Abstract:

Samuel A. Chambers’ “The Hegemonic Politics of Race” expands Joel Olson’s article into a broader critique of liberalism by referencing and building upon the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who develop what Chambers interprets as a viable “politics of hegemony.” While congratulating Olson for his powerful elucidation of the problems of whiteness, both in the context of multicultural and color-blind ideals, Chambers cautions that without expanding Olson’s call for an “abolitionist” personality into a new form of radically democratic politics, Olson may be subject to the very same critiques of mythical self-invention he levels at the multicultural and color-blind ideals in his essay. In articulating the nature of a “radical democracy,” Chambers provides an additional component to Olson’s arguments that allows for the practical dismantling of the traditional, liberal democratic order through a deep questioning of white hegemony.

THE HEGEMONIC POLITICS OF RACE:
THE PLACE OF AN ABOLITIONIST PERSONALITY
IN THE RADICAL DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARY

Samuel A. Chambers*

Anyone who thinks through, or works with, politics and the law, has known for quite some time now that — despite the eloquence, force, and historical staying power of Justice Harlan’s famous phrase — our Constitution simply is not colorblind.1 From the

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1 See, e.g., Derrick Bell, and We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice 34 (1987), where Bell refers to the work of historian William Wiecek who has documented in the main text of the Constitution at least seven specific accommodations to slavery.
original document produced by the framers’ compromises, to the Reconstruction Amendments, to the Civil Rights legislation of the late 1960’s, both the Constitution and the laws emanating from it have had to deal directly with issues of race. The Constitution has thus never been blind to color, even when it tries to make the law neutral with respect to race. Indeed, the latter efforts attest to the former fact. Moreover, multiculturalism offers no real resolution of this paradox. Very few of even those activists most committed to its goals, still believe that multiculturalism provides any sort of simple solution to the problems of the colorblind doctrine. Multiculturalism remains plagued by real or apparent problems of overwrought particularism, racial bias, and idealist fantasy. It might, therefore, seem somewhat redundant, or perhaps simply unnecessary, to point out “The Limits of Colorblind and Multicultural Personhood.”

However, Joel Olson’s essay does much more than its title might suggest. Rather than merely drawing out some contingent limitations in the colorblind and multicultural ideals of personhood, Olson exposes the fundamental and necessary contradictions that lie at the core of those ideals. Both colorblindness and multiculturalism serve to maintain whiteness as an often invisible racial identity of power and privilege. Olson’s precise and potent critique of multiculturalism and colorblindness shows how both ideals remain trapped within and emerge from the logic of political liberalism, which is itself tied to an expansionist economic capitalism. Olson’s essay thereby greatly exceeds the scope of a critique of ideals of personhood; it calls into question the very terms of liberalism, that regime which circulates and maintains such ideals. This radical questioning often goes on in between the lines of Olson’s essay — emerging only in the repeated references to “greater democracy” and the “truly democratic” — but it reaches its focal point in his clearly radical conclusion: “democracy should aspire to blackness.”

Yet, to paraphrase Olson, what would a democracy that aspires to blackness look like? Certainly such a transformation could never be carried out within the given conditions of liberal-capitalism. However, it also cannot be achieved merely by the articulation of an alternative ideal of personhood, the abolitionist personality. Olson admits, and eloquently defends, the somewhat utopian nature of his description of the abolitionist personality. I wish to challenge not utopianism itself, but the content Olson

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2 Such structural tensions cannot be reconciled through some sort of Hegelian synthesis; rather, these contradictions serve to deconstruct the ideals themselves. In other words, the logic of Olson’s argument precludes reconciliation with advocates of either multiculturalism or the colorblind ideal and calls for a much more radical political project concerning race.

3 Here one might fruitfully compare Olson’s work to that of Ruth Frankenberg, who delineates three distinct but overlapping discourses on race, and whose chief critical target is the colorblind discourse. Frankenberg favors a “race-cognizant discourse” as the best way for feminists to overcome the entrenched problems of race. Throughout her work, Frankenberg’s central question remains that of how white women “think through race,” so larger structural issues, and questions of democracy, fall outside her scope. I hope to push Olson’s work in a direction that I think it already gestures, well beyond the frame of individual thought. See generally, RUTH FRANKENBERG, WHITE WOMEN, RACE MATTERS: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WHITENESS (1993).


5 Olson traces the contours of the abolitionist personality with three primary elements. Whatever the context-specific content, an abolitionist personality will be: 1) opposed to white privilege; 2) based on the values of black culture; and 3) resolutely political in its identity.
gives it, for he may fall prey to the same myth of self-invention that he begins his essay by criticizing. Our racial identities are historically constructed through relations of power—abolitionist, no less than white and black—so the invention of “new conception of personhood” may ring hollow without a formulation of the expressly political terms in which such a personality might emerge or flourish. In short, if liberalism gives rise to the multicultural and colorblind ideals of personhood, and if their critique calls for a reconstruction of democracy and the creation of an abolitionist personality, then we need a description of both the abolitionist personality — which Olson provides — and that new form of democracy — which he does not.

In the space remaining I cannot work up such a description from scratch. Instead, I wish to argue that the project of radical democracy as recently articulated by Ernesto Laclau might offer a home for the abolitionist personality painted by Olson. Specifically, I think that to save the abolitionist personality from becoming just another self-invention myth, it needs to be woven into the tapestry of what Laclau and Mouffe call the radical democratic imaginary. Therefore, I will attempt to understand, or perhaps reinterpret, the abolitionist personality within the framework of a politics of hegemony. What prevents such a reinterpretation from becoming uncharitable is the key link that exists between Olson’s project of challenging whiteness and the project of radical democracy: namely, hegemony. I see these connections between the abolitionist personality and the scope of radical democracy as latent within Olson’s very description.

The force of Olson’s argument lies in its pellucid articulation of the problem of whiteness today, which proves to be an issue not of individual bias or overt racism, but of hegemonic power. The power relations that produce and maintain whiteness remain embedded within a particular history, a history that Olson’s essay and many of the works he cites have begun to trace. Colorblindness utterly ignores and at times goes so far as to suppress this history; hence Justice Harlan’s famous but no less false claim that “our constitution is color-blind.” Multiculturalism, on the other hand, asserts the importance of history but does so only by depoliticizing it, by asserting that each race or culture has their own history, separate from the rest and developing along some neutral path. Hence, we witness the narcissistic desire to find or, if necessary, invent a white culture, a drive that forms the logical telos of whiteness studies. “Whiteness, though, cannot be understood apart from the history of white supremacy.” Therefore, a genealogy of whiteness reveals neither a blank slate nor an unobjectionable set of natural cultural developments but rather a battleground of political contestation — a struggle for the creation and maintenance of whiteness as a hegemonic articulation of dominant power.

The task of historicizing shows precisely how multiculturalism and colorblindness remain trapped within the binaries of liberalism. In illustrating that Olson’s critique hinges upon the historicizing of colorblindness and multiculturalism, I would like to challenge the very a-historical logic of liberalism that bears these ideals. Colorblindness, to start, rests squarely upon a postulation of the abstract “we” of liberalism. The “we” of

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7 Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537, 559 (1896) (Harlan, J., dissenting).

8 Olson, supra note 4, at 17.
the preamble to the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence becomes the abstract and utterly disembodied we of liberalism — a completely free and equal, and non-raced we. But as Wendy Brown argues: the “‘we’ in liberalism is sustainable [only] as long as the constituent terms of the ‘I’ remain unpoliticized.”9 Race, particularly whiteness, must remain unpoliticized in order to maintain the fiction of liberal equality — an equality formally granted to all but substantively denied to many. This abstractness of the liberal we — which is also the colorblind we — perpetuates whiteness by removing it from the political realm and thereby implicitly condoning or encouraging it in the social realm.

By turning to the other binary pole of liberalism, the individual ‘I’, multiculturalism fares no better. Olson’s most significant criticism of Charles Taylor’s politics of recognition is that by conflating race with culture Taylor occludes a genealogical study of the political construction of race and race relations. I would submit that Taylor’s communitarian commitment to multiculturalism remains perfectly assimilable to a pluralist interpretation of liberalism. Rather than autonomous and spontaneously-forming interest groups competing freely for government outputs, Taylor has pre-existing cultural groups competing freely for public recognition. In either case, the historical and political constitution of those groups is eclipsed, so individual identity remains a private matter only to be represented abstractly on the plane of politics. The individual of liberalism or multiculturalism — the logics are the same — becomes raced only as an individual issue of culture. Once again, the power and privilege of whiteness remain shielded from political scrutiny or radical questioning by lodging them firmly, and safely, within an apolitical realm. The political logic of liberalism therefore obscures the problem of whiteness either by making it disappear — since the universal “we” is not only not racist, but not even raced — or by displacing it onto the individual I, as a problem of personal racism.10

What we need today to effectively challenge whiteness, not as a form of culture or an idea in someone’s head, but as a set of precisely political structures and relations of power, is a politics of hegemony. To give a preliminary definition that I hope to expand upon through this discussion, hegemony names the political practices by which a particular political group seeks to articulate a demand out of which irradiates a set of


10 On this issue, witness George W. Bush’s presidential debate responses on questions of hate crimes or lesbian and gay civil rights legislation. Bush simply refused to take a clear position on either of these forms of legislation (even though he has opposed them both in the past); instead, he continually reasserted his own, individual “compassionate conservatism.” When pressured by Al Gore, Bush responded by insisting that he is a “tolerant person” and appeared hurt that Gore or the voters might think he had a “hard heart.” The implicit logic to such a response suggests that homophobia and racism remain problems only of individuals. The rhetorical force of the phrase “compassionate conservatism” lies in its ability to deflect structural issues — of poverty, racism, or homophobia — by emphasizing individual values of generosity and care. In a historical sense, this issue has precedent. Civil rights leaders in the early days of the Kennedy administration debated one another over whether it was better to have, on the one hand, a president whose appointment of federal judges and position on civil rights supported the black community but who did not personally like to even share the company of blacks (Eisenhower), or, on the other, a president who not only tolerated blacks but seemed genuinely to enjoy their company and respect their humanity, but whose appointment of federal judges and lip service to civil rights tended to thwart the movement (Kennedy). See, TAYLOR BRANCH, PARTING THE WATERS: AMERICA IN THE KING YEARS 1954–63 700 (1988) (discussing of the contrast between the Eisenhower and Kennedy appointees to the Federal bench).
universal or universalizing effects.\textsuperscript{11} We have to understand whiteness today not simply as an individual identity, for few whites explicitly and consciously identify with whiteness in this way. Whiteness is a hegemonic articulation of power that has been maintained despite the decline of the herrenvolk era as a legitimate political ordering of race relations. However, the colorblind and multicultural ideals have secured the hegemony of whiteness precisely by depoliticizing race — especially whiteness.\textsuperscript{12} The universal effects of whiteness — its structuring of economic, political, and social logics, and its seepage into almost all variants of power relations — continue to circulate despite the explicit illegitimacy of whiteness as a universal political ideal.

We can only make sense out of the universality of whiteness by understanding that universality as hegemonic, as containing the ghosts of the particularity that constitute it — the legacy of the herrenvolk era masked by the colorblind and multicultural ideals. In other words, the classical philosophical understanding of universality as pure, transcendental, and unchanging proves false, hollow, and dangerous (since historical atrocities have been carried out in the name of such a universal). This is not to suggest a false universal/true universal binary — as if we could finally, today, achieve the true universality that has evaded us for so long — but to reject the classical conception of universalism outright.\textsuperscript{13} Such a rejection entails a concomitant acceptance that all claims to universality are just that, political claims to universality enunciated by and from some realm of particularity. Laclau extends this logic to the broadest realms of politics when he states: “there is no universality which is not a hegemonic universality.”\textsuperscript{14} However, we can see how powerfully it illuminates the politics of race in which a foundationalist universal principle of white supremacy could never hold. Nevertheless, white supremacy prevails.

\textsuperscript{11} Laclau and Mouffe seek to “retrieve” the concept of hegemony out of the history of Marxism, particularly the writing of Gramsci, in which it originally developed. In doing so, they have taken a term that initially contains largely pejorative connotations — as hegemony serves to explain the continued ideological and material dominance of capitalism—and ressignify it as a mostly neutral or positive term, one which seeks to describe all efforts at political articulation. For a partial set of references to the concept of hegemony as it develops in the works of Laclau and Mouffe, see \textsc{Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, & Slavoj Zizek}, \textsc{Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left} (2000); \textsc{Laclau & Mouffe, supra} note 6; \textsc{Ernesto Laclau, New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time} (1990) [hereinafter \textsc{Laclau, New Reflections}]; \textsc{Ernesto Laclau, Emancipation(s),} (1996) [hereinafter \textsc{Laclau, Emancipation(s})]. It involves no overstatement to say that the central concern of all of these works is the concept of hegemony. See, \textsc{Samuel A. Chambers, Giving Up (on) Rights?} (2000) (unpublished manuscript).

\textsuperscript{12} That is to say, race is still a political topic in America, but only when the issue concerns African-Americans or other citizens of color — only when the question is one of Affirmative Action or the demographics of crime, for example. Whiteness, however, remains thoroughly unpolicitized, precisely as that which exists outside of the domain of the political.

\textsuperscript{13} \textsc{See Linda Zerilli, The Universalism Which is Not One}, \textsc{28 Diacritics} 3 (1998).

\textsuperscript{14} \textsc{Ernesto Laclau, Structure, History and the Political, in Contingency, Hegemony, Universality} 182, 193 (2000).

\textsuperscript{15} For one explicit effort to apply Laclau and Mouffe’s thought to the politics of race, see \textsc{Anna Marie Smith, Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary} (1998).
The project of radical democracy insists on conceptualizing politics as at root a matter of hegemonic articulations; radical democracy thereby provides a vehicle through which to challenge the hegemony of whiteness. A hegemonic political articulation spans the liberal divide between universal (the abstract disembodied ‘we’) and particular (the private, depoliticized ‘I’) because hegemony depends on the capacity of a group’s particular demand to reach beyond itself, gesturing toward the level of the universal. Yet precisely because the universality always retains traces of the particularity that articulates it, the universal itself must be thought as an empty signifier. There is thus no substantive content to the universal besides that given to it through a particular political articulation. Hegemony, therefore, must be conceived as hegemonizing — as filling the empty signifier. As Laclau writes: “this relation by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness is exactly what we call a hegemonic relationship.”

The particular demands, of course, cannot be programmed in advance of their actual political articulation, but we can certainly conjecture and offer visions of possible empty signifiers. Laclau and Mouffe have named this envisioning process: the radical democratic imaginary. “The democratic imaginary does not constitute itself on the level of the positivity of the social, but as a transgression and subversion of it.” For democracy to aspire to blackness, it must, at the least, subvert the current configuration of the liberal democratic order. Thus, the content and scope of the abolitionist personality can be thrown into relief by placing it within the frame of the radical democratic imaginary.

The abolitionist personality has the potential to emerge within a politics of hegemony, for only through political action can the hegemony of whiteness be confronted, and only through such contestation can the abolitionist personality remain viable. Indeed, Olson’s primary charge to the abolitionist personality, “the refusal of [the] recognition of whiteness,” only holds within the terms of a politics in which whiteness can be explicitly challenged. Yet whiteness can only be subverted if it can first be located, named, and specified — an impossible task within the terms of a foundationalist politics. In other words, liberal universalism, that abstract and disembodied we, does not advocate explicitly the supremacy of whiteness precisely because the “we” is not even raced in liberalism. If we reject the universal/particular binary of liberalism — and this is exactly what radical democratic politics insists — then it quickly becomes possible to locate whiteness within the frame of hegemonic politics. Thus, the democratic aspirations to blackness can only ever be hegemonic aspirations because outside the logic of hegemonic politics (i.e., inside the logic of liberalism)

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16 LACLAU, EMANCIPATION(S), supra note 11, at 43.

17 Here we see one crucial distinction between radical democratic thought and utopian thought, since utopian thought bases itself on the vision of “Utopia,” a blueprint of the ideal society, while the project of radical democracy (while depending upon the production of various discursive “myths”) refuses any such programmatic approach. For Laclau’s own elaboration on both the differences and affinities between the radical democratic imaginary and utopian thought, see LACLAU, NEW REFLECTIONS, supra note 11, at 232.

18 LACLAU & MOUFFE, supra note 6, at 149–94 (chap. 4).

19 LACLAU, NEW REFLECTIONS, supra note 11, at 187

20 Olson, supra note 4, at 21.
whiteness, contra Olson’s assertions, never shows itself. It proves rather difficult to confront that which cannot be seen.

To put it otherwise, we can emphasize and attempt to unravel the meaning of abolition within the idea of an abolitionist personality. I do not wish to downplay the importance of the historical lineage to nineteenth century abolitionists, but clearly the goal of an abolitionist personality in the twenty-first century has to be something quite different. What must be abolished through the struggles of this personality — within the terms of a hegemonic politics — is not a specific law or edict but whiteness itself. Or, perhaps more strictly, we can say that the hegemony of whiteness must be overcome.  

For this very reason, such abolition cannot be carried out merely by individuals (or even the liberal aggregation of many individuals) but by a broader political articulation that seeks to subvert white hegemony.

It is for this reason and in this manner that I now wish to read the claim, democracy must aspire to blackness. Democracy aspires to blackness not simply by having more individuals who identify with black culture — as those who take up an abolitionist personality may well do — but by opening up democratic structures and institutions to a radical questioning of white hegemony. Laclau describes democratic politics as follows: “a succession of finite and particular identities which attempt to assume universal tasks surpassing them; but that, as a result, are never able to entirely conceal the distance between task and identity.” This articulation of the practice of democracy radically undermines the liberal binary I/we since it describes the I as emerging through the political articulation of a partial and indeterminate we. The corollary seems clear: “incompletion and provisionality belong to the essence of democracy.” The aspiration of democracy to blackness through the vehicle of the abolitionist personality amounts to nothing more, and certainly nothing less, than a hegemonic subversion of the power and privilege of whiteness.

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21Because I wish to avoid a discussion of race that centers upon the individual, I would also prefer to circumvent a debate over whether white identity must be abolished. If the hegemony of whiteness can be subverted then the question of white identity becomes secondary, or perhaps even moot. In either case, the abolition of whiteness cannot be effected merely by a wholesale conversation from white personality to abolitionist personality; such a transformation will depend upon politics, a politics of hegemony.

22Laclau, EMANCIPATION(S), supra note 10, at 15.

23Id. at. 16.