In recent years, increasing importance has been given to vulnerability as a critical concept for reconsidering the ethics and politics of our neoliberal times. In rethinking the value of vulnerability as it has been mobilized in contemporary politics and as a theoretical concept, the embodied character of the subject has been central to this work. At the same time, the body has re-emerged as pivotal in contemporary debates about current political dynamics as they have been paying special attention to the affective dimension of our political lives. This renewed interest in vulnerability, affects and bodies might be indicative of the political challenges posed by our historical present, especially in light of current global governmental logics, heightened processes of precarization, militarized securitization, political disenchantment with traditional party politics, and subsequent new forms of resistance. Among other issues, the various meanings, predicaments, and potential of democracy vis a vis the hegemony of neoliberalism are at stake. In this context, I would like to ask: how do discourses of vulnerability and the embodied and affective character of political dynamics figure in relation to an account of hegemony? By addressing this question, I will also try to assess whether vulnerability can operate in ways that either support or go against a radical democratic view.

One of the premises of this project is that we need to consider bodies and vulnerability in a way that questions the negation of politics by means of moralization, as happens, for instance, in the case of many humanitarian practices. However, it might be the case that this critical insight into vulnerability goes only part of the way. In my
view, it is most important to cast these vulnerable, affective, material, and relational bodies in a way that does not amount to views of affect and embodiment that disregard the role of hegemony and articulation in politics. By these views, I refer to those responses to neoliberal biopolitical governmentality that hold that the truly effective resistance is in our bodies, that representation and counter-hegemonic politics have become ineffective or irrelevant; that now is the time for developing affirmative (mostly micro) politics that find in the energies of bodies a counter-force to outmoded political subjects and obsolete state oriented political aims.iii

By posing this caveat my intention is not to override the crucial role of affect and vulnerability in political dynamics. Rather, the question is: how can embodied vulnerability and the affective dimension of politics bolster a radical democratic perspective that at the same time accounts for hegemony? I tackle this question following Judith Butler’s conceptualization of vulnerability, which is central to her ethical-political framework.iv Broadly speaking, this relational perspective is based on the subject’s radical dependency and capacity to affect and be affected, which, in turn, indicates the vulnerable and embodied character of subjectivity.v I understand this relational affective dimension to be indicative of the permeable character of embodied political subjectivities. The way, then, in which we conceptualize these permeable embodied political subjects, is central to our understanding of radical democratic practices. Following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theorization of hegemony and radical democracy, key for my understanding of radical democratic practices is the constitutively antagonistic character of society. In their view, the representation of society as a totality is the effect of a hegemonic articulation, and depends on an exclusion that figures as its constitutive outside; hence the necessarily open-ended struggle for hegemony, and the key role of contingent political articulations.vi
The approach to the politics of vulnerability that I try to formulate, linking it with hegemony and radical democracy, is not only at odds with that of immanent approaches to affect and politics. These approaches tend to rely on the conviction that current political dynamics are mainly played out in unmediated ways (i.e. avoiding articulation). Further, it might also be dissonant with those agonistic takes on the politics of vulnerability that are significantly influenced by Hannah Arendt’s model. At this point, I hope to incorporate into the politics of vulnerability and the public assembly of a plurality of bodies acting in concert –two topics extensively theorized by Butler– the antagonistic dimension of the political. In this way, I hope to shed light on another aspect of vulnerability’s political potential, while critically considering how radical democratic practices may look when the political dimension of embodiment is taken into account.

**Embodied Vulnerabilities, Biopolitics, Resistance**

In contesting the devastating effects of both coloniality and neoliberalism, which subject whole populations and sectors of populations to dreadful conditions, condemning some to social death, while literally murdering others, humanitarian enterprises refer to vulnerable populations as a mechanism for presenting a moral or ethical call to appeal to the public to ‘help the victims,’ and in so doing, they reaffirm rather than question the borders of assigned injurability. What these humanitarian views cannot address is how we are all involved in the production of this vulnerability, as can be seen, for instance, with the effects of coloniality. The effect of this approach is to depoliticize the situations that led to such extremes forms of deprivation –for example, by framing the potentially demandable situations of injustice and further claims for rights or egalitarian principles as human needs that require charitable gestures and
benefactors. These different evocations to vulnerability constitute a renewed theoretical attention given to affects and bodies. As Lilie Chouliaraki points out, the media’s showcasing of the suffering of distant others is key to humanitarian practices. According to Chouliaraki, this suffering imposes an ethical demand on the audiences to feel and act in solidarity with those who suffer by means of a sustained appeal to their sensibility or even their moral sentiments. Similarly, Didier Fassin shows us how the portrayal of the recipients of humanitarian action as vulnerable—which is key to the whole humanitarian machine—, depicts these subjects almost exclusively as the carriers of bodies subjected to naked violence. The construction of ‘the suffering other’ as a mute and helplessly un-nurtured, violated, or deprived body demands affective responses willing to commit to humanitarian enterprises, thereby moralizing otherwise potentially political claims.

By ignoring the role we all play in the differential distribution of vulnerability and its political character, humanitarianism does not really question the causes that produce this inequality. Instead, it attempts to mitigate some of their most painful effects. But these moral appeals to human sensibilities actually obscure the biopolitical dimension of global governmentality, that is, the regulation of human-life processes under a governmental rationality that takes as its object targeted populations. Arguably, humanitarian evocations of an abstract and purely decontextualized human condition demanding a moral response tend to cover up the murderous governmental logics of coloniality and neoliberal securitarian and austerity policies. Humanitarian pleas for aid, after all, seem to compensate for the deprivation and violence to which certain populations are subjected, either in war zones, refugee camps, or shantytowns, while in fact it is indirectly contributing to the perpetuation of a vicious circle.
Further, humanitarianism may participate in the expansion of the biopower exercised over those populations declared in need of protection or humanitarian help, insofar as the very vulnerability of those populations becomes the ground of their regulation and control.\textsuperscript{xi} The way in which the question of violence against women has been mobilized in human rights campaigns and developmental projects, as well as being central to campaigns against sex work, is a case in point.\textsuperscript{xii} In these cases, the bodies of the victims are presented to us for the most part in isolation from their complex social contexts. These calls avoid any serious engagement with questions of poverty, exclusion, discrimination, or axes of inequality more generally. The reframing of sex work within the paradigm of trafficking and the campaigns for the criminalization of clients following the so-called Nordic model in Europe show that the advancement of criminalization of sex work altogether is animated by the understanding of commercial sex as a form of sexual violence exercised upon women’s bodies \textit{per se}, rather than by a focus on violence against \textit{sex workers}. So much so that, as sex workers organizations have systematically pointed out, abolitionist impulses tend to serve the prosecution and control of sex workers, worsening their work conditions and increasing the likelihood of them becoming targets of violence, and not the other way around.

Likewise, the tendency of international women’s human rights agendas is to concentrate primarily on the violence against women’s ‘bare’ bodies. However, this is in stark contrast to their selective focus, mostly centered on racialized gender-based violence, rape (mostly as a weapon of war), and female genital cutting, for which they tend to respond in decontextualized ways, by adopting negative cultural stereotypes, ‘rescuing women,’ and promoting individualist forms of empowerment.\textsuperscript{xiii} As has been amply documented, by not addressing the geopolitical context in which these dynamics operate, when violence against women becomes an international object of feminist
concern, it tends to serve civilizational crusades, and the production of the racialized cultural Other.\textsuperscript{xiv}

The centrality of ‘vulnerable bodies’ and affective appeals within humanitarianism is, in fact, part of a broader and far more complex scenario where biopolitical power that organizes bodies and affects has taken center stage. Notably, precarization is at the heart of this problem. As Ilaria Vanni and Marcello Tari point out, precarization is not just about the expansion of a form of organization of labor that parallels the decline of the Fordist model, but is the norm through which the government of life is enacted.\textsuperscript{ xv} Of course, this norm does not affect everybody in uniform terms as it works across stratified populations, and certainly does not operate in the same way in the global North as in the global South, nor within different regions. What unifies it as a biopolitical tool of neoliberal governance is the way it signals the social, political, economic, but most of all, affective and subjective conditions of current global capitalism. The precarization of jobs (doing away with the ideal of secure and stable employment), the blurring of the borders between work and life, and the centrality of affective and immaterial labor actually aimed at the production of new subjectivities, are some of its crucial traits.\textsuperscript{xvi}

It is in light of this panorama that it has been argued that as neoliberal biopolitics functions through the direct government of bodies and affectivities, it is at this level that we may find effective forms of resistance to it. This is the claim of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, who argue for an affective resistance, the formation of other biopowers from below.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Contesting this claim, in “Chantal Mouffe's Agonistic Project: Passions and Participation,” Yannis Stavrakakis rightly criticizes the post-hegemony thesis embraced by authors like Jon Beasley Murray,\textsuperscript{xviii} not only for not being able to recognize the
mutual entanglement of discourse and affect, but also for not taking into account that the theory of hegemony of Laclau and Mouffe do consider the affective dimension of politics. And I could not agree more with Stavrakakis. For my part, while I do concur with those accounts that claim that we need to counter the biopolitical dimension of neoliberal governmentality, in line with Stravakakis, I cannot accept an idea of biopolitical power that implies a neat distinction between body and discourse (understood in a broad sense as processes of signification or meaning making).

According to these views on biopower inspired by Negri and Hardt, the concept of hegemony would not be useful for explaining contemporary political logics. Given, then, that we are primarily governed through non-conscious affective means, rather than through persuasive discourse, the argument goes, the current political moment requires forms of resistance that operate beyond the politics of representation and subsequent counter-hegemonic strategies. Such effective forms of resistance would mobilize new forms of affect, and political formations that, like the multitude, escape the logics of representation. Based on non-representational theories, the argument could be understood as asserting that current biopolitical forms of subjectivation over-determine any ideological position and any discursive formation. To counter such over-determination, the primary modality of resistance should be played out at the level of bodies and affects; new subjectivities outside the grips of neoliberal norms of subjectivation should be forged.

Contrary to Foucault’s basic tenet about the co-constitutive entanglement between discursive practices and bodies, the presumption here is that biopolitics is opposed to hegemony, but this opposition only makes sense to the extent that we accept the premise, wrong in my view, that biopolitical forms of power are disconnected from discursive formations, and that such formations have no operation in the field of affect.
Post-hegemonic as well as Post-Operaist visions are not divorced from social processes, though. There are clear synergies between them and forms of activism that are indifferent to, if not skeptical of, the possibility of pushing social changes through the politics of liberal representative democracy. Movements inspired by different versions of Autonomism, Commons activism, and anarchism, or the forms of organization in direct popular assembly among others, propose instead to generate alternatives sites to both parliamentary and governmental logics of State apparatuses. And when democratic states have been hijacked by the dictates of finance capital, other forms of manifesting a democratic claim (or a claim to democracy) inevitably had to emerge.

While precarization places the question of affect and bodies at the center of debates, the politicization of the vulnerability of bodies as a form of resistance acquired a new significance in the light of the changing neoliberal politics of recent years. The intensification of precarization after the 2008 financial crisis—affecting vast sectors of populations from the global North, including many who were not expecting to belong to the disenfranchised (the new poor) and particularly the young population—, together with longer processes of pauperization across the globe, have triggered public manifestations of social discontent in many parts of the world. This has led a number of authors, Judith Butler among them, to pay special attention to the so-called politics of the street, engaging in an extensive reflection on forms of resistance that have recently challenged the limits of representative democracy for not being democratic or representative enough, such as the Occupy Movement or the Outraged People in Mediterranean Europe. The criminalization of social protest and the subsequent intensification of securitarian policies via the militarization of security forces,
particularly after 11 September 2001 and increasingly so after the 2008 financial crisis, have only heightened the role of bodily vulnerability in these forms of resistance.

In this context, Judith Butler has reflected positively on the politics of the street as a form of public assembly, an enactment of the popular will, a demand for self-determination and popular sovereignty, all of which are essential values for a democratic view of politics.\textsuperscript{xxv} Throughout these timely interventions, she highlighted, rightly in my view, key aspects that amount to the political potential of these public demonstrations. The performative dimension of the gathering of bodies occupying (or rather claiming) public spaces is central to her argument about how the popular will is brought about.\textsuperscript{xxvi} It is through the acting in concert of the bodies gathered in different forms of public assembly, and not necessarily through their explicitly verbalized demands, Butler argues, that a plural popular will might be performed. Importantly, Butler also finds in these public demonstrations an instance that locates vulnerability at the core of resistance. Vulnerability is not opposed to agency here, but rather entangled with it.

This central role granted to the plurality of \textit{the bodies acting in concert} as well as her focus on the political mobilization of vulnerability in practices of resistance, however, is at a distance from post-hegemonic views. In the following sections I show how Butler’s theorization of public assemblies suggest the possibility of moving towards articulation and counter-hegemonic politics by looking into Butler’s theorization of vulnerability \textit{vis-a-vis} its differences from both liberal-humanist as well as immanent and vitalist approaches to embodiment that belong to some of the new discourses on affect. In so doing, I aim to argue for an approach to vulnerability and radical democratic practices that take hegemony and antagonism into account.
Vulnerability/Permeability

Butler’s theorization of bodily politics of assembly and vulnerability seems to share with other approaches to vulnerability and posthegemony theoretical-political visions a preoccupation with the corporeal life of the subject. However, her approach clearly differs from them in significant ways. To a large extent, the difference between them is indebted to the distinctive conceptualization of bodies and affects in the relational ethics of vulnerability that Butler offers, which rejects both sovereign ideas of agency and either an immanent or a vitalist consideration of embodiment. This conception involves firstly, an understanding of vulnerability that is based on the social (and therefore mediated) configuration of bodies. And secondly, it presupposes a reading of Foucault that diverges from those interpretations of biopolitics that presume that it is possible to separate affects from discourse. To unpack these arguments, let us start by considering Butler’s approach to bodily vulnerability.

One of the usual meanings of vulnerability implies the idea of unwanted permeability, or a kind of permeability that renders the permeable entity (be it an object, matter, the environment, or an individual or collective subject) weak or exposed to injury. Etymologically, vulnerability comes from late Latin vulnerābilis, from Latin vulnerāre: to wound, from vulnus a wound. According to the OED, to be vulnerable is to be ‘exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally; [or] (of a person) in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect.’

This conventional definition, which is the one that circulates in contemporary imperial forms of global exploitation and liberal human rights frameworks, tends to equate vulnerability and injurability, and refers to the possibility of being exposed to injury or attack, and therefore in need of either defense or protection. However,
Butler points out, vulnerability cannot be reduced to injurability. While injury results from the ‘exploitation of that vulnerability,’ vulnerability emerges from subjects’ relationality, and it is constitutive of our capacity for action. Butler highlights two aspects of vulnerability in association with relationality: on the one hand, its link with dependency—the idea that we are radically dependent on others, and on the material and social world in which we come into being, and which might sustain us or fail to sustain us. On the other hand, to be vulnerable implies the capacity to affect and be affected. This aspect of vulnerability involves a constitutive openness in the subject, regardless of whether it is wanted or not. This openness could be interpreted as a reminder that we are socially formed subjects whose shape and agency is actually co-constitutive with an outside that necessarily impinges upon us. Following Butler, however, the inescapable capacity to be affected, which amounts to our responsiveness, is, in fact, inextricably enmeshed with our capacity to ‘act’. This intertwining is at the basis of her critique of the dichotomy between activity and passivity, or in other terms, between agency and vulnerability. There is neither an opposition, nor a necessary causal or sequential logic between them.

This chiasmic structure of agency and vulnerability recalls for me the dialogic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, who insist on the permeable character of ‘our acts,’ ‘our voices’ and ultimately ourselves. Following Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic approach to subject constitution, I understand permeability as a trans-individual way of being in the world. Given the trans-individual character of subjectivity, permeability becomes a marker through which to highlight the idea that the subject is always decentered by the primacy of the other in its own being. According to Bakhtin, we live in dialogue, and can only come to know ourselves through the perspectives of others. At the same time, our uniqueness demands us to be responsive, as ‘our own acts’ and crucially our
‘own voice’, are, from the start, always-already answers both constituted by and responding to other acts and voices; the world is addressing us.xxxv

For Bakhtin, this dialogical character of subjectivity situates us in the realm of answerability from the start, and therefore grounds our ethical relation to the world. As all our voices are mutually co-constitutive, the subject is conceived as a polyphonic palimpsest, for which Self and Other can hardly be differentiated.xxxvi Understanding the metaphor of the ‘voice’ in a phenomenological rather than a strictly discursive sense, permeability points more clearly to the idea that, being open (and therefore permeable) beings, we are all mutually affected by each other and the world around us, which in turn, is permeable as well. Permeability indicates the relational character of vulnerability in a way that highlights the impossibility of establishing a clear origin and destiny for the circulation of affect (both in spatial and temporal terms) and by this move it also reminds us of the unstable (and always in the process of being negotiated) boundaries of the vulnerable ‘I.’

This focus on permeability may well be just a semantic nuance, but it is helpful for distinguishing two distinctive conceptual uses of vulnerability: a) vulnerability as the capacity to be affected (which might be acknowledged or disavowed), I call this permeability; and b) vulnerability as a condition that is differentially distributed, and which might relate more straightforwardly with Butler’s notion of precariousness.xxxvii

While permeability seems to be a phenomenological, albeit socially structured condition, vulnerability emerges as an effect of that condition. I cannot manage my permeability, but given my subjective and objective position, this permeability can make me more or less vulnerable. Vulnerability may indicate an objective state: no matter how invulnerable I pretend to be or feel, my vulnerability will be there despite my will. But it can also describe a subjective state, as it might be something that one
feels or is capable of acknowledging to a greater or a lesser extent, or fail to acknowledge at all (subject to “resistance” in the psychoanalytic sense). In either case, we can see that there are always some subjects who find themselves more vulnerable than others, while we could not say that some subjects are more permeable than others without compromising the relational paradigm altogether.

Permeability can be understood as one of the instantiations of relationality, and the body figures as an emblematic locus where reflections on relationality, injurability and vulnerability have for the most part been staged. However, while bodies may better expose this constitutive permeable character of the subject, bodies and affects have also served the reaffirmation of injurability and victimhood in ways that are contrary to the politics of vulnerability suggested here. For instance, this version of vulnerability clearly diverges from the humanitarian views described in the previous section. But how does our consideration of ‘affectability’ and vulnerable bodies differ from how bodies and affects have been conceived within discourses on affect? How do these differences give way to a different reading of biopolitical power, one that does not dismiss the relationship between affect, discourse, and power, and the role of hegemony in contemporary politics of resistance?

**The politics of Affect, Power, Hegemony**

In this section, I hope to show the differences between an immanent approach to affect and the politics of vulnerability discussed here. To do so, I will be following Linda Zerilli’s remarks on the shortfalls of the so-called affective turn, which, according to the author, are not only due to its immanent and vitalist characterization of affect, but also to the ontological status it is granted. Following this discussion, I will consider how
biopolitical power might be interpreted and resisted in light of a critical view that incorporates the insights of Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe.

Linda Zerilli is interested in assessing the reach and implications of the so-called affective turn as it has been increasingly influencing feminist and democratic political thinking. What is particularly problematic for Zerilli is how the ontological split between body/matter and mind/culture produced by these latter theories of affect foreclose the possibility of thinking seriously about the ‘judging subject.’ Zerilli argues for a post-sovereign theory of judgment that challenges the dualism that these theories of affect reiterate. My reading, however, is less concerned with the question of judgment, than with the differences between those critiques of the sovereign subject that are based on ‘affect’, and the critique of the liberal individual and sovereignty that a critical and relational approach to embodied vulnerability proposes.

Zerilli reminds us that many of the problems posited by the affective turn are not new. Indeed, the question of embodiment and materiality has been at the center of feminist concerns for decades – if not since its inception. Clare Hemmings has made this case well. The other element that we need to take into account is its lack of conceptual unity. Zerilli rightly takes into account a first necessary distinction within the work on affect: on the one hand, those authors whose work is concerned “with the irreducible entanglement of feeling and thinking,” such as Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed, among others. On the other hand, those theorists who propose a new ontology, either in its vitalist or new materialist understanding of affect via Gilles Deleuze, particularly as read by Brian Massumi, replaying the old dualism between reason/mind, and affect/body, while pretending to overcome it. Zerilli’s focus in this regard will be on the perspective developed by William Connolly, as an exemplary representative of this second trend.
I am particularly interested in this ontological dimension insofar as it touches on a key element within current discussions on vulnerability: namely the body. In effect, this vitalist turn to affect presumes the materiality of the body—conceived as prior to the work of culture or signification. How to think about the link between corporeality and subjectivity is pivotal to the definition of this move as an ontological one. This point is important for my argument, as this question is at the center of what differentiates it from the relational considerations of vulnerability that we are dealing with, and with other approaches to feelings and emotions that do not deny the co-constitution of affects and the social that I will address later on.

Zerilli argues that this ontological turn to affect de-links affect from objects, and from any form of cognition or intentionality, radically detaches judgment from any affective or embodied basis, reinstalls a new sort of naïve empiricism that believes in direct unmediated contact with and perception of the world, and therefore is not able to account for the normativity of experience. Significantly, according to Zerilli, this approach posits unbounded irrational affect as the ultimate determinant of subjects’ conduct and beliefs, and finally, rehearses the same mistake that other critiques of rationalism have made, reproducing a strict split between conceptual thought and pre-conceptual experience or perception.

The insistence on the specificity of affect as that which is essentially pre-personal, pre-social, in sum prior to any labor of culture, concepts, or signification, and therefore not conditioned by any force other than itself, is aimed at underscoring its radical autonomy. Hence, the conclusion that affect is the ultimate determinant of our conduct and beliefs, and yet fully separated from them—a point that is central to Zerilli’s critique. Zerilli rightly points out that such a view ultimately would not be able to give an account of resistance, as it is destined to conclude that anything we may think or do
as political subjects is in the last instance the result of the manipulation of our affects, conceived as belonging to a fully different order than our thoughts.

This observation resonates with some criticisms made of Foucauldians for not leaving space for agency, as well as those interpretations of biopolitical forms of power as purely affective to which I have referred earlier on. Foucauldian understandings of subjectivation in general, and regulative power in particular, point to the fact that power dynamics may well require the subjective affective investment of individuals to effectively operate, and even produce these investments. This is one of the central arguments of Judith Butler’s *Psychic Life of Power*. Furthermore, resistance is never opposed to power according to this view, but rather one of its forms and possible effects. However, this does not mean that resistance can only mirror and reproduce the power relations that it is resisting. Simply put, this means only that resistance can seek to transform some of the effects of a power field, but by no means will resistance ever put an end to it. In other words, we cannot think of freedom or justice outside of power (these very same ideals are implicated in it), nor can we aspire, through resistance, to achieve radical autonomy, self-transparency, or total social harmony.

Here I risk making a wild and bold association of sorts: with all the caveats that account for the huge differences between the two approaches, we can still find some resonances between Foucault’s approach to power, the theory of hegemony of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and the theory of agonistic politics developed by Mouffe. By suggesting this parallelism my intention is not to dismiss the conceptual disparities between these perspectives. For instance, there is a radical epistemological dissonance between regulation and hegemony that I consider important, as it has
implications for how we may understand the role of affective forces in relation to politics, a point I will address later on.

Let us consider this parallelism. Foucault’s critical approach to power questioned Marxist views on ideology and the emancipatory ideals of the sexual liberation movement, concerned as they were with liberating their subjects from the grips of power. In this sense, one could read Foucault’s observations on the mutual implication of regulation and resistance as a theory of the ineffably agonistic character of freedom. Laclau and Mouffe, at first together, and later through different theoretical moves, have also criticized orthodox Marxism, drawing attention to the constitutive, but at the same time indeterminate and contingent antagonistic character of society, which underlies the fact that there can be no ultimate truth, nor final accord, on ideals of justice and equality. The meaning of those signifiers is always already a matter of the content of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles. According to Mouffe’s model, it is precisely the unavoidability of this antagonism that structures ongoing agonism.

Foucault’s agonistic approach to power and resistance is one that, like Mouffe’s, can never be foreclosed by definition. At an ontological level, power dynamics have no outside for Foucault; resistance is a never-ending struggle. In turn, both Laclau and Mouffe have argued that we can aim to transform social relations towards a more just organization of the social, but we will never definitively achieve a totally reconciled society. Antagonism and therefore hegemonic power relations are constitutive of the political, and there is no escape from this ontological limit.

Foucauldian analysis points to those instances of power dynamics that may well not be yet politically articulated as an object of struggle (i.e. in the form of a claim) insofar as subjectivation, regulative power and concomitant forms of biopolitical
governmentality operate through discourses of truth (notably scientific ones) that present themselves as non-political. Laclau and Mouffe, however, focus on precisely how subjects articulate political claims, or rather how political subjects are constituted through those articulations. Each of them highlights different aspects of politics: one is concerned with the biopolitical mode of government by which our bodies are regulated and we are subjectivated; the other with the constitution of political subjects in the specific field of the political struggle for hegemony. Arguably, the affective dimension of our social existence might work differently in each of these instances. But this only confirms that affective forces are present in both of them. We need to take into account that, after all, the theory of hegemony relies fundamentally on a psychoanalytic account of the human subject and its desires, and only within this framework can we pose the question of what motivates and mobilizes people. As Laclau, points out, “hegemonic totalization requires a radical investment… and engagement in signifying games that are very different form conceptual apprehension.” To the extent that it is precisely affective investment that will sustain a contingent articulation of arbitrary chains of equivalences among heterogeneous signifiers, it seems totally misleading to assert that the dynamics of affect are crucial to one realm (say biopower) but not the other (hegemony).

Going back to our discussion about those approaches to politics that privilege the biopolitical to the detriment of hegemony based on the assumption that affect is not implicated in hegemonic articulations as the advocates of the post-hegemony thesis suggest, I therefore reject the conclusion that we necessarily have to radically oppose the two insights, and assume that we may find the truly politically relevant questions for our times (let alone their answers), exclusively in one or the other camps. I would also call into question the way in which the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics is used to
indicate the futility of those political theories that are concerned with questions of political articulation. In fact, I think both approaches to power and politics are necessary, for neither alone can give a full account of how politics works today –mainly because when we take into account that in order to effectively resist biopolitical neoliberal governmentality, the naturalization of the latter has to be challenged through a process of politicization, that is, it needs to be brought into the game of signifiers as an object of political discourse.

Psychic Investments, Body languages

There is no reason to assume that the affective dimension of our lives absolutely determines social and political practices. This caveat does not imply a dismissal of affectivity; nor a stake in a cognitivist approach to politics or a claim to sovereign agency. The same idea of affectability at the core of Butler’s notion of vulnerability relies on the understanding that our experience of the world is certainly traversed by affective currents that are not fully in our control. Further, it also suggests that neither is affectivity ever fully autonomous since its chiasmic structure makes it impossible to separate the affect from what affects it. Butler’s approach to vulnerability, Laclau and Mouffe’s approach to hegemony, and the discourses on affect considered here are wary of the all too powerful capacity accorded to sovereign agency. But, unlike Butler and Laclau and Mouffe, the latter are also reluctant to work with psychoanalytic insights into the limits of consciousness in order to understand what drives human action.

Psychoanalysis, however, offers one of the most powerful theories for explaining the tenacity of our attachment to what subjugates us, and the persistence of forms of oppression despite their widespread critique. If Freud has left an enduring lesson, it is that awareness does not itself lead to change. And this is why hegemony is
not merely about persuasion, but rather cathectic investments in an articulation. As Yannis Stavrakakis has remarked, both Laclau and Mouffe actually consider this affective dimension of politics as a crucial element for the production of political identities and the works of hegemony and counter-hegemonic strategies.\textsuperscript{xlix}

One could conjecture that what the turn to affect is trying to account for is in fact unconscious drives that are not under our control. From a psychoanalytically informed perspective, the source of this compulsive behavior would not be located at an ontological pre-social and pre-personal level, but rather at the core of unconscious processes involved in the social formation of the subject. Albeit with all their differences, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe all highlight the key role played by psychic investments and passionate attachments in political life.

Starting from the idea that psychic contents are socially formed, and that social discourses require the psychic investment of the subjects they interpellate in order to actually operate, it seems necessary to accept that some aspect of unconscious life remains opaque, a claim which does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that unconscious affective currents are radically autonomous from social processes and are the last determinant of our political behavior. Rather, they just lead to the affirmation of the mediation of embodied affectability for thinking political identifications and articulations.

To claim that there is an area of experience and even knowledge that is embodied, non-intentional and pre-reflexive, may point to the critique of the sovereign subject, and the limits of transparency (of what can be disclosed). But this does not mean that this experience is not mediated by signification (if only at an unconscious or pre-reflexive level). Everything depends on how we conceive the process of social meaning making. This resonates with Butler’s approach to embodied processes of
signification, best exemplified by the performative dynamic of norms. Norms are not general rules articulated through mechanisms of representation, as if they were presented to us as objective prescriptive truths we are required to follow. Rather, they structure and inform bodily practices that enact psychic processes of identification by which we come into being. They are pre-predicative, not explicit, and learnt in embodied practical ways, and they are certainly open to other movements of the body, other practices that might subvert them.

As Butler has stated on a number of occasions, if we are vulnerable subjects, one of the dimensions of this vulnerability is undoubtedly our vulnerability to interpellation and to the name, where the name functions as a synecdoche for the normative social world that precedes us and marks the process of subject constitution. Now, interpellation is not just about verbal speech acts; it is also about unintentional modes of touching, relating to, looking, moving, hence the importance of affectability for understanding how bodily performativity works. This also means that signification exceeds speech: the body communicates unspeakable ‘messages’ in languages that might not be translated into representational discourse, but this does not mean that there is no signification at all. When it comes to ethical relationality, Butler writes: ‘(a)ny sign of injurability counts as the “face”.’ The uncomfortable place of vulnerability in between relationality and injurability shows the central role of the paradigmatic permeability of the embodied subject upon which the ethical demand is made. But also suggests that this permeability is not devoid of processes of signification, as enigmatic as they might be. Correspondingly, the somatic is never to be found outside fantasy, while fantasy, in turn, is never to be completely a-social; the circulation of affect, its attachment to an object, its random transferability to another, work in tandem with communicative processes regardless of whether or not we can put them into words.
Both Stavrakakis and Zerilli rightly point out that, contrary to this idea of intertwined mediations among the social, the psyche and the body, the affective turn is part of a broader ontological turn in political theory, where affect and body figure as privileged tropes for mobilizing the fantasy of a material unmediated relation to how things really are. This sort of reconstituted empiricism hinders the mediation of signification—and therefore the omnipresence of power and norms.

But I am tempted to read this ontological turn as a symptom. Given that the promise of a direct access to reality also elevates affect (outside the socially formed subject), matter or objects to the new role of agents, one could arguably see it as a symptom that in some cases even works in favor of an evacuation of the political. My sense is that the celebration of material agency also has a stake in dismissing our subjective involvement in the political, sometimes disguised as an appeal to the humility of the human, other times becoming the occasion for disavowing our own political apathy, lack of hope, or sense of either deception or anticipated defeat. The impasse we are in, which according to Lauren Berlant, drives forms of ‘cruel optimism,’ may also lead to different negotiations of the “desire for the political” in times of neoliberal systematic crisis. And one could perhaps think of this hope professed for the autonomous agency of affect as one of them.

In a similar vein, it could also be seen as a symptom that mirrors the perverse transparency of power and the cynicism of our times. And so, the question emerges: given the current cynical modality of power, according to which it is not so much the opacity of the operations of power that allow for their resilience, but their very transparency, their presence on the surface, it is clear that awareness and critical judgment might not be enough to counter it. This is a moment when it is not so much a neurotic-paranoid logic whereby we are haunted by and therefore supposed to unveil the
insidious hidden operations of power that subject us, but rather one that perversely fetishizes the overt exercise of power. Despite, or perhaps even as a response to, massive criticism, we bear witnesses of the exhibition of violence in the most obscene ways. We are, then, compelled to wonder: how does the investment in a democratic imaginary manage to shift despair, resignation, indifference or condescending compassion into political solidarity, and collective, active resistance to this violence? Where might we find forms of counter-hegemonic ‘affective articulation’ that effectively challenge this logic and that might be understood to put at stake a reconsideration of this important dimension of hegemony?

**Embodied Articulations and Radical Democratic Politics**

As I have argued in previous sections, the focus on bodies and affectability might suggest that there are some resonances between the turn to affect and the ethical turn to vulnerability. The paradigmatic materiality, affectability and permeability of bodies are pivotal to both the affective turn and the recuperation of vulnerability as a generative concept. And yet, the focus on bodies and affectability can lead to very different political outcomes depending on how we understand them, and these differences do matter, if we are to consider how to account for hegemony, and move towards effective radical democratic politics. Can vulnerability and embodied forms of resistance be cast in ways that disregard neither the importance of affective investments, nor the importance of counter-hegemonic articulations in politics?

One could understand Butler’s claim that ‘when the body "speaks" politically, it is not only in vocal or written language,’ to suggest that, in certain circumstances, bodies could produce political articulations. When reflecting on public assembly, Butler points out that the plurality of bodies on the streets may, through concerted action, enact
a right—for instance, performing the right to appear in the political field—, or a demand—against precarity, or for the sustainability of those very same bodies—. And yet, there is a difference between affirming the political signification of these instances and saying that the bodily performativity of the public assembly may articulate particular political ‘contents.’ Could we read these bodies acting in concert as the site of potential articulations?

According to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, what is central to an articulation is the contingent way by which two or more elements come together to produce certain meanings, subjects, or identities. Stuart Hall would mobilize this notion of articulation to understand the cultural realm, and claim that articulation makes manifest that there is ‘no necessary or essential correspondence of anything with anything.’ One of the key aspects of Laclau and Mouffe’s development of the notion of articulation is that it is the contingency of articulations that makes them the object of political dispute. But, seen in this light, this idea also suggests that articulation can and actually may be performed in many different ways, including social practices, discourses, events, and surely forms of embodiment. Arguably, articulation should not be limited to representational discourse (that is, the equation of discourse to verbal speech), and, in this sense, what bodies do may well perform political articulations. However, the question remains: how are we to interpret what might be articulated in the embodied dimension of public assemblies, mostly when the legitimacy of a state regime or vision is challenged, when, by their very nature, public assemblies challenge the established meaning of democracy, and the whole space of politics? This question confronts us with two related problems: on the one hand, the temporality of what we may understand as a political articulation; on the other hand, what is articulated there beyond representational discourse or verbal speech.
Butler writes: ‘Perhaps these are anarchist moments or anarchist passages, when the legitimacy of a regime is called into question, but when no new regime has yet come to take its place. This time of the interval is the time of the popular will… characterized by an alliance with the performative power to lay claim to the public…’lvii Certainly, one could read the alliances of bodies in this performance as a form of articulation. And, as Butler suggests, when considering the meaning of such articulation, temporality is important. If we limit our analysis to what has been said or enacted in that moment, we may not be able to consider the political space that the same articulation opens. These moments articulate something, the effects of which we cannot assess in the here and now of the political happening itself. They belong, in certain measure, to the contingency of political struggles, and the unpredictability of what these moments might open up.

The gap between these manifestations of the popular will, whose task is precisely to disrupt the usual course of politics, and what comes next, opens the space of hegemonic struggles. This gap, theorists of hegemony caution, should prevent us from celebrating too summarily the moment of disruption per se. In turn, Butler indicates that ‘there are many reasons to be suspicious of (these) idealized moments.’lviii And this, regardless of whether or not this political moment leads to more conventional state-oriented counter-hegemonic battles for government rule –this can happen or not, and many other things may happen too. Consider the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring in Egypt, where soon after the electoral victory of Mohamed Morsi, the democratically elected government was removed in 2013, and the dreadful situation in the region, in contrast to the fate of Indignados movement, the electoral success of Syriza in Greece and the mixture of success and difficulty that followed, to some extent similar to the success and challenges that Podemos faces in Spain. Even if we accept the contingency
of hegemonic struggles, this is different from giving in to that contingency. Surely, we cannot reduce the meaning of a political happening to its explicit demands, and it is clear that political articulations exceed the conscious intentionality of any particular actor. But we might want to be cautious not to definitely celebrate the affective force of the happening itself when such a celebration’s focus on the affective dimension of experience serves to dismiss the necessary transience of such moments, and disavow the current difficulty for articulating effective and sustainable political alternatives to neoliberal polices.

At stake here is the task of counter-hegemony and the articulation of the ‘we’ who is assumed to belong to the political community, and the ‘other’ it necessarily produces. While we may not always be able to perceive a clear intention, what these bodies assembling in public articulate is a ‘we’ that in one way or another necessarily opposes an ‘other.’ At this point, the question of antagonism becomes key as it signals the orientation of such articulation. Butler also suggests the inevitability of this antagonism.\[lx\] It might be precisely in light of this antagonism that we may be able to determine whether the articulations at stake could be counter-hegemonic or not.

Antagonism is pivotal to radical democratic politics. Such politics point to the constitutively antagonistic character of the political.\[lx\] According to Laclau and Mouffe, the political is defined by its undecidability and therefore its arbitrariness –there is no rationalist or deliberative response that could justify our political views.\[lxi\] The arbitrariness of the political points to its essential lack of foundation. It is precisely this foundational lack that, in turn, demands that any political position to struggle for hegemony –when any position credibly presents itself as common sense, a natural truth, or rational, that is, in fact, the sign of its hegemony. What this struggle for hegemony also produces is the ‘we’ of the political community it claims to represent.
Antagonism is central to radical democratic politics as any decision implies the exclusion of other political possibilities; but more crucially, because the hegemonic definition of the political community needs the demarcation of a ‘constitutive outside’ to define itself as such; out of this border a constitutive exclusion remains. A radical democratic politics involves the understanding that there is no ultimate political closure, and therefore accepts the ever-present existence of antagonist forces. It is a politics that conceives the boundaries of the polity as always open –perhaps, vulnerable or permeable?—to the challenges of what has been excluded.

The ‘we’ of the public assembly could be the 99% occupying streets and parks, the ‘outraged people’ camping on central squares in protest against political classes that do not deliver ‘real democracy,’ or the self-perceived autochthonous Europeans marching against the migrants. All these demonstrations articulate a different version of the body politic. If we think about this ‘we’ across the differential distribution of vulnerability, we see that in some cases the exposure of vulnerability serves as a claim of the excluded and the redefinition of the political community. In other cases, it works as a demand for more exclusion—leading to an enhancement of the vulnerability of the other. And yet in some cases, the act of exposing vulnerability does question how vulnerability is extremely ill-distributed but without questioning the outer limits of the ‘we.’

The permeability of bodies, in this sense, works as a metaphor for the permeability of the body politic, and the constant negotiation of its boundaries. According to Butler, this ‘we’ performs a popular will that might be plural and heterogeneous. But if this is so, it is not because of the immediate performativity of the acting in concert. Rather, the ‘we’ that these bodies perform articulates an antagonist relationship with what they are resisting, and particularly with what they are also
excluding. The question, then, is how affective investments and shared vulnerability produce articulations that agonistically reconfigure social antagonisms, calling into question the hegemonic borders of the body politic. This questioning has to endure towards an always-open horizon for further struggles to come. A radical vision of democracy, after all, seems to be less concerned with the realization of an ultimate ideal, than with the ceaseless mobilization of permeable alliances that may question its own limits.


ii For an account of the so-called turn to affect, see Hemmings, “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn”; Clough, “Introduction” to *The Affective Turn*, 1-33; Blackman and Venn (eds.), *Affect* (a Special Issue of Body & Society); and
Pedwell and Whitehead (eds.), *Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory* (a Special Issue of Feminist Theory).

iii There are a variety of positions that draw on the primacy of affective currents, and/or the potential of life forces to argue for a new form of politics more suitable to respond to the challenges of our times. They might range from the “affirmative politics” proposed by Rosi Braidotti (on Braidotti’s affirmative politics, post-human nomadic ethics and zoe-egalitarianism, see *The Posthuman*, 100-104 and 190-195), to John Beasley-Murray’s post-hegemonic politics (see *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America Poetics*); from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Multitude*, to William Conolly’s neuropolitics (on Conolly’s use of neurosciences and Deleuzian approaches to affect to develop his perspective on pluralism, see *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*; on his recourse to the creativity of life-processes for thinking democratic practices, see *The Fragility of Things*).


v On dependence and affectability, see Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 50-84; *Frames of War*, 33-54; and Butler in this volume.

vi Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

vii Following Anibal Quijano, I use coloniality to indicate the pervasiveness of colonial relations after decolonization. See Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America.”

viii Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*.

On biopolitics, international relations and neoliberal governmentality see Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

On an approach to vulnerability as a transformative ground able to challenge the biopolitical management of vulnerability, see Ziarek, “Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability: Disrespect, Obligation, Action.”

See Grewal, “Women’s rights as Human rights: The Transnational Production of the Global Feminist Subject.” On the connections between humanitarianism, migration policies and sex work see Mai, “Between Embodied Cosmopolitism and Sexual Humanitarianism.”

For a critical analysis of the use of vulnerability and the neoliberal reframing of empowerment within the field of gender and development, see Madhok and Rai, “Agency, Injury, and Transgressive Politics in Neoliberal Times.”


On the relationship between immaterial labor, biopolitics, and the production of new subjectivities, Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.

Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.


Stavrakakis, “Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Project: Passions and Participation.”

xxi Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. I.*

xxii By Post-Operaism I refer to the Italian Autonomist tradition, in this chapter represented by Negri.

xxiii Chantal Mouffe offers a critique of these ‘politics of withdrawal’ in *Agonistics,* 65-84.

xxiv We can understand many contemporary public demonstrations, social movements, and political manifestations along these lines, from those against evictions, precarious jobs, unemployment, austerity policies –specially those against cuts in public health and education-, to migrants’ organized resistance to violence at the borders.

xxv Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.*

xxvi Butler, “Bodies in alliance and the politics of the street.”

xxvii Merriam-Webster Dictionary (online).

xxviii See Butler, *Precarious Life.* As has been extensively noted, the othering of Islam as a threat to the West after 11 September 2001 encouraged renewed imperial impulses presented as self-defense, while mobilizing civilizational enterprises allegedly aimed at ‘protecting the Other’s victims.’

xxix Butler, *Frames of War,* 54-62.


xxxiii On the trans-individual character of the speaking subject, see Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination.*

xxxiv Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres.”

xxxv Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act.*
On the notion of polyphony in Bakhtin, see “The Problem of Speech Genres” and “Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Novel and its Treatment in Critical Literature.”

Butler, *Precarious Life*.

On the body as the emblematic locus of vulnerability, see, for example Phillips, *Our bodies, Whose Property?*

Zerilli, “The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgment.”

Hemmings, “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn.”


Cf. (2)

For an account of feminist critiques of Foucault’s notion of power in relation to the project of feminism, see McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*.


On the role of signifiers in hegemonic struggles, see Laclau, *Emancipations*.

*Mouffe, Agonistics*.


See Butler’s reading of Jean Laplanche’s enigmatic signifiers in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 71-73.


Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

lv Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

lvi Hall, “Minimal Selves,” 44.

lvii Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” n/p.

lviii Ibid.

lix See Butler, Introduction to *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

lx See Mouffe, “Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?”

lxii Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. On the critique of rationalist understandings of liberalism and deliberative democracy, see Mouffe, *On the Political*.

lxiii On the development of the notion of constitutive outside, see Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Times*.

lxiv The series of demonstrations organized by the group “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West” (PEGIDA) in Dresden, Germany, between December 2014 and February 2015, followed by a smaller but still worrying demonstration in Newcastle, UK on 28 February 2015, illustrate the point. Auspiciously, strong anti-racist demonstrations against PEGIDA and its offshoot BOGIDA eclipsed or frustrated other demonstrations to be held in Edinburgh, Berlin, and Bonn.