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THE HEGEMONIC WORLD PICTURE

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Abstract: The present article examines the relationship between representation and politics. Modern Western scholarship, being principally guided by the essentialist paradigm, typically understands representations as mimeses of essences. Contemporary scholarship has, however, increasingly destabilized the essentialist paradigm—a trend that culminates in the work of post-structuralists. From the standpoint of post-structuralist theory, the distinction between “essences” and “representations” is completely dissolved. This leads us to understand reality as being discursively constructed through the ordering of meaningful representations—a purely human endeavour. The political implications of this theoretical intervention are of considerable significance. If what appears to be true (i.e. representations) and therefore natural is culturally constructed, it can be molded in a manner that disproportionately serves the interests of particular identities. In this sense, representations are understood as being invariably undercut by dimensions of power and therefore inhere to the political dimension of social life. Representations can by extension be understood as elements through which hegemonic projects are constructed.

Keywords: Hegemony; Representation; Politics; Power; Language.

“Metaphysics grounds an age, in that through a specific interpretation of what is and through a specific comprehension of truth it gives to that age the basis upon which it is essentially formed. This basis holds complete dominion over all the phenomena that distinguish that age”.

Heidegger, “The Age of the World
Picture”

Our aim in the present article is to examine the relationship between politics and representation. The enunciation of the problematic at once yields a definitional ambivalence. What does it mean to represent? Are we referring to political

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representation, as when a political leader mobilizes populations? Are we talking about representation of politics, as when, for example, a political candidate or issue is depicted by the media in a certain way? Or are we invoking the ethical dimensions of representation as when a fact or a process is thought to be represented in a correct or incorrect way? And is it possible to articulate the problem of representation without invoking ethical and ideological commitments? Is there any such a thing as accurate representation, or is “accuracy” that which conforms to our ethical values?

The guiding question that I would like to put forth is whether the dichotomy between “true” and “false” representation can be substantiated against a more detailed examination of the ontology of representation. It might indeed be the case that the presumed dichotomy between “true” and “false” representation is symptomatic of the constitutive ambivalence that inheres to representation. I would like to endorse the following hypothesis: Any process of representation is constitutively ambiguous, and it is this terrain of ambiguity that enables the constitution of power relations and thus politics. Therefore, there can be, strictly speaking, no distinction between “true” and “untrue” representations, and by extension “true” and “untrue” politics.

It is appropriate to proceed by briefly examining the theoretical history of “representation” in Western canonical scholarship, in efforts to reveal the various underlying assumptions that have “arrested” the notion. For most of its trajectory, Western scholarly thought was fundamentally guided by the doctrine of essentialism, which posits that the ultimately reality of objects, facts, processes, etc. is governed by an internal and immovable essence that can be intelligibly understood. And while essentialism assumes a variety of forms in the Western philosophical canon (e.g., differentiation between “essence” and “meaning”, “essence” and “appearance”, etc.), the implication is that the innermost identity of an object can find an unadulterated expression at the level of meaningful statements or contemplation. There can thus be, on some level or under certain conditions of empirical or rational verification, a one-to-one correspondence between “object” and “thought”, “object” and “idea”, “reality” and “idea”, “object” and “language”, etc. Ergo, the inner-most identity of objects, i.e., their essence, is governed by an immutable core that can be

rationality grasped and articulated, uncontaminated by the whims of culture and language. The role of philosophy, at large, was to discover these essences, the most significant of which were, in their various permuted forms, “the essence of man”,² “the essence of God”,³ “the essence of nature”,⁴ “the essence of things”⁵ and “the essence of history”.⁶ The Enlightenment’s promise indeed relied on these essentialist premises.⁷ Once the inner-most essence of “objects” and thus Truth was discovered, human experience could be ordered according to its essential predicates and be harmonious with itself.⁸

In linking this discussion with the problematic at hand (i.e. of representation), what interests us is an age-old distinction that has governed theoretical knowledge and socio-political practice more generally—the distinction between “essences” and “appearances” or between “essences” and “representations”. As already stated, the theoretical assumption that had historically dominated Western scholarship was that the inner-most

² See Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; René Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008; John Locke, *Two treatises of government and a letter concerning toleration*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2003; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on political economy and the social contract*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999; Karl Marx, "Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844", in R. C. Tucker (ed.), M. Milligan (tran.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY 1978; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of judgement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of practical reason*, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis, IN 2002; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Discourse on metaphysics", retrieved from <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/leibniz1686d.pdf> [access.: Nov. 2018]; Plato, *Republic*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, IN 2004.

³ See Locke, *Two treatises of government and a letter concerning toleration*, op.cit.; Leibniz, "Discourse on metaphysics", op.cit.; Kant, "The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God (1763)", in D. Walford, R. Meerbote (eds. & trans.), *Theoretical philosophy 1755-1770*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp.107-202.

⁴ See Marx, "Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844", op. cit.; Aristotle, *Physics: Books I and II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992; Leibniz, "Discourse on metaphysics", op. cit.

⁵ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Penguin Books, London 1998; Leibniz, "Discourse on metaphysics", op. cit.; Aristotle, *Physics: Books I and II*, op. cit.

⁶ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977; Marx, "Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844", op. cit.; Karl Marx, "The German ideology: Part I", in R. Tucker (ed.), S. Ryazanskaya (tran.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY 1978.

⁷ See M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, "The concept of enlightenment", in G. S. Noerr (ed.), E. Jephcott (tran.), *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2002.

⁸ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*. op. cit.; Immanuel Kant, "An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?", in M. J. Gregor (ed. & tran.), *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp.11-22; Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the communist party", in R. C. Tucker (ed.), M. Milligan (tran.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY 1978; Auguste Comte, *A general view of positivism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009.

truth of “facts”, “objects” or “processes” could be discovered and find an expression as a meaningful statement, in an adulterated fashion. Thus, representations were understood as either correct, incomplete or incorrect “mimeses” of essences.⁹ By extension, an inaccurate articulation of what something is, would fall under the category of false representation. As an example, the Marxian notion of “false consciousness”, which has historically plagued the politics of the Left, is governed by this theoretical logic. Ideology was understood by Marx as an inverted (i.e. false) representation of reality, where the ideas of the ruling class, having been adopted by the working class, prevented the latter from acknowledging their true conditions of existence, in other words, their essence.

In contemporary politics, we are seeing novel manifestations of this logic, namely, people’s decision to abstain from voting because “politicians say one thing but do another” or because “politics is by nature unethical”. In this sense, politicians’ actions are seen as: (a) being distanced from presumably universal ethics; and (b) false representations of their stated ideological stance or pre-election promises. But the question should be raised: What differentiates right from wrong, and do political ethics derive from any absolute (ontological) principles that can be universally applied? Or do disagreements about what is right or wrong merely reflect differential ideological positions? What seems like ethical political conduct to one person is certainly anathema to another.

Let us proceed by contrasting two diametrically opposed understandings of truth. The first is the essentialist understanding of truth that was outlined above: Any fact, object or process is governed by an inherent essence that can find an accurate and unadulterated expression in intelligible thought. In contradistinction, the pragmatic perspective understands truth in terms of its effect: The relevance of the politician’s lie, as an example, does not concern its empirical verifiability but the effects that it engenders. The pragmatic “reading” of reality has increasingly penetrated contemporary social and political thought—a development that is to a very large extent attributed to post-modern

⁹ See, as examples, Plato’s discussion of art in book X of *Republic*, and Aristotle’s *Poetics*. While Aristotle believed that representations were the medium through which reality could be discovered, Plato expressed a suspicion toward representations, since they were “removed” from ideal reality and could inculcate illusions.

and post-structuralist thought.¹⁰ The argument holds that no aspect of “reality” can be evaluated in accordance with “objective” criteria and that any such evaluation is embedded in cultural precepts that are not ontologically derived but culturally constructed.¹¹ In this sense, differential perspectives merely reflect conflicting ideological currents that are, in a highly complex (and interwoven) fashion, embedded in our social worlds. A one thousand Euro salary can be seen by one person as an opportunity and by another as exploitation, depending on their respective ideological dispositions. Neither evaluation is truer but all are a product of political articulations—socially constructed cultural precepts that are disseminated in one way or another in the social fabric.¹² The implication to be drawn as far as our understanding of representations goes is that, from a pragmatic standpoint, representations are no longer evaluated in terms of their ideological consistency but in terms of the social and political effects that they engender¹³ (more on this later).

Why should one espouse the pragmatic reading of reality? Let us briefly answer this question by tracing the sequential destabilization of essentialist reasoning in formal scholarship. While I cannot be exhaustive in the present article, I will identify what I consider to be the most relevant theoretical “moments” that introduced certain disruptive effects within the dominant essentialist paradigm that has long withheld the unwarranted distinction between “essence” and (false) “representation”. Early relevant theoretical breakthroughs were advanced in the phenomenological tradition, beginning with the work of Husserl¹⁴ who blurred the distinction between “essence” and “appearance”, through his notion of “phenomena”. The implication here is that “essences”, to the extent that they do exist, can only be accessed through their phenomenal appearance, which is “adorned” by

¹⁰ See Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Richard Rorty, *Deconstruction and pragmatism*, Routledge, London 1996.

¹¹ See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, 2 ed. Verso, London 2001; Ernesto Laclau, *The rhetorical foundations of society*, Verso, London 2014; Jacques Derrida, "Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences", in J. Natoli, L. Hutcheon (eds.), *A postmodern reader*, State University of New York, Albany, NY 1993; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without apologies", *New Left Review*, 166 (1987), pp.79-106.

¹² See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, op.cit.

¹³ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, The Noonday Press, New York, NY 1972.

¹⁴ See Edmund Husserl, *First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague, Netherlands 1980, vol. ii.

“doxa”, that is, common sense knowledge. The implications that were already germinating in phenomenological thought would find their most developed expression in the work of Heidegger who asserted that essences could only manifest themselves through language. In this sense, language was understood as an ontological plane that enabled the presencing of Being¹⁵ —the ontological, as such. Language was thus understood, not merely as an adornment of essences, but as something that allows an essence to come into appearance. The appearance that essences assume, however, manifests according to the linguistic structure, which is invariably subject to flux. “Essences” thus appear differentially in each historic epoch.¹⁶

The Heideggerian assault on classical metaphysics would find its most effective counterpart in contemporary linguistics and post-structuralism.¹⁷ From the standpoint of contemporary linguistic epistemology, reality, being, existence, etc. are not only channeled through, but constituted by language.¹⁸ The “essence” of anything is thus understood as the total sum of meanings that come to co-constitute it at the level of perception, which is invariably linguistic, as all ideas are understood as operating in the general domain of language.¹⁹ These premises were pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure²⁰ who demonstrated that there are no positive terms in language. In other words, no linguistic term can be understood solely in reference to itself. Language is composed by a series of signs that are only intelligible in terms of their oppositional and associational difference, e.g. I am a man because I am not a woman, because I am a father, because I am a brother, because I dress and behave in “masculine” ways, etc. In this sense, what something is cannot be reduced to any presumed “internal essential core” but is rather the sum total of its linguistic and therefore meaningful associations,

¹⁵ See Martin Heidegger, "Language", in A. Hofstadter (transl.), *Poetry, language, thought*, Perennial Classics, New Haven, CT 2001, pp. 185–208.

¹⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to philosophy (from enowning)*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN 1999.

¹⁷ See Derrida, "Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences", op. cit.

¹⁸ See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in general linguistics*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY 1966; Jacques Lacan, "The instance of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud", in B. Fink, H. Fink, R. Crigg (trans.), *Écrits*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY 2006, pp.412-39; Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, Routledge, London 2002; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, op. cit.; Laclau, *The rhetorical foundations of society*, op.cit.; Derrida, "Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences", op. cit.

¹⁹ See Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without apologies", op. cit.

²⁰ See Saussure, *Course in general linguistics*, op. cit.

which, as various theorists have demonstrated, are invariably undercut by planes of metonymy and metaphor.²¹ If representation is to be understood as a symbolic expression of something else, then we can very well suggest that representation inheres to the general structure of language, which is invariably symbolic in character. As an extension, “representation” is not to be understood as an “attempt” to either replicate or express any sort of underlying essence, but as that which constitutes the very identity of facts, objects or processes. As Laclau and Mouffe, succinctly articulate it

There are not two planes, one of essences and the other of appearances, since there is no possibility of fixing an ultimate literal sense for which the symbolic would be a second and derived plane of signification. Society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order.²²

Reality, therefore, is constituted through representations, whether we understand representations in terms of communication media, e.g. television, books, internet, or any sort of symbolic medium more broadly, i.e. language and thought. From this perspective, the totality of language and therefore representations, to the extent that they constitute perception, are no longer understood as descriptors of underlying essences. Representations and, more broadly, language are understood as the building blocs of social life—they acquire the status of an ontological ground.

Now, why would this matter in regards to our understanding of society and politics? Quite simply because the sum total of our social experience is constituted by a meaningful fabric that invariably operates through language—to the extent that something is made intelligible, it operates in the general domain of language, which is representational. By extension, the political dimension of social life ensues when particular orderings of meaning result in uneven power relations. For example, if the working class comes to accept that a subsistence salary constitutes what is normal, and comes to accept such premise as fundamental, it enables employers to appropriate a

²¹ See Roland Jakobson, "The metaphoric and metonymic pole", in R. Dirven, R. Porings (eds.), *Metaphor and metonymy in comparison and contrast*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, Germany 2003, pp.41-47; Lacan, "The instance of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud", op. cit.; Laclau, *The rhetorical foundations of society*, op. cit.

²² Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, op. cit.

higher portion of surplus value, e.g. a worker might produce three thousand Euros worth of commodities, but is only paid eight hundred euros for their efforts. This discussion reveals the full relevance of the pragmatic approach: the worker's "true" interest is something that is invariably contingent upon contextual ideological convictions. A Marxist will assess the capitalist relations of production as exploitation, whereas workers very often assesses them in terms of "opportunity". If reality cannot be subjugated to any underlying objective essence, neither of the two assessments can ultimately be apodictically verified—they simply become two different perspectives. The situation cannot, therefore, be assessed in reference to any seemingly objective criteria. But it can be assessed in terms of the (power) effects that it engenders: When the worker interprets an "exploitative" situation as "opportunity", a relation of power that disproportionately benefits the employer is established. The constitution of reality, therefore, consists in the ordering of meaningful representations, the effect of which is the uneven distribution of power. Politics and representation therefore concern, not a restricted domain, but the very constitution of society.

I would at this point like to invoke a most-interesting passage from Heidegger, if only allegorically, so as to fuel my argument. In his fascinating discussion of "The Age of the World Picture", he reaches the following conclusion:

The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word "picture" [Bild] now means the structured image [Gebild] that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before. In such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is. Because this position secures, organizes, and articulates itself as a world view, the modern relationship to that which is, is one that becomes, in its decisive unfolding, a confrontation of world views.²³

This thought-provoking passage poetically echoes the spirit of the present article. Why is there such a confrontation of world views (or world representations) and what is the political significance of such contestations? Due to various contemporary technological, economic and political developments, cross-cultural interaction has drastically

²³ Martin Heidegger, "The age of the world picture", in W. Lovvitt (tran.), *The question concerning technology and other essays*, Garland, New York, NY 1977, pp.134-35.

increased.²⁴ The effects of inter-cultural communication have been variously outlined by a number of authors: cultural hybridity,²⁵ multiculturalism/cosmopolitanism,²⁶ cultural domination,²⁷ etc. What interests me here is how the dissemination of various forms of representations in the global social fabric engenders uneven relations of power, where particular cultural constructs acquire political efficacy, in the sense that they are able to effectuate a world in accordance with their image. They become the most desirable cultural elements and the ones that are able to direct or subsume oppositional cultural currents. In other words, they become hegemonic.

Some anecdotal considerations are appropriate. Upon my return to Cyprus from North America, where I had lived for twelve years, nearly all of my friends and acquaintances were shocked at my decision to return to my home island. I was, time and time again, met with the following trite expression: “Why did you come back? I would have never chosen to come back!” In their minds, the U.S. constituted an ideal. It was considered to be a country with countless professional opportunities, high incomes, a rich social life replete with diverse forms of entertainment, and so on and so forth. Granted, there was just some truth to their perception of the U.S., but what was missing was the comprehensive picture. To this day, when compared to other Western countries, the U.S. tops the list in regards to a wide array of social problems, not least the highest poverty rate. Its social life can be particularly deficient due to its lack of stable communities and the dominance of individualism. Stable social relationships are hard to come by, due to its incredible social dynamism and geographical mobility, and so on and so forth. We can thus very well state that certain positive aspects of the U.S. had “trumped” (pun intended!) its negative aspects, where one form of representation had superseded and subverted another. In other words, particular representations of the

²⁴ See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991; Heidegger, "The age of the world picture", op. cit.; Ulrich Beck, *World at risk*, Polity Press, Cambridge, England 2009; Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000; Saskia Sassen, *Territory, authority, rights: From medieval to global assemblages*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2006; David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds.), *The global transformations reader*, 2 ed. Polity Press, Cambridge 2003.

²⁵ See Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Globalization as hybridization", in M. Durham, D. Kellner (eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*, Blackwell, Malden, MA 2006.

²⁶ See Ulrich Beck and Daniel Levy, "Cosmopolitanized nations: Re-imagining collectivity in world risk society", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30/2 (2013), pp. 3–31.

²⁷ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2000.

U.S. had come to represent it as a totality—these particular representations, we can say, had been “extended” beyond themselves, and thus came to “override” other (oppositional) representations. “The part” had successfully come to represent “the whole”. This process coincides with Laclau and Mouffe’s definition of hegemony.²⁸

We can now extend this logic by considering the multifarious aspects of our social worlds. Hegemony entails any sort of process wherein particularities come to assume the role of representing totalities, in what is otherwise a pluralistic terrain. Let us reconsider the case of the U.S. The U.S. is a highly pluralistic society (sometimes described by post-modern theorists as “fragmented”). It is governed by ethnic, linguistic, racial, etc. plurality. Yet, the nominal category of “American” comes to assume the role of representing all identities, as if they were equivalent. The invocation of the national category (i.e. American) thus overshadows society’s constitutive plurality. Now, as various works have shown, this logic inheres to the general logic of language, or discourse.²⁹ What interests us, however, are the various power effects that are animated by such processes of representation.

Let us return to our example. We already established that the category “American” serves the purpose of obfuscating society’s constitutive plurality—it practically “effaces” ethnic, racial, linguistic, etc. diversity. But does the category serve, to a greater extent, the interest of one particular group? Let us answer this question vis-à-vis a thought experiment. Surely, when I invoked the category of “American”, an image was conjured in the reader’s mind. What was that image of? I would argue that it was, most likely, the image of a white male. This reveals that representations are not innocent. The category that comes to subsume all differences as equivalent³⁰ (i.e. American) is, to a greater extent, tied to particularistic content, i.e. white and male. This is not to suggest that representations are absolute—they are invariably ambiguous and polysemic—but

²⁸ See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. op. cit.

²⁹ See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, op. cit.; Laclau, *The rhetorical foundations of society*, op. cit.; S. Hall, “The question of cultural identity”, in *Modernity: An introduction to modern societies*, Blackwell, Malden, MA 1996.

³⁰ See Ernesto Laclau has demonstrated that the articulation of discursive equivalences subverts but partially retains the content of its constitutive particularities. For a more detailed discussion see “On the Names of God” in Laclau, *The rhetorical foundations of society*, pp.37-52, op. cit. See also “Myth Today”, in Barthes, *Mythologies*, op. cit.

that they are governed by certain (dominant) representational tendencies, the effects of which are multidimensional. When “white male” becomes, to a greater extent, equivalent with “American”, it results in uneven relations of power. As just one example, a voter might be less likely to vote for a black woman for Congress, precisely because the representation of the black woman might be perceived, on some level, either consciously or unconsciously, as being incompatible with “American”.

These are the discursive logics at play that underlie (implicit) forms of discrimination. But it is important to note that representations are interwoven in a very complex fashion and come to constitute the multilayered schemas of our perception. Thus, for many Americans, “American” might come to be synonymous³¹ with “liberal capitalism”, “individual liberty”, “Starbucks”, “Walmart”, “American exceptionalism”, “strong military”, “political and military intervention in other countries in order to serve our interests”, etc. In other words, the hegemonic representations that constitute people’s perception come to reference differential perceptions and life modalities that are presumably equivalent with the category that symbolizes the totality, i.e. “American”.

The total sum of these representations conjure up what might be called a hegemonic world picture, that is, a particular ordering of one’s perception and therefore actions, according to dominant forms of representation³² that come to be saturated with affect.³³ I should be clear that I use the term hegemonic to emphasize that these dominant representations speak, to a larger extent, to the interests of particular identities. One can very easily see, as an example, how the association of “American interest” with “military intervention” serves the economic interests of the military-industrial complex. Going back to my friends’ and acquaintances’ reaction after having told them that I moved back

³¹ For a most insightful discussion on the political dimension of metonymy and metaphor see “Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor” in Laclau, *The rhetorical foundations of society*, pp.53-78, op. cit.

³² For a more detailed examination of how everyday experiences are (re)positioned within a “master” hegemonic discourse, see p.57-69 in P. Vahabzadeh, *Articulated experiences: Toward a radical phenomenology of contemporary social movements*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003.

³³ See Slavoj Zizek, “Enjoy your nation as yourself!”, in *Tarrying with the negative: Kant, Hegel and the critique of ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 1993, pp.200-238; Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2007; Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason*, Verso, London 2005, pp.101-117.

to Cyprus, one can say that they desired³⁴ to live in the U.S. because of a dominant narrative that, by virtue of various factors such as the media, has come to be widely disseminated at the global level: that the U.S. is the land of opportunity. A hegemonic world picture had thus come to materialize and, by extension, animate people's perceptions and actions. The effective dissemination and, therefore, hegemonization of this world picture is one of the principal engines that drive American economic interests, e.g. the U.S. fashion, entertainment and technology industries.

Let us now conclude the argument by laying out the general associated implications. If the pragmatic understanding of reality is to be upheld, then it becomes clear that the prime-most responsibility of political critique is to examine and expose how the articulation of representations results in power effects. We do not relinquish efforts of promoting what is "right" or "wrong", but we are conscious that ethical judgments reflect ideological commitments and that critique is invariably embedded in cultural precepts that are socially constructed. This, of course, does not mean that we cannot put politicians to the test when they "say one thing but do another" or when they act unethically, but I believe that this preoccupation misses the broader picture. A civic attitude that is appropriate for the challenges and complexities of the post-modern world needs conceptual tools that extend far beyond this simplistic right/wrong logic. If, as established earlier, power materializes when one representation effectively subverts other representations, then political responsibility calls upon us to adopt the deconstructive attitude.

The deconstructive attitude's does not evaluate representations in terms of their ideological consistency or verifiability. Rather, it aims to reveal: (a) the underlying values that representations promote or foster; (b) how particular representations enable power effects by subverting competing representations of reality; and (c) whose interests particular representations promote. Let me demonstrate this by means of an example. When Margaret Thatcher came into power in the 1980s her political ambitions were bathed in rhetoric that heavily criticized the U.K.'s "dependency culture" that the Labour

³⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the relationship between ideology and desire, see Jason Glynos, "The grip of ideology: A Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6/2 (2001), pp.191-214.

party had presumably nurtured. In contradistinction, Thatcher promised to support and strengthen the U.K.'s "entrepreneurial culture". Now, taken at face value, such rhetoric might even have an "empowering" ring to it. But if we are to assess the effects that Thatcherian policies had on U.K. society, an altogether different picture emerges: the poverty rate nearly tripled over the course of a decade, the upper income tax bracket was reduced from 83% to 30%, government services were privatized leading to higher costs for citizens, collective bargaining rights were assaulted leading to less favourable working conditions and lower incomes for the working class, welfare spending was reduced resulting in less income for the poor. Thatcher's appetite for an "entrepreneurial" Britain was, to a large extent, consistent with her policies in that she effectively empowered principally (big) business owners and the rich. But what her rhetoric and actions obfuscated was that her empowering of entrepreneurs simultaneously constituted an assault on the lower and working class. As just one example, terms such as "entrepreneurial culture" were deployed in order to hide the fact that state expenditure of many sorts had to be reduced in order to accommodate tax cuts for the rich. When "entrepreneurial culture" was elevated to the status of a total representation, it practically effaced its myriad constitutive elements, many of which led to dire consequences for vulnerable populations. And this situation could not have been evaluated in terms of a truth/lie dichotomy. On the one hand, Thatcher's commitment to "empowering" the U.K. by nurturing an "entrepreneurial culture" was "truthful" and consistent with her policies, but it yielded ambiguous effects: it at once strengthened some forms of entrepreneurialism, while gradually deteriorating social and economic securities and benefits, the overall effects of which were to disempower the lower social strata.

Today, we are in some respects living in the Thatcherian shadow, when terms such as "entrepreneurialism", "development", "efficiency", etc. are thrown around and presumed to be innocuous. These particular terms (the part) become representations of total economic policies (the whole), while obfuscating their plural constitutive dimensions (hegemony). "Development" might sound good to the ear, but seldom will one ask: "What kind of development and for whom"? Will lowering taxes in the name of "development" empower citizens if it is simultaneously met with reductions in forms of

income redistribution, such as reductions in education, healthcare, and welfare expenditure?

It is simply a matter of which representation will prevail. If, as the post-structuralists have it, reality is comprised of representations, then the sort of power that is enabled by the play of representations is animated by processes of subversion. This game is called politics, where one representation operates at the expense of another.