

Desire and Collective Identities: Decomposing Ernesto Laclau's notion of demand

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Ernesto Laclau's work was marked by his post-foundationalist and anti-essentialist approach to studying collective political identities in general and populism in particular (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 192, 193; Laclau, 2005a, p. ix). Laclau believes there is no such thing as a solid and immutable base on which social practices—and the identities that exert influence on these practices—can be sustained. Social practices are contingent discursive performances that take place in an inconsistent symbolic order—that is, a symbolic order that is not firmly grounded and therefore can be questioned and profoundly changed. That said, Laclau seems to inadvertently contradict himself in one crucial point of his theorization. By making the idea of demand the basic unit of analysis, Laclau seems to attribute a *noyau dur* to the demands, that is, a solid particular content that can adapt to different discourses but which at its core resists change.

The main aim of this article is to decompose Laclau's idea of demand to allow for a fruitful interpretation of his work. To do so, I will refer to Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of demand and its constitutive parts. It is not by chance that Lacan is raised here. Laclau himself has increasingly relied on Lacanian categories as pillars of his political reflections since as far back as 1985. Yet, although Lacan had a lot to say about the idea of demand, Laclau never indicated how psychoanalysis could influence this concept. I am now trying to fill this gap in a productive way, complementing Laclau's theory. Through Lacan, I argue that demands—even if only in their *noyau dur*—cannot be taken as the basic unit of analysis but rather as contingent discursive constructions providing an avatar for desire.

The article is structured into three parts. In the first, I argue that Laclau's treatment of demands as the basic unit of analysis ends up distancing him from his post-foundationalist and anti-essentialist approach toward discourse by relying on a pre-existing *noyau dur* of demands that would not change in different discursive articulations. In the second part, I return to Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of demand to show how demands are symbolic constructions that hide desire and that one should not confuse a fantasmatic object that is demanded with the desire that sustains this demand. In the third part, I explore the political consequences of this insight for empirical, normative, and ethical analysis. I conclude that, by questioning the status of demands as the basic unit of analysis and stressing the role of desire in political mobilization, one can reach an understanding of a broader set of political phenomena, reframe political strategies, and learn more about democratic and anti-democratic movements. Moreover, it strengthens Laclau's framework by offering a reading of his later references to the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation as a democratic answer to escape the metonymy of desire.

2 | A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL PROBLEM

Laclau has presented an intriguing notion of demand since his early writings. From *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) onward, Laclau theorizes how different struggles can come together in a discursive articulation that still manages to preserve their particular features. From *Emancipation(s)* (1996) onward, these struggles are treated as demands and these demands are later described as the basic unit of political analysis, instead of groups (Laclau, 2005a, pp. 72, 73). While studying populism, Laclau claims that collective identities are formed in the contingent articulation of demands around a nodal point that he called an empty signifier—for example, the “people.” However, Laclau never explained the status of these demands and never fully answered questions on how they appear. As Laclau treated them as the basic units of analysis, it seemed that he relied on what I call an implicit but likely unintended “essentialism of demands,” as if these demands were immanent, naturally emerging from material conditions or wherever.

This perceived essentialism of demands involves both theoretical and empirical problems. In theoretical terms, it goes against his professed anti-essentialist approach. How can immanent demands fit Laclau’s discourse theory that sees reality as a contingent discursive construction beyond essentialism?

Essentialism stands for the idea that routine social practices are rooted in a solid base, in a fixed and immutable essence that defines them. There are many expressions of essentialist thought throughout history. Probably the most disreputable is biological essentialism, that reduces a group’s identity—be it women, blacks, etc.—to its biological characteristics, as if an identity could be an expression of biological determinism. However, essentialism is not dependent on a simplistic association between innate traits and identity outside social relations. For example, there is also class essentialism that reduces collective identities to positions within a productive system. In this case, it is the common lived experience that immanently produces the essence and determines a true “inner being,” a certain identity from which one cannot escape.

At first sight, by dealing with demands instead of groups, Laclau hoped to move beyond essentialism. Groups have identities, and if one considers that groups are the basic unit of political analysis, their identities—women, blacks, gays, etc.—emerge as essentially given (Laclau, 2005a, pp. ix, 72, 73; Marchart, 2018, p. 112). There is no way of questioning these identities or even enquiring their constitution. Therefore, theorizing in terms of demands would allow these identities to be put into question. Laclau could say that the identity of a “people” was not given: it was the result of the articulation of many different demands. Through the empty signifier, different demands assume an equivalence by their unfulfillment experiences attributed to an antagonistic other. Laclau sees the empty signifier as a symbolic element that establishes meaning and gives coherence to it. Each collective identity articulates meaning in a certain way, around a certain empty signifier, with the meaning of each demand changing in this process. For example, a demand for “liberty” means different things when articulated around different signifiers such as socialism or capitalism. Moreover, there is nothing—no essence—leading demands to a specific articulation. In fact, when caught in the middle of a discursive struggle, a demand becomes a floating signifier whose meaning will be defined in an hegemonic dispute, the result of which is radically contingent (Laclau, 2005a, p. 131). Additionally, Laclau presented a similar, complementary reasoning in a debate with Slavoj Žižek where he differentiated between request, claim, and demand. Laclau believes that a demand is not “ready” but should rather be constructed through the transformation of relations of subordination to relations of oppression and domination (Laclau, 2006, pp. 654, 655, see also Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 153, 154).

However, if Laclau’s approach could avoid essentialism in the analysis of broader groups gathered under the name of the “people,” his idea of demand apparently involves some unintentional essentialist leftovers on a smaller scale. To take a quotation out of context, I could say that Laclau inadvertently “*moved from an essentialism of the totality to an essentialism of the elements*” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 103). Even if the demands can be articulated and have different meanings in different discursive constructions, Laclau still seems to rely on what I call a *noyau dur* of demands. Despite an early admission that a variety of new demands can only emerge in a liberal democratic ideological background (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 163–165), there is a recurrent tendency to assume that demands are given, at least

against this background. It is as if a demand—whether economic or political—always evoked an immanent substrate. This particular—and I would say, essential—content is represented in the bottom semi-circles of his famous diagram (Laclau, 2000a, p. 303). As Laclau says, this *noyau dur* does not disappear when incorporated into broader popular movements. Each struggle “retains something of its own identity” (Laclau, 1997, p. 304), for the articulation around an empty signifier “requires very much the persistence of the demands” in their difference and particularity (Laclau, 2005b, p. 46).

In fact, Laclau implicitly states that a demand is always a demand by someone or some group. In discussing the difference between request and demand, Laclau refers to a “group of people in that area who have been frustrated in their request for better transportation,” along with other particular groups with other particular demands (Laclau, 2005b, p. 37). It is precisely because Laclau still relies on the *noyau dur* of a demand that the difference between groups and demands—a distinction that he tried to stress precisely to avoid the essentialism of groups (Laclau, 2005a, pp. ix, 72, 73)—collapses. And in this sense, Laclau’s idea of demand could hardly explain how particular groups—once again, women, blacks, gays, etc.—formed their identities. As the *noyau dur* of demands, one part of a group’s identity is given by what they essentially are.

What I have been calling Laclau’s unintended essentialism of demands is comprehensible if one considers the context in which he was writing. When he and Chantal Mouffe published *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), their goal was to include new social movements in a political analysis against homogenizing tendencies in traditional Marxism. They wanted to show how these movements could be articulated in a common popular front without losing their particular features in a monolithic identity (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 167). The problem is that this approach presupposes that these particular features, which must be preserved, exist as such in themselves. As a result, I argue that Laclau’s idea of demand should be broken down in order to uphold his theory and get rid of possible leftovers of essentialism that remained unresolved.

As indicated above, beyond theoretical incongruences, a perceived essentialism of demands also carries deep empirical consequences, adversely affecting the quality of political analysis. Indeed, the essentialism of demands may be challenged by the accounts of recent protest movements. Although some of these movements have been described as fitting Laclau’s model, ethnographic studies have pointed to other dynamics of collective identity building.

In Occupy Wall Street, for example, demands took a back seat. Although the first call to occupy was searching for a single demand that could bring together all the dissatisfactions, internal disputes within the movement led it to reject an official demand. The key figures of the movement claimed that explicit demands would reduce its transformative power and allow it to be administratively co-opted into the existing system, while their goal was to foster an anarchist identity and prefigure a different society (Kang, 2012, p. 64). Having said that, it could be claimed that there were many implicit demands within the movement—ending austerity, ridding politics of money, creating jobs, among many others—which would preserve Laclau’s scheme.

In this sense, Emmy Eklundh’s analysis of the Spanish *Indignados* movement may be more productive. She claims that reducing a movement such as the *Indignados* to its demands—whether economic demands or demands for democracy—ignores the fact that there is a “crisis of subjectivity” at the basis of any collective mobilization (Eklundh, 2019, p. 132). As she says:

Political subjectivity is not constructed around well-defined demands: the demands are plural, change over time, or are not recognized as demands in the first place. (Eklundh, 2019, p. 148)

Eklundh defines the glue that gathers a group as “visceral ties”—a term she defines both as a new name for empty signifiers and as a shorter-termed “type of bond” beyond concrete demands (Eklundh, 2019, pp. 115, 133). She claims the most important aspect of the Spanish demonstrations was the will of being together and constituting social bonds. It was an experience of belonging that provided an answer to this “crisis of subjectivity.”

3 | DEMANDS OR DESIRE?

Although Eklundh's work on the *Indignados* was very insightful, her idea of visceral ties could be further developed in two dimensions. First of all, as I said above, visceral ties are defined both as a new name for empty signifiers and as a "type of bond" (Eklundh, 2019, pp. 115, 133). It is not clear how these two definitions came together, for the empty signifier is a symbolic element that may imply social bonds but it cannot be easily argued that it is a social bond in itself. Second, I feel Eklundh could clarify how the idea of visceral ties relates to Jacques Lacan's theory of desire.

I argue that a study of the idea of demand in Jacques Lacan's work could provide fruitful insights to decompose Laclau's notion of demands. It leads me to suggest that the main element in understanding the construction of collective identities is desire, not demand. In his tenth seminar, on anguish, Lacan "denounces" demand, stating that

[...] every demand, even the most archaic and the most primitive, always has something deceptive with respect to what preserves the place of desire. [...] the demand comes improperly at the place of what is eluded, the object a. (Lacan, 1963/2004, pp. 76, 77)

For newcomers, this passage, and especially the reference to the object *a*, may seem obscure. What Lacan is saying in a nutshell here is that every demand hides the true nature of desire as it puts a specular object where there should be none. To understand what this means, it is worth revisiting Lacan's works from the late 1950s and early 1960s, when he explained that the baby's early process of acquiring language creates a desire defined in a very precise way: a desire that desires no symbolizable object.

Before explaining this process, it is worth highlighting that while entering language is central in shaping the particular subject's development, it is not limited to the subjective level. One could be led to imagine that psychoanalysis only concerns the particular subject and cannot be extended to the study of collective movements. However, this impression not only overlooks Freud's many comments on social issues (Freud, 1921/1955, 1927/1961, 1929/1961), but ignores the idea that language is a collective phenomenon, a key element of socialization. Language is ruled by a symbolic order that is collective. It influences one's norms and ideals. Through language, the collective realm is at the roots of one's crisis of subjectivity, and it is also often in the collective that promises to solve this that crisis will emerge. Therefore, the frontier between the subjective and the collective is blurred, to say the least (Freud, 1921/1955, p. 69; Zicman de Barros, 2019, pp. 93, 94).

Lacan starts the description of the process of incorporating language by ascertaining that a newborn has needs, such as breastfeeding. The idea of need here is almost a materialistic one which relates to the material needs of the living being, independent of language and consciousness. Needs are partial. They relate to fragmented parts of the body-unit before the newborn has drawn the contours which define him as a unified and independent whole. Indeed, needs are expressed at a moment when the newborn knows no boundaries, when everything is overwhelming, borderless. There are no limits to the expression of the newborn's needs. There is no frontier marking where his mouth ends and the mother's breast starts. Mother and baby live almost in symbiosis. It is this moment of symbiosis that will be forever lost when the baby enters the world of language, leading him to a later retrospective idealization of this pre-symbolic time when his needs were immediately satisfied as an experience of full enjoyment.

The process of entering into language tries to put some order—an arbitrary symbolic order—to the baby's excesses and establish boundaries. Lacan calls this process symbolic castration. But how does it work? And why does it have this name?

As Lacan claims, human babies are all born premature, as they depend on their maternal figures (Lacan, 1966, p. 810). Difficulties inevitably emerge when this maternal figure is not at hand. These moments of separation allow the baby and the mother to be seen as two different entities. Lacan calls this process symbolic castration because, when the mother is not close, the baby has to call her attention, to communicate his needs to her through language, through symbols—and more specifically through demands. The demand is a symbolically articulated need. Yet, in the process of symbolization, something else happens. By converting a need into a symbolic articulated demand, the baby implicitly

adds a desire for recognition to it (Lacan, 1966, p. 268). When the maternal figure answers the baby's demand, she, at first, recognizes it, putting the baby in the position of the object of her love. In short, beyond any need and behind every demand there is desire—the baby's desire to be desired, a search for love. As Bruce Fink said, for Lacan “*all speech is demand*,” and “*every demand is a request for love*” (Fink, 1999, p. 60). However, this request for love submits the baby to the other. The baby wants to be loved and therefore starts to adapt, fit, and conform to the other's rules—the symbolic order, the social norms—in the hope of acquiring the other's desire and reestablish an idealized pre-symbolic experience of full enjoyment.

The idea of a desire for desire appeared to Lacan in his studies of Alexandre Kojève's reading of Georg Wilhelm Hegel. From Kojève, Lacan states that desire is the desire of the other (Lacan, 1966, pp. 802, 813). It has two non-exclusive interpretations. First, one desires just as the other desires. For example, the daughter desires a charming prince as this is the desire of her mother. Second, one desires to be desired by the other. The problem is that the other's desire will never be mastered forever. As many interpreters correctly pointed out, desire itself has no specular object—that is, it is not a common object of one's daily life (Fink, 1995, p. 90). The other's desire is present, for example, in the gaze (Lacan, 1964/2014, p. 303). The other's gaze can always vanish and be attracted by something else. One cannot control it. And one can become its prey, in a quest to dominate it that is doomed to fail.

Lacan will name this desired desire present in the gaze object *a* and claim that this concept was his only original contribution to psychoanalysis. The object *a* names this desiring capacity that one desires in the other—it is what causes one's desire. The object *a* is not a specular object—that is, it is not a common object that one can symbolize—but sometimes it can be embodied by specular objects—by a commodity, a leader, an idea, a loved one (Lacan, 1964/2014, p. 303). To be more precise, Lacan says that common objects would cover, veil the object *a*. In this process, the subject would be lured by fantasy, by the fantasmatic promise that having this specular object would give consistency to the symbolic order, cope with subjective lack, and reestablish a moment of pre-symbolic full enjoyment. One can idealize that conquering someone else's love could fill a subjective lack. An advertising culture can convince some people that buying certain products will produce some kind of deep satisfaction (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 228). A political leader can claim that his election would reinstall a lost greatness from a glorious past (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 204). Yet, these promises are always misleading. That is why Lacan later referred to these specular objects covering the object *a* as *faux-semblants*, or fantasmatic semblants of *a*.

The idea of a *faux-semblant*, of a semblant of *a* is very important in terms of the idea of demand. Because a demand has a specular object, it is in fact hiding, covering desire, the non-specular object *a*.

While the semblants of *a* can structure many different fantasies and circulate a plethora of affects, Lacan claims that the non-specular object *a* is associated with a special affect: anguish. As I said above, desire, strictly speaking, has no object—its “object” is the non-specular object *a*. In this sense, it is interesting to notice that, at a certain point in his theorization, Sigmund Freud also claimed that anguish, unlike fear, had no object (Freud, 1926/1959, pp. 164, 165). Fear is fear of something while anguish remains undefined. Lacan connects these two ideas and shows how object *a* and anguish are related. Confronting the non-specular object *a* in its purest form produces anguish as it points to the impossibility of mastering the other's gaze, the uncertainty of the other's desire (Lacan, 1963/2004, pp. 13, 14), which indicates the lack of a basis for one's fantasy sustaining the symbolic order. Indeed, if Lacan describes anguish as the affect that does not deceive (Lacan, 1963/2004, p. 92), it is because anguish exposes the lack of basis of one's fantasies. Therefore, on the contrary, a demand copes with anguish by giving a fantasmatic semblant of *a* to the subject.

Before continuing, I should point that if, at first sight, anguish may seem to be something one correctly tries to avoid—and to a certain extent this is true—Lacan and his followers stressed the importance of embracing anguish as a way to embrace the contingency that marks one's life and be open to transformations. In an inspiring moment, Jacques-Alain Miller distinguished between constituted anguish and constitutive anguish: the former is related to immobility while the latter points toward openness to change (Miller, 2004).

This digression on anguish is relevant to the discussion on demands because it helps in understanding another of Laclau's concepts: his idea of dislocation (Laclau, 1990, pp. 60–67). Dislocation was introduced in 1990 and represents a major incorporation of Lacanian insights by Laclau (Stavrakakis, 2007, pp. 73, 74). It refers to the constitutive lack

that traverses both the symbolic order and the subject. As I read it, dislocation is nothing more than the name Laclau gives to the experience of helplessness, discontent, uncanniness, *malaise* or, as Lacan puts it, anguish. If one can quote Lacan and say that a demand is a symbolic articulation to cope with anguish by offering a specular object to the subject, the same is true for dislocation. A demand copes with dislocation. The subject is lured by the specular object of the demand, ignoring the fact that he desires the other's desiring capacity. He desires recognition, love (Lacan, 1963/2004, p. 179, 180).¹ Lacan regarded a neurotic as precisely someone who avoids anguish by trying to replace the other's enigmatic desire for well-stated demands (Fink, 1999, p. 62; Lacan, 1963/2004, p. 77). By giving an object to the subject to relate to, a demand promises to solve the irreducible subjectivity crisis created when entering language. Moreover, it promises to reestablish the retrospectively idealized pre-symbolic full enjoyment.

It is worth noticing that it is not only in lively promises of full enjoyment that one finds a demand offering a specular object where should be none. The same happens in the gloomy excuses for the unfulfillment of these promises. As in the case of fear mentioned above, affects such as anger, hate, resentment, and even indignation can also imply designating fantasmatic objects to cope with anguish. In these cases, the subject externalizes his subjective division, attributing the responsibility for his discontent to an antagonist (Freud, 1929/1961, pp. 64–66). Žižek would say that, in these cases, the antagonist—for example, the immigrant—is presented as a “thief of enjoyment” (Laclau, 2004, p. 300; Žižek, 1993, pp. 202–204). He is a sponger enjoying himself at one's expenses, a scapegoat whose removal is demanded as a way to solve one's crisis of subjectivity.²

Although Lacan's theory is complex and hard to summarize, I believe that what one should keep from this section is that the breaking down of the idea of demand into its constitutive parts—need and, more importantly, desire—gave it a new dimension. The demand is a symbolic articulation that conceals the enigmatic character of desire. Moreover, the object targeted by a demand is contingent. There is not necessarily a symbolic element concealing desire. It will vary in each case.

4 | POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Lacan's stances on demand and desire are not at odds with Laclau's theory, but complement it and provide fruitful insights. The main theoretical consequences of breaking down the idea of demand is that the possible leftovers of essentialism collapse. As Joaquín Valdivielso put it in another context, “*demands seem to be derivative rather than the very foundation of radical constructivism*” (Valdivielso, 2017, p. 306).

In Laclau, the *noyau dur* of demands could stand for the need. But, once incorporated into language, need becomes secondary, as desire takes the lead.³ And a demand does nothing but cover desire with layers of signifiers, assigning to it a semblant, a false specular object. If a specular object—whether a commodity, leader or lover—fascinates us, it does so because it covers the non-specular object *a*.

In political analysis, the idea that desire—the desire for the other's desire—is central in subjective experience changes how one should study the construction of political identities. It provides new ways to interpret collective mobilizations, new insights for normative intervention, as well as new tools for an ethical analysis of these mobilizations.

For the interpretation of political movements, the first result of questioning the idea of demand is that demands become less central in the construction of collective identities. What takes over instead is the desire to be together, to construct social bonds, to form a community and to have an experience of belonging. Judith Butler and Jacques Rancière touched on this point, each in their own particular way. For Butler, when bodies come together in protest movements, there is, first of all, a demand for appearance, to erupt in the symbolic space and, more importantly, to be recognized—that is, to be the object of the other's desire (Butler, 2015, pp. 72, 73, see also 1987, pp. 197–199). The problem with Butler's approach is that she still refers to demands, not desire. She says that bodies gathering in the square express a vague demand for justice (Butler, 2015, pp. 25, 26). By framing it in terms of demand, I think she misses the point.

In the case of Rancière, one gets closer to the notion of desire. David Howarth and Aletta Norval once stated that Rancière dealt with a “pre-history of demands”—and “their inchoate expression by political subjects who have not yet fully appeared on the political stage” (Howarth & Norval, 2016, p. 306). What does this idea of “pre-history” stand for? Rancière implied that it is through appearance that the part of no-part can be counted and recounted, emerging to re-politicize a community (Rancière, 1995, pp. 49, 50). Taking this into consideration, I argue that Rancière deals with a pre-history of demands as, before any demand is symbolically articulated, there is a desire for recognition—a desire for the other’s desire.

The second consequence for political analysis is that, as demands are secondary and have no *noyau dur*, there is no need to think of collective identities as an articulation of multiple demands that keep their particularity. It may be the case but one should consider other possibilities such as demands that are dissolved or reconstructed, or a single signifier that unites citizens around a common cause, diluting other particular struggles.

In normative terms, this approach prevents the activist becoming a hostage to demands. Although the affective investment in some signifiers can be very strong and hard to question (Stavrakakis, 2007, pp. 163–169), one should not simply assume that emancipatory projects—such as leftwing populism—always have to compromise with existing demands that do not fit in with its goals. In a world marked by emerging extreme rightwing demands in the public sphere—for example, tougher immigration laws—it is important to keep in mind that an emancipatory project can use another language, trying to reshape the demands instead of incorporating what is given.

Still at the normative level, I must say that my comments stressing the importance of desire cannot be used to dismiss political demands. Economic demands and demands for democracy are legitimate, refer to concrete problems and are at the heart of important mobilizations. The discussion about desire has very little to say about demands’ normative justification. It does not concern demands’ validity, but questions whether these demands are anguish-provoking or if they simply cope with anguish. The issue is not if a demand is well-grounded and normatively justifiable, but rather how to ethically relate to it (Žižek, 2006, p. 304). A demand may be fair and sound, but if one affectively invests in it as a promising way to cope with subjective lack, one moves further away from accepting the radical contingency at the basis of collective identities.

Indeed, as indicated above, making desire a key element in the construction of political identities impacts the ethical analysis of these identities. In ethical terms, the importance of acknowledging the role of desire in the construction of collective identities is that it opens the way to moving beyond what Lacan called the metonymy of desire.

For Lacan, the subject before analysis is trapped in desire. The object *a* is deceptively embodied in common objects, in semblants of *a* that promise to cope with subjective lack. Since these fantasmatic promises will always be frustrated, the subject finds himself passing from one idealized object to another. To move beyond that, in an analysis, the analyst must distance himself as far as possible as a specular figure of authority from the object *a*. As Lacan says, in this way the analysand will be able to “mutilate” the analyst. The analyst must incarnate the object *a* as a pure desiring capacity for the analysand to understand that he does not desire the analyst as a fascinating semblant of *a*, but the analyst’s enigmatic desire. In a rather enigmatic passage, Lacan claims that a consequence of unveiling the metonymic logic of desire is that the subject gets closer to an analytical cure, when “the drive can present itself” (Lacan, 1964/2014, p. 305).

Passing from desire to drive at the end of the analysis: what is the political translation of this idea? Curiously enough, a possible answer to this question was suggested by Laclau himself through the psychoanalytic notion of sublimation (Laclau, 2005a, p. 113). Despite his perceived essentialism of demands, in a theoretically rough but fruitful way Laclau seems to incorporate the distinction between the dynamics of desire and the dynamics of the drive—a distinction whose consequences can become clearer now that his notion of demand was decomposed.

It is worth noting that Laclau refers to the concept of object *a* in his theorization and that at two particular moments he discusses the notion of desire (Laclau, 2005a, pp. 119, 226). However, inspired by Joan Copjec, he does so following a complementary interpretation of Lacan (Copjec, 2004, p. 60; Laclau, 2005a, pp. 111–113). For Laclau, the object *a* is not related to desire. Instead, it is related to the drive. Lacan himself stressed the role of object *a* and its semblants both in desire and in the drive (Lacan, 1964/2014, p. 189; Žižek, 2008, p. 327). In each case, however, they follow very distinct dynamics whose specific aspects cannot be ignored. In desire, the object *a*

follows the logic of idealization, while in the drive it follows the dynamics of sublimation (Zicman de Barros, 2019, pp. 99, 100).

The distinction between idealization and sublimation was first introduced by Freud (Freud, 1914/1957, p. 94). In idealization, one is trapped in the metonymy of desire, passing from one idealized semblant of *a* that promises an impossible full enjoyment to another in an endless cycle. One idealized lover after another, one commodity after another, one leader after another—the subject constantly replaces frustrated fantasies in an impossible quest. He never notices that what is moving him is desire. He is lured precisely by a variety of objects that try to cope with the anguish provoked by the other's enigmatic desire. In this sense, one could even argue that idealization is an expression of symptom, for symptoms since Freud can be seen as a substitutive formation to cope with anguish (Freud, 1926/1959, p. 144).

In contrast, one is not coping with anguish in sublimation—at least not in the classical fantasmatic way. For Freud, sublimation is one of the possible destinies of the drive without symptom formations, in which the drive deviates from its aim (Freud, 1915/1957, p. 126). Lacan will generalize sublimation, claiming that deviation from its aim is a characteristic of every drive (Lacan, 1964/2014, p. 186). As Lacan puts it, what matters in the drive is not the object—for example, the food—but the pleasure of the mouth (Lacan, 1964/2014, pp. 188, 189). In other words, in sublimation the object is just a support and not the aim of the subject. What is at stake in sublimation is the satisfaction produced by repeatedly contouring the object, without actually grasping it. As a result, in sublimation one is dealing with a kind of “*satisfaction from what is destined to dissatisfaction*” (Assoun, 2017, p. 125).

One can say that sublimation is not related to a fantasmatic semblant of *a*, but rather to what, inspired by Paul-Laurent Assoun, one could call a sublimatory semblant—“*semblant sublime*”—the avatar of the object *a* in the drive (Assoun, 2017, pp. 91, 124; Zicman de Barros, 2019, p. 109). Instead of following the metonymy of desire of idealization that promises an impossibility, the sublimatory semblant—for example, an emancipatory symbol of the “people”—takes part in “*a symbolization of impossibility as such as a positive value*,” an impossibility that is accepted as such (Laclau, 2000b, p. 199). Although he does not develop it, this seems to be what Laclau had in mind when he referred to the object *a* in the drive (Laclau, 2005a, pp. 119, 226).

Laclau was frequently accused of cynicism for his support of populism. For instance, Benjamin Ardití said that although Laclau knows that fantasmatic promises “*can only be mythical*,” he nevertheless defends a deceitful populist strategy misleading the masses “*to embark in a project of plenitude*,” for it could advance a progressive agenda (Ardití, 2010, p. 496). More recently, Žižek criticized the fantasmatic character of populism while joking that nowadays there are “*two other versions of the opium of the people: the opium and the people*” (Žižek, 2018, p. 204). Nevertheless, Laclau's incorporation of the notion of sublimation favors a different interpretation of his work. In his passages cited above, Laclau suggests that the populism he defends goes beyond the metonymy of desire. What I called the sublimatory semblant sets the coordinates of an impossible center around which the subject circulates, without ever trying to reach its aim. Unlike many of his critical commentators, interpreting Laclau in this way means that the signifier “people” in democratic populism is not promising full enjoyment or a closed identity. In fact, it points to the lack of basis of the symbolic order, to the fact that the fantasies sustaining it have no solid foundation. However, this is an idea that Laclau himself never fully developed—and which could remain occult without the decomposing of the notion of demand as it was done here.

With this reading of Laclau, one is not far from what Jason Glynos described as a radical democratic *ethos* (Glynos, 2003, pp. 194, 195, see also 2000, pp. 15, 16) or from Jacques Derrida's idea of a “*democracy to come*” (Derrida, 2003, pp. 126–128). This is a shared open horizon that one always tries to signify, but whose partial significations are accepted in their contingency and incompleteness. From this perspective, the distinction between idealization and sublimation—that is, the distinction between the dynamics of desire and the drive, respectively—marks the distinction between anti-democratic and democratic modes of political mobilization. As there is no solid ground and definite answers to support social practices in a post-foundationalist and anti-essentialist approach, a democratic community—or, to be precise, a community that embraces an ethics of radical democracy—is one which traverses fantasy and, instead of being lured by idealized objects promising to cope with subjective lack, accepts this subjective lack and finds ways to enjoy it (Stavrakakis, 2007, pp. 278, 279).

It is worth noting that, in psychoanalysis, one is not referring to traversing fantasy in the sense of leaving it behind. Once in the symbolic order, the subject will always relate to signifiers, fantasies and symptoms. Without them, there would be no reality for the subject to inhabit. However, in sublimation one tries to transform the way to deal with these signifiers, fantasies and symptoms. Instead of promised impossibilities of the logic of desire, the subject accepts an impossibility as such in the drive.

5 | CONCLUSION

By returning to Jacques Lacan's original formulations, this article argued for a decomposing of Ernesto Laclau's notion of demand that shows the centrality of desire in political identification. From Lacan, one understands that demands are part of fantasies that try to cope with anguish caused by a desire for the other's desire that cannot be mastered. As such, demands should be interpreted as contingent discursive constructions and not as the basic units of analysis. This view allows for a broader interpretation of political phenomena that do not necessarily fit Laclau's scheme of an articulation of multiple demands that keep their particular content. It also frees political activists from the need to try and incorporate given demands. Finally, highlighting the importance of desire permits a new interpretation of Laclau through the distinction between the dynamic of desire in idealization and the dynamic of the drive in sublimation. It is productive for the understanding of democracy as a political ethic that accepts the constitutive lack of ground of social practices and embraces it as an openness to constant questioning of the identity of the "people."

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NOTES

¹ What Lacan means with the idea of recognition must be clarified. In some passages Lacan affirms that the desire for the other's desire is a desire for recognition (Lacan, 1966, p. 268). However, recognition must not be read as the recognition of a pre-given identity. Confronting Hegel, Lacan says that the other's desire never recognizes oneself, for there is no specular object to be recognized (Lacan, 1963/2004, pp. 179, 180). That is why the other's desire produces anguish, which can only find a solution through love—the match of two objectless desires.

² One could think that an affect such as greed—expressed, for example, in special-interest groups' resistance to taxes and their will to keep the state at bay—has nothing to do with desire. It would be a matter of cold economic maximization. Yet, since Adam Smith one knows that wealth accumulation is a mode of social recognition (Smith, 1759/2010, pp. 59, 214, 249)—indeed, Smith's judging "spectator" whose sympathy one tries to acquire could be easily compared with the other's desiring gaze in Lacan. Moreover, greed is probably complemented by a "self-sufficiency fantasy" that copes with the other's anguish-provoking desire (Glynos, 2014, p. 183). According to this kind of fantasy, full enjoyment could be achieved if "thieves of enjoyment"—such as politicians or even those who live on welfare—were not enjoying themselves at one's expense.

³ One could consider the hypothesis that there are political mobilizations that are driven only by needs. However, for Lacan the subject is constituted through language, and once it emerges it is impossible to think of a need without desire. A pre-linguistic need is therefore a functional hypothesis, a "myth"—in the sense Lacan gives this word, that is, it refers to a subject at a moment when there was not yet a subject (Lacan, 1958/1998, pp. 90–92, 461). As a result, even the most material demand—for example, a demand for food—will always be mixed up with desire (Lacan, 1956/2018, p. 314). Laclau himself admitted this, saying there was nothing in material conditions that determined the irruption of resistance movements (Laclau, 1990, pp. 7–9, 2005a, p. 84).

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