Abstract

That the term “tyrant” is regaining currency in some political contexts demands a thorough consideration of its specificity as a subject position. In this paper, I propose to think the tyrant in light of the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I will begin by considering the political subject from the viewpoint of the longstanding search for a subject of emancipation. Such a search has had to deal with several failures resulting from its incapacity to think the subject in view of the radical openness of the social. This social, replete with antagonism, is the discursive field where the game of hegemony plays out, implicating as participants not only the subject of emancipation but also the subject of oppression posed as its enemy in an antagonistic relation. “Tyrant” is but a name accorded by a subject aiming for emancipation to such an enemy. By rejecting all temptation to provide the tyrant with an essence, the very precarity of the term arises, as it is in the end nothing but an empty signifier charged with representing a universal at once impossible and necessary – in this case, total crime. As such, the term tyrant is only relevant for designating a subject position to the extent that, as an empty signifier, it is an object of hegemonic articulation. It is through the very naming of the tyrant that a tyrant is constituted, announcing by this same act the start of a whole hegemonic game that is nothing but politics itself.

Keywords

Laclau, Mouffe, tyrant, tyranny, hegemony, antagonism, universality, empty signifiers, subject, emancipation