

Gezi Spirit on Russian Streets?  
The Emergence and Potential of Russia's Contemporary Left

By

Albrecht Berg  
B.A., Malmö University, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In Interdisciplinary Studies

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**Supervisory Committee**

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(Department of Sociology, CSPT)

Dr. Serhy Yekelchuk, co-supervisor  
(Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies)

## Abstract

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Many considered the end of Soviet Communism as a sign that politics, and Left politics in particular, had been transcended in Russia and the world. Yet recent events, and this author's own experience, contradict this vision. This paper will show that there is a radical, emancipatory, progressive Left emerging in Russia. However, this emerging politics remains unimaginable within the conventional ontology of Russian politics. This hegemonic ontology envisions an antagonism between "two Russias": the conservative, lethargic, Eastern, rural masses and the energetic, progressive, Western, urban minority, which divides the political field among the existing actors. This paper will reject this vision and redraw the political landscape such that the contours of Russia's emerging new Left can come to light. In this task, the author draws on the theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Their post-Marxism emphasizes the discursive nature of socio-political dynamics and rejects the positivism of canonical Marxism. This paper affirms their basic premise, but advances a "discursive materialist" reading that explicitly rejects idealism and post-political fantasies. Through this theoretical lens it is possible not only to account for the emergence of the new Russian Left as such, but to show how its emergence works to effect a general reconfiguration of the political field. An excursion to the Turkish Gezi Park protests of 2013 vividly demonstrates the potential of Russia's emerging Left, namely, its capacity to articulate a progressive, emancipatory populism.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who made this project possible through their generous support, their practical help and advice, their insights, and feedback. While I am solely responsible for any and all of its shortcomings, I hope it does justice to the work and thought of these individuals:

Vera Akulova,  
Vanya,  
Kseniya Brailovskaya,  
Ilya Budraitskis,  
Shura Burtin,  
Dimos Chatzoglakis,  
Berndt Clavier,  
Yegor,  
Boris Kagarlitsky,  
Alexander Lehtman,  
Zoe Lu,  
Isabelle Magkoeva,  
Anastasia Moskvina,  
Yetkin Nural,  
Austin Simpson,  
Kim Smith,  
Vlad Tupikin,  
Peyman Vahabzadeh  
Bettie Vasileva,  
Ute Weinmann,  
Serhy Yekelchuk,  
Gelya Zhukova.

## Epigram

*“Yüz bin gözle seyrederim seni, İstanbul'u.  
Yüz bin yürek gibi çarpar, çarpar yapraklarım.*

...

*Ben bir ceviz ağacıym Gülhane Parkı'nda.  
Ne sen bunun farkındasın, ne de polis farkında.”*

*(Сотней тысяч глаз гляжу, гляжу на тебя, Стамбул.  
Листья мои - бьются они, как сотни тысяч сердец.*

...

*Я – дерево ореховое в парке Гюльхане,  
но ни полиция, ни ты не знаете обо мне.)*

*(I watch you with one hundred thousand eyes, I watch Istanbul.  
Like one hundred thousand hearts, beat, beat my leaves.*

...

*I am a walnut tree in Gülhane Park,  
neither you are aware of this, nor the police.)*

-Nâzım Hikmet, longing for Istanbul, from his Moscow exile<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>During the Gezi uprising, which happened to coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hikmet's death, Cem Karaca's classic musical adaptation of the poem *Walnut Tree* was (unsurprisingly) modified, with Gezi replacing Gülhane Park, and hundreds chanted his verses in their defense of the trees. As if in a poetically inverted version of Hikmet's longing, radical activists in Russia instantly recognized the deep relevance of the Gezi uprising for the Russian context, as is reflected in the many discussions it sparked (Burtin, 2013; Дискуссия "Стамбул-2013", 2013; Kichanova, 2013).

## Introduction

On December 26, 1991 the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin for the last time. After seventy-four years, the Soviet socialist project had come to an end. The following year, Francis Fukuyama (1992) published his “End of History” thesis in book form, asserting that the final victory of liberalism was imminent, and the post-political order about to commence. Apparently politics, and Left politics in particular, had been transcended in the Soviet Union and the world. Case closed.

However, recent events contradict this vision. The past two years were marked by a global wave of dissent to repressive regimes and neoliberal policy. Mass protest engulfed cities from Madrid to Sofia and conquered squares from Tahrir to Syntagma. They shook Quebec, Chile, Brazil, Spain, and occupied Wall Street and Istanbul’s Gezi Park. Russia, too, saw unprecedented mass demonstrations, and – significantly – leftist politics were one of the driving forces behind this oppositional surge.

This author’s own experience of political struggles also complicates Fukuyama’s vision. Particularly while living in Moscow during the spring of 2012, I closely followed the opposition protests against the dubious outcome of the presidential election results, and was confronted with a different picture. I interacted with activists, students, and academics, who were keenly aware of global political trends and who would confidently reject the classical liberal doctrine. I met with young people who were part of radical anti-fascist groups confronting fascist gangs on the streets of Moscow, and queer feminists who considered the struggle against hetero-sexism and that against capitalism to be complimentary. I noticed that many intellectuals, well connected across Russia’s borders, often had a nuanced, critical nostalgia for aspects of the Soviet past, combining anti-capitalist and anti-Stalinist sentiments. Participating in some of the largest opposition

demonstrations in Russia since the Soviet collapse, I could not help but notice the red, purple, Anarchist, Green and rainbow flags flying over crowds of enthusiastic young protestors.

In short, I encountered emancipatory politics, building on neither vulgar Marxist-Leninist mantras nor the Fukuyamean tale of post-politics. To me, this indicated the emergence of a contemporary Left, and that none of the dominant narratives adequately captures the dynamics of politics in contemporary Russia. In my view, this provokes a rethinking of the general socio-political field, and the role played in it by the contemporary Left.

As a review of the existing literature reveals, however, scholarship on Russian politics is largely still invested in such outmoded ontologies and narratives. Legalist analyses focusing on official parliamentary politics find that opposition to the Putinist system consists of archaic communist and classical liberal projects. Given the stagnation of both of these political blocs, there has been a tendency toward pessimistic conclusions. This suggests that the Putin regime simply satisfies the lethargic Russian population's demands, as long as the price of oil remains high enough to ensure cash inflow from abroad.

When scholars have moved beyond the limits of official party politics, and picked up on the countless examples of resistance to the current regime, it has tended to frame them in terms of a developing "civil society", implicitly affirming the Fukuyamean fantasy of a post-political order. This project attempts to break with the ontological confines of the "two Russias", within which one can only conceive of emancipatory politics and creative resistance in Russia as being the domain of a small, energetic, modernized minority pitted against a lethargic, conservative majority.

After first examining those subjects peripheral to Russia's new Left (including the Old Left, the liberals, and "civil society") I will pick up on the few existing analyses that have traced a radical progressive politics outside of such constraints, and extend these analyses. I will sketch

the emerging new Russian Left, the space in which it operates, the gains it has made in its emergence, and the relevance it already has for political dynamics. That is, by bringing together the numerous examples of particular grassroots resistances, radical street mobilizations (especially of youth) and the creative labor of progressive artists and intellectuals, and by envisioning them beyond old ontological constrictions of “civil society”, “subculture”, or “creative class”, I will essentially redraw the map of Russia’s political spaces and subject positions, such that Russia’s contemporary Left can emerge.

Thus, this project not only has an empirical ambition, but a theoretical one as well. The collapse of the Soviet Union represented a moment of reorientation for much social theory. While some (such as Fukuyama’s disciples) saw it as final proof of the fact that Marxist thought belonged in the dustbin of history, for others it meant an emancipation of the Marxist project from outdated orthodox variants of it. My quest to adequately interpret the role of Russia’s contemporary Left is at the same time, and necessarily, an exercise in such theoretical explorations. Somewhat analogously to my moving beyond outdated categories of the political Left, I attempt to develop a theoretical approach that does justice to Russia’s contemporary social and political condition; one which is marked simultaneously by radical “post-modernity” and the stout perseverance of what some had already considered features of a bygone modernity.

This brings me to first consider some of the productive aspects of Negri and Hardt’s thought, such as their notion of immaterial labor and the shape of their “multitude”. However, the eschatological mission of their revolutionary “multitude” turns out to be untenable in my attempt at understanding the contingent emergence of Russia’s contemporary Left. I instead advance a reading of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony, which affirms their commitment to the contingency and non-positivity of the social, while accommodating some of the more classically Marxist tenets, without which the theory would lose its radical edge and practical relevance.

From this theoretical vantage point I am able to move beyond the constricting logic marring much of the existing analyses of Russian politics, to show the obscured spaces, missed subject positions and hidden connections that, together, are the contemporary Left.

I believe my reading of Laclau and Mouffe allows for a better interpretation of recent developments, including the massive wave of street protest of 2011-2012, and provides a productive basis for Left strategy. The conception of the social as operating discursively makes the limits of old Marxist (*and* classical liberal) essentialisms and eschatologies apparent. At the same time, by accommodating conventional Marxist trajectories of investigation in this essentially un-Marxist body of theory (and therefore always on the condition of contingency), it permits for some of the classical factors of “determination”, such as Russia’s horrendous economic inequality and strong disciplinary state, to be reintegrated as *tendencias* that cannot be ignored. What this means in practice is that the relevance of the 2011-2012 protests can be appreciated in spite of the fact that they cannot be extracted from some objective economic determinant; at the same time, the failure of this protest movement to meaningfully articulate economic demands can be appreciated as a key factor in its temporary defeat. Importantly, Laclau’s later thought on populism, seen in the light of a political earthquake in a different country (which I had the chance to witness first hand), allows for an analysis of the new Russian Left that extends far beyond the protests of 2011-2012.

On May 28, 2013, more or less by coincidence, I joined a small protest against the demolition of a park in Istanbul, Turkey, unaware that I was witnessing the birth of an uprising that would fundamentally change that nation. An analytical excursion to Turkey’s Gezi Park uprising of 2013, and subsequent analysis of what happened there through my Laclauian theoretical lens, allows me to demonstrate the larger significance of Russia’s emerging contemporary Left for the country’s general political horizon. There are many structural

similarities between Turkey and Russia, reflected to an extent in both countries' respective oppositional movements. In both cases, for example, small scale particular resistances, easily ignored by conventional political analyses, became key constituents of the recent spectacular oppositional uprisings. However, the character of the oppositional surges in each country was also quite different. As the Gezi Park protests (in contrast to their Russian counterpart) are an excellent example of the successful construction of a progressive Left populism *à la* Laclau, analyzing the factors which facilitated that outcome is helpful in my attempt to understand the current situation of the Russian Left. Focusing particularly on how the hegemonic camps' modes of operation facilitate the production of populism, and on the role of experience, allows for the obstacles and potentials of the Russian Left to be gauged.

From the theoretical point of view, the example of Gezi Park and how it compares to the Russian context not only affirms the basic tenet of Laclau and Mouffe's anti-essentialist, discursive approach, but also demands a certain refinement of it. For one thing, it highlights the importance of appropriately integrating the centrality of "material"<sup>2</sup> factors such as physical space, state violence, and experience for the formation of populist articulation. Furthermore, the phenomenon of "Gezi Spirit" and its embryonic Russian counterpart indicate the possibilities of formulating a pluralist, progressive Left subject position, and point toward the conditions for such a possibility to become reality.

What this project attempts, in short, is a fresh take on the contemporary dynamics and the intrinsic potentials of Russian oppositional politics. I reject the conventional ontology of the "two Russias" which limits the majority of scholarly analyses and political practice in the country. I emphasize the existence and relevance of a politics unrepresentable and unimaginable in that ontology: the contemporary Russian Left. Through my "discursive materialist" adaptation of

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<sup>2</sup> Reservations about the term "material" that compel me to use it in quotation marks will be clarified in the theoretical section.

Laclau and Mouffe's thought, I sketch the (thus far under-appreciated) new Russian Left as an articulation of elements in excess of the hegemonic order. As the example of the Gezi Park protests shows, the centrality of this emerging politics is not only in its growing role as one of Russia's political subject positions among several, but in its capacity to confront and reconfigure the political topography as such.

I begin by reviewing the existing literature on Russian oppositional politics, and showing its limitations. In Chapter One I trace Russia's emerging contemporary Left. The second chapter offers a critical reading of Laclau and Mouffe's thought. In Chapter Three I examine the Gezi Park protests in Turkey through my "discursive materialist" understanding of their work, and of Laclau's thought on populism, in order to show how the Russian new Left's key potential lies in its capacity to infuse Russian oppositional politics with Gezi Spirit.

## Literature Review

When studying the literature on progressive and radical forms of Russia's opposition, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a conspicuous gap in research. Studies have been conducted on various subjects that are peripheral to Russia's contemporary Left, but never identify this new political subject explicitly. Scholars have focused on parties, organizations, movements, and phenomena of which certain characteristics constitute Russia's young Left, or which inhabit parts of the space where this new politics operates, but so far there have been no studies dedicated to this emerging politics itself or the space in which it operates. In this literature review, I will go through studies on peripherally related fields: in the parliamentary sphere this would be what I refer to as the "Old Left" (the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, fringe Stalinist parties, loyalist phony leftists) on the one hand and the liberal opposition on the other; on the extra-parliamentary side this would be so-called "civil society" (or "social protest") and street based activism (mostly pro-regime and reactionary).

Looking at the conventional rendering of these topics, I will highlight the ways in which the predominant ontological organization of Russia's political reality fixes the various expressions and dimensions of new Left politics to the established political subjects that are thought to exhaustively account for the entire relevant political field. My criticism is that this ontological order is inadequate, and that it forecloses the detection of this new and evolving subject by carving up the space in which it operates into the territory of the conventionally perceived actors. Lastly I will point to the few existing texts that have picked up young Left politics (in a still somewhat tentative fashion) and have thus effectively begun to deconstruct the ontological edifice that has, thus far, prevented this politics from registering.

The most significant related topic that has received a good degree of attention is what I call the “Old Left”. This is the official successor party to the Soviet Communist Party, the so-called Communist Party of the Russian Federation or CPRF (Urban, 2003; March, 2001; Sakwa, 1998; Levintova, 2011; Bozóki & Ishiyama, 2002). In discussing the developments and prospects of the CPRF under conditions of “post-communist ideological confusion” (Sakwa, 1998:128), these studies point to the ambiguous political orientation of the party. Both Sakwa and March note the CPRF’s obvious dilemma of being both conservative and radical at the same time, in its attempt to preserve the Soviet Union’s revolutionary tradition (March, 2001:264). March describes the party’s platform as directly opposed to liberal democracy (quoted in Levintova, 2011:730), and Ishiyama and Bozoki see it as heading towards an increasingly nationalist patriotic direction; an assessment Sakwa shares (quoted in Levintova, 2011:730). While Levintova identifies increasing social democratic tendencies in party discourse, the very existence of explicit nationalist-socialist currents within the party points to the dubiousness of the party’s claim to, and some observers’ consignment to the party of, a Left character (Levintova, 2011:730). Given that the party has remained largely unreformed since the Soviet era (Mudde & March, 2005:29), and that its eternal, iron-fist leader Gennady Zyuganov’s background is the Soviet Communist Party’s apparatus (Heyden & Weinmann, 2009), it can safely be labeled as “Old Left” (with the emphasis emphatically on the *old*, rather than the *Left*).

For the purpose of this study and its search for a *contemporary* Left in Russia, the CPRF is thus not a relevant constituent. However, the party’s electoral performance and continuing street presence are certainly significant as indicators of elements of the larger new Left formation. The persistence of what some call “socialist value culture”, meaning, “support of state welfarism and collectivism”, are the general foundation of the party’s lingering presence (Mudde & March, 2005:29; March, 2006:432). The same applies to other elements of the “Old Left”, such as small

Stalinist groups like the Russian Communist Workers Party (RCWP), which have received modicums of attention (March, 2006:439), and the pseudo-leftist Kremlin project A Just Russia (March, 2009; Levintova, 2011:743).

Another key area of scholarly (and journalistic) focus has been Russia's liberal (or "democratic" as it is sometimes referred to in Russia<sup>3</sup>) opposition<sup>4</sup> (Hale, 2010; White, 2010). These parties are (or at least have been, until recently) conventionally labeled as *the* opposition alongside the Communists (Gel'man, 2005), a tendency that is mirrored by the majority of journalistic accounts of Russian politics, according to which their leading functionaries (including Boris Nemtsov, Sergey Mithrokhin, Grigory Yavlinsky, Garry Kasparov, Mikhail Kasyanov) are described as the representatives of the Russian opposition. This conception is problematic in two respects. First, the legalist-technical logic of reducing "opposition" to "opposition *parties*" dramatically overemphasizes the relevance of electoral politics for the dynamics of political subject formation and popular contestation of the status quo in contemporary Russia. Second, it simultaneously reduces oppositional politics to liberal politics (in as much as the CPRF's opposition to the Kremlin is mostly symbolic anyway), dramatically limits the political space, and prevents the full diversity of Russian oppositional politics from registering.

This narrow conception of opposition in Russia inevitably leads one to questions such as "Political opposition in Russia - is it becoming extinct?" (Gel'man, 2005); the massive wave of protest in 2011-2012 clearly renders this logic obsolete. Nevertheless, the scholarship on Russia's liberals is valuable for this project, exactly for how it shows the limitations of official politics for

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<sup>3</sup>Gel'man attaches a qualitative difference to the terms liberal and democratic, with the former signifying the stronger free-market platform of the URF, and the latter the more social-liberal ideology of Yabloko (2005:18-21).

<sup>4</sup>The faux-oppositional, so-called Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), headed by political clown Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, must not be mistakenly included in Russia's actual liberal opposition, first because it is not liberal, and second because it is not oppositional.

popular and oppositional mobilization against the current regime. Conceiving of party politics as politics *as such* is tempting for it has very tangible features. However, the epistemological flaw here is to forget that the world outside of party politics, the world some apprehend through the notion of social movements, is more complicated, more fluid and less tangible. The existing work on parties is enlightening in as much as it represents the clearest formulation of the paradigm governing the general field of Russian politics. Its logic, according to which liberalism is *the* antagonist to the stagnation/stability (the terminology depending on which camp you belong to) of Putin's Russia, mirrors the hegemonic political discourse.

Another vector through which to approach the matter, which moves beyond party politics, is one focused on post-Soviet Russia's rich history of "social protests", as these usually sporadic and isolated eruptions of dissent are often labeled. Clément (2008), for example, has observed the dynamics of contemporary grassroots activism in Russia. Her work sharply problematizes the equation of liberal party politics with oppositional activism, noting that when the bureaucratically organized established oppositional parties try to enlist social movements for their purposes, they introduce authority and hierarchy into them (Clément, 2008:83). This has the effect of perpetuating "the dominant model of power relationships – relying on passive loyalty to an empowered leader" (Clément, 2008:83). There is some literature looking at a number of issue-specific groups, such as local environmental campaigns (Yanitsky, 2012; Evans, 2012). However, an issue in this literature is that this diverse array of radical grassroots opposition tends to get at least partly, if not entirely, subsumed under the construct of "civil society", conceived as an intermediary between public and private (Evans et al, 2005). This subsumption depoliticizes this form of opposition by interpreting it from a post-political point of view.

There are a few studies that have granted this world of "social protest" its own political subjectivity, such as that by Heyden and Weinmann (2009). They describe the various local and

regional manifestations of dissent, including resistance to urban development and environmental degradation, sporadic militant labor action, pensioners' protests against neoliberal monetization of their benefits, and LGBT protests. Gabowitsch (2013:148) adds protests by cyclists, motorists, and students to the list, and identifies the multitude of this sort of opposition as a key forerunner to the 2011-2012 wave of protest. This literature is valuable for my investigation of the contemporary Left, in that it specifically focuses on the potency of political activism outside of the parliamentary system, and grants small local manifestations of dissent the status of a political actor. Indeed, by discussing the role of political activists, including anarchists and socialists for in such resistances (Gabowitsch, 2013:130), they provide a cornerstone to my sketch of Russia's emerging new Left.

Moving beyond parliamentary politics in general brings one into a grittier realm. There are numerous studies on oppositional political activity in the form of street mobilization. This is a sphere that is interesting for this study of Russia's contemporary Left given its informality. However, what has been dominating research on street-based oppositional activism in Russia is a focus on loyalist youth movements (created from above) and right-wing politics.

Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party, for example, has been noted for its presence on streets and squares, and its notoriously bombastic utilization of such physical activism (Rogatchevski, 2007; Schwirtz 2007:75). Studies of fascist and nationalist movements in Russia, have noted the significance of street, neighborhood, and sub-culture based recruitment of youth, and the customary use of physical violence by such groups (Shenfield, 2001:80, Verkhovsky, 2000). Another notorious case of street activism that has been studied is the Kremlin invention *Nashi* (Schwirtz, 2007). The group was created after the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" of 2004, to prevent a similar scenario – the seizure of central public space in the capital by an oppositional movement effecting regime change (Belov, 2008:49). While this example certainly highlights the

political dimension of physical space, its political content as well as its “artificial” origin (*Nashi* would scornfully be referred to as the *Putin-Jugend* by critics) was obviously far from that I am looking for in my search for Russia’s young Left.

Importantly, there are a few scattered attempts at taking a closer look at radical leftist street mobilization. In his inventory of the Russian Left, March identifies an emerging “new radical left social movement”, or “new fringe”, of post-Marxists environmentalists and globalization-critics (March, 2006:449). He identifies the green-anarchist group Rainbow Keepers, the Vanguard of Red Youth and the Russian section of the Committee for a Workers’ International (KRI), as the most prominent examples of such extra-parliamentary political groups, naming direct action, occupations, sit-ins and “performance art” as their tactics (March, 2006:450). With Heyden and Weinmann (2009), several more radical leftist movements (or reformulations of those listed by March), such as Autonomous Action (libertarian-communist) and the Left Front (socialist) appear on the radar (Heyden & Weinmann, 2009:317-318). Gabowitsch, finally, ties this emergence of extra-parliamentary radical Left movements into the bigger picture, by highlighting their relevance for the 2011-2012 protests (Gabowitsch, 2013:21, 126-127, 130-133).

Reviewing this literature on the spaces, groups, and movements peripheral to Russia’s contemporary Left, I detect a conceptual obstacle. One way of putting it would be to say that Gel’man’s (2005) crude classification of “the opposition” as consisting of a *progressive* liberal faction and a *conservative* Communist faction, seems to underlie the majority of analyses of Russian political dynamics, extending even beyond the realm of parliamentary party politics. For example, most of the literature on instances of “social protest” (with the notable exceptions of Heyden & Weinmann (2009), Clément (2008) and Gabowitsch (2013)), deploy a notion of “civil

society” to capture the vibrant but ostensibly “apolitical” political activism of ordinary people across the country (Volkov, 2012:61, Javeline & Lindemann-Komarova, 2010).

Such a rendering, which lumps direct action and militant resistance against the status quo in with bureaucratic NGOs (Putin’s “foreign agents”), works well within the neoliberal narrative of modernization, espoused by Western governments and Russia’s liberal opposition. An occasionally required supplement to this logic is to portray “social protests” which explicitly contradict the neoliberal narrative (the best example being the pensioners’ protests against monetization reforms in 2005) as mere reactions (or transitional phenomena) against modernization by a conservative populus (Gabowitsch, 2013:154<sup>5</sup>). Thus, as soon as the widespread instances of resistance take on a conceptual life of their own, they are implicitly turned into an extension of the progressive liberal opposition or the conservative Communist Party.

A similar tendency is at work in many of the analyses of the 2011-2012 protest movement. Within this narrative, the demonstrations were caused by the modern, energetic and liberal segment of society rising up and defending itself (Volkov, 2012:56). The allegedly exceptional tech-savviness and hipsterdom of the majority of protestors are turned into indicators of the “apolitical” and “progress” affirming character of the movement; in effect, identifying it as an extra-parliamentary expression of the standard liberal demand. At its most basic, the conflict is portrayed as one between those afraid of change (clinging to stagnation/stability) and those wanting the future (Krastev & Holmes, 2012:43).

Promisingly, however, some have put this very division under scrutiny. Heyden and Weinmann dedicate their 2009 book on resistance to the Putin system to what they call the “*other* Other Russia” (Heyden & Weinmann, 2009:7), that is, the opposition distinct from the

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<sup>5</sup>Gabowitsch does not advocate this view, but recognizes it as a popular line of thought among liberals.

conventional Other Russia<sup>6</sup> of the liberals. As a result, they are able to sketch an oppositional political subject in the interstice between the liberal and communist oppositions, radical street movements, and so-called “civil society”, effectively anticipating the emerging contemporary Left I am describing. Ilya Matveev (2014) highlights how the doctrine of the “two Russias”, championed (tellingly) by liberal commentators, the Old Left (to some extent) *and* the Putin regime, divides the polity into “the people” and “the minority”. The former, according to this conventional reasoning, is resistant to change, constitutes the “silent majority” and is reflected in the repressive state, while the “enlightened minority” is the agent capable of bringing progress (Matveev, 2014:188).

This review of the literature not only provides a rough outline of where to find Russia’s emerging new Left, but also shows the necessity of breaking out of the ontological framework adopted by most researchers in order to find it. Studies of the official Old Left and liberal opposition provide some of the indicators of new Left demands, but simultaneously show the limits of parliamentary politics, practically and conceptually. Investigations of extra-parliamentary oppositional activism highlight the breadth, vigor, and potency of such forms of struggle, but often unhelpfully locate it outside of emancipatory politics or outside of politics as such. Aside from obviously reactionary or government-instigated street activism, the categories used for such forms of struggle usually depict them as apolitical, and designate them “civil society”. This study seeks to pick up a number of the themes that the above reviewed literature has already tentatively studied, and conceptually weave them into a mature portrayal of Russia’s contemporary Left. I aim to show how the excess of popular discontent which the parliamentary opposition (and regime) are unable to contain enables the formation of a leftist political subjectivity, as the various shapes of excess discontent meet one another.

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<sup>6</sup> At its peak, Garry Kasparov’s umbrella group The Other Russia was one of the most visible representatives of the liberal opposition.

## Chapter One: Who, Where and What is Russia's Contemporary Left? Tracing an Emerging Politics

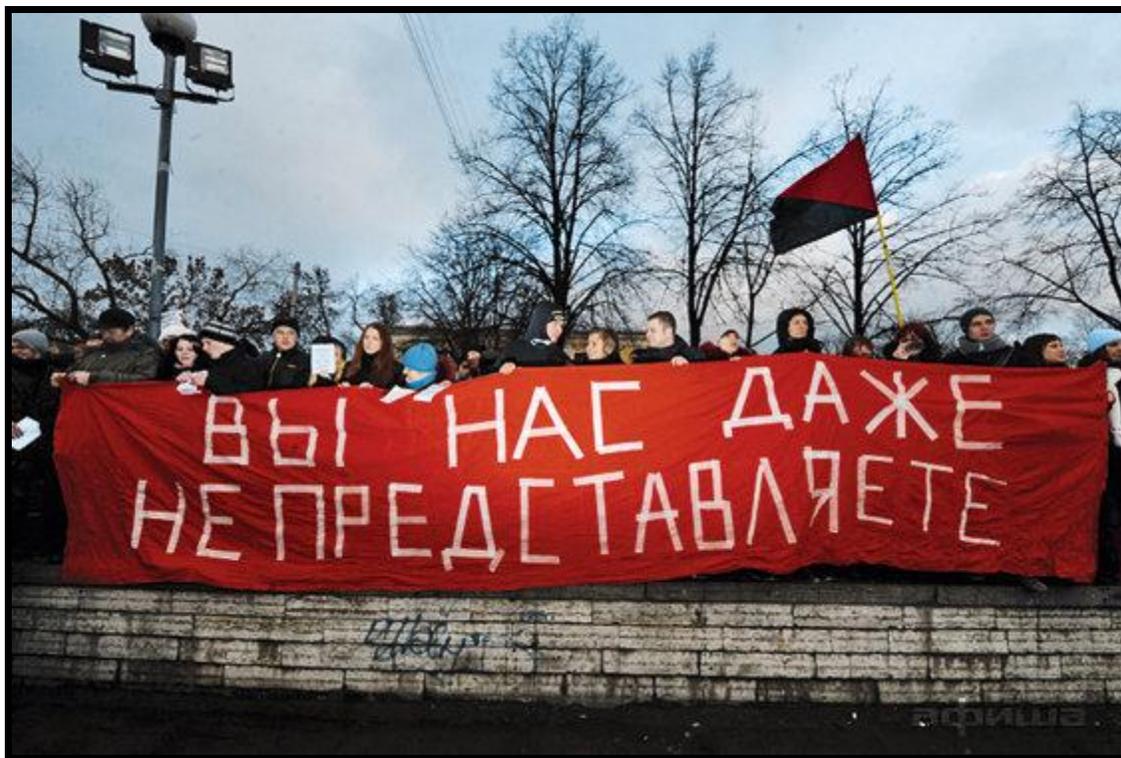


Figure 1: "You don't even/can't even represent/imagine us"

This project seeks to explore a realm of theoretical and ontological uncertainty. The stagnation and final collapse of Soviet socialism demanded a radical rethinking of the meaning of the term “Left”. Given the centrality of narratives to all fundamental political projects, such rethinking cannot but operate partly on the level of narrative. Did the Left simply *lose* its historical battle, become superfluous, and disappear, as Francis Fukuyama (1992) was quick to declare right after existing socialism in Eastern Europe had disintegrated? Did the Left-Right distinction itself become outdated, now that the world had experienced the “End of History”, and entered a post-modern and post-political era? After all, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev himself declared

in the speech marking his own resignation (and simultaneously that of the Soviet Union and, by extension, that of existing socialism) that “We’re now living in a new world” (Gorbachev, 1991).

Alternatively, did the socialist project perhaps merely get struck by a temporary crisis from which it is certain to rebound sooner or later (in sync with capitalism’s own cycles of crisis) as some unshaken Marxist-Leninists adamantly declare? After all, Gorbachev’s one time energetic, liberal successor Boris Yeltsin (having become a physical and political wreck) had to apologize for dramatically disappointing those who had believed in the imminent rise of a liberal, free-market heaven in Russia in his own resignation speech on the eve of the new millennium (Yeltsin, 1999). Perhaps we do not live in a “new world” at all. Perhaps the supposed indicators of the post-political and post-modern era were but a mirage and the true Left has just been temporarily out of order; emancipation lies in the recovery of the tried and true methods of conceptualizing and fighting the one true struggle, and any social justice claims transcending this logic (such as queer feminism and environmentalism) may be discarded as bourgeois or imperialist distraction maneuvers. Of course, neither one of these simplistic renderings is acceptable.

While the above questions are relevant on a global scale, they are perhaps nowhere as pressing as in Russia; a land which, after the world’s first successful Marxist revolution, was for seven decades governed by an ostensibly socialist doctrine, only to end up as one of the harshest class societies today (Bennetts, 2014:123). Indeed, Russia, as a site, is interesting for such considerations, in that the above conflict over the correct historical-political narrative is at the bottom of how to even conceptualize contemporary realities in the country.

The general “post-modernity” of Russia has become a staple of travel guides and cinematic portrayals of the country. Indeed, the amazingly stark juxtaposition of twenty-first century relativism with symbols of certainty from a bygone era, observable in contemporary

Moscow's urban landscape, is striking. A green Heineken billboard will urge passersby to "open up their world" while beside it a larger than life bronze Lenin points toward communist utopia. Commuters are focused on their iPads as they, along with migrants and tourists from all corners of the world, ride the Metro to and from stations with names such as *Proletarskaya* and *Marksistskaya*. Moscow's morphing skyline, as well, seems to speak of the kind of immaterializing post-modernization emblematic of our new globalized world, as industrial smokestacks of state-owned factories have given way to the slick glass and steel structures of the *Moscow City* financial district. Aside from such anecdotal evidence, it is clear that Russia has left behind socialist modernity and dramatically realigned itself macro-economically, joining the G8 in 1997 and the WTO in 2012. Closing one eye, tilting your head and squinting, you may indeed see a Russia that appears Fukuyamean: symbols of socialism have become mere relics of a by-gone era, as the dynamic forces of the global market revolutionize a now post-political society.

At the same time, commentators as diverse as liberal Western critics and steadfast Russian Marxist-Leninists never tire of pointing to the continuities with the modern "past" visible in today's Russia. The former highlight the perceived Soviet character of government, symbolized by Putin's revival of the Hero of Labour award, and pompous Soviet-style military parades (Associated Press, 2013). The idea here is that Putin represents a nostalgia for socialism and resistance to change; clinging to the world of yesteryear. This logic agrees with the Fukuyamean take, if only to caution that in Russia the fight is not over yet; the forces of old are still running the show, and the new world is yet only embryonic. In a curious inversion of liberal-modernist logic, those on the other end of the political spectrum argue that the perceived post-modernity of today's Russia is merely a superficial phenomenon. They emphasize how the entanglement of the super-rich elite with the organs of the state actually marks a return to pre-

socialism. For them, the disintegration of the Communist Bloc, hailed by Fukuyama as the end of history, was actually a return to the pre-socialist era.

Neither of the above two hypotheses is particularly convincing, though both contain kernels of truth. On the one hand, Gorbachev's "new world" is an indisputable reality. This new world, marked by increasing globalization and virtualization, certainly encompasses Russia in as much as Russian oligarchs and their money move across a world of permeable (for them) borders. As well, Russian workers and consumers have been integrated into global circuits of resources, information, services, goods and affects. However, this world is not entirely new either. As liberal critics point out, capitalism in Russia does not smoothly operate according to the rules of picture-book post-modernity; most importantly, the free market has not produced the kind of free, liberal society that was supposed to follow its replacement of Soviet central planning. From the anti-capitalist point of view, the harsh realities of capitalism (most evident in the country's extreme income inequality, with 35% of the country's wealth owned by 110 billionaires (Bennetts, 2014:123)) make the continued nostalgia among many Russians for the "old world" all but irrational. Furthermore, the methods employed to deal with the resulting political grumblings are decidedly old-fashioned: surveillance by the secret police, propagandistic crusades by the church and the mainstream press, and the batons of the interior ministry's troops.

If the world is then both new and old, modern and post-modern, continuous and discontinuous with twentieth century (or even nineteenth century) realities, what does this hold for the role of the contemporary Left in Russia? Certainly, there is cause for radical opposition to Putin's status quo. The country has the world's highest inequality (Synovitz, 2013), with around twenty million Russian's living below the national poverty line (Rapoza, 2012); corruption is rampant (The Moscow Times, 2013). The political system is marked by a strong power vertical, topped by the Presidential administration; press freedom is restricted (Ponomareva, 2013), and

the judiciary hardly independent (Balmforth, 2013). The social climate is marked by government fostered chauvinism and reactionary clericalization, with sexual minorities and migrants especially exposed to violence, exploitation, and marginalization.

Yet, it seems that none of the above narratives – that of Fukuyamean apolitical post-modernity, the classical liberal one of a yet-unachieved post-modernity or that of Old Left pre-socialist modernity – can fully account for these contemporary dynamics. These rigid narratives (along with their respective “ends” of history) need to be abandoned in order for the subject position that is the contemporary Left in Russia to emerge. Perhaps the Left has been reformulating itself into its contemporary shape, unnoticed and obscured by hegemonic ontologies. In that case, who, what, and where is Russia’s contemporary Left?

In what follows, I will sketch Russia’s emerging contemporary Left. As will become apparent (after a discussion of those actors that, according to the dominant ontological order, should be the obvious candidates for representing this politics), the process of sketching the contemporary Left involves a fundamental reorganization of the political ontology. In other words, this is not only about a fresh understanding of what is meant by leftism in Russia (one that is neither overshadowed by, nor oblivious to, either the country’s Soviet legacy or the changes since then) but about a fresh understanding of the political field in general. My claim is that Russia’s emerging Left has thus far remained largely obscured within an ontology that corresponds to the above criticized narratives. I suggest that once the focus is adjusted (such that progressive politics is emancipated from them) a new Left which is able to speak to both the “new world” and “old world” dimensions of reality, can emerge – and with it a new vision of the Russian political horizon, as such.

Those actors that one would expect to play the role of the Left or progressivism, according to the dominant ontology, make for a good place to begin. The natural first stop in the

search for Russia's contemporary Left opposition is what I will call, in an effort towards clear disassociation, the "Old Left". This Old Left is constituted by several factions. Within lingering cold war logics, according to which leftism equals unquestioning Soviet allegiance-come-nostalgia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF, the successor organization to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) may easily be mistaken to have a monopoly on leftist politics in Russia. While the CPRF is certainly relevant to any discussion of the functioning of Russian politics in general (if simply for being Russia's only large opposition party) and Left politics in particular (if simply for claiming to be Communist) its relationship to the contemporary Russian Left is almost the exact opposite of how cold warriors would have it. It is telling that in the company of young Russian Left activists, one occasionally hears the sarcastic comment that the CPRF is the strongest anti-communist force in contemporary Russia<sup>7</sup>; others have called it a "rotting corpse", of which the leftist project needs to urgently rid itself (Penzin, in Dziewanska et al, 2013:124). Such polemical descriptions demonstrate the gulf between Russia's contemporary Left and the politics of Old Left forces such as the CPRF.

Taking a closer look at the CPRF does a lot to explain this seemingly odd discrepancy. The party promotes a bizarre cocktail of conservative socialisms, combining aspects of Marxism-Leninism with nationalist and religious sentiments officially decried as reactionary during much of the Soviet era (Ignatow, 1998:4). To deploy a common (though problematic) distinction, the party may have an economically leftist (anti-capitalist, collectivist) agenda but is culturally and socially conservative. As a result, and in line with the liberal narrative, some consider the CPRF a plainly conservative party (Sakwa, 1998:142); others label it "conservative communist" (March, 2001:264), for how it justifies communism "by its symbols, institutions and as a national tradition, rather than primarily by its theoretical validity or teleological aims" (March, 2001:264).

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<sup>7</sup>As told to me by Trotskyist, Libertarian-Communist, and Russian Socialist Movement activists on numerous occasions, upon being asked about their view on the CPRF.

That is, the true ethos of the CPRF is one of *conservation* for its own sake, rather than one of communism as a radical, emancipatory, greater goal. This should make it clear that the party, as such, can in no way be considered a constituent of Russia's contemporary Left. If not its mere general conservatism, then the significant national-socialist discourse (Levintova, 2012) featured in the party, makes its being considered leftist even less possible. Furthermore, regardless of its ideological content, the party does not seem to have any actual ambition to seriously challenge the status quo in any way other than symbolically. Under the iron-fist leadership of Gennady Zyuganov, the party seems to merely play the role of opposition in order to secure material benefits for its functionaries, with those attempting to change this being consistently purged from the party apparatus by Zyuganov (Budraitskis, 2011).

Another smaller but not unimportant component of the Old Left, is the systemic opposition party A Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya* - SR), the Kremlin's homegrown pet social-democratic/democratic-socialist party. A member of the Socialist International (Socialist International, n.d.), its ideology is ostensibly left-of-center. Some analysts even accept this self-description, and consider it a serious contender for the role of leading contemporary Left force (Levintova, 2012:743). However, SR's alleged leftism is similar to that of the CPRF, in that it combines a somewhat progressive economic agenda with a conservative social one. In any case, headed by Putin's personal friend Sergey Mironov, it can safely be considered part of the Russian regime of "managed democracy"; it is the ruling system's token social conscience and, if need be, a safety valve for those voters dissatisfied with the harsh capitalist realities of Putin's Russia (Gel'man, 2008, March, 2009). By thus serving to diffuse and pacify leftist popular inklings, the party's character can be described as conservative as well, meaning that SR is not a constituent of Russia's new Left either.

Beyond these two large, officially “leftist” parties, there are a number of small orthodox factions (often unabashedly Stalinist) such as the Russian Communist Workers’ Party of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (RCWP-CPSU), which occasionally cooperate with the CPRF. For them, an ever more dogmatic assertion of the official doctrine of the Soviet (or rather, Stalinist) era is the way to combat its ever more obvious obscurity. While these groups certainly advocate systemic change, they generally deny any need for ideological renewal in the light of post-Soviet developments and are outright hostile to some emancipatory projects (not to mention their failure to recognize Stalinism as positively reactionary).

What these different Old Left forces have in common is a radical partition of progressive emancipatory politics; or to put it in different words, a mobilization of some aspects of the Left project at the cost of others. While the CPRF speaks to the real injustices of post-Soviet developments, it does so primarily by symbolically rehabilitating the Soviet discursive world, supplementing it with new-found elements of conservatism (national, religious, traditional), and thus advancing them within a conservative project that promises the return to “the good old days”. The Stalinists do the same, just more “purely”; rejecting the sellout to religion and nation, only to be even more apologetic of Stalinist crimes than the CPRF. Part of this Old leftism is to associate emancipatory politics contrary to their conservative rendering of Soviet discourse as well as fundamental challenges to the status quo with the trauma of the post-Soviet years, and the unleashing of capitalism; in effect, justifying their social and cultural conservatism and/or their collaboration with the regime. As a result, the Old Left collaborates with the liberals, in that it confirms the classical liberal narrative of the essentially conservative nature of Left politics; it thus disqualifies itself from the category of Russia’s contemporary Left.

Having dismissed the Old Left in the quest for Russia’s progressive Left, what about the established liberal opposition? The most notable actors here have been the Union of Right Forces

(URF), Yabloko, and more recently, Solidarnost, the Progress Party, and the Republican Party of Russia – People’s Freedom Party (RPR-PARNAS). They represent the opposite extreme of the ideological spectrum, in that they are outspokenly pro-capitalist, inspired by the assumption that human progress truly does find its peak in Western liberal free-market democracy. Though principally progressive demands transcending Old Left economic reductionism (such as for democracy, human dignity, minority rights, ecological sustainability and freedom from state repression) may be part of their discourse to different extents (qualifying some of them as leftist, according to some observers (Levintova, 2012:743)), the Russian liberal bloc has a track record of prioritizing the freedom of the market over democratic and social justice concerns. Liberal support for Yeltsin’s authoritarianism (including his shelling of the parliament in 1993) justified by the need for a “Russian Pinochet” (Bennetts, 2014:4), is one of the clearest examples of this. This politics represents the diametric opposite to that of the Old Left, but crucially based on a shared basic premise of equating economically leftist demands with conservatism. They share the Old Left division of the political field, only to invert the political imperative: promoting progressive values is equated with economic deregulation, privatization and commercialization. The result of this agenda is the marginalization and popular distrust of the liberal camp.

Having excluded the Old Left (CPRF, Stalinists, loyalist “leftists”), as well as the official liberal opposition from the category of Russia’s new Left, one may wonder: does that not leave hardly anything at all? This interjection is valid, but somewhat misses the point. Regardless of the political content advanced by these parties, their significance to overall political dynamics in Russia is limited. Aside from the Russian system’s already strong presidential tilt, limiting what relevance party politics may have had as a site of actual contestation during the 1990s, their centrality to oppositional dynamics has disappeared as democracy has come to be increasingly “managed” under the Putin/Medvedev administration. As the entire parliamentary process (from

the registration of parties to the counting of the ballots) is subject to this management, there is no official oppositional party that does not rely on deal making with the authorities in order to ensure its inclusion. In other words, while party dynamics are a way to gauge dynamics affecting Russia's contemporary Left (as will become apparent in a moment), the world of political parties is not where the Left primarily operates today.

Extra-parliamentary politics is therefore all the more interesting a site for this project of sketching Russia's contemporary Left. Contrary to common (orientalist) wisdom, post-Soviet Russia has seen countless manifestations of oppositional collective action, including environmental campaigns, human rights defense, neighborhood resistance to redevelopment, students' and academics' struggles against the commercialization of education, residents' battles against the de-collectivization of common spaces, LGBT activism, self-organizing migrants, women's movements and independent labor action. In the majority of cases such manifestations of oppositional activism have been local and they tend to eschew the label "political", which is associated with self-interest and manipulation (Clément, 2008). Within the dominant political ontology this sphere is generally labeled "civil society", affirming the characterization of these movements as "apolitical". In a sense, this scholarly classification is an extension of the end-of-history narrative. Defining "civil society" as the "intermediary between the public and private spheres" (Evans, et al, 2006:5), and describing its constituents through labels such as "civic activism" or "citizen engagement" (aiming to "affect policy"), radical resistance and direct action as frequently employed by environmental, neighborhood, and independent trade union groups are lumped in with formal NGOs and oligarchs like Mikhail Khodorkovsky (2006:75). The implied de-politicization of collective action affirms the vision that there are no longer any fundamental political questions to be decided: all that's left is neutral "problem solving". In light of the fact that today's Russia clearly does not live up to this post-historical standard, "civil society" is

always described as ever “developing” or “maturing”. Within this teleology, repression of, or obstructions to, “civil society” become residual phenomena; archaic structures of the strong-state, attempting to hold on to elements of the socialist past. “Civil society” thus gets rendered as the future apolitical subject, pushing for the same goal as the liberal opposition, only already acting from the other side of history’s end. It should be clear that much of what is conventionally called “civil society” is crucial for my sketching of Russia’s contemporary Left, but that the very label needs to be rejected for my purposes. I will get to that in one moment.

One final sphere that is important for this task is what I will (awkwardly) call “street politics”. This is a world of informal movements, spectacular performance, and (often) physical force dominated by youth and drastic political visions. Given the prominence of the right wing and loyalist AstroTurf movements such as *Nashi*, this sphere is rarely associated with progressive demands by observers. When clearly leftist projects, like Russia’s substantial *Antifa* movement, have made their presence felt, they have often tended to be interpreted as sub-cultural phenomena (Gabowitsch, 2013:130), and are thus depoliticized in a move similar to that discussed above in the context of “civil society”.

The above tour of Russia’s oppositional landscape, as depicted by most scholarly and journalistic accounts, shows that within the given ontology there is no detectable Left; indeed, there is not even a space for a progressive radical politics. The parliamentary sphere is divided between liberals and conservative “leftists”; beyond parliament lies only an apolitical “civil society”, reactionary street violence, and sub-cultural marginals. This would seem to confirm the hegemonic logic essentially shared by liberals, the Old Left, and Putin himself, according to which the fundamental struggle is one between the past and the future; between the East and the West. The Old Left stands for stability and certainty; demands exceeding its conservative logic are signs of Western decadence. The liberals are the vanguard of civilization, fighting against

lingering Soviet stagnation and for a fledgling “civil society” to be able to “mature” fully and make Russia a “normal” country on par with Western, liberal post-modernity. Putin is the strong arbiter, aware of the conservative heartland’s need of stability, wisely managing the development of democracy and capitalism at an appropriate pace, and avoiding the misguided perversions of Western liberalism. This general script agreed upon in ironic harmony by this unholy trinity does not allow for the role of a subject that is simultaneously progressive *and* popular, anti-authoritarian *and* anti-capitalist, “post-modern” *and* fundamentally political. However, this script has become increasingly untenable.

An anecdote from the earliest days of Russia’s recent oppositional surge highlights the discrepancy of this ontology. In November 2011, two months after then-president Dmitri Medvedev announced his and Putin’s planned castling maneuver, and two weeks before the December 4, 2011, Duma elections, then-Prime Minister Putin climbed into a ring in a Moscow stadium to address the audience of a mixed martial arts fight that had just ended. Before he began complimenting the Russian victor, Fedor Emelianenko (a celebrity member of Putin’s United Russia party), for his exemplary patriotic qualities, the audience began booing the president-to-be. Western media and scholars were as baffled as Putin himself. Was this not “the kind of event where [Putin] should have been in his element” (Bennetts, 2014:94)? Were those watching not “presumably Putin’s kind of people” (Petrou, 2013:33)? Many who had long felt discontented with the status quo, and who were watching this rare televised display of dissent, felt immensely empowered. What no commentator seemed to know was that the man who had lost the fight, American Jeff Monson (a die-hard anarcho-communist covered in politically symbolic tattoos including the words “freedom” and “solidarity” in Russian), has a massive fan base among

Moscow's substantial anti-fascist and anarchist skinhead scene<sup>8</sup> – which is hardly a Putin-friendly demographic. In other words, rather than indicating that Putin's popularity had suddenly dropped to the point that even presumably gullible, patriotic MMA-fans hated him, this episode proved wrong the conventional wisdom that such a demographic need necessarily be pro-Putin by virtue of its low-brow, hence lower-class and conservative, character.

The bewilderment on the part of most observers caused by this episode reveals the practical effects of the above outlined narrative and its corresponding ontology on the political imaginary. Ilya Matveev excellently traces the contours of this fiction, calling it the polemical strategy of the “two Russias” (2014:187). This “theory” distinguishes the “enlightened minority” from “the people”, endowing the former with vigor, creativity and a neo-colonial burden to spread civilization among the latter, who are rendered a silent, patient, lethargic mass, reflected in the repressive, conservative state. As Matveev shows, this notion of the “two Russias” experienced a true heyday during the 2011-2012 wave of protest, promoted by both the liberal camp and the government to explain what was happening. Protesters were characterized as affluent hipsters, or as belonging to “a middle class comprised of young, urban, well-educated, and relatively prosperous men and women” (Aron, 2012). When mobilized approvingly, this rendering was supposed to underscore the degree of “maturation” of Russia's “civil society”, and that the protesting subject was not a working class discontented by capitalism, but an energetic, post-political non-class, trying to bring about normal, post-historical civilization. In its negative sense, this rendering was meant to depict protesters as an inauthentic, privileged, corrupted elite, out of touch with the interests of the true Russian people.

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<sup>8</sup> Aside from the commercial fight, Monson had used his time in Moscow to lead an anti-fascist hand-to-hand combat teach-in for a large crowd of enthusiastic youth, and give an interview to the anarchist journal *Avtonom* (Monson, 2011).

However, as the above anecdote of Putin's failed PR stunt illustrates, this vision does not adequately capture the character of the protest movement, nor can it conceptualize the new political landscape the contemporary Left is born out of and is helping to shape. One of the most memorable slogans of the protests poetically speaks to this deficiency in imagination. A group of Petersburg libertarian-communists exploited an idiosyncrasy of the Russian language for their slogan: "*Vy nas dazhe ne predstavlyate*" (afisha, 2012). The word for "imagine" and "represent" is identical in Russian and allows for a concise mockery of the dominant regime's failure to not only represent, but to even simply imagine the essence of the challenge posed to them during those tumultuous months: "You don't/can't even represent/imagine us". This brilliant slogan needs to be extended here, and read as a critique of the entire ontology of Russian politics, shared by scholars and experts as well. The contemporary Russian Left is *unrepresentable* and *unimaginable* within the hegemonic logic of the "two Russias".

In order for this new politics to emerge, the entire topography of the political field needs to be differently cast. This involves a number of corrections to the dominant narrative(s) summarized above. First, one needs to do away with the myth equating economic liberalization with progress in the social, political and cultural spheres, and the resulting notion that Russia has been either progressing or regressing according to this uniaxial system of measurement. One of the chief erroneous and far reaching effects of this logic is the assumption that the Putinist "thermidor" represents a dramatic break with, and regression from, the "advances" of the Yeltsin era. Obliterating continuities between the two regimes, this rendering attempts to forget how the authoritarianism of liberal reformer Yeltsin was crucial in laying the foundations for Putin's "managed democracy" (Budraitskis, 2014:172-173; Heyden & Weinmann, 2009:48-49). Further, by depicting Putin as "anti-liberal" this logic has difficulty accounting for the objectively capitalist realities of today's Russia, reflected in the country's integration with the global

capitalist market and the administration's continued implementation of neoliberal reforms, most recently of the welfare, health and education systems. Even at the level of personal biography this logic is flawed. After all, Putin rose to power as part of Yeltsin's entourage (who, in turn, rose to power in the not-so-liberal CPSU). In the same sense, such personal continuities ironically trouble the supposedly deep-seated antagonism between the current regime and its liberal critics. One of the most bizarre cases of this is socialite and TV star Ksenya Sobchak, who came to be one of the most visible representatives of the liberal opposition during the protest wave. She is the daughter of former Petersburg mayor and Putin-mentor Anatoly Sobchak, thanks to whom the current president was able to rise from insignificant, low-ranking intelligence officer to Yeltsin's inner circle during the 1990s (Petrou, 2013).

Against this myth of "economic-equals-political progress", any serious analysis needs to point out the harmony (rather than contradiction) between economic liberalization, political authoritarianism and social conservatism. Under Putin the state has not simply become "stronger again" (i.e., more like the Soviet Union); it has become stronger in its repressive function, while continuing to shed responsibilities to its citizenry. Ilya Budraitskis (2014), borrowing from David Harvey, describes Russia as a "neoliberal state", in that its function of distributing social welfare has been reduced "in favor of its exclusive reinforcement as an instrument supporting open class rule" (Budraitskis, 2014:177). Again, this trend is anything but a break with the Yeltsin years. Neither vote-rigging, nor strong presidential influence on the mass media, were invented by Putin; they were *inherited* from the Yeltsin era. It is also false to deduct a "return to socialism" from the intertwining of the political and economic elite. Rather than the state "reconquering" what was lost during the privatizations of the 1990s, this synthesis of state and capital (which, incidentally also did not begin with Putin, but already existed under Yeltsin, with his "family" of rich and powerful oligarchs) underscores the corporatization and marketization of the state by

capital under neoliberal conditions (Kagarlitsky, 2006). The state did not regain control of the market; it became part of the market (Budraitskis, 2014:177).

A second supposition implied by the dominant ontology of the “two Russias” which needs to be done away with is that postulating a privileged middle class whose desires for modernization are being held back by a lethargic, conservative working class reflected in Putin (and the Old Left). This crude class analysis, which sees a conservative-socialist populace, or “patient majority” (Volkov, 2012:56), pitted against an educated, Westernized elite, or “privileged minority” (Volkov, 2012:55), cements the division of the political according to which economic leftism is, by default, at odds with social progressivism. Furthermore, by contrasting the Western/urban with the “rural heartland”, this analysis frames things in a neo-colonial West-East binary. This reasoning should be confronted, first, on the grounds that the category of class in post-Soviet Russia is much less straight-forward than implied by it (Wood, 2012), and second, in that no clear cut political interest can be directly extracted from people’s (already vague) class belonging anyway. With regards to the first point, the usual assumption is that self-identification, economic indicators, symbolic capital, and educational levels unanimously and unambiguously demarcate people’s class belonging to confirm the “two Russias” thesis. However, as Wood points out, depending on the criteria the Russian “middle class” makes up “between 7 and 80 per cent” of the population (Wood, 2012:31); precisely because these indicators do not neatly overlap. As Chehonadskih (2014) notes, self-identifying as middle class is generally meant to convey a self-perception as “ordinary” or “average”; a reasoning shared, tellingly, by both anti- and pro-Putin protestors (Chehonadskih, 2014:205-206). In the context of the 2011-2012 anti-Putin protests, even those advancing the thesis of the opposition’s middle class character admit that economic background was the weakest indicator of participants’ middle class belonging (de Vogel, 2013:14-15). Chehonadskih points out that many of them were in fact extremely poor,

when judging by income (Chehonadskih, 2014:206). In light of these ambiguities, the most tangible indicators of middle class belonging turn out to be educational background and symbolic capital. That these factors hardly determine a persons' political trajectory was underscored by ironic slogans such as "A good hipster is a red hipster", sported by some members of this allegedly "privileged minority".

This is where the obfuscating function of the notion of "civil society" fully makes itself felt. As the supposed liberal determinant of middle class-ness turns out to be untenable, "two Russia" advocates, in a conceptual sleight of hand, substitute it with the above described notion of a maturing and increasingly active, energetic, and self-assertive post-political "civil society". This "civil society" supposedly is fighting for the future that the "patient majority" is fearful of (Volkov, 2012:56). However, given that this "civil society" is constructed by encompassing a wide variety of "civic actors", most of which can hardly be painted as being of the "privileged minority" (retired people resisting neoliberal reforms, wildcat and independently organized striking workers, self-organizing migrants, local residents fighting development, etc), this obstinate attempt at saving the analytical framework of the "two Russias" actually helps deconstruct its very foundations.

Once the basic premises of the "two Russias" thesis are dismantled, it becomes clear that the numerous instances of dissent, resistance and opposition in Russia are no longer containable in such simplistic accounts. Broadening the view again beyond the protests of 2011-2012, the obvious question is now: Do the rioting pensioners of 2004-2005 and the striking auto-workers at Russian Ford factories; indeed, do the millions of "conservative" communist voters really fit the category of the "patient majority"? Are the neighborhood and environmental initiatives resisting dispossession and development through direct action; are anti-fascist skinhead youth and precariously employed "red hipsters" really part of the "privileged minority", dissatisfied with the

“confluence of their material privilege with political impotence” (Volkov, 2012:55)? Further, are all minorities’ emancipatory claims and demands for human dignity, by default, liberal? And are those who have benefitted from the consolidation of capitalism in Russia since Gorbachev necessarily the ones with the greatest interest in deposing Putin and holding free elections?

This is where I begin tracing the actual contours of Russia’s new Left, and where I return to those subjects I initially labeled peripheral to and dissociated from it: the Old Left, the liberals, and forms of informal opposition conventionally subsumed under categories like “civil society” or “sub-culture”. In accordance with my transcendence of old ontologies (“two Russias”) and narratives (progress vs. stagnation) I need to now dissect these subjects and retrieve from them the constituents of today’s Left. In other words, SR’s and the CPRF’s systemic and ideological conservatism needs to be analytically separated from the fact that there is enough vaguely socialist sentiment among the Russian electorate for Putin to order his friend Mironov to pretend to head a leftist opposition party, and for the CPRF to receive around a quarter of the vote<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, it needs to be understood that many protestors’ self-identification as “democrats” (Volkov, 2012:57), actually does not automatically translate into support for liberal parties or their politics. Further, the fact that Russia’s “civil society” often self-identifies as “apolitical” should not be turned into proof of a “vanguard” segment of society leading the way to Russia’s catching up with post-political post-modernity. Doing so obscures the fact that much of Russia’s grassroots resistance by residents, neighbors, women, workers, migrants, drivers, cyclists, military conscripts and environmentalists against dispossession, exploitation, marginalization and violation by the bureaucratic-capitalist class has a clear anti-hegemonic – indeed, analytically speaking, a fundamental class – dimension to it. Instead, each of these manifestations of dissent

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<sup>9</sup>...or even significantly more than that. Some activists and observers I have spoken to are convinced that it is the CPRF’s results which suffer most from falsifications in favor of United Russia.

need to be understood as betraying a form of political excess; an excess of dissent, unrepresentable and unimaginable within the given order.

The continuing electoral success of the CPRF a quarter century after its relegation to opposition obviously captures an excess of dissatisfaction with post-Soviet realities. The fact that SR has brought forth some key spokespeople and organizers of the protest movement, who can be tentatively associated with the new Left (Ilya Ponomarev, Oleg Shein), and that it has a number of young and radical leftist activists working as aides to those MPs reflects the excess of personal capacity in regards to intellectual and organizational work. The continued demand for greater democratic freedoms articulated even by those disenfranchised in the process of capitalist transformation should likewise be seen as yet another expression of excess demand for different options. Finally, grassroots activism marked by formal abstention from official politics *and* practical radicalism (frequently resorting to direct action), and its inverse, “sub-cultural”, hyper-political radicalism (anarchist skinheads, red youth movements, the hardcore punk community, etc.) each speak to the incapacity of “managed democracy” (arguably of representative democracy as such) to accommodate opposition, in a sense reflecting an excess of political action and imagination. This reimagining of each of these expressions as forms of political excess allows for a new picture to emerge. What if this excess is a political subject in itself, irreducible to conservative Soviet-nostalgia, Western liberalism, “civic engagement” or youth “sub-culture”? When this new subject, located outside the ontology of “two Russias” and its narrative of “progress vs. stagnation”, materializes out of virtuality, the emergence of Russia’s contemporary Left can be witnessed.

I should be clear here: this is not to argue that, secretly, CPRF voters, Muscovite LGBT activists, anarchist street fighters, and neighborhood activists in Siberia all somehow share a common, progressive Left vision. There are obviously tremendous differences between these

different demographics and demands, and as adherents of the “two Russias” thesis will instantly point out, many “contradictions”. However, the point is that contradictions between, for example, a rural neighborhood initiative and a Moscow group of queer socialists, are products of the hegemonic political ontology, not essential to the respective demands or demographics; none of the above forms of political excess are mutually exclusive. The growing political awareness of the possibilities beyond the “two Russias” is what marks the embryonic new Left. The contemporary Left attacks the hegemonic ontologies and narratives that deny its existence; it challenges them symbolically through the production of new aesthetics and imaginaries, it confronts them practically by operating precisely at the intersections of different expressions of political excess. In what follows I will take a look at some of the most notable manifestations of this struggle.

First, I will return to the context of educational background, symbolic capital and their supposed political determination already briefly discussed above. As I pointed out, the reasoning that higher education or a sense of fashion alone fully determine, as if by some natural law, one’s political “home turf” was creatively challenged by slogans such as “a good hipster is a red hipster”. Notably, this ironic challenge to the conventional political order of things was not formulated in isolation, but is a manifestation of a broader intellectual current. The slogan was also the central assertion of artist Arseniy Zhilyaev’s manifesto, published in May 2012, in which he castigates apoliticism (Zhilyaev, 2012). Zhilyaev, who is a member of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSD), belongs to a growing scene of radical artists and intellectuals that emerged in the mid-2000s. They include collectives like *Voina*, *Chto Delat*, and *Pussy Riot*; they defy the dominant political and aesthetic order; for instance, by reclaiming anti-Stalinist elements of the Soviet heritage (Dziewanska et al, 2013:8-9). In the literary realm, a similar trend has been called Russia’s “new avant-garde” (Bozovic, 2014). Personified by poets like Kirill Medvedev (also a

member of the RSD), and reflected in the revival of revolutionary intellectuals like futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, this trend breaks with the notion that contemporary intellectual resistance must be liberal and ideologically continuous with the anti-communist intelligentsia of the Soviet 1980s.

This realm of vibrant, creative, and radical intellectual work is parallel to a similar process in the domain of gender and sexuality. Young feminist and LGBT activists and intellectuals, such as Vera Akulova (2013) and Isabelle Magkoeva, are emancipating their politics from perceptions of them as being necessarily Western-imported or liberal by highlighting the history of the Russian women's movement and by emphasizing the revolutionary gender policy of the early Soviet period. In parallel, socialist groups like RSD and KRI have been among the most vocal critics of recent homophobic and misogynist campaigns by the hegemonic bloc. Analogous to how contemporary Left artists are rediscovering the "red hipsters" of the Soviet avant-garde, these activists and intellectuals show how queer politics is not alien to, but was in fact pioneered in Russia.

*Pussy Riot* and the self-presentation of Left Front spokesperson Sergey Udaltsov can be seen here as embodying this new Left horizon aesthetically and through performance. *Pussy Riot's* iconic "Punk Prayer" stunt in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior formulated an anti-clericalism that wasn't Stalinist, and an anti-authoritarianism that wasn't liberal. Generally speaking, their rainbow-colored balaclavas allude at once to militant insurrectionism and to diversity-affirming post-Fordist emancipatory politics. A semiotic analysis of Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov's activist aesthetic highlights a similar trajectory in the more properly political sphere. With his shaved head, and frequently sporting polo shirts in classic skinhead fashion, he appeals to urban working class subculture. Simultaneously, his black sunglasses and jacket seem like props out of the revolutionary, post-modern cult film *The Matrix*; an impression Udaltsov

underscores by being spectacularly surrounded and arrested by dozens of identical looking, Agent Smith-like riot police, and spreading images thereof in the virtual and social media world. While his working class machismo lends credibility to Left Front slogans such as “Power to the millions – not the millionaires!”, self-styling himself in the image of iconic post-modern ninja Neo resonates with a desire for emancipation from less material forms of deprivation and oppression.

Moving on to a more applied, everyday form of political activism, one can see contemporary Left politics as imagined and embodied by the above examples at work in a number of key instances. A rather tragic event that highlights this well is the assassination of Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova by neo-fascists on January 19, 2009, in central Moscow. Markelov was a socialist lawyer who had made a name for himself representing leftist activists, victims of crimes committed by Russian forces in Chechnya, and renowned liberal journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Baburova worked as a journalist for the liberal daily *Novaya Gazeta*, was an environmentalist and a member of the anarcho-communist movement Autonomous Action. The broad, progressive scope of Markelov’s and Baburova’s political work was brought to the fore through their murder and understood, perhaps for the first time, as coherent. The annual anti-fascist vigils that have since been held on January 19 to commemorate the murders have been a positive and tangible manifestation of this new politics.

The anti-fascist movement (the emergence of which Baburova and Markelov, who authored of the manifesto *Red Book of Antifa* (n.d.), were also instrumental in) has been another formulation of new Left politics. Demographically, *Antifa* is located at the intersection of radical politics and disenfranchised youth “sub-culture”, particularly around football and music. This world (the very existence of which makes a mockery of the perception that those dwelling in swanky downtown apartments have a monopoly on true opposition to Putin), was recently expressed in literary form by anarchist author Petr Silaev, in his semi-autobiographic debut novel

*Exodus* (2013; published under the pseudonym DJ Stalingrad). The politicization and radicalism born from the material and spiritual bleakness of life in the grey *spalnye rayony* (bedroom suburbs) under Putin, has been similarly reflected in anti-fascist and anarchist punk, hardcore and rap groups, like Moscow Death Brigade and What We Feel.

One pivotal event of the Russian new Left's recent history, which explodes the ontology of "two Russias" more clearly than perhaps any other, took place in the Moscow suburb of Khimki on July 28, 2010, and featured radical youth in the main role. The town had seen one of the most remarkable acts of prolonged local resistance, with residents attempting to save a forest threatened by road construction for some time. On that day, in response to a violent attack on local protestors by neo-fascists, coordinated from above (RFE/RL, 2010), a crowd of several hundred anti-fascists and anarchists (organized by local activists who were at home in the anti-fascist scene, semi-formal Left organizations and the local forest defense initiative) stormed the town's administration building (covering it in graffiti) without the police having a chance to intervene (Krainova, 2010).

While this is the most spectacular example of the synthesis of different dimensions of the new Left subject (local "apolitical resistance", street mobilization of youth, semi-formal Left movements), it is not the only one of its kind, as radical extra-parliamentary anarchist and socialist groups have frequently been involved in such struggles. This should not be surprising, given that development projects like that in Khimki are often pushed through at the cost of average working people (or their life quality), for the profit of the lower echelons on the bureaucratic-capitalist elite (who have a financial stake in them), and are guarded by private security companies with ties to (or employing thugs from) the far right spectrum and state security organs, and thus lend themselves to a contemporary Left project that embodies the opposite values.

In summation of this sketch of Russia contemporary Left, the emerging political subject I call the new or contemporary Left is unrepresentable and unimaginable within the currently dominant narratives and ontologies. Its emergence thus implies a rejection of the hegemonic order which equates the freedom of capital with human liberty and dignity, which depicts the central antagonism in Russia as that between a small minority pushing for the future and a conservative populous resistant to it, and finally, which identifies the liberal opposition, “civil society” and/or the creative middle class as embodying the former, and Soviet-nostalgic, conservative-socialist masses reflected in the Putinist state as embodying the latter. The contemporary Left consists of various forms of excess-of-opposition which the hegemonic order cannot encompass; its emergence is marked by a symbolic, intellectual and practical antagonism to these hegemonic structures. I can now answer the question that has been guiding this discussion.

Who is the contemporary Left? It is not the Old Left, the liberals or Putin. It is those who gather on January 19 to commemorate Stas Markelov, Nastya Baburova and their political work; it is the radical youth who stormed the Khimki administrative building and those involved in local resistances across the country; it is the new generation of radical artists and intellectuals, the red hipsters, and the new Russian avant-garde; it is the anti-capitalist queers and feminists. Broadly, it is many of those who vote for the Old Left or liberals, not because they want Stalinist pseudo-socialism or a Russian Pinochet, but because they want neither, indeed, because they reject the Putinist fusion of Stalin and Pinochet, but are left without an imaginable alternative to both.

Where is the contemporary Left? It is neither located in the parliamentary system of parties, nor in an apolitical “civil society”. It operates at the intersections of and interstices between formal politics, informal movements, and particular resistances.

What is the contemporary Left? It is not the working, creative, middle or any other class. But neither is it merely an idealist dream, uniting people by virtue of its mere persuasive vision and detached from the material realities of neoliberal authoritarianism. But what exactly is this new subject, and how can it be apprehended theoretically? In what follows, a lengthy excursion into theoretical considerations will provide an answer to the question of how to, theoretically, envision this emerging politics.

## Chapter Two: “Discursive Materialism”

*“So what if nothing but the breadth of a knife blade separates us from the other, dark side of the Zero Cliff?”*

-Protagonist D-503, in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s dystopia *We* (1993[1924]:113)

The history of socialist theory is a history marked by failure. If Marx’ thought compellingly traced observable dynamics of the time, subsequent Marxisms have all too often been preoccupied with explaining why prophecies were not coming true, and why history was developing “abnormally”. The inception, perverted contortions, and miserable disintegration of existing socialisms in the course of the twentieth century exacerbated this crisis dramatically. In spite of theoretical innovations along the way, by thinkers and strategists like Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin, Antonio Gramsci, or Louis Althusser, by the late twentieth century, Marxism was felt by many to be at a dead end. Toward the end of the twentieth century, different theorists with a politically radical perspective have attempted to overcome this impasse by synthesizing the (crudely speaking) “modernist” Marxist tradition with different (again, crudely speaking) “post-modern” projects.

In general, the Russian condition lends itself to a probing of such efforts at synthesizing those bodies of theory. After all, the history of Soviet socialism plays a central role in the reorientation of radical theory during the last decades. Given the centrality of the Russian case for the Marxist project, re-centering Russia is thus quite helpful in gauging the profundity of different ways to rethink that project. Further, Russia seems to be an excellent site for the fusion of “modern” and “post-modern” thought, given that it seems to inhabit both epochs at once. Inversely, these post-Marxist theoretical projects are the most promising approach if one wishes

to comprehend the emergence and potential of Russia's new Left politics which, as seen above, is not reducible to objective class interests.

In theoretical terms, the conception of the Left outlined above as being an amalgamation of diverse demands and demographics, broadly corresponds to the post-Marxist school of thought as articulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001 [1985]), and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their *Empire* trilogy (2000).

I will first take a look at how Negri and Hardt envision the contemporary Left struggle. Their *Empire* (2000) has been welcomed by some as perhaps a "Communist Manifesto for the twenty-first century" (Žižek, 2001). What Negri and Hardt seek to accomplish in *Empire* is a full conceptual integration of Marxian and Foucauldian/Deleuzian thought, by considering the development of contemporary capitalism and resistance to it through a Foucault-inspired notion of power. The rationale for the integration of these two theoretical trajectories is the perception of the former as outdated, and in need of being rewritten for present times with the help of the latter. They argue that contemporary global capitalism should be understood as what they call Empire – "a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open expanding frontiers" (Negri & Hardt, 2000:xxi, emphasis in original). They adopt Deleuze's development of Foucault's bio-power into what he calls "societies of control" as a central aspect of Empire (Negri & Hardt, 2000:25), in order to expand and revise the old Marxian approach.

This fusion of Marx and Foucault yields a number of insights. For one thing, their appreciation of "immaterial labor", which they note "occupies an increasingly central position in both the schema of capitalist production and the composition of the proletariat" (Negri & Hardt, 2000:53), allows a transcendence of rigid economist reductionisms sported by orthodox Marxist-Leninism. Recall here the low-income "red hipsters" engaged in intellectual production, or

migrants carrying out low-prestige service work for minimal pay, and it becomes clear that the contemporary Russian proletariat is not only made up of industrial workers. Instead of waiting for the industrial working class to finally stage revolution, Hardt and Negri rethink the proletariat as encompassing all those “within capital and sustaining capital” (Negri & Hardt, 2000:53). This contemporary proletariat is what they call the *multitude*.

In a sense, thus reconfiguring the proletariat as “*all* those exploited by and subject to capitalist exploitation” (Negri & Hardt, 2000:53, emphasis in original) as a “plural multitude of productive, creative subjectivities of globalization” (Negri & Hardt, 2000:60) is an innovative way to recast all the various and diverse resistances against the contemporary order into the revolutionary Marxist teleology. According to them, the multitude is now the agentic historical subject to eventually overthrow the contemporary order. In other words, with Negri and Hardt one would be able to envision the subject I call the emerging Left in exactly the role Marxism has always prescribed for the industrial working class. This, however, is where the trouble lies. While Negri and Hart’s post-Marxism opens up many new possibilities, they retain from Marx one of the most constricting features, namely his eschatological view of historical development. That is, while they sketch a subject that corresponds in many respects with the contemporary Russian Left I am attempting to conceptualize, by suggesting to extract it and its destiny from the objective laws of capitalist development, they offer no helpful insights into how this subject is formulated, relying instead on automatism and necessity.

A further unhelpful consequence of their teleology is that the bio-political and immaterial properties marking the fully developed presence of Empire and the Multitude are inadvertently rendered the new yardstick of “ripe” revolutionary conditions. So, should one be inclined to descend from the global level to that of Russian radical politics; and should one be inclined to believe that “conventionally material” exploitation is still central to its dynamics (all post-

modernity aside), one ironically finds oneself in Lenin's shoes again: in an underdeveloped land, lagging behind the Global North and its revolutionary schedule.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in contrast, offer what I believe to be a better solution to the question of how to overcome Marxist constrictions without losing its political edge; thus providing an adequate theoretical foundation for considering the emergence of Russia's contemporary Left. Similar to Negri and Hardt's *Empire*, their 1985 intervention *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* attempted to fundamentally reconfigure the theoretical groundings of Left politics, with the hope of reinvigorating the Left project as a whole, and updating Left theory to correspond with contemporary struggles. Basing their own approach on new, post-structuralist foundations, they opened a new trajectory for the Marxist tradition, which would later come to be labeled as post-Marxism.

In what follows, I will discuss Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism as laid out in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Analyzing the post-structuralist emphasis of the work, I will examine the breaks and continuities with classical Marxist thought in general, and innovative renderings of it, like those of Gramsci, Althusser and Stuart Hall in particular. Further, I will discuss the political implications of their theoretical project, highlighting the risk of potentially proto-idealist readings of their theory. By focusing on the shift in emphasis detectable in later texts, especially Laclau's 2005 book *On Populist Reason* which brings the analysis of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* closer to political practice, I argue that, while Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical underpinnings are dramatically different from those of canonical Marxism, if not misread, the implications of their analysis for political practice do not tend to dramatically differ from those of previous innovative renderings of Marxist thought. With respect to the Russian context, this allows me to acknowledge that the emerging Left cannot be extracted from any

objective conditions in the spirit of scientific Marxism, but that innovative Marxist analyses nevertheless provide the foundation for Left strategy and success.

Laclau and Mouffe begin the discussion of their theoretical project by outlining the most problematic elements of the Marxist tradition. While they acknowledge diversity and frequent contradiction within the Marxist canon, they identify class essentialism, stagist conceptions of history, and economic reductionism (observable in various Marxist camps from reformist to revolutionary, from parliamentary to syndicalist and, as I noted above, in Negri and Hardt, in its own way) as some of its key flaws. The deficiency of these rigid concepts has been attested by the constant need to theoretically reconcile them with empirical observation, through supplementary concepts.

The theory of “uneven and combined development” and the notion of “hegemony”, for example, were born out of the need to bridge discrepancies between Marxist orthodoxy and observable trends. While the former sought to integrate “abnormal” (from the classical Marxist perspective) historical development as observed outside of Western Europe into the general Marxist conception of historical materialism, the latter was a series of attempts to imagine collective political action beyond narrow understandings of class war between clearly delineated and given classes.

As they track the theoretical innovations of those Marxist thinkers attempting to patch up the fissures in the classical Marxist fabric (most notably Luxemburg, Lenin, Gramsci, and Althusser), Laclau and Mouffe note a positive trajectory. With each of these theoretical responses to crisis, Marxist theory becomes more flexible, less determinist and less essentialist. If, in the late nineteenth century, it was common Marxist doctrine that history would more or less literally unfold in correspondence with historical materialist prophecy, after Lenin there was a degree of contingency. History could now be “infiltrated”, development could proceed unevenly.

If the basic Marxist doctrine was once that the proletariat was, by pre-destination, the necessary actor to bring about communist revolution, post-Gramsci Marxism could conceive of class struggle in terms of a prolonged war of position, in the process of which the historical actor was ever in the making. In this Gramscian world of hegemony, in fact, the historical subject was not so much the objectively given *class*, but the contingent *collective will*. Furthermore, particular ideological elements, such as certain cultural practices or political positions, no longer had an inherent class belonging but could potentially be mobilized for or against a given hegemonic project.

If the economy was once seen as the sole determinant of cultural, political, philosophical – in a word, ideological – conditions, after Gramsci (and even more so after Althusser's re-rendering of Gramsci's thought), ideology could be understood as material in itself and in constant interaction with the economic base, rather than merely passive superstructure. According to Althusser, by being embodied by real institutions and enacted by real people in real life, ideology not only had a material dimension, but was indeed central to the reproduction of the given relations of production.

Laclau and Mouffe, finally, see their own project as taking one more crucial step beyond these innovations in order to shed what they consider the last remnants of Marxist essentialism. These remnants are in Gramsci's case the fundamental class core of any hegemonic project, and in Althusser the continued conception of ideology (however material it may be) as just that – ideology, thus preserving the base-superstructure model. What prevents Althusser and Gramsci from going further, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is their investment in a positivist understanding of the social, fundamental to Marxism by definition.

Their move from Marxism into post-Marxism lies precisely in the rejection of the "positivity of the social". What Laclau and Mouffe do accordingly is to carry over the leftist

political project, thus far founded on Marxist positivism, onto the post-structuralist terrain of discursivity.

While this abandonment of central Marxist tenets may look like rejection *ab extra*, Laclau and Mouffe see themselves as traveling down the river that is Marxist thought, the water of which is naturally becoming diluted and refreshed with each new tributary (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:4-5). In light of this theoretical-territorial shift, which involves leaving behind many of Marxism's signature terms, I need to clarify Laclau and Mouffe's terminology. In the following, I shall go through their key terms, thus sketching the topography of their analytical approach.

As stated, for Laclau and Mouffe, discursivity rather than positivity is the essence of the social. Discourse is therefore at the heart of their theory. Having moved beyond the positivity of the social and rejected "society" as a valid object of discussion, and with it "the conception of society as an ensemble united by necessary laws" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:96), what Laclau and Mouffe call the "field of discursivity" takes its place as the appreciable social space (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:111). Within it, identities and relations are constantly produced, negotiated, and rearranged by differentiation from and articulation (that is, conjoining) with other identities and relations.

In the field of discursivity is discourse(s), defined by Laclau and Mouffe as the "structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:105). If articulation produces discourse, what is articulation? Articulation refers to "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:105). Articulation needs to be understood here in both the performative sense, akin to "uttering", and as a joint connecting separate entities (or actually *differences*, to be precise). The entities conjoined, in Laclau and Mouffe's terminology, are "moments": "The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse,

we will call moments” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:105). If not in articulation with other moments, moments are mere “elements”, or floating signifiers<sup>10</sup>.

Crucially, articulation is only ever temporary and tentative, and the fixity it provides only ever partial. This is so because “a discursive totality never exists in the form of a simply given and delimited positivity” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:110). The discursive field is not contained, thus the “the relational logic [of discourse is always] incomplete and pierced by contingency” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:110). In other words contingency, and thus articulation, are possible “because no discursive formation is a sutured totality and the transformation of the elements into moments is never complete” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:107). It is as a result of this perpetual incompleteness that the field of discursivity is in constant flux, a field of perpetual dynamism and possibility.

Within this ever fluid world in which there are neither extra-discursively accessible objective facts nor primary experience, the smallest unit of analysis can no longer be an *a priori*, given subject. Neither individuals nor groups can be directly extracted by virtue of their objective location in a positively transparent structure (such as the relations of production), or their matter-of-factual material experience. Accordingly, Laclau and Mouffe refer to what previously would have been called struggles, actors, or subjects, as *subject positions* instead (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:11, 115). Subject positions are produced and modified through processes of articulation.

This is a good moment to step back and consider the scope and implications of Laclau and Mouffe’s move, reflected in the terminology just explained, of substituting discursivity for positivity. Yevgeny Zamyatin’s classic dystopian novel *We* (Zamyatin, 1993 [1924]), which envisions a future under One State, ruled with mathematical perfection and claiming to embody the utopia of a fully reconciled society and thus poetically expressing what the political

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<sup>10</sup> Laclau and Mouffe usually formulate this *vice versa*, stating that elements become *mere* moments, *reduced* to a specific meaning and position.

implementation of a steadfast scientific positivism would dictate, will serve as a literary aide. Classical Marxism, in line with the doctrine of Zamyatin's One State, assumes that "truth is one, and the true path is one" (Zamyatin, 1993:65); namely, that of inevitable proletarian revolution. Against this, Laclau and Mouffe point to perpetual contingency of the social, and to the impossibility of extracting predictions for future developments from "objective" reality. If positivist Marxism asserts, like the adherents of One State do, that "infinity does not exist" and that "philosophical victory" is guaranteed as "everything is calculable" (Zamyatin, 1993:223), Laclau and Mouffe, like Zamyatin's disbelieving protagonist D-503, ask what is beyond this finite universe. Their answer is that there is no finitude, that the social is not conceptually containable. Accordingly I-330, the subversive revolutionary in Zamyatin's *We*, challenges One State in the spirit of Laclau and Mouffe when she declares that, since there is no final number in mathematics, "how can there be a final revolution?" (Zamyatin, 1993:168). In other words, the infinitude of the social does not only do away with the assumption that "the true path is one", but even with the expectation that a fully reconciled society marked by perfect entropic equilibrium is possible.

So far so French and post-structuralist. There are, however, Marxist terms that survive Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical renovation, albeit in modified form. Hegemony, obviously, is one of the key terms they carry over from the Marxist repertoire. Broadly speaking, it still refers to a largely similar constellation as in Gramsci, for whom the struggle for hegemony was a war of position in which a class (or rather, collective will) would articulate a variety of floating elements such that they would result in a historical bloc in the interests of that collective will.

It is precisely this emphasis on the creation of contingent relations between independent elements that predisposes the notion of hegemony for a place in Laclau and Mouffe's discursive world; or, as they put it, "it is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of

the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:134). The field where hegemony emerges is one “where [the floating signifiers Laclau and Mouffe call] 'elements' have not crystallized into [more fixed, articulated] 'moments’” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:134). Hegemony, in their theory, should be understood not as “a determinable location within a topography of the social” but rather as “a political type of relation, a form, if one so wishes, of politics” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:139).

Contrary to Gramsci, the articulating subject cannot be a fundamental class, in the sense of the solid bedrock under layers of contingency. Instead, articulation and hegemony are produced from temporary subject positions, which themselves are the product of their difference from other temporary subject positions and possible articulations; this takes place without stemming from any extra-discursive origin, and on one and the same plane – in the general field of discursivity (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:135). What differentiates hegemony from the many other articulatory practices taking place in the social is the existence of “a confrontation with other antagonistic articulatory practices” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:135). Hegemony is fundamentally defined by struggle, the ambiguous zone between antagonistic fronts where floating elements could potentially be integrated into antagonistic articulations, is the site of that hegemonic struggle.

From here on, and with the non-essentialist preconditions discussed above in mind, trademark Gramscian terms easily find their place in the analytical repertoire. Organic crisis describes the disintegration of relational structures and proliferation of floating elements; sociopolitical spaces, relatively unified around certain nodal points, are historical blocs – or hegemonic formations, if generated in antagonism. Gramsci’s war of position retains its relevance as a metaphor for political spaces that happen to see two antagonistic camps though, having abandoned the notion of necessary and fundamental dichotomous class confrontation, it is

no longer assumed that this is the only possible way for things to play out<sup>11</sup>. Having discarded Gramsci's lingering class essentialist limitations significantly broadens the range of his terms to such an extent that it makes sense to state, for example, that "the tensions inherent in the concept of hegemony are also inherent in every political practice and, strictly speaking, every social practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:88). Thus, given that the issue is no longer merely a particular, narrow range of conflict (between fundamental classes), Gramsci's vocabulary takes on a much wider scope.

Having clarified the basic logic and the terms of Laclau and Mouffe's analysis, the question is: what does this accomplish? If compared with the classical Marxism which the authors set out to move beyond, there are two major implications: first, the failure of Marxist prophecy to materialize, and the failure of the working class to become conscious of its destiny, is no longer a theoretical conundrum. Having rejected the calculability and accepted the contingency of the social, there is no longer a discrepancy between practical and philosophical victory (or, for that matter, defeat). All investment in predictable historical scripts, designating plot lines as well as the actors and their roles, has been abandoned. The second implication follows from the first: sociopolitical struggles other than the workers' movement (for example those for the emancipation of various minorities, against heterosexism, racism, ecological devastation, or for decolonization) are no longer mere *sideshow*s to, *distractions from*, or distorted *reflections of* the true proletarian struggle, but have become (conceptually) equally relevant. The true path is no longer one. In other words, what used to be a cause for crisis for old Marxism has, in Laclau and Mouffe, become accepted as perfectly normal; what used to be relegated to a lesser order has been fully integrated into their analysis.

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<sup>11</sup> Imagine, for example, a multi-polar field of several relatively equal nodal points contesting each other's claims over constituent moments.

At this point, two reactions should arise for anyone sharing not only Laclau and Mouffe's skepticism toward positivist Marxist orthodoxy, but also their investment in the Left project as such. The first reaction is a sense of liberation from previous doctrinal fetters, which finally permits a consistent analytical vocabulary that is not constantly tempted to dismiss the relevance of "non-traditional" struggles which cannot be somehow forced into a conventional Marxist analysis, or that is drawn to proto-vanguardist paternalism toward subaltern subjects sporting "false" consciousness.

The second reaction, however, is a sense of immediate unease, a distrust toward what seems to be the risk of total arbitrariness with regards to different possible ways of articulating political struggle, seemingly implied by Laclau and Mouffe's anti-essentialism. Is their rejection of even the most flexible base-superstructure models not tantamount to a return to the liberal idealism, the rejection of which was the origin of the Marxist project? Having rejected positivist materialism and affirmed floating elements of meaning and their articulations in various discursive formations as the only tangible unit of analysis, are they not in a domain of ideas which may be arbitrarily mobilized this way or that? Having rejected the essential antagonism of given classes, implied by their contradictory objective interests, are they not in Fukuyama's post-historical land of "win-win-politics" and technical "solutions" to society's problems, theorized by the likes of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens? No and yes.

No, in the sense that Laclau and Mouffe adamantly reject the understanding of discourse as merely verbal-ideational. The distinction underlying such an understanding would postulate that there are discursive practices, and an objective field of extra-discursive facts (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:108). In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe "affirm the material character of every discursive structure" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:108), and that every object is discursively constituted. While one may distinguish the verbal-linguistic from the non-verbal-linguistic,

according to their view this distinction can only take place within the general field of discursivity. The “practice of articulation”, they state, “as fixation/dislocation of a system of differences, cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:109). In short, affirming the discursive character of the social “has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:108, emphasis in original). In other words, given the materiality of discourse, a (post-)politics of dialogue and “listening to one another” is not the answer. However, collapsing the conventional distinction between the material and the ideal still initially muddles the distinction between the physical and the verbal.

Yes to the above question, therefore, in the sense that Laclau and Mouffe remain ambiguous with regards to the question of what makes certain articulations possible, more likely, more durable, or more powerful at a given time than others. This is not to say that the authors suggest a reading according to which there is always absolute freedom of articulation to unfold in any which way. For example, they note that once the economist paradigm has been rejected, it becomes apparent that various forms of social protest may be articulated freely of class bounds. Immediately they add, “*freely*, that is, of any *a priori* class character of struggles or demands – obviously not in the sense that *every* articulation is possible in a given conjuncture” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:86, emphasis in original). Elsewhere they state that it would be “wrong to propose ... either pluralism or the total diffusion of power within the social, as this would blind the analysis to the presence of nodal points and to the partial concentrations of power existing in every concrete social formation” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:142). This clearly counters the criticism of arbitrariness. However, owing an answer as to what might make some articulations plausible and what might predispose certain possible articulations over others (and whether or not

there might be any pattern to this pre-disposition), leaves the risk of proto-idealist readings of the analysis, which construes the articulatory game as one of neutral chance or simple intellectual ability.

Laclau and Mouffe's central problem in the political sense is therefore, as they acknowledge, "to identify the discursive conditions for the emergence of a collective action" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:153). They provide the starting point of an answer by explaining that in order for a relationship in which an agent is uncontestedly subjected to the decisions of another (a relation of subordination, in their terms) to become a site of antagonism and struggle (a relation of oppression, in their terms) and potentially yield emancipation, is for that discursive structure to be subverted by a discursive exterior. They cite Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 manifest *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which politicized the previously "natural" subordination of women by articulating it with the democratic discursive structure of liberty and equality, as the prime example of such a process (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:154). However, the logic behind why the exterior discursive nodal point of the democratic imaginary became available to Wollstonecraft and articulable within a gender context at this precise moment in history remains mysterious. Simply *noting*, rather than *explaining*, the availability of the democratic imaginary and Wollstonecraft's feminist articulation of it is exactly to remain within the domain of the verbal which, as discussed above, is but one dimension of discourse.

The opposite response would be the plethora of classical Marxist sound bites that come to mind when explaining Wollstonecraft's place in history with positive scientific certainty: natural forces of production, objective laws of historical materialism, inevitable contradiction with relations of production, dialectical *Aufhebung* of superstructural fetters, etc. However, having rejected essentialist preconditions of all variants including Marxist (economy) and liberal (human nature), there is "nothing inevitable or natural in the different struggles against power, and it is

necessary to explain in each case the reasons for their emergence and the different modulations they may adopt” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:152). At this point it seems that one has arrived at the limit of Laclau and Mouffe’s explanatory ability, or willingness to venture into palpable hypotheses (in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, that is). Wary of falling into essentialist trappings, they prefer to err on the side of caution and refuse to provide anything more tangible than to say that every case is particular, and every development is contingent.

This refusal is puzzling in two respects. For one thing, if one has not already, one certainly starts to wonder why it is that Laclau and Mouffe see their project as an extension of the Marxist tradition. Aside from a seemingly coincidental, sentimental attachment to socialism as a political project, and an adoption of some key concepts out of the Marxist tradition (albeit divorced from their fundamental directional configuration) the connection is not apparent. The Marxist project arguably revolves around an ambition to formulate hypotheses regarding the process of political struggle and the centrality or powerfulness of certain elements as compared to others. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe, by stressing the contingency and particularity of all articulatory processes, seem to negate precisely the possibility of such hypotheses or the possibility of statements on the power relations between different elements beyond descriptive statements formulated in hindsight. Political practice, however, needs more (and as I shall show shortly, a refined reading of Laclau and Mouffe does provide more).

This discrepancy between theoretical correctness and political meaningfulness speaks to the second sense in which Laclau and Mouffe’s refusal to go beyond acknowledging complexity and particularity is puzzling. It is puzzling in as much as it seems to fall victim to an unwarranted analytical leap from dangerously essentialist terrain into a realm of theoretical safety, which is devoid of practical meaningfulness. Leaping away from *inevitability*, they land in total *unpredictability*, skipping over the possibility of *tendentia*lity, and losing the politically and

analytically critical edge in the process. The fact that a ship has raised its anchor, and that the effect of the ocean's currents and the wind's antics always are subject to the sailors' utilization of them, does not mean that the direction of the ship will forever remain unpredictable or that one can make no meaningful statements about the process of sailing. While making precise predictions regarding the effect of wind and ocean on sailboats (as such), based on a notion of underlying physical laws, is impossible (as long as the focus is on a ship designed, built, rigged and steered by humans), merely asserting that impossibility is not particularly profound. Thankfully, this is not exactly what Laclau and Mouffe are arguing.

The issue here is not so much a conceptual failure, but a matter of their theoretical intervention's emphasis and direction. Shifting focus to Laclau and Mouffe's preface to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy's* second edition, written in 2000, and to Laclau's 2005 book *On Populist Reason*, helps clarify this issue. In both texts one can detect a certain backpedaling motion, or perhaps more accurately, an attempt to clarify misunderstandings stemming from the argumentation in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

To explain this, I will focus on three particular aspects, beginning with Laclau and Mouffe's rejection of potential liberal misreading of their original analysis, as expressed in the preface to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy's* second edition. While reaffirming the basic premise of the 1985 book, they make a point of clearly demarcating their own approach from liberal, dialogical anti-politics *à la* Giddens and Beck (and to a lesser degree, Jürgen Habermas). Against it they assert that they never envisaged the social terrain as neutral (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:xv, xvi). Incidentally in this context, the phrase "power relations" (which was never used in the book) makes several appearances in the preface.

Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005), which clearly builds upon the analysis developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, offers a second interesting clue on how to read the earlier work

by him and Mouffe, namely Laclau's response to criticism by Žižek. As a retort to Žižek's alleged desperate clinging to economist notions of "determination in the last instance", Laclau declares that "nobody seriously denies ... the centrality of economic processes in capitalist societies" (Laclau, 2005:237). The "unevenness of the elements entering the hegemonic struggle", Laclau states, is actually what his theory of hegemony is all about (Laclau, 2005:236). Given that Žižek's criticism does not so much aim at Laclau's inattention to unevenness per se, but rather his seeming denial of unevenness resulting from the qualitative difference between physical and verbal (economic and ideological) elements, Laclau's retort acknowledges this qualitative difference, only disagreeing with Žižek in that he sees this unevenness as historic rather than transcendental, and still locates it entirely within discursivity.

A third clue, also found in *On Populist Reason*, is already in the very title of that book. Populism is understood by Laclau as "a way of constructing the political", crudely speaking, through an establishment of a chain of equivalences into a popular camp of a *plebs* claiming to be the *populus*, positioned antagonistically toward elite power. This "political logic" (Laclau, 2005:117) is so pervasive, according to Laclau, that it is fair to state that there "is no political intervention which is not populist to some extent" (Laclau, 2005:154). This is a curious shift from the argumentation in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In that book's irritation with Gramsci's "lingering essentialism", and its effort to move away from his assumption of the ultimately dichotomous division of the political field, "the fundamental concept is that of 'democratic struggle'" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:137), and the topography of the political field is generally marked by multi-polarity. *Popular* struggles, on the other hand, "where certain discourses *tendentally* construct the division of a single political space in two opposed fields ... are merely specific conjunctures resulting from the multiplication of equivalence effects among the democratic struggles" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:137, emphasis in original). In other words,

while Laclau and Mouffe had left behind Gramsci's basic premise of the "two camps", the later Laclau rehabilitates and promotes it to the level of universal political logic.

Let me recapitulate the three above observations. First, in light of the flourishing of anti-Marxist, anti-materialist, and neoliberal political and theoretical escapades of the late 1980s and 1990s, Laclau and Mouffe are compelled to clarify what had not been sufficiently clear in the original presentation of their theory; namely the fact that the discursive terrain of the social is not neutral, but marked by power relations. Second, upon being prodded by "orthodox communist" troublemaker Žižek, Laclau clarifies that his rejection of objective, extra-discursive economic laws never meant to deny the (discursive) centrality of economic processes within the current capitalist social context. Third, descending from the pure realms of meta-theory (in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*), where Gramscian insistence on the ultimately dichotomous tendency of the political is dismissed by the authors (lest their theory become contaminated with Marxist essentialism!), to the gritty empirical world of applied politics (in *On Populist Reason*), Laclau notes that just such a division as prescribed by the populist logic is actually paradigmatic of politics as such.

It is in this sense that the shortcomings of Laclau and Mouffe's original rendering, and the subsequent need for clarification, are not a conceptual failure but a mere issue of emphasis. In the context of theoretical stagnation on the Left in the late 70s and early 80s, and in their effort to get rid of essentialist fetters, they did what was necessary at the time and pushed against determination, positivism and calculability. Hence the frequent polemical leaps from, for example, the rejection of logical deducibility of an interest in socialism merely by virtue of being working class, to the implied suggestion that being working class would have no predisposing effect whatsoever toward articulation with socialist politics. Similarly, they equate the failure of Marxist theorists to militantly reject all economism with intolerable essentialist rigidity,

inadvertently implying that emancipation from rigidity requires an anti-economist, proto-liberal theory blind to power relations and the centrality of economic processes.

Incidentally, this slightly impetuous theoretical fervor is quite reminiscent of an earlier pair of radical theorists and their zeal in setting things right. In an 1890 letter to Ernst Bloch, Friedrich Engels admits that Marx and his efforts to counter overt idealism in their time led to an inaccurate overemphasis of the economic realm. As a result, he laments, “the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it” (Engels, 1890). In the letter, Engels affirms his belief in the ultimate determining effect of the “production and reproduction of real life”, adding that to distort this into saying that “the economic element is the *only* determining one” would be to turn that proposition “into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase” (Engels, 1890). This production and reproduction of real life, according to Engels, involves “innumerable intersecting forces” (Engels, 1890) including political, juridical, philosophical, religious, as well as simply accidental ones. These lines are interesting, not only as a showcase of a theorist cleaning up the mess of misreading that resulted from a particular emphasis of an intervention articulated within a given environment. It is interesting, also, for how it attempts to explicitly preempt the kind of economic reductionism that Laclau and Mouffe trace in Marxism, beginning roughly around the same time. This is not to say that Engels did not still advocate a positivist view incompatible with Laclau and Mouffe’s approach, but it paints a much more diverse picture than that of the archetypal Marxist economist straw man. What both pairs of theorists have in common is the need for *ex post facto* rectification of a theoretical project that, due to historical necessity, overstressed a particular trajectory.

I feel I have reached a point of reconciliation. Consistent with their ethic of “reactivation” (that is, of making the original theoretical act visible again (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:viii)), Laclau and Mouffe act in the true spirit of Marx and Engels, and do to late twentieth century Marxism

what Marx and Engels did to nineteenth century German philosophy. For what was the original theoretical act of Marx and Engel's materialism? It was, at its most basic, an attack on the idealist mystification of material processes of exploitation. Laclau and Mouffe, in turn, deliver a blow against positivist mystification of political processes in the political and social theory of the Left. In essence, both share the desire for demystification.

I am now in a position to better appreciate the value of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony. Having confirmed that the fluid, indeterminate, ever incomplete, and always potentially dynamic nature of discursivity should not to be mistaken for a neutral, arbitrary, or ideational terrain of verbalism or merely deliberative dialogue, the formulation of meaningful and politically critical statements and hypotheses becomes possible again. Though I have rejected predetermination, innate necessity and eschatology, that does not mean that tendencies, likelihoods or potential regularities of this or that articulation should be ignored. Though I have rejected the notion of the economy as an extra-discursive realm of objective laws, I can state that (given the centrality of economic processes to the given social configuration) less verbal, more material discursive elements may have a tendency to float less freely than others, that some may lend themselves more to certain articulations than to others, and so forth.

In this light, understanding their work as implying overt and arbitrary freedom of possibilities appears to be misguided. Materiality can thus be safely "rehabilitated", in the sense that economic elements are more central than mere verbal-ideational ones, albeit always under the premise of them being part of the social world of discursivity. I have thus returned to the possibility of radical politics. In this light, the role of signature Marxist notions in Laclau and Mouffe seems almost non-controversial. Not only Gramsci's flexible and innovative Marxism, but even somewhat more orthodox accounts of historical development could be accommodated,

albeit under the premise of the perpetual contingency and ultimately non-necessary character of such explanatory models.

To return to the example of Mary Wollstonecraft's articulation of gender relations and the democratic project into political feminism: it is now safe to suggest that the onset of modern capitalism and the resulting economic inefficiency of the old sexual order facilitated Wollstonecraft's articulation. Such an analysis can clearly be formulated within Laclau and Mouffe's framework, as long as the observed dynamic is not exaggerated into a transcendental principle postulating that the facilitator somehow operates according to extra-discursive, physical laws and necessarily needs to be the ultimate determinant. The interjection here might be this: how do I account for the degree of an observed "facilitation" (call it "tendential determination" if you will), without exaggerating it into a *de facto* extra-discursive determinant? This is, of course, precisely the challenge innovative Marxists have faced since the challenge of orthodox economism first became apparent.

Indeed, all of a sudden the perceived difference between Laclau and Mouffe's project, and that of their innovative Marxist predecessors (whose essentialist limitations they are so keen to move beyond) shrinks dramatically. If upon the first (mis)reading of their approach, it was unclear in how far Laclau and Mouffe could even legitimately claim to emerge from the Marxist tradition, now the better question seems to be in how far they actually go beyond the unorthodox theorists of that tradition.

Stuart Hall, for instance, argues for a Marxism "without final guarantees"; one which preserves the notion of determinacy, but understands it "in terms of setting of limits, the establishment of parameters, the defining of the space of operations, the concrete conditions of existence, the givenness of social practices, rather than in terms of the absolute predictability of particular outcomes" (Hall, 1996:43). Rather than expecting determination in the last instance, he

continues, one should “think of the materialism of Marxist theory in terms of determination by the economic *in the first instance*” (Hall, 1996:43, emphasis in original). While accepting the general premise of contingency, he affirms that “Marxism is surely correct, against all idealisms, to insist that no social practice or set of relations floats *free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located*” (Hall, 1996:43, emphasis added). Such flexible Marxism seems to come down to very similar conclusions about social processes as my “discursive materialist” reading of Laclau and Mouffe. The question, in other words, is precisely this: what is the difference between a non-dogmatic, flexible materialist essentialism (Hall’s “Marxism without guarantees”) and a post-structuralist analysis underscoring discursivity, which does not lose track of the centrality of the material dimensions of discourse? I seem to have returned to square one. The answer is, of course, that the latter rejects the foundational assumptions, the theoretical starting point of the former. This difference seems small, but is crucial. To borrow once more from Zamyatin: “Yes, we’ve come back to zero – yes. But ... this zero is completely different” (Zamyatin, 1993 [1924]:112). There is, one might say, “some kind of silent huge, narrow, knife-sharp cliff” (Zamyatin, 1993 [1924]:112) here.

In day to day political struggles, the difference between the theoretical position Laclau and Mouffe started from and that advocated by innovative Marxists (like Hall) may be marginal and any insistence on sorting it out may seem esoteric. The question of whether a given antagonistic conjuncture is ultimately determined by natural law (but subject to countless contingencies) or ultimately contingent (but subject to malleable, but viscous tendencies) seems, from the point of view of political practice, tantamount to theoretical hairsplitting. However, even “if nothing but the breadth of a knife blade separates us from the other dark side of the Zero Cliff” (Zamyatin, 1993 [1924]:113), it is precisely what side of this cliff one is on that makes the difference between an infinite universe of never ending revolution and the suffocating harmony

of One State, between the awareness of everlasting possibility, with all its doubts and the dogma of ultimate calculability; with all its certainty. Crucially, although I have arrived at zero again, everything is different; thus the transition through Laclau and Mouffe is necessary. It is only afterward that I can safely reintegrate innovative Marxist approaches. In other words, my reading (and its slightly awkward label “discursive materialist”) fully endorses the fundamental principle of their intervention, merely insisting on the need for vigilance against idealist derailment.

How can this reading of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory aid an adequate understanding of the emerging Russian Left? As I have rejected the notion of calculable economic determination, contingency is now the basic assumption, and what used to be “objective laws” have become “contingent *social logics*” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:142, emphasis in original). As political projects can no longer be extracted from objective interests, this allows for a rethinking of the Left as outlined above. By conceiving of the social as operating discursively it becomes possible to transcend old Marxist (*and* classical liberal) essentialisms and eschatologies. The subject position that is Russia’s contemporary Left does not need to be a class or a unified political doctrine; it is a number of elements coalescing in a new subject position, or “collective will”. Laclau and Mouffe’s approach allows for this subject position to emerge without subscribing to class essentialist or Fukuyamean explanatory models: the true Left, at its most basic, is the articulation of leftist economic policy with social progressivism, of anti-capitalist with anti-Stalinist critique.

Laclau and Mouffe’s thought thus has great liberatory potential for political practice. It encourages one to stop worrying and let go of floating signifiers should they have drifted out of the articulatory terrain of a contemporary Left project (think of Soviet patriotism, as it is currently being mobilized in the service of Putinist geopolitics). It demonstrates that elements don’t have an inherent identity, but acquire one through their articulation into larger discursive

structures. This affirms that individual human dignity, for example, may very well be part of a radical Left project, regardless of the fact that anti-social liberal articulations claim a monopoly over it. Similarly, this approach frees the Left from certain syndicalist dogmas, according to which particular articulations by the (supposedly given) working class are invested with near-biblical, prophetic truth; implying, by extension, that if the working class rejects homosexuality, then LGBT emancipation is counter to Left politics. All of the above dynamics can thus be conceived as challenges of articulation, which need to be tackled through a contemporary, emancipatory hegemonic project. At the same time though, by acknowledging the material dimension of discourse (or to say the same thing backwards, the discursive dimension of the material), and the unevenness of “weight” amongst different elements, one can steer clear of proto-idealist and post-political dialogism that denies fundamental antagonism. What this means in practice is that the relevance of an event like the 2011-2012 protests can be appreciated in spite of the fact that it cannot be extracted from some objective economic determinant, while at the same time the failure of this protest movement to meaningfully articulate economic demands can be appreciated as a key factor in its temporary defeat.

However, a crucial point: as already discussed at length, the articulation of the new Left subject position in contemporary Russia cannot take place within the current topography of the political field. As elaborated above, the Left does not simply emerge to take its place as one political actor among several. Its existence denied by the entire hegemonic order, the contemporary Left stands in antagonism to all the dominant political narratives and ontologies, and the subject positions accommodated within them. That is, the Left, as a camp, stands in opposition to the hegemonic order, against the ontological harmony of the liberals, the Old Left, and Putin. This is where, in a sense, I return to “zero” once again, and am looking once more at “two Russias”. But once again, this “zero” is different. It is not the humble people against the

worldly intelligentsia, not Stalinism against liberalism, not East against West. It is the hegemonic order which cannot think outside of those exact boundaries – challenged by an emancipatory, progressive Left, unimaginable and unrepresentable within it. This is where the discussion needs to move to the logic of populism.

### Chapter Three: Gezi Spirit – Or How to Articulate a Progressive Populism

*“Thus upon all the points of attack automatically converged angry human swarms ... This was their battle, for their world ... For the moment that incoherent multiple will was one will...”*

John Reed’s impression of the October Revolution,  
in *Ten Days That Shook the World*, (2007 [1919]:201)

Russia’s emerging Left is, in a way, beyond the current hegemonic horizon. It is not, as I have established above, merely a renovated version of the Old Left or the liberal project, but the emergence of a new nodal point in the discursive field that is the Russian social and political context. It articulates various demands, which are in excess to the current order, to formulate a subject position that faces the entire hegemonic order antagonistically. As its defining characteristic is its unimaginability and unrepresentability within the current regime; as it cannot be accommodated in the system, the new Russian Left needs to be understood as what Laclau (2005) would call a populist project. My assertion is that only once this new subject is envisioned through Laclau’s framework of populism, can its potential to fundamentally and lastingly reconfigure the entire political field be fully appreciated. This, admittedly, is a bold suggestion. However, an excursion to Turkey’s Gezi Park will show that what was unimaginable only days ago can become imaginable when the power of progressive populist logic is seized.

In contrast to the term’s conventional meaning, Laclau’s populism should not be mistaken for a type of movement, with particular political content or a specific form. Instead, populism is a “political logic” (Laclau, 2005:117) that describes the process of constituting “a global political subject bringing together a plurality of social demands” by way of constructing “internal frontiers and the identification of an institutionalized other” (Laclau, 2005:117). What does this mean more specifically?

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe put forward a distinction between what they call “democratic” and “popular” subject positions (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:131). In his discussion of populism, Laclau picks up on this division. A democratic demand is isolated and may or may not be accommodated by the given social order. Demands for a better labor code, same-sex marriage, or ecological sustainability would be examples of democratic demands (Laclau, 2005:74). A popular demand, on the other hand, is a “plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity” (Laclau, 2005:74). A democratic demand, by virtue of its isolation and accomodatability, does not divide society. A popular demand however, if it develops into a full-fledged popular subject position, a stable system of signification (Laclau, 2005:74), divides society into two opposing camps (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:131).

Thus, when Laclau is discussing populism, he is talking about the process of articulating a number of democratic demands into a popular one, and the construction of the frontier dividing the resultant opposing camp, which comes with it. In Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the popular moment is associated primarily with Third World countries in which extreme exploitation and repression facilitate such a division of society; while in *On Populist Reason*, Laclau centers the populist moment and identifies it as “the political act *par excellence*” (Laclau, 2005:154). To put it simply, there are no political projects which are not in some way populist, there are only varying degrees of populism (Laclau, 2005:154).

To go back to the above examples, one can easily see, for instance, that upon closer inspection even the isolated demand for ecological sustainability is already an equivalential conglomeration of different, more isolated demands – for the preservation of particular habitats, for rational long-term economic thinking, for the life quality of those negatively effected by non-

sustainable practices, etc. When talking about populism though, Laclau is focused on the extension of this logic to its fullest.

In order for that to happen, the *plebs* (that is, the plurality of numerous “underdog” demands articulated in an equivalential chain) need to claim to be the one and only legitimate people. The *plebs*, in other words, need to form a global subject – a *populus*, that is “a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community” (Laclau, 2005:81). This process involves an investment in a particular identity, picked out of the field of articulated differences, to embody the totalizing function. In becoming the stand-in for the populist demand, this signifier is emptied of its original meaning; an empty signifier embodying the unity of articulated demands.

Anyone remotely familiar with the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey can already see how that example relates to Laclau’s populism. Not only are the Gezi Park protests an exceptionally vivid example of the general dynamics Laclau is describing but, significantly, it is an example of the construction of *progressive* populism. Allow me to take a closer look. What happened in Turkey?

In late May of 2013, a group of about 50 protestors (this author among them) gathered in central Istanbul’s Gezi Park to prevent the razing of trees to make way for a large scale construction project. Scuffles broke out with the riot police on site, and police dispersed the crowd. Though a local politician was able to negotiate a temporary halt to the demolition, the deployment of pepper spray and tear gas against the unarmed demonstrators had kicked off a momentous series of events. Thousands of people began to occupy the park to prevent police and crews from continuing their work. A massive early morning raid, drowning the park in clouds of tear gas, escalated the situation into large scale street fighting, with protestors eventually successfully reconquering the park and holding on to it for about two weeks.

Within days of the initial confrontation in Istanbul, protest spread throughout the entire country with similar occupations of public space in several major cities, eventually mobilizing millions of participants (Yetkin, 2014; Yörlük 2014:424). The liberated zone around Gezi Park and adjacent Taksim Square, fortified by massive barricades, turned into an exceptional zone of political recomposition, which was mirrored across the Turkish social (and non-censored conventional) media sphere in virtual form; a recomposition which would have lasting effects on the entire country.

The movement as a whole was marked by a number of astonishing features. Most importantly, there was a stunning solidarity among the highly plural and previously often antagonistic demands voiced. Radical emancipatory LGBT and feminist politics, for instance, were powerfully voiced in the presence of conventionally heterosexist factions of hyper-masculine football-ultras, while Kurdish nationalists waved their hitherto extremely contentious flags without provoking any serious escalations with Kemalist nationalists. The unity of the protests' diverse demographic constituents was similarly surprising, with a vast array of economic backgrounds; high-income specialists and homeless children participated equally. The movement's relationship to physical force, and the general consensus regarding it, was notable too. Police violence was relentlessly resisted, but property destruction was limited to a very specific set of targets: construction equipment designated for park demolition, a number of vehicles belonging to pro-government media, and a few city busses (strictly for the purpose of barricade building). Indeed, protestors went to great lengths to take care of the space in their possession – one widespread joke was that Taksim Square had never been as clean as during its occupation, surrounded by barricades. A collective sensation was born on those barricades; it grew and matured in occupied Gezi Park, and spread throughout the whole country. This strange

mood, inexplicably shared by the multitude of participants, was what began to be called *Gezi Ruhu* - Gezi Spirit (Yücel, 2014:34).

This Gezi Spirit is also central to understanding the legacy of the Gezi episode. In assessing the achievements of the movement, one is confronted with a certain ambiguity. While the immediate aim of preserving Gezi Park seems to have been secured for now, Erdoğan's government was not shaken and larger scale tangible political effects are lacking. However, what participants and observers seem to agree on is that the success of the Gezi movement lies in the fact that it effected an irreversible reconfiguration of the political field of Turkey. One of the most significant indicators of this lasting recomposition is the (relative) de-marginalization of LGBT persons and sex workers – the 2013 Istanbul Pride Parade saw an unprecedented turnout of approximately one-hundred thousand people. Another sign of this recomposition is the accelerated renewal of the Kemalist opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), manifested in its opening itself toward previously suspect demands (especially Kurdish autonomy). The linkage of this policy shift to the legacy of the Gezi uprising was openly acknowledged by one CHP party member, who said that the constructive atmosphere in a meeting between his party and representatives of the pro-Kurdish BDP had been demanded of them by Gezi Spirit (BBC, 2013). Much more widespread solidarity with worker's struggles, as in the case of the powerful and explicitly political reaction to the deaths of more than three hundred miners in the town of Soma in May of 2014, both among those directly affected as well as among non-industrial-working class urbanites, is another testament to the legacy of Gezi Spirit (Letsch, 2014).

Further, many have linked the progressing disintegration of the ruling Islamist camp, most clearly illustrated by the fallout and ensuing dirty feud between Erdoğan and his former ally Fethullah Gülen and his Hizmet Community, to the Gezi events (Tuğal, 2013). In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, one could say that the most apparent effect of the Gezi protests was the creation

of a new oppositional nodal point, and the destabilization of the hegemony of the ruling neoliberal-conservative Islamists and their Kemalist and far-right nationalist oppositional counterparts.

How can the Gezi uprising be explained in Laclauian terms? The Gezi movement clearly represents a prime example of a populist project *à la* Laclau. First, one can observe the articulation of a vast array of isolated democratic demands. The countless factions that joined the movement included environmentalists opposed to unsustainable development; republicans opposed to the neo-imperial and commercial reshaping of public space; neighborhood organizations resisting neoliberal turbo-gentrification; and the local LGBT community, which was invested in the particular site for its role as a cruising ground. Each of these separate democratic demands had been frustrated by a state refusing to accommodate them for some time. The role of the “empty signifier”, “the part which identifies itself with the whole” (Laclau, 2005:82), is of course the particular, local struggle against the razing of Gezi Park.

This alone, though, does not yet constitute populism as defined by Laclau. What makes the Gezi Park protest a populist mobilization is the movement’s claim to represent “the only legitimate totality” (Laclau, 2005:81); essentially to claim, in its diversity, to be the *populus*. One poetic manifestation of this explicit claim was the word *Halk* – people – spray painted over the word *Polis* – police – on metal fence segments which had been left, *en masse*, in the vicinity by the retreating authorities after they had given up on trying to keep demonstrators out of the park, and which were then appropriated and turned into street barricades serving the opposite purpose. Similarly, an industrial excavator which was captured by the legendary warriors of football supporter-group Çarşı and deployed against armored police vehicles became famous as the *Halkın Dozeri* – the People’s Dozer (Ben benim, 2013). As explained by Laclau, the construction of a boundary demarcating the opposite camp is always implicit in the constitution of a populist

“people”. In the case of the Gezi protests one can see this construction in the depiction in the popular imaginary of Erdoğan in particular and his AKP cronies and police troops in general, as mad, power-hungry, cold-blooded, authoritarian murderers who relied on the use of tear gas to impose their will on the people; this was expressed in countless graffiti, slogans and internet memes.

Crucially, the populist articulation of the Gezi movement was not simply a more visible or more powerful reiteration of something that had already been in existence to begin with, but created something entirely novel. The conglomeration of numerous frustrated demands under the empty signifier of Gezi Park is nothing less than an entirely new production, which only found its unity in the very act of its constitution. There was no prior logical or necessary unity to the demands, and indeed many of them were (until then) articulated in often contradictory discursive structures (recall macho-football-ultras vs. LGBT politics, or Kemalist vs. Kurdish nationalisms). It is only after Gezi Park assumed its role as empty signifier, subsuming the rest, that they could be conceived as constituting one oppositional object and, importantly, one that is bigger than the sum of its constituent parts. A comment regarding the overcoming of the previously nationalist paradigm of Turkish politics, which summed up the transformation as one of “being a nation into being a people” (Üstündağ, 2013), underscores the Laclauian populist logic. This novel, and irreversible (not in the sense of eternal, but in the sense of non-erasable), recomposition of the political field is the legacy of Gezi Park. And this, precisely, is where one begins to approach Gezi Spirit.

A further key aspect of the Gezi protests (and the main reasons for discussing it at length in this paper) is that it was not just a populism, in the general sense of following the political logic described by Laclau, but in the loosest sense a progressive Left populism as Laclau was hoping to see develop more in the post-Marxist future. That is, if in pre-Gezi Turkey there might

have been oppositional subject positions (such as Kemalist nationalist, ethno-nationalist, feminist, orthodox Marxist, liberal, and so forth (Bakiner, 2013)) with any number of conceivable ways of articulating them into a populist project, what was hope-inspiring about the Gezi protests was that the populist articulation that *did* take place was a vague amalgamation of the *emancipatory*, *collectivist* and *inclusive* dimensions of pre-existing discursive structures, generally excluding reactionary and chauvinist elements. Indeed, the Gezi Park uprising had a clear leftist character: the fight for accessible public space was a fight for the commons, the fight for Taksim Square was symbolically continuous with the workers' movement's struggle since the massacre there on May Day 1977. The Gezi example is thus not only interesting from a purely scholarly-theoretical point of view, but from that of Left strategy as well. This generally progressive character of the mobilization adds another hint for understanding Gezi Spirit.

What exactly is Gezi Spirit in practice? And how can it be cast in Laclauian terms? In the wake of the Gezi experience participants and commentators (and commentating participants) have attempted to define Gezi Spirit. Some begin by mentioning the protests' demographic constitution and its novelty, saying that Gezi Spirit is youthful and female (Yücel, 2014:34-36). The next step is to further identify Gezi Spirit with progressive political content, such as freedom, pluralism, respect, solidarity and anti-capitalism (BBC, 2013, August, 10). While these factors are central to Gezi Spirit, its essence lies beyond them. Just as Laclau, in his quest for populism, notes that demographic constitution and political content can give no satisfactory definition of populist mobilization, I too must now move to the level of *political logic* to understand Gezi Spirit.

The most common feature noted by those trying to put their finger on Gezi Spirit is the creation or discovery of a specific political logic, expressed for example as a "new solidarity" (Letsch, 2014), as the possibility of unity in diversity (Bakiner, 2013) or as an active redefinition

of democracy (Örs, 2014). A comment by a feminist activist shows how this new logic of solidarity was manifested in practical terms: protestors who were initially uninterested in queer politics (such as football ultras) “stopped using expressions like 'faggot' and 'whore' in their protest slogans when they realized that LGBTs and sex workers, too, were with them in the park” (Letsch, 2014). Additionally, she added that secular feminists went through a similar process, as they realized that women wearing headscarves shared many of the same problems (Letsch, 2014).

On first sight, it would seem that to speak of Gezi Spirit is simply to discuss the construction of populism as described by Laclau. In many ways, the exhilarating sensation felt by many and captured by the notion of Gezi Spirit is simply an appreciation for the redrawing of the boundaries of the political field. Participants and activists invested in particular struggles felt a boost of motivation upon seeing that their demands were no longer confined to isolated niches, but articulated in a grand oppositional project. The breaking down of the discursive structures which had previously fettered the diverse demands that made up the Gezi movement in outdated, dead-end configurations (Bakiner, 2013) is certainly a key dimension of Gezi Spirit. If it was limited to this, Gezi Spirit would simply be a colloquial way of describing the political logic of populism.

However, Gezi Spirit is more than that; it goes beyond the theoretical framework of populism presented by Laclau. Gezi Spirit, one might say, has a certain element of exponentiality, grounded in self-awareness. As different demands encountered each other in clouds of tear gas, this led to the sudden epiphany that the previously impossible (Sayers, 2014) – the redrawing of the map – was in fact possible, such redrawing accelerated, and the potential of renewal increased exponentially. Additionally, as the fixity of the overall political landscape suddenly lost its perceived permanence, the fixity of each demand’s internal structure was opened to re-articulation as well. Bülent Eken (2014) describes this as a “logic of becoming”, which is

“based on the seeds of transformation planted in an encounter in which each party moves on to something else that he or she could have never formulated before or outside the encounter” (Eken,2014:434).

It is exactly this element of awareness, which enabled this exponential potential that is at the heart of Gezi Spirit. What happened during the Gezi Park uprising was not a mere gathering of demands enabled by their mutual frustration, but an often conscious cross-infusion of these demands with elements of each other. Again, the example of gender is very telling in this regard. When (government-engineered) rumors spread through Gezi Park and the media that veiled women had been attacked by secular protestors, feminists in Gezi Park (some of whom wore headscarves themselves) adopted the common slogan of “Gezi Park is ours!” (in the sense of, “we, the people”) and extended it to “Gezi Park is ours!”, in the sense that the park belonged to all women regardless of their religious belief, or choice to be or not be veiled<sup>12</sup>. As well, when protestors outraged at state violence called police and Erdoğan “sons of whores”, sex workers who were part of the movement made clear that they did not want to be associated with the violence of the state (which they were all too familiar with), and retorted with banners that stated that they most certainly were *not* the mothers of any of the hated abusers (Korkman & Açıksöz, 2013). In a similar fashion, when police and government representatives were called “faggots”, people responded by sharing pictures online of rainbow-flag wielding front-line warriors hurling tear gas canisters back to sender, with ironic, self-critical comments such as “Today I learned a lesson on manhood from a faggot”. It was after such critical interventions by some demands against the reactionary and chauvinist elements of others, that the general discourse started to shift, and proceeded to “dis-articulate” misogynist, homophobic and fascist elements.

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<sup>12</sup> The slogan was similarly extended to other, internal domains: “Çarşı is ours!” became a way to confront that group’s sexist tendencies.

There is a metaphor Laclau uses that can help in elucidating this process, though for my purposes (as I am going beyond Laclau) it needs to be poetically refined. Borrowing from Schopenhauer, Laclau likens the constitution of the populist subject to a group of porcupines huddling together to stay warm (Laclau, 2005:89). That is to say, there is an inherent tension to the construction of the popular subject position, in how the various discrete democratic demands need to get close enough to “stay warm”. In other words, to constitute a substantial popular camp imbuing each demand with added strength, they simultaneously need to keep enough of a distance not to hurt one another; i.e., to compromise their own structure as separate democratic demands. This gives a general idea of the process of populist constitution; however, it is also somewhat misleading. The first point is that as a number of democratic demands come together to form a popular one, they do not remain discrete entities as the separate porcupines do, but are reconfigured themselves. Furthermore, what this example fails to account for is the way that critical engagement among the separate constituents itself is not only *desirable* from a Left point of view, but a crucial source of strength for the resulting popular demand. Was not the feminist critique of sexist slogans chanted in Gezi Park a very deliberate sting by one porcupine inflicted on another? Was it not exactly this sting which allowed for the Kemalists (and other factions) to emancipate their demands from reactionary elements previously articulated with it, and thus allow for greater unity and strength? The same applies across the board, with Kurdish women or sex workers challenging other feminists’ nationalism or bourgeois elitism; with anti-capitalist Muslims challenging Kemalists’ or Socialists’ islamophobia; with anarchists and Kurds challenging Kemalists’ militant nationalism, and so forth.

In this sense, Gezi Spirit does not mean different democratic demands keeping just the right distance from one another, lest their internally coherent demands be compromised by others; it means different democratic demands, through their proximity (born out of the initial

solidarity of identification with the empty signifier), ridding one another of reactionary elements, and thus reconfiguring their own internal composition. Naturally, this is not a neutral process of mere “populist gravity”. Solidarity can also find its end in just such tensions, as indeed it did in some cases. Take the example of the far right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which soon dropped out of the Gezi uprising after initial attempts at jumping on the bandwagon. Given that it had nothing to add to the movement, and that it was made up entirely of elements contrary to other democratic demands present, there was no reason for it to be included and no way for it to reconfigure itself short of abandoning its own agenda entirely.

Just as the nature of Gezi Spirit is not politically neutral, neither is its logic arbitrary. What I suggest is that the essence of the Gezi Park movement was in the application of its general ethic within and throughout itself. As the populist subject under construction claimed the legitimacy of a populus (by virtue of it being rendered a *plebs* through Prime Minister Erdoğan’s marginalization, exploitation and oppression), it was the logic of this claim to legitimacy that feminists, Kurds, LGBT people and other marginalized groups mobilized in order to be included and in order for hostile elements to be expelled. It is this awareness that is key to Gezi Spirit, and it is this awareness that Laclau fails to account for. Rather than a pack of porcupines awkwardly shuffling to and from one another in their instinctual quest for warmth and fear of pain, Gezi Spirit functions more like a swarm, composed of numerous smaller flocks, with each of which being reconfigurable and dissolvable in itself. Each flock that joins is aware of the fact that its future is best secured in unity, and is even ready to cast out this element or that should the flock’s inclusion in the swarm hinge on doing so. In effect, each flock is reconstituted and the swarm as a whole moves collectively into new political environs, thus shifting the center of gravity of the entire political field. In short, Gezi Spirit is the awareness of the possibility of recomposition and the collective seizing of this opportunity through a globally emancipatory logic of the swarm.

As an effect of this self-awareness called Gezi Spirit, by which individual demands extended the logic of the common popular demand to its internal workings, what happened during the Gezi Park uprising was not just a populism which constructed a border dividing the opposing camps along differences of content, but one which constructed the border along the difference of each camp's respective *modus operandi*. By identifying Erdoğan as the oppressor, the patriarch, the authoritarian, the privatizer-commercializer, the denier of dignity, the usurper of the commons, and the one unwilling to listen, be self-critical and adjust, the popular camp was able to construct itself as the opposite: as a movement of liberation, emancipation, socialization, inclusion, mutual care and dignity<sup>13</sup>. That is, the populist project of Gezi was not only one of political contents frustrated by the regime, but one of frustrated political ethics. In thus countering the ruling hegemony's very logic of operation and its marginalization of each of the constitutive democratic demands, Gezi Spirit (through its own progressive logic of radical democratic practice) achieved an "expansion of democratic sensibilities", challenged existing hierarchies (Yeğenoğlu, 2013). It thus produced not just "an alternative", but "the mother of all alternatives", as anthropologist and journalist Ayşe Çavdar puts it (Letsch, 2014). This mother of all alternatives is the possibility of a progressive populist politics that is radical and progressive not just in content, but also in terms of conduct.

By now, the obvious question is how this preliminary attempt at defining Gezi Spirit can help in trying to understand what has happened, what is happening and what may happen in Russia. That is, why did the Russian protests of 2011-2012 not feature their own Gezi Spirit? Is it realistic to even consider the possibility of a progressive Left populism, powered by such an inclusive and radically progressive ethic to develop in Russia? How does Gezi Spirit, inspiring as it may be, actually relate to the Russian situation? Are not the two situations far too different for a

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<sup>13</sup>Korkman and Açıksöz (2013) discuss this dynamic with particular focus on the gendered logic of Erdoğan's claim to legitimacy as the sovereign.

comparison to provide any meaningful insights? Let me conduct a brief comparative analysis of these two political fields.

To begin with, the general political contexts of both Russia and Turkey share many commonalities that may be surprising to some. Gabowitsch makes the accurate point that if one is looking for a productive comparison with any other polity, Turkey lends itself much more to analyses of Russia than Western Europe or North America, to which it is all too often awkwardly compared (Gabowitsch, 2013, June 2). To begin very generally, both countries are located on the European periphery, in geographic, cultural and economic terms. They are the nation-state remnants of past Eurasian Empires, and each looks back on a twentieth century of drastic, European-inspired authoritarian modernization projects (Gabowitsch, 2005); both continue to be troubled by separatist sentiments in their restive peripheral territories and the traumas resulting from atrocities committed on them by the center. These generalities may seem superficial, but actually play a relevant role in contemporary political dynamics. Looking at more recent trends, one can note that after the decline of each country's guiding ideological narrative – Soviet Communism and Kemalism – a certain revival of imperial ambitions combined with neoliberalism has been guiding policy in Erdoğan's Turkey and Putin's Russia.

While both countries have seen an increasing integration with global capitalism and a general adoption of Western style modes of governance in the last 20 years, in each case (though admittedly to quite different extents) opaque structures of power (conventionally captured by terms like “power vertical” and the “deep state”) repress undesirable media, use the judiciary to persecute potential political challengers, and at times even assassinate those who too persistently challenge the elite<sup>14</sup>. In both countries, strong-man rulers have been overseeing socially conservative and economically neoliberal projects; incidentally, both have resorted to political

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<sup>14</sup> The most spectacular examples of such assassinations would be those of Anna Politkovskaya and Hrant Dink.

castling maneuvers – Putin’s in 2012, Erdoğan’s apparently scheduled for August of this year – with a “good cop” subordinate – Putin’s Medvedev and Erdoğan’s Gül – to extend their careers as heads of state. While both rulers have enjoyed continuously high approval ratings, neither is known for his willingness to compromise with opposition demands. Instead, both frequently and increasingly portray themselves as the defenders of the majority against subversion and sabotage by external plots and decadent Westernized elites. Putin’s “two Russias” discussed above finds its mirror image in Erdoğan’s “two Turkeys”, which similarly pits the urban, the educated, the privileged, the foreign, the rebellious, the deviant and urban against the authentic, hard-working, poor, rural heartland. In reality, of course, neither Putin nor Erdoğan are the champions of the toiling and exploited poor, given their similar neoliberal track record of commodifying health care, commercializing education, and privatizing previously public spaces and goods (Eken, 2014:429).

If the two countries share a number of analogous historical developments, and if their current modes of rule are roughly comparable, how far may the analogy be extended? Are their resistance, opposition and radical activism similar or different? The respective historical moments of mass protest seen in both countries are a good focal point for this comparison. Many have noted the diversity of the 2011-2012 protests in Russia, similar to that observed in Turkey. Indeed, they certainly featured the basic characteristics of Laclauian populism, in that the empty signifier (fair elections) came to subsume a wide variety of distinct grievances or democratic demands, each of which was being frustrated by the incapacity of the system to accommodate them for a long time before the eruption of mass protest. In both cases there was a highly diverse, and often contradictory, array of political factions while the majority of participants did not previously belong to any official political group.

In a similar fashion to the Gezi Protests, the Russian demonstrations against the rigging of the Duma elections of 2011 initially baffled many protestors in terms of turnout, and in the relative solidarity among otherwise antagonistic oppositional factions. Russia too saw the occupation of a public park by protestors, in what became known as Occupy Abai. A few days after, and in response to, the violent dispersion of the protest against Putin's inauguration as president on May 6, 2012 in Bolotnaya Square, thousands gathered in a green area surrounding the monument to Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuli on Chistoprudny Boulevard in northern central Moscow and occupied the park for about a week. In spite of all these above named parallels, it seems inappropriate to refer to the dynamics observed there as Gezi Spirit. While it seems certain that the wave of protest in 2011-2012 left a lasting effect on the Russian oppositional developments, the kind of fundamental recomposition of the general or even the oppositional political field in Russia was lacking.

To get a better understanding of the different dynamics of the respective protest movements, it helps to unpack their similarities and differences in detail. How does the class composition and the political thrust of the Gezi Park protests, and those against Putin in 2011-2012, compare? The usual suspects were quick to characterize both movements as being reflections of the rise of the "new global middle class" (Fukuyama, 2013), affirming the happy capitalist success story and the conventional Western wisdom of the oppressive state suppressing the naturally growing desire for true liberal democracy. In spite of both Erdoğan and Putin generally agreeing with and using this very depiction (except to discredit their opponents as being "spoiled" and "ungrateful" for a government benefiting them), the actual class composition of both protest movements is much less straightforward than this rendering would have it. In the Turkish case, many of these supposed middle-class protestors (such as service sector and part-time employees) were economically much closer to being working class or in the process of

proletarianization, while all the protestors killed by police violence had working class backgrounds (Yörük, 2014:424). In Russia too, even those who argue that the 2011-2012 movement was essentially a middle class one admit that “economic data was the weakest indicator of middle class membership” of the protestors (Vogel, 2013:15). In both cases, observers and commentators (including Fukuyama) therefore derive the middle-class-ness of the protestors from their above-average educational background and, especially in Russia, from self-identification. From an economist-reductionist point of view these are fairly weak indicators, and thus hardly imply an obvious political determination. If, furthermore, one approaches the matter with a Laclau and Mouffe inspired discursive analysis, it becomes clear that even if both movements had been homogenously middle class, their political trajectory would still be subject to articulation. As a matter of fact, the Gezi Park protests demonstrate this clearly, in that regardless (or despite? or because?) of the “middle-class educational background” of the protestors, the popular demands were clearly leftist ones, in as much as they emphasized a collectivist ethic of reclaiming the commons (Yörük, 2014:424).

As noted by Gabowitsch (2013, June 2), in both cases local activist groups struggling against gentrification and development projects of common spaces and activist groups fighting for the emancipation of marginalized minorities paved the way for the mass protests, and provided some degree of infrastructure, while the major organized opposition parties (CPRF and CHP) remained mostly on the sidelines. In both cases it was arguably the micro-dynamics of the regime’s mode of operation experienced by such “apolitical” activists that provided the initial spark. In Turkey’s case it was the immediate experience of state indifference to local opposition and violent police repression of the defenders of Gezi Park, in Russia’s it was the volunteer election monitors’ experience of being harassed by local election officials; and in both cases subsequent government-media reporting (or rather lack thereof) and official statements

dismissing those experiences, which triggered and facilitated grassroots mobilization of larger demonstrations in the immediate aftermath of those experiences (Gabowitsch, 2013, June 2). In both cases, it was the frustration of one micro-political democratic demand (resulting from the system's logic of operation) that provoked a populist articulation of a variety of "apolitical" (other such grassroots activist groups) and "officially political" (parties, movements) demands under the empty signifier of the originary demand.

This similarity of the process of mobilization in each context not only highlights the underlying homology of the respective modes of rule, but suggests that there is something pivotal in this hegemonic logic for the observed populist articulation. The construction of the populist demand, in each case, cannot simply be derived from the constitutive democratic demands' shared property of being simply un-accommodated; the articulation critically hinged on the escalation of aggressive counter-measures prescribed by the hegemonic logic of rule. Since, as shown above, it is exactly in the production and global extension of a counter-hegemonic, emancipatory logic that Gezi Spirit can be located; it seems then that some of the basic facilitators to a potential Russian Gezi Spirit were present during the unfolding of the anti-Putinist protest in December of 2011. Why, then, was there no Gezi Spirit in Russia? This is the moment at which one must dare formulate a "discursive materialist" hypotheses, as in the above example of Wollstonecraft's articulation of political feminism.

In order to do that, I will begin by looking at some of the practical differences. Police violence has been acknowledged as the single most prominent escalating factor for the constitution of the Gezi Park populist subject (Moudouros, 2014). In Russia, there was no immediate violence against the volunteer election observers in their efforts to oversee the counting of ballots, and the coercion of initial post-election demonstrations by overwhelmed police did not exceed the usual. Significantly, however mundane it might seem, the

indiscriminate nature of the Turkish police's go-to response – mass amounts of teargas, engulfing not just its intended victims but all bystanders and residents as well – did a great service to mobilization efforts and the spread of solidarity to wide sections of the population. In Russia, the physical separation of participants from non-participants ensured through police cordons surrounding sites of sanctioned protest, as well as the non-residential character of central Moscow<sup>15</sup> (both of which curiously mirror the already severe social atomization of post-Soviet Russian society), made it much more difficult to establish liberated zones in the immediate proximity of, and with open access for, millions of people as was the case with occupied Gezi Park. Thus, the capacity of the protests as events to function as physical sites and catalyzers for the kind of embodied political recomposition seen in Gezi Spirit was seriously impeded. As explained by Laclau, the quilting function of articulation “is never merely a verbal operation, but is embedded in material practices” (Laclau, 2005:106). The most concise hypothesis explaining the lack of Gezi Spirit in Russia is thus the lack of some key “material” elements.

In a similar vein (and somewhat complicating Gabowitsch's simple equation of the character of the initial spark of the Turkish and Russian explosions of protest) the empty signifier under which all subsequent popular subject formation took place was also quite different; to be more exact, it was lacking in material immediacy. While it is correct that in both cases it was the direct frustration of the grassroots engagement of “normal people” (neighborhood park defenders in Turkey, volunteer election monitors in Russia) that facilitated the articulation with other “apolitical” demands suffering similar frustrations, there is of course a qualitative difference between those respective democratic-demands-*cum*-empty-signifiers. If Gezi Park was being defended from a physical assault for its immediate material properties of providing residents with recreation, the poor with accessible refuge, marginalized sexual minorities with a cruising ground

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<sup>15</sup>Save for those lucky ones still in possession of apartments from the era of affordable downtown dwelling, only the super-rich can afford to live in central Moscow.

and so forth, the monitoring of a national election as a demand already operates on the plane of abstraction from people's immediate life worlds. Thus, the initiating event, in each case, predisposed different trajectories for the constitution of the populist project as a whole. In Turkey, "properly political" demands (such as political movements and parties) needed to extract their own relevance from (and articulate their own politics with regards to) the frustration of one local struggle which was comparable in essence to countless others across the country experienced by "normal people". Noticeably, the Gezi Park protests remained leaderless, independent of political parties and grassroots driven. In Russia, on the other hand, the originary antagonism was "meta-political" to begin with, such that articulation with "properly political" demands were only one step away (granting established politicians, wronged by the fraudulent elections, a significant space for self-insertion), while the articulation of grassroots demands hinged on their capacity and willingness to abstract themselves from the immediacy of people's life worlds, into the sphere of the empty signifier of "fair elections".

There is another sense in which these dynamics significantly affected the "ideological" developments of the respective movements. As discussed above, the logic of rule and the way it frustrated democratic demands was a crucial facilitator for the emergence of the populist subject in both the Gezi Park and 2011-2012 protests. In this respect, there is one consequential difference in Erdoğan's and Putin's respective claims to legitimacy which greatly affected the oppositional populist mobilizations internal logic. Both enjoy genuine popularity among broad sections of the population, in effect making it very difficult for an oppositional project to claim popular legitimacy. In Turkey this conundrum was addressed through Gezi Spirit, in as much as it rendered authoritarianism illegitimate in spite of Erdoğan's electoral majority. Gezi Spirit not only practically demonstrated the kind of radical democracy which Erdoğan's notion of dictatorial majoritarianism denies; it also posed a challenge to the endurance of that logic by

offering some elements of Erdoğan's genuine majority – such as religious people, marginalized by authoritarian secularism in pre-AKP Turkey – a place in its ranks. It is not without reason that the presence of veiled feminists and self-declared anti-capitalist Muslims in Gezi Park, as well as the respect, solidarity, and appreciation with which they were embraced as part of the movement, is one of the most frequently cited manifestations of Gezi Spirit. In contrast, the Russian case, due to the prominence of the *technical* illegitimacy of Putin's electoral majorities, had the movement evade the issue of Putin's actual popularity. As a result, instead of Gezi Spirit, Russia saw a spirit of legalism and proceduralism dominate the protest movement, promoted by liberal politicians fantasizing that they would win elections if only things went fairly<sup>16</sup>. This, however, should not only be seen as a failure of the larger protest movement, but ironically as another curious victory of Putin's "managed democracy"<sup>17</sup>.

Having discussed some of the key reasons for the lack of Gezi Spirit in Russia's latest oppositional uprising, I have thus also arrived at a rough approximation of what, if not Gezi Spirit, characterized the populism of the Russian anti-Putin mass protests. If Gezi Spirit was marked by a democratic ambition that went beyond parliamentarism, then its Russian counterpart (Bolotnaya Spirit, if you will) was the humble ambition to be more law-abiding than the opposite camp. If Gezi Spirit asked fundamental questions regarding the distribution of wealth and access to the commons, Bolotnaya Spirit was concerned with corruption, embezzlement and theft in as much as these practices constitute a breaking of the law. If Gezi Spirit meant a pervasive recomposition of its constituent demands (and thus the entire political field), Bolotnaya Spirit saw the pragmatic coalition of discrete factions (this time truly conceivable through Laclau's porcupine metaphor), and even a frequent affirmation of the hegemonic division of the political

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<sup>16</sup> A notion debunked by the fact that not even 9% of those eligible voted for Navalny in Moscow's most recent mayoral elections, in spite of them being conducted relatively fairly.

<sup>17</sup> We can add this to the list of functions fulfilled by rigging elections, as discussed by Krastev and Holmes (2012).

field, in terms of the “two Russias”. If Gezi Spirit was a redefinition of democracy, Bolotnaya Spirit was a call for democracy as conventionally understood. In this sense, the fundamental difference between Gezi Spirit and Bolotnaya Spirit is this: while both are examples of Laclauian populism, the former went beyond the scope of Laclau’s theory, in its self-awareness and seizure of populist possibilities. The latter, in its lack of populist ambition, actually refused to live up to the possibilities that were being created.

Now, what does the above reveal about the role of the contemporary Russian Left? The answer: it reveals the centrality and potential of this emerging politics to the overall Russian context. It allows one to appreciate how even in its infancy the new Russian Left has already opened new avenues of political articulation, and has the potential to do so even more effectively in the future. The new Russian Left has the capacity to infuse Russia with Gezi Spirit. Before considering this proposition in detail, one more set of concerns should be addressed.

Doubts may have arisen by now which need to be spoken to briefly. Is the kind of Gezi Spirit imagined in Turkey even remotely realistic in the Russian context? For those struggling with the daily challenges of trying to advance various progressive demands in contemporary Russia, it is difficult to picture tens of thousands of people of various economic and ethnic backgrounds and political persuasions camping out on Red Square; challenging capitalism, police repression and reactionary ideologies together in the kind of “utopian atmosphere of egalitarian community, autonomy and liberation” (Yeğenoğlu, 2013:4) observed in Gezi Park.

There is no question that the given conditions and configurations need to be seriously taken into account when discussing the potential for thorough populist recomposition. To go straight to the most controversial example: is not widespread homophobia one of the key nodal points in the discursive field that is Russian politics, to a much greater extent than this was the case in Turkey? The answer to this question and all similar skepticism has two parts. First, one

should be careful to avoid exaggerating the rigidity of such configurations. Turkey, just like Russia (and, for that matter, countless other places, such as the US), has a history of intense homophobia. In fact, it was not too long ago, in the mid 1990's, that the very neighborhood associations that were at the heart of the defense of Gezi Park were the cheerleaders of brutal, pogrom-like, state-sponsored gentrification efforts against trans-persons and sex workers in central Istanbul areas like Ülker Sokak (Yücel, 2014:49). The fact that such a configuration now seems so much less imaginable is but another proof of the severity with which Gezi Spirit reorganized the discursive field. In reverse, before Putinist spin doctors discovered the topic, queerness of sorts was openly celebrated on federal TV in Russia (the pop duo t.A.T.u., which even gained popularity abroad in 2003, being an example of this). What this highlights is merely the ever potentially floating nature, that is, the re-articulatability, of such signifiers<sup>18</sup>. Generally, while the current political status quo in Russia certainly appears infinitely distant from occupied Gezi Park, one should not forget that Gezi Park happened in spite of widespread conservative sentiment, homophobia and well-organized fascism in Turkey<sup>19</sup>. At the same time, to imagine Gezi Spirit in Russia does not mean for it to unfold in exactly the same fashion as it did in Turkey. To do so would be to imbue the given elements with an untenable trans-contextual positivity. While the logic of Gezi Spirit, by definition, prescribes progressivism and inclusion of emancipatory demands, and is consequently at odds with contemporary Russian state-sponsored homophobia, it would not necessarily need to take the same form as it did in Turkey, and its success would not necessarily be measured by the future attendance of Pride Parades.

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<sup>18</sup>As a matter of fact, Russian politics has a rich history of such floating signifiers. Alexander Dugin, who went from obscure occultist to mainstream geo-political guru is one great example, National Bolshevik leader Eduard Limonov, who went from ultra-extremist opposition, to liberal ally, to cheering Putin for annexing Crimea, another. The CPRF's and Putin's fusion of Soviet nostalgia with orthodox christianity, discussed above, yet another.

<sup>19</sup>The far right ethno-nationalist MHP has received between 8-16% of the vote in elections over the last ten years.

A second, more subtle skeptical objection regards the role of Putin and his mode of governance, and how it differs from Erdoğan's. The latter's political project involves a genuine ideological framework of economic liberalism combined with Islamist conservatism. The governing AK Party's history is tied to the tradition of Turkish political Islam, and its statements and policies are generally coherent with this doctrinal framework. Putinism, on the other hand, is much less invested in any such genuine or coherent project. Instead, cases such as Russia's recent homophobic campaign or hysterical Soviet-style "anti-fascist" patriotism, point toward a much more pragmatic function of such investments. In other words, if the Gezi Park populism was facing an opponent who was simply certain in the righteousness of his own project, the Russian counterpart is facing an antagonist who is well versed in the art of hegemonic jiu-jitsu (or rather judo, as it were, in Putin's case) and much more consciously acts in it to achieve desired effects. However, the two mentioned examples (homophobia and Soviet patriotism) are also indicators of an increasing ideologization of the Putinist project. Whether sentimental investments in traditional sexuality or the by-gone Soviet era played a driving role in policy making, or were mere polit-technology; the more the hegemonic camp confines itself to a coherent ideological narrative, the greater the range of possibilities for attack for an oppositional populist project.

This leads exactly to the role of the emerging Russian Left. Gezi Spirit in Turkey was not determined by any objective law of oppositional dynamics, but neither did it simply materialize out of thin air. Gezi Spirit was the result of the "unique and sudden alliance" of manifold local instances of resistance that had been gaining steam in the months ahead of May 2013 (Yörük, 2014:421-422). The fact that radical Left groups and logics had already been active in those populist components-to-be (in the Kurdish struggle, in struggles against brutal gentrification, in the LGBT and feminist struggles, among football ultras Çarşı) made subsequent articulation into reactionary populism (after all, one can always conjure up Jews to blame, if one wants to; the

case of Ukraine's Maidan populism comes to mind) much less, and articulation of progressive populism, *à la* Gezi Spirit, much more likely. At the end of the day, the many minute interventions which together built the foundations of Gezi Spirit (such as the above cited moment of internalization of Gezi Spirit to incorporate feminist politics, advanced by groups such as the Socialist Feminist Collective (Karaca, 2013)) were all launched by *somebody* – somebody, that is, who already operated in the new political topography, beyond the hegemonic horizon. This *somebody*, of course, was the Turkish counterpart to the contemporary Left I outlined earlier for the Russian context: radical queers and feminists, libertarian leftist movements and intellectuals, local neighborhood and environmental resistances, the Kurdish and other minority movements. Applying this insight to the Russian context, what I suggest is that, in its very emergence, the new Russian Left is acting in a similar fashion; it has made the building of a Gezi Spirit possible, and the continued development of the Left is acting as a facilitator for such a constitution. Let me consider these moments in detail.

How is the new Russian Left preparing the ground for the emergence of Gezi Spirit in Russia? To begin with, the contemporary Left is the only political project that is able and willing to envision something like Gezi Spirit in Russia. That is, in contrast to its political competitors it is conceptually equipped to engage in the hegemonic struggle in way that can fundamentally reconfigure the political landscape. The approach to dealing with the discrepancy between cultural conservatism and economic progressivism among the majority of the population in Russia (which, though vague and commonly overestimated, is generally there) is a good example of this. For the liberals, who tend to hold exactly the opposite views in both spheres, the answer is either resignation (hoping for the magic of legalistic proceduralism to yield results more favorable to the liberal project) or the impetus to “enlighten” the masses on both their economic and cultural backwardness. The Old Left divorces both spheres from one another; either to

remain within economist thinking, or to accept the rules set by Putinist spin doctors and sell economic leftism with reactionary positions on everything else (a position that is close to that of the more socialistically inclined, Strasserist nationalists). Both of these positions accept the general organization of the political field, and are thus only minimally engaged in hegemonic struggles over the general political landscape, and not at all in the production of any Gezi Spirit<sup>20</sup>.

As outlined in the beginning, the new Left in Russia is emerging precisely in the interstice, or rather at the cost of or indeed in antagonism to, the hegemonic organization of the political space of the “two Russias” (cultured/liberal/decadent/enlightened/parasitic/urban elite vs. the primitive/hardworking/sluggish/conservative/authentic/rural masses). In being located outside of or against this conventional topography, the contemporary Left foreshadows the kind of fundamental political recomposition that is characteristic of Gezi Spirit. This is practically visible in how the new Left has operated with regards to grassroots and particular struggles (i.e. democratic demands). Instead of depoliticizing them into the reflexes of a repressed civil society or reducing them to mere effects of hidden economic processes (as the liberal or Old Left approaches would), the new Russian Left is conceptually able to integrate various emancipatory and radical democratic demands in a (yet mostly virtual) populist subject position.

The new Left transcends the old factions’ horizon by articulating anti-capitalist critiques with queer ones, in bringing grassroots initiatives in contact with anti-authoritarian politics of self-determination, and by engaging anti-fascism with ecology; in each case transforming what each of those individual demands encompasses. The contemporary Left understands, in other words, that articulating culturally progressive demands with economically leftist ones is neither

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<sup>20</sup>One additional position (in fact, the worst of all positions), which is reflected to some extent in Navalny, is the right-liberal one of making economically rightist policies more palatable for the majority by packaging them in a culturally reactionary agenda (ironically, mirroring Putin’s own logic or rule!). While this project thus seems to synthesize some heterogeneous demands, and therefore can be considered a populist project, it is certainly contrary to the emancipatory logic of Gezi Spirit.

categorically impossible nor tantamount to “tricking” people by selling them something they reject by wrapping it in something they like. The new Left understand that there is an alternative configuration, which can be brought about through hegemonic recomposition. By actively engaging in grassroots struggles, contemporary Left actors create the conditions of possibility for such grassroots demands to become articulated in structurally radical populist projects, and acquire the practical experience of articulating politics outside of the dominant framework. The contemporary Russian Left lays the groundwork for such recomposition when it asserts that there is an alternative, and states that “the alternative is the creation of a broad democratic (and hence Left) movement for change in Russia. A movement, whose demands will unite [provincial] workers and the [Moscow] intelligentsia, gays and migrant workers” (Zykov, 2014, translation mine). The contemporary Left’s centrality to overall political dynamics, in other words, is in its capacity to address the profound shortcomings of the contemporary order, and turn the non-place between and beyond the old discursive structures into a subject position in its own right. Able to speak to and integrate different demands in a way none of the other factions can, its emergence destabilizes the general political topography.

Beyond this centrality the new Left already has, it is imbued with the potential to not only destabilize the overall discursive field, but to shift it into more progressive environs altogether. That is, aside from conquering new hegemonic territory outside of the dominant order and by living the logic of Gezi Spirit within its ranks, the contemporary Russian Left nurtures the seeds of Gezi Spirit with the potential of it spreading far beyond its ranks. The emergence of the contemporary Left in Russia is proceeding according to a script similar to that observed on a much larger scale in Gezi Spirit. The recent emergence of a radical, diverse, and inclusive May Day demonstration in Moscow, comprising anarchists, socialists, feminists, LGBT, and greens, reveals this process. The appearance of these new demonstrations did not only end the CPRF’s

oppressive monopoly on mobilization on that day, but have even begun to cleanse themselves of elements contradictory to Gezi Spirit (with a faction of homophobic, hyper-masculine class-reductionist “anarchists”, who have since mutated into quasi-reactionaries, recently quitting this new Left mobilization). In a sense, such processes of internal recomposition should thus not be mistaken for harmful infighting, but understood as a kind of dress rehearsal for the larger progressive populist project. In light of such practice, it is no surprise that contemporary leftists played a key role in the closest thing to Gezi Spirit Russia witnessed during the recent oppositional surge – Occupy Abai. Anarchists, socialists and other progressives who were able to draw on their own experience of Left practice were able to facilitate popular assemblies and collectively organize tasks like people’s kitchens (Gabowitsch, 2013:21). Fittingly, the leftist band Arkady Kots<sup>21</sup> song “Walls” (adapted from the popular anti-Franco tune “L’Estaca”, and incidentally later also the hymn of Poland’s *Solidarność*, one of Laclau’s favorite examples of populism) became the anthem of the camp (Bennetts, 2014:171).

In light of the experience of Gezi Park, let me critically consider some of the most iconic examples of the new Russian Left already discussed above, and how far they have lived up to the logic of Gezi Spirit. As noted in the semiotic analysis above, Left Front leader Sergey Udaltsov can be credited with having taken the right steps toward Gezi Spirit in how he synthesized modernist working class demands with post-modern virtual ones, and thus taking steps to break the hegemonic organization of the political field. Unfortunately, since the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict, Udaltsov and many of his socialist comrades have acted less wisely and fallen victim to the Putinist ploy of legitimizing imperialist foreign policy and intensified nationalism by appealing to Soviet patriotism. Gezi Spirit certainly could encompass an integration of some forms of Soviet nostalgia, for example by drawing on Soviet internationalism in order to

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<sup>21</sup>New avante-garde poet Kirill Medvedev, discussed earlier, is the singer of the band.

articulate an anti-racist populism that includes migrant laborers (arguably the most exploited and marginalized major demographic group in today's Russia). However, given that the recent government campaign of Soviet nostalgia is much more of a nationalist project for creating an external and internal enemy (Ukraine, traitors), it is actually the opposite of Gezi Spirit, and highlights once more the hegemonic expertise of Putinist spin-doctors. In other words, while Udaltsov's Left Front may have avoided the obvious trap of falling for Putin's homophobic campaign (by at least remaining largely silent on it – not great, but at least not a totally catastrophic solution), it unfortunately took exactly such a turn with regards to the Ukrainian crisis<sup>22</sup>.

The example of Pussy Riot can be analyzed similarly. On the one hand, their project of radical, post-modern, anti-clerical insurrectionism transcended many of the hegemonic delineations of the political field, and could perhaps be compared to one of the most iconic symbols of Gezi Spirit: the woman in the red dress being pepper-sprayed by police. The latter image, widely circulated in media, the internet and street art, showcased not only how the AKP narrative of Turkey's religious masses being oppressed by a militarist secular regime was no longer the dominant reality, but even that resistance to contemporary authoritarian Islamist regime was not based in the stale old Kemalism which the AKP had ousted. The woman in the red dress embodied a new, young, female, red (symbolically), non-militarist subject of resistance. In a similar sense the story of Pussy Riot, including their performances and subsequent prosecution, not only highlighted the Church's complicity with Putinist neoliberal authoritarianism (thus eliminating any fantasies of Putin being some sort of closet-socialist), but also that resistance to this complicity is no longer embodied by an Old Left nostalgic for a

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<sup>22</sup>In Laclau's terms, one could say that rather than positioning itself as the only legitimate *populus vis-à-vis* the hegemonic antagonist Putin, Udaltsov and company submitted to Putin's hegemonic logic and *his* claim to represent the *populus vis-à-vis* the Western-backed, fascist putschists in Kiev.

militantly atheist Soviet Union. However, as some (Akulova, in Dziewanska et al, 2013:279-287) have pointed out, Pussy Riot failed to emancipate itself from the framework of the “two Russias”, often relying on culturally neo-colonialist discourse regarding lower classes; for example, in making ordinary worshippers the target of their criticism. This failure became more pronounced as their legal defense increasingly appealed to conservative discourse, asking for leniency on the grounds of the defendants’ intellectual background or motherhood, almost entirely abandoning leftist and feminist discourse in the process.

With regards to both of the above examples there are positive tendencies, though. The apologetic betrayal of the Left project to Putin’s chauvinist foreign policy by some factions has led to a further refinement of the contemporary Left, evidenced by the many Leftist who did come out against the war, and the attempt at hijacking conventionally Left moments such as anti-fascism. Similarly, critical approaches to Pussy Riot such as Akulova’s are exemplary of a radical queer politics that rejects the logic of the “two Russias” and is capable of articulating feminist positions with anti-capitalist demands for equality and justice.

Let me conclude this analysis of Gezi Spirit and its Russian potential by discussing the theoretical lessons gained. First, the unfolding of the most recent waves of protest in Russia and Turkey certainly confirm Laclau and Mouffe’s basic premise of the discursive character of the social, in as much as neither can be extracted from some objective law of economic development. Both affirm the centrality of the equivalential articulation of diverse demands according to what Laclau later developed into the political logic of populism. The relevance of the logic of the opponent (Erdoğan and Putin), and the potential resulting emergence of populist self-awareness, *à la* Gezi Spirit, showcase that political dynamics are never automatically determined by anything extra-discursive, but are always subject to articulation. Importantly, though, on the basis

of this discursive understanding of the social, I can affirm the centrality of certain non-verbal, or “material”, elements.

First of all, it is clear that the success of populist articulation hinges to a significant extent on the incorporation of “social demands”, which are not already abstracted from people’s life worlds. This, of course, should not be understood as a theoretical return to the land of total calculability and determination. A successful populist articulation may emerge even as an amalgamation of a variety of purely “ideal” or “ideological” demands, although, pragmatically speaking, such a scenario seems much less likely, and less desirable from a Left point of view, than a populist project which articulates demands of a more “material” nature. The much greater success of the Gezi uprising (which was unified under a master signifier that had a very immediate, physical dimension, compared to the stunted populism of Russia’s protest over technical irregularities in the electoral process) highlights this well.

Further, it is clear that the intersection of experience and the event is central for the unfolding of populist logic. Having examined the performative dimension of Gezi Spirit as an embodied exercise of progressive populist subject formation (Bakiner, 2013) facilitated by indiscriminate state violence which instilled broad solidarity, I would suggest that these related sites (experience and the event) should be central to any Laclauian attempt at understanding the dynamics of populist mobilization. That is not to deny that “all 'experience' depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:115), but simply to accept that even given the ever discursively constituted conditions of the social, the discursive elements we generally refer to as “experience” will tend to have a greater weight in the uneven field where articulation takes place, than merely contemplative/verbal/mental/ideal elements. This is where the relevance of the emphasis on a “materialist” reading of Laclau and Mouffe’s thought becomes apparent again. “Objective experience” (as such) guarantees no calculable results – just as there

are no objective facts that determine social outcomes extra-discursively. Indeed, experience should not be understood here as pre-discursive to begin with: experience, while “material” in the sense of non-verbal, is obviously discursive in as much as the sensations constituting it acquire their meaning through interpretation, memory, etc. But precisely in its non-verbal, “discursive materiality”, experience is more pivotal in the uneven field of the social than verbal persuasion or intellectual contemplation. In other words, no amounts of tear gas or communal camping will determine with certainty this or that political articulation. Practically speaking, however, it can be ascertained that for the purpose of credible scholarly analysis and successful political tactic, one is well advised to start paying very close attention when such “discursively materialist” elements as tear gas cartridges start flying. In this sense, the above examination of progressive populist dynamics in Turkey and Russia affirms the theoretical refinement of Laclau and Mouffe’s thought which I have called “discursive materialism”, and which rejects the calculability of the social while steering clear of verbal-dialogical anti-materialism.

## Conclusion

At its most basic, this project speaks to the transition from one era to another. Although, as I stressed, the massive wave of anti-Putin protests between the winter of 2011 and the summer of 2012 did not fundamentally reconfigure Russia's political field in the way the Gezi Park uprising reconfigured Turkey's; it did nevertheless effect a lasting change. As some have noted (Budraitskis, 2014:184, Krastev & Holmes, 2012), the protests rang the death knell for Putin's system of "managed democracy" with its architect, one-time leading Kremlin polit-technologist Vladislav Surkov, fallen from grace. However, what is ending is not only the era of "managed democracy", but with it the post-Soviet era as such (Dziewanska et al., 2014:9). With repressive coercion, reactionary ideological campaigns, and aggressive neoliberal reforms on the rise since the protests, the last lingering hopes for historical "normalization" of post-Soviet Russia (whether nationalist, liberal or Old Left) are dissolving (Budraitskis, in Dziewanska et al, 2014:118). No ethnic or religious "awakening" is uniting Russia's fragmented society, no healthy liberal democracy is following in the wake of capitalist transformation and no class conscious mass movement is being produced by capitalism's objective economic contradictions.

The crucial question is what this new "Post-Post-Soviet" (Dziewanska et al., 2014) period will bring. What will become of the different manifestations of excess discontent, which have thus far been articulated in the political subjects of the dying ontological order and its narratives of post-Soviet "normalization"? What I am suggesting is that we are currently observing a process, which in Gramscian terms could be described as organic crisis. In fact, it now seems that the entire post-Soviet period was a prolonged organic crisis, its full effects delayed until recently by a common delirious subscription to narratives of "normalization" that were never able to encompass existing realities to begin with. As these narratives become increasingly unable to

contain contemporary discontent, and the associated subject positions become increasingly unstable, new possibilities become ever more apparent. This sketch of Russia's contemporary Left has been focused on showing how a new Left politics is being constructed out of elements that were, until recently, bound to discursive structures – structures which are now disintegrating. Perhaps an even more clear testimony to the re-articulation of many of these floating signifiers is Putin's own political project. This project is ever more clearly dissecting the old subject positions in a highly telling way. Ever harsher neoliberal reforms are pursued while Medvedev-style lip service to liberal values has been abandoned. Stalinism is being increasingly rehabilitated, while revolutionary elements of the Soviet heritage are explicitly eschewed. All the while, nationalism, clericalism and reactionary values are becoming more and more central. By steadily accumulating the worst aspects of the departing era's political subject positions – neoliberalism, reactionary social policy, and proto-Stalinism - and positioning itself in antagonism to the positive elements, the Putinist project is sketching the ideal blue-print for its own antagonistic counter-part: a collectivist, progressive, libertarian Left.

For now, the “Noah's Ark of the discontented is still searching for political direction and articulation” (Chehonadskih, 2014:207). What I suggest is that with the onset of the Post-Post-Soviet era, the contemporary Left's pivotal role is in shaping the consolidation of the emerging new ontological order and demarcating the boundary dividing the Noah's Ark of the discontented from its opponent. What this demands in terms of strategy is progressive populism, or Gezi Spirit. This means, for example, engaging Putin in his game of hegemonic judo, to hijack his adaptation of the logic of the “two Russias”, and use it to articulate a radical progressive popular opposition. The task, in other words, is articulating all the various forms of excess discontent or democratic demands in a populist chain of equivalence, united not simply by their common frustration but by a mutual commitment to a counter-hegemonic *modus operandi*. In spite of all

doubts to the contrary, the example of Turkey's Gezi Spirit shows the possibility, against all odds, of such a populism. And indeed, seeds for such an articulation can be found in Russia.

The word “*vlast*” – power – has for some time served to unify the cause of all the various popular grievances: oppressive state bureaucracy, thieving oligarchs, power-seeking politicians (Budraitskis, 2014:178). This signifier, perhaps better than any other, apprehends the core of what a potential Russian Gezi Spirit would materialize in opposition to. Clément's (2008) discussion of social protest and local activism shows how the rejection of the dominant model of power relationships at the grassroots level already serves as a facilitator of collective action and solidarity. Somewhat similarly, radical queer activists have mobilized the notion of “victim blaming” (“she was asking for it”) as a basic denominator of the enemy, showing how the same logic that underpins hetero-patriarchy can be found in neoliberal and nationalist discourse (the poor should blame themselves for being poor, migrant workers for getting exploited or murdered by fascists). The Left's great potential lies in seizing upon this nodal point, fortifying it, identifying it as the opponent, positioning itself in exact antagonism to it, and integrating it into politics proper. Such would be the essence of a Russian Gezi Spirit. As it happens, Russian *vlast* is not merely there to be seized; it is actively calling forth its revolutionary antagonist. As independent radio editor Sergei Buntman notes, through its mode of operation, “power ... is creating a new revolution” (Petrou, 2013:38). In other words, the potential progressive populist vision of “two Russias” (which I see the contemporary Left as bringing about) is that of the people, in diverse, progressive unity, challenging *vlast*.

In an eerily symbolic coincidence, January 19 is a day of commemoration not only in Russia. On January 19, 2007, exactly two years before the murder of Stas Markelov and Nastya Baburova in Moscow, renowned Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink was shot by a Turkish nationalist in central Istanbul, not far from Gezi Park. His crime – challenging the hegemonic

narratives of the Turkish state by urging public discussion of the Armenian genocide by Turkish nationalist forces in 1915. His funeral, shunned by the leaderships of both the oppositional Kemalists and the ruling AK-Party, turned into a historic demonstration of one hundred thousand people chanting slogans like “We are all Armenian”. Some have identified that day as a precursor to the Gezi movement (Yücel, 2014:39). Perhaps one day people in Russia will look back at Markelov’s and Baburova’s murders and the subsequent annual anti-fascist manifestations on January 19, and will also be able to see them not just as the tragic end of two brave and inspiring people’s lives and struggles, but as the beginning of something yet unimaginable at the time. To say it with Gezi Spirit: *Bu daha başlangıç* – this is only the beginning.

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