very few public outings just weeks before she died in July 1952, to attend her husband’s re-inauguration as president, her body was held up by a support made of metal and wax, hidden under a flowing fur coat. And famously, following the coup that overthrew Perón in 1955, her corpse embarked upon a long, mysterious journey that led to an unmarked grave in a Rome cemetery. Something always escapes.

In the end, populism, and so also cultural studies, is an anti-politics. No wonder cultural studies has been derided for its complicity with the status quo, however radical its rhetoric. It is not so much that its practitioners are victims of bad faith. It is that cultural studies takes hegemony at its own word, and so misses the ways in which hegemonic processes stand in for other, more complex, means by which dominance is asserted and reproduced. If there is anything that can be salvaged from populism, it is its antipathy to representation. In the second half of this book, in a discussion of non-representational and un-narratable affect, habit, and the multitude, I outline a theory of posthegemony that can better account for dominance and social order. We need such a new theory because cultural studies merely reinforces sovereignty, the notion that power comes from above, and that the only options for the dominated are negotiation or acquiescence. It is blind to the ways in which state institutions emerge from immanent processes, and secure their legitimacy well below consciousness, with no need of words. So long as cultural studies continues to take these processes for granted, then all its articulate verbosity is no more than a form of complicitous silence.
Notes


7 Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 4; Thompson, “The Long Revolution,” 33.

8 See Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, The Empire Strikes Back, and Women’s Study Group, Women Take Issue.


12 Sarlo, Scenes from Postmodern Life, 55.

13 Moreiras, The Exhaustion of Difference, 8.

14 Ibid., 247, 251, 241.


18 See Grossberg, Dancing in Spite of Myself.

19 Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of This Place, 78.


22 Crasweller, Perón, 10.
“La fiesta del monstruo” is included, along with many other such stories, in Olguín, *Perón vuelve*.


27 McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, 13, 32.

28 Beasley-Murray, “Unpopular Cultural Studies.”

29 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 188.


32 Ibid., 12, 13.

33 Bell, *Populism and Elitism*, 3.

34 Ibid., 190, 175.

35 Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 12.

36 Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, 44.


38 Quoted in Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, 43.


40 Quoted in Iturrieta, *El pensamiento peronista*, 42.

41 Ibid., 41.

42 Perón, *El pensamiento político de Perón*, 121-23.

43 Perón, *Los vendepatria*, 310, 311, 315.

44 Ibid., 181, 109-13, 317.

46 Iturrieta, *El pensamiento peronista*, 42.


48 Iturrieta, *El pensamiento peronista*, 42.


52 Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 3; Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 6.

53 Hall and Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, 73.

54 See, for instance, Hawkes, *That Shakesperherian Rag*.


56 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 328.

57 Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, 106.

58 Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” 239.

59 Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 78.

60 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 328, 333.


64 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 332; Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” 267-78; Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, 376.

65 Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, 394.


69 Quoted in Ciria, Política y cultura popular, 311. See also Perón, El pensamiento político, 123-25.

70 Laclau, Emancipation(s), 36, 55.

71 Taylor, Eva Perón, 141.

72 Laclau, Emancipation(s), 56.

73 See di Tella, Argentina under Perón, 66.

74 Moreiras, “Pastiche Identity,” 207.

75 Frow, Cultural Studies and Cultural Value, 79.

76 Belsey, “From Cultural Studies to Cultural Criticism?” 19.

77 Hall, “The ‘First’ New Left,” 36, 32, 36.


80 McGuigan, Cultural Populism, 5, 244.

81 Agger, Cultural Studies as Critical Theory, 194.

82 Hall, “The Toad in the Garden,” 40.


85 Hall, The Hard Road to Renewal, 165.

86 Hall, “The Toad in the Garden,” 53.


88 Critchley, “Why I Love Cultural Studies,” 64.

89 Harris, From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure, 3, 5. See also Lee, Life and Times of Cultural Studies, 142.

91 Turner, British Cultural Studies, 177.

92 Quoted in Brennan, Wars of Position, 240.


94 Sparks, “Stuart Hall,” 95.

95 Critchley and Marchant, “Introduction,” 3; Brennan, Wars of Position, 245.


98 Laclau, New Reflections, 200.


100 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, 131, 169-70.

101 Laclau, On Populist Reason, 43.

102 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, 7, 69.

103 Ibid., 75, 85, 136.

104 Laclau, Politics and Ideology, 159, 158.


106 Laclau, Politics and Ideology, 160, 161, 162.

107 Ibid., 160; Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, 127.

108 Laclau, Politics and Ideology, 166, 174, 173.

109 Ibid., 131, 130.

110 Laclau, “Populism,” 42.


112 Laclau, Politics and Ideology, 172-73.

113 Laclau, On Populist Reason, 225; Laclau, “Populism,” 47.

115 Ibid., 189, 190, 191.

116 Laclau, *Empancipation(s)*, 54, 55, 56.


118 Ibid., 217, 221.

119 Ibid., 193.

120 Ibid., 217.


122 Ibid., 174, 196.


124 Ibid., 167, 138, 139.


126 See Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica*.

127 James, *Doña María’s Story*, 220.

128 Auyero, *Poor People’s Politics*, 182-204.

129 Ibid., 202.

130 Laclau, “Populism,” 45.

131 Ibid.

132 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 73, 89, 116, 125

133 Ibid., 73. Laclau, “Populism,” 36.


135 Laclau, “Populism,” 36.


137 Ibid., 86, 97, 105.
138 Ibid., 100, 170.

139 Laclau, Politics and Ideology, 196, 172-73, 173.

140 Ibid., 196.

141 Ibid.

142 Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” 75, 76.

143 Frow, Cultural Studies and Cultural Value, 78, 80.

144 Laclau, Politics and Ideology, 197.

145 Ibid., 198.

146 Di Tella, Argentina under Perón, 18.

147 Sebreli, Los deseos imaginarios del peronismo, 64-67; Romero, A History of Argentina, 108.

148 Luna, Perón y su tiempo, 1:408.

149 Romero, A History of Argentina, 111.


151 De Ipola, “Populismo e ideología,” 949, 960.

152 See, most notably, Geras, “Post-Marxism?”


154 Laclau, “Teorías marxistas del estado,” 54.

155 Jameson, Postmodernism, ix.

156 James, Resistance and Integration, 264, 262.

157 Ibid., 264, 259, 97, 30.

158 James, Doña María’s Story, 16, 211, 212, 254-55.

159 Auyero, Poor People’s Politics, 145, 147.

160 Kraniauskas, “Political Puig,” 129.
161 Quoted in Poneman, *Argentina*, caption to plate 2.


163 Kraniauskas, “Political Puig,” 126, 123, 131.