



# The polysemy of an empty signifier: the various uses of Ernesto Laclau's puzzling concept

Thomás Zicman de Barros 

Sciences Po, Center for Political Research (CEVIPOF), CNRS, Paris, France

## ABSTRACT

The concept of empty signifier is possibly the most prominent among those developed by Ernesto Laclau. However, despite its success among discourse theorists, this notion remains puzzling. It has been used in various contexts and different configurations, and has become polysemic. My goal is to attempt to clarify this concept. To do so, my study is divided into two parts. First, I go back to the psychoanalytic concepts that seem to have informed Laclau's earlier formulations on the empty signifier. Second, I revisit Laclau's work to highlight five different uses he made of the notion of empty signifier. In different contexts in Laclau's work, the empty signifier named (1) a symbol of the pure being of the symbolic system; (2) a particular demand that represents all other particular political struggles; (3) a 'negative' symbol that names an antagonistic other; (4) a symbol whose content is problematically poor; and (5) a symbol pointing to an open identity. Whereas I conclude that it is not possible to produce one simple definition of empty signifier, I argue that we should not reject the concept, but rather use it to grasp the complexity of processes of identification.

## Foreword

When we think of the work of Ernesto Laclau, probably the most relevant concept that comes to mind is that of empty signifier. Since its introduction, this notion was employed by Laclau and his entourage to study the construction of political identities in general, and populism, in particular. But what does it mean for a signifier to be 'empty'? And how does this signifier operate?

The reality is that, despite its success among discourse theorists, the notion of empty signifier is puzzling.<sup>1</sup> The term has been used in various contexts, in different configurations, becoming polysemic. My goal in this paper is to attempt to clarify this concept. To do this, my research was divided into two parts. First, I go back to the psychoanalytic notions that seem to have informed Laclau's earlier formulations on the empty signifier. I refer specifically to the categories of *point de capiton* and master signifier elaborated by Jacques Lacan. Second, I revisit Laclau's work to indicate five different uses he made of the notion of empty signifier, and how it could be used in different contexts.

I admit from the start that I could not – moreover, that I do not think it is possible to – produce one simple definition of empty signifier. Still, I believe that, by showing the roots of this notion and the various ways it was used by Laclau, it is possible to learn something about how collective identities work, and their relationship with radical democracy. I conclude that the polysemy of the notion of empty signifier should not lead us to reject the concept, but rather to grasp the complexity of processes of identification.

### **Point de capiton and master signifiers**

The notion of empty signifier has a predecessor in Laclau's work, as it were. The first reflections on what would one day be formulated as an empty signifier appear in 1983, with the notion of nodal point.<sup>2</sup> In the following years, in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe, Laclau would further develop this concept, defining nodal points as discursive elements '*which partially fix meaning*', providing some stability to discursive constructions.<sup>3</sup> Eleven years later, in Laclau's solo work, this notion would evolve even further, and be mostly replaced by the concept of empty signifier.

The introduction of the notion of an empty signifier was not without controversy. Indeed, the apparent interchangeability between the concepts of empty signifier and nodal point created some confusion. Many years later, some still claimed that '*it is not clear whether the empty signifier is simply synonymous with the nodal point, a refinement of the original concept, or picks out and captures different aspects of social reality*'.<sup>4</sup>

I claim that these two notions can be further understood if read against the psychoanalytic concepts that inspired their formulation in the first place. While nodal point explicitly refers to Lacan's notion of *point de capiton*,<sup>5</sup> the empty signifier is frequently related to his concept of master signifier.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of *point de capiton* – the translation of which would be 'quilting point' or 'anchoring point' – appears in Lacan's first seminars as he discusses the main topic of his earlier career: psychosis.<sup>7</sup> The *point de capiton* is a metaphor that refers to the upholstery button that stabilizes a couch's structure. Concerned with psychotic cases, Lacan aims to understand what differentiates psychosis from other psychic structures and concludes that the button in the upholstery, the *point de capiton* that would stabilize the psychic system, is absent in the psychotic's discourse.

For Lacan, the element that plays the role of *point de capiton* is precisely a signifier. As is known, for Lacan, the signifier has primacy in the signification process, and it is also what structures the subject – the subject is a product of the signifier. The *point de capiton* is nothing but a signifier that occupies a higher hierarchical position in terms of its importance in the symbolic order. It is a signifier that anchors the signifying chain, that stops the flux of signifiers. It is, in other words, the last irreducible reference that gives sense to the entirety of a discourse. According to Lacan in his seminar on psychoses, it is '*from this signifier that everything irradiates and is organized*'.<sup>8</sup>

Lacan introduces the notion of master signifier in his seventeenth seminar precisely as an alternative metaphor for the *point de capiton*.<sup>9</sup> Both concepts play similar roles in his theory. As Laclau and Mouffe indicate in the preface of the second edition of their book, *points de capiton* and master signifiers could be treated as synonyms.<sup>10</sup> As the *point de capiton*, the master signifier is the discursive element that gives meaning to the entire chain of signifiers.<sup>11</sup> It is the master

signifier that ensures the readability of any given discourse.<sup>12</sup> Without the master signifier, the other signifiers would be floating.<sup>13</sup> While this floating state explains how discourses are flexible and can be transformed – i.e. how, by replacing a master signifier by another, the entire meaning of a chain can change – it also indicates that, in the total absence of a master signifier, a discourse would be incoherent, chaotic, psychotic.

Bruce Fink once characterized the master signifier as ‘*the nonsensical signifier*’.<sup>14</sup> He did so because, to a certain extent, the master signifier breaks the linguistic rule that establishes that, as meaning is always relational – meaning is established in the relationship between signifiers – a signifier can signify anything, but not itself.<sup>15</sup> The master signifier is a signifier that points to itself, in the sense that it stops the free float of signifiers and anchors meaning. To put it in more political terms, one could say that the master signifier is the last reference of meaning, of ‘full’ meaning, that cannot in itself be put into words. It establishes its own foundation, its own legitimacy.

Indeed, this idea of an ultimate reference of meaning that structures a discourse is present in the works of many philosophers and political theorists. Before Lacan, Karl Marx had already referred to a ‘*point d’honneur*’ sustaining one’s world.<sup>16</sup> Much later and openly informed by psychoanalysis, Claude Lefort discusses the role of the references of certainty – the ‘*repères de certitude*’, as he calls it in French – that modernity would have dissolved.<sup>17</sup> Following Lefort, one could claim that Lacan’s master signifier promises to reinstall these references of certainty, to give coherence to reality. In this sense, one could also compare the master signifier to what Ludwig Wittgenstein referred to as ‘*some propositions [that] are exempt from doubt*’, that which is taken for granted.<sup>18</sup> Continuing in Wittgenstein’s tradition, the master signifier would be the final element of what Richard Rorty called a ‘final vocabulary’.<sup>19</sup>

In different terms, one could say that the master signifier composes the core of any ideology.<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt defined ideology as the ‘*logic of an idea*’.<sup>21</sup> Based on her definition, one could say that the master signifier is the central element which ensures the operation of this logic, from where its coherence emanates. It is the ‘*axiomatically accepted premise*’ from where everything else is deduced.<sup>22</sup> It is a ‘*point of certainty where the need for discussion is dismissed*’ as it is ‘*haunted by tautology*’.<sup>23</sup> We can also cite other notions that are related to the master signifier – such as Jacques Derrida’s ‘transcendental signified’ or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s ‘masterwords’.<sup>24</sup>

That said, the master signifier is not simply a symbolic element. As it was already implicit in the notion of *point de capiton*, Lacan highlights that the master signifier is related to desire and enjoyment. In this short space, I have no means to present these notions in detail. I have done so elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Concisely, I can say that, from a Lacanian point of view, the subject is traversed by a constitutive lack. There is something incomplete in his being. Such incompleteness, according to the Lacanian theory, is connected to a desire for recognition, for being desired by the others – as Lacan says, we desire the other’s desire. And we may daydream that if we succeed in capturing the other’s desire, we may experience some kind of full enjoyment. The issue is that these two goals are impossible to reach. The others’ desire – which Lacan refers to as object *a* – is not something we can possess once and for all, and the full enjoyment is an unattainable fantasy. For this very reason, the way to obtain this recognition always appears distortedly, through idealized objects. We believe that by buying a car, conquering a love

partner, or simply winning a political dispute, we may experience this moment of perpetual delight.

Without further psychoanalytic digressions, what we must retain from all this is that the master signifier frequently plays the role of an idealized object, fascinating us as if it could provide an answer to the lack that traverses us. This is what explains its strength. We adore a leader because we believe they know something about our desire, and that their victory would re-establish a lost glory from the past. As such, the work of psychoanalysis – its great challenge – is to criticize these signifiers. To a large extent, psychoanalytic treatment requires showing that there is nothing solid behind these magic words. It consists of showing that a world full of certainties and enjoyment does not exist, and that the symbolic order that sustains itself on master signifiers is not consistent.

### The various uses of the empty signifier

As I indicated, in the same way that Lacan's notion of *point de capiton* was explicitly associated with the idea of nodal point, there would also be an equivalence between the notions of master signifier and empty signifier. Some could even claim that, in the same way that Lacan moved from the *point de capiton* to the master signifier, Laclau moved from the nodal point to the empty signifier.<sup>26</sup> The problem is that they are not perfect synonyms. And there are two reasons for this.

The first reason for not treating nodal point and empty signifier as synonyms is that the concept of empty signifier represents some kind of break in Laclau's work addressing universality. In his book written with Mouffe, although they stress the importance of preserving 'a symbolic frame' structured around 'a common point of reference'<sup>27</sup> – i.e. the nodal point –, they had also claimed that radical democracy would imply 'renouncing the discourse of the universal'.<sup>28</sup> Here, universality would be associated with the homogenizing tendencies of Marx's tradition that saw the working class as the only universal class.<sup>29</sup> This perspective implied the incapacity of accepting the radical contingency of such universality, which also made it difficult to deal with a plurality of new social movements in their diversity. As Laclau understands it, in practical terms, Marx's followers engaged in 'a culture of the elimination of specificities', of taming their expression in the name of a universal doctrine.<sup>30</sup> Soon after the publication of his book with Mouffe, however, Laclau starts to complexify his understanding of the relationship between universal and particular, indicating the inescapable presence of a universal dimension in every discourse.<sup>31</sup>

The empty signifier accomplishes a partial reconciliation with universality. The concept first appears in a book intervening in a debate on identity politics. From a discussion on equivalence and difference, the empty signifier emerges as a concept in an attempt to inform 'the redefinition of the existing relation between universality and particularity'.<sup>32</sup>

Through very formal reasoning, what Laclau attempts to show is both the same time the particular character of universality – i.e. the fact that every appeal to the universal is always contingently embodied in a particularity –, and the fact that a universal dimension is present in every discourse.<sup>33</sup>

The second reason for not treating nodal point and empty signifier as synonyms is that, so to speak, the notion of empty signifier is not synonymous with itself. Already in its first formulation, the empty signifier acquired different meanings. Throughout Laclau's work, as the empty signifier reappeared in different publications, new uses and

possibilities for the concept were suggested by Laclau and his entourage. The polysemy is so intense that it is difficult to claim that one is dealing with different dimensions of the same concept, dimensions that could be placed together coherently. To explain this, in the following pages, the empty signifier will be critically presented as:

- (1) a symbol of the pure being of the symbolic system;
- (2) a particular demand that represents all other particular political struggles;
- (3) a 'negative' symbol that names an antagonistic other;
- (4) a symbol whose content is problematically poor;
- (5) a symbol pointing to a non-saturated symbolic space, to an open identity.

These different uses coexisted in Laclau's work. For instance, the first three appear in the same chapter in which Laclau introduced the concept for the first time. Laclau himself never distinguished between these different applications of the concept. In some cases – notably the first two – Laclau presents them together, as if one were the logical consequence of the other. In other cases – especially the third one – his formulation is implicit and underdeveloped. In the fourth case, I could claim that Laclau makes a performative contradiction, as he uses the concept in ways that he had openly rejected. In the fifth case, one is dealing with a marginal use of the concept by Laclau that nonetheless opens a broad path to distinguish between different forms of constructing collective identities and their relationship with radical democracy.

### ***First use of the term: A symbol of the pure being of the symbolic system***

The first use of the notion of empty signifier in Laclau's work defines it as a necessary feature of every symbolic system. For Laclau, the empty signifier is the *only* means to ensure that a system of meaning does not collapse.<sup>34</sup> As he continued to affirm throughout the rest of his life, every symbolic system needs to establish barriers – otherwise coherence of meaning would not be possible.<sup>35</sup>

Considering that the symbolic system is differential – i.e. a signifier can only have a meaning through its relationship with other signifiers – the limits of this system, required for its coherence, can only be marked by another difference, but a qualitatively distinguished difference. As a result, the empty signifier is precisely this entity that represents '*the pure being of the system*' against its antagonistic limits that are pure negativity – the Lacanian real, as he says.<sup>36</sup> The limits are described as antagonistic in the sense that the term acquired in Laclau's earlier work with Chantal Mouffe, because what is beyond them is constitutively threatening the consistency of the system, threatening its identity.<sup>37</sup>

It is at this point that Laclau introduces a very important notion that accompanies his theorization on the empty signifier: the notion of equivalence. According to Laclau, although inside the symbolic system the relationship between signifiers is differential, when confronted with what is excluded from the system, it is possible to understand that there is an equivalence between them. All have something in common: the fact that they integrate the same closed symbolic system, against a common threat.

Here, one can start to see that the notion of empty signifier, already in this first formulation, is not a simple synonym of master signifier. For Laclau, the empty signifier is not simply a nodal point that serves as the last reference to fix meaning, but it also represents the

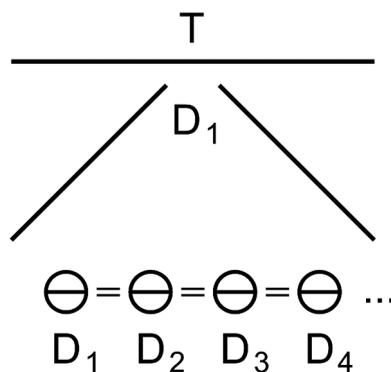
systematicity of the system. For Laclau – in a step that is not uncontroversial – it means that the empty signifier is the signifier that names ‘us’. Although one cannot rule out that this is a way for a master signifier to structure a discourse, it is important to understand that this is a very specific discursive configuration, whose generalization can be questioned.

That said, it is worth noting what the notions of master signifier and empty signifier have in common. If psychoanalysis stresses that the master signifier is always inconsistent, Laclau says that the empty signifier will never succeed in completely representing the pure being of the system. Every attempt to name the wholeness of the system will always be inadequate because the irreducible differential character of the system condemns it to be traversed by a lack<sup>38</sup> – in summary, the symbolic order is inconsistent, and a society understood as a closed system is impossible.<sup>39</sup> As Nico Carpentier has pointed out in a recent article that openly echoes Laclau’s first use of the term, the goal of critique of ideology precisely to show the contingency, particularity, and inconsistency of empty signifiers.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Second use of the term: A particular demand that represents all other particular political struggles***

A few pages after introducing the concept of empty signifier, Laclau moves on to the practical political translation of the idea of equivalence that he saw as central in his first use of the concept. This is the second interpretation of empty signifier, which Laclau presents as a logical continuity of the first, but that one may try to separate. For Laclau, in practical terms, the empty signifier is presented as a gathering point of political struggles.<sup>41</sup> One is not simply dealing with the signifier that names ‘us’, but with the struggle that represents ‘our’ struggles in a populist movement.

Because of its more concrete applications, this use is perhaps the most widely disseminated in the literature. It was further developed and formalized in Laclau’s triple debate with Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler. It was there that he presented his famous diagram reproduced in [Figure 1](#) where many different demands –  $D_1$ ,  $D_2$ ,  $D_3$ ,  $D_4$ , representing the various demands of revolutionary Russia such as ‘Peace’, ‘Bread’ and ‘Land’ – are articulated around a particular demand –  $D_1$ , ‘All power to the soviets!’ – playing the role of empty signifier and against a common enemy – in this case, Tsarism.<sup>42</sup>



**Figure 1.** The dynamics of articulation<sup>43</sup>.

As Laclau explains when he introduces this chart, what gathers the different demands is not a shared positive content. There is no positive common denominator determining why different struggles start to be seen as equivalent. For Laclau, the equivalence is based on the fact that all demands remain unsatisfied. That is why he represents the demands with two semicircles.<sup>44</sup> The bottom part of the circle, he says, represents the particular content of every demand which does not dissolve in the moment of articulation, while the upper part of the circle represents what allows equivalence and articulation in the first place: a shared lack.<sup>45</sup>

Here, Laclau also adds an important qualification when he says that signifier  $D_1$  is only *tendentially* empty.<sup>46</sup> It means that a signifier is not empty in absolute terms, but to a certain degree. Emptiness, here, is understood as the loss of a particular original meaning by the signifier that becomes ‘*the rallying point of equivalential associations vaster than itself*’.<sup>47</sup> As he says, the wider the chain of equivalences in a populist movement, the emptier the nodal signifier should be in order to represent all other demands.

A problem with this second use comes precisely from his apparent concreteness when compared with the first. In an effort to politically translate an abstract linguistic conjecture, Laclau presents an interpretation of the empty signifier that is more precise, but also more limited than the first one. The antagonistic relationship between the system and its constitutive outside becomes an antagonistic political struggle between the people and its enemies. He also moves from a formal relationship between signifiers to a political relationship between demands.

As Žižek says, political struggle is indeed implicit in Lacan’s idea of master signifier. The master signifier can be contested, and a rival master signifier may indeed represent a threat to a discursive articulation. Also, master signifiers such as ‘communism’, ‘nation’ and ‘people’ imply antagonistic others – for instance, ‘capitalism’, ‘foreigners’ and ‘elites’. However, these signifiers do not necessarily represent a series of well-defined demands in an equivalential chain. Moreover, the notion of political struggle in itself seems to refer to a particular configuration of signifiers.

A possible solution for Laclau’s second use of the term consists of going back to a notion that he quickly and increasingly introduces as a synonym for political struggle: the notion of demand.<sup>48</sup> Laclau never clarified how he conceptualized demand. Frequently, it is used as another name for political struggle. However, as one revisits Lacan’s notion of demand, one can find a fruitful way to interpret Laclau’s theorization. As Bruce Fink indicates, for Lacan ‘*all speech is demand*’.<sup>49</sup> In other words, a statement does not need to be articulated in a particular form to be a demand. If this is true, Laclau’s favourite example of empty signifier – the name of a leader – becomes more coherent.<sup>50</sup> Not only clear statements such as ‘*Perón al poder!* [Perón back to power!]’ are a demand: any symbolic element – for instance, the name of the populist leader alone, or any other symbol – could play this role and be an empty signifier.

That said, two issues remain. The first one, which I called essentialism of demands, was discussed elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> As Laclau does not develop Lacan’s insights on the notion of demands, he relies on them as if they had a *noyau dur* beyond symbolic articulation.

The second issue with the political translation of the notion of empty signifier – the second use of the term – is an apparent contradiction with the first use of the concept. As Laclau says, in practical terms, the emptier the signifier, the more a particular struggle will represent all the other struggles. This part is easy to understand. However, it is not

clearly compatible with the abstract notion that every symbolic system needs to have frontiers separating it from the outside and giving it consistency, therefore, it must have an empty signifier. If one follows this intuition, it makes no sense to speak of the level of emptiness of an empty signifier. If a system needs an empty signifier to be internally coherent, less 'empty' signifiers would imply weaker 'systematicities of the systems' – psychosis, *in extremis*. In this sense, one may conclude that only clearly 'populist' situations in which a clear antagonism is in place would allow for the representation of the pure being of the system and, therefore, for the fixation of meaning.

### **Third use of the term: A 'negative' symbol that names an antagonistic other**

Although this is a dimension frequently neglected by discourse theorists, Laclau associated the notion of empty signifier with the antagonistic other. This is the third use of the term, which is furtively introduced by Laclau in the same chapter along with the first two.

It is directly linked to the fact that subjects are constantly confronted with the inconsistency of the symbolic order. That is because the empty signifier here names the antagonistic other that *threatens* one's identity. It symbolizes all that is beyond the symbolic system and, to guarantee the limits of the symbolic order, it must '*become the signifier of pure threat*'.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Laclau suggests that every discursive formation has two empty signifiers.<sup>53</sup> As Yannis Stavrakakis has claimed when trying to distinguish nodal point and empty signifier, there are empty signifiers that are not nodal points. As he says, every discourse has at least two empty signifiers: the nodal point representing the internal coherence of the discourse, and its opposite, an empty signifier representing the limits of a discourse.<sup>54</sup> In a controversial statement, Laclau claims that this signifier names Lacan's 'real', making reference to pure negativity.<sup>55</sup>

However, as further developments by both Laclau and other authors have suggested, the 'negative' empty signifier obeys different rules. It would be a symbolic element of a fantasmatic discourse, a symbol constructed to be scapegoated as the causes of society's misfortune. In short, in this fantasmatic discourse, if there is no such thing as a harmonious society, it is because someone or some group – represented by the 'negative' empty signifier – is sabotaging it. In Laclau's famous diagram cited above, one could say that Tsarism itself was the 'negative' empty signifier which, gathering monarchs, landowners and capitalists would constitute the 'enemies of the people', the source of all problems in Russian society at that time.<sup>56</sup>

In this sense, the 'negative' empty signifier also implies equivalences, but of a different kind. In a rare recent reflection on this 'negative' empty signifier, Thomas Jacobs has claimed that a name such as 'terrorism' erases differences and nuances: this 'negative' empty signifier produces equivalences between different phenomena such as religious and non-religious, left and right, isolated or collective 'terrorist' acts in a blurred and mythical 'otherness'.<sup>57</sup> Laclau's own comments on the 'negative' equivalences are slightly distinct, though. In 1980, Laclau had already sketched the idea of a situation in which '*every characteristic of the aggressor [ . . . ] is presented in relation of equivalence with the other characteristics*', which are '*stripped of its "literal" meaning and comes to signify negativity*'.<sup>58</sup> As such, following Žižek, the emptiness of the empty signifier naming the antagonistic other can be seen when one assigns to this other a series of pejorative

attributes at the same time.<sup>59</sup> For Žižek, this equivalence present in the ‘negative’ empty signifier is what allows the articulation of various groups against it. Each group can find in the antagonistic other a well-suited almost customized reason to despise and oppose it.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, we should also point out how this assignment of pejorative attributes to an antagonist may produce discourses with high levels of internal contradictions. Like the Jew in antisemitic discourses, the other can be introduced *simultaneously* as a dangerous ruthless communist *and* a greedy usurer capitalist pig.

Clearly, we are dealing with a fantasmatic construction, frequently associated with the notion of ‘theft of enjoyment’.<sup>61</sup> The fantasmatic argument is that, if we do not experience full enjoyment, it is because someone else enjoys at our expense, in an obscene and immoral manner. It is the immigrants, for example, who are truly responsible for the nation’s problems, as they do not work and live on welfare – at the same time that they steal our jobs, of course.<sup>62</sup>

Here, a remark must be made: it must be highlighted that Laclau described the antagonistic other as radically excluded – as an ‘*always escaping real*’ to be stigmatized – years before his introduction of the notion of heterogeneity.<sup>63</sup> Heterogeneity refers to the subaltern social elements – such as the lumpenproletariat in Marx’s thought – that do not fit in the antagonism opposing ‘us’ and ‘them’ – in Marx’s tradition, the antagonism between workers and the bourgeoisie. More broadly, we can call heterogeneous anything that troubles this cleavage. This is important because the notion of heterogeneity brought new light to the debate on negativity in discourse. Considering that meaning is relational, throughout time, Laclau understands that, on some occasions, ‘*division is perfectly compatible with the status quo*’.<sup>64</sup> The antagonistic other is truly part of the discourse that defines our identity and, as such, it is already within a certain symbolic order, reaffirming this order. As a result, it cannot be defined as radically excluded. Instead, the real constitutive outside would be the heterogeneous, whose emergence exposes the radical contingency of the frontier that defines the identities of both ‘us’ and ‘them’.

#### ***Fourth use of the term: A symbol whose content is problematically poor***

It is interesting to note that the inconsistencies frequently associated with the ‘negative’ empty signifier reappear differently in the fourth use of the term. This approach seems to give a particular interpretation to its notion of emptiness: emptiness as a lack of coherent meaning. Although Laclau formally rejected this use on a few occasions, I argue that one can repeatedly find it in his work.

As explained above, the master signifier is frequently described as inconsistent, a ‘nonsensical signifier’, something that cannot be adequately put into words.<sup>65</sup> The fourth use of empty signifier assumes this characteristic of the master signifier in a particular way, as if its self-referencing anchor status implied equivocality, ambiguity, abstraction or vagueness.<sup>66</sup> The idea is that, for nobody actually knows what the empty signifier stands for – the name of the leader, for instance, can mean different things to different persons –, it is capable of luring people with different and even contradictory positions to identify with the same symbol. Étienne Balibar criticized Laclau in these terms. For Balibar, Laclau’s empty signifier would be an ‘empty naming’, in such a way that different groups could interpret the same symbol in diverse ways.<sup>67</sup> Not far from Balibar, Pierre Ostiguy and Benjamin Moffitt have recently claimed that the empty

signifier should instead be called an ‘overflowing’ signifier, for it would allow for members of the same camp to ‘associate many meanings with the term, name, or leader’.<sup>68</sup> However, differently from Balibar, Ostiguy and Moffitt celebrate this ‘overflowing’ signifier for its mobilizing power that constructs some sort of unity out of differences.

Despite Balibar’s, as well as Ostiguy and Moffitt’s readings, Laclau formally disallowed this kind of interpretation on many occasions. For him, empty signifiers are neither equivocal nor ambiguous. He defines an equivocal signifier as that with different ‘fully realized’ meanings, but whose meanings vary according to the context. There are many signifieds associated with the same signifier in different moments. ‘Left’ and ‘right’, for instance, mean different things today compared to what they meant during the French Revolution. In its turn, an ambiguous signifier is described by Laclau as a signifier with an ‘excess or deficiency of signification’.<sup>69</sup> It can be marked by an overdetermination of meaning – that is, it is equivocality expressed in a single moment, with ‘Left’ and ‘right’ meaning different things for different people at the same time – or by an underdetermination of meaning – nobody knows what ‘Left’ and ‘right’ stand for. For Laclau, none of those is an attribute of an empty signifier. In a somewhat mysterious formulation, he argues that the empty signifier would be a signifier that ‘signifies the limits of signification, appearing as interruption, subversion, distortion’.<sup>70</sup>

A few years later, this topic re-emerged when Laclau rejected ‘abstraction’ and ‘vagueness’ as a characteristic of the empty signifier. Recalling his debate with Butler, Laclau claimed that the emptiness of the empty signifier ‘is entirely different from [...] poverty of contents’ of abstraction.<sup>71</sup> According to Laclau, those who accuse populism of relying on abstractions are based on the wrong assumptions. In abstraction, he says, one tries to find a common conceptual denominator – e.g. ‘capitalism’ – for the different grievances in society. For Laclau, such a common denominator does not exist in itself. As he says, during the Russian Revolutions, the slogan ‘Peace, Bread and Land’ was not an abstract conceptual denominator of all unsatisfied demands, but a symbol able to express struggles beyond those expressed in the slogan. What takes place with the empty signifier would be simply and precisely the performative construction of a symbol beyond particularisms.<sup>72</sup>

In turn, Laclau says there is an ‘ideological or political underdevelopment’ in vagueness, which he does not see as a necessary trait of populism.<sup>73</sup> In other words, for Laclau, the ‘empty’ character of the empty signifier refers to its ability to represent a plurality of demands, which does not necessarily follow from a lack of content or coherence and, on the contrary, can create coherence between demands.

The problem is that his examples and explanations can frequently lead one at least to consider that it is the vague content of the empty signifier that is at the root of its attractiveness.<sup>74</sup> According to Laclau, for instance, Perón’s success relied on his charisma, but also on the vagueness of his discourse, potentialized during his exile.<sup>75</sup> Precisely because Perón was forbidden to speak in Argentina, associated with his decision of being ‘very careful not to take any definitive stand in the factional struggles’, that his figure could be associated by the different Peronist factions with different and frequently incoherent projects – factions which at the moment of the leader’s return to the country would ultimately and tragically get involved in fratricide conflicts.<sup>76</sup> Laclau also points out that, had General Georges Boulanger taken power in France, he would necessarily alienate

some elements of his base since, once in government, it would be impossible to fulfil contradictory demands that sustained his anti-institutional movement.<sup>77</sup>

Laclau himself admits that in wider popular movements ‘*the identity of both the popular forces and of the enemy becomes more difficult to determine*’, producing “‘*vagueness*” and “‘*imprecision*””.<sup>78</sup> As he says, when

[...] the tendentially empty signifier becomes *entirely* empty, [...] the links in the equivalential chain do not need to cohere with each other at all: the most contradictory contents can be assembled, as long as the subordination of them all to the empty signifier remains.<sup>79</sup>

In any case, Laclau himself does not seem to see it as a problem. Not far from Ostiguy and Moffitt’s celebration of an ‘overflowing’ signifier, he claimed that the success of populism depends precisely on the poor content of its empty signifier: ‘*The so-called “poverty” of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy*’, he concedes.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Fifth use of the term: A symbol pointing to a non-saturated symbolic space, to an open identity***

Unlike the idea of emptiness as vagueness, in the fifth use of the notion of empty signifier, the emptiness resides in the non-saturation of the symbolic space. Every symbolic order is by definition non-saturated – i.e. there will always be something heterogeneous escaping it –, but in the fifth use, this non-saturation is accepted and somehow represented as such.

This approach is inspired by some passages in which Laclau stressed that a tendentially empty signifier is capable of gathering different – and potentially almost all – unsatisfied demands present in society in an ‘*indefinite expansion of an equivalential chain*’.<sup>81</sup> Sometimes, he indicates that there is an ‘*irresistible attraction*’ in this process.<sup>82</sup> From this definition, he distinguishes a particular expression of populism – ethno-populism – that would not involve a truly empty signifier. In the case of ethno-populism, the process of tendentially and indefinitely incorporating demands is limited – the ‘people’, in ethno-populism, is more particularistic, and cannot incorporate demands of immigrants and other minorities, for example.<sup>83</sup> According to Laclau, in ethno-populism one is not constructing a frontier inside a community, but an exterior frontier separating it from foreigners.<sup>84</sup> Although this may seem like a simple choice of different signifiers – the elites or the foreigners – for Laclau, it limits the scope of who can join the ‘people’, and makes it anti-pluralistic.

The way Laclau conceives ethno-populism may have consequences compared to the way one relates to identity. In general, this reading will advocate that the signifier ‘nation’, especially when understood in its ethnic roots, cannot be an empty signifier as it refers to a closed, positive identity in a discourse that attempts to fix signification once and for all.<sup>85</sup> In the same vein, one could say that the signifier ‘class’, when defined in its strictly economic and sociological terms, would present the same problem.<sup>86</sup>

Following this reasoning, it is possible to conclude that while signifiers that are not truly empty try to constitute closed identities, a signifier would be genuinely empty when it points towards an openness, a certain indeterminacy. Hence, the signifier ‘people’ in authentic populist discourse could be a point of reference for an open identity that, in its indeterminacy, can put together various demands in larger chains of equivalences. It

constantly welcomes the heterogeneous, the radically excluded real that threatens our identities, that questions the very meaning of ‘us’.

To a better understanding of this idea, it should be noted that Laclau affirmed that an empty signifier would be a signifier that signifies the limits of signification.<sup>87</sup> In this fifth interpretation, this passage can be read in a specific manner. Here, the signification of the limits of signification implies the acceptance of these limits as such, the acceptance of the impossibility of society.<sup>88</sup>

In this sense, the empty signifier would not be ‘transcendental’, as Derrida had suggested, or ‘master’ in Lacan’s terms. On the contrary, the empty signifier would not be the last reference of meaning, but precisely the symbol of the radical contingency of meaning, of an openness of meaning. In rhetorical terms, the idea here is that if, in a catachresis, a signifier constitutes something where there was nothing, this signifier can nevertheless refer to a void, to an impossibility as such, which is accepted as such.<sup>89</sup> Here, the emptiness of the empty signifier could be associated with Lefort’s ‘empty place’ of power, which plays a major role in radical democracy.<sup>90</sup>

In psychoanalytic terms, the idea here is that the empty signifier would not constitute a fantasy of a closed identity and full enjoyment, but rather indicate a way for traversing fantasy and accepting the loss of full enjoyment as such. As I have explained elsewhere, Laclau associates the empty signifier with what psychoanalysis calls sublimation, which Sigmund Freud and Lacan characterized as a destiny of the drive that goes beyond fantasy.<sup>91</sup> In sublimation, one does not seek the other’s desire – the object *a* – in fantasies of fullness. Instead, in sublimation, the subject accepts the impossibility of mastering the other’s desire and of achieving fullness, and he does this precisely through a representation that evokes emptiness, lack.

Laclau suggests that different expressions of populism would involve different relations with fantasy, beyond the tortuous paths of the search for the other’s desire through idealized symbols and the construction of thieves of enjoyment.<sup>92</sup> In the case of radical democratic populism, we could think of a signifier that goes beyond the moralism that opposed good and evil. A signifier that allows the questioning of all fantasies traversing a discourse in a way that ‘*illusion transcends itself, destroys itself, showing that it is there only as a signifier*’.<sup>93</sup> It is radical democratic for it instigates the constant questioning of the identity of ‘us’, in a movement to ceaselessly include subaltern subjects within the ‘people’.

As clarified, the notion of an empty signifier related to an open meaning is different from the idea of an empty signifier as vagueness. There is no guarantee that vagueness implies accepting indeterminacy, radical contingency, embracing an ethics of radical democracy. In fact, the examples seem to suggest the contrary. The vagueness of Perón’s statements could only produce a variety of fantasmatic identifications, not a common open horizon. Each faction of Perón’s followers idealized the leader in a particular way, and when confronted with the other faction, they tried to impose their particular point of view once and for all, by force, if necessary. The inevitable fratricide caused by a vague empty signifier was at the antipodes of a tolerant radical democratic empty signifier.

Having said that, I must admit that despite its potential to explain radical democratic identification, this interpretation of the empty signifier is heterodox and far from being consensual. It somehow contradicts the canonical readings of Laclau’s work, in which the

empty signifier would be precisely the opposite of emptiness in the radical democratic notion of the 'empty place' of power. Instead of stressing and embracing radical contingency, the lack of certainty on which to lay the foundation of society, the empty signifier would try to cope with contingency and bear a fantasmatic promise of full enjoyment. The empty signifier is normally interpreted as '*the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness*', which sustains the fantasy that this 'wholeness' of the community exists and is reachable.<sup>94</sup>

The main issue is that the idea that the emptiness of the empty signifier indicates a non-saturated symbolic space openly introduces a distinction between different kinds of populism – a radical democratic populism and an undemocratic populism, such as ethno-populism. Although this distinction is relevant and, once in a while, latently sketched in Laclau's work – for instance, in his debate with Rancière<sup>95</sup> –, the fact is that Laclau never fully developed it, at least not at the level of the concept of empty signifier. On the contrary, as a rule, he assumed positions that seem to contradict this necessary differentiation. For instance, Laclau claims that the logic of equivalence and the empty signifier that emerges from it could appear in discourses with the most different ideological contents.<sup>96</sup>

Only one year before his reflections on ethno-populism, Laclau had claimed that the empty signifier would bear no relation to an agonistic '*opening to the other*'.<sup>97</sup> In the same context, he also stated that the empty signifier bridges the gap between the 'is' and the 'ought', trying to fill a constitutive lack by engaging the subject in an unconditional commitment.<sup>98</sup> Its role of providing an order in a situation of anomy, of a subjective 'organic crisis' is indifferent to the ontic content playing this role.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, there is no necessary connection between the empty signifier and emancipatory or radical democratic movement. Because of its function, the role of empty signifier could be played '*by any force, not necessarily democratic*'.<sup>100</sup>

The lack of a clear differentiation between different expressions of populism in Laclau's work is somehow comprehensible if one considers that the frontier separating ethno-populism from inclusionary populism is, in fact, not always clear.<sup>101</sup> Inclusionary references to the people and exclusionary references to the nation can get confused. Moreover, as Laclau once said, there would be '*no adequate theoretical resources*' to differentiate them at the ethical level, for they all would be ontic expressions radically discontinuous *vis-à-vis* ontological considerations.<sup>102</sup> However, if this is the case, the idea of an empty signifier pointing to a non-saturated symbolic order is further weakened.

Despite all these observations, nevertheless, I sustain that we are dealing with a fruitful interpretation that should be further explored so one can finally understand what radical democratic populism could be.

## Conclusion

Having presented these five uses of the notion of empty signifier by Laclau, a few options appear on how to proceed. For instance, one may dismiss some of the uses, selecting a few or even one that would be the most correct and coherent. Another tempting path would be to simply dismiss and abandon the notion as a whole by claiming that it is incoherent – as if the excess of uses would make it useless. Curiously enough, Mouffe's position on the

matter seems to lie in the middle of these two positions. In recent public interventions, Mouffe has stated that she had always opposed Laclau's use of the notion of empty signifier, claiming it would create confusion, and called for the adoption of 'hegemonic signifier' instead – an expression that, to my knowledge, Laclau only used once.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps a 'hegemonic signifier', as conceived by Mouffe, would be closer to Lacan's master signifier and provide more coherence to the notion.

Yet, I disagree with all these alternatives. Although we should never cease to seek clarity, Derrida taught us that concepts will always be haunted by aporias, by blind spots.<sup>104</sup> A perfectly coherent concept is an impossibility, and can only be the product of some kind of violence which is inevitable when one '*alleges to be sure to be right, freed from doubt, in designating, characterizing, categorizing*'.<sup>105</sup> For Derrida, we must be able to use language in its sedimented form, but also be aware of its limits, of its very radically contingent status. In fact, some of the most interesting advances in political theory seem to come precisely from exploring these points where suture is lacking. Therefore, for this reason, I believe that the polysemy of the empty signifier is in fact fruitful.

To further clarify, I do believe that we should distinguish the various uses of the empty signifier to differentiate between undemocratic and radical democratic ideologies. However, distinguishing between these two cases does not imply rejecting the notion of empty signifier or providing two clearly defined binary concepts. On the contrary, I believe that the fact that the same category – empty signifier – can be applied to describe both undemocratic and radical democratic practices explains how various modes of identification can coexist sharing the same symbols, but mobilizing different ethical positions. Moreover, this polysemy is an important reminder that, as suggested above, the distinction between these two positions is tenuous – that the same empirical signifier can assume various dynamics over time. As a result, abandoning the notion of empty signifier would possibly cause us to miss the rich insights that can emerge from the polysemy itself.

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## Acknowledgments

Preliminary versions of this paper have been presented at a meeting of the Brazilian Network of Discourse Theory on March 18, 2021, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Populism Specialist Group (PSA) Annual Workshop, 'Populism: New Perspectives', on June 9, 2021. I am grateful to Scott Huntly, whose demands for clarity on the meaning of empty signifier led me to write an important part of this article.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ORCID

Thomás Zicman de Barros  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1657-6939>