

# Ex-Marxism Without Substance: Being A Real Reply to Laclau and Mouffe

There is a discursive strategy commonly adopted by politicians, particularly at election time, in the face of discomfiting questions. It consists of appearing to respond to a questioner but without actually answering her question. The thing has the external form of an answer but is not one. Practically everyone knows how this works. The politician subtly alters the terms of the question to suit his own convenience, or substitutes a different one, or just repeats what he has already said (which may have prompted the question in the first place), or talks about something else altogether—or uses some combination of these moves. In any case, he does not answer. It is with just such a ‘politician’s reply’ that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have responded to my criticisms of their book. To have expected that they would receive these with any warmth would obviously have been foolish. But no even moderately careful reader, such as one might think each of them had good enough reason in this case to be, can have been left in doubt as to what the

criticisms were. I lay them out in summary and then show, one by one, how Laclau and Mouffe have thought fit to deal with them.

After a brief introduction, to whose subject matter I shall later return, my critique of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* falls into two main sections. In the first, I argue that the book presents an impoverishing caricature of the Marxist tradition, and in the second, that what it offers instead is intellectually empty. As each of these arguments itself falls into two major parts, there are four contentions here: (1) that the authors caricature Marxism by their habitual procedure of confronting it with spurious, absurdly rigid antitheses; (2) that the account they render of some key Marxist thinkers is a travesty of the tradition, reducing and devaluing it and distorting many of its ideas; (3) that their own social theory is all but vacuous: conceptually slippery at decisive points and unable to explain anything specific; and (4) that it is also normatively indeterminate, fit to support virtually any kind of politics, progressive or reactionary. In addition, early in the first of the essay's two sections I introduce a theme which is then pursued as and where relevant through both of them, namely: (5) that in the book's inflated rhetoric of 'essentialism', 'suture', 'closure', there is a facile criticism of the thought of others, undisciplined by responsible criteria and amounting to a form of obscurantism. Finally, in a concluding section on the authors' overt politics, I note (6) how disappointingly thin are the ideas on democracy from two would-be 'radical' democrats and, worse than thin, the appearance here also of some of the more standard tropes of Cold War anti-Marxism. Half a dozen central arguments, then.

## 1. Polarities

Laclau and Mouffe begin their response to the first one by misstating it. I am supposed to have reproached them with having '*based (their) main theoretical conclusions*' on rigid oppositions; with having 'counterposed two polar and exclusive alternatives, without considering the possibility of intermediate solutions that avoid both extremes'.<sup>1</sup> Not so. And indeed the opposite of the point I make repeatedly: which is that they *criticize Marxism* in the light of excessively polarized alternatives, whilst allowing themselves the intermediacy they need and, more, downright imprecision and evasiveness. This contrast is formulated—explicitly—at least three times and is fundamental to the structure of my critique.<sup>2</sup> The misstatement is an enabling one, in the sense of helping to yield the appearance of answers where there are none, via a shift from the polarity criticized to some other.

(i) Take first, for the unadorned purity of the displacement, the third of the examples I discussed, objective interests. As Laclau and Mouffe do not trouble to remind NLR's readers which particular antithesis it was I took exception to in this matter, let me do it. It was the 'clear' 'alternative' (their words): either one has a theory in which 'an absolutely

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<sup>1</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies' (hereafter WA), *New Left Review* 166, November/December 1987, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Geras, 'Post-Marxism?' (hereafter PM), *New Left Review* 163, May/June 1987, pp. 50, 51, 72.

united working class will become transparent to itself at the moment of proletarian chiliarism' in which case one can believe in objective interests; or one abandons that theory, and the notion is then 'meaningless'. I pointed out that a concept of objective interests does not require belief in all of *that*. No Marxist has to choose between objective interests with chiliarism and the rest and rejecting the concept altogether. To which the 'reply' now is: we do not criticize the notion of interests as such, only that of objective interests (as though I had said different); and because we know there are interests, it is not a rigid 'either/or' alternative we put forward—meaning presumably that interests as Laclau and Mouffe conceive them stand between objective interests and just no interests. But *this* was not the alternative I criticized and *their own* conception of these things, however 'intermediate', is not pertinent to what I did criticize: namely, the ludicrous choice they posed for Marxists. Such is what they call showing 'in all three cases' how *my* criticism is based on 'misrepresentation'.<sup>3</sup>

It might have been more charitable to pass over this as just the authors' way of retreating from a formulation they did not wish to defend, were it not for the fact that they have simply replaced that one with others of its kind: to wit, that the idea of objective interests presupposes something inscribed in the nature of agents 'as a gift from Heaven'; and that 'only God and Geras know' how this is compatible with a 'non-essentialist' social theory. Well, really . . . I had already noted an occurrence of this gift-from-Heaven 'thesis' as a substitute for serious argument, over the question of human nature.<sup>4</sup> To no avail. Not just my own and others' defence of the latter concept on carefully reasoned, theoretical and empirical, grounds but a whole literature on human needs seems to have passed these humanists by. Apostles of intellectual openness and pluralism, they can see no creditable basis for a view here different from theirs; it could only be a slightly crazed conception of socialist revolution or, if not that, then—this. Mark, as relevant to another issue I shall come to, their use of the language of religious faith—'chiliarism', 'gift from Heaven', 'God'—as a negative reference point.

(ii) On the question of relative autonomy things are slightly more complex. Laclau and Mouffe are willing this time to defend the rigid alternative I criticized them for posing, so demonstrating that I did not misrepresent them; but only in conjunction with pursuing the claim that I did misrepresent them. No problem: they simply obfuscate the contours of the *particular* antithesis I complained of—as addressed by them to Marxists—in order to show again how they, for their part, steer a most judicious course between extremes. Citing a passage from their book which, this too, they forbear now to put before the reader, I gave evidence of the choice they defined for *Marxism*: either so strong a notion of determination that the concept of relative autonomy becomes 'redundant'; or else the entities theorized as relatively autonomous are simply 'not determined' by the set of basic determinants, which cannot

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<sup>3</sup> WA, p. 92. For this and the next paragraph, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (hereafter HSS), Verso, London 1985, p. 84; PM, p. 51; and WA, pp. 96–7.

<sup>4</sup> PM, p. 75—in reference to HSS, p. 117.

therefore be that. This is a choice in effect, I argued, between these determinants determining totally and not determining at all, 'explaining everything and determining nothing'; a choice, for Marxists, of either openly embracing economism or kissing historical materialism goodbye. At the same time, I made it perfectly clear, not once and not twice but three times at *that* point in my text, what the authors saw as the proper solution of this Marxist 'dilemma': namely (and quoting them), 'plurality of political and social spaces', and again 'irreducible plurality of the social'; and once more (in my own voice) 'plurality'. Not only that, but I went on later, apropos of 'hegemonic articulation', to give an account of this plurality—complex and fluid; 'crisscrossed by antagonisms'; with no privileged centre but many articulatory practices; of multiply constituted, mutually limiting identities, struggles, movements; and so forth—an account that could have left no one in ignorance of the fact that Laclau and Mouffe do believe in the reciprocal effectivity or mutual interaction of one thing and another.<sup>5</sup>

In response I told a simple story. If I am chained to a post by the ankle, then the chain is a basic determinant of my lifestyle since it will powerfully affect it—and I enjoy a relative autonomy in what I can do. The story had one point and one point only. This was not to suggest that, say, capitalist relations of production are to the bourgeois state *exactly like* a chain is to a person chained. Nor was it to deny that there is room for serious argument and difference in this difficult area: I expressed myself—again, quite explicitly—to the contrary, my theme being precisely that it was the way this question, amongst others, was posed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that foreclosed the possibility of any fruitful intellectual engagement with a flat, arbitrary 'either/or'. No, the point of the story was to show that a fundamental determinant, to be one, need not explain or determine everything; that Marxists are not bound to choose—in plainest words—'between the most extravagant economic reductionism and what the authors here commend to us, just plurality' (or between the alternatives, as I also put it, 'Either one is all or all are one'); that we could just hold, about the state in capitalist society, 'that capitalist relations of production, and the configuration of classes they define, are *primary* to the explanation of such polities'.<sup>6</sup>

### A Relation of Omnipotence

There are three components to Laclau and Mouffe's effort of reply.<sup>7</sup> First, they present my argument in a form that leaves it nicely ambiguous what I was criticizing: whether—and as I was—the all-determining/not-determining alternative they lay down for Marxism, thereby rendering relative autonomy unthinkable in historical-materialist terms; or their rejection of this concept themselves owing to the overly rigid constraints on their own thought—as I was not. This confected ambiguity then allows them carefully to explain, over and again, that *they*, you see, *do* recognize 'the relative efficacy of each sphere', and do *not* 'set up a rigid alternative between total autonomy and absolute subordination'.

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<sup>5</sup> PM, pp. 48–50 (vis-a-vis HSS, pp. 139–40) and 67–9.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis here added. PM, pp. 50, 63.

<sup>7</sup> For what follows, see WA, pp. 92–5.

Another evasion. A displacement of my question, which remains without a reply, as we shall see. Second, they charge me with 'sleight of hand' and a 'trick', because with the example of the chain I transform a relation of determination into a relation of mere limitation. The short answer to this is that I do not. But Laclau and Mouffe simply *leave out* anything inconvenient for them. For all its artificiality, the example was put together with the degree of care necessary to my purpose, which was to give a model of powerful but less than total determination, combining both limits and pressures. After describing how it might limit me, I therefore wrote, 'The chain *not only limits* me, negatively; it *also compels* me to certain actions'; and illustrated this point in turn.<sup>8</sup> So important to the authors is it that determination is not mere limitation that they repeat it three times in a dozen lines. How was it possible, then, for them to overlook just this aspect of the argument, and in dealing out a language of trickery at that? I do not know. But a worrying pattern is becoming clear here. It is for all the world as if they were investing everything on the circumstance that their readers will not simultaneously be reading my essay: a rather short-sighted approach to intellectual debate.

Third, and exposing the futility of all this, Laclau and Mouffe just repeat the concept of determination I had put in question. Determination, it so 'happens', is not only not mere limitation, it is not any combination of limits and pressures (or conditions, influences, causes, etc.) short of the whole works. Thus, we are told: 'the base/superstructure model affirms that the base . . . *determines* the superstructure, in the same way that the movements of a hand determine the movements of its shadow on a wall'; and that this is a relation of *expression*; and that the concepts of determination in the last instance and relative autonomy are '*logically incompatible*'; and that the former of them denotes 'a relation of omnipotence'. Attempts to complicate the model with a notion of 'mediations' do not change anything, since entities related via mediations are, strictly, not even separate. There can be no effectively autonomous entities if determination in the last instance is 'an *apriori* truth', because that is then part of the essence of such entities. I think it will be readily agreed that these observations do restate the view of determination I criticized. But what is the argument for it? There is no argument. That is what determination *means*. We have been given a series of stipulative definitions, nothing more. The authors themselves obscurely appreciate the point when, after nearly a thousand words of this, they confess parenthetically—about one of their stipulations, but it applies to the whole lot—that all their 'reasoning' here is 'actually, unnecessary' since affirming fundamental determination and effective autonomy simultaneously 'was inconsistent from the beginning'. That was, indeed, what I cited them as holding, and then contested (as being the 'merest verbal edict').<sup>9</sup> How is it an answer, though, simply to say it again, even several times? It is confirmation of the criticism and not a reply to it. Further, if this is the level of the discussion, I can just open my dictionary, where the *first* meanings given for 'determine' are 'to put

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<sup>8</sup> PM, p. 49—emphasis here added.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

terms or bounds to' and 'to limit'.<sup>10</sup> From 'anti-essentialist' theoreticians of discursive multiformity—and who invoke the authority of Wittgenstein to boot—one could have expected a little better.

For, to imagine that the history of Marxist thought could be so adjudicated by definitional fiat is preposterous. Starting with Marx's 1859 *Preface, fons et origo* in this matter, the relationship under discussion is formulated not in one univocal definition but with a series of terms, of different force ('corresponds', 'conditions', 'determines'), and even there only 'as the *guiding thread* of my studies'.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent history of Marxism could be written as one long meditation, with real differences internal to it, on the exact nature, scope, strength, of that relationship. But an *omnipotent* base and a superstructure determined *like a shadow on the wall*: that is the reductionist caricature I made objection to, repeated in spades. If there have been Marxisms like it, other Marxisms refused so to be, and the fault of Laclau and Mouffe's whole standpoint, as I showed, is to rule such refusal incoherent, within any historical materialism meaningfully so called, by simple diktat: with determination, sorry, no relative autonomy! One (relevant) episode of recent intellectual history is now cast in a new light. All of Althusser's project appears to have been based on a semantic mistake, since he insisted, as no one more vehemently, that relations of determination are not relations of expression, when . . . they are.

### Systems of Domination

Setting word-play aside, therefore, I just put again the question Laclau and Mouffe have not looked squarely in the face. Why is there no logical space between 'the most extravagant economic reductionism' and mere 'plurality'? Why no space for a notion of explanatory *primacy*? How *could* this be ruled out as a matter of logic alone? Let us take only one argument that has been important within Marxism. This is the argument that it makes a difference whether or not the political institutions of a capitalist society are parliamentary-democratic ones resting on an ensemble of 'liberal' rights, practices and procedures: a 'quite enormous difference', as Trotsky put it in connection with Nazism, and for workers' organizations, 'a question of political life or death'. The point has been formulated in various ways. As by Trotsky himself, who spoke of parliamentary democracy and fascism as two 'different systems of (class) domination', within the former of which the workers are able to create 'elements of proletarian democracy'; 'defensive bulwarks'; 'within the bourgeois democracy, by utilizing it, by fighting against it, their own strongholds and bases of *proletarian democracy*: the trade unions, the political parties, the educational and sport clubs, the cooperatives, etc.' Or as by Luxemburg, whose ideas on parliamentary democracy I have myself criticized in another respect, but for whom it was 'one of the most

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, Glasgow 1976, pp. 87–91. It includes, as if by foresight, the following: 'Matters of this degree of seriousness and complexity will not be settled by verbal definition but arguments about them can be thoroughly confused by insistent and pseudo-authoritative application of one fixed sense of this highly variable word and its derivatives.'

<sup>11</sup> See David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford 1977, p. 389 (emphasis added); and Michael Evans, *Karl Marx*, London 1975, pp. 61–5.

powerful and indispensable means of carrying on the class struggle', 'necessary to the working class because it creates the political forms (autonomous administration, electoral rights, etc.) which will serve . . . as fulcrums in its task of transforming bourgeois society'.<sup>12</sup> However formulated, it is a view that has been common to all serious Marxist thinkers, and it has no credible sense other than that political institutions and structures have a specific effectivity of their own and are therefore *not* the mere epiphenomena ('shadows') of class or economic power. And—contrary to the 'simplistic' view the authors here allege—political democracy is not reducible to this: it is *not* the pure expression, or simple instrument, of the interests of a dominant class. As a *reality* with important consequences, as (to some degree) a separate and independent institutional configuration, its structures and procedures must be given due causal weight.

At the same time, the Marxist tradition has never accepted the view of the state propagated by liberalism and pluralist political science: as a sort of neutral arena; or arbiter or mediator between and 'above' classes. Marxists reject such notions because, in their judgement, the competing influence, the limits *and* the pressures, exerted by structures of exploitation and class carry a *greater* causal weight, and their effect is that the state tends to give capitalist interests priority over those of working people—not in everything and without exception, but in general, most of the time, in what matters most. Hence, *relative* autonomy only; but it is no less real for that and does not mean state forms are merely nugatory: Marxists are also capable of thinking in terms of more and less. Nor is the judgement they make here, concerning the explanatory *primacy* of relations of production and class, 'an *apriori* truth': it is an empirical hypothesis, albeit of long historical range; subject to exceptions as well as to confirmation; subject also, in principle, to the possibility of being falsified should there (turn out to) be too much and too cogent historical counter-evidence to it. The serious and interesting issues at stake, therefore, are not advanced a single millimetre by bandying about definitions of a thought-stifling kind ('determines' is 'omnipotent', 'mediations' means 'not separate', and so forth). What the mechanisms of bourgeois hegemony are, what the exact ways in which class power determines—effects, limits or conditions—political results at the level of the state, is one such issue. How much explanatory importance is to be assigned to: a) the modes of *economic power* as such, the various ways in which capitalist interests and actions either indirectly constrain or bring direct pressure to bear upon the state; b) factors of *social composition*, that is, the extent to which the class origins and background of those who make, administer and adjudicate law, align them with the dominant economic class; c) factors of *structural limitation*, in other words, the (differential) degrees to which different types of state and their constituent structures—historically shaped as in every case they have been by some particular nexus of dominant class inter-

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<sup>12</sup> See Leon Trotsky, 'What Next?' in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, New York 1971, pp. 144, 154–5, 158; Rosa Luxemburg, 'Social Democracy and Parliamentaryism', in Robert Looker (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings*, London 1972, p. 110, and 'Social Reform or Revolution', in Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York 1970, p. 80; and cf. my *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, Verso, London 1976, pp. 51–63.

ests—block or hinder access to decision making by the majority of the ruled?

These are difficult questions, in which the assessment of evidence is critical. More than one view about them is possible, obviously. A lot of Marxists make the sort of judgement they do in this matter because they consider the volume of evidence in favour of the historical-materialist hypothesis to be rather formidable. One can perfectly well respect other, competing views, other assessments, of the historical evidence, soberly presented and conscientiously argued for. More: any serious Marxism is duty bound to engage with these. What is much harder, however, is to respect a view, from people themselves quite lately Marxist, in which any rational form of Marxism has all at once become *untinkable*, and by act of definition. This smacks of something else: intemperate flight, perhaps, or mentality of repentance; in any case, what can aptly be called intellectual ‘closure’.<sup>13</sup>

### Double Logic

(iii) The other of the extreme antitheses I objected to concerned the process of unification of a fragmentary working class. It was Laclau and Mouffe’s alternative—formulated in connection with Luxemburg’s thought—either ‘necessary laws’, ‘proletarianization’, ‘crisis’ (unification, that is, by sheer economic determinism), or else fragmentation is ‘permanent’ (and class, consequently, not fundamental to the unities which politics constructs). My reply to this, as before, was *tertium datur*: a common class situation and some economic tendencies of capitalism could be seen, not as inexorably producing proletarian unity, just as providing the conditional basis for a socialist politics with that goal.<sup>14</sup> The authors now complain of a ‘flagrant’ misquotation on my part. I omitted to say that they were here only engaging in a ‘game’ of ‘frontiers’, wherein they extended in turn the ‘operative area’ covered by the different logics of structural determinism and spontaneism. The above alternative *only* arises from a sort of experimental *reductio ad absurdum*, in which Marxism is taken in its most ‘essentialist’, ‘exclusively determinist’ versions. But, outside of that . . . well, they themselves not

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<sup>13</sup> A brief comment on Nicos Mouzelis’s contribution to this question. Though he too is concerned largely—but from his own angle—to defend Marxism against Laclau and Mouffe’s criticisms, Mouzelis contends that there is ‘a type of reductionism . . . inherent in all Marxist discourse’. This is because even overtly non-reductionist Marxisms, such as stress the relative autonomy of the political sphere, still subject the latter to a subtle ‘downgrading’. By contrast with the economic, which is treated as a site of structural determination and as capable of theorization as that, the political becomes the site of pure agency and conjuncture and so its differential forms or ‘modes’ are not theorized in their own right or given, in practice, the sort of weight conceded in principle in the affirmations of relative autonomy. As follows from what I say in the text, I do not accept this. What is true is that theories of the political within Marxist thought are still very underdeveloped. But the suggestion that the political sphere is simply reduced in all Marxism to a kind of untheorized, rolling conjuncture, with no real explanatory force being granted to different political *forms*, does not square with these arguments regarding the specificity of both fascism and parliamentary democracy. They concern precisely *types of state*; (in Trotsky’s words) ‘different systems of . . . domination’ and their differential effects. Mouzelis himself, it may be noted, treats Marxism’s theoretical underdevelopment in this area as remediable, so permitting that the reductionism I think he wrongly alleges is not after all actually ‘inherent’ to historical materialism. See Nicos Mouzelis, ‘Marxism or Post-Marxism?’, *New Left Review* 167, January/February 1988, pp. 108, 117–21.

<sup>14</sup> HSS, p. 13; PM, pp. 50–1.



only ‘pointed out the presence of a double historical logic in the text of Rosa Luxemburg’—determinism *and* spontaneism—they ‘presented the history of Marxism . . . as a sustained effort to escape the “either/or” logic of determinism’.<sup>15</sup>

Were it not for a rather special feature of it, one would have to think this argument had been concocted for a joke. But as it carries with it the accusation that I am intellectually ‘dishonest’, or, at least, *maybe* dishonest, I assume more serious intent. Let us, therefore, talk a little further about relations of ‘expression’. It can sometimes happen that in a single phrase or gesture you suddenly see summed up—‘expressed’—the whole outlook or disposition or character of a person. Just so, in one paragraph here there is captured, concentrated, the seemingly limitless arbitrariness of what has now become of the thought of Laclau and Mouffe. The two of them, unconstrained not only by what others but even by what they themselves write, discreetly refrain from mentioning that what their ‘reply’ terms the ‘double historical logic’ in Luxemburg’s thought was also called, in their book, an ‘irreducible dualism’ and ‘a double void’. How could they possibly have forgotten this when, as I think they will acknowledge, my critique did rather focus on that last phrase?<sup>16</sup> And they tactfully decline here to say that what is now characterized as Marxism’s ‘sustained effort etc.’ goes under the rubric, in the book—on page after page—of ‘dualism’, ‘spurious dualism’, ‘the dualism of classical Marxism’, ‘exactly the same dualism’. And why does it? Because, according to them, the two logics, the two sides of the said dualism, are inconsistent with one another: not ‘two positive and different explanatory principles’ (as they put it apropos Luxemburg), but ‘ultimately incoherent’ (apropos Gramsci).<sup>17</sup> True, they do not establish, they merely assert, this inconsistency, in the very manner we have just witnessed again with ‘determines’ and relative autonomy. Still, that is what they do assert, time and time again, and so the ‘game’ of frontiers is really *it* and that is why I took it to be it. It is *their* contention, not mine, that a historical-materialist framework excludes any *coherent* use by its proponents of (good) concepts like relative autonomy, hegemony, overdetermination, Luxemburgist ‘spontaneity’, and so on; *their* contention that it is an ineradicably ‘essentialist’, ‘economist’, ‘reductionist’ framework. For any logical mind persuaded by this contention and not confused by the momentary exigency of having to find *something* to say, that imposes a choice between straight, unmitigated economic determinism and whatever is thought to be the separate and opposed logic of the aforesaid (good) concepts. But this is exactly the alternative disclosed by the so-called game of frontiers. And this is precisely the reason Laclau and Mouffe have taken the ‘post-Marxist’ path. And then, when it is pointed out that it is a falsely polarized alternative, reposing on a caricature of historical materialism, they turn round in all injured innocence and say in effect, *by way of vindication*: but this was ‘only’ a caricature—a *reductio ad absurdum*—of Marxism, which we *knew* and we *said* to be more complex actually, embodying other, better logics *as well*. They ‘only’ neglect to observe that it is a complexity

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<sup>15</sup> WA, pp. 95–6.

<sup>16</sup> HSS, pp. 12–3; PM, pp. 61, 69.

<sup>17</sup> HSS, pp. 26 (and 29), 51, 69, 99; and 13, 69.

they have condemned as incoherent: void. Void, yes indeed—right word, wrong object—and bottomless.

The character of response, then, is becoming all too plain. To the first criticism made of their book the best these writers have to offer is blank repetition of the point contested; and apart from that there is just evasion or displacement of the questions actually raised, strategic exclusion of key aspects, now of my argument, now of their own, denial of having posed a choice they manifestly have posed; and then some bluster ('God and Geras') and a touch of personal accusation. It will get no better. But already there is material enough and more that I could, were I so minded, level a charge of intellectual dishonesty of my own. I do not. Partly because I believe it to be rare—people generally deceiving themselves before 'deceiving' others—and partly because when it happens, as I suppose it sometimes does, it is impossible without close personal knowledge to know that it has. There is, in any case, a more plausible explanation for all this—to which point I will return. For now, let it suffice to say that, whatever the explanation for it, one thing is crystal clear: it is the *form* of 'making a reply' that is everything here, the quality or substance of it—nothing. To adapt a well-known aphorism concerning justice: a reply need not actually be made, but it must be seen to be made.

## 2. Marxists

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* unfolds a view of various Marxist thinkers which, my essay argued, is systematically impoverishing, a travesty. Two items preface what there is of a response to that argument.<sup>18</sup> The first item is a summary redescription of the authors' project as they see it; but in the same artless spirit we just now encountered: their book sought to show that 'Marxist thought' has 'been a persistent effort . . . to distance itself from essentialism', the emergence 'internal to Marxism itself' of other, better logics. That is what their book sought to show. Not that Marxism *is* the 'essentialism' (principal, omnipresent, Laclau-Mouffian epithet of its deficiency), is the 'reductionism', 'economism' and the rest; and that *every* Marxist effort to 'distance itself' has therefore yielded for its author a dualism, whether 'irreducible' or 'spurious' or 'incoherent'. No, the 'persistent effort' and 'internal' to Marxism. We can leave behind this species of self-presentation. We have already seen its secret: suddenly and conveniently ascribing *to Marxism* what is everywhere else claimed to be logically *incompatible* with it *qua* 'essentialism' etc. My own critique, if I may say so, expressed the whole matter rather more clearly. At the very beginning of the argument that Laclau and Mouffe had produced a travesty, I wrote, 'To be absolutely precise about this: it is not that they deny all the strengths, insights, contributions of theoretical value, as they construe them, to be found in the work of Marxist *writers* . . . But such elements of value are all stipulated as being *external* to the real parameters of Marxism.'<sup>19</sup> If this characterization is inaccurate, we are owed a reason why it is now necessary to be on a 'post-Marxist' terrain at all; why, to put the same thing differently,

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<sup>18</sup> For what follows, see WA, pp. 97–9.

<sup>19</sup> PM, p. 48.

these various 'elements of value' in the work of Marxist writers do not show (what they do show) that not all Marxism has been 'essentialist' and reductionist; why, to turn their own equivocation right round upon the authors, Marxist thought has not indeed contained—'internal' to it—the 'anti-essentialism' they here briefly allow that it has; why *Marxism*, then, is not made rich and current again through having so restored to it that inner wealth of which it was earlier stripped. The entire 'post-Marxist' standpoint will begin helplessly to unravel.

The second item, complementing this positive self-image, is an image of another stripe. Laclau and Mouffe express themselves amazed by my view 'that Bernstein and Sorel "abandoned" Marxism', adding: 'and in Geras this has the unmistakable connotation of betrayal'. In fact, 'abandoned' is their word and not mine, but no matter, I do say that Bernstein and Sorel rejected, or broke with, Marxism (just as the authors have now done).<sup>20</sup> There could, I suppose, be room for argument to the contrary about this. It would be interesting to see some. But, in any event, it is not a wildly eccentric view. In Bernstein's case, at least, it is the view of Peter Gay, Carl Schorske and George Lichtheim amongst other scholars of a notably different political outlook from mine. It is also, I submit, entailed by what Laclau and Mouffe themselves aver concerning both Bernstein and Sorel.<sup>21</sup> But what about 'betrayal'? The rude fact is that I say nothing whatsoever about either Bernstein or Sorel having betrayed anything. Hence: 'unmistakable connotation of'. So introduced, 'betrayal' quickly *displaces* 'abandonment'. The authors wax indignant: 'What can we think about this ridiculous story of "betrayal" and "abandonment"? What would one make of a history of philosophy which claimed that Aristotle betrayed Plato . . . that Marx betrayed Hegel?' They tell us. 'We' would think that for the person who approaches things in this way 'the betrayed doctrine is an object of *worship* . . . a religious object' (mark it again, the pejorative reference to religious belief). Further . . . 'We know the story very well: Bernstein betrayed Marx; European social-democracy betrayed the working class; the Soviet bureaucracy betrayed the revolution . . . thus, the only trustees of "Revolution" and "Science" are the small sects belonging to imaginary Internationals which . . . are permanently splitting.' I think Laclau and Mouffe may here be wanting to suggest to the reader that Geras is some kind of a Trotskyist and 'we' all know about them. It is desperate stuff.

If it is true that I am a worshipper of Marxism or relevant that I am some kind of a Trotskyist, one should be able to show how this is reflected in, and vitiates, *specific* criticisms and arguments that I *in fact* direct at their book. Better still, as the product of a devout, unquestioning mind and vitiated, these criticisms and arguments should be no trouble to deal with: one could, then, just reply to (as in: answer) one or two of them, instead of throwing up one smokescreen after another.

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<sup>20</sup> PM, pp. 40–1, 53, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, New York 1962, pp. 68, 72, 143, 151; Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905–1917*, New York 1970, pp. 17, 19; George Lichtheim, *Marxism*, London 1964, p. 290. Cf. J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, London 1966, Vol. 1, p. 205—and HSS, pp. 30–1, 38–9, 41.

I mean, what, otherwise, are we to think? What I, personally, do think, is that this is testimony again to the meaning of discursive 'openness' and 'pluralism'. The most (let us just say) frontal criticism of Marxism and all its works—that is good, plain creative intellectual endeavour. But defence of Marxism, against this same criticism and because it is judged to be (let us just say) unconvincing, *this* can only be sectarianism and piety. Another very well-known story: non-Marxists can, but Marxists never do, adopt their opinions and judgements on a reflective, questioning, considered basis. It confirms—in a different register, so to say—the justness of the charge of travesty. For, closure and chiasm, fixity and reduction, 'essentialism' *ad nauseam* and more of the same: how *could* Marxism now be entertained by a thoughtful, open intellect, be defended any other way than piously?

As for 'betrayal': although it has been overused, I believe this notion *is* sometimes apt, in political as in personal affairs. People can betray comrades or supporters; or their own stated principles. I think an excellent example of the latter case to be, precisely, the conduct of many 'anti-militarist' social-democratic leaders at the outbreak of the First World War. But in intellectual matters, in the assessment of theoretical approaches or paradigms—their strengths, their problems and their failures—the question of betrayal is neither here nor there. Betrayal of a *theory*, a conception of history or society, this is indeed a nonsense; and so it would be to think that Bernstein or anybody else had 'betrayed Marx'—or *Marxism*. I do not. What has possibly confused these writers is a view of *themselves* imputed to me on the basis that my tone of address was a sharp rather than warm, congenial one. Difficult as it may be for them to accept these, there are other reasons for that than the break with Marxism as such. *Ex-Marxist* opinion and criticism, also, can be such as to command the respect of Marxists. Where it is of a measured and serious kind, they have a responsibility to try to meet it in like spirit. More: it may have to be acknowledged as identifying some weakness(es) within Marxist thought in need of being made good, since there are enough of those. (But *which* social theory lacks them?)<sup>22</sup> By the same token, however, there is no obligation on Marxists to be impressed by any old collection of facile exaggerations and stale anti-Marxist prejudices. That is—once again—harder to respect, and so is the relentless diminishing of a vital intellectual tradition into a shrunken, parodied remnant of itself: harder to respect, coming from anyone; hardest, coming from people who *might* have been expected to know better. If any concept of betrayal applies here, it is only betrayal of the intellectual standards proper to serious enquiry and debate. Laclau and Mouffe may not be able to agree with these, my reasons, much less find them welcome, but that's the way it goes. One puts one's work in the public domain and then sees.

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of just *one* such weakness, see my 'Marxism and Moral Advocacy', *Manchester Papers in Politics*, Department of Government, University of Manchester, 1987, and my conclusion to 'The Controversy About Marx and Justice', *New Left Review* 150, March/April 1989, pp. 84–5.

## The Stigma of ‘Essentialism’

From the friendly self-description and the indignation the authors proceed to what they style a ‘point by point’ reply to my main criticisms of their treatment of Marxist thought. Their first—which purports to respond to my first—point here is that I have accused them of ‘choosing *at random* a group of Marxist thinkers’ (my emphasis), and this they have not done, for they were narrating an intellectual *history*. They certainly make life easy for themselves. I gave a detailed account of the intellectual history they narrated, displaying how, for every Marxist thinker there treated, effectively *the same thing* had been construed: namely, some (smaller or greater) amount of headway, against the thinker’s Marxist economism and ‘essentialism’, towards understanding the world (in terms of contingency and what have you); but always failure ultimately to leave the said deficiencies behind, and hence a dualism. Finding the standards of demonstration deployed unimpressive, I commented, with satiric but not at all frivolous intent, that it was a simple game; in which ‘you take some Marxist, any Marxist will do . . .’ and then go through the one reductive exegetical routine. My point was not that the authors *had chosen* Marxists haphazardly. A line which runs from Luxemburg and Kautsky through Plekhanov, Labriola, the Austro-Marxists, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Althusser—that is not just any random bunch of Marxists (which is why I spoke, in introducing my summary of this, of ‘the treatment meted out here seriatim to a number of Marxism’s more important thinkers’). My point was that, with the intellectual methods in question, it makes no difference, *whichever Marxist thinker you choose* you can effortlessly ‘show’ the same thing.<sup>23</sup>

I *then* went on to identify the reason for this. We are afforded no demonstration by Laclau and Mouffe of how, in the writers treated, Marxist categories have been inflated into ‘essences’; thus no demonstration that these actually are ‘essentialist’. Bare use of the categories is proof, *ipso facto*, of ‘essentialism’. To be the latter’s victim—or perpetrator—it suffices that you be a Marxist, irrespective of whether or not you reduce everything to class or economic, or any other singular, significance. For, ‘essentialism’ functions doubly in the discourse of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: as concept and as stigma—and these two are, so to put it, dislocated. As concept, it is roughly given by the notion of ‘expressive totality’. It is monism, reduction of apparent complexity to the underlying simplicity of an essence, explanation of the whole by reference to one part, and so on. As stigma, however, ‘essentialism’ is compatible with *not* explaining everything by reduction to one essence. It is merely some categorial discrimination, within social ‘plurality’, between more and less important. As I pointed out, the authors not only do *not* show that for their chosen Marxists class, say, *was* all-explanatory, they *do* show that it was *not* all-explanatory (the basis, this, for ‘essentialism’s’ companion stigma, ‘dualism’). That does not deter them in the slightest from the charge of ‘essentialism’: a sort

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<sup>23</sup> WA, p. 99; and PM, pp. 48, 52–6. I have left aside here a useless quibble by the authors that their main focus was not economism but ‘essentialism’—as if their history of Marxism had been at all neglectful of the first or this criticism of mine had failed to mention the second.

of littler ‘essentialism’ in which everything is explained by the one essence, except for what isn’t. It is a bit like some mediaeval tests for witchcraft.

But to this whole argument Laclau and Mouffe have nothing to say, a rather curious silence in a ‘point by point’ reply. The fact is—and as I argued next—they themselves involuntarily show (but now as in: display) the genuine meaning of essentialism: promotion of a concept or schema to the point where it is just omnipresent in the real, despite every evidence to the contrary. Such is their own account of Marxism, history or no; a self-enclosed, unfalsifiable theoretical matrix.<sup>24</sup>

Their second point, then—which responds to my fourth—is this: ‘we are supposed to have contradicted ourselves by saying that Marxism is monist and dualist at the same time. But there is no contradiction here: what we asserted is that Marxism becomes dualist as a result of the failure of monism. A theory that starts by being pluralist would run no risk of becoming dualist.’ That is the whole thing, undiminished, from beginning to end. At least this time Laclau and Mouffe have come up with an original sort of response to criticism: not just a repetition of the position criticized, but a repetition, as near as makes no difference, *of the critic himself*. As any reader can verify with but a moment’s effort, what is proffered here as a reply virtually paraphrases a section of my criticism, the questioned being simply given back as the answer. I myself set out this logic of theirs: that *because* it was monist whilst the world was not, Marxism has had to be dualist in order to cope.<sup>25</sup> But this, which they take as a finishing, is only the starting line for any half-way serious reply. For, I went on to argue that it is a perverse logic. It rests on merely *ruling* Marxism to be always-already monist, in every one of its guises and lineages; and then, by the process of impoverishment I protested against, discounting all conceptual matter testifying otherwise—the likes of ‘spontaneity’, political initiative, hegemony, relative autonomy—as foreign to its nature, and so the other half of a dualism. The question which my critique clearly posed is: but what, then, leaving aside cruder versions of it, *establishes* Marxism as monist-and-hence-also-dualist rather than just complex and thus not monist and consequently not dualist either?<sup>26</sup> Or rather than pluralist-from-the-start and, as such, in ‘no risk of becoming dualist’? (I deliberately take the chance of being misconstrued here: I do not intend, obviously, a Laclau-Mouffian but an ‘ordered’ type of pluralism, a conception of ‘primacy’, as set out both above and in the earlier essay). This question the authors do not even try to answer. Without an answer to it, their account of Marxism is exactly as cogent as the argument that all people are vegetarians, most of them, though, incomplete vegetarians with a ‘dualist’ diet.

### Methods of Construction

The sole—and intellectually unsatisfactory—basis of this dualist rendition of Marxism is the one I went on to identify, and to which Laclau

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<sup>24</sup> PM, pp. 56–7.

<sup>25</sup> WA, p. 99; PM, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> PM, p. 63.

and Mouffe's next point is addressed. I suggested that it is only because they read the history of Marxism teleologically, because they treat certain concepts there as anticipating themselves, that they can represent these, retrospectively endowed now with a particle of their own thought, to be incompatible with historical materialism—as their thought *is* incompatible with it. To this they have responded by saying that there is no other proper way than theirs to proceed. History 'is always history of the present', it is constructed by 'questioning the past from the perspective of the present'; 'there is not an *in-itself* of history, but rather a multiple refraction of it, depending on the traditions from which it is interrogated.'<sup>27</sup> This is, again, a side-stepping of the issue by assertion of an uncontentious but irrelevant truth. Or else it is something worse. Yes, the historian or social philosopher is not a blank sheet and so forth. Thus, if there are some today interested in notions of justice, they are entitled to reread Marx's work in the light of that interest and even to try to show that he was moved by such considerations himself though his texts overtly deny it. But they do, then, have to *show* this: by reference, precisely, to the texts, and their contexts, any independent evidence there might be about Marx's intentions, and so on. One cannot make any kind of history one wants out of the present and its perspectives. In practice (as always with this philosophical tendency) Laclau and Mouffe argue in exactly the manner of everybody else: as if their account of Marxism could be assessed by reference to *what it is an account of*. In that case, to establish a dualism here they need to demonstrate the logical *inconsistency* between, for example, Gramscian hegemony and structural-Marxist concepts of class; or between Leninist political alliance, or Trotskyist permanent revolution, or Luxemburg's mass strike arguments, or Althusserian overdetermination, and the same. But they do not and, I contend, they cannot, because there is none. They merely generate an appearance of inconsistency by denaturing these concepts and arguments into shades of another, future 'discursivity'. To react to this criticism by saying in effect, 'But that is our perspective, what else can we do?', is empty. One could do what others have to do, meet criticism with argument and evidence, give reasons, if there are any, why the account of Marxism produced from within this perspective deserves to be taken seriously, *as* an account of Marxism—reasons beyond the bare fact of the perspective *being* a perspective.

Or . . . is the perspective indeed just sufficient unto itself? Are we dealing, in other words, with what the authors elsewhere in their text allege to be 'an invention of the fundamentalists', that is, with a relativism?<sup>28</sup> Quite probably. But it is impossible (as always with this philosophical tendency) to pin down, because by its nature it is—endlessly—equivocal about its nature, right down to the very deepest layers of thought. Hence, no 'in-itself of history, but . . . a multiple refraction of it'. Of what, though? Let them have this as they please. If their account of Marxism *is* sufficient unto itself, there is nothing for the three of us to discuss here. They are welcome to that particular kind of dark security. But for my part, I will still do my best to persuade

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<sup>27</sup> PM, p. 59; WA, pp. 99–100.

<sup>28</sup> WA, p. 85.

those who accept such terms that there is a gulf between Marxism as it was and is and the Marxism Laclau and Mouffe have 'constructed'.

We now have another insight into the methods of this construction. Their book maintains that it is a 'logic of the symbol' ('the overflowing of the signifier by the signified') that governs Luxemburg's conception of the mass strike and its notion of an interaction between the political and the economic. I dispute this. It is an ungrounded intrusion of their preoccupations upon hers. They claim I have provided no *argument*, merely an 'enumeration'. They refer thus to my detailed break-down of her ideas, in thirteen separate points. As it is my contention that they do violence to these ideas, how else should I argue the case than by setting out her view of the mass strike in as much detail as space will allow, so that readers then have the material—textual *evidence*—to judge for themselves as to the cogency and balance of the disputed interpretation? But Laclau and Mouffe have a different approach to these things. They 'would not disagree', you see, with my mere 'enumeration': it does not contradict anything in their analysis. But, strange to relate, from the experience of revolution, they then pick out for explicit mention that *and only that* which neatly fits their 'symbolic' interpretation: to wit, that a strike over wages can in certain circumstances symbolize opposition to the system as a whole; just as 'rose' can symbolize 'love'! Everything *else* in the enumeration, some dozen points, all other 'logics' or causalities—the strengthening of organizations by involvement of new layers of the working class, troops shooting striking workers, the effects of socialist agitation, the use of newly-won political rights in furthering trade-union work—they prefer not to talk about, much less explain for their readers. Thus can one aspect of a complex conception be transmuted into its central 'mechanism'. And thus can you reply to criticism by saying exactly the same thing again without addition.<sup>29</sup>

That much on Luxemburg. But on the other Marxists whose treatment I criticized, there is even less. On Althusser: silence. On Lenin: silence. On Trotsky: ritual enunciation of the word 'theoretical' (italicized four times within a paragraph) to cope with the fact that the notion of relative autonomy is central to a text in which, it was alleged, he had simply fallen back on the greenness-of-life argument. One or two sentences isolated from their place in that text suffice to validate his reliance on the greenness of life. But half a dozen formulations of 'relative autonomy' in the same text (merely a brief reply to a critic) and the whole comparative historical discussion of the Russian and Western European states which supports them in his primary writings on this question: not, by Laclau and Mouffe's fine sense of proportion, a *theoretical* analysis. And on Bernstein, Sorel and Gramsci (joint subjects of two memorable paragraphs of untrammelled discursive play)? Silence.<sup>30</sup>

So, to the second criticism made of their book the best the authors have to offer are a couple more pure repetitions, unsullied by the strain of persuasive reasoning; and apart from that there are just some significant

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<sup>29</sup> PM, pp. 59–62; WA, pp. 100–1; in reference to HSS pp. 8–14.

<sup>30</sup> PM, pp. 62–65 (and HSS, p. 71 for the two paragraphs); WA, p. 100.



gaps in a 'point by point' reply; responses hardly better than the gaps since they succeed in either missing or dodging the point of *each* of the four points they pretend to respond to; a manifestly tendentious and self-serving characterization of the sort of account of Marxism *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* contains; and then a little piece of demagogic attitudinizing.

### 3. Voids

My critique takes some care pointing out a deficiency at the heart of Laclau and Mouffe's social theory: in the notion of 'hegemonic articulation'. Unable, in their own terms, to conceive the identities articulated by a political discourse as either 'elements' or 'moments' (i.e., as constituted, respectively, outside or inside the given discourse) without falling thereby into an 'essentialism', they settle for them being something in between. I showed, however, what this means in practice: a systematic conceptual prevarication. Against the idea of a class delimitation of identities, the *internal* (the constitutive power of the articulating political discourse) is urged, and all such external 'fixity' dismissed in favour of 'radical unfixity' and the like; as if the internal was just everything. But then against the articulating discourse being rendered into a closed totality, and in favour of 'pluralism', the *external* (independently and separately constituted identities) is appealed to and so some external fixity allowed after all. I argued: first, that there are no clear or consistent criteria of usage here, only usages of convenience, whether of fixity/unfixity, interiority/exteriority etc.; second, that the critique of Marxist assumptions in this matter is entirely vitiated because it *depends* on one side of the prevarication (that there is no external fixity) holding firm—Marxism has lived from the beginning with identities constituted *in part* politically; and third, that the conception is nearly vacuous, since it enables one to explain nothing about the relative fates of different political discourses except by falling back on other, including 'economic' Marxist, categories. All of this is laid out over several pages—composing one sixth of the essay to which they belong.<sup>31</sup> I report Laclau and Mouffe's views in detail, the core of what they positively put on offer. I develop these criticisms of them: methodically, step by step, in terms, I believe, of some clarity, and with substantiating quotation and full referencing. I engage at length with their ideas. The two of them respond more economically. They say nothing.

### 4. Norms

Then there is the matter, also, of the normative vacuity of their work. What are the grounds, I asked, for their usage of 'progressive'? What is the normative basis for *any* determinate political direction?—when the categories of progress, objective interests, 'the anthropological assumption of a "human nature"', 'universal discourses', have all been rejected. Laclau and Mouffe begin with a profession of pluralist virtue: if it is 'apodictic certainty'—as does not admit of any 'discussion'—that is being asked for, then there can be no such normative foundation. But there is still the 'possibility of reasoning politically and of preferring,

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<sup>31</sup> See PM, pp. 67–75.

for a variety of reasons, certain political positions to others.’ Never mind about a certainty beyond discussion. As an ‘epigone of Marxist orthodoxy’,<sup>32</sup> I would have, of course, to want that sort of thing. But, actually, reasons would be fine, ordinary discussable reasons, a ‘variety’ of them. What are they?

We get here, first, a brief discourse on humanism. The authors do not deny the validity of humanism’s values, they say, but merely insist that these have been constructed over a long history. They prefer it, then. The paragraph devoted to it, however, is exclusively given to talking about the ‘emergence’ of humanism, this ‘process of multiple construction’, the ‘various discursive surfaces where it has taken place’, and so forth. But *that it was constructed* cannot itself be a reason for preferring it. As I do not have to tell Laclau and Mouffe, everything of this sort is constructed; hence also the ‘racism, sexism, class discrimination’ by which, they observe, humanism is threatened.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps they think that referring thus—from the outside—to the production of humanist values in positive terms sufficiently acquits them of any obligation to explicate reasons. But there is a small difficulty with this. For, *the* value they single out so to refer to is the humanist concept of ‘Man’, no more, no less: the “‘human being”, without qualification’. They do not trouble to explain how one such concept of ‘man’ can be adjudged better than another once a *human nature* has been excluded, just what in that case *are* the reasons for preferring it; how, indeed, you can *think* a concept of ‘man’—from the inside—without ‘any anthropological foundation’. The contradiction is dazzling and merely generalizes that which I had already drawn attention to: their appeal to a notion of *human* capacities, but without any human nature. If ever there was a threadbare orthodoxy of the Left, whether Marxist, structuralist or ‘post’-either of them, supported intellectually today by nothing but the force of constant reiteration, it is this denial of a human nature. Having spent the best part of three years on a painstaking argument, reason by itemized reason, against it, I do not think too highly of little homilies about certitude and reasoning from people whose own level of argument on human nature is the ‘presumably a gift from heaven’ one. For the rest, that the authors’ outlook might draw determinate normative content from an indirect reliance on assumptions they overtly reject, I already pointed out. The resulting self-contradiction and the ‘indirection’ are now given a new—and extraordinary—expression: external endorsement of humanist discourse about ‘man’ in a discourse about discourses, because ‘man’ in a presentation of reasons is inadmissible, having been expelled under another name.

And we get here, second, a recapitulation of Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of the democratic revolution. It is another discourse about discourse. For, if you search this recapitulation for what it is they might construe as supplying reasons for the (democratic) political position they prefer, all you will find is the following: that the relation of worker to capitalist is not intrinsically antagonistic but only rendered so in terms of democratic discourses of equality and rights. This is an enhanced

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<sup>32</sup> WA, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> Why do they not say ‘racism, sexism, classism’ here?

argumentative mode: pure unenlarged repetition, as several times before, but now without even signalling that there has been a criticism—as though the repeated just needed no defence; rather than masquerading as the defence of itself. The capitalist-worker relation may well be transformed into an antagonism (and, thereby, an oppression etc.) in the terms of one discourse. But in the terms of another it is not; and in the terms of yet others there is virtually no relation, as I showed, that cannot be construed as antagonistic in this way. So the notion of antagonism as such yields no specific normative orientation. We still need reasons for preferring this discourse to others. Now, try to present equality *as a reason*—and not mere object in a ‘sociology of discourse’—in a way that depends not at all on any, even minimal conception of human nature, or of basic human needs or human qualities; nor at all on principles of fairness or justice of quite general, that is, universal, scope. The discourse of equality and *human* rights is a ‘universal discourse’ if such there be at all; of the sort Laclau and Mouffe aver has had its day. They are utterly bereft here, by their own facile dismissals deprived of anything which could be given as a reason.<sup>34</sup>

What we have before us is not so much an answer to criticism as an abject debacle: a discourse *about* reasons, incapable of articulating any; a theory *of* discourses effectively speechless, unable to conduct one.

## 5. Essences

The cause of it, this moral vacuum, this strange, evasive, second-order talk, is plain: anything Laclau and Mouffe might venture as a reason directly out of their own mouths would be an ‘essentialism’. The cause is their prodigal use of this last notion. Objective interests: an ‘essence’. Human nature: an ‘essence’ (and so, it follows, *essential* human needs). Progress: an ‘essence’. Marxist class: an ‘essence’—and relations of production: an ‘essence’. The party: an ‘essence’. Revolution: an ‘essence’. Society: an ‘essence’. Separately constituted ‘elements’ of the social: ‘essences’ . . . Without an effort, and some criteria, of discrimination between organizing theoretical concepts and genuine reductionisms, this becomes a blight on serious thought, an obscurantism. One can maintain that there is a human nature, to return for a moment to that, without making it the source and centre of all things, without denying the complexity of the social, etc. It has a certain, not altogether unimportant, explanatory role, that is all. And even categories with a very important explanatory role have to be shown to be more than just this to establish an ‘essentialism’. They are indispensable to purposeful enquiry. But Laclau and Mouffe find reductionist ‘essences’ everywhere, even where there are explanatory categories they *know* to be less than exhaustive for the thinker who uses them. There is not a social theorist, Marxist or otherwise, of whom it could not be ‘shown’, up to standards equivalent to theirs, that his or her thought was ‘essentialist’—though not fully so, and hence dualist as well. I have already proposed the gist of such a demonstration for their own thought. This entire line of criticism and questions, however, a clear presence throughout my essay—why discourse, all-pervasive, is less of an ‘essence’ than class;

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<sup>34</sup> See, for this section: PM, pp. 75–8, 82; WA, pp. 101–5 (and HSS, pp. 3, 116–7, 152–3, 181, 188).

why what Bernstein continued to allow to Marxist categories sufficed to land him with a dualism, when the authors can fall back on these at need and that is all right—they have chosen to meet with another quiet absence in their own.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. Politics

I drew attention to a tendency of the authors to write of Marxism as though democratic concerns and principles were just foreign to it: to conflate the tradition as a whole with its authoritarian forms, so discounting its other, democratic heritage. This is, of course, a quite widespread tendency with non-(and especially ex-)Marxists, but it is by no means universal amongst them and of interest, therefore, coming from writers who profess a residual linkage to their Marxist past. Anyhow, I took issue with a way of talking about Marxism that effectively equates it with Stalinism. Laclau and Mouffe's 'reply' to this is rather special. Has Geras not heard of Stalinism? they ask; and the one-party system, press censorship, other such things? It may be wondered how such a 'reply' is possible in the circumstances. Easy. They report one sentence from my argument: that I—in common with very many other Marxists—'take it as axiomatic that socialism must be democratic'; treat this as meaning that I hold the relation between socialism and democracy to pose no problem; and they are off. What about Stalinism? What about tanks? It is not axiomatic for anyone 'who does not live on Mars'; or 'in Gerasland' . . . and so on. Nothing, not in my text, not in theirs, no sense of care or just plain decorum, restrains them from the exigency of the instant; the quick, cheap riposte—the most fatuous vulgarity. They just ignore: the whole context of these words of mine they bring to the reader's notice; the fact that it is by contrast, *explicitly*, with Stalinism—and with 'the forms and pretensions of "actually existing socialism"'—that I emphasize the democratic heritage of Marxism; the fact that but two pages earlier in their own text, it was belief in the Soviet bureaucracy's 'betrayal' of the revolution I was being berated for, so that I did know about Stalinism, *then*. Nothing of this matters. How you 'construct' things is how they are. On the basis of one sentence I am representable as thinking what I do not. That releases our authors from the need of any genuine reply, in particular from having to decide either to defend or to correct the one-sided picture of Marxism and democracy they have presented.<sup>36</sup>

Laclau and Mouffe will have trouble finding, in my critique of them or in anything else I have written, a real piece of evidence that I think the relation between socialism and democracy is unproblematic; which is why they are obliged to construct one. They will find, rather, an abiding concern with questions of socialist democracy, and an understanding of the necessity of socialist pluralism that goes back a long way before 1985: formulated unambiguously a decade earlier; learned partly, it is true, from sources outside Marxism, but also from discourses within it; basing myself on which I some good while ago engaged critically with, to reject, the problematic of *the* party (without a single reference, it

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<sup>35</sup> PM, pp. 47–8, 56–8, 64, 70–71, 74–5, 78 and *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> PM, pp. 79, 82; WA, p. 101 and n. 28 pp. 103–4.

should be said, to ‘essentialism’).<sup>37</sup> And this was precisely the point of my statement they so traduce: that a socialism that is democratic is not only thinkable, but has been much thought, within Marxism, has been a central aspiration, goal and project there, an integral, continuous strand. Any account of the tradition that suggests otherwise is worthless. That is not to say there are no problems for contemporary Marxism in this area: relating, especially, to the need for more precise theory about the institutional shape, the regulative norms, rights and procedures, of a socialist democracy; for a prospective map of the constitutional order of feasible socialism. But Marxism has no special burden to bear here vis-à-vis other currents of socialist thought. This is a common question for them—us—all, a rather large one. Some sobriety before it, a certain fair-mindedness and balance in assessing the relative records of different socialist traditions, would not come amiss from authors who, as I observed, themselves offer virtually nothing towards such a map, repeating all the while, ‘*radical* democracy’. This, the main point in my comment on their views on democracy, they prefer, yet once again, to step around, in order to focus on a single prefatory remark interpreted in their own inimitably free way. Except . . . that they now offer for our edification a formula—‘the consolidation and democratic reform of the liberal state’—whose radicalism would scarcely embarrass the Rt. Hon. David Owen.<sup>38</sup>

What *is* it, though, that keeps reproducing this (at every turn, every point), the nimble side-step? According to Laclau and Mouffe, I represent them as seeing communism and fascism as identical ‘types of society’. But that is not what I said. Which was: that they use ‘totalitarianism’ as denoting something *common* to a politics of the left and fascism, and whose source, with respect to the left, is located within the logic of Marxist theory itself, because within ‘every attempt to establish a definitive suture’. Responding that communism and fascism are not identical types of society is child’s play. It spares them, again, having either to defend or to amend the thesis that totalitarianism is inherent in the very nature of Marxist thought. This raises an interesting question. Their essay of ‘reply’, though it withdraws not one of the *specific* disparaging theses about Marxism with which *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is thick, has taken on, oddly, a certain greater friendliness of tone towards it, at least where vague, unfocused *generalities* are concerned. Laclau and Mouffe talk at the end, for example, about ‘giv[ing] to Marxism its theoretical dignity’. They ought, then, to say whether this is or is not the dignity of having been responsible for show trials, mass purges, the Gulag and the rest.<sup>39</sup>

## Diversions (I) – Existence

No reader of my essay could possibly mistake what its main concerns were: to contest the authors’ rendition of Marxism and criticize the

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<sup>37</sup> See *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, pp. 183–5, 188–90, 193 and *passim*; ‘Classical Marxism and Proletarian Representation’, *New Left Review* 125, January/February 1881; and *Literature of Revolution*, Verso, London 1986 (in which that essay is reprinted), pp. xiii ff. and the essays in Part II.

<sup>38</sup> WA, p. 105.

<sup>39</sup> PM, p. 81; WA, pp. 105–6.

social theory they now prefer. This is thirty-eight pages of forty, 95 per cent of the body of the text. The other two pages were given to a certain matter of ontology: whether objects exist external to thought. After some introductory remarks, Laclau and Mouffe begin by devoting fully 40 per cent of their response to those two pages. Why? The issue addressed there is an important one, doubtless. But in view of their failure to reply to anything else; not even the pretence of a reply, just complete silence, on two of the principal criticisms (concerning elements/moments and subordination/antagonism/oppression) of the social philosophy they offer; one cannot help wondering about what really governs the sense of proportion here. In any case, on *this* question they are not short of what to say. We are taken through the philosophers, authorities ancient and modern: Wittgenstein, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Richard Rorty, Aristotle, Plato, Berkeley, Hegel, Charles Taylor, W. T. Stace, Marx, Heidegger, Derrida, Saussure, W. V. Quine and Nietzsche. And where do we arrive? Just exactly where I said we were when we started: the authors formally affirm the existence of objects external to thought, but the rest of what they say cancels this out, robs it of any theoretical weight. For, once you try to give some content to these objects, you are dealing with their 'being' rather than their 'existence' and being is discourse-specific, discourse-relative. You cannot say anything *about* what exists outside thought, only that things do. I engage merely with the argument.<sup>40</sup>

But racking up a couple of silences of my own now in return, I will not be discussing: a) Whether Laclau and Mouffe are philosophical 'idealists' in the *true* meaning. If they want not to be that, who am I to quibble over a word? b) What could have motivated the patronizing dissertation—and its companions—that a football is only a football 'within a system of socially constructed rules'; as though I had imagined there to be some pre- or extra-social footballs, just primordially such.

Let us take, however, stones. If there were no human beings, the authors say, 'those objects that we call stones would be there nonetheless; but they would not be "stones"'—because of the absence of languages classifying and distinguishing them. Why the scare-quotes? The *word* 'stones', its meaning, cultural associations, human uses of actual stone, etc., would not be there. But if the objects we call stones would be there, then stones would be there, because they are the common referent of the expressions 'those objects we call stones' and 'stones'. Set that aside. If the objects we *call* stones would exist, would any of their properties with them? Such as make them a different kind of entity from, say, the one we call water, and such as would prevent what we call a bird from what we call drinking the first but not the second? If there is an affirmative here—that stones (for short) and water and birds would be differentiated by their properties even in the absence of discourse and so of classification—then part of what some philosophers call the being of objects seems to be right in there from the beginning with their existence. And if not, you cannot speak intelligibly about what exists outside thought *at all*: about inherent properties, what *was* the case in the prehistory of humankind. Existence has been emptied

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<sup>40</sup> For this section, see WA, pp. 82–92; PM, pp. 65–7.

of all content to the benefit of being-discourse. It is easy to see why relativism could seem like 'a false problem' from within this perspective. Existence, so emptied, can be no external control for different versions of being, and the hope of any such control is misguided.

Now, reconsider this proposition: 'Subjects cannot . . . be the origin of social relations—not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible—as all "experience" depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility.' I impugned the logic of it: it simply discounts one condition of experience (powers) on the grounds of there being another (discourse).<sup>41</sup> To the criticism that they here effectively annul the 'conditions of possibility' of discourse itself, Laclau and Mouffe respond by arguing that it is 'meaningless', 'absurd', to speak about 'the conditions of possibility of the being of discourse'. But I spoke of the conditions of possibility not of the being of discourse but of discourse, period. Do any such conditions *exist*? Such as natural powers, the biological make-up of humanity, a certain kind of brain? Laclau and Mouffe cannot say. They cannot say 'yes' without, again, putting a bit of what they call being back into what they call existence. But if such conditions do not exist, we will have to say all of nature is a discursive construction. *This* is what the two of them in fact do say. They say: 'natural facts are also discursive facts'—for the 'simple' reason that 'the idea (!) of nature' is historically constructed. And I say: this (like every) relativism is based on obfuscating the distinction Althusserians used to make between the real object and—the idea of it—the object of knowledge.

One other matter here. Forbearing to treat the two 'constructions' as on level terms, I take an earthquake to be a natural phenomenon and not an expression of the wrath of God; calling the latter construction a superstition. The authors opine on this account that I regard myself as 'a functionary of truth', an embodiment of 'the Absolute Spirit'.<sup>42</sup> I shall consider in turn the possibilities that this is not a serious argument and that it is. The grounds for taking it as unserious are that Laclau and Mouffe themselves plainly do not regard religious faith as an adequate basis for forming any kind of view about the world; which is why they can belittle the notion of objective interests or a human nature with 'chiliasm', 'heaven', 'God'; and me as a 'worshipper'. But when I say what they on some level also believe—and which has nothing to do, for me, with claims to absolute knowledge, transparency and so forth, and everything to do with what in the present state of our knowledge we have the best evidence for thinking—then we get this 'functionary of truth' stuff. It is the stuff not of argument at all, stuff only for touching up an image of Geras which this whole 'reply' is rather keen to establish, for want of a single argument of substance. One can only reflect, once more, on whether there are limits of *any* kind on the discursive 'patterns' these writers will permit themselves. Geras, it seems, must *not* voice the sort of assumptions about religious belief with which Laclau and Mouffe *do* scoff at others, including Geras—and

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<sup>41</sup> PM, p. 68–9 (and HSS, p. 115).

<sup>42</sup> See WA, n. 17, pp. 89–90.

do even here, in these lines where they so admonish him. For, as what does Geras see himself? Why, as an embodiment of the Absolute Spirit!

I now take the argument seriously, on the grounds that if the authors themselves take their discursive philosophy seriously, it is hard to see what reason they could have for differentiating in terms of truth value between the two 'constructions' of the earthquake and dismissing one of them as a superstition. Just two alternative discursive constructions of 'being', then. Here I pose a different question. How far are they willing to go in this direction? For, you see, you can say not only that an earthquake is an expression of the wrath of God, but also that AIDS is; or that famines, widespread poverty, are. We might regard the first, in that case, as due punishment rather than the consequence of a non-moralizing virus, and give prayer as the best way of dealing with the second. Laclau and Mouffe will not go this far. Why not?

## Diversions (II) – Language

I did not mince my words in saying what I thought of the quality of the ideas and arguments in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Its authors disapprove, complaining that my essay belongs to a genre of denunciation. They invite their readers to decide what to think of me for 'such language'.<sup>43</sup> I bring this rejoinder to a conclusion with a few observations on the matter. First, as to my denouncing them, I say the opposite is true. I engaged *with their ideas*, arguing with these in considerable detail and over a space of more than twenty thousand words. They may not like the result of that engagement but no author has a right to expect only favourable results. They, on the other hand, as the foregoing demonstrates, have not done me the same courtesy: of responding squarely to the actual arguments I put forward. The complaint about denunciation is merely part of their effort to deflect attention away from the balance of *argument*, with an image which is itself purely denunciatory: epigone, denouncer, functionary, worshipper. This image, some well chosen silences, a lot of intellectual wriggling and evasion, are made to stand in where the (harder) activity of responsible advocacy should be. Laclau and Mouffe make a bad mistake here, just trading on the stupidity of the reader—as though there were nothing outside their present discourse against which it could be gauged.

Second, as to the language itself which they complain of, I am disinclined, on further reflection and in the light of their 'reply', either to withdraw or to temper a single one of the epithets I used of their book. Indeed, nothing testifies more clearly to the aptness of those, nothing more clearly to the nature and intellectual standards of that book, than the poverty of what has now been produced in its defence. What words *are* apt to describe an intellectual approach which, criticized for posing the spurious alternative, *a* or *c*, when there is another possibility, *b*, responds by simply changing the alternative and explaining, 'you see, we do not say either *-p* or *-r*, because in fact we think *q*'?<sup>44</sup> Which insists on a meaning for 'determination' that leaves no choice but

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<sup>43</sup> WA, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> This is the structure of the 'reply' dealt with in 1 (i) above.



between the most rigid economic determinism and unqualified plurality and—in the next breath!—charges a critic with dishonesty for saying that this is the kind of choice the approach imposes?<sup>45</sup> Which defends itself against the criticism of having distorted Marxism through the lens of its own preoccupations by appeal to the fact that its way of looking at Marxism is a way of looking at it? Which endorses (a discourse containing) the humanist concept of ‘man’, having rejected the anthropological assumption of a human nature? Which asks, has he heard of Stalinism?, of someone who says that there is another Marxist tradition *than* Stalinism? Which fends off the question of the conditions of possibility of discourse by calling it a meaningless question? ‘Obscurantism’, ‘absence . . . of all sense of reasonable constraint’: that seems fair. And so does ‘theoretically profligate, dissolute’; because such, I submit, is what we are faced with here, a kind of licentiousness in the realm of ideas. It has to be one of the more grotesque ironies of the recent history of socialist thought that the authors of all this are unembarrassed to pin upon themselves the badge of ‘obstinate rigour’.<sup>46</sup>

I, for my part, therefore, now invite the reader to consider this question. How is it possible for two people, responding to criticism of *their own* work—for, who has a stronger interest than they in seeing the import of such criticism?—to contrive to miss the point not just of one or another, but of virtually every, argument put to them, piling evasion upon evasion, pure repetition upon pure silence, self-contradiction upon irrelevance, with never so much as one decent answer in what is supposed to be a reply? For reasons earlier stated, I do not impugn the intellectual honesty of these two people. I think there is a simpler explanation. They are just short of genuine answers. Unable to meet the criticisms made of their book, they recklessly thrash about for anything, more or less whatever, that might preserve a certain appearance, a certain external *form*.

Third: it is possible, of course, to express oneself more gently, tactfully, than I did and now do again. In most circumstances there is a lot to be said for that: for friendlier, less adversarial norms of debate. But I have to say that I did, and do, not judge the circumstances of this particular debate to call for any such emollient, my own perception of what was *casus belli* being rather different from the one implied by Laclau and Mouffe’s expression of grievance in this matter. They would like to have it that there they were, two conscientious scholars quietly ploughing their own furrow, only to be viciously set upon by a rude sectarian and fundamentalist. By such injured naivete I confess myself unimpressed. Over pages and pages—and some current back-peddalling by them about this notwithstanding—the authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* systematically rubbish the Marxist tradition, with their

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<sup>45</sup> See, in turn, 1 (ii) and 1 (iii) above.

<sup>46</sup> WA, p. 79. Even in citing the language of which they complain, Laclau and Mouffe cannot be bothered to be too accurate: they leave off the qualifier, ‘theoretically’, from the adjectives, ‘profligate, dissolute’, and disconnect these from the elaboration of them that is their direct sequel in my text—viz., ‘more or less any ideational combination or disjunction being permitted here, without regard for normal considerations of logic, of evidence or of due proportion’—part of which they then give *separately*; so allowing the impression that I have, perhaps, charged them with some sort of moral depravity. See PM, p. 43.

battery of 'isms', from 'essentialism' through 'monism' and 'dualism' to 'stagism' and 'classism' and 'apriorism' and a good few more, and with 'suture' and 'closure' and 'chiliasm' and 'fixity' and 'transparency', repeated again and again, relentlessly, conjoined, recombined, permuted.<sup>47</sup> It is hard to think of another book so rich, and at the same time so ugly, with a terminology of error; with such an ease in the use of it, on the flimsiest pretexts (wild antitheses and exegeses, for which no serious word can now be found as a defence) and in a way that just mocks the trouble, the worry, the difficulty, of mature intellectual work. Such is good enough for the wholesale depreciation of Marxist thought. But themselves subjected to a forthright language of riposte, Laclau and Mouffe cry foul, not very nice.

### Democracy and Knowledge

Fourth, their complaint, and the image of myself it is designed to feed, are part of a more general theme, a double and mischievous obfuscation, which should be brought out into the light. Marxism and Marxists, for aspiring to cognitive objectivity, are held to lay claim to certainty, absolute knowledge, transparent access to truth and so on; whereas the theory of discourses, being (what I call) a cognitive relativism, is supposedly undogmatic, open and pluralist, *democratic*. This view of things simply conflates the aspiration to knowledge—shared by Marxism with the mainstream traditions deriving from the Enlightenment—with notions of intellectual finality and infallibility. But unlike faith or dogma, genuine knowledge is always provisional, subject to revision in the light of new information and evidence, needing periodically to be restructured, fallible; open therefore to 'pluralist' discussion and criticism, yet at the same time, pending possible rebuttal or revision, *knowledge* so far as we have managed to get. The aspiration, and all claims, to knowledge, in the sense of it just explained, are democratic by their nature, because they have to satisfy rules of consistency, external reference, evidence, that are accessible in principle to all, *public and accessible*—if sometimes only with difficulty—as are the realities themselves to be known.

There is nothing democratic whatever, on the other hand, about a perspective that plunges these matters into utter arbitrariness and irrationalism. Laclau and Mouffe 'democratically' cut *everybody* off from access to what could meaningfully be called either truth or objectivity—with the single exception, dear to all relativists, of themselves. Overtly denying that there is any being-as-such, any in-itself, in terms of which competing discourses might be adjudicated, they install somewhere out of sight a secret tribunal of truth, mysterious in its ways, which allows *them* to judge here: as 'essentialist', hence *wrong about the nature of the world*; as economist, thus unable to understand the *reality* of the social; as determinist, therefore misconstruing history's *actual* openness, etc.; which allows them to employ a language of external reference, of objectivity, of truth (saying not 'that is how we like to look at it', but 'this is how it *is*, here is what *happened*, *these* are the developments') to tell us what is really what; which allows them that long, that tireless,

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<sup>47</sup> For references, see PM, p. 45 n. 8.

that never-ending 'this is how it is', with which the relativist tells you why you cannot say 'this is how it is', so sending rational knowledge and consistency to the devil.<sup>48</sup>

There is another aspect to Laclau and Mouffe's complaint against me. It is that, 'absolutely definite about the psychological motivations that led (them) to write (their) book', I directly accused them of bending before careerist and political pressures, the pressures of self-interest and age. I did not. What they refer to here are the framing remarks of the introduction to my article, in which I raised *in quite general terms* the question of how far such pressures have been at work in the rightward drift of so many left intellectuals of my generation, and in the flight, within this, of so many of them from Marxism.<sup>49</sup> I freely concede that by placing these reflections at the start of an essay concerned exclusively with the critique of one book I may have created the basis for being misunderstood as I have. I did take some care, however, to emphasize that I was *not* putting in question the authors' integrity, as they themselves acknowledge but choose to discount. And such reflections are, in any case, perfectly legitimate ones; for anyone except she or he who imagines they are not subject at all to social pressures, that the pursuit of ideas is just exclusively that. Intellectuals can have a way of being extremely kind to themselves, ready to explain the behaviour of the whole world, but not to have their own situation within it exposed to discussion, as though they alone were beyond the pull of motives, disinterested, pure seekers. As a general issue, the question of pressures can reasonably be posed—especially in the social and political climate of today, and in face of numbers of quite unbalanced farewells to Marxism and indeed socialism, many of them lacking in intellectual substance. If Laclau and Mouffe just *know* this question is not relevant to their case, well and good. It is a confidence that sits oddly beside their dismissal of 'transparency' as a dream, and not one I would be willing to claim for myself. Still, I do not gainsay them on this. People can be moved just by the force or the flow, or by the play, of their ideas.<sup>50</sup>

But enough is enough. The two of them express a mock surprise that I should have devoted so much space to a book I judge so negatively. There is no cause for puzzlement. As a certain giant thinker contributed to explaining, the reach and the hold of ideas is not always a direct function of their truth or quality. Because he was not the reductionist he is so often represented as having been, he knew also that criticism of mystifying ideas is necessary, nevertheless, to trying to weaken the hold they have. In this case it is necessary for a quite particular reason.

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<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Collier and Bob Fine for discussions on this point (and cf. Bob Fine, *Democracy and the Rule of Law*, London 1984, pp. 199–200). I also take the opportunity of here thanking my friend, Paul Cammack, for more general discussion of the various issues. None of these individuals, of course, is hereby implicated in responsibility for what I have said.

<sup>49</sup> WA, p. 81; PM, pp. 40–2.

<sup>50</sup> With reference to the introduction to my essay, Mouzelis writes: 'what is really crucial in the context of a debate such as this is less to ascertain the reasons, conscious or unconscious, behind an author's break with Marxism and more to establish the cognitive validity or non-validity of what he or she has to say.' (*New Left Review* 167, pp. 108–9.) It is just because I think this that I devoted forty pages to arguing about the validity or non-validity of what Laclau and Mouffe had to say.

Laclau and Mouffe's insubstantial attack on Marxism and insubstantial alternative to it exploit the proper concern there is today about socialist agency. It has been put to me a few times, and it is something they themselves play on in both the introduction and the conclusion of their 'reply', that their thought is at least addressed to an important set of problems. Yes. But intellectual work has not yet become so easy that just addressing serious problems suffices to vindicate whatever they are addressed *with*.

Socialist thought is faced, today, with two broad kinds of difficulty. On the one hand, and as is only to be expected in consequence of the breadth and immensity of socialism's objectives, it is faced with problems of theory, of understanding; analytical and empirical questions, whether about the changing nature of capitalism, the forms and principles of a socialism worthy of the name, the movements, the moralities and the strategies that might have a chance of constituting it. It is now widely recognized, and amongst socialists of the most different persuasions, that answers are not so easy to come by. They are a long haul. The practice of producing or discovering them, as is also widely recognized, must inevitably be a many-headed, collective effort, in which open debate, a careful weighing of other viewpoints, innovation, revision and emendation, take their place beside commitment and enthusiasm. But socialist thought presently also confronts, on the other hand, a singularly hostile political and intellectual environment. It is pressed in from all directions by those ready to write it off, deride it, belittle both its hopes and its achievements as illusion or dross.

So besieged, socialist thought—in all its currents and varieties—has an even heavier responsibility than it should generally own to anyway, to conduct its discussions in a spirit of sobriety and just proportion and with a sense of the complex paths that truth and error alike persist in tracing across all straightforward maps of the historical intellect. Argument by caricature and simplification; by easy reduction and intellectual short-cut; by light-minded use of such hackneyed vulgarizations as have already been answered many times over (and as will be seen today for vulgarizations not only by Marxists but by a substantial number of fair-minded, non-Marxist students of Marxism)—this is a dual dereliction. It obstructs fruitful socialist debate. And it reinforces the currently difficult external environment of that debate. It is no fit style for the kind of socialist pluralism we need. In any case, enough is now more than enough.