

Populism and Instrumentality: From Pathological Symptoms to Ontological Sinthomes for Educational Theory and Laclau's Ontology¹

The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being. That is how we must read Freud's "wo we war, soll ich werden": you, the subject, must identify yourself with the place where your symptom already was; in its pathological particularity you must recognize the element which gives consistency to your being (Žižek 1989: 81).

Instrumentality and education, does educational research ask the right questions?

In the spirit of this special issue question, "Authoritarianism – do we ask the right questions?" this paper articulates a novel approach to the emergent questions over the instrumentality of education in general and to politics in specific. Educational research has been criticizing the instrumentality of education mainly in the context of the neoliberal policies in higher education and, through that, has shaped radical positions claiming the autotelic value of education against any instrumentality whatsoever. Moreover, educational research has been attacking populism in a way that reduces it to a register of evils and pathologies incoherent with education and that we do enough when we condemn it. However, a look at the contemporary forms of instrumentality would question if the critique of neoliberalism has anything new to debunk, especially when the neoliberal hegemony retreats after more

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than three decades of the world's new order, leaving the space for a chaotic void. At the place of this vacuum, the decomposition of neoliberal hegemony is replaced and rearticulated by new hegemonies such as those that populism represents. In this context, the instrumentality of education is no longer a simple question of education's differentiation from learning, skilling, upskilling, training, or human capital theories. Instead, it is about new challenges articulated in the guise of a performative quest of education's (anti-) instrumentality, such as the (in)dependence of schools regarding family values, the tension between universal educational ideals and cultural particularisms in increasingly more multicultural societies, whether sex education should be a thought subject and, if yes, with which content, and what about the new/old question of religion in the classrooms. Answers to such questions should not be simply normative but should be taken as serious questions that necessitate, especially, a novel understanding that is aware of their ontological underpinnings.

It is in this context the present paper looks at the questions of instrumentality and populism in relation to education as not simple symptoms of a situation that went awry but of a new order where competing hegemonies are trying to act on a radical contingency of political actions which even the most conservative movements start to recognize through their fervent politics of decisionism. Henceforth, if we are to provide a satisfying answer not only for us, educational researchers, and preachers of democracy, we should articulate adequate answers that recognize this ontology and look at citizens gripped by undemocratic hegemonies, not as simply fooled masses. The next section starts with the aim of looking at instrumentality and populism as not simple pathologies but requiring attention to the conditions of their articulation.

What a scandal!

Scandals catch our attention even when we are sure they are unworthy of serious talk. It is hard to exclude them because our most profound emotions, including fear and pity if not laughter, are gripped while witnessing a metamorphosed subject. Moreover, when we want to dismantle the scandal's logic, we find it useless because a scandal makes sense precisely by transgressing it. In similar terms, newspapers and magazines take the scandals of their subjects as only deserving a description of how they deviate from their normality. This approach limits pathology to a simple description of what is outside normality instead of asking if the pathology can say anything serious and ontological about its subjects.

From a different angle, academics consider the pathological and the normal not as immediate categories but mediated through discursive articulations. However, academia seems satisfied by deepening the distinction between the normal and the pathological concerning some topics. Take, for example, this contribution's topic: the instrumentality of education in general and populism in particular. Most

investigations look at populism as instrumentalizing education, a subject that should be freed from any instrumentality. This description departs from the assumption of the normality of education. It then evaluates it against a situation where it is subsumed to pathological subjects, populism, and instrumentality. This departing standpoint is satisfied at best with describing the pathological consequences of instrumentality and populism on education or, at most, suggesting ways to deal with it.

Conversely, the present paper investigates the ontological conditions of articulating education, populism, and instrumentality together beyond the scope of pathologizing or normalizing this relationship. It examines the condition of framing populism and instrumentality with education as pathological. It argues that the core element of this conception of pathology is the evasion of every subject's antagonism and contingency. This argument carries significant weight in the field. Firstly, education is hardly seen as a space of conflict, let alone as a participant in a populist antagonism. Secondly, instrumentality is understood as a sign of the contingency of education, which deviates it from its essence, supposed to refuse all instrumentality. Therefore, the contribution reconsiders antagonism and contingency to change the reading of this relationship as pathological. It takes them not as exceptional or unimportant but ontological. In the next section, the paper starts with contingency, leading later to reconsider antagonism.

Reconsidering pathology through hegemony

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's political philosophy is the primary for this contribution. They are crucial because the way they read contingency in their seminal book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), does not make it a simple pathology but a foundation of ontology. There, they worked on pathologies not the same as this contribution deals with (populism and instrumentality). However, their approach to pathology is ontological and can be generalized to this work (Marchart 2018). Hence, the contribution will detail the central tenets of Laclau and Mouffe's argument and then come back to view the paper's topic through their lenses.

Laclau and Mouffe studied the pathological elements in Marxist theory that caused the crisis of Marxism and that socialist theorists such as Luxembourg, Lenin, Kautsky, Lukacs, and Gramsci had to confront. This crisis appeared first in the failure of an automatic transition to socialism, second in the decline of the proletariat's unifying power, and lastly, in the inability of Marxism to account for the diversity of social movements since the sixties, such as environmentalism, feminism, and anti-colonialism, which have removed class struggle from its privileged leadership of the socialist transition (Laclau 2000a: 206, Laclau 2000b: 299–300, Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 159). Although many found these pathologies to be reasons for abandoning Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe did not reject the Marxist project because of these shortcomings. Nor did they deal with these impasses as unessential contingencies that would be surpassed

in the long term once the Marxist prophecies came true. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe have no distance between what is theoretically true in Marxism – and therefore should be accepted – and what is empirically contingent and consequently should be dealt with only empirically. At the same time, Laclau and Mouffe's project is an ontological scholarship that departs from these empirical impasses that do not correspond to theory as not simple contingencies but ones capable of providing a new ontology to deepen Marxism, to make it more Marxist.

This reading of pathologies as ontologically revealing contingencies led to Laclau and Mouffe's groundbreaking theorization of hegemony. They did not view hegemony as a mere contingency that grips and masks the truth. Instead, they saw it as a way to fill the ontological lack in every subject without being necessary to it. This unique perspective on hegemony, which seems to be distant from the idea of any grounding, becomes ontological elements of every subject's foundation (Hudson 2006). Returning to the crisis of Marxist theory, it was here that Laclau and Mouffe introduced the concept of hegemony into Marxism. This was their response to historical contingencies that the Marxist determinist theory could not explain. Hegemony, for them, was a way to address the crisis of Marxism without abandoning a deterministic reading of history. Despite the repeated failures of these theorizations of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe did not see this as a sign of the failure to save the Marxist project. Instead, they saw in these failures the potential to continually foster socialist hegemonic strategies, highlighting the transformative power of hegemony (Price & Sutherland 2008).

The present contribution builds on this assumption and aims to highlight clearly that Laclau and Mouffe can tell us, as they did with Marxism, that a pathological or contingent fact is not something to discard as irrelevant by reducing it to the antithesis of normality. Instead, their reading reveals how the ontological foundation for every subject stems from an ontological lack. As the last section of this contribution will explain, this is a way to open the horizon for continuous and radical emancipation that does not have to accommodate itself to fix normality. First, this investigation will take this argument further to show its implications for the pathological relationships under investigation here: education, populism, and instrumentality. This paper will start by detailing the two visions of contingency Laclau wants us to overcome and the alternative we can take concerning the relation of education to populism and instrumentality study.

For Laclau (1990: 18–27), two ways to read contingency need to be corrected. First, it is not the accidental alterations of a subject that do not define its essence. The second conception, less reductive but unsatisfying, takes contingency as the gradual alterations of a subject before it attains a predestinate essence. These two readings reduce contingency to a mere pathology against hard normality, close the gate to serious investigation of these contingencies, and reduce hegemony as being a way to cover them. Let us see how discarding these two short conceptions of contingency may lead to reconceptualizing populism instrumentality and education as ontologically

hegemonic subjects. The conclusion will start here with a subject dear to Laclau and Mouffe and closer to hegemony in its common meaning than the other two: populism. It will make this reconsideration of the relationship between populism and education. Meanwhile, the paper will gradually look at instrumentality, an element usually framed as pathological to education, and it will argue the way it is generally understood is contradictory to Laclau and Mouffe's ontology, therefore unless we read it in the way this paper suggests it is going to be contradictory to their work.

The hegemonic approach to populism

The general understanding of populism is of being only a contingent discourse that produces hegemonic false consensus to manipulate the people. However, this paper wants to show an alternative view, that populism is hegemonic but that the only foundation a subject (here, the people) has is in hegemony. To clarify, we should go back to the two invalid visions of contingency presented earlier and distance populism from them. Firstly, if populism is only to be read as a pathology, the study of populism will be limited to reporting scandalous and pathological populist statements. In a more promising yet unsatisfactory case, the relevancy of populism is shut down by taking it as a significant contingency, which is, however, unsustainable in the long term. The core of both positions is that the final articulatory goal of populism, defining the meaning of 'the people', is ontologically assumed to be a rational population. Yet, because of populism, the people, as a subject, is momentarily manipulated; all it needs is some time before rationality returns, and for the liberal and democratic truth to prevail over the false hegemony of populism. This is how most explanations of populism reduce it to pathological elements such as problems in the transition to modernism, post-war traumas, and economic recessions (Laclau 2012: 143–158). In a word, populism has nothing to do with the people and has nothing ontological about it.

To these concepts, Laclau alternatively proposes an alternative notion of populism adequate to the conception of contingency as ontological. In *On the Populism Reason* (2005), this move is made by elevating populism from a contingent pathology as ideational, historical, functionalist, and sociological to a contingency that holds the keys to the ontological foundation of the people as a totality. For Laclau, 'the people', the ultimate goal of articulation for populism, is much more than an assemblage of residents or citizens (population). 'The people' as a subject is a political discursive articulation with no privileged signifier (social class, ethnicity, race, history, etc.) capable of constructing its fullness. Therefore, populist contestations are more than a simple contingent challenge of the subject; they are ontologically revealing of the people's negativity as a subject (and ontologically of any other subject). That is to say, that 'the people' as a totality is a subject that is ontologically lacking and ultimately unfixed, and that is why it is susceptible to question and challenge.

Moreover, this means that the only essence the people (or any other subject) has is in this contingency. Therefore, what we call reading populism as a pathological contingency is ontologically revealing to the subject of 'the people' and any other subject once we generalize this reading. Similarly, I take populism from being a scandalous and antagonistic contestation of the real essence of education as a gateway to understanding something ontological about it and its instrumentality. The contribution will start with something that may seem, for the moment, distant from the argument. However, retrospectively, it will show itself as the way to this alternative ontological conception of contingency that will be a common ontology for the three subjects in question (the people, education, and instrumentality). This argument is the fear of de-pathologizing populism. I will tackle the accusation of de-pathologizing as pathological.

The importance of an ontological approach

The interest in contingency as ontological and not merely pathological can be questioned if it is not an exercise of abstract and futile speculation. Skepticism also exists about it being the symptom of the inability to make clear, logical, and analytical arguments about the argument under investigation as one would do via other hard empirical methodologies. One could even ask why this contribution decided to wander ontologically instead of going to its subjects directly and immediately. Most importantly, these questions raise the fear that normalizing populism turns this concrete political manifestation into metaphysical speculation and endless contemplation.² Thus, the fear is that the price to pay for avoiding a pathologizing contingency is scarifying the ethical engagement against real-life pathologies connected to populism, such as racism, xenophobia, and homophobia (Glynos 2001: 205, Glynos 2003: 188–189).

Moreover, and most importantly, educational theorists seem to mistrust this contingent foundation of the subject as it may weaken education. Hence, they aim to secure and champion education's independence as a subject immune to the instrumentalities of politics, especially "the pathological" populist ones. Specifically, the dread is that by emphasizing contingency, the instrumentality of education appears legitimate; thus, the specificity of education gets lost to the service of other fields (politics, employment, empowerment, etc.). These two fears of reading our subjects through an ontology where contingency is the cornerstone come from a larger fear of ontology. Should we then give up on ontology despite the attentiveness it provides us while thinking? The answer is no; instead, we should find

² Metaphysics here is not understood positively as for example in Levinas's or Cassirer's reading. It is understood as pejoratively relying on supernatural explanations of reality, which are not scientifically validated or above the material world. Hence, they are illusional and close to our understanding of real-life problems.

an alternative conception of ontology that can help us better understand these issues rather than being trapped by them. Indeed, an alternative picture can put us in a preferable position for dealing with populism and instrumentality.

First, the fear of closing real-life pathologies questions into metaphysical speculations may lead many to a de-ontologisation that is satisfied solely with real-world observations. Yet, ironically enough, the condition to accept de-ontologisation is again established on an ontological conception of the subject (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 7). Figuratively, it is just like the hydra paradox, where ontology is a beast that grows two heads for each one cut off, and the effects of actions to reduce “the problems of ontology” result in stimulating its multiplication and the more we try to eliminate it, the more we are implicated in it (Marchart 2018: 8–9). This is undoubtedly a good argument in favour of the ever-inescapability of ontology; however, it does not discard the fear of it. Therefore, one needs to overcome this trepidation by a re-conception of ontology in a new way rather than solely affirming its eternal persistence.

Hansen (2014) provides a good starting point in his discussion of one of the famous conceptions of de-ontology by Niklas Luhmann from which this paper can present an alternative conception of ontology. Luhmann (2013: 185) defines ontology as “the result of a mode of observation that operates based on a distinction between being and non-being and that subordinates all other distinctions to this one.” From this point of view, it is legitimate that ontology is reducible to metaphysics. However, there is a way to ensure Luhmann that we can escape the entrapment of metaphysics while thinking ontologically. This can be achieved right here by deepening his distinction of “being” and “not being” to be penetrable and constitutive of these two sides: the being and the not being. This is constructive in facing contingency in ontological terms, as developed in the philosophy of Laclau and Mouffe. For them, contingency is most importantly synonymous with antagonism, which is an excellent answer to Luhmann’s distinction between being and not being, and how they limit and sustain each other instead of being distinct.

Because of this emphasis on antagonism, doubts may arise again whether this contribution will fulfill its promise of being an inquiry that treats the relation of education to instrumentality and populism in ontological rather than pathologizing terms. Therefore, we should understand Laclau and Mouffe’s position; for them, antagonism is not reduced to conflicts between friends and foes and the scandals and pathologies that these produce. Their work on antagonism is much more extensive and significant, as Laclau explains:

I am not asking myself what are the actually existing antagonisms in society, but something more fundamental: What is an antagonism? What type of relations between social forces does it presuppose? This is a question usually overlooked in the sociological literature, which usually concentrates on actual ‘conflicts’, ‘confrontations’ and ‘struggles’, but which does not pose the question about the ontological nature of these categories. However, we must focus on this nature if we want to advance on the theoretical front (Laclau 2014: 102).

As is evident here, in the traditional understanding of antagonism that Laclau and Mouffe oppose, subjects have antagonists and political relations with their outside to, for example, secure resources, fight for life, or expand. If all that antagonism was this external conflict, then Laclau and Mouffe must have been late in announcing it since nothing is new here; from Democritus to Critical Theory, antagonism was the core element of the entire topic. Instead, for Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist reading, there is an attention to antagonism as an outside contradiction of the subject, as well as its internal, inescapable political conflictual contingency and the impossibility of identity to attain a sustainable fullness with no disturbing antagonisms (Marchart 2018: 28–29). This paper finds its grounds in this double dimension of antagonism that it takes as ontological to every subject.

The ontological primacy of antagonism

To say that antagonism is internal to the subject does not mean, as cultural studies view it, that it is a micro conflict distinct from a larger external macro one. Nor is it a simple exaggeration to say that the conflict between subjects can be so radical that it torments each subject internally. According to Marchart (2018), it is not either of these cases; the antagonism is about conflict (negativity), constitutive of every subject. Take, for instance, our relationship of interest here between antagonism, populism, and education. Suppose, as most research does, that antagonism is only external and affects the contingent appearances of the subject (both education and populism) but never its eternal essence (what is education and what is the people). In this case, any investigation would probably be limited to seeing the sinister populist instrumental impact on the moral, citizenship, and sex education curricula and, in a more optimistic approach, how education can be instrumental in doing something about populism in return. The interest in both cases is seeing how these two subjects enter momentary exchanges but return to their essential meaning in the long term. Thus, no matter what populism makes education look like, or how it deforms it, education will always have the same necessary and undeformed meaning. In this case, as in most academic research, populism and education are conceived as essential antagonists, and thus, they are sublet to positivist approaches with clear and ready epistemologies.

An alternative to this reduction of antagonism to the subject's exterior conflict exchanges, a circular conception of antagonism between its interior and exterior, can enable us to grasp something ontological between education and populism and internal to them. The circularity of antagonism suggests that empirically perceived populist contestations of education (external conflict) are the first gate to education's and the people's internal subjectivity (i.e., what is education and what is the people). What are we finding internally in these subjectivities?

Is it an original untouchable essence? Not really; there is an internal negativity that can only be turned into a positivity hegemonically, making the subject (in this case, education and the people) susceptible to external negativities. However, our thinking is not nihilist either because nihilism would need an objective reality to be constructed against. Alternatively, as in post-foundational philosophy, which this contribution builds on, there is no hard objective reality; hence, the aim is to work on radical negativity as productive of every subject (Laclau 1987, Marchart 2007). As Laclau (1989: 81) clearly puts it, “The dissolution of the myth of foundation does not dissolve the phantom of its own absence.” This contribution acts on recognizing that the phantom is not unimportant, but it is the basis of subjectivity. Thus, the question is not whether there is a hard ground for the subject (i.e., education, the people, instrumentality) but what happens to the subject on contingent grounds.

In the same terms, it might seem like we are turning around in an empty cycle by saying that the external antagonistic conflict is only possible through this internal conflict and that, reciprocally, internal conflict is only possible through an external one, as if we are in the egg and the chicken conundrum. This would be the question of ontology understood as the craving for the first essential being of every subject (or a fundamental antagonism that generates everything). This is not the issue here, as this contribution does not ask which (the internal or external antagonism) comes first. Assuming that every identity is contingent, we give up on the eternal nature of the subject and its originality. Metaphorically, this means that if we talk about the first originality of the subject or its primary antagonisms, the best this first originality can be is metaphorically a “second one” (Laclau 1989). Therefore, when thinking about contingency or antagonism, the question is not who is guilty of making the subject uncomfortable by its antagonisms. It is something beyond that, something about the totality of the subject while we recognize this ontological antagonism. The aim is to see how the subject is constituted and de-constituted through these perpetual antagonisms (Marchart 2021). Henceforth, these external antagonisms are the royal gate to the subject’s external conflicts, especially to their internal being. If we start from external antagonisms, it is not because this has priority. Rather, it is because the only appearance of the internal antagonism (the subject’s radical negativity) we hold is this external antagonism.

This circularity of antagonism to every subject is ontologically and methodologically crucial and holds the cornerstone of this contribution’s investigation. It makes antagonism the key to being more attentive to the selection of its study subjects in a way that chooses subjects that appear to have contradictory external relations with each other. Therefore, the combination of education, populism, and instrumentality is not intended to contribute to the pathologizing tone that denounces the populist instrumentalization of education. Alternatively, the engagement in research on these subjects, which are scandalous to each other, aims to make the three, education, populism, and instrumentality, reveal their internal

antagonism (their being) because they only reveal their internal antagonist deadlocks (ontology) after external dislocations. Specifically, where the subject (education) is more comprehensible is the space of antagonism emphasized twice. This occurs primarily through populism as a moment of contestation and then through the instrumentality that education should escape its economic and political plans, not to mention its populist ones. This paper will explain how this is the case with populism before moving to instrumentality.

In populism studies and educational research, it has been a tradition to call populism a specter, but for this contribution's understanding of antagonism, it is a revenant. This means that populism's repetitive coming back does not aim to indicate evidentially politically problematic situations. Instead, it is revenant in as much as that it aims to seek answers to legitimate questions (ontological, epistemological, and ethical) that end up being described as marginal and normatively discarded.³ These questions are only graspable with attention to an ontology to which populism points – antagonism. This contribution makes this ontological horizon clear by generalizing this reading of antagonism to the other antagonist relation that this contribution deals with. It is the relation of instrumentality to education.

Instrumentality as scandalous

What triggers reflection on how instrumentality is not a simple pathology is the observation that in numerous populist discourses, education is an instrument for solving economic, social, and political problems. However, every politically hegemonic instrumentality depends on its misrecognition as not being instrumental. Even in theoretical discussions on education, instrumentality catches us in an aporia where, on the one hand, the rejection of instrumentality does not exclude the desire for it (Snir 2021, Carusi & Szkudlarek 2024). Simultaneously, while we reject instrumentality, we agree indirectly on instrumentalities that do not diverge from the general goals of education. Hence, one cannot fail to notice that education is instrumentalized for noble aims from human rights and citizenship to economic progress and sustainability. Yet, for safety, many want to scarify the desire of education to be instrumentalized in any way whatsoever, to avoid the excuse for any perverted instrumentalization that may deviate education from its noble pedagogical finalities. In both cases, instrumentality seems to be synonymous with shame; if one accepts it, it is on the condition of making clear that education can also exist without being instrumentalized (Biesta 2001, Masschelein & Simons 2013, Hodgson et al. 2018).

³ I rely here on Derrida's hauntology in the *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international* (2012).

Indeed, there is an antagonism to investigate in this opposition between the acceptance and rejection of instrumentality. However, will we use the knowledge we gained from Laclau and Mouffe on antagonism merely to spot this antagonist relationship between education and instrumentality? Or, from a better but still not satisfying standpoint, are we going to go one step further by questioning how Laclau's knowledge of antagonism, understood as a limit to knowledge, limits the knowledge that Laclau and Mouffe give themselves? Thus, we take their theory work on antagonism as a subject and reflexively trace its limits through their theory of antagonism. And by that, we reduce their knowledge on the limits of knowledge (antagonism) to a full knowledge to be attacked in its limits by its own theoretical means. These questions are relevant for two reasons: first because instrumentality is not an easy moment for Laclau and Mouffe's ontology, and second, it activates this contribution's epistemology. The paper will detail both respectively.

In the dominant understanding of instrumentality, one can notice an antagonist moment in Laclau and Mouffe's theory. Instrumentality framed, as it usually is, via a causal process risks being an essential point. It is a fixed transcendental moment that can mechanically center all the other elements of his theory to be a fully fixed structure. Consequently, it pushes Laclau's and Mouffe's radical contingency into a contradiction where antagonism is not ontological but absorbable by formal positivism. Consider, for example, the relationship between education and populism; if the former is assumed as instrumental to populism in terms of causal relation, it can be envisaged, according to the same logic, that proper measures and technics developed progressively by experience can solve all society's radical ontological negativity. In a word, instrumentality risks being sublet to positivism and its results by reading instrumentality through a causal framework. In contrast, Mouffe and Laclau's goal concerning antagonism is not a positivist epistemology (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 113).

Indeed, both antagonist relations of instrumentality to education and Laclau and Mouffe's theory are intriguing, and they are indeed questions that this contribution takes. However, a question should first be asked about the epistemological status of antagonism since it is through antagonism that we came to these questions: Is there any knowledge to take from a knowledge primarily interested in the limits of knowledge? In more concrete terms, can antagonism even be a symptom? These questions are fair because if we advance that every subject is embedded with negativity (that the ontological character of antagonism supposes), then the question is against which positive reality is antagonism going to be a symptom? The question is if antagonism is only a matter of spotting scandals. If the answer is positive, then the point about antagonism (and this contribution) is missed because antagonism is not just about the relation of contradiction between subjects but also primarily about something more substantial. It is about internal antagonisms in particular.

Antagonism's sinthomatic epistemology

When antagonism is captured in its usual pathological connotations, research limits itself to describing the empirical conflicts right in front of our eyes. With this goal, we know a lot about antagonism, as we content ourselves with the usual questions such as who wins or loses in an antagonism? How is the conflict developing? What are the strategies for resistance? And so forth. Reversely, antagonism, taken from the terms presented so far, appears to be not an empirically given or scientifically determinable object of political or social reality. With antagonism being ontological to every subject and especially being a negative moment of every subjectivity, not an objective one, the question becomes, is it possible to face head-on what is not objective and what escapes objective knowledge because of its negative nature? Thus, it becomes clear that antagonism is not easy to investigate through a simple description of a particular positive conflict as we realize that antagonism undermines that very positivity, which is why it cannot be limited to positive facts. Hence, thinking about ontology in these terms pushes us to think about epistemology as well: what can and cannot we know? Accordingly, instead of blindly following the scientific approaches to the study of populism, we are implicated in the matter of what we are studying. And we can only do this concerning the ontological grounds that antagonism activates. In these terms, what we get is a sort of reflexive epistemology.

Accordingly, antagonism cannot take the form of a usual symptom that indicates the existence of something else. However, this does not make it irrelevant; it makes it a more meaningful symptom. In similar terms, Lacan's late teaching (Lacan 2016) has a specific understanding of the symptom compatible with Laclau and Mouffe's antagonism (Stavrakakis 2002).⁴ The symptom, or what Lacan calls the *sinthome*, is not the sign of what is pathological and not working compared to normality. The *sinthome* is an embarrassing moment for the subject but offers ways of being for it. Hence, antagonism expresses an external conflict of the subject with others, which can be phenomenologically perceived. However, this should not reduce it to a simple sign, a symptom of something not working according to empirical or theoretical normality. We should not be satisfied with these external manifestations of antagonism as being correct. Alternatively, we should also aim at antagonism as internal to the subject, which can be expressed in an internal negativity that allows these external subversions of the subject in the first place.

Accordingly, antagonism does not just limit the subject by expressing a simple solvable contradiction as much as the fact that the *sinthome* is an enigma that presents a solution without being fully resolvable. In a word, antagonism and the symptom are doing the same thing, "detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain

⁴ This paper refers to Lacan here and throughout because of his significant influence on Laclau, making the reference both relevant and well-founded.

‘pathological’ imbalance which belies the universalism, this imbalance, far from announcing the ‘imperfect realization’ of these universal principles – that is, an insufficiency to be abolished by further development – functions as their constitutive moment: the ‘symptom’ is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus.” (Žižek 1989: 16). On these grounds, with this internal antagonism, the interest is firstly ontological; then, it is to a reflexive epistemology that recognizes this internal negativity. And finally, it is an ethics of instrumentality that problematizes and recognizes this ontological negativity. I will now revisit populism and instrumentality *sinthomatically* (as *sinthomes*).

Populism revisited *sinthomatically*

Populism is usually read as a symptom having a connotative medical sense, making it a criterion to distinguish political pathology from political normality. In Lacan’s early conception of the symptom, there is a similar understanding of the symptom as “the series of exceptions, disturbances, and mal-functionings, measured by the ideal of full integration into the symbolic Law (the Other).” (Žižek 2002: 58). For academic research, populism often plays the same role in designating a pathology in relation to a symbolic register of political normality, working as an *a priori* theoretical reference of how society is or should be. Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of populism is beyond this reductionist conception of populism as a borderline between normality and abnormality (De Cleen & Glynos 2021). Instead, they give a stronger position to change the status of populism from something marginal to a symptom of ontology. Laclau helps rescue populism from its marginal and vilified position within the field of social sciences at large (Biglieri & Perelló 2019).

However, the potential of this conception risks being reduced in two cases: first, if the farthest research inspired by Laclau and Mouffe’s work goes is indicating the ontological blindness of the studies that judge populism to be only an abnormality. Second, in the context of educational research, if we adopt the (symptomatic) theory of populism inspired by Laclau and Mouffe and then rephrase it in pedagogical terms. Instead, a faithful symptomatic reading of the Lacaudian approach continues his symptomatic reading by departing from his ontology (with Mouffe) to detect heterogeneous points of breakdown and imbalance in this same theory and pedagogical theories. This moment does not only show a contradiction in these theories as having the merits of being an external antagonistic moment. It reveals the skeleton of their being. In this contribution, this moment is instrumentality; therefore, I will revisit it here in new symptomatic words.

Instrumentality revisited sinthomatically

Let us revisit how this paper captured instrumentality as an antagonist to education and to Laclau and Mouffe's theory by casting this antagonism as sinthomatic. In these new symptomatic terms, we can still see that the opposition between educational theory and Laclau's ontology to instrumentality are legitimate positions. However, the way they are questioned is somewhat reductive of antagonism. Alternatively, we need to read instrumentality, the moment of antagonism here, itself antagonistically as a subject. That is to say, not only as a relation between two subjects having their antagonisms (education and populism) but as a subject itself hindered and constituted by antagonism. In this way, instrumentality, being an antagonism and therefore limiting the subject but also constituting it, is not only a symptom of the limits of education theory or Laclau's ontology but also of their constitution.

Therefore, this work evades two positions: one that defends education against instrumentality and the other that reduces education to a political instrument. I modify the understanding of instrumentality. I present it as a symptom but not as a code to be solved or a disease to cure. Instead, by considering instrumentality as a symptom (sinthome) of antagonism's ontological meaning, I aim at instrumentality in a place of a twisted act for every subject: it is a negation and a violation, but an internal one, and thus it is constitutive of the subject (Stavrakakis 2002). Therefore, the aim is not to find a reason to reject or accept Laclau and Mouffe's position of populism as being instrumental, nor is it to ask educational theory to reject or tolerate instrumentality. Alternatively, the goal is to change the understanding of instrumentality from being a pathology to an element necessary for the Lacaudian approach and educational theories to achieve their constitution. In these terms, I see instrumentality as a gateway to reconsidering urgent epistemological and ethical impasses for Laclau's ontology and educational theory.⁵

The conception of the sinthome will answer to the incongruity of both positions, namely to Laclau's ontology of antagonism and the educational theory's refusal of instrumentality. The contribution works on two levels presented as animating the sinthome; first, it fleshes out a problem (radical ontological negativity), and second, it offers the solution. We need a new ontological and epistemological reading for the first goal and, for the second, an ethical one.

Epistemology of instrumentality

First, by focusing on populist articulations, this contribution asks what it takes for education and populism as subjects to be in instrumental relation. We find that education is instrumentalized as a demand to fix the people's incompleteness

⁵ Here, I rely on Žižek's approach to the symptom in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989).

as a totality hegemonically. In Laclau's theory of populism (2012: 165), the people is more than an assemblage of the population. It is a political discursive articulation that has no primary signifier to ground it (social class, ethnicity, history, etc.). Accordingly, a populist articulation of education refers to education as one of the main nodal points for this articulation. This supposes that education is also taken in antagonist terms; thus, it has its negativity which never makes it a fully objective demand. Therefore, in a populist articulation, education becomes more than the realm of didactic or pedagogical discussions. But, it is a space susceptible to be articulated into new popular alternatives in which each shows itself as a solution (an instrument) to solve the people's problems. Consequently, a populist articulation of education is not a mere repetition of a discourse on the people, but articulation is taken in the way that Laclau and Mouffe theorize it (1985). For them, articulation does not simply refer to "organization" or "expressing," but it is "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 105). Thus, the proper populist instrumentalization of education transforms the object of education (the people) and education itself.

Nevertheless, this grounding function is not a mere technicality because the articulated identities contaminate each other (Laclau 2000b, 2006, Carusi & Szkudlarek 2020). Hence, what is the sediment contents of education contaminate the people, and vice versa for education as it has to adjust itself to economic, social, and political elements outside its realm, which is put as an instrument for them. In this paper, I develop this logic as a co-prosthetic relation, where instrumentality as a prosthetic relation covers hegemonically over the lack of these identities through the embodiment of another subject. However, both identities pay for such a grounding relation by being mutually dependent and thus contingent subjects (Atif 2021).

As with any successful prosthesis, instrumentality desires to be taken not as instrumental but as natural. It wants to be part of the being of the subjects of the instrumental relation (education and the people) but without being perceived as external to them (as instrumental). Hence, instrumentality aims to move hegemonically the subject (the people and education) from a certain (instrumental) contingency to an absolute necessity (Atif 2024). However, given the ontological character of antagonism, this naturalness is threatened by other political contestations. Despite that, instrumentality does not give up on the desire for naturalness. This contribution moves to the ethical dimension of instrumentality by problematizing this desire for naturalness for education theory and Laclau's and Mouffe's ontology.

Ethics of instrumentality

The ethics of instrumentality cannot be a simple deduction from the last sections because the ethical good instrumentality aims for is, like any subject, ontologically divided via antagonism. I approach this division through how instrumentality is a supplementary operation with unknown results. It aims to fill education's lack of being prosthetical. However, the success of this operation is not guaranteed as we do not know if we are making an alien addition to education's being or replacing what it has lost; that is the double sense of the supplement (Derrida 1976: 246). Nonetheless, instrumentality does not relinquish its desire to reach a natural complement that sufficiently closes identities' negativity without being perceived. This is how instrumentality moves itself and the subject from a certain contingency to a hegemonic order experienced as an absolute necessity.

Thus, answering the Lacanian ethical question, "Have you acted in accordance to the desire in you?" (Miller & Lacan 2013: 311), becomes a hard task since this desire of instrumentality is not simple but is a twisted one, the answer is, "I did as long as you do not need to ask me this question." In this twisted desire, I find something to problematize the Lacaudian and the educational theories. It is a way to address ethical paradoxes in the Laclauian ontology and educational theory. I will explain how the prosthetic logic posits itself as a challenge for both.

Many critics ask if the emphasis on the political (antagonism) in Laclau and Mouffe's ontology happens at the price of the ethical (Dean 2002). Others are sceptical of a general normative deficit in their ontology and in particular regarding their approach to populism (Critchley 2012, Mazzolini 2020, Žižek 2006). Instrumentality gives us a good standpoint from which to approach this challenge once read as a problem of instrumentality. We can ask, what if Laclau and Mouffe's hegemonic and socialist strategy, because of its ethical deficit, can deploy non-democratic strategies by being an instrument that can also be used for non-democratic goals? A first, but unsatisfactory, answer through an anti-instrumental rationality argument may suggest that an instrument is not only an instrument. Accordingly, Devenney (2006) demonstrates that Laclau and Mouffe's theory disorients any means-end- rationality. However, this is not enough because the ethical deficit persists even in the antagonist terms in which we have presented instrumentality. Specifically, the prosthetic logic of instrumentality may also suggest that the good to which instrumentality aims, naturalness, can also be explained in non-democratic manifestations that Laclau and Mouffe reject, such as post-politics (Mouffe 2005b). Post-politics is the denial of antagonism and the political character of all political projects and their presentations as non-political. This has damaging consequences as the repressed confrontation between adversaries that recognizes the political character of the latter's projects risks returning as a battle to the death in the form of natural versus instrumentalized (political) projects (Mouffe 2005a, 2005b).

In an educational setting, the same post-political fears can be expressed, as, for instance, the political disavowal in education through a fundamental consensual elimination of conflict. In these terms, educational theorists' struggle against instrumentality can be understood as a resistance to ways of submitting education to economic plans and learning society agendas that present themselves as non-political (e.g., Nussbaum 2016, Giroux 2017). However, recently, in populist movements such as Bolsonaro's *Escola sem Partido* in Brazil, Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party's war against Sex education, or AFD's allied movement *Aktion Neutrale Schulen* in Germany, depoliticization is performed paradoxically via ultra-politicization. Hence, education is articulated as being instrumentalized by progressive agendas (Marxist, queer, feminist, etc.), and the solution is an ultra-militarization (politicization) that brings education to its natural state out of any instrumentalization.

Instead of leaving prosthesis as a logic of instrumentality because of this incongruity, this paper argues that only by staying faithful to its desire can instrumentality be democratic. However, this desire should be taken on both levels of antagonism, the internal and external. The question is how to deal democratically with the loss that antagonism refers to. As forwarded before, antagonism refers to the loss at the heart of every identity, its ontological lack. To answer the question of how to deal with the double sides of antagonism that instrumentality refers to, I draw on Freud's distinction between how mourning and melancholia deal with loss (Freud 1924, Glynos 2014). Both Freud's mourner and melancholic are sad and depart from a denial of their loss. However, later, the mourner recognizes and responds to the call of reality to let go of the lost loved object, while the melancholic remains stuck in his loss, blames himself for it, and becomes a prosthesis of his lost object. Thus, the lost object continues to exist as part of the sad subject. In this paradox, Freud describes mourning as healthy and melancholia as unhealthy.

Similarly, inhibiting instrumentality by melancholically rejecting loss does not take us back to a state with no antagonism. It, unfortunately, produces totalitarian and undemocratic distinctions between essentialist projects; some are instrumentalists, and others are not. Ironically, it produces more instrumentalities while fundamentally denying instrumentality, whereas in a healthy prosthesis, recognizing the ontologically lacking nature of all identities opens the door for new discourses on education that try instrumentally to act on that loss. In these terms, I suggest a radical democratic instrumentality of education that is drawn on this prosthesis. It is radical not in the sense of aiming at a radical solution of turning every antagonism into naturalness. Its radical character implies, on the contrary, that we save education only by taking into account its radical impossibility instead of taking it as an identity that is transcendental to any instrumentality.

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Summary

This contribution discusses a relationship usually framed as antagonistic between education and two contemporary elements, populism and instrumentality. Political scientists argue that populism manipulates education, while educational philosophers contend that instrumentality compromises education's intrinsic value by using it for external purposes. Both views, however, oversimplify the role of antagonism. To address this, the author draws on Ernesto Laclau's political theory, suggesting that antagonism is not merely an external force disrupting education but is intrinsic to populism, instrumentality, and education itself. This means antagonism is part of their inherent negative character, enabling their connection in the first place. The author estimates that this starting point can emancipate the study of the relationship of education to populism and instrumentality from a description of the external pathological states of these subjects to an ontological investigation of each with epistemological and ethical results that touch more adequately the urgent challenges of populism and instrumentality to education.

Keywords

education, populism, instrumentality, sinthome, prosthesis

Streszczenie

Populizm i instrumentalność: od symptomów patologicznych do ontologicznych sinthomów teorii edukacji i ontologii Laclaua

Niniejszy artykuł omawia relację, zazwyczaj ujmowaną jako antagonistyczną, między edukacją a dwoma współczesnymi elementami, populizmem i instrumentalnością. Politolodzy argumentują, że populizm manipuluje edukacją, podczas gdy filozofowie edukacji twierdzą, że instrumentalność podważa jej wewnętrzną wartość, wykorzystując ją do celów zewnętrznych. Oba poglądy jednak nadmiernie upraszczają rolę antagonizmu. Aby to omówić, autor odwołuje się do teorii politycznej Ernesta Laclaua, sugerując, że antagonizm nie jest jedynie zewnętrzną siłą zakłócającą edukację, ale jest nieodłącznie związany z populizmem, instrumentalnością i samą edukacją. Oznacza to, że antagonizm jest częścią ich immanentnie negatywnego charakteru, co umożliwia ich połączenie. Autor szacuje, że ten punkt wyjścia może uniezależnić badanie relacji edukacji z populizmem i instrumentalnością, od opisu zewnętrznych stanów patologicznych tych podmiotów, do ontologicznego badania każdego z nich, z wynikami epistemologicznymi i etycznymi, które lepiej uwypuklają pilne wyzwania, jakie populizm i instrumentalność stawiają przed edukacją.

Słowa kluczowe

edukacja, populizm, instrumentalność, sinthome, proteza