

ARTICULATION AND THE LIMITS OF METAPHOR'

Ernesto Laclau

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actividades@consellodacultura.org

Ernesto Laclau

Ernesto Laclau is Professor of Politics at the University of Essex, UK, and Distinguished Professor of Humanities and Rhetorical Studies at Northwestern University, USA. Author of *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London, Verso, 1977; *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, London, Verso, 1990; *Emancipation(s)*, London, Verso, 1996; and *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005. Co-author (with Chantal Mouffe) of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 1985; and (with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek) of *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality. New Dialogues on the Left*, London, Verso, 2000. Editor of *The Making of Political Identities*, London, Verso, 1994.

ARTICULATION AND THE LIMITS OF METAPHOR'

por Ernesto Laclau

I

In a well-known essay Gérard Genette discusses the question of the interdependence between metaphor and metonymy in the structuration of Proust narrative. Following the pathbreaking work of Stephen Ullmann, he shows how, on top of the central role traditionally granted to metaphor in Proust's work, there are other semantic movements of a typical metonymic nature whose presence is, however, necessary, for metaphor to succeed in its figural effects. A hypallage such '*sécheresse brune des cheveux*' – instead of '*sécheresse des cheveux bruns*' – would be a typical example of such metonymical displacements. Genette, however, insists from the very beginning, that it is not a simple question of recognising the coexistence of both metaphor and metonymy in the Proustian text, but of showing how they require each other, how without the one shading into the other neither of them could play the specific role which is expected from them in the constitution of a narrative economy. In his words: 'far from being antagonistic and incompatible, metaphor and metonymy sustain and interpenetrate each other, and to give its proper place to the second will not consist in drawing a concurrent list opposed to that of metaphors, but rather in showing the relations of "coexistence" within the relation of analogy itself: the role of metonymy within metaphor'.

Genette gives several examples of such interconnection. Thus, he refers to the numerous cases in which 'bell tower' (*clocher*) is metaphorically (analogically) related to 'ear' (*épis*), or to 'fish', depending on the environment of the church – rural in the first case, and maritime in the second. This means that the spatial relation of contiguity is the source of metaphoric analogical effects. 'Ear – bell tower (or *église – meule*) in the middle of the fields, 'fish – bell tower' near the sea, 'purple – bell tower' over the vineyards, '*brioche – bell tower*' at the time of the sweets, 'pillow – bell – tower' at the beginning of the night, there is clearly in Proust a recurrent, almost stereotyped stylistic scheme, which one could call cameleo – bell tower (*clocher-caméleo*). Thus there is a sort of resemblance by contagion. The metaphor finds its support in a metonymy. Quoting Jean Ricardou, Genette enounces the principle: 'qui se ressemblent s'assemblent (et réciproquement)'.

Many more examples of this essential solidarity between contiguity and analogy are given: that between autoctonous dishes and *vin de pays*; between peintures and their geographical framework; between the desire for peasant women and their rural milieu; between relatives; between images succeeding each other in diegetic metaphors; between landscapes and their reflection in the glass doors of a bookshelf, etc. In all these cases we see that, without the mutual implication between metaphor and metonymy, it would be impossible to ensure the unity of a discursive space. Proust himself was only partially aware of this mutual implication and tended to privilege its metaphorical side. As Genette says: 'The indestructible solidarity of writing, whose magic formula Proust seems to be looking for ("only metaphor can give a sort of *eternity* to style", he will say in his article on Flaubert) cannot only result from the horizontal link established by the metonymical trajectory; but one cannot see how could it result from just the vertical link of the metaphoric relation either. Only the crossing of one by the other can subtract the object of the description, and the description itself from "time's contingencies", that is, from all contingency; only the mutual crossing of a metonymic net and a metaphoric chain ensures the coherence, the necessary cohesion of *text*'.

Let us see how this crossing takes place. Central to it is the structure of 'involuntary memory'. Apparently we have, in the mechanism of reminiscence, the case of a pure metaphor, devoid of any metonymic contamination (the taste of the Madeleine, the position of the foot in the uneven pavement, etc). But the punctual character of that analogical memory is immediately overflowed. As Genette shows, it is only retroactively that the analysis finds that reminiscence starts from an analogy which it would isolate as its 'cause'. 'In fact, the real experience begins, not by grasping an identity of sensation, but by a feeling of "pleasure" of "happiness", which first appears without the notion of its cause'. Although the examples in *Swann* and in *Le Temps Retrouvé* differ in their unfolding, the essential point is, in both cases, that the chain of reminiscences goes, in a metonymic way, far beyond the original analogy (in *Swann*, the cup leads to the reminiscence of the room, from the room to the house, then to the village and from there to the whole region). '(T)he essential here is to note that this first

explosion [the analogic detonator] is always accompanied also and necessarily, by a kind of chain reaction which proceeds, not by analogy but by contiguity, and which is very precisely the moment in which the metonymic contagion (or, to use Proust term, the *irradiation*) substitutes the metaphoric evocation’.

For Genette it is this crossing between metaphor and metonymy that ensures that there is a narrative. If we had only had the metaphoric dimension, *A la recherche du temps perdu* would not have been a novel but a succession of lyrical moments without any temporal chaining. So he concludes: ‘Without metaphor Proust (approximately) says, there are no true memories; we add for him (and for everybody): without metonymy, there is no chaining of memories, no *history*, no novel. For it is metaphor that retrieves lost Time, but it is metonymy which reanimates it, that puts it back in movement: which returns it to itself and to its true “essence”, which is its own escape and its own Search. So here, only here – through metaphor but *within* metonymy – it is here that the Narrative (*Récit*) begins.’

A few remarks before taking leave of Genette. He has illuminated very well the relation of mutual implication between metaphor and metonymy which alone creates the unity of the text. That mutual implication has, thus, *totalizing* effects. He quotes, for example, the following passage from Proust:

‘Je me jetais sur mon lit; et, comme si j’avais été sur la chouchette d’un de ces bateaux que je voyais assez près de moi et que la nuit on s’étonner de voir se déplacer lentement dans l’obscurité, comme des cygnes assombrés et silencieux mais qui ne dorment pas, j’étais entouré de tous côtés des images de la mer’ (I, p804)

And Genette comments: ‘One remarks here the explicit concurrence of the metaphoric relation (*comme si*) and of the metonymic one (*près de moi*); and the second metaphor is also itself metonymic, grafted into the first (*navires = cygnes*)’.

The question which remains, however, to be posed, is that concerning the kind of unity that the articulation metaphor/metonymy manages to constitute. Granting – as I think it should be – that such a unity is vital to the coherence of a text, there are several possibilities as to how to conceive the interaction between these two dimensions. Genette does not, certainly, suggest that such an interaction should be conceived as the adjustment of the pieces of a clockwork mechanism, and the very terms that he uses (*recouplement, croisée*) suggest that he has something considerably more complex in mind. He does not, however, advance very much in determining the specific nature of that *recouplement*, largely, I think, because his main concern is to show the *presence* of both tropes in the Proustian text. Discussing Jakobson’s distinction

between metonymy as the prosaic dimension of discourse and metaphor as the poetic one, he asserts that 'one should consider Proustian writing as the most extreme attempt towards this mixed stage, fully assuming and activating the two axes of language, which it would certainly be laughable to call "poem in prose" or "poetic prose", and which constitute, absolutely and in the full sense of the term, the Text'. For the issues that we are going to discuss in this essay it is crucial to precisely determine the logics involved in the articulation of axes of that 'mixed stage'.

II

Genette is clearly conscious that his use of the categories 'metaphor' and 'metonymy' is somewhat idiosyncratic, for it goes beyond what canonical rhetoric would have ascribed to them. There is in Proust, for instance, a marked preference for 'continuous metaphors' (*metaphores suivies*). 'There are very rare in his work those fulgurant rapprochements suggested by a single word, the only ones for which classical rhetoric reserved the name metaphor'. In many cases the analogical comparisons take place in a continuous way, occupying several pages of the text. But also, it could seem abusive to call metonymy a contiguity of memories which does not involve any relation of substitution. However, as Genette points out, 'it is the nature of the semantic relation what is at stake, and not the form of the figure ... Proust himself has given an example of such an abuse by calling metaphor a figure which, in his work, is most frequently a comparison explicit and without substitution, so that the effects of contagion to which we have referred are nearly the equivalent, on the axis of contiguity, of what Proustian metaphors are in the axis of analogy – and are, in relation to metonymy *stricto sensu*, what Proustian metaphors are vis-à-vis classical metaphors ... The signal-sensation becomes very quickly in Proust a sort of *equivalent* of the context to which it is associated, as the "*petite phrase*" of Vinteuil has become, for Swann and Odette, "as the national air of their love": that is, its emblem'.

This passage is crucial. Genette speaks, on the one hand, of an 'abusive' use of rhetorical categories; but, on the other, he describes such an abuse as a transgression involving a movement from the *form* of the figure to a *semantic* relation which, while implicit in that form, goes clearly beyond those formal limits. So the following questions arise:

- 1/ If the semantic relations underlying both metaphor and metonymy transcend their rhetorical form, are not those relations anchored in signification as such, beyond classical rhetorical limits, or, alternatively, could not signification be seen as a generalised rhetoric – ie. that 'rhetoricity' could be seen not as an abuse but as constitutive (in the transcendental sense) of signification?

2/ In that case, is it enough to conceive that 'beyond' the rhetorical form as simply 'semantic' – which would necessarily attach it to the level of the signified? Would not the relationship signifier/signified involve a dialectic which takes us beyond semantics, to a materiality of the signifier which inscribes rhetorical displacements in the very structure of the sign? (Let us think in Freud's 'verbal bridges').

3/ Why are those displacements rhetorical in nature – ie. dominated by the basic opposition metaphor/metonymy?

4/ How to conceive of that opposition? Does it involve a relation of complementarity or, rather, a mutual limitation of their effects, so that metonymy establishes the limits of metaphor and vice versa?

One way of dealing with these questions would be to turn our attention to a theoretical approach which explicitly tries to link rhetorical categories to the structural dimensions of signification as such. I am referring to the famous essay by Roman Jakobson 'Two aspects of language and two types of aphasic disturbances'. Jakobson's starting point is that aphasia, being a disturbance in language use, 'must begin with the question of what aspects of language are impaired in the various species of such a disorder' (p69) . Such interrogation could not be answered 'without the participation of professional linguists familiar with the patterning and functioning of language' (p69).

As Jakobson points out, any linguistic sign presupposes its arrangement through two different operations: *combination and contexture*, by which the sign gets its location, in accordance with syntactic rules in an orderly succession with other signs; and *selection and substitution*, by which a sign can be replaced by others in any given structural location. This distinction corresponds to the two axes of language identified by Saussure: the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic (which he called associative). Combination and substitution were, for Saussure, the only two kinds of operation regulating the relations between signs. Starting from these two dimensions, Jakobson identifies two aphasic disturbances: the first, the *similarity disorder*, is related to the impossibility of substituting terms, while the ability of combining them remains impaired; in the second – the *contiguity disorder* – is that ability to combine words what is affected. Quite apart from aphasic disorders there is, according to Jakobson, a propensity in each language user to primordially rely on one or the other pole of language. 'In a well known psychological test, children are confronted with some noun and told to utter the first verbal response that comes into their heads. In this experiment two opposite linguistic predilections are invariably exhibited: the response is intended either as a substitute for, or as a complement to, the stimulus ... To the sti-

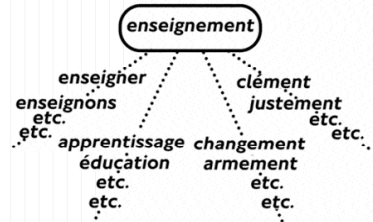
mulus *hut* one response was *burnt out*; another, *is a poor little house*. Both reactions are predicative; but the first creates a purely narrative context, while in the second there is a double connection with the subject *hut*: on the one hand, a positional (namely, syntactic) contiguity, and on the other a semantic similarity' (p90/91).

From these two axes of language – the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, substitution and combination – Jakobson moves to the rhetorical field: metonymy would correspond to combination and metaphor to substitution. And this alternative is not purely regional, but regulates human behaviour as a whole: 'In manipulating these two kinds of connection (similarity and contiguity) in both their aspects (positional and semantic) – selecting, combining and ranking them – an individual exhibits his personal style, his verbal predilections and preferences' (p91). 'The bipolar structure of language (or other semiotic systems) and, in aphasia, the fixation of one of these two poles to the exclusion of the other, require systematic comparative study. The retention of either of these alternatives in the two types of aphasia must be confronted with the predominance of the same pole in certain styles, personal habits, current fashions, etc.' (p93). This argument is, for Jakobson at the basis of a wider cultural interpretation. In verbal art we have that in poetry, lyrics privileges the metaphorical axis, as in romanticism and symbolism, while in realist art, whose epitome is the novel, metonymic displacements prevail. We have here again, in different terms, the argument that we had already found in Genette: Proust's major work is a novel and not a paratactic succession of lyrical moments, because metaphors are grounded in metonymic connections. For Jakobson this alternative applies equally to non-verbal art: in cubism, the succession of synecdoches is essentially metonymic, while in surrealism the quasi-allegorical images lean towards metaphor. And, in film, the plurality of angles and close-ups in Griffin's production is metonymic in nature, while in Charlie Chaplin and Eisenstein a metaphoric substitution of images structure the narrative. Indeed, any semiotic system can, for Jakobson, be understood in terms of the metaphoric/metonymic alternative.

The great merit of Jakobson's analysis is to have brought rhetorical categories to their specific location within linguistic structure, that is, to have shown that it is the latter which is at the root of all figural movements. Metaphor and metonymy, in that sense, are not just some figures among many, but the two fundamental matrices around which all other figures and tropes should be ordered. So the classification of rhetorical figures ceases to be a heteroclitite enumeration of forms and presents a clear structure anchored in their dependence on the fundamental dimensions of language. The transition from these dimensions to their specific rhetorical investment requires, however, some further considerations which I will summarise in the next few pages.

1/ There is, in the first place, the question of the transition from the axis of combination – the syntagmatic dimension – to metonymy. Because, although a topological movement along that dimension can only be conceived in metonymical terms, there is nothing in combination, considered in isolation, requiring that such a movement should take place. One can perfectly imagine a combination of terms following syntactic rules which would not involve any metonymic displacement. There is a zero-degree of the topological as far as combination is concerned. I can perfectly say ‘*sécheresse des cheveux bruns*’ instead of ‘*sécheresse brune des cheveux*’. If so, the figural would be something added to signification from outside, not an integral part of signification, and we would be back to the classical vision of the rhetorical as an adornment of language. So if we want to establish a more intimate connection between tropes and signification, we have to find a way of undermining the very possibility of a rhetorically neutral zero degree.

2/ This way is quickly found once we move from ‘combination’ to the second axis: ‘substitution/selection’. For here, on the difference with the axis of combination, there is no zero-degree: substitution (again, considered in isolation) is not submitted to any a priori syntactic rule. Saussure himself says it: ‘While a syntagm immediately calls the idea of an order of succession and of a determinate number of elements, the terms of an associative family do not present themselves in either a definite number or in a determinate order’. So the axis of substitution, *which is also constitutive of language*, subverts the very principle of structural locations on which the syntagmatic succession is grounded. Saussure’s diagram of the ensemble of possibilities opened by substitution is most revealing:



One of these possibilities is particularly important for our argument: the impossibility of confining substitution (and, as a result, topological transgression) to the order of the signified. Saussure asserts: ‘There is either double community of sense and form, or community of only either sense or form. Any word can evoke anything susceptible of being associated with it one way or another’. This is why we asserted before that the ‘beyond’ the rhetorical form cannot be confined to *semantic* associations. One possibility is that rhetorical movements do not only take place at the level of the signified but also at that of the signifier. (In Freud’s ‘rat man’, there is displacement from ‘rat’ to *Spielratten* (gambling) and thus the father (a gambler) is incorporated into the ‘rat complex’).

3/ Where do these considerations leave us as far as the relationship metaphor/metonymy is concerned? The main conclusion is that the notions of ‘analogy’ and ‘contiguity’ which are, respectively, the defining grounds of the two tropes, far

from being entirely different in nature, tend, on the contrary, to shade one into the other. Why so? Because both of them are transgressions of the same principle, which is the differential logic associated to the syntagmatic axis of the signifying system. The only distinction which it possible to establish between both figures is that, in the case of metonymy, the transgression of the structural locations that define the relations of combination is fully visible, while in metaphor, analogy entirely ignores those structural differentiations – associations, as Saussure shows, can move into the most different directions. In one sense it can be said that metaphor is the *telos* of metonymy, the moment in which transgression of the rules of combination has reached its point of no return: a new entity has come into existence which makes us forget the transgressive practices on which it is grounded. But without those transgressive practices which are essentially metonymic, the new metaphoric entity could not have emerged. As Genette shows in the case of Proust, analogy is always grounded in an originary contiguity.

We can draw here a conclusion which will be important for our political analysis: contiguity and analogy are not essentially different from each other but the two poles of a continuum. Let us give an example which I have discussed elsewhere. Let us suppose that there is a neighbourhood where there is racist violence and the only force capable of confronting it in that area are the trade unions. We would think that, normally, opposing racism is not the natural task of the trade unions, and that if it is taken up by them in that place it is by a contingent constellation of social forces. That is, that such a 'taking up' derives from a relation of contiguity – ie. that its nature is metonymic. Let us however think that this 'taking up' continues for a long period of time – in that case people would get accustomed to it and would tend to think that it is a normal part of trade union practices. So what was a case of contingent articulation becomes a part of the central meaning of the term 'trade union', 'contiguity' shades into 'analogy', 'metonymy' into 'metaphor'. Anticipating what we will discuss presently, we can say that this is inherent to the central political operation that we call 'hegemony': the movement from metonymy to metaphor, from *contingent* articulation to *essential* belonging. The name – of a social movement, of an ideology, of a political institution – is always the metaphorical crystallization of contents whose analogical links result from concealing the contingent contiguity of their metonymical origins. Conversely, the dissolution of a hegemonic formation involves the reactivation of that contingency: the return from a 'sublime' metaphoric fixation to a humble metonymic association.

4/ With this conclusion, however, we have only established: a) that the metaphoric/metonymic distinction has a matricial priority over other tropes – which it is possible, one way or the other, to reduce them to that matrix; and b) that such a matricial distinction does not simply refer to opposites but to the two poles of a continuum. But

to assert that rhetoricity is inherent to signification requires one more step: to show that without a tropological displacement signification could not find its own ground. I have tried to prove this point elsewhere and I will not repeat it here. Let us just say that this proof requires showing that signification, to be possible, requires its own closure, and that such a closure, because it involves the representation of an object which is both impossible and necessary, leads to the discursive production of empty signifiers. An empty signifier, as I have tried to show, is not just a signifier without a signified – which, as such, would be outside signification – but one signifying the blind spot inherent to signification, the point where signification finds its own limits and which however, if it is going to be possible at all, has to be represented as the meaningless precondition of meaning. In psychoanalytic terms, it would be the moment of the Real – the moment of distortion of the Symbolic, which is the precondition for the symbolic to constitute itself as totality. Now if the representation of something irrepresentable is the very condition of representation as such, this means that the (distorted) representation of this condition involves a *substitution*, that is, it can only be tropological in nature. And it is not a substitution to be conceived as a replacement of positive terms: it will involve giving a name to something which is essentially ‘nameless’, to an empty place. That is what gives its centrality to *catachresis*. And as any figural movement involves saying something more than what can be said through a literal term, catachresis is inherent to the figural as such, it becomes the trade mark of ‘rhetoricity’ as such.

5/ Let us go back, at this point, to the question of the ground of the metaphoric/metonymic continuum. Such a ground is given, as we have indicated, by the opposition of *any* tropological movement to the differential logic of combination inherent in the syntagmatic pole of signification. The difference between analogy and contiguity is that although both, through their substitutions, subvert such a differential logic, the visibility of what is subverted is very much present in the case of metonymy, while it tends to disappear in the case of metaphor. But if this subversion of combinatorial locations is inherent to rhetoricity, and rhetoricity is one of the dimensions of signification, this means that the latter can only be conceived as an endless process of successive institutions and subversions of different locations. That is why structuralism of strict observance has always tended to emphasise the syntagmatic pole of language at the expense of the paradigmatic one. But the ambiguity created by the operation of the two opposed logics of combination and substitution did not go entirely unnoticed, even in the work of Saussure. As Joan Copjec has pointed out: ‘Emphasizing the “synchronic perspective” of the linguist and his community, Saussure eventually decided to give priority to the contemporaneous system of signifiers operating at some (hypothetical) moment: the present. Forgetting for his own purposes his important stipulation that meaning must be determined retroactively, that is, forgetting the diachronic nature of meaning, he ultimately founded the science of

linguistics on the systematic totality of language. Thus, the structuralist argument ceased to be that the final signifier S2 determines that which has come before, S1 and became instead that S2 determines S1 *and* S1 determines S2; that is reciprocal oppositions stabilize meanings between coexistent terms; and differential relations no longer threatened the transvaluation of all preceding signifiers’.

If we incorporate, however, the diachronic perspective that Saussure himself enounced but forgot about, the consequence is clear: S2 can be the ground of the system only as far as it does not have a precise, particular location within it. The same argument can be presented in terms of set theory: what names the set cannot be part of it. What the rhetorical turn would add to this argument is that the term naming the set would be one of the particular elements of that set which splits its own identity between its own particularity and its role of signifying the totality. It is this double role which is at the root of all tropological displacement.

6/ Rhetoricity, as a dimension of signification, has no limits in its field of operation. It is coterminous with the very structure of objectivity. This is, first of all, connected with the notion of ‘discourse’ that we have used in our work, which is not exclusively or primarily linked to speech or writing, but to any signifying practice. This involves that it is equivalent to the social production of meaning, that is, to the very fabric of social life. There is no possibility of any strict separation between signification and action. Even the most purely constative of assertions has a performative dimension, and, conversely, there is no action which is not embedded in signification. For the same reason, there cannot be any stark separation between signification and affect, given that the latter is only constituted through differentially cathecting the various components of a signifying chain. As in Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’, words and actions (to which we should add affects), are part of an interdependent network). This means that linguistic categories such as the signifier/signified and syntagm/paradigm distinctions – if properly theorized – cease to belong to a regional discipline and come to define relations operating in the very terrain of a general ontology.

But, secondly if signification could close itself in syntagmatic terms – ie. if paradigmatic relations of substitution could themselves be reabsorbed by combinatorial rules – the role of rhetoric could not be ontologically constitutive. The structuralist closure of the relation of mutual determination between S1 and S2 could be achieved without any tropological device being brought into the picture, and so rhetoric would be relegated to its traditional role as adornment of language. But it is here that our remarks concerning the impossibility of achieving any closure of a signifying system without representing the irrepresentable become relevant. Once the centrality of catachresis is fully accepted, rhetoricity becomes a condition of signification and, as a result, of objectivity.

Thirdly, once the status of rhetoric has been recognised in its true ontological generality, relations that in this essay we have approached in a strictly topological terminology, are likely to be reproduced at different levels of analysis of human reality, even when the rhetorical nature of the distinction introduced is not perceived or recognised. In Psychoanalysis, to give the most obvious example, the rhetorical character of the workings of the unconscious has been explicitly recognised a long time ago. Condensation has been assimilated to metaphor and displacement to metonymy. The logic of the object *a* involves precisely an investment by which an ordinary object becomes a substitute for the unreachable Thing. In Lacan's terms; sublimation is to elevate an object to the dignity of the Thing. This operation of investment is cat-achrestical through and through. And Copjec, in her film studies, has shown how the close ups are not a part within the whole but a part which functions as the very condition of the whole, as its name, leading to that contamination between particularity and totality which, as we have seen, is at the heart of all topological movement.

In the rest of this essay I will try to show the operation of those distinctions that we have been discussing, within the political field. I will argue that the tensions that we have detected along the continuum metaphor/metonymy, can be seen as fully operating in the structuration of political spaces. I will discuss two cases. In the first, we will see an almost complete unilateralization of the metaphoric operation. In the second, a systematic blockage of the transition from metonymy to metaphor – ie. the prevention that contiguity shades into analogy. The first possibility I will illustrate with the logic of the general strike in Sorel; the second, with the political strategy of Leninism.

III

We have to give some precise theoretical status to the operation in which we engage ourselves when trying to see the way rhetorical categories are (implicitly) present in those logics governing the distinctions which structure areas different from those in which rhetoric was originally thought to be operative. We should basically avoid two temptations. The first is to make of rhetorical categories the locus of a hard transcendental, that is, of a level in which all pertinent theoretical distinctions would be formulated and which would reduce the terrains of their 'application' to the empiricity of 'case studies'. But we should also avoid the other extreme, consisting of seeing the two levels as fully enclosed universes, whose mutual relations could only be conceived in terms of purely external homologies. The question of the comparison itself between regions and levels should be conceived in topological terms: no level has a transcendental priority over the other, so that their very interaction should be seen as an area of displacements blurring the frontiers between the empirical and the tran-

scendental. Each should theoretically enrich the understanding of the other in an intertextuality which has no ultimate anchoring point.

If we try to think those organising categories of the political field which make possible a comparison without rhetorical analysis, we could advance the following thesis: politics is articulation of heterogeneous elements, and such an articulation is essentially tropological, for it presupposes the duality between institution and subversion of differential positions which we found as defining a rhetorical intervention. Social organisation is not, however, exclusively political; to a large extent it consists of differential positions which are not challenged by any confrontation between groups. It is only through this confrontation that the specifically political moment emerges, for it shows the contingent nature of articulations. Using a Husserlian distinction, we could say that the social is equivalent to a *sedimented* order, while the political would involve the moment of *reactivation*. Contemporary forms of technocratism would express this dissolution of the political and the reduction of the management of the community to a mere question of expertise. It is the replacement of politics by knowledge, whose earliest formulation we find in Plato.

We have here the basis for a comparison between this duality politics/administration and the two axes of signification – that of combinations and that of substitutions. The more social order is stable and unchallenged, the more institutional forms will prevail and will organise themselves in a syntagmatic system of differential positions. The more the confrontations between groups defines the social scene, the more society will be divided into two camps: at the limit, there will be a total dichotomisation of the social space around only two syntagmatic positions: ‘us’ and ‘them’. All social elements would have to locate their identities around either of these two poles, whose internal components would be in a mere relation of equivalence. While in an institutionalist political discourse there is a multiplication of differential positions in a relation of combination with each other, in an antagonistic discourse of rupture the number of syntagmatic differential positions is radically restricted, and all identities establish paradigmatic relations of substitution with all the others in each of the two poles. In my work I have called these two opposed political logics, logic of difference and of equivalence, respectively. Given that the equivalential chain establishes a paratactic succession between its component links, none of them can have a position of centrality founded in a combinatorial logic of a hypotactic nature. So if the unity of the equivalential chain is going to be organised around a privileged signifier, such a privilege cannot be derived from a differential structural position, but from a cathectic investment of a radical kind. The symbols of Solidarnosc in Poland got their success not from any structural centrality of the Lenin shipyards in the country, but from the fact that they expressed radical anti-status quo feelings at the moment in which many

other social demands were frustrated for not finding institutional channels of expression within the existing political system. This process by which identities cease to be purely immanent to a system and require an identification with a point transcendent to that system – which is the same as saying: when a particularity becomes the name of an absent universality – is what we call *hegemony*. Its logic is identical with the logic of the object *a*, which we have already referred to, and, for the reasons that we have given, it is essentially catachrestical (= rhetorical).

One last point requires our consideration. A hegemonic operation is essentially tropological, but requires very particular strategic moves to be performed within the metaphoric/metonymic continuum. Other moves, however, are equally possible, given that the continuum does not prescribe a priori either the direction that interventions in it should take, or the different forms of articulation between its two extreme poles. Genette presents the decision by Proust which made possible the existence of a narrative, as precisely that: a decision. But he himself points out that other decisions would have been equally possible, in which case we would not have had a novel but, for instance, a succession of lyrical moments. In the same way, the emergence of a hegemonic logic in Gramsci's political thought takes place against the background of various different ways of conceiving politics in the Marxist tradition which, while still being describable in terms of the possibilities opened by the metaphoric/metonymic distinction, are different from the hegemonic turn. It is to that history that we have now to address our attention.

IV

We have spoken about a zero-degree of the rhetorical, whose attainment would ideally require that the syntagmatic differential logic is able to dominate the whole field of signification (in the expanded sense that we have given to this last term). The prerequisite for attaining such a zero degree would be, of course, the ability of the syntagmatic logic to fully control paradigmatic substitutions (an ability which we have good reasons to be rather sceptical about). However, we have so far limited the question of the zero degree to its structuralist version – ie. to a purely *synchronic* system – while identifying the notion of diachrony to a retroactive fixation/transgression which would operate from 'outside' the structural 'inside'. Is this, however, the only true alternative? Is it necessary that a purely syntagmatic/combinatorial space is organised in a synchronic way? I think it is not. As far as diachrony is not conceived as a contingent, external intervention, but as structured by a teleology, a diachronic succession is perfectly compatible with a zero degree of the tropological. Pure differentiability (our zero-degree) is not necessarily linked to either simultaneity or succession.

It is from this point that we have to start in our consideration of the Marxist tradition. For at the root of this tradition there is a discourse anchored in Hegelian teleology. We know the defining features of the latter: the essential determinations of any entity are to be found in its *conceptual* specificity; the *conceptual* contradictions inherent in this specificity force us to move to a new entity embodying a new *conceptual* stage, etc. Marx did not change things in the least with his 'inversion' of Hegelian dialectics: if the ground is 'matter' rather than the 'Idea', but matter has inner laws of movement which are *conceptually* specifiable, Marx's materialism is as idealistic as Hegel's. Ontologically speaking they are not, actually, different from each other.

The important point for our subject is that in the vision of History which emerges from this diachrony, the different stages in the succession are not conceived as *interruptions* of what preceded them but as *teleological fulfilments*. We are dealing with a pure combination in which each actor and task has an assigned place in a secular eschatology grounded in the 'necessary laws' of History. It comes as no surprise that the main political consequence of this approach is to privilege 'strategy' over 'tactics'. Long term strategic calculations were considered to be possible because the teleologism of the premises opened the way to historical predictions, even if they were only 'morphological predictions', to use the words of Antonio Labriola. And any unfulfilment of those predictions could be dismissed as a temporary aberration to be superseded once the 'necessary laws' reasserted their long term validity.

The most extreme versions of this teleologism are to be found, of course, in the orthodox currents of the Second International, but it is enough to read the 'Preface' to the *Critique of Political Economy* to realise that, although in less crude ways, it impregnates the whole of the Marxist tradition. That is why we can speak of a rhetorical zero degree: in this syntagmatic succession there is no place for either metonymic displacements or metaphoric reaggregations. One could, however, ask oneself: but is it not precisely along the combinatorial succession of differential positions that metonymy operates? The answer is yes, but metonymy, as we know, involves a subversion of the principle of differentiability through substitutions grounded in contiguity, and it is precisely these substitutions that syntagmatic literalism tends to block.

Marxist literalism required the reduction of the process of historical development to a mechanism which had to be conceptually apprehensible as far as its laws of movement are concerned. But that conceptual apprehensibility also required that anything escaping what is specifiable by those laws should be discarded as historically irrelevant. 'The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformation it is

always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be distinguished with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophical – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.'

Now, it is precisely this sharp distinction between what is relevant and what is not, that is blurred during the first 'crisis of Marxism' at the end of the XIXth century. Capitalism recovered after a long period of depression, and the transition to the monopolistic phase and to imperialism started. In such a situation the socialist faith in the collapse of the system as a result of its internal contradictions was shaken. Historical development had revealed itself to be far more complex than had been assumed, and such a complexity took the form of a contamination between social levels which, according to the classical theory should have remained distinct. ('Organised capitalism' ceased to be explainable by pure market laws and an element of conscious regulation intervened at the very level of the infrastructure; imperialism led to the emergence of a 'working class aristocracy' and consequently to an attenuation of class conflicts, etc.) The consequence for our analysis is that the very terrain which had made accessible the zero degree of the tropological was shattered and rhetorical movements became highly important both in a metaphoric and a metonymic direction.

This tropological turn, however, took a variety of forms and directions. As we anticipated, the first example that we'll refer to is the later work of Georges Sorel. As many other socialist thinkers of his time, Sorel, at the time of writing the *Reflections on Violence*, had lost faith in the perspective of capitalism bringing about its own collapse as a result of purely economic laws. So in order to keep alive the revolutionary vocation of the working class, it was necessary to appeal to something different from economic determinism. Some kind of subjective principle had to be brought into the picture. It is important to realise that, for Sorel, his support for the proletarian struggle was not grounded in the justice of the workers demands but in his belief that the proletariat was the only force in society capable of preventing bourgeois decadence. For, the prospect facing contemporary societies was a general decline of civilisation. The principle capable of keeping the purity of proletarian identity was *violence*. For this purpose, it was essential that the working class did not intervene in politics, for that would co-opt it into the mechanisms of the bourgeois State. He opposed 'proletarian violence' to 'political violence' – the latter being epitomised by Jacobinism.

Proletarian violence had to be organised around a *myth*. '[M]en participating in great social movements represent to themselves their immediate action under the form of images of battles ensuring the triumph of their cause. I propose to call *myths* these constructions whose knowledge is so important for the historian: the syndicalists' general strike and Marx's catastrophic revolution are myths'. He counterposes 'myth' and 'utopia'. While the latter is a pure intellectual construction, the blueprint of a future or ideal society, myth is just a set of images capable of galvanising the masses' imagination and projecting them into historical action.

The myth around which proletarian identity should be organised is that of the *general strike*. 'I understand that this myth of the general strike horrifies [*frousse*] many *wise people* because of its character of infinitude; the present world is very much inclined to return to the opinion of the ancients and to subordinate morals to the good management of public affairs, which leads to locate virtue in a just middle. As far as socialism remains a *doctrine entirely presented through words*, it is easy to make it deviate towards a just middle; but this transformation is clearly impossible once one introduces the myth of the general strike, which involves an absolute revolution'. And, again: 'Today revolutionary myths are almost pure, they make possible to understand the activities, feelings and ideas of the popular masses preparing themselves to enter into a decisive struggle, they are not descriptions of things, but expressions of wills'.

In a myth, the infinitude of the task goes together with the paucity of its contents. Its function is, precisely, to separate the militant from the concrete aim of his particular action. Let us suppose that a group of workers participate in a strike for higher wages. If the strike is successful, and its only aim was that particular demand, success leads to demobilization and to the integration of the workers into the status quo. However, if participation in that concrete action is seen as a simple episode, educating the proletariat for the final aim, the meaning of the particular struggle changes altogether. But, for this, the myth of the general strike has to be operating from the very beginning. This explains the *infinitude* of the task, to which Sorel refers: it cannot be identified with any particular aim. And it explains also the poverty of its contents which is actually more than poverty, for, as the name of an infinite task, it negates the very possibility of any content (which would necessarily have to be finite). The Sorelian myth is one of the purest examples of what we have called 'empty signifiers'. It does not matter whether the general strike is an event which could happen or not. Although Sorel is not entirely explicit in this respect, I think that the very logic of his argument leads towards a negative response, for any finite fulfilment would compromise the infinitude of the task. Its status approaches that of Kant's regulative idea.

How, however, to read this set of displacements that Sorel brings about against the sequence of categories of classical Marxism? Where and how exactly does the tropo-

logical turn take place? To start with, in Sorel there is not any syntagmatic plurality of places of enunciation because they all converge in reinforcing a unique proletarian identity. Whether we are dealing with a strike, a demonstration, a factory occupation, they are simply occasions for the rehearsal of a unique 'future' event: the general strike. These occasions are certainly plural, but their plurality is present only to eclipse itself as a mere support of the single event which speaks through all of them. That is, we are faced with a pure metaphorical reaggregation which is not interrupted by any metonymical plurality. There is nothing to displace, because the sites of the metaphorical event are there just in order to be negated by the latter. To put it in clear terms: the revolutionary break does not proceed through equivalence but through absolute identity. So, in some way Sorel is the symmetrical reverse side of the 'rhetoric zero degree' of the Second International. For the latter, there was no room for any tropological movement in the determination of the emancipatory subject. For Sorel, such a determination could only proceed through an extreme form of that tropological movement, namely, a pure metaphor which has eliminated all traces of its metonymical grounding. Analogy unconceals an essence which has broken all links with contiguity. Equivalence is replaced by pure identity. (As this identity, however, is constructed around an empty place – the general strike – whose discursive effects depend on its lack of content, its assertion is close to nihilism. Not surprisingly, Sorelianism fed very different currents of thought, from radical communism and ultra-leftism, to fascism). We can go back here to Genette's analysis of Proust. According to him, as we have seen, there is narrative in Proust only because metaphors are inscribed in a metonymic movement; otherwise we will only have a succession of lyrical moments. Well, this last possibility is what Sorel's text enacts. Each revolutionary act does not find its meaning in a succession endowing it with its *raison d'être* within the series, but, rather, each of them is the expression of some sort of repetition drive constantly reinstating, in a Sysifus way, a single identity. That is why Genette's notion of a succession of lyrical moments as an alternative to Proust's narrative – ie. pure metaphorical flashes not inscribed in any metonymical succession – applies so well to Sorel's vision of politics. And, also, why there can be no Sorelian strategy based in a long term calculation. While for a Kantsky or a Plekhanov such calculation was based in supposedly known laws of history, for Sorel the mere idea of a long term prediction makes no sense. The assertion of a revolutionary subjectivity largely escapes strategical considerations.

V

If Sorel's discourse is structured in a terrain in which political subjectivity can only operate through a total metaphor which conceals even the traces of its metonymic ground, the experience of Leninism is different: the metonymic subversion of the dif-

ferential space of Marxist teleology has to remain visible, to the point of making impossible the movement towards its metaphoric *telos*. Leninism emerges as a *political* answer to an anomaly in historical development. Russia was supposed to follow the pattern of the classical bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the West. The task ahead was the overthrowing of Tsarism and the opening of a long period of capitalist democracy, so that socialism was only a long-term prospect, to be achieved as a result of the contradictions of a fully fledged capitalist society. In that democratic revolution the bourgeoisie was supposed to be the 'natural' leading force. Tasks and forces were assigned roles according to a preordained succession. The anomaly was that the autoctonous Russian Bourgeoisie had arrived too late to the historical scene, when a world capitalist market was already well established, and as a result it was too weak to carry out its own democratic revolution. Capitalism, however, was rapidly developing in Russia as a result of foreign investments, so that there was the paradoxical situation - 'anomalous' regarding the canonical pattern - of a country which was mature for a democratic revolution and in which, however, the 'natural' agent of that historical transformation was incapable of carrying out its task.

As a result of capitalist development, however, a robust working class was emerging, which had none of the limitations of the indigenous bourgeoisie, and so - this was the thesis of the Russian social-democrats - it had to take up the historical task of leading the democratic revolution (in alliance with the peasantry, in the Leninist version) which its natural agent, the bourgeoisie, had left unfulfilled. This anomalous taking up of a task by a force which was not its natural agent is what the Russian social-democrats called 'hegemony'. So we have a fracture in historical development, a discontinuity in the sequence of its categories. The taking up of the democratic tasks by the working class was an event politically explainable by a set of historical circumstances, but not insertable as one of the necessary links of the canonical paradigm. It was an 'exceptionality', to use the terminology of the time.

Now if we study the structure of this exceptionality, we immediately see that it was the *presence* of the working class at the centre of historical events at a moment in which the country was mature for a democratic revolution which assigned it to that role. It was a relation of *contiguity*. So we are dealing with the construction of a new link between task and agent which can only be conceived as a metonymic displacement.

We know, however, that any metonymy has a natural tendency to shade into a metaphor, the relation of contiguity to become, through continuous association, one of analogy. So we could normally expect that the nature of the democratic task changed when taken up by the proletariat, and that the class nature of the latter was also

altered as a result of taking up a democratic task. However, nothing of the kind happened. The whole Leninist strategy was designed to prevent that the exceptional task became the site of the construction of a new political subjectivity. The class nature of the proletariat had to remain unchanged. The Leninist motto was: 'to strike together and to march separately'. Why so? Various reasons conspire to it, but the main one was that for Russian revolutionists – the Bolsheviks included – Russian exceptionalism was exactly that: an exception and, on top of that, one which was going to be short lived. Neither Trotsky, nor Lenin – even after the 'April Theses' – thought that a proletarian power in Russia, given its backwardness, had any prospect unless it found its natural continuity in a revolution in Germany and the main other highly developed capitalist countries in the West. If that had been the case, the Russian 'exceptionality' would have been quickly integrated into a 'normal' process of historical development.

If we consider the matter retrospectively, we find here the root of the double discourse which will be inscribed in the Communist experience of the years to come. The canonical sequence of categories had to be maintained as an ultimate unsurpassable horizon – the Marxist syntagm was never formally questioned – but, as a counterpart, actual politics was going to be dominated increasingly by an empiricism of exceptionalities which eluded any theorisation. Stalin's *Realpolitik* was the extreme expression of this divorce between theory and practice, but in more attenuated forms it is going to dominate the whole of Communist experience. The way in which both levels were combined can perhaps be seen at its best in the case of Trotsky. The whole logic of 'permanent revolution' is only thinkable if the empiricism of the exceptionalities is articulated to the discourse of the 'normal' syntagmatic development. The argument runs as follows. Russia was mature for a democratico-bourgeois revolution in which the bourgeoisie – Trotsky accepted the point – was incapable of playing the leading role. This would result in a democratic revolution led by the proletariat. But – Trotsky added – the bourgeoisie would not tolerate proletarian power – even if confined to democratic limits – and would respond with a massive lockout. The result would be that the workers' movement, in order to consolidate its power, would have to advance in a socialist direction. Revolutions always start with democratic banners, but their stabilisation and consolidation requires their transition to the socialist stage. This model will be repeated *ad nauseam* by Trotskyists in all imaginable historical contexts. The classic 'stageism', although interrupted by an 'exceptionality' is in full operation: the class nature of social agents is unquestioned as well as that of the tasks and of the succession of phases.

So the metonymic moment had to be frozen, preventing the construction of new identities through metaphoric reaggregations. Here we see the difference with Sorel. For him there is no narrative, only the sequence of metaphoric moments through which

proletarian identity is constantly reinforced. For Leninism, the interaction between the two discursive levels, forces it to engage in a permanent narrative, so that the metonymic moment is never abandoned. It is for that reason that Leninism is an eminently strategic type of discourse, whose difference with the strategy of the Second International is, however, visible: for the latter, strategic reflection was based on a historical prediction grounded in the necessary laws of history; while for Leninism, given the operation of exceptionalities, strategies have more the character of conjunctural analyses.

This notion of conjunctural analysis forces us, however, to move beyond Leninist frozen metonymies and, indeed, beyond the historical horizon of Marxism. For the question is: how exceptional are the exceptions? According to Lenin, world capitalist market is not only an economic but also a political reality: it is structured as an imperialist chain. Crises can take place in one point of it which result – given that the chain is broken by its weakest link – in dislocations of the relations of forces in other points of the chain. This makes possible a seizure of power even if the ‘objective’ material conditions have not been met. In such situations there is no longer any question of either a pure combination of stages – as the one postulated by the theory of combined and uneven development – nor of a necessary class belonging of social agents, for what is at stake is the constitution of complex social identities constructed on the basis of practices homogeneizing the heterogeneous. That is, we are dealing with metaphoric reaggregations. Frozen Leninist metonymies no longer do the trick. I think that Gramsci’s notion of ‘collective wills’ should be read in this light. But this incorporation of the metaphoric dimension does not lead us back to Sorel’s camp either. For Sorel this is a unilateralisation of metaphor, because the proletarian identity that he tries to consolidate is given in advance. No question for him of incorporating heterogeneous elements into a wider social identity. That could only lead, in his view, to undermine the class consciousness of the proletariat. However, once the political process is seen not only as a reassertion of an identity but as its construction – as in Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ – the metonymic dimension cannot be ignored. Hegemony means the passage from metonymy to metaphor, from a ‘contiguous’ starting point to its consolidation in ‘analogy’. But with this we are very close to the relationship metaphor/metonymy which Genette finds in Proust’s text. Translating it into political language, we could say that because there is Narrative (*Récit*) there is strategy. But as the identity of the agents of that strategy is not given beforehand, we will always have short term strategic movements, not anchored in any eschatology. They will exactly operate at the point in which metaphor and metonymy cross each other and limit their mutual effects.

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