# THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

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by

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# Abstract

This thesis studies contemporary posters that are purportedly antiwar to demonstrate that they constitute a heterogenous group of signifiers. There is therefore tension between the individuality of each poster and the unity that results from the rubric of opposition to war. In general terms, this disparate group is unified in spite of internal differences. Thus a more general political concern is exposed, the ability of a particular representation to take on a universal function, speaking for differential elements as though they were equivalent. To explore difference and equivalence as structuring forces, Ernesto Laclau's concept of empty signifiers is recruited, not merely to understand these posters, but to unpack the broader political and social concerns that result. People too are represented as different or equivalent in ways which they do not control. The consequences of empty signifiers for the agency of the political subject are thus also discussed.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The politics of representation

This thesis began as a study of antiwar posters which have been posted on Internet sites opposed to the "War on Terror" as initiated by the George W. Bush administration following the attack on the World Trade Center. I asked how these antiwar posters can coherently stand for opposition to war given that they are a heterogenous group. As I will demonstrate, opposition to war is a particular concern that does not adequately describe all of the posters assumed to be antiwar. In this sense, a particular restricted understanding of opposition to war has been elevated to the status of a universal. A multiplicity of posters is described by generification as though they were all the same. In that process differences are glossed over. During the writing of this thesis, it has become clear that not only have I been developing claims about antiwar posters, but also about many political issues in general. The ability for a particular representation to stand in for a host of differences is not limited to these posters; it is also a political concern. In fact, it has recently become a dominant issue in Newfoundland and Labrador. Newspaper columnist Margaret Wente (2005) indicted the populace of this province as ungracious exploiters of the welfare system, shrewd operators who couch behind claims of victimhood. In response, Danny Williams, the premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, attempted to uphold the nobility of its citizens in the face of these criticisms. For both Wente and Williams, though they disagree about what it is that makes all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians the same, they nevertheless concur that there is something we all share. The only question is to identify what exactly is shared. Wente

claims we are layabouts, Williams characterizes us as hard-working and proud. In contrast to both positions, I find it more productive to recognize that people who live in this province are irreducibly different from each other, despite columnists' and politicians' claims to the contrary. However, I will not be making an argument about the accuracy of particular representations. Rather, my concern is with the inherent political potential of representations. Specifically, we can be represented by others in ways over which we may have little control. Those things with which we identify can be taken up by others in unforeseen directions. If representations can ground our identities, produce unity, and elide difference, yet are not fully under the control of those represented, what are the consequences for political agency?

The purposes of this study are threefold. The first is to determine what Ernesto Laclau's (1996b) concept of *empty signifiers* can tell us about the antiwar posters I have examined. Laclau's use of the term *empty* may be misleading, for a signifier without any signified is at the very least problematic (Chandler 2002; Laclau 1996b) and according to some evaluations it is impossible (Saussure 1916/1986). Laclau defines an empty signifier not as a signifier that has no content, but as one that points to the very limits of a system of signification. The genre of antiwar poster, along with other genres, does not have clearly defined limits. Many of these posters are open to multiple interpretations. Empty signifiers, by fixing limits, are a means to resolve this ambiguity.

However, this resolution is an inherently political act. Therefore, the second purpose of this thesis is to explore the political implications of empty signifiers in detail. For Laclau, politics is the struggle to enforce a particular reading of the empty signifiers,

such as *democracy*, that structure human organization. A particular reading of an empty signifier has been successfully implemented and accepted when it is no longer seen as the outcome of a contingent political struggle but as natural and inevitable. In other words, it has achieved the status of a *myth*, in the sense developed by Roland Barthes (1957/1982). Using terms borrowed from Husserl, Laclau calls this struggle over empty signifiers and their mythologization *reactivation* and *sedimentation*, respectively. I will examine Barthes' work on myth to shed light on the sedimentation and reactivation at work in both these posters and more general political concerns.

The third purpose is to discuss the political consequences of empty signifiers with respect to conceptions of the political subject. If, in accordance with many sociological understandings, people are determined by the social conditions within which they find themselves, where does change occur? Laclau, along with Chantal Mouffe, takes the concept of *overdetermination* from Althusser (1969) and *hegemony* from Gramsci (1971), applying them to a conception of contemporary political action. When a particular element purports to speak for a whole array of disparate elements it is a hegemonic act. Hegemony occurs when the disparity of the represented elements is passed over and the particular element is taken as a universal truth. However, the different elements are never fully expunged. Their differences can re-emerge, disrupting the claims to universality of any particular element. It is in this interplay between a fixed representation and its overdetermination by difference where a space for political agency may be found.

Much of Laclau's conceptual apparatus is grounded in semiotic terms, and this is

partly because he approaches politics as a process that involves representation in its very structure. Politics and signification are structurally homologous and are therefore linked a priori. One structural facet shared by both systems is the aforementioned relationship between the particular and the universal. Semiotically speaking, this is manifested in the relationship of the individual work to its genre. Politically speaking, we find it in the relationship of individual identity to one's membership in a community.

The social and political nature of representations is well-established (Hartley 1992; Hodge and Kress 1988). The socialization process itself is one of the most cogent links between representation and social organization. We are constituted as subjects by the signs that precede us, and we are implicated in the community that adheres to them. This train of thought is not new; we find it in George Herbert Mead's (1934/1962) theory of self and Blumer's (1969) treatment of symbolic interactionism. To be socialized is to learn collectively-shared systems of meaning. We are taught the signs of our experience, whether they are signs of gender, race, material culture, or kin. When a group responds to these signs in a similar manner, its members have been socialized in the same way, thus constituting a community. Our lives are structured in accordance with signs.

Insofar as all signs are polysemous, they are open to competing interpretations which are alternate ways of organizing human experience. The importance of Ernesto Laclau's work is that his theory of politics rests on this ambiguity of representation, suggesting a re-evaluation of what it means to be a member of a community and also a political subject. The disruption of lived meanings and attempts to hegemonize a particular meaning are in themselves political. This is demonstrated readily in

contemporary political debates. Is marriage a specific relation between a man and a woman or is it an agreement between two adults? Does life begin at conception and does it end with the loss of brain function? Is he a revolutionary, an insurgent, or an unlawful combatant? In each of these cases, the meaning of the term (marriage, life, soldier) is contested, producing real and lasting consequences for its referents.

I will develop the idea of ambiguity or polysemy by exploring the formal characteristics of one particular example of signification, contemporary antiwar posters, so that the underlying general connections between ambiguous representation and politics can then be made apparent. It is not what these posters mean, but how they mean that is most important. What these posters tell us is found in their form: their structure provides insight into politics.

## 1.2 The War on Terror

The posters that I will examine address the terrorist attack that occurred on September 11, 2001. There has been much debate over the causes and consequences of this attack, and over the nature of the attack itself. As well, the very definition of terrorism is itself debated. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "the lack of agreement on a definition of terrorism has been a major obstacle to meaningful international countermeasures" (2005). Nevertheless, a working definition that applies to the current context and to my intuitions is provided by Walter Laqueur (1987), who defines terrorism as "the use of covert violence by a group for political ends…usually directed against a government, but…also used against other ethnic groups,

classes or parties". He continues, "Terrorists seek to cause political, social and economic disruption, and for this purpose frequently engage in planned or indiscriminate murder" (p.72). Laqueur, too, however, also recognizes the difficulty in producing an adequate definition of terrorism. I will provide the context within which opposition to war developed but an in-depth analysis of that terrorist attack and the subsequent action taken by oppositional groups is beyond the scope and intent of this paper.

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004) provides a cohesive and extensive exposition of the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. The information that follows is found in that commission and in additional sources as cited. On September 11, 2001, members of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network hijacked four passenger planes, flying two of them into the towers of the World Trade Center. A third plane was flown into the Pentagon, whereas the fourth crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. It is suspected that this fourth plane was to be flown into the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The Pentagon was severely damaged and both towers of the World Trade Center collapsed. No people onboard the planes survived, and as a result of these attacks, almost three thousand died. Questions of terrorism and war immediately came to the political forefront. The United States government initiated actions with the goal of reducing global terrorism and increasing domestic security in the United States. These actions have cumulatively come to be known as the 'War on Terror'. The United States identified Osama bin Laden, leader of terrorist organization al-Qaeda, as the prime suspect responsible for the organization of the World Trade Center attack. The Taliban government of Afghanistan was targeted for its refusal to turn over bin Laden as well as

for the extensive terrorist training camps harboured in the country. Supported by the British military, U.S. armed forces began bombing al-Qaeda and Taliban targets on October 7, 2001.

In the pursuit of other states that met the criteria of the War on Terror, Iraq became an object of scrutiny. Information released through military and administrative channels claimed a link between terrorist groups, weapons of mass destruction, and the rule of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. The United States had been engaged with Iraq on military and political issues since 1990, but international attention on the country increased. The U.N. Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) began inspecting Iraq for stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, the possession of which would indicate Iraq's failure to comply with the United Nations Security Council's resolutions on disarmament (UNMOVIC – Selected Security Council Briefings 2002-2003). George W. Bush, President of the United States, received congressional approval to attack Iraq in the event of failure of the diplomatic resolution of the issue. On March 17, 2003, he issued a 48-hour ultimatum that unless Saddam Hussein and his sons left Iraq, U.S. forces would act to remove them. On March 20, 2003, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq began.

**1.3 Methodology**

Between September, 2003, and September, 2004 I found and catalogued antiwar posters (n=1248) from multiple Internet sites. I sought out posters that were explicitly labelled antiwar either on the page on which they were displayed or by those pages that

linked to those sites. I found these sites in two ways: through a general search of the terms *antiwar posters* and *peace posters* and through the network of links each site provided to other similar sites. The majority of posters was drawn from English-language web pages; some were taken from sites in the German (.de) and Italian (.it) domains. However, even though the posters were found in these domains, their content mirrors the diverse makeup of their producers. The posters include text in English, German, Italian, Spanish, French, and Arabic.

Duplicating the difficulties and experiences of other research of ephemera (Clinton 1981; Rickard 1978) many of these posters were available intermittently or for only a short period. Some remained on-line during the research period; others were removed shortly after they were posted. All posters were saved electronically and catalogued for reference purposes.

While my theoretical questions are concerned with representation, it is difficult to ask how many posters are representative of the phenomena in question. On the Internet alone, several thousand posters are available. To add those posters distributed on a local scale, or available only through non-electronic means, is to account for an overwhelming amount of material. An Internet search conducted in multiple languages would result in many more posters. Even if I restrict my focus to those posters on the Internet explicitly related to war in Iraq there are still hundreds which fit that criterion, with new posters being produced well into the summer of 2004. It would thus have been possible to continue the collection of posters indefinitely. This study cannot claim to speak for all antiwar posters on the Internet.

## Chapter 2 Contemporary antiwar posters

### 2.1 The genre of antiwar posters

The complex relationships between Iraq, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction have been hotly contested and remain so at the time of this writing. In the months prior to the invasion and in the time since, there has been considerable opposition expressed to war in Iraq, to the War on Terror, and to current military action in general. On February 15, 2003, the largest mass protest movement in history took place, where 11 million people demonstrated under the rubric of opposition to the then-potential war in Iraq (Mann 2004, Tarrow 2003). However, as James Jasper tells us, "Moral protest comes in different styles. The standard ones today include large public rallies and marches, occupations of symbolic or strategic sites, provocative verbal and visual rhetoric, and more mainstream lobbying and electioneering" (1997, p.6). The opposition to the War on Terror and its related components has taken this very multiplicity of forms. One of the most prolific graphic forms has been that of posters, which are important not only for their quantity but also for their content.

In a discussion of antiwar posters, however, we cannot get ahead of ourselves. Surely we must first know what antiwar art is. Is it possible to situate these posters in the received history of antiwar art? D.J.R. Bruckner (in Bruckner, Chwast and Heller 1984) says that antiwar art is produced not for its own sake but in response to military action, so the vagarious times of war mean that antiwar art has developed intermittently, in response to culturally- and historically-specific conflict. He goes on to say, "That lack of continuous development has tended to keep the symbolism of antiwar art relatively

simple" (p.8). We will see shortly that these posters do not all feature "relatively simple" symbolism insofar as they can be read in multiple ways. In their attempt to provide a clear history of antiwar art Bruckner et al. did not "include abstract art because of its lack of clarity on the theme. We have tried to keep the ubiquitous symbolic and allegorical clichés – so endemic to this art – to a minimum" (p.7). They are thus able to provide a coherent presentation of antiwar art precisely because they have discounted what they consider problematic instances. A history of antiwar art may be most convincingly told around superlative examples, however my concern is not to account for those posters that seem to embody antiwar sentiments very well, but to account for the different instances that are subsumed under the idea of 'antiwar art'. We want to know what antiwar art is in practice and can do so only by looking at the way the concept is actually used. Therefore, instead of imposing an a priori definition of antiwar art, I will look at what others have determined belongs to this genre.

As I have said, the Internet features many sites that include, by their mandate or that of others who link to those sites, posters that are antiwar, pro-peace, or against war in Iraq. These claims are usually explicit but may be implicit or subtle. One of the largest online galleries is the Campaign on Iraq Poster Exhibition featuring several hundred posters by people "express[ing] their views of the war" (Faja and Holmes, n.d., ¶ 1). Although the mandate is non-partisan, a majority of the posters are antiwar, or at the very least these posters are oppositional in tone. There is also Another Poster for Peace, which says that "Our goal is to help create a grassroots 'anti-campaign' to counter the brilliant marketing the U.S. administration is currently running to promote its war agenda" (n.d., ¶

3). A third site, No War Font, says it "is an open-source style font project, bringing together graphic designers, artists or just skilled people from all over the world to make it much more comfortable to fight for your rights" (Greige Büro für Design 2004, ¶ 2). In all cases, these posters have been identified as belonging to the antiwar genre. It is in this act of presenting posters as antiwar, and them being accepted as such, that the genre is produced (see Becker 1995).

Genre is problematic, however. We know that there is a genre; it is used by those who establish and contribute to these online galleries, as well as by audiences who make sense of the content of these galleries. We know that the genre has a referent, namely the set of posters displayed on the Internet as antiwar posters. What is problematic is determining the relationship between the posters and the genre. Robert Stam (as cited in Chandler 1997) and Rick Altman (1999) outline this difficulty of defining genres, identifying two general problems which apply fully to these posters. Firstly, we cannot determine the properties that an element must have to belong to the genre without excluding some posters that are, in practice, treated as antiwar. Secondly, the elements of a genre are not necessarily exclusive to that genre alone. Any generic element may belong to multiple genres. In spite of these problems, the genre is not rendered meaningless nor is it deprived of its utility. The operators of the image galleries will not disband their operation if they are told that the boundaries and content of the antiwar genre are indeterminate. There is tension between the concept of the antiwar art genre and the instances that constitute that genre. I will treat this as a problem between the particular and the universal, because the link between the particular elements, the posters,

is at odds with what is universal to them, namely their participation in the genre.

## 2.2 Saussure's sign and structure

A structuralist framework might enable a proper analysis of this tension between the particular and the universal. Saussure's fundamental concepts of the sign and the structure have been revised and reformulated by both Roland Barthes and Ernesto Laclau to whom I will later turn. For Saussure, a sign is something that holds meaning for the subject who experiences it. Common signs are words, pictures, and gestures. They point to something other than their phenomenal instantiation. Each sign thus has three elements at work: the signifier, the signified, and the subject. The signifier is the form of the sign and the signified is the concept represented by the sign (Chandler, 2002). That concept is the result of the interaction between the formal characteristics of the sign and the process of interpretation provoked in the subject. Without the subject to find meaning there are no meaningful phenomena and thus no signs. In the case of antiwar posters, the posters have a physical presence (which is the signifier), but mean something more to us than their physical existence (that meaning is the signified). Every antiwar poster is a sign, or can be a sign, if it is meaningful to a subject.

We first experience signs as meaningful and only then is it possible to conceive of their dyadic significative form. Sign analysis remains just that: an analysis, not a synthesis (Saussure 1916/1986). The signifier-signified distinction is determinable only a posteriori, for we do not observe the world and then decide on potential signifiers that will be conferred meaning. This inseparability is constitutive of the sign, and it is

necessary to point out that there are not signifiers and signifieds roaming the world separate from each other. Also, Saussure's schema of sign, signifier, and signified does not permit one to determine what the meaning of a sign is: it describes the anatomy of signs, not their content. Of course, we should remember that in talking of signification, we still cannot present the signified via language. To attempt to do so is to make recourse to other signifiers. Inasmuch as I wish to discuss signification, this deferral of the signified is unavoidable. For example, any attempt on my part to say what the signified is will use signifiers. The signified can be known but not represented, for representation, by definition, entails signification.

Along with this 'vertical' description of the sign, Saussure's structuralist account also sees each sign as sensible on a 'horizontal' level, existing within a structure constituted by other signs. In his words, "the concepts in question are purely differential...defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system" (p.115). There are no signs without their relationship of difference to other signs. These relations of difference can be temporal or spatial. A sequence of sounds will reveal the differences between the sounds just as a pattern of colours shows the differences between the colours. In any case, it is the boundaries between signs that make a structure. For example, the idea of nomadism is inseparable from the idea of what it means to be sedentary, and the border between the two ideas mutually defines, or structures, what those words mean. Those boundaries, rather than any essential characteristics, are lines determining simultaneously the signs *nomadic* and *sedentary*. It is in this way, through relations of difference between

elements in a system, that the elements are constituted.

Hodge and Kress's (1988) treatment of traffic lights indicates that a structuralist account of signs is more complex than simply finding formal similarities or differences in signifiers. Traffic lights are signs entrenched in daily life, and though they exist within a structure, the authors reject the idea that the lights are signs with a basic correlation between a structural location and their meaning, insisting that we must take account of other factors to understand these signs insofar as they are also social phenomena. We must account for context, inasmuch as traffic lights signify with regards to specific situations, including both the physical environment and the people who see these lights. The location of the lights indicates who they address, namely motorists, though the lights can also be read by pedestrians as to the behaviour of traffic. What these lights signify is also dependent on the dialect with which they are read, so that for some motorists amber means that they must speed up, for others it means that they must slow down. These different ways of understanding the lights produce what Stanley Fish called *interpretive communities* (1989), constituted by those people who read a set of signs in similar ways. Motorists can take into account other interpretive communities to predict how others may navigate the intersection. The traffic lights also point to their location in juridical systems, and by extension state systems, that enforce motorists' behaviour. The lights signify penalties if there is non-compliance, though interpretive communities may arise around what compliance is understood to be.

It is worth noting that these lights are signs shared by all users. There are not different sets of lights for different groups of people. There is thus the potential for an

egalitarian arrangement, whereby all users can engage traffic lights as the same signs. The question that I will develop in this study is the conditions by which signs can be engaged by all users in the same way, and inversely, how they can be read differently. It is difficult to enforce one reading on all audiences. Signifieds are not immutable but neither are they whatever we want them to be. Laclau sees contemporary political action as this process of navigating between the fixity and fluidity of signs, a process I will examine in depth.

Insofar as antiwar posters are signs, their meanings can vary. We cannot deduce an unequivocal meaning from any or all antiwar posters. A look at only a small number of antiwar posters is sufficient to indicate the difficulty in positing a simple meaning. Even when we take into account the different readings they offer and the way in which they address their audience, the problems of genre remain. I will first look at the content of these posters, turning to their structural relationships in Chapter 2.

## 2.3 Micah Ian Wright and ProtestWarrior

Micah Ian Wright's Propaganda Remix Project (2004) features dozens of posters that use previously issued war propaganda with alterations of the text or the image to produce a different meaning than would be suggested by the original poster. Criticism of the war on Iraq, of the War on Terror, and of the current U.S. administration is apparent in his gallery.

One of Wright's posters (Plate 2.1) reads "You shut your mouth; We'll bomb who we want! You're either with us or with the terrorists!" The words frame a fighter pilot

**Plate 2.1**
Untitled. Micah Ian Wright (n.d.)
Retrieved April 8, 2004 from http://homepage.mac.com/leperous/.Pictures/youwe.jpg

standing in his cockpit. Flying in the background are planes similar to that of the pilot's. The colours of red, white, and blue and the type of plane pictured, used on a small scale by the Allies in World War II, suggest that the pilot stands in for the United States. Though there is no explicit indication that the words belong to the pilot, he is looking at us, so we combine the visual and verbal address. Further reinforcing the speaker as a mouthpiece for the United States are his words that echo George Bush's comments of September, 2001, when he said "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" and those of November of the same year, "You are either with us or against us in the fight against terror." There is an additional similarity between the fighter pilot and George Bush, when on May 1, 2003, Bush, wearing a flight suit, was flown onto the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln to announce the end of major combat operations in Iraq.

Interestingly enough, the very same image (Plate 2.2) is used by the organization ProtestWarrior, an organization founded by Alan Davidson and Kfir Alfia in opposition not to war but to the antiwar movement. Their slogan is "Fighting the Left, Doing it Right" (Kfir and Davidson 2004). The text of their poster, which uses the very same image as Wright's, reads "Hey France… You shut the hell up, we'll protect civilization". It appears that at the level of the sign, these posters are roughly equivalent. Both use the same picture accompanied by an aggressive statement. However, the meaning of each seems diametrically opposed. Wright's poster, read as hyperbole, is a critique of the very attitude it expresses, whereas Davidson and Alfia's poster seems to indicate an approval of that arrogance. In fact, virtually the same signifier is used for opposing signifieds. Is it sufficient to attribute the difference in meaning to the producer's intentions? That would

**Plate 2.2**
Untitled. Alan Davidson & Kfir Alfia. (n.d.)
Retrieved October 1, 2004 from
http://www.protestwarrior.com/nimages/signs/pdf/pw_sign_2.pdf

be unsatisfactory, for it suggests that what the producer intends is expressed clearly by the image. This *intentional fallacy* (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946/1976) has been discounted. We do not receive the senders' intentions and then use them to decipher the sign. We use the sign and other phenomena available to us, including context, to find a meaning, and can only infer that the meaning we get is what the senders' intentions are (Gombrich 1996).

The text of these posters, as a means of disambiguation, shows that context need not be relied upon to rationalize the posters' similarities and differences. Although context is certainly important, priming a certain reading, it is not the key to seeing the difference of these posters. If we are to make recourse to context, it must be invoked as more than a catch-all for disambiguation. In fact, the crucial difference to these posters is the manner in which they address their audience. The poster by Wright addresses the audience directly by using the pronoun *you*. The poster by Davidson and Alfia, although in actuality speaking to the audience and using the same pronoun, does so obliquely. The audience is engaged quite differently with each poster, locating the reader in what Fiske (1987, building on Althusser 1971) would call a *subject position*. For the poster to be understood the reader must occupy the position set up by the poster's form of address. In Wright's poster, we are directly engaged by the speaker and are confronted directly with the aggression. For the poster to be deciphered we must be the person that the pilot is telling to shut up. We are then left to choose whether we are on the bombers' or the terrorists' side, and the pilot threatens us into making a particular decision. In the second poster we are again produced as a subject but as a passive one. The dialogue is between

the pilot and France, and we are in a superficial way absolved of engagement with the issue. We have the illusion of neutrally observing the dialogue, and this hides the fact that we have to be directly engaged for the poster to make sense. We are constituted as a subject, provided we are not French, included in the *we* of the poster, the group that is defending civilization and is against France. Anyone who is French and reads this poster will be put in a peculiar situation as the poster does not address a French person but France itself. In that case, that person must either defend their nation or criticize France, which, since the reader has already identified as a French person, will be a self-criticism. The visual similarity of these two posters is at odds with their dissimilar meaning. This lack of correlation between appearance and signification is not unique to those posters, however. From Edward Booth-Clibborn (1979):

> One of the minor ironies of World War II was the similarity in layout between the illustrated magazines *Signal* and *Picture Post*, the one German, the other British. A typical page from 1942 carries a photograph of a German panzer grenadier crouched in a foxhole on the Russian front. With a few changes in the caption that page could have come from either publication. In fact it appeared in *Picture Post*. (p.46)

Ultimately, these posters show not that the text disambiguates the image as much as it exploits the ambiguity of the image. There are a multitude of readings the image lends itself to, enforced by the text. A signifier, with subtly different visual or textual juxtapositions, can signify opposing viewpoints. To consider Wright's poster an element of the antiwar genre and Kfir and Davidson's exempt, the genre must be produced by something other than a similarity of signifiers. In this case it is produced in part by the words, but as we shall see in the next example, disambiguation, whether textual or otherwise, may not explain membership in the genre.

## 2.4 Three posters from war.miniaturegigantic

The previous two posters were visually very similar. We will now look at three posters, all from another online gallery, that are quite different. All three have been presented, by virtue of their inclusion in the online gallery, as commentary on the War in Iraq, and further demonstrate the problems of genre.

Noah Lyon's poster (Plate 2.3) features an image of Ronald McDonald, icon of the international corporation McDonald's, sporting a stylized moustache, which presumably references Adolf Hitler. The poster appears to have been produced with markers, its style connoting low technology, despite the image being displayed on a computer. This suggests a 'do-it-yourself' aesthetic; in contrast to the slick representations produced by mainstream media and political campaigns. It also suggests an idea of play, which is in contrast to both the gravity of war and Adolf Hitler. These oppositions are *metonymic*, they are parts conceptually linked to the work as a whole. Here the oppositional parts, play/work and technology/home-made, are metonymic of the oppositional nature of the poster itself: it is against war.

However, why is this poster antiwar? I assume, by the mere fact of its inclusion on the website, that it makes some commentary on the Iraq war. Compelled to make sense of the poster in this context, I take the basic, first-order signification of Ronald as metonymical, that is, standing in for a related concept, the McDonald's corporation. Creating a chain of associations, I take the McDonald's corporation then to be metonymical of America. The image of Ronald McDonald is itself speaking for the United States, or in particular the administrative action of the U.S. Having conducted that

**Plate 2.3**
Untitled. Noah Lyon. (n.d.)
Retrieved March 2, 2004 from http://www.miniaturegigantic.com/357.html

elaborate justificatory work, I set that chain of associations aside. Understanding *synecdoche* as a form of metonymy, where a part of the whole points to the whole in itself, I find the moustache synecdochic of Adolf Hitler, himself signifying undesirable government. Armed with these two chains of association, I juxtapose the chains in the way that the imagery is juxtaposed. I conclude that according to the poster America and Hitler's rule are equally aggressive and dangerous. Note also that this poster involves a combination, a superimposition, giving primacy to McDonald. The moustache is worn by the clown and not the reverse. This places the clown (the USA) in the status of an agent who is wearing, rather than is worn by, the moustache (fascist/dictatorial policies). Having traced a rationalization of how this image fits my expectations, I have, in a sense, 'made it work'. However, I could easily conceive of a context within which this image would signify criticism of McDonald's or criticism of advertising, thus an alternate context would produce a much different reading. That this poster belongs solely to the antiwar genre is untenable.

'Keith F' provides a poster (Plate 2.4), quite different from that of Lyon's. Whereas Lyons exhibited a technically crude style, Keith F uses photography, artwork, text and many more colours. There is also a minor text included. Lyons' poster is a cartoon of sorts. Keith F's poster, however, is no more indebted to realism, inasmuch as the photos are blurred and oriented sideways. We do find that his poster includes imagery that is familiar in many antiwar posters, including police, protestors themselves, the American flag, a likeness of George Bush, the word 'Empire' and the colours red, white, and blue. However, these components seem arrayed more or less randomly; their

**Plate 2.4**
Untitled. Keith F. (n.d.)
Retrieved February 11, 2004 from
http://war.miniaturegigantic.com/posters/keithF/empire3.pdf

does not disambiguate a reading of the poster. Are those contents of the poster, insofar as they appear in other antiwar posters, sufficient to permit its inclusion in the set? That is to say, if other posters with this imagery signify opposition to war, then must this poster, by sharing that imagery, signify the same thing? Firstly, such an interpretation would replicate the problems of Wright's and Kfir and Alfia's posters. Also, duplication of imagery has no intrinsic meaning besides its duplication. We still have not found why these visual components, either singularly or in the aggregate, signify opposition to war.

Before proceeding further, we must finally look at Üzeyir Lokman's image (Plate 2.5) from the same gallery. The poster features silhouettes, photography, and fields of colour. I can identify an image of a person running down a cobblestone street at night. The poster is evocative of dreaming or reflection, placing the photo where the 'mind' of the silhouette would be conceived. The photo itself is mysterious; we ask what is being run from or towards. The multiple silhouettes suggest different people, but their relationship to each other is indeterminate. The array of colours as background does not serve to disambiguate any meaning, but rather contributes to a sense of the unknown as a whole. What of these features make this an antiwar poster? It seems to have no reason to be antiwar other than the fact that it has been labelled as such by others, whose reasoning cannot be extrapolated.

Seeing these posters in the context of the gallery, in passing, they may be accepted as antiwar. For the first poster I can, albeit torturously, produce a meaning upon reflection. With the last two, I cannot make such a claim. I agree that they are antiwar, but in Lokman's case this is without reference to its formal characteristics at all! I have

**Plate 2.5**
Untitled. Üzeyir Lokman. (n.d.)
Retrieved March 2, 2004 from http://www.miniaturegigantic.com/400.html

allowed them to be read as antiwar by their subsumption to the mandate of the website. Having been set up to receive these posters in a certain way, I then tried to make them fit. What is peculiar to Lokman's poster is that the genre imputes it with a meaning when that meaning is supposedly constructed by these posters. As a result, it is not clear what determines meaning: the genre or its elements? Lokman's poster is antiwar by virtue of being included in the set of antiwar posters. If this criterion is sufficient, what else can conceivably be included? If Lokman's poster means antiwar simply by the fact that it is there, does the individual content of any of these posters determine anything? From what did the genre of antiwar posters stem, if not its individual instantiations?

For all three of these posters I do not claim that my analysis is absolute. There are other interpretations available, as well as complexities to these posters that have not been discussed. It would also be possible to find posters that boldly state 'No War in Iraq'. If we set those posters at one pole and Lokman's at another, the antiwar posters on the Internet are distributed with some regularity across that spectrum of abstractness. However, this should not suggest that one poster is 'more antiwar' than another. Even if we granted that, we would still have the same problem: what characteristics could be used as a referent for whether a poster is more or less antiwar?

## 2.5 Multiple movements signified

Not only are there differing signifiers among these posters, but also differences on the level of the signified. There are posters making a variety of claims. One simply says "busharon" with the *s* replaced by a swastika, presumably as a critique of the United

States' support of Israel in the Middle East conflict. Another poster says "drop tuition, not bombs!" Some posters claim that the loss of jobs, not terrorism, is the real concern. Many posters parody the logos of international corporations including those of Shell, Nike, McDonald's, and Disney in a denunciation of direct and indirect war profiteering by multinational corporations.

Each of those posters presents opposition to the war with reference to another demand or claim. In doing so, the antiwar genre is again problematized. Many posters claim the war is wrong not because war in itself is wrong, but because of other causes. War is a vehicle by which a number of diverse positions are expressed, so they do not only signify opposition to the war, they also signify opposition to other causes. The oppositions listed in the posters above are partial insofar as each is not fully nor solely against the war.

## 2.6 Why these are problems of genre

At the very least, those who posted these posters believe them to be antiwar. They do not appear to be pro-war. Beyond that, why are the posters included in the antiwar genre rather than excluded from it? The first pair of posters involves a similarity on the level of the signifier but a broad discrepancy on the part of their signified. It is a mistake to assume that similar signifiers indicate similar signifieds and that different signifiers indicate different signifieds. Kenneth Burke (1984) calls this the "danger of analogy": "Because two things are found to possess a certain trait in common which our point of view considers notable, we take the common notable trait to indicate identity of

character" (p.97). We should avoid this danger, quite easily shown by the American flag which draped on a soldier's coffin can signify quite differently than when flown at a professional baseball game or burned in protest.

The posters in the second group, by Lyon, Keith F and Lokman, seem to be limit-cases, for they are neither obviously antiwar but neither are they completely exempt from being antiwar. By drawing the limits of this genre into question, by revealing that we cannot be sure of the criteria of exclusion or inclusion, then not only are these exceptions or border cases problematic, they render the inclusion of any member in the set problematic. If we cannot determine the boundaries of the concept, how do we know if anything at all belongs and what that might be? We are then forced to reconsider even that imagery that appears to belong naturally to the genre. It is not possible to establish a list of necessary and sufficient characteristics internal to a poster that would make it antiwar. If characteristics were posited, it is quite possible that a new poster could be produced and accepted as antiwar without having any or all of those characteristics.

In the third set of posters, there is a difficulty in reconciling the individual meaning of each poster with the meaning of the genre to which those elements are subsumed. Many posters are not merely in a simple opposition to the war but articulate different agendas via the war. The antiwar genre is thus not constituted solely by those posters expressing a rigid, basic, opposition to war in itself. Exactly what, then, produces the genre?

Prototype theory and family resemblance theory are both attempts to answer this question. They have commonalities with Laclau's approach but are not identical to it. In

Wittengenstein's (1953) discussion of family resemblances, there is the genre, or family, within which there are a number of features intersecting among elements, so that any one element shares features with other elements without there being specific essential features common to all. Wittgenstein provides the example of games:

> I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on.
> What is common to them all?....For if you look at them you will not see
> something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a
> whole series of them at that. (p.66)

Although this avoids the problems of essentialism, the word *game* still suggests a bounded set, insofar as the word does not refer to everything. What all games have in common is the name itself. This seems to be a tautology, but in Chapter 5 I will show, via Žižek's (1989) antidescriptivism, that it is not. Laclau's approach accommodates this intersection of multiple similarities; the name that unites them is an empty signifier.

A related theory is Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory, though *category* replaces *genre* as the central term. Rosch conducted extensive research on the manner in which people categorize objects. Sharing family resemblance theory's opposition to the classical conception of genre, categories are not defined by specific, universal characteristics. Making reference to her 1975 work with Mervis, she says "the more prototypical of a category a member is rated, the more attributes it has in common with other members of the category and the fewer attributes in common with members of the contrasting categories" (1978, p.37). However, this confirms the inseparability of the genre, or category, from culture. A genre is not an objective, unchanging set, but is produced through the judgements and decisions made by human actors. In this context, a prototype is the determining principle of the category:

> To speak of a prototype at all is simply a convenient grammatical fiction; what is really referred to are judgements of degree of prototypicality….For natural-language categories, to speak of a single entity that is the prototype is either a gross misunderstanding of the empirical data or a covert theory of mental representation. (p.40)

An empty signifier attempts to point to that "grammatical fiction", one whose outlines are established through contextually-specific perceptions and judgements. I will explore this in detail in Chapter 2.

Ultimately, the antiwar genre is not produced by similarity of signifieds, nor is it determinable by a shopping-list of features that may or may not be included in these posters, and finally opposition to war may itself be a signifier for many anterior movements or claims. How then do the contents of these posters constitute the genre? Michael Shapiro (1993, p.7) says, "to be unified or structured – whatever else is true – means necessarily to have internal differentiation; in other words, a structure is a whole constituted by (disparate) parts." Despite Shapiro's claim, the reasons why these internal divisions and a general unity are simultaneously possible are not obvious. Even granting what he says, it is still important to understand why it is the case. According to Laclau, people have an interest in the prototypes, families, and signifiers that structure their lives. It is in their relations of difference themselves that these posters are allied, and it is though empty signifiers that this relationship is best expressed.

# Chapter 3 Empty signifiers

## 3.1 The 2004 World Social Forum

As I indicated in the introduction, the relationship between the particular and the universal, or between parts and wholes, is not unique to these antiwar posters. Social organization relies on the distinction and does so on two levels: of the individual to a community and of social groups to the whole of society. A study of the relationships between different elements that constitute a totality may then be relevant to the domain of antiwar posters as much as to descriptions of social phenomena in general. The problems of genre are in that sense social problems. For example, are all members of a class alike? To what extent are they different and what are the limits to membership? There are numerous examples that prompt these questions; I will begin by looking at one example in particular. The World Social Forum (WSF), most recently held in Mumbai in January 2004, saw 310 different organizations participating under the WSF's extensive charter of principles which advocate pluralism, democracy, and alternatives to globalization. How could these disparate groups become a unified Forum? In his account of the Mumbai WSF, Randeep Ramesh writes:

> The profusion of agendas made it difficult to see how an effective, coherent coalition could be formed….But the common thread running through every argument was of the struggle of the powerless against the powerful. It ties together all the disparate causes. (2004a, ¶ 6)

The problems of genre are thus evoked: what makes the Forum a unified event? The diverse causes of the WSF mirror the diversity of antiwar posters. Many of the Forum's movements, if not all of them, belong to multiple, differing, social networks. How are these disparate movements allied? The "common thread" that brought all the WSF causes

together may be considered an *empty signifier*. To explain this, I will continue the analysis of antiwar posters, doing so via Laclau's structuralist framework. Having described the operation of empty signifiers, I will then apply the conclusions I draw to the particular situation of the WSF.

## 3.2 Laclau's signifying system

In Chandler's (1997) words genres are "frameworks within which texts are produced and interpreted" (¶ 18). Such frameworks are similar to Laclau's discussion of signifying systems. Laclau, drawing on Saussure, maintains that any signifying system is a system of difference and that those differences constitute a system. Every element in the system has an identity produced by its differential status to the other systemic elements. Without positing the limits that constitute a closed system the identity of each poster would float, continually deferred to ever-multiplying relations of difference. A meaningful system is closed, for "if all identities depend on the differential system, unless the latter defines its own limits, no identity would be finally constituted" (Laclau 1996b, p.52). Unless the genre of these antiwar posters had limits the meaning of any of the posters would never be finally constituted, for each poster is only sensible in its difference from the others.

Laclau, however, asks the question of how these limits can be known. How can a limit be represented without the representation itself being an additional difference within that system? In other words, how can a differential element point to what is outside difference itself? In response to these questions, Laclau makes the important distinction

between limits and *constitutive difference*. Constitutive difference is internal to a system of signification and is what produces the system's elements. For example, the distinction between black and white is a constitutive difference. On the other hand, the limit that every signifying system requires points to a "radical exclusion" (p.39), demarcating what is inside the system from what is outside of it. What is colour and not colour cannot be determined solely through differences within colour itself. The exclusion that produces the limit, insofar as it is outside the signifying system, cannot be directly signified by that system.

Genre as a signifying system is determined by what is radically excluded from the very possibility of being signified by that system. This has to be phrased carefully; it is not just another differential element that is excluded but something that cannot be signified by the system itself. For example, the genre known as the Western is composed of many elements. Those elements are constituted by internal differences, so that *Rio Bravo* gains its identity in its differences from *The Wild Bunch* and from all other movies of the genre. However, the limits of what is and is not a Western cannot be shown solely by reference to this particular genre. Any particular difference within the genre cannot point to the system as a whole nor to the reasons why its elements are allied. Ultimately the Western genre as such is salient only in its difference from other genres, whether they are comedies, thrillers, or otherwise. There may be an overlap, a genre of comedy-westerns for example, but this is not a problem as long as there is a radical exclusion of any other genre to constitute a radical outside. What a genre excludes is not one film, nor films in the aggregate, but another genre, which is precisely what cannot be formulated in

terms of the generic elements alone.

Isn't this the same logic by which a differential system is organized? Wouldn't genres merely be elements in a larger differential system? Even if we allow this, we are no closer to resolving the problems of genre, but are forced to continually readdress them. The metasystem in which genre is an element would have to make recourse to yet another higher-order system to be understood. This solution falls into regress, and since there is no ultimate position from which these metasystems in their entirety could be known, we reach a point where we cannot articulate a metasystem. Systems, then, must be signified immanently. Laclau's point though is this is possible only through an empty signifier.

Two additional objections must be addressed. The first is that the genre of antiwar posters (and any signifying system) follows a set of rules that distinguish it, namely its generic codes, and that these codes are sufficient to account for the genre. A radical exclusion would thus not be necessary. Implicit, however, in such an argument is the knowledge of what codes are peculiar to the system in question. To know the codes that constitute antiwar as a particular genre, one must know that they are different from the codes that govern a different genre. This of course reaffirms an exclusionary limit.

The second objection is how we know whether a poster should be classified as within one genre rather than another. Why is a poster, for example, antiwar? Why can't we just put it in a different system? This last objection treats elements as monadic and the systematizing operation as secondary, as though an element is actively put into one of many freely chosen systems of meaning. This is not true, for our very definition of elements requires that they be produced through difference and are thus always within

some system, regardless of what that system is. Every element is inextricable from systemic relations of difference that constitute its identity.

When the limit produced between genres is not an internal difference of those signifying systems, the means to signify this difference is not found within the system, except, as Laclau maintains, through an empty signifier. What is an empty signifier? Could such a thing be possible? Laclau admits that the idea of an empty signifier, a signifier divested of its connection to a signified, is problematic (1996b, p.36). From a purely Saussurean viewpoint, it is impossible, as I discussed in Chapter 2. However, rather than merely being a signifier evacuated of a signified, an empty signifier is a signifier that stands in for the system of signification itself. In a system, each element is different from other elements in the system, but those constitutive differences are equivalent in their opposition to what is radically excluded. What all the systemic elements have in common is not something essential, but "a radical exclusion which is the ground and condition of all differences" (p.39). In Gololobov's words,

> An empty signifier is a signifier without a signified which being an active element of the language expression designates not a particular concept but a whole meaningful chain where other elements obtain their meaning in the logic of difference from another [sic] ones. (2004, p.2)

The differences of the generic elements are equivalent in the face of what stands outside the system. The constitutive differences of each element are cancelled and those "differences collapse into equivalential chains" (Laclau 1996b, p.39). An empty signifier is a signifier emptied of its immediate content and used to signify this equivalential chain. Each element is thus "constitutively split" (p.38) between being an instance of itself, and an instance of the genre. For antiwar posters, it means each poster has its own

message but can also be read generally as an antiwar poster. This dual status means a poster can signify a particular message as well as the genre itself.

This phenomenon, whereby one element comes to speak for the elements with which it is allied, is readily observed in these posters and elsewhere. As I have indicated, this conceptualization of relations is also applicable to much political action. Stockdill's (2001) discussion of grassroots AIDS awareness activism finds that many activist organizations employed AIDS as an empty signifier insofar as it allies issues of race, class, substance abuse, and sexuality in a chain of equivalence. A chain of equivalence does not mean that all movements are the same, but through this chain they are seen as allied by the AIDS awareness movement. Stockdill calls this perception of the situation a multidimensional perspective, where "the activists who possess a multidimensional perspective consistently identify battles against multiple inequalities as inseparable from fighting AIDS" (p.214). Empty signifiers express this inseparability. Thus in saying that AIDS is an empty signifier does not mean that AIDS as a social issue was meaningless, waiting to be filled with other content. In fact, it means, from this perspective, that AIDS and AIDS activism can no longer be understood outside of the relationships they held to other issues and vice-versa.

### 3.3 *Antiwar* as empty signifier

These antiwar posters fulfil Laclau's schema. They are elements in the signifying system which is the antiwar genre. The genre fixes particular relations of difference and provides the ground within which the antiwar identity of each poster is constituted.

Milton Glaser's poster (Plate 3.1) is different in a number of ways from the posters that I have already discussed. It is not explicitly antiwar, but neither can it be proven that it is not antiwar. Its focal point is the text. It, like other posters, is a member of the genre because it has been allied with them through a radical exclusion. This alliance is not fixed nor is it spontaneous, it is produced through defining and re-defining the meanings of the posters and the meaning of the genre itself. For all these posters, their differences are rendered equivalent in their opposition to what is radically excluded, namely war. The genre is the empty signifier, for it points not to any essential content but to a chain of equivalence that orders differential elements. When more and more posters are rendered equivalent the quality that is equally present becomes more and more indeterminable.

If we understand the signifiers of war and antiwar as having any essential characteristics whatsoever, we remain in the problems typically associated with genre analysis, trying to determine what features are essential to the genre.

> The more the chain of equivalences is extended, the less each concrete struggle will be able to remain closed in a differential self....On the contrary, as the equivalent relation shows that these differential identities are simply indifferent bodies incarnating something equally present in all of them...the less concrete this 'something equally present' will be. (Laclau 1996b, p.42)

Opposition to war is not a positive characteristic; it relies on the exclusion of war. That is why we cannot look to the posters themselves to determine some essential properties that indicate their inclusion in the genre. We would be attempting to find, on either side of the exclusionary limit, a definable centre, the one true signified of war and antiwar. These posters have encompassed peace movements, anti-Americanism, the Israel-Palestine conflict, anti-globalization, the defence of France, and more. The only way the signifier

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**Plate 3.1**
Untitled. Milton Glaser. (n.d.)
Retrieved April 7, 2004 from http://www.anotherposterforpeace.org/posters/Glaser-DISSENT.pdf

*antiwar* can accommodate all these posters is if it empties itself of its particular signified, if it ceases to signify an essential opposition to war and makes these posters equivalent. Instead we must understand that the genre, or system, is not closed, but relies on something excluded from it. The antiwar identity of any of the posters is always contingent and not generated from internal characteristics, but from collective alliances and exclusions.

Antiwar posters are in opposition to what the war means. What this war means, or to put it somewhat differently, what this war is about, is fittingly enough a dominant political issue. Is the war about weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, liberating the Iraqi people, or bringing Saddam Hussein to justice? Is it about U.S. imperialism, the hunt for cheap oil, American control of the Middle East, or the spread of democracy? These multiple ideas are condensed in the signifiers *war* and *antiwar*. *War* and *antiwar* have become empty signifiers, not because they are empty of content, nor because they are full of content, rather because they are the signifiers through which multiple claims are articulated. This condensation of meaning is unpacked in political debate as a battle over what the war and its opposition will ultimately mean. In this view, the distinction between war as an objective thing in the world, untrammelled by what is said about it, and the political issue of what the signifier *war* means, is difficult to maintain. For example, speaking about the March 5, 2003 worldwide protest against the war in Iraq, Erik Haensel (2004), a reporter for the Canadian United Press, describes the Vancouver arm of the event as "hundreds of compassionate people interacting together, with their differences overshadowed by the impending war". He asks similar questions about the

'true' nature of the war, specifically in response to George Bush's claim to defend the innocent: "I wonder, who really are the innocent? What is this peace that we are killing to protect? What does it look like, and how is it perceived by people around the world?" (p.13).

Gololobov is quite accurate when he says that the empty signifier doesn't designate a concept. It signifies the structure of the system as such. In the words of Laclau "it is only by privileging the dimension of equivalence to the point that its differential nature is almost entirely obliterated – that is emptying it of its differential nature – that the system can signify itself as a totality" (1996b, p.39). However, it is not enough to say that the system is now signified by *antiwar* and that these posters are allied in their collective opposition to another polysemous signifier, namely *war*. If the differential content of the posters is reduced in favour of the equivalential chain, then what meaning would remain in the unity of the posters? It would seem that only the system as such, bounded by its exclusionary limit, remains. Yet if the empty signifier only points to systematicity, then why do people actually read and use these signs as having something to do with the War on Terror as it actually exists? The solution is in the constitutive split of the signifier. Any empty signifier will be deficient insofar as it too belongs to the chain of equivalence. The empty signifier thus has a dual status, both as the sign it was originally and as the indicator of a multitude of partial struggles. Any empty signifier, immanent to the chain of equivalence that it signifies may be privileged as the empty signifier, yet its differential content threatens to break through. That differential content acts as an anchor around which the equivalential elements are

articulated. It is the nodal point through which all partial struggles or elements are articulated. For example, in the posters discussed above, Pro-Palestinian sentiment is antiwar because it is in opposition to the warmonger (Bush); anti-globalization is antiwar because the war is an extension of corporate power beyond state jurisdiction; opposition to the perceived or real injustices of the ruling U.S. administration is antiwar because the administration initiated this war. This recurring "because…" always points to the empty signifier, the war, which becomes the focal point or theme for the different struggles. The heterogenous movements are, when read in accordance with the theme of antiwar, retroactively determined to be an antiwar whole. The opposition is in this way constituted by those differential elements that appeal to that immanent signifier of antiwar to legitimate their inclusion in the system.

## 3.4 Posters revisited

Lyon's McDonald's poster can be read through the empty signifier of *antiwar*. The poster then not only claims an opposition to war, but defines what is being opposed and what that opposition means, to the effect that the war is about big business. This idea is reaffirmed in the posters that use the logos of Shell, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, the Gap, Wal-Mart, Mobil and Nike, to name a few. The signifier *antiwar* is being rearticulated in the establishment of what the war is about. Opposition to war may then be read as opposition to economic globalization. Another example is the slogan "No blood for oil." This slogan is so popular that it may seem to be plainly and explicitly in opposition to war. However, by providing an argument why the war is wrong it makes a claim as to

what the war is about, namely oil profits at the expense of human life. This too can redefine what opposition to war means. Thirdly, those posters that demonize George Bush may be anti-George Bush, but when read through the empty signifier of antiwar, where the war is something undertaken by George Bush, they rearticulate what opposition to the war means. These posters are again constitutively split: they speak to something particular to themselves but are antiwar in general.

The poster by Lokman remains somewhat problematic. It fulfils the form of antiwar posters, sharing the proportions and mode of presentation of many of them. By inclusion in the gallery, via association, we can read it as antiwar. However, is it in opposition to anything? Many observers may very well reject this poster as antiwar. However, that is not a problem solely of Lokman's poster, even though this poster brings the problem to light. Any poster is of course subject to people's readings of it as oppositional or not. We cannot look to this poster to find the radical exclusion within it; that would return us to a problematic essentialism. Rather, the radical exclusion sets up a boundary within which posters may be accepted via the empty signifier's articulation. This unification is open to contestation so not all posters that attempt to be linked via the empty signifier will be.

## 3.5 Returning to the WSF

Each movement in the WSF is also an element in a differential system. All the movements are allied in their opposition, and this positioning sets up those causes in a relationship of equivalence with each other. This chain of equivalence is condensed in

the signifier of opposition to the powerful. The profusion of agendas was articulated in

the empty signifier of collective opposition to a dominant order in itself. Perhaps then

this is why Randeep Ramesh can say:

> Everybody is sure of what they are against - capitalism, imperialism and
> George Bush. Posters proclaim that "Asia Pacific women say no to war",
> and there are talks on "US hegemony and the Arab street". Yet nobody
> can say what precisely they are all for. (2004b, ¶ 2)

The relationship of all the struggles can't be described with more exacting

precision. Nobody can say what they are for because there is no essence to all these

movements independent of their very alliance. Any attempt to provide details on the

common foundation of the struggles will do so not by accurately describing that common

foundation but by glossing over differences of a fundamentally heterogenous group.

Thus, it is possible to conceive of someone who studied a global democratic movement

in the attempt to find a unity of all struggles, but insofar as those struggles are different

from each other, one cannot look deeper to find their common cause. A concerted

examination would reveal the multiplicity of movements that were present, not a unified

core.

This is demonstrated by an alternate conference held at the same time as the 2004

WSF. Mumbai Resistance 2004 was "organised by far-left groups who claim that the

social forum has been 'co-opted by capitalism'." Organizer G.N. Saibaba says "the WSF

are not serious about changing the world. They do not accept the need for armed struggle

and we do" (Ramesh 2004b, ¶ 10). However, in one of their press releases, Mumbai

Resistance says "MR-2004 is not an anti WSF programme, but one with the clear and

sharp focus that the WSF fails to provide and is committed to building a strong and

genuine anti-imperialist movement" (2003). In the same press release, Mumbai Resistance prides itself on unifying over 50 organizations and over 100 people "from different walks of life" who will form part of the reception committee. It appears that Mumbai Resistance, just like the WSF, allies diverse claims and movements.

In fact, the WSF and Mumbai Resistance share a radical exclusion which is sufficient to render, from one perspective, their differential status equivalent: in the face of capitalism and globalization they are the same. When the WSF and Mumbai Resistance are in the same position in relation to power, they can be set up in a chain of equivalence. They are, perhaps unwittingly, unified in their opposition to the system. Although speaking about a climate of repression in general, Laclau's claims resonate with this imbrication of the WSF and Mumbai Resistance:

> All of [the struggles] are seen as related to each other, not because their concrete objectives are intrinsically related but because they are all seen as equivalent in confrontation with the repressive regime. It is not, consequently, something positive that all of them share which establishes their unity, but something negative: their opposition to a common enemy. (1996b, p.40)

The radical exclusion of the WSF and Mumbai Resistance creates a chain of equivalence between them. However, the radical exclusion is not an essential feature of the chain's constitutive elements. It is not merely individual elements each opposing the same thing that, when in the aggregate, exist in a chain. It is in the very process of linking the elements in the chain that their identity as antiwar or antiglobalization is produced. Therefore, the elements certainly have a specifiable identity, however this identity is not determined by essential features but by processes of rendering differences equivalent and producing exclusions.

The question now remains of whether the different agendas of the WSF and Mumbai Resistance can be adequately pursued under the same rubrics. If they are represented and unified by their anti-globalization status, then can they act in the name of anything but a basic opposition to globalization? For supporters of globalization, all anti-globalization may be the same. This practice of rendering differences equivalent may explain why political issues are frequently presented as binary oppositions. In a triune structure, any two of the elements may be seen as in opposition to the third, and thus are rendered equivalent, not by conscious choice, but by virtue of their shared opposition. Hodge and Kress (1988, pp.151-161) provide an elaborated discussion of these processes but do so in the context of newspapers, where relations of equivalence and exclusion, among issues, political figures, and audiences, are established through the newspapers' modes of address.

Michael Hardt, in his essay 'Today's Bandung?' (2002), discusses the 2002 World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre. He distinguishes between two positions represented at the WSF. The first, dominant, perspective is what he calls "an anti-globalization position"; the second a position of "democratic globalization" (p.114). The former was not dominant in quantitative terms, of how many held that position for example, but in terms of who held it: the host, the official spokespeople, and those figures that were most prominent in press accounts. Hardt sees the anti-globalization position as the product of movements organized hierarchically, tied to the nation-state. In this sense, politics is found in a nation's internal binary oppositions, as is found between political parties for example, and in its external binary oppositions with other nations. The

democratic globalization position, on the other hand, is the result of networked movements, where any original binary opposition is further mediated by other elements in the network, thus moving beyond a static polemicist politics. Hardt champions this latter perspective, arguing that it is a much more accurate description of contemporary politics and political change. The democratic globalization perspective encourages the multiplication of divisions and alliances, producing new relationships and altering old ones.

For Laclau, this is politics in itself. The establishment of binary oppositions and fixed relations inhibit change. In that scenario, instead of multiplying the claims that can be made, all claims end up reduced to simple explanations and schema. It is a *mythologization* of equivalences and differences. Political change, on the other hand, as described by the democratic globalization perspective, requires that concepts and relations be malleable, not entrenched. The problem is that empty signifiers enable this entrenchment just as much as they allow differences to act in concert. Building on this idea, I will examine empty signifiers in light of *myth*, a concept developed by Roland Barthes in his essay 'Myth Today'.

## Chapter 4 Myth

### 4.1 Myth and empty signifiers

War and antiwar, and globalization and anti-globalization, can be understood as empty signifiers. They each articulate a number of movements and perspectives all unified in their opposition to what is outside their differences. The meaning of each differential struggle is derived from the radical exclusion, and the set of unified differences are condensed in the empty signifier.

As we saw in the case of the WSF and Mumbai Resistance, systemic elements may not be in control of their differential identity. When Mumbai Resistance and the WSF share an opposition it is difficult for them to be articulated as separate relative to that opposition. The members of the WSF and Mumbai Resistance can be labeled members of the same group whether they consider themselves such or not. They are equal relative to the radical exclusion. Similarly, it can be difficult for a poster to have a particular meaning when read through the empty signifier of antiwar. The particular content is eschewed in favour of the equivalential feature.

Empty signifiers, in speaking for a host of elements, attenuate their particular content and anchor differential relationships. However, when the empty signifier appears to have particular content, and this content is taken to be the essence of the system, then the chain of equivalence has turned into *myth*. Under conditions of myth, the chain of equivalence is constituted by identical elements. Under these conditions, all antiwar posters are the same; they are explicitly in opposition to war and exceptions are easily and unproblematically identified. This sort of generalization is demonstrated in the idea

of the Left, an idea found in the following exchange between Adam Shatz and Michael

Walzer. Writing in *The Nation*, Shatz (2002) says, referring to Walzer's recent *Dissent*

essay "Can There Be a Decent Left":

> Walzer…accused the antiwar left of expressing "barely concealed glee
> that the imperial state had finally gotten what it deserved." (When I asked
> him to say whom he had in mind, he said: "I'm not going to do that.
> Virtually everyone who read it knew exactly what I was talking about.")
> (p.27)

Although Walzer says almost everyone knows what he means, it is doubtful that

is true. In a similar vein, Andrew Potter, in the *National Post*, writes "the anti-

globalisation left wears its economic illiteracy like a badge of honour. As far as most of

them are concerned, economics is just right-wing ideology" (2004). Globalization is such

an ambiguous term (Appadurai 1996; Beck 1997/2000) that Potter's statement is difficult,

if not impossible, to evaluate. Who is this Left? Given that there is an anti-globalization

left, is there then a pro-globalization left or an anti-globalization right? In any case, can

we assume a true Left whose essence can be determined and relative to which we can

judge the truth of statements about the Left? To do so would be to accept its

mythologization. A dismissal of Walzer's and Potter's comments as groundless

accusation or mischaracterization commits the very same error. In both criticism and

defence, the Left is presented as something unto itself, reaffirming the technique by

which Potter's and Walzer's comments gain their force. The question is no longer

whether there is a Left or not, their comments appear as fact or opinion about something

that already exists. What constitutes the Left is in part produced here by Walzer and

Potter, not because they know what the Left is but because they can use the signifier of

the Left to suggest that they are talking about something that exists independent of their comments. As a signifier 'the Left' can be appropriated by these writers and others and taken into unforeseen or unwanted directions.

Myth is important to our discussion because it helps articulate this dislocation of control over signifiers. To return to the antiwar posters, once they fall under the rubric of *antiwar* that signifier is not under the control of any one poster or person. *Antiwar* can be used to articulate numerous claims, as an empty signifier, or it can take on, through mythologization, a life of its own.

## 4.2 What is myth?

Some theorists distinguish between three levels of meaning, where the first order is that of denotation, the second order that of connotation and the third that of myth. Barthes himself did not make such a distinction in his essay "Myth Today", restricting himself to two levels of meaning, though he recognized myth as a particular form of connotation. In Chandler's (2002) words, "*Denotation* is routinely treated as the definitional, 'literal', 'obvious' or 'commonsense' meaning of a sign, but semioticians tend to treat it as a signified about which there is a relatively broad *consensus*" (p.227). Connotation is the use of a sign as a signifier, producing a higher-order sign, and in practice is the associations suggested by a sign. When we see an image of the American flag, it denotes the flag in itself, whereas it connotes 'the United States of America', 'freedom' or otherwise. Barthes himself would later problematize the idea that signs denote, that they have a natural, common-sense reading (1964/1977). For example, to

know that a photograph denotes a particular scene, that is to say to know that a two-dimensional image refers 'naturally' to a three-dimensional physical object is possible only by learning the codes by which the image should be read, and thus is not denotation in the sense of a natural, given reading.

I will, like Barthes, distinguish between two levels of meaning: the lower-order meaning where the sign appears to stand unto itself, even though this is only an appearance, and the higher-order meaning where a sign employs a previous sign as its signifier. This higher order meaning is at the level of myth. In Barthes' own words, myth "*is a second-order semiological system.* That which is a sign…in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (1957/1982 p.99). Barthes' oft-quoted example from his essay 'Myth Today' must yet again be employed; it illuminates the distinction between these levels of signification particularly well. He describes the cover of an issue of the magazine *Paris-Match* where we are told that "*a black soldier is giving the French salute.*" However, that is not all that the image signifies. To Barthes it also says:

> That France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour
> discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better
> answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by
> this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (1957/1982 pp.101-102)

For conceptual clarity Barthes uses the terms *form*, *concept*, and *signification* to talk about signs at the level of myth. The form is the first-order sign as signifier, the saluting soldier in the example above. The concept is the second-order signified, the impression Barthes derives from the form. The sign that is thus established from this form and concept is the signification. Although the meanings Barthes receives from the magazine may seem obvious or logical, the sign is insufficient to explain the

signification. The image on its own is not sufficient to derive all that Barthes reads in it. The mechanism by which the peculiar relationship between the form and concept is produced must be examined. It is neither contingent nor necessary.

## 4.3 The myth of these posters

Myth, as it is not confined to *Paris-Match*, is also found in these posters. The individuality of each poster, the claims each makes, are subordinated to the myth. The distinction between the sign and the signification corresponds to the dual status of these posters in their relations of equivalence and difference. The poster as sign is a differential element. Each poster is its own sign, established in its difference from other posters. In a chain of equivalence the poster's signification is antiwar. To demonstrate: at the first-order level, a picture of George Bush is the sign, the image is the signifier, and the signified is the concept of the person. At the higher level of myth, the form is this sign *in toto*. The signification is George Bush as embodiment of the United States, whether as the aggressor, or world superpower, or otherwise. A poster that says "Stop Bush" then not only means what "Stop Bush" means, that is to say prohibit the actions of a particular person, rather the poster also points to itself as element of the antiwar genre, to its position in a movement, to itself as a poster and not, for example, an advertisement.

Myth, if it is anything more than signification, is the recruitment of the sign to justify or legitimise the signification. In Judith Williamson's (1978) discussions of advertisements she invokes the idea of the *objective correlative*, taken from T.S. Eliot's examination of Hamlet. An objective correlative is where a signifier is seen as objectively

related to one specific signifier. Myth is the empty signifier rendered as an objective correlative. Whereas the empty signifier treats differences as equivalent only relative to a radical exclusion, myth posits an essential content that determines identity. This is concomitant with the essentialist notion of genre. The chain of equivalence becomes a chain of identity. Since the original trace of the empty signifier remains, the signified, namely 'opposition', is expressed by all of these movements. Under conditions of myth, the point of the differential elements, of the signs, is only to justify the myth itself. The antiwar genre is taken as a naturally occurring category for which these posters are only so many functionally identical instantiations.

Thus, even though the signifier has been 'emptied', its differential content can always be returned to. The sign's ambiguity is a storehouse of justifications for the myth. The deferred or shelved first-order meaning is always resorted to as a well from which content can be drawn, used to explain the myth when necessary. Images of flags, bombs, or stop signs, or use of the word *No* can be used to argue that these posters are truly and unequivocally antiwar. However, those images that do not fulfil the mythical idea of antiwar are then discounted as irrelevant or unimportant. The second-order reading then appears natural and a logical conclusion from the constituent parts. The myth seeks out exemplary posters, prototypical posters, and uses them to confirm that there is an antiwar genre, using the sign for legitimation when necessary and passing over it when unnecessary or inconvenient. The first-order meaning is held at arms length, recruited when necessary to justify the myth and ignored when it interferes. Thus myth results from the empty signifier taken to its logical conclusion. How so? If each particular

element is articulated by an empty signifier, each suffers the danger of being taken as identical with the particular content of the empty signifier, the trace of the immanent element that can always return. As Barthes tells us:

> The signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness. This alternation is, so to speak, gathered up in the concept, which uses it like an ambiguous signifier, at once intellective and imaginary, arbitrary and natural. (1957/1982, p.109)

This is also the sort of totalising explanation that is found in stereotype and prejudice: 'all X are alike'. Differences found in individual elements are discounted; elements that fulfil the stereotype are employed to justify it. The myth of *Paris-Match* works by positing the signification first and then finding its instantiation in the sign. In a sense, myth is neither a falsehood independent of its content, nor is it the logical conclusion drawn from its content. For example, each of these posters is antiwar, since they are read as such and signify opposition to war to many people. To this extent the myth is accurate. However, the myth is misleading when it suggests that these posters are unequivocally and solely antiwar, and that their opposition to war is immutable and objectively determinable from the content of these posters alone. To contrast the two: empty signifiers fix the limits of the system so that identities and differences can be constituted and expressed; myth fixes the system itself so that identities and differences are unchanging. To believe in the myth is paradoxically to believe that there is no myth: It can be argued that all objects subsumed under the generalization are fundamentally the same, sharing some essential, internal feature. This understanding is, as we have seen, false.

Of course, the absence of an essence does not prohibit people from acting as though there were one. For example, we need only return to the statements by Walzer and Potter. Note the use by Walzer, of '*the* antiwar left', instead of '*an* antiwar left'. This innocuous *the* implies something real and specific. Under the guise of describing the Left Potter and Walzer in fact establish its characteristics, and by extension attribute those characteristics to the multiple oppositions allied, intentionally or not, in the name of the Left. Walzer himself is explicit about this process. He identifies one ideological failing of the Left as the belief that "Any group that attacks the imperial power must be a representative of the oppressed, and its agenda must be the agenda of the left. It isn't necessary to listen to its spokesmen" (2002, ¶ 12), seemingly unaware that he is committing that very same error. Walzer's definition of the Left is actually an attempt to impute essential characteristics to a whole range of different elements, all unified by the radical exclusion of the ambiguous "imperial power".

By making claims about the Left, Walzer, Potter, and numerous others suggest that there is such a thing, which they may then criticize, with significant consequences. Those who can be identified as the antiwar Left do not have total control over how the term is used. This problem is not limited to antiwar posters or activists, nor is it limited to the Left. All representations, insofar as they are collectively shared, do not remain under the control of their ostensible referents. Others can take up the signifiers of our identities and move them in unforeseen directions. This problem of political agency is addressed by Laclau via the concepts of *sedimentation* and *reactivation*, describing the naturalizing function of myth and the political function of empty signifiers, respectively.

## Chapter 5 The politics of sedimentation and reactivation

### 5.1 Problems of representation

The problems of representation are not only issues for the genre of antiwar posters, but also for social movements themselves, as we saw in the case of the WSF and Mumbai Resistance. It is not clear how collectivity can be expressed without eliding the important differences of a collective's constituent parts. Empty signifiers are an attempt to resolve this problem but open the path to mythologization. This is shown clearly in the following discussion by Michael Parenti (1993) and his political economy analysis of news media. Parenti provides an in-depth account of how protest is represented by the press. Two sections from Parenti's text are worth quoting at length as they show the tension between the universal and particular with which Laclau is concerned. In his account of *The Washington Post*'s report of a 1981 march held under the auspices of protesting the U.S. aid provided to El Salvador, Parenti says:

> We read that the demonstrators varied "from long-haired hippie hold-outs with painted faces to L.L. Bean-clad outdoorsmen to health-conscious joggers who had stopped by to witness the spectacle….The demonstration took on a flea market atmosphere – something for everyone." It was a "hodge-podge collection." Even the headline proclaimed: "25,000 PROTESTORS MARCH FOR MIXED CAUSES." The *Post* story assumed there was an incongruous mix of issues, when in fact the demonstration sought to link a range of domestic and foreign policies and make common cause against the government. Such linkage is easily misunderstood by a press that treats issues as isolated, unrelated events. (p.106)

Parenti is critical of *The Washington Post*, and the press in general, for omitting the signifier, the U.S. relationship to El Salvador, that ties all the groups together and would make the demonstration a meaningful whole. The article implausibly suggests that

the swarm of protestors had no link between them. In doing so any particular significance to the march is dissolved. The relationship between the United States and El Salvador could have been the empty signifier that allowed the articulation of such different groups and particular causes. However, the only chain of equivalence provided by the story is perhaps the idea of "demonstrator" or "protestor", both of which are ultimately meaningless, insofar as they do not point to any radical exclusion, to anything that is protested or opposed. The elements are not unified in any meaningful way.

In a second excerpt, Parenti discusses an issue that seems to contradict the above problem. In a discussion of the ways that the press in the United States discredits protest, Parenti says:

> Content is also scanted through single-issue reductionism. The indictments
> made against the policies that help foster poverty, racism, sexism,
> economic exploitation, environmental devastation, capitalism, and
> imperialism are reduced to just one or two specific complaints by the press
> – for example, "end the war." While the demonstrators are branded as
> extremists intent upon disrupting orderly society, the press reduces the
> truly radical content of their message to a minimal reformist demand.
> (p.110)

Thus, in Parenti's first example, *The Washington Post* is wrong for not describing the demonstration as unified. However, in the second example, Parenti is critical of the press for articulating a focussed demand, such as "end the war". In the former case the struggles are described as disparate, in the latter they are taken to be homogenous, neither of which satisfies Parenti. Is he in fact contradicting himself?

I argue no. It seems, quite simply, that the truth of these movements is that there are a number of interested parties each acting in the name of one particular issue. By eliding the particular issue, the movements' force is discredited, and by reducing the

multiple movements to a single issue, the issue is not seen as the result of social forces.

For example, in the former case there is a demonstration but it is not really for anything.

In the latter, the relationships of war to poverty, ecological responsibility, and class division are omitted and the war is a discrete, particular issue that is opposed for its own sake. Thus it is not the case that Parenti is presenting two incompatible complaints. The problem is that representations themselves allow these reductions to occur. It takes effort to recognize the links between multiple causes and to express solidarity across difference, even with the aid of a focusing point such as an empty signifier. This effort, or lack thereof, is found in processes of what Laclau calls *sedimentation* and *reactivation*.

## 5.2 Sedimentation and reactivation

Laclau draws an important distinction between the social and the political. Borrowing the terms *reactivation* and *sedimentation* from Husserl, the social is constituted by "the sedimented forms of 'objectivity'" (1990, p.35). For Laclau, history is the result of decisions produced under conditions of power. Any social phenomenon is the result of competing interests. Sedimented phenomena, however do not account for the constitutive choice or conflict that produced them. Every 'fact' of history hides, and thus carries the trace of, what could have been otherwise. There are two consequences for history. The first is that sedimentation is a dehistoricization, where things are what they are simply because that is their nature, and thus the conditions of their existence are elided. For those instances where history is discussed, it is the unfolding of the necessary, as in Hegel or Marx for example, as a logical movement of its internal characteristics.

Sedimentation hides the constitution of history as possibilities realized at the expense of alternatives. The contingent grounds of our lives are hidden, suggesting that the conditions of our lives are themselves ahistorical and essential.

> Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a 'forgetting of the origins' tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of a mere objective presence. This is the moment of sedimentation. (Laclau 1990, p.34)

The similarity of sedimentation and myth should not be overlooked; I argue here that they are coextensive. Fiske succinctly states a link between myth and sedimentation: "Myths work to naturalize history. History is the accumulated social experience that has produced the divisions and differential power relations in our society" (1987, p.134). He provides an example of the vilification of Hispanics in America, where the history of oppression and racial exploitation that produced the current context of white and Hispanic America is suppressed. Statistical correlations of race and crime are explained not through this history but by reference to a supposed racial Hispanic essence. "The only views that need no explanation or defense are those that have been naturalized or exnominated into common sense by the operation of myth". In this way, the myth of Hispanic essence and crime is taken as common-sense and in no need of justification. When everyone is in agreement over a term, such as 'justice', then it is sedimented and appears coterminous with its object. Seidman (1994) traces this practice of sedimentation through poststructuralist thought and its offshoots, describing Derrida's argument that:

> Whenever a linguistic and social order is said to be fixed or meanings are assumed to be unambiguous and stable, this should be understood less as a disclosure of truth than as an act of power, the capacity of a social group to impose its will on others by freezing linguistic and cultural meanings.

(p.202)

When particular features of the sedimented ground are rendered ambiguous, they are *reactivated*. It is a de-essentialization, where the presence of an alternative meaning reveals the contingency of the dominant reading. "Reactivation does not…consist of returning to the original situation, but merely of rediscovering, through the emergence of new antagonisms, the contingent nature of so-called 'objectivity'" (Laclau 1990, pp.34-35). Because of this givenness it can be very difficult to reactivate sedimented practices. However, difficulty does not mean that it is unnecessary. "One core task of opposition movements is to contest the prevailing definitions of things, the dominant frames. They must 'rectify names,' they must change the way people construe the world" (Gitlin 1980, p.283).

Having revealed the supposed objectivity of the myth as just that, mythical, the *political* is produced. Politics is the reactivation of sedimented signifiers and consequently the disruption of myth. Laclau and Chantal Mouffe develop this idea, arguing that political action must reactivate sedimented signifiers and align various movements in chains of equivalence and difference. The mythologized empty signifier has to be shown to have competing interpretations, which point not to a singular interpretation but to a chain of elements of disparate interpretations, the identity of which relies on a radical exclusion. In the example above, it may be necessary to show that Hispanics do not share an essence beyond their oppression by a dominant group, or conversely to emphasize that their very identity is the product of that oppression. In this manner, the nature of the empty signifier is demonstrated rather than sedimented. It is not

denied that Hispanic is not a meaningful term or that Hispanics have nothing in common, but that the concept is not essential. What is held in common is historically produced by an external force and is in that sense contingent. This analysis of structure attempts to navigate between pure universality and pure particularity. Laclau does not exhort a world of pure politics, where every meaning is reactivated, nor does he suggest that all relationships could be sedimented; he sees both as impossible situations. The former is lacking the field of the social as a necessary reference upon which politics occurs. The latter is a situation whereby all difference is eradicated, a structural impossibility.

## 5.3 Seymour Chwast

In 1967, prompted by the Viet Nam war, Seymour Chwast released the poster *End Bad Breath* (Plate 5.1). However, "Mr. Chwast regrets that his classic work is once again relevant to current world politics" (Another Poster for Peace, 2004). This poster is meaningful again in the context of the war in Iraq. It is placed into the antiwar genre, a system of signification, where it is in relations of equivalence and difference with other contemporary posters. It is meant as a statement on the Iraq war, and its reissue can be interpreted through the lens of sedimentation and reactivation.

Insofar as opposition to war in Iraq and the Viet Nam war are expressed via this shared signifier, there is the opportunity to conceptually link both movements. Because of the generality of the poster, events subsumed can be equated, so the war in Iraq is in some sense related to the war in Viet Nam, as are the correlated oppositions.

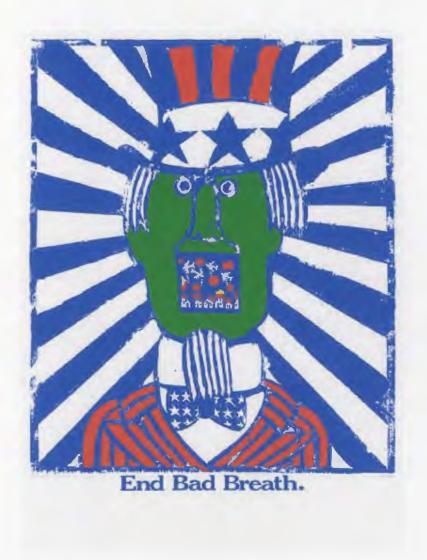Nevertheless, this poster does not oppose the Franco-Prussian war, for example,

**End Bad Breath.**

**Plate 5.1**
*End Bad Breath.* Seymour Chwast. (1967).
Retrieved April 7, 2004 from http://www.anotherposterforpeace.org/posters/Chwast.pdf

nor the American Civil war, so it is to some extent temporal and related to the U.S. How is this the case? The reference to James Montgomery's use of Uncle Sam (a character first introduced by Thomas Nast as a symbol of the United States) is pertinent. The poster suggests that, at the very least, it is the American role in the war that is opposed and that should be opposed by the audience: the poster exhorts us to 'End Bad Breath'. The American role is central or active, rather than passive. It is Uncle Sam's breath that stinks, not someone else's. His green face also makes commentary on the morbidity of the war, so that America itself is not just wreaking ill on others, but is itself sick.

In its sedimented form this poster is articulated with reference to the Viet Nam war and related opposition. It thus appears as a document of an objective, fixed history. When viewed as a response to a particular event, it cannot be re-integrated into contemporary contexts. However, this is not a feature inherent to the poster, but only a manner in which it is read. That reading also presumes that the Viet Nam war is not an object of debate among Americans. Rather, the Viet Nam war is a sedimented event, is objectively understood in its entirety.

Nevertheless, Chwast's poster is indeed relevant with respect to the current war, and its reissue is what sparks its reactivation. This reactivation is a process of questioning the sedimented meaning of the poster, of whether it is wholly and solely in opposition to the Viet Nam war. The poster no longer fits into an objective, total history. It disrupts that dominant reading and signifies something new. No longer is the Chwast poster an anchor for '60s protest, it is now a complicated claim of opposition to the war in Iraq. What about the criticism that the poster was never against a specific war but against war in

general? This is incorrect as well. The claim that this is, or was, an anti-Viet Nam war poster is accurate. It signifies opposition to the Viet Nam war to many people and in many contexts. However, it is not solely that. The meaning of the poster is not inherent to it but is found in the relations of equivalence and difference within which it is articulated. By moving between the poster as sedimented Viet Nam relic and contemporary commentary, we can see how posters are antiwar yet not merely antiwar, just as Barthes can claim that "wine is objectively good, and *at the same time*, the goodness of wine is a myth: here is the aporia" (1957/1982, p.148). This aporia is resolved through the fluctuation between sedimentation and reactivation, between the conception of signs as objective correlatives of what they point to and as elements in contingent chains of equivalence. Thus, for Chwast's posters, relevance to Viet Nam is true, and at the same time is a myth, insofar as it is not in the essence of the poster but has been sedimented as such. When Chwast's poster can be lifted out of one context and dropped into another, we know that its meaning is subject to re-contextualization and is not merely a sign-post for one singular event.

Ultimately, the poster always seems to be about a particular conflict, whether the Viet Nam war or the War on Terror. It is never empty in the sense that it is waiting for a signified to come along. It would still be meaningful were there never a war in Iraq nor the intent to have one. However, once activated, its relevance to the Viet Nam war can be a mythical storehouse of meaning, offering allusions to the failure of America's military and the protest of the 1960s, to name only two possibilities.

**5.4 Activistism**

Critical of the current state of what they call the 'activist Left', namely the protest

groups who mobilize around issues of social justice, Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood,

and Christian Parenti (2004) develop the idea of *activistism*, which is a kind of activism

for its own sake. In other words, it is action without ends other than action itself. They

say "the antiwar 'movement' is perhaps the most egregious recent example of a

promising political phenomenon that was badly damaged by the anti-intellectual outlook

of activistism. While activists frequently comment on the success of the growing peace

movement" (namely quantitative success, in terms of turnout at rallies for example) "no

one seems to notice that it's no longer clear what we're protesting. Repression at home?

Future wars in Somalia or Iraq?" (p.311) As it stands, activistism is not a new

phenomenon:

> Indeed, the very concept of a *movement* has been certified; an *activist*, left
> or right, is now a stereotyped persona accorded a right to parade quickly
> through the pageant of the news….Many movements which can be
> presented as working for (or against) concrete assimilable reforms have
> become regular, recognizable, even stock characters in newspapers and
> news broadcasts." (Gitlin 1980, p.284)

In both cases, the pitfall of the empty signifier discussed in Chapter 3 has

occurred. The chain of equivalence, namely a number of different elements acting in the

name of something, is mythologized into a chain of identity. All activists, in this scenario,

identify with the empty signifier of activism itself. Since there is no positive identity to

that empty signifier beyond the trappings of protest, the chain of identity is ultimately

without meaningful political content. Activistism thus has an absence of meaning or

goals, precisely what Featherstone et al. identify. It is the fulfilment of a stereotype. In

reference to a 2001 protest against war in Afghanistan, the authors suggest "the moment called for doing something more than brandishing the exact same signs – 'Stop the Bombing' and 'No War for Oil' – that activists poked skywards during the Gulf War" (p.309). The empty signifier of antiwar protest has become sedimented. Old slogans are used not in the sort of reactivation that was found in Chwast's poster but merely for repetition. Activistism, in fulfilling the stereotype, entrenches the status quo by reaffirming the sedimented order. It relinquishes control over how signifiers are articulated and thus has reduced political influence. The idea of the activist is condensed in activistism and is free for others to manipulate, so we return to Walzer and Potter making claims as to what antiwar and the Left are in fact about. Activistism merely reaffirms ideas of binary oppositions, of the activist versus oppression in general, and we are left with the authors' despair: "'War is not the Answer' is little better than 'War is the Answer' – recently spotted on a Manhattan counterdemonstrator's placard" (p.314). What Laclau and Mouffe argue for is opposition to this regimentation itself.

### 5.5 Return to the problem

Antiwar posters have served as an opening into our central problem: that of the identity of an element vis-à-vis the system which it stands for. There are numerous examples, already cited, and there are many more. To take one that is thematically different from previous examples, we need only look at the 1960s grape boycott by the United Farm Workers of California. The grape boycott was the empty signifier, articulating the overdetermination of partial struggles to the point where it involved

> Not just the major trade unions, but church, civic, student, environmental, anti-war, and consumer groups....Civil rights and consumer groups endorsing the boycott included the Urban League, the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Mexican-American G.I. Forum, the Consumer Federation of America, and the National Consumers League. (Jasper 1997, p.260)

As a result, this condensation of movements ended up "pitting Richard Nixon and the military and corporate worlds against labor, the anti-war movement, liberals, and the Left" (p.260). We can see in this list of alliances a broadening network whose central opposition is articulated through a grape boycott, even when the boycott in itself is not the raison-d'être of the NAACP nor the Mexican-American G.I. Forum. Nevertheless, what is privileged is not the particular content of the grape boycott but the opposition to a radical exclusion that the grape boycott condenses.

More instances abound, as in Brett Stockdill's (2001) AIDS activism research, mentioned in Chapter 2. He discusses a Los Angeles candlelight vigil held in observation of the neglect of AIDS issues. Quoting Marco, a participant, on the candle as a symbol central to the event: "That candle meant a lot in terms of Mexico and Salvadorean people's peace protest. It started to take on different meanings, and people were joining those marches that just believed in justice and freedom" (p.228). This particular vigil was coordinated as part of the Day of the Dead, a holiday holding "special significance for Latinos/as". Again we see that AIDS is here not a concern independent of other phenomena. It lies at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, resistance, identity, and understandings thereof.

From Drucilla Cornell's discussion of the category *Latina*, produced through a

radical exclusion and "which encompasses everyone who is not Spanish who is from some country in South America, Puerto Rico, or Mexico" (Cheah and Grosz 1998, p.35) to Sharon Groch (2001) on the disability rights movements that draw on the signifiers, such as the slogans and images, of the civil rights movement, or Rick Fantasia and Eric L. Hirsch (1995) who identify the veil, worn by Islamic women in Algeria, as a dynamic condensing symbol of the forms of resistance that developed in response to French colonialism, we see empty signifiers and the alliance of differences. However, grapes and the grape boycott, candles, the veil: these have no essential qualities that strictly represent one thing only. They can be taken up in different ways and at different times. The multitude of movements that can be described via empty signifiers is not because empty signifiers are things in the world but because they are way of viewing the world. They are, like their obverse, myth, "a message…defined neither by its object nor by its material" (Barthes 1957/1982, p.94). This way of reading, inasmuch as it is concerned with the establishment and maintenance of power, is found in relationships of *hegemony* and *antagonism*.

## 5.6 Hegemony

Laclau considers hegemony his "central category of political analysis" (with Chantal Mouffe 1985/2001, *x*; see also Laclau 1996a). Hegemony, however, has a storied history and did not spring fully-formed from Laclau and his work with Chantal Mouffe. The definition of hegemony upon which they build comes from Antonio Gramsci, Italian writer and Marxist theorist, who was imprisoned in 1926 by the fascist government that

he opposed. During his eight years in prison, Gramsci produced what would be published posthumously as *The Prison Notebooks*, diverse essays of historical and political theory. Hegemony is one of the seminal ideas cultivated in these writings and his definition of it is worth quoting. For him, hegemony results when:

> previously germinated ideologies become 'party', come into confrontation and conflict, until one of them or at least a combination of them tends to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself throughout society – bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages, not on a corporate but on a 'universal' plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental group over a series of subordinate groups. (1971, pp.181-182)

Hegemony involves here the dominance of one group over another, not through force but by circumscribing the plane of debate, "posing all the questions around which the struggle rages". This is why, as mentioned earlier, it is difficult to reactivate sedimented practices. Sedimentation, as myth, takes on the air of common-sense and naturalness, and thus does not need justification, but becomes ensconced in the practices of social institutions. Stuart Hall, in his discussions and elaborations of Gramscian hegemony, reaffirms hegemony as an attempt to establish the rules over what can be said and how (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts 1976, p.39; Hall 1982). However, not only does hegemony circumscribe the terrain upon which struggle occurs, but also "it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', 'inevitable', 'taken for granted' about the social order" (Hall 1980, p.137) and is thus a mythical viewpoint.

How is hegemony taken up by Laclau? Given an understanding of social relations constituted by an endless play of difference, hegemony is the attempt to put a stop to this

proliferation, to fix limits and therefore sediment the particular relational order.

> To 'hegemonize' a content would therefore amount to *fixing* its meaning around a nodal point. The field of the social could thus be regarded as a trench war in which different political projects strive to articulate a greater number of social signifiers around themselves. (Laclau 1990, p.28)

Hegemony is produced from the sedimentation of new chains of equivalence and difference around an empty signifier. Herbert Marcuse (in Starr 2000) provides an example of this, where capitalism attempts to fix empty signifiers in a hegemonic move, framing "'freedom' as the freedom to consume, 'peace' as the repudiation of enmity" (p.4).

The hegemonic process is as follows: an empty signifier speaks for a number of differences that are allied in opposition to a radical exclusion. The empty signifier is thus a particular, immanent element taking on a universalizing or totalizing function. However, when the immanent element is taken as the essence of the chain of equivalence, the differential identities become fixed: they act in the name of the sedimented empty signifier. As I discussed in Chapter 3, this process is a mythologization. The empty signifier as an immanent element first speaks for a chain of equivalence. Its particular content is deferred. However, this deferral is never complete and the particular content returns, to be applied retroactively to the chain of equivalence. All the differential elements are then read as identical to the particular content of the empty signifier. When mythologized, the empty signifier ceases to be a particular element contingently representing a host of differential elements. Its particular content is taken as the essential feature of all the differential elements for which it speaks. By establishing a particular meaning for the empty signifier, the differential elements are arrayed in a particular

order, determined by the immanent content of the sedimented empty signifier. This move towards hegemony is, for Laclau, inevitable yet never fully reachable. Any social struggle is an attempt to hegemonize the content of an empty signifier, whether the struggle is figured to be progressive or oppressive.

These hegemonic claims are attempts to institute an order to society, by making it an intelligible, fixed structure where everything has its determinate place. By providing the empty signifier as a nodal point around which relations are structured, limits are established to differential relations. This is why Laclau can say that "society generates a whole vocabulary of empty signifiers whose signifieds are the result of a political competition" (Laclau 1996b, p.35). Success in that competition results in hegemony, for the empty signifier has its content restored, pinning down the chain of difference for which it speaks.

It is not the case that all popular movements are consciously pursuing the reactivation of sedimented practices. Both a neo-conservative camp and a socialist camp may attempt to sediment alternative chains of elements around the signifier of 'democracy' as the 'true' meaning of that empty signifier.

> 'The protesters don't understand the threat' of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, said Scott Johnson, 55, a Navy veteran from Minneapolis. 'It's a war of liberation for people.' Elsewhere, protesters denounced Bush's Iraqi policy in a major rally in San Francisco, where protesters came by the thousands. 'I'm hoping that the bus loads of people coming as far away as Oregon and Nevada give an indication that this isn't just the crazy loons in San Francisco – but we reflect the opinions of the entire United States,' said Tim Kingston of the anti-war group Global Exchange. (Fox News, 2003)

We can see here attempts to fix a chain of equivalences around the empty

signifiers of war and its opposition. For Scott Johnson, the protestors all share an essential misunderstanding of a threat. For Tim Kingston, all San Francisco protesters are identical, and they represent everyone in the United States. Both speakers are attempting to establish their particular chain of equivalence as universally true, both are hegemonic claims. It is a move from the particularity of the empty signifier to its role as a universalizing principle. Those empty signifiers that are sedimented take the place of the universal principle by which society unfolds. In the words of Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1976), "the dominant culture represents itself as *the* culture. It tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range" (p.12). However, because empty signifiers stemmed from particular elements, they serve particular interests.

> The social is not only the infinite play of differences. It is also the attempt to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order. But this order – or structure – no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt – by definition unstable and precarious – to act over that 'social', to *hegemonize* it. (Laclau 1990, p.91)

So why is hegemonic success never complete, why is it "by definition unstable and precarious"? Hegemony requires, firstly, effort on the part of dominant institutions. The term *sedimentation* may suggest that hegemony is passive, but this is not the case. Hegemony "is not universal and 'given' to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to be *won*, worked for, reproduced, sustained." (Clarke et al. 1976, p.40). However, in addition to this, Laclau explains that it is in the structure of signification itself that hegemony will never be a finished project. It is for him logically impossible. This will be examined in Chapter 5, and it is a consequence of overdetermination.

Even though it is not a finished project, hegemony still occurs. Various empty

signifiers do become sedimented with a particular meaning. However, there is no immediate reason why one is picked over another. Can we account for why one signifier in the equivalential chain will become the empty signifier and not another? There is no way to calculate which one will do so. In the case of the posters, discussed above, why war rather than another movement? Isn't the definition of the war the result of hegemony? Again, the war is inextricable from other concerns, so its employment as the empty signifier for diverse issues is no surprise given its current role on the world stage. However, it is not possible to derive the reasons why one element becomes an empty signifier rather than another. If it could be logically determined then there is in a sense an inevitability to it, which is precisely what the empty signifier denies. There is no transcendent unifying principle for social cohesion. Any element may, at various times, come to take on that role. It is not the product of a logical operation but the result of *antagonistic* relations.

## 5.7 Antagonism

The pairs 'sedimentation/reactivation', 'social/political', and 'myth/empty signifier' are structurally similar to one another. The first term in each pair attempts to fix the relationship between a system and its elements, making it simple, whereas the latter term disrupts that relationship, revealing it to be complex.

This cycle from a hegemonic order through reactivation back to sedimentation is possible only through relationships of *antagonism*. Antagonistic relations are not merely oppositional relations. An opposition does not impinge on the identities of the opposed

elements. Laclau (1990) explains antagonism in a critique of Marxism, arguing that the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are in opposition insofar as the two groups are defined negatively by each other, but there is nothing in the logic of opposition that results in the transformation of one group or the other. The opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, in this sense, is merely the differential relationship between two fully-constituted identities. The opposition of the relations of production cannot generate the rupture that will produce a revolutionary class. The capitalist system, even from this Marxist viewpoint, can operate efficiently with oppositional relationships, without resulting in contradiction or collapse. It is only when the proletariat refuses its identification as a purely economic category, when its members reject their imputed identity of wage-labourers, that an antagonistic relationship develops. The proletariat must feel its identity to be inhibited by the relationship of opposition, that there is something external to it that is not fulfilled by the economic function, for the relationship to move from opposition to antagonism. For example, the members of the proletariat must feel that their identities as free agents, as family members, gendered subjects, or otherwise are stopped from being fully-formed. Laclau develops this argument to explain why Marxism as a closed system cannot account for a revolutionary situation. There must be something outside the relationships that subverts them, that can not be addressed in terms of the elements themselves, insofar as Marxism defines them.

A similar case more closely allied to antiwar posters and war in Iraq is found in the premise 'either you are with the U.S. or you are against them'. There is nothing in this claim that produces antagonism; in fact the two positions are quite compatible.

Antagonism will only occur when people who occupy the position of support for or against the U.S. feel that the opposition inhibits the full realization of their identity. That 'something else' to their identity, that which cannot be realized, is external to the oppositional differential relationship and cannot be derived from the terms of the latter. This is precisely how Laclau (1990) describes antagonism: there is "no shared system of rules" between antagonistic forces. "Rules and identities are *violated*: the antagonist is not a player, but a cheat" (p.11). Thus, the identity of the person who is considered 'against the U.S.' can only change the situation by maintaining that his or her identity is not fully accounted for by this relationship and conceptually stepping outside of the system of rules or hegemonic order within which this relationship occurs. In doing so, the relationship can no longer be defined as one that is explained in the phrase 'with us or against us'. Without changing the rules of engagement, we remain in the problem of activistism: the activist who fulfils the stereotype of the Left-Right divide, who is acting without changing these oppositional relationships, maintains them through his or her sedimented signs of opposition.

Negative examples of antagonism abound. One is the Time-Warner television program *Crossfire* which is hardly unique but condenses the point made here. This show, despite claims to being political, is precisely the opposite, for it depends wholeheartedly on sedimentation. Considered a show of political debate, it features hosts representing the Left and the Right. The hosts' job, in filling these positions, is to embody a supposedly transcendent political ideology which they in fact immanently constitute. Under a Republican administration, the representatives of the Right support the administration

whereas the Left commentators attack the administration and its policies, and vice-versa. It supposes that there is an essential, or even contingent yet independently real, political institution that needed representation. I have already discussed that the Left and Right are only placeholders for the concerted expression of various claims. Without those specific claims, there is nothing to Crossfire's perpetual opposition besides its maintenance. Even when a particular issue is discussed, the direction the conversation will take is quite predictable. Although the show purportedly "examines the political and social issues impacting the United States" (CNN – Crossfire, n.d.), it does not constitute political debate inasmuch as it does not reactivate ideas or relationships. Instead it sediments preconceptions about partisan politics. It also sediments the idea that politics is ideological pugilism and is solely about affirming what team one is on. As we have seen, the Left and Right have no content of their own but stand for the equivocation of different demands; at least until mythologized through oppositional structure. There is no antagonism on *Crossfire*.

## 5.8 Antagonism and posters

Although I am making my argument with increasing reference to social and political action, it still applies fully to the issues of representation in antiwar posters. Again, this is because they are structurally similar. Antagonism has hereto been discussed with respect to individual identity. However, antagonism results as a feature of the incompleteness of any signifying system, an incompleteness which the empty signifier attempts to suture. Insofar as the genre of antiwar posters is not a closed system, it too

exhibits antagonism. On Internet site Whitehouse.org, (Patriotic Posters –

Whitehouse.org) there are posters critical of the U.S. administration and the war in Iraq.

Like Wright's remix project, many are produced from propaganda posters. One of them

(Plate 5.2) has the image of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's head

superimposed on the body of a soldier. The text reads "Sgt. Rummy sez…Hope Allah's

Wearing Kevlar!" The very same poster is also present at a number of Republican

websites, (GOPFun.com; Fortliberty.org) albeit intermittently. Those sites are pro-

Republican, and condone Sec. Rumsfeld. This is problematic because the very same

poster is used to express two opposing views. Unlike the posters employed by Wright and

ProtestWarrior, this poster is the very same. For Whitehouse.org it is a criticism and for

Republican websites it is an endorsement. If opposing viewpoints used different posters,

then we would have a relationship of opposition. We could also correlate, correctly or

incorrectly, the identity of each group to what we read in the poster. However, we cannot

do that here. Laclau, in an interview with Ian Angus (1998), provides an appropriate

analysis:

> There is an antagonism between two social forces, we can find that these
> none of these [*sic*] two forces have a discourse which is commensurable
> with the other. Now, there are two ways of reacting, visavis, this
> antagonism. Either to say, well, the antagonism is a mere appearance of
> some kind of objective underlying process which can be explained in its
> own terms. Or, we can say antagonism goes down to the bottom: any kind
> of social objectivity is reached simply by limiting antagonism.

It is quite clear that the two posters are not commensurable with each other. The

opposing views cannot be reconciled through a stable opposition, as is the case with the

Micah Ian Wright and ProtestWarrior posters. Neither can the poster become an empty

signifier unifying the two posters through a radical exclusion, because the particular



**Plate 5.2**
Untitled. (n.d.)
Retrieved September 2, 2004 from
http://www.whitehouse.org/initiatives/posters/rummy.asp

content of the poster is antagonistic in itself. It can only be resolved through the sedimentation of one meaning at the expense of the other, and we have, in Laclau's words, simply gone down to the bottom. Stuart Hall (1982) provides another example of this, talking about racial struggle:

> Sometimes, the class struggle in language occurred between two different terms: the struggle, for example, to replace the term 'immigrant' with the term 'black'. But often, the struggle took the form of a different accenting of the *same* term: e.g. the process by means of which the derogatory colour 'black' became the enhanced value 'Black' (as in 'Black is beautiful'). (p.78)

In the former example, although Hall describes the struggle as one of replacement, it is conceivable that *immigrant* and *black* could coexist, and the relations between the two words and their referents could be established. However, when the term *black* is itself contested, then antagonism is inevitable, since the derogatory term and the enhanced term are incompatible. There will be attempts to hegemonize one meaning at the expense of another. The alternative is that different contexts will use different connotations of the word, but this is no better, for it is a move from antagonism to the separation of people, which is a dissolution of the social.

## Chapter 6 Overdetermination and the political subject

### 6.1 The political subject

Given the empirical context of proliferating social movements and the concurrent globalization and fragmentation of social experience, as well as the epistemological problems occurring in Marxist, structuralist, and psychoanalytic traditions, how can social organization occur and be theorized? Laclau's discussion of empty signifiers and hegemony is a postmodern analysis insofar as it is a response to these conceptual complications (Critchley and Marchart 2004; Townshend 2004). However, rather than championing this fragmentation or lamenting its inevitability, Laclau sees in it the grounds for a progressive politics. Thus, although his position falls within a postmodern sensibility by eschewing metanarratives, as Lyotard (1979/1984) described, or by dismantling previously-essentialized concepts such as class, he does so by finding in those practices some freedom for practical political action.

Drawing on a number of theoretical traditions, as we have seen, he is attempting to describe the relationship between an individual element and a system, or between a particular element and the universal idea or principle that it incarnates. That logic has been described through the example of the antiwar poster genre, for those posters exhibit the irreducibility of a system to the aggregate of its elements and the irreducibility of elements to instantiations of a systemic essence. Nevertheless, Laclau's concern goes beyond signifying systems in a restricted sense. It applies to people too. This constitutes a critical response to the classical idea of the subject who generates identity independently of social forces, but also to the extreme sociological idea of the subject as the mere

intersection of interpersonal social effects. I will emphasize first what he does not argue: that sometimes the subject is self-willed and self-produced, and other times is affected by external conditions. Nor does he argue simply that the subject is found in between these two positions. Instead, he provides a rigorous schema that addresses the problem directly. Laclau is not working out the abstract logic of empty signifiers for its own sake; he provides a means for the conceptualization and analysis of the constitution of social subjects. I have already touched upon much of this schema. In this final chapter, I will focus on the specific role played by overdetermination vis-à-vis social subjects.

Etymologically speaking, politics is about the organization of the *polis*, of multiple subjects, in which sense those signs that constitute and organize people are political. Politics is concerned with the way empty signifiers articulate our differences and equivalences. As with antiwar posters, so too are people wound up in articulation, sedimentation, and reactivation. This is obvious in light of socialization, which I described in the introduction as a process whereby we are taught shared meanings for signs: children must acquiesce to some sedimented structure if they are to engage the world at all:

> A social individual, born into a particular set of institutions and relations, is at the same moment born into a particular configuration of meanings, which give her access to and locate her within 'a culture'. The 'law of society' and the 'law of culture' (the symbolic ordering of social life) are one and the same. These structures – of social relationship and meaning – shape the on-going collective existence of groups. But they also limit, modify and *constrain* how groups live and reproduce their social existence. (Clarke et al. 1976, p. 11)

This alludes to Althusser's contention that ideology is itself a material force, in the sense that the social reproduction of existence directly involves symbolic practices.

People often wish to change the world that they are born into, and this is done by reactivating signifiers that structure that world. It is not enough to say that signs play a role in organizing experience so I am devoting this chapter to the logic of how and why the reactivation of signifiers is possible. Throughout this chapter, the foremost principle that I will rely on is overdetermination, a principle that the argument in the preceding chapters was implicitly based on.

## 6.2 Overdetermination

Overdetermination has been used in a number of theoretical streams. None have employed it in exactly the same meaning but neither is it a free-floating signifier. It is, at least in its use by Laclau, inflected by its previous psychoanalytic and Marxist incarnations. Sigmund Freud, the 'father of psychoanalysis', described overdetermination (1900/1988) as the process by which dreams are produced. During sleep, the unconscious mind produces intense and often culturally or cognitively forbidden desires, thoughts, and emotions that can only be reconciled by translation into representations that are acceptable to the conscious mind. These latter representations are what are remembered by the dreamer upon awakening and are the *manifest content* of the dream. This manifest content is a shield against the repressed *latent content*, the truth of the dream. However, the manifest content was not simply analogous to the latent dream-content. It was overdetermined by it. The latent content was realized in the manifest content through various processes that kept what was latent hidden to the dreamer, whether through such operations as condensation of meaning, a displacement of meaning, or symbolization,

enabling the mind to process the latent content without being confronted by the overwhelming truth of the psyche. These psychic processes meant that the manifest dream-content was not reducible to any specific psychological feature in the individual's life, nor could all the features that overdetermine the dream-content be added together to produce the dream. The dream could not be accounted for in a simple causal sequence from latent content to manifest content, nor were they in a simple homology. The multiple intersecting relationships had to be worked out by the analyst and analysand. The manifest/latent relationship, insofar as overdetermination is concerned, is like the problem addressed between the antiwar poster and the genre, namely the relationship of particular elements to their collective representation. However, the concept of overdetermination as employed by Laclau is not explicitly Freudian, despite Laclau's later partiality to psychoanalytic theory. The concept of overdetermination was first revised by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser.

In his essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', Althusser (1969) argues against the parsimony of a Marxist economic reductionism. Althusser follows Engels' and Marx's position that the object of study is not the logic of the economy in itself but the 'production and reproduction of real life' from which economic concerns are inextricable. These reproductive practices, which Althusser divides into economic, political, and ideological practices (Coward and Ellis 1977), overdetermine each other, so that any social arrangement is not reducible to a one-way algorithm of the economy producing the superstructure. The superstructure is no mere epiphenomenon of an economic foundation but is in fact a necessary aid to the maintenance of the relations of

production. In this sense, he is arguing against an arithmetical operation by which the superstructure of culture and human relations spring ready-made from the forces of production, only then to be impotent vis-à-vis those forces. Rather, the production of social life must take into account superstructural features, none of which can fully be explained in terms of a narrowly-conceived economy. The commingling of the economic, the political, and the ideological means that history is not endogenous to economic logic. This overdetermination again is meant to account for the difficulty in conceiving a transcendental organizing principle for society, such as the economic base, given the multiple forces at work. Contemporary social and political life does not appear as the unfolding of a necessary logic, whether a Hegelian dialectic or economic determinism, and therefore any political juncture is overdetermined by the multiple forces at work.

Overdetermination, however, is not merely a concept of multiple causality. There is always an excess of one element over another. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985/2001) Laclau and co-author Chantal Mouffe focus on the symbolic character of overdetermination. For them, Althusser is not transplanting a concept about signs to the realm of physical and material causes, he is claiming that the symbolic is a fundamental dimension of social order, and this is why he made recourse to the Freudian concept, which: "only makes sense within a symbolic world and involves the symbolic constitution of relations" (Laclau 1988, pp.252-253).

However, Laclau and Mouffe are following Althusser's thought in a way, according to them, he himself was reticent to do. "The most profound *potential* meaning of Althusser's statement that everything existing in the social is overdetermined, is the

assertion that the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985/2001, pp.97-98). Laclau intends to realize this potential meaning and in doing so feels himself to be rejecting the last holdout of both Althusser and Gramsci: the economic as determinate 'in the last instance' and that social unity operates around class. For Laclau, the breadth of the overdetermination of struggles extends beyond class conflict (Townshend 2004). Resorting to class retains the idea that the economic is determinant and merely re-integrates other considerations under its auspices. If, however, it is the case that social life is overdetermined, then there is no necessary reason why a social unity would be a class unity. It is also here that Laclau says:

> There is no direct continuity between political subjectivity and classes in the economic sense….On the contrary, hegemony is a process of rearticulation, of the internalization through new articulations of something that was external. However, Gramsci still retains an element of essentialism because this process of the interiorization of the external always has to take place around a class core. (1988, p.252)

Laclau and Mouffe reject the idea that there is a necessary class core (Bowman 2002). Class is an empty signifier, acting to produce class-based subjects.

For Laclau and Mouffe, Marxism itself can become hegemonic in its own right. In the face of "the lack of automatic correlation between the 'objective' social location of members of the working class and their identities" (Townshend 2004, p.270, see also Bowman 2002 and Hall 1982), Marxism resolves this gap through a reduction. The "objective social location" of working-class people is their identity in full. In this sense class is a sedimented empty signifier, insofar as it structures experience in line with a concept of Marxist theory. In contrast, for Laclau, "the unity of the class is precisely a symbolic unity" (Laclau 1988, p.250). That unity is not prescribed by structural positions

but through the representation of multiple events as acting in the name of class. The mode of production therefore is not the determinate logic of the social sphere but merely a conceptualization that can make sense of a multiplicity of subject positions.

To see how Laclau moves beyond Marxism, we can examine what he calls the "overdetermination of partial struggles" (1996b, p.40), borrowing the terminology from Althusser and Freud but finding political application in Rosa Luxembourg's analysis of class struggle. Luxembourg was one of the founders of the Spartacist League, a Marxist revolutionary organization that found its greatest effect but also its dissolution in the 1918 German Revolution, a revolution marked by unification and fractures amongst revolutionary camps. Luxembourg saw labour strikes as actions driven firstly by particular interests. Those strikes were partial relative to the general unfolding of the Marxist revolution. The revolution was therefore overdetermined by the multiplicity of strikes acting against the exploitation of labour. Therefore, each action taken against capitalist oppression is internally split: each acts for its own sake but is also taken to be action against the oppression of capitalism. In this sense "The unity of the class….is determined by the accumulated effects of the internal split of all partial mobilizations" (p.40). If class is not an immutable organizing principle of society, but rather is a contingent and particular immanent mode of organization, the question is now: when political action is undertaken, in the name of what do the individual elements act? Chantal Mouffe (1988) argued that contemporary movements are partial not with regards to the general project of class-based revolution but to what she called the general political project of the Enlightenment, the expansion of the domain of democratic values. Laclau

shares this vision of the expansion of democratic values:

> The indeterminacy of the relations between the different demands of the social actors certainly does open the possibility for their articulation by the right; but insofar as such articulations are not *necessary*, the field of possibilities for historical action is also widened, as counter-hegemonic struggles become possible in many areas traditionally associated with the sedimented forms of the status quo. (1990, pp.82-83)

Thus, although there are no guarantees for inevitable progress and emancipation, the dimensions of the terrain upon which struggles for equality occur can be expanded, given that social unity is a matter of contingent construction, not the inevitable outcome of specifically class-based conflict.

## 6.3 The consequences of overdetermination for signifiers

According to Laclau, then, we have a symbolic overdetermination "whenever the signified is more abundant than, or overflows, a given signifier" (1988, p.250). I argue that, given their potential polysemy, every signifier is overdetermined by its signified. There are numerous signifieds or referents possible. The signifier must be sufficiently general to handle the inevitable changes in the characteristics of the signified. These changes may be broad and obvious, or merely changes in time and space. As was indicated in the introduction, people are subject to signification. For example, 'Newfoundlander' suggests something that all residents have in common other than geographical location or place of birth. Of course, this characteristic, whether it is a personality trait or genetic, for example, does not apply to all those ostensibly covered by the term. This is demonstrated by the seven-year old inhabitant of an outport community who is much different than the sixty-year old resident of St. John's. 'Newfoundlander',

then, is overdetermined by its signifieds. It can thus be manipulated to political ends through its reactivation, exposing differences among Newfoundlanders that were previously hidden, or articulating a commonality among Newfoundlanders that is antagonistic to the dominant one. This overdetermination is present in many social situations. Gender, race, and class are all social concepts overdetermined by the people constituting them. "No single identity ever completely captures anyone's shifting and complex sense of self; every articulated identity already excludes" (Starr 2000, p.32). People are not independent of their communities nor are they fully explicable by the definitions of the group(s) to which they belong. This is like genre, and Barthes too recognizes this overdetermination, albeit with a different theoretical language, saying,

> it is very rare that [language] imposes at the outset a full meaning which it
> is impossible to distort. This comes from the abstractness of its concept:
> the concept of *tree* is vague, it lends itself to multiple contingencies. True,
> a language always has at its disposal a whole appropriating organization
> (*this* tree, *the* tree *which*, etc.). But there always remains, around the final
> meaning, a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating:
> the meaning can almost always be *interpreted*. One could say that a
> language offers to myth an open-work meaning. (1957/1982, pp.119-120)

This open-work meaning is what keeps the realm of sedimented signs the social, open to political reactivation. To return to our dominant example from the first chapter, 'antiwar', when referring to an explicit singular opposition to war does not include all the subtleties of the posters included in the genre.

> We can think of many pertinent historical examples where the conduct of
> a social struggle depended, at a particular moment, precisely on the
> effective dis-articulation of certain key terms, e.g. 'democracy', the 'rule
> of law', 'civil rights', 'the nation', 'the people', '*Man*kind', from their
> previous couplings, and their extrapolation to new meanings, representing
> the emergence of new political subjects. (Hall 1982, p.78)

## 6.4 The Instability of hegemony

Overdetermination is why hegemony is never total and why political action remains possible. I will of course express the caveat that the means to articulate different meanings and have them shared are often dependent on power relations and cultural and economic circumstances. Hegemony by its nature is difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, overdetermination is inherent in signification and it is what allows the potential dispersion of control. For Clarke et al. (1976), hegemony "does not mean that there is only *one* set of ideas or cultural forms in a society. There will be more than one tendency at work within the dominant ideas of a society" (p.12). The inevitable instability of the hegemonic order is the result of its very attempts to present itself as a universal system, to speak for all the differences it includes. However, the particularities that are denied or clouded inhibit an absolute structural closure. "Indeed, it is only because no meaning is actually fixed that there is a space in which hegemonic struggle can take place" (Laclau 1988, p. 249). We can see this when Todd Gitlin discusses the 'American Dream' as a rhetorical device, saying "each attempt to arrest the flux of Americanness, to pin down once and for all the nature of national membership, has failed" (1995, p.47). It has failed precisely because any empty signifier cannot speak for all people, or all instances of 'Americanness'. Any empty signifier will always require, as we have seen, a radical exclusion. A hegemonic understanding of 'Americanness' is in particular one that is elevated to the level of the universal. There is always the remainder, though, of the alternative meanings latent in 'America' that overdetermine it. Social organization in that sense is unpredictable, and any fixing of disorder is temporary and contingent. The

'suturing' of society, the production of a closed social totality that is graspable in its entirety, is an impossibility. Hegemony only hides the exclusions inherent in any sedimented chain of equivalence. Those exclusions overdetermine the empty signifier that represents them.

> …we tend nowadays to accept the *infinitude* of the social, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility. (Laclau 1990, p.90)

## 6.5 Identity

We have, then, the following situation: society is never finished, given that it is the play of differential relations. However, hegemonic practices act to close this space, to provide it with limits, and do so through affirming a particular meaning of an empty signifier. When this signifier is sedimented, it defines the social field. However, this can be disrupted given the overdetermination of every signifier by its signified. Pursuant to a sociological conception of the subject, subjects are determined by their position in a field of social relations. Identity is a function of one's structural location. However, if the social is never complete, if there is never a total fixing of limits, then the individual is never fully-formed. Every hegemonic act is thus an attempt to fill this lack, to suture the social space so that identities can be finalized. This is a never-ending process, due to the instability of hegemony. "This is the reason why the post-Marxists talk of 'subject positions' as opposed to 'subjects', as political identities are partial, provisional and constantly in a state of flux" (Bowman 2002, p.808). However, this may be somewhat misleading. The recognition of the contingent nature of the structural tension between

fixity and malleability does not repress or discount subjectivity, but rather indicates the productive nature of subjectivity. The formal structure of society is undecidable, so "the hegemonic act will not be the *realization* of a rationality preceding it, but an act of radical *construction*" (Laclau 1990, p.29). Subjectivity is never finally established, though hegemonic practices, in their attempt to fix differential relations, constitute subjects. Hall (1996) says of the production of identity that "There is always 'too much' or 'too little' – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality….It entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier-effects'. It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process" (p.3). Identity is produced through representation, through narratives and symbols that are appropriated to provide a sense of 'we'. Identities are produced retroactively, so they are not a result of history but a symbolic construction of how we have come to be.

This state of flux is what Laclau would call a *discursive* structure, and it is in this that we have a very succinct response to the tension between the classical subject and the socially-determined subject:

> Both relations and identity are always in a precarious state because there are no signifieds that can be ultimately fixed….Each element has a surplus of meaning because it cannot be located in a closed system of difference. And at the same time, no identity is ever definitely and definitively acquired. Such a situation, in which there is a constant movement from the elements to the system but no ultimate systems or elements – these are finally metaphoric expressions – a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed, is what I call "discourse." (Laclau 1988, p.254)

. He is in fact describing a lack of equivalence between the imputed identity and the

inhibited identity that produces antagonisms. For antagonism to occur, one party must imagine its identity as more than what dominant meanings prescribe. It has to see itself as overdetermining the position attributed to it. However, this identity is imagined in such a way that it can be realized only through the removal of the opposing radical exclusion. This radical exclusion or what Laclau (1990) also calls a radical outside "is an 'outside' which blocks the identity of the 'inside' (and is, nonetheless, the prerequisite for its constitution at the same time)" (p.17). Similarly, any antiwar movement or system is both constituted by, and finds its full realization inhibited by, the same thing. "Every identity is dislocated insofar as it depends on an outside which both denies that identity and provides its condition of possibility at the same time" (p.39). This was demonstrated in Laclau's critique of the revolution as endogenous to the relations of production and forces of production. The proletariat have to imagine, or picture, their identity as somehow lacking, as being oppressed by the current situation, and that only a revolution would enable this identity to be realized. They must recognize their overdetermination as subjects, and reactivate the meanings latent in their identity. These meanings, precisely because they are not the dominant meanings prescribed, are not the economic positions imputed to them. The idea of the class subject, in this perspective, cannot in itself bring about antagonism and therefore cannot incite change.

This *identity imputation* is a critical problem when hegemony is an attempt to fix subjects in particular relations in a social structure. The signifiers that represent ourselves can be appropriated by others to unforeseen ends. We may be represented in ways with which we do not agree, and our representations of ourselves may be articulated, and

sedimented, in ways which we do not desire.

> Just as people *as workers* have no voice in what they make, how they make it, or how the product is distributed and used, so do people *as producers of meaning* have no voice in what the media make of what they say or do, or in the context within which the media frame their activity. The resulting meanings, now mediated, acquire an eery substance in the real world, standing outside their ostensible makers and confronting them as an alien force. The social meanings of intentional action have been deformed beyond recognition. (Gitlin 1980 p.3)

There is hyperbole at work here, given that many workers do have a say in what they make and how. Nevertheless, if we expand the argument beyond the realm of material production, as Gitlin does, we can see that, for example, what 'Canadian' means is not under the control of every member who is identified as such, nor is it under the control of Canadians in the aggregate. The control over identity is not exclusive to those who are subsumed by it. This external definition by others is demonstrated in stereotype. We can be identified as members of a group despite our will. A protestor can be identified as Leftist, and have a multitude of characteristics imputed to him or her. For example, an artist may consider herself as a member in an explicitly, well-defined antiwar group. However, since she does not have control over how she is represented, then the signs that represent her can be rendered into a chain of equivalence with other movements, and be labelled anti-American, Leftist, unpatriotic, or otherwise in a hegemonic move.

To fully identify with one's representation(s) leads to an objective correlative, such as the activist who identifies with the representations of activism, which results in activistism. It puts one's identity purely in the structure within which it was found and makes the subject an objective correlative. In Bowman's (2002) words:

> One should not *identify* political agents with named or real *referents*. A

political identity will be formed in relation to a political issue (an antagonism); that identity is not the whole or entire identity of the person or persons who hold it. (p.805)

Slavoj Žižek (1989) raises this issue in nominalist terms providing the example of anti-Semitism, under which Jews are *X*, *Y*, and *Z*, where these variables are loathsome or pathetic qualities. However, the possession of these qualities is not what makes the Jew a Jew, but it is (according to the anti-Semite) due to the very nature of the Jew that these qualities are present. There is an anterior cause, something internal to the Jew that results in these attributions. What is this quality? In the common rebuttal to anti-Semitism or many forms of prejudice, we may say: 'They are not really like that' as though one could actually speak truthfully of 'them', thereby confirming that there is in fact some essential feature that the bigot has simply misidentified. Žižek maintains that there is no such feature. But how do we know what words mean at all? What do they point to? For Žižek, the consistency of the word itself is the guarantor of identity. The name retroactively confers identity by opening up a spot in a signifying structure that is filled by a signified. For example, 'democracy' presupposes its object, but any characteristics we ascribe to that object are contingent. The name is what maintains identity among all things named as democratic, and nothing more. We then look in vain for what democracy is, since any articulation we may examine could be otherwise. When the concept is figured to point to an essence, we are again in the realm of myth, which presumes reference in language. Under conditions of myth, phenomena fulfil the requirements of abstract categories. Things can be judged by their fit or lack thereof with a mythical worldview. This is an inversion whereby the signified does not determine what the sign is about but the

signifier determines what the signified is about. Judith Butler, one of Žižek's and Laclau's contemporaries, makes a similar argument relative to gender differences. The identity of a gendered subject is not found in anatomy. Gender, rather, is the signifier that makes a binary biological distinction meaningful (Butler 1990).

In this sense, then, to say that representations are political, or that politics shares the form of representations, "representation" can be a misleading term inasmuch as it suggests that representations are a means through which a transcendent political reality is conveyed. In the words of Hall (1982):

> It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean.* (p.64)

The title of Amory Starr's 2000 study of anti-globalization movements comes as no surprise. Entitled *Naming The Enemy*, she makes it quite clear that the very fact of naming has a dual function: it establishes the limits of the enemy but therefore also gives the enemy, and its resistance, form. In an alternate vein, the title of Mann's 2004 book *Peace Signs: The Anti War Movement Illustrated* says that the movement is illustrated through these signs. However, the idea of a unified antiwar movement is possible not because it found voice in all posters that are now figured to be antiwar, but because war condenses a number of different responses.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion – a tolerance of difference

This thesis has been a study of Laclau's concept of overdetermination, illuminated primarily by contemporary antiwar posters posted on Internet sites opposed to the "War on Terror". The problem of the overdetermination of signifiers, for which any signifier may become empty, produces conditions for political action. The relation established between the element and the system or between a signifier and multiple signifieds is produced through hegemonic practices. The integration of Barthesian myth, which was very much a political analysis since its inception, affirms the political nature of signification, and this not necessarily because sign-analysis can be applied to the campaigns of politicians, lobby groups, and other interested parties, but because of the consequences that result from the nature of signification itself. Insofar as signifiers are always overdetermined, they offer a space where political agency can be conceptualized.

Having begun with concerns of the genre, and how it reveals the complexity between collective representations and individual instantiations, I can come full circle, returning to a study of genre conducted by Rick Altman (1999). In one of his closing chapters he provides an analysis of how disparate people and practices can be unified under the rubric of the nation. He justifies this insofar as he understands genres as "regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single unified social fabric" but considers this an "outrageous but logical extrapolation" from his understanding of genre. I have endeavoured to show that this is in fact not an outrageous extrapolation, for the structure of genre is in a large sense coterminous with the structure of political representation. When he says "against all expectation, genre theory might

actually help us think about nations" (p.206), it seems that he is correct, but I add that it may help us think about more than nations as well.

The theoretical grammar of Laclau provides a concise and productive way to do this sort of thinking, whether about genre, nation, or collective political action. The specific movements discussed here, as well as others, may be examined in detail in light of this framework, to determine the extent to which a Laclauian analysis captures the experience or practice of social movement actors.

Laclau's work provides us with an analytic tool. It is neither a prescription nor is it an empirical account of empty signifiers as things in the world. If there is any conclusion to be drawn, it is in favour of reactivating those sedimented categories that serve to fix relations of oppression and domination, and to do so a 'tolerance of difference' is required. A tolerance is required if we are to conceive of partial struggles as belonging together, if we are to see diverse elements not infinitely separate from each other, but also if we are to avoid prejudice and stereotypes. I therefore use 'tolerance' in two senses. In the first sense there must be a tolerance by which the representation is judged adequate to what is represented, of the variation within which something can be accepted as what it is named. In the case of our antiwar posters, we can use the concept 'antiwar art' for a diverse number of referents. There is a range within which we are ready to grant membership in the set. If the context, the poster, and the audience are amenable, then the sign may be 'antiwar art'. This applies to all sedimented practices. The signifier is sufficiently general to be recruited to diverse means.

The second form of tolerance is more active, and it is a tolerance of reactivation.

We must recognize that each element is subject to ambiguity. When one is tolerant of difference in this sense, one can expose or cleave those differences previously restricted by the signifier. Every signified is overdetermined. Thus it is not that empty signifiers are somehow distinct from other signifiers, but that *empty* refers to this necessary ability of each signifier to speak to differences.

Amory Starr (2000) argues that if the world is structured, then agency and resistance enter the picture outside of structural differences or in the interstices of social relations. However, if we grant that elements are produced differentially, then one cannot evade the structure but can only move within it. There is no political matrix that is imposed upon us, which only needs to be removed; any position, by definition, requires relationships to other elements or subjects. Change is produced not by stepping outside of the structure of signification but by exploiting the ambiguity inherent in the structure, and this is done through chains of equivalence and difference, through sedimentation and reactivation. The solution is to engage the system and be active in it rather than passive.

Laclau wants to describe these conditions by which the political can re-emerge in a sedimented social sphere. However, he does not suggest that recognition of difference will result in a utopia, given that politics is never finished:

> Even in the most radical and democratic projects, social transformation
> thus means building a new power, not radically eliminating it. Destroying
> the hierarchies on which sexual or racial discrimination is based will, at
> some point, always require the construction of other exclusions for
> collective identities to be able to emerge. (1990, p.33)

It is thus the task of a critical analysis to discover and name these exclusions, inclusions, and hidden equivalences. Political freedom, by my account, may be found in the ability

of people to collectively construct the relationships that organize their lives, rather than in the submissive occupation of structural positions determined by others. A critical Laclauian perspective would thus be able to productively recognize the following general operation: any claims to universality or unity overlook and constrain differences and do so relative not to essential content but rely on a radical exclusion. Inversely, seemingly irreconcilable differences can be allied by making reference to what they exclude in common. I suggest then that a political sensibility is one attuned to identifying this operation.

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