

Post-Marxism?

Times change and people change. Their ideas change; develop, progress—and regress. There can be gradual change within a more or less stable intellectual framework. And there can also be sharper breaks, mutations of outlook in which one thing is renounced and another embraced. But each person has to take his leave or make her peace, as the case may be, in a way conformable to his or her own sense of dignity. We may cite the example of Eduard Bernstein, in the history of Marxist thought the first and the best-known so-called revisionist. Anyone at all familiar with his work will know that what he achieved—or perpetrated—was not truly a revision; it was a renunciation. The judgement is based not on any narrow or sectarian definition of what Marxism is but on the broadest, most inclusive definition possible. Bernstein challenged or set aside virtually every significant principle of Marxist thought. But he presented this as just a revision and it is not difficult to see why. For his political context and his audience were those of the German SPD, an avowedly Marxist party, with a Marxist programme,

lineage and traditions, and within which Bernstein himself was an old and respected figure. Not only his public but also his own past will have weighed upon him, long-standing member of the organization, party editor, the friend and literary executor of Friedrich Engels. In the circumstances, it is understandable that he should have claimed only to be updating Marx's ideas in the light of contemporary developments, and not, as he really was, to be rejecting them lock, stock and barrel.

A first caution is needed here. No suggestion is intended that a person's relation to his or her own ideas is a purely, or even primarily, instrumental one, consciously calculated for advantage. In general, at any rate, one is bound to assume sincerity. Other things can be at work, all the same, than just the internal exigencies of an intellectual process.

Yesterday and Today

These remarks bear directly upon today. In the advanced capitalist world from the mid-1960s a generation of intellectuals was radicalized and won for Marxism. Many of them were disappointed in the hopes they formed—some of these wild but let that pass—and for a good while now we have been witnessing a procession of erstwhile Marxists, a sizeable portion of the generational current they shared in creating, in the business of finding their way 'out' and away. This exit is always presented, naturally, in the guise of an intellectual advance. Those of us unpersuaded of it cannot but remind its proponents of what they once knew but seem instantly to forget as they make their exit, namely, that the evolution of ideas has a social and material context. We cannot help wondering how far their recent trajectory may have been influenced by a range of factors which they themselves would doubtless prefer to overlook: the pressures upon them of age and professional status; the pressures of the political time and environment we have been passing through, not very congenial, in the West at least, to the sustenance of revolutionary ideas; and then the lure of intellectual fashion, a consideration not to be underrated by any means.

The life of the intellectual of the left is pulled by different forces. There is, on the one hand, a moral commitment of some sort, however formulated: to socialism, the end of exploitation, human liberation, a decent existence at last for everyone. But there is also, on the other hand, a certain self-image, *as* intellectual, and amongst its constituents, the desire for recognition, and so, perhaps, originality, and the hope or the sense of being in the very van, not just abreast of the latest theoretical development but one of its actual partisans and sponsors. The force of the former, the gravitational pull of moral commitment, is a variable one, as this same intellectual is well enough aware while she or he understands Marx. It is stronger when materially manifested, so to speak, visibly represented in and supported by a social movement—that of the exploited and the otherwise oppressed—particularly on the march, in active struggle. It is much weaker where this is absent; or in defeat or retreat. The bare commitment, and the ultimate historical objectives, can come here to seem rather abstract and remote, so distant from a particular personal destiny as to be hardly related to it at all. In the light of what is intellectually on offer at this moment, the theoretical

perspective which has most securely embodied the commitment and the objectives for more than a century—Marxism—may then begin to appear as old hat.

A second caution is now necessary. This is not the thesis of the inevitability of a growing political moderation and conservatism with age. There can be few socialists who were not once, at a point in youth or early adulthood, confronted by the patronizing wisdom of maturity and told in effect that their socialism was wholly appropriate to their years but otherwise misguided, as they would themselves eventually come to realize. At the time, all of us will have felt such counsel to be false and some of us now know that it was so. There is no inevitability about it. We are still socialists and have been able to learn too from those who sustained the idea to the very end. A couple of decades on, however, it is impossible not to acknowledge a certain truth in that cynical counsel, even if another than the one that was intended. For, casualties and departures there are. Once beyond the enthusiasm of their early years, with its follies, to be sure, but with a capacity also for energetic and disinterested solidarity, some *will* be carried away, more attentive now to other voices: so-called realism, resignation, or merely candid self-interest.

A couple of decades on, from the late 1960s. To be a Marxist then was, in a manner of speaking, the thing, or if not *the* thing, certainly something. But it did carry a commitment and this has become more difficult with the times. In such a situation, straightforward renegacy—if I may risk this expression—is always possible, of course. One can reject Marxism for some old and standard alternative: Christianity, liberalism or what have you. But there are reasons why a more disguised route may well be taken. One of them is self-protection against the idea of a volte-face, since people do not generally like to admit having turned around. Another is the bond a person already has with a given audience or milieu and the reluctance to sever it completely; or, put rather more concretely, an awareness of the great intellectual and moral authority Marxism continues to enjoy, notwithstanding its many enemies and critics. And a third is the consideration, already mentioned, of wishing to be an up-to-the-minute thinker. These reasons have nothing to do with a will to deceive. They concern the sources of respect and of self-respect; that which one has and that which one wants. Again, everyone must settle accounts in a way compatible with their own pride and dignity.

Beyond Marxism

With these observations as a backdrop I want to discuss Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*—which styles itself 'post-Marxist'.¹ This is not because I consider the book to be theoretically worthwhile in any substantive respect. I do not. Indeed, it is a product of the very advanced

¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (hereafter HSS), Verso, London 1985, p. 4. Except where indicated otherwise, all emphasis in quotations is Laclau and Mouffe's.

stage of an intellectual malady, in a sense I shall presently explain; and it is theoretically profligate, dissolute, in ways I shall also seek to demonstrate, more or less any ideational combination or disjunction being permitted here, without regard for normal considerations of logic, of evidence or of due proportion. But the book is interesting nevertheless for at least two reasons. The first is that, as Ellen Meiksins Wood has said, it is 'beautifully paradigmatic': it brings together virtually all the key positions of a sector of the European left moving rightwards;² and the second is the post-Marxist claim itself.

This has, let it be noted, relative, at least, to the likes of Bernstein's 'revision' of Marxism, a certain plain-speaking accuracy. The authors announce a clear break. They are now beyond Marxism. There is a bit more to be said about it, however. For, they do also insist on reminding us that Marxism is where they have come from. Whilst allowing that their present conclusions could have been arrived at by other paths and ones 'alien to the socialist tradition'—to which one can only say: verily!—they are mindful of their own past and have chosen, therefore, to proceed from 'certain intuitions and discursive forms' within it.³ Could they be mindful too in this of links they are for the time being content to preserve? I shall suggest, in any event, that the tendency in recent Marxism most germane to the construction of their current outlook is merely the bad side of something which was two-sided in the hands of its originator. And then there is the exact meaning in which they may be said now to be 'beyond' Marxism. At the point in time, thought and politics they have so far reached, the post-Marxist tag no doubt has a nicer ring to Laclau and Mouffe's ears than would the alternative, 'ex-Marxist'. It evokes an idea of forward movement rather than a change of colours, what purports to be an advance or progress, and all decked out in the finery of discourse theory. My contention will be that at the heart of this post-Marxism there is an intellectual vacuum, a term I use advisedly: both a theoretical and a normative void, with some very *old* viewpoints, prejudices and caricatures around it.

I mount, then, what is in a certain sense a defence of Marxism; in a certain sense only, because it is to be doubted that anyone not already a Marxist will be persuaded to become one just by virtue of what I have to say here. But my purpose is more limited. It is to show that if there are good reasons for not being, or for ceasing to be, a Marxist, so-called post-Marxism isn't one of them.

Let us try to orient ourselves. These are some standard Marxist positions rejected in Laclau and Mouffe's book. In the first place: that objective, or structural, class position is the primary historical determinant of social and political identities and alignments; that the relations of production (or economic structure) enjoy(s) explanatory primacy; that politics and ideology are, correspondingly, secondary; that the metaphor of base and superstructure is a theoretically viable one.⁴ Then: that the

² Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class*, Verso, London 1986, p. 47.

³ HSS, pp. 3–4.

⁴ See, e.g., HSS, pp. 30–1, 58, 67–8, 109, 174.

working class has an objective interest in socialism; that it is valid to speak of the *objective* interests of a class; that there are structural tendencies towards unification of the working class, for all the factors which fragment and divide it; and that as compared with other potentially radical social forces, it has a special—what these writers, in a noteworthy usage, like to call a ‘privileged’—connection with the struggle for socialism.⁵ Denied also: that socialism itself, the abolition of capitalist production relations, is the crucial strategic goal within the project of emancipatory social transformation (rather than, as Laclau and Mouffe now see it, just a dimension of ‘radical democracy’, or of ‘the democratic revolution’) and defines the fundamental moment, the decisive point of revolutionary rupture, in this epochal process of transformation.⁶ And even, finally: that society and history can be rendered intelligible by some unifying principle or principles, or within a unified framework, of explanation and knowledge (something rejected however, it must be emphasized in this case, only incompletely and without the trouble of intellectual consistency, since with this as with every other assertion of relativism, its advocates necessarily contradict themselves so soon as they venture explanatory categories of their own).

Now, I think it fair to say that there is nothing in this catalogue of denials that could really surprise anyone. They are all thoroughly familiar. With the possible exception only of the last of them, they will be readily assented to by ordinary, old-fashioned *non-Marxists*. To discover what could be *post-Marxist* here, we must proceed a bit, therefore.

Expressive Totality

We will find, at least, something taken from one school of Marxism and taken further, so to say. Across its several particular propositions and negations, Laclau and Mouffe’s argument is organized around a single all-embracing constructional principle. This is the division between the *simple* and the *complex*, or the *closed* and the *open*. On one side, there is simplicity, a desire for theoretical closure; on the other side, the recognition of complexity and openness. That is how the intellectual universe is divided.

In attempting to understand social and historical processes, there are those—the Marxist tradition in its entirety, but other thinkers as well—who reduce the complexity, diversity, multiformity, disparateness, plurality and opacity of it all to the simple, the single, the unified, the transparent. Thereby they theorize a closure. Determined from, and intelligible by reference to, one foundation or origin, society becomes a closed totality, is conceived, in the word of a less familiar idiom, as *sutured*. Because of this, of ‘the conviction that the social is sutured at some point, from which it is possible to fix the meaning of any event’, Marxism is deficient.⁷ *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is replete with the language of its deficiency: ‘reductionist problematic’ for obvious

⁵ HSS, pp. 82–7.

⁶ HSS, pp. 156, 176–8, 192.

⁷ HSS, p. 177.

reasons, ‘monist’ and ‘profoundly monist’, because of the idea of the unique foundation, ‘essentialist discourse’ (. . . ‘essentialist core’, ‘essentialist vision’, ‘essentialist conception’, ‘orthodox essentialism’ . . .), because this foundation is an essence of the social, and ‘economist paradigm’, because it is the economy; ‘classism’, because of the primary role accorded to its constituent classes, ‘stagist paradigm’, because of the necessary stages through which it evolves, ‘rationalism’ and ‘rationalist paradigm’, because of the belief in the transparent intelligibility of the social whole, and still more, on account of the closed or fixed or *a priori* conceptual basis. And then a variety of combinations: like ‘essentialist monism’, and ‘classist economism’, and ‘economist stagism’; ‘essentialist apriorism’ also; ‘essentialist fixity’; ‘the internal rationality and intelligibility of a closed paradigm’, ‘a purely classist and closed view of the world’, ‘the sutured space of a rationalist paradigm’, and so on.⁸

But there are those, on the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe themselves particularly, who insist on facing up to social complexity, diversity and the rest and, to this end, on ‘the open, non-sutured character of the social’,⁹ which has no essence except negatively speaking: ‘we must begin by renouncing the conception of “society” as founding totality of its partial processes. We must, therefore, consider the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or “negative essence” of the existing.’¹⁰ In other terms: ‘the mere idea of a centre of the social has no meaning at all.’¹¹ Unification and closure are, here, accordingly impossible: ‘The moment of the “final” suture never arrives.’¹²

Nourished though it plainly has been from other sources as well, readers of Althusser’s writings will easily recognize within this polar contrast an old friend and familiar foe, by name the ‘spiritual’ or ‘expressive’ totality. The concept was used by him in the effort to remove Marx’s mature work out of the shadow of Hegel, in whose thought, Althusser argued, the apparent complexity of the social whole was *merely* apparent since its multiple aspects were always traceable and therefore reducible in the end to an original common essence, itself a moment or stage in the development of the world spirit. The diverse and manifold appearances of the Hegelian totality were expressions of this unique spiritual essence, which was present and more or less legible in them all. The outwardly complex thus gave way to the essentially simple.¹³ Against every such simplifying tendency, Althusser himself emphasized the

⁸ These expressions appear at HSS, pp. 21 (and 67), 4, 18, 88 (and 97), 69, 71, 70 (and 76), 76 (and 104), 76, 177, 68, 3, 100, 13–4, 55, 57 (and 61), 177, 177, 16, 68, 99. There is also, for good measure: ‘classist categories’, ‘a monist perspective’, ‘dogmatic rationalism’, ‘class reductionism’, ‘a classist terrain’, ‘essentialist paradigms’, ‘essentialist assumption’, ‘essentialist solutions’—at pp. 11, 27, 34, 52 (and 85), 62, 77, 109, 134. And still the list is far from being complete.

⁹ HSS, p. 138.

¹⁰ HSS, p. 95.

¹¹ HSS, p. 139.

¹² HSS, p. 86. This echoes Althusser’s well-known formula, ‘From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes.’ See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London 1969, p. 113.

¹³ See *For Marx*, pp. 101–4, 202–4; Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, London 1970, pp. 93–7; and my ‘Althusser’s Marxism: An Account and Assessment’, in Norman Geras, *Literature of Revolution*, Verso, London 1986, pp. 108 ff. For an excellent new assessment of Althusser’s thought, see Gregory Elliott, *Althusser – The Detour of Theory*, Verso, forthcoming.

reality of ‘overdetermination’; and Laclau and Mouffe in turn—as they put it, ‘radicalizing’ this last concept¹⁴—now propose openness and the like. But a crucial shift has taken place. The concepts in question were deployed by Althusser to inscribe a line within Marxism between what he saw as its authentic and its deviant forms. Laclau and Mouffe redraw the line between the whole of Marxism, this erstwhile mentor of theirs included, all vitiated beyond the hope of any remedy, and the theoretical outlook they have come now to favour.

The Continent of Theoretical Error

It would be wrong, however, to pick out only the discontinuity in this use they make of ‘essentialism’ and its cognates, for there is also a clear and unhappy continuity to be observed—beyond that involved in the bare employment of these categories, that is. The Althusserian spiritual or expressive totality had, to put it crudely, both a good and a bad side. The good, what was valuable in the context of much Marxological discussion of the time, was that it created an opening for Marx the materialist historian, student of economy and polity, social scientist, making this figure of him visible again to a new generation from behind the obscuring image of just one more philosopher, ethical, speculative or visionary. It warned against the temptation of preordained harmonies, any too facile story of the progress of the world, be it even one about human species-being, and laying stress upon the scientific ambition of Marx’s enterprise, stressed with it the contradiction, the specificity of ‘levels’ and of detail, the complexity indeed, of the domain and the material that had to be theoretically assimilated and understood. To this extent, it could point Althusser’s readers, notwithstanding some severe confusions of his own in the matter, towards the empirically based character and rational spirit of the enterprise: the labour and difficulty of it, the process of change inherent to it, the necessary movement of revision and correction. The bad side of the same concept, however, was the disposition it appeared to encourage in its author to bring the entire intellectual universe down to a sort of Manichean opposition. Outside the tightly-drawn circle of Althusserian, overdetermined truth, the sin of expressive totality was *everywhere*, sometimes on the strength of a single concept or argument, sometimes on the strength of no more than the accusation itself. And it united the most seemingly diverse intellectual phenomena, rendering them unwittingly complicit with one another. Hegel and empiricism, economism and humanism, historicism and rationalism; Hegelianizing Marxism and Marxism of the Second International; Marxism of the Second International again, humanism likewise and—Stalinism: all of these and more linked up in one gigantic equation of reductionist error. Save for a very few, Marx in maturity, Lenin, Mao, and these not exempt from it altogether, there was scarcely a thinker of Marxist pedigree on whom the taint of that error did not lie exceedingly heavy: from Engels and Luxemburg, through Korsch and Lukács, to Gramsci, Sartre, Della Volpe, and beyond.

Of course, and so as not to oversimplify for my own part, a certain diversity, also, was conceded here and sometimes, even, localized or

¹⁴ HSS, pp. 87, 97.

mitigating merits would be signalled by Althusser and praised. But at bottom, beneath the whirl of difference, in the fundamental, underlying structures of thought, there always turned out to be, whether clearly expressed or lightly concealed, the same kind of deficiency: the reductionist assumption of an original essence. Indeed, the deep irony in this is that one of the best possible examples of an expressive totality is—so to put it—the Continent of Theoretical Error According to Althusser. It is a space in which a quite enormous variety of ideas, idioms, philosophical and cultural lineages, may be seen to derive from, for having been all but reduced to, a single common essence, that species of error which Laclau and Mouffe today freely call ‘essentialism’. It is this less salutary side of Althusser’s own use of the notion of expressive totality, his readiness to suspect and detect it on all sides, that I had in mind in speaking earlier of an intellectual malady. It was a mischievous part of his legacy, one very soon disencumbered by others of the seriousness and rational commitment of his overall purpose, for the generous dealing out of theoretical anathemas; against all other Marxisms or, if necessary, against Marxism itself.

The same thing, in any case, is now to be found in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* but it is much more advanced than with Althusser—in the way that a malady, and not that a theory, advances. There is the same Manichean division, albeit that Marxism as a whole has come to fall on the wrong side of it, and symptomatic of it the largesse with epithets of error, as also the sheer plurality of them. Monism or economism, classism or closure, transparency or sutured totality: so many names of theoretical failure, or so many names, rather, for variants of a single theoretical failure, since that is what it amounts to, ‘essentialism’. And consequently we have here again the same irony as before, the category returning against its user: a whole continent of thought stalked by the one mistake, a veritable sutured totality of incorrect ideas. In one critical respect, however, things have gone much further. For, whilst the new truth which Laclau and Mouffe oppose to all this is generically similar to the Althusserian in favouring complexity, diversity and so forth, against simplicity and a belief in essences, the difference is that, now, virtually *any* framework of historical explanation, any principle of sociological *intelligibility*, can be condemned in the name of ‘the openness and indeterminacy of the social’.¹⁵ This is the meaning of such passages as that dismissing ‘any a priori schema of unification’, and as that referring to ‘the rationalism of classical Marxism, which presented history and society as intelligible totalities constituted around conceptually explicable laws’, and as that ‘dissolving’ the postulate of “‘society” as an intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered on the basis of certain class positions’.¹⁶ Despite its abuses, Althusser’s expressive totality was at least intended in an enlightening spirit: as a putative contribution to the project of scientific reason and research; in the old and worthy effort to understand and explain. Laclau and Mouffe have embraced an obscurantism, capable of disparaging every explanatory project, because an ‘essence’ will always be discoverable in whatever principle or principles of explanation it may put forward.

¹⁵ HSS, pp. 144–5.

¹⁶ HSS, pp. 36, 3, 2.

With him, Althusser, the bad was partially redeemed by the good. With them, it is redeemed by nothing and is just plain ugly. Later I shall come back to the irony I have identified here and show how it can be turned against our two authors to uncover the idleness of the game out of which they have fashioned a book.

All Or Nothing At All

So that we may eventually reach this point, let us begin, however, with a simple question. How does it happen that, where for Althusser overdetermined complexity was the very heart of authentic Marxism, for Laclau and Mouffe something generically similar shows Marxism to be hopelessly vitiated? A preliminary answer is that Laclau and Mouffe just give a caricatured and impoverishing account of what Marxism is. 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*. No, they too will notice and praise these, the compensating qualities in a fundamentally blemished oeuvre. But such elements of value are all stipulated as being *external* to the real parameters of Marxism, a positive contribution made in each case in spite and not because of the fact that the author was a Marxist, made against the genuine basis of his or her creed. In a nutshell, Marxism is defined by Laclau and Mouffe in the most uncompromisingly necessitarian or determinist, most rigidly economic, and—if one must—most simplifyingly ‘essentialist’ terms; and then dismissed for being determinist, economic, ‘essentialist’. I shall give two sorts of evidence for this claim: some examples of a recurring technique of argument; then, a summary of the treatment meted out here seriatim to a number of Marxism’s more important thinkers. Just note first what is no doubt only a small corroborating sign, but such as is not to be overlooked in a text so emphatic about the importance of discourse and all its varieties. That is a certain patronizing way Laclau and Mouffe have with the use of capitals: writing, for instance, ‘a whole conception of socialism which rests upon . . . the role of Revolution, with a capital “r” . . . and conceptually built around History in the singular’; and ‘the essentialism of the traditional Left, which proceeded with absolute categories of the type “*the Party*”, “*the Class*”, or “*the Revolution*”’; and ‘a discourse concerning the privileged points from which historical changes were set in motion—the Revolution, the General Strike.’¹⁷ It is a parodying mode, this, reducing Marxism to a fragment of itself, and that the poorest, the whole tradition to a few dogmatic absolutes. Conceptual absolutism, we shall see forthwith, can also be in the eye—and mind—of the beholder.

A first example of it concerns recent Marxist discussion of the notion of relative autonomy, ‘a dead end’ according to the authors: ‘In general, such attempts to explain the “relative autonomy of the State” were made in a framework that accepted the assumption of a sutured society—for example, through determination in the last instance by the economy—and so the problem of relative autonomy, be it of the State or of any other entity, became insoluble. *For, either the structural framework*

¹⁷ HSS, pp. 2, 190, 192.

constituted by the basic determinations of society explains not only the limits of autonomy but also the nature of the autonomous entity—in which case that entity is another structural determination of the system and the concept of “autonomy” is redundant; or else the autonomous entity is not determined by the system, in which case it is necessary to explain where it is constituted, and the premise of a sutured society would also have to be discarded. It is precisely the wish to combine this premise with a concept of autonomy inconsistent with it, that has marred most contemporary Marxist debate on the State . . . If, however, we renounce the hypothesis of a final closure of the social, it is necessary to start from a plurality of political and social spaces which do not refer to any ultimate unitarian basis.¹⁸

It is the point about the ‘irreducible plurality of the social’ again.¹⁹ But observe the stark and unbending antithesis of the alternative we are presented with in support of it. *Either* the basic determinants explain the nature of as well as the limits on what is supposed to be relatively autonomous, so that it is not really autonomous at all; *or* it is, flatly, *not* determined by them and they cannot be basic determinants. These alleged determinants, in other words, either explain everything or determine nothing (the logic being quite general in scope: ‘. . . relative autonomy, be it of the State or of any other entity . . .’). They explain either all or nothing at all. This poses an uncomfortable choice for Marxists, naturally. Unable to say ‘nothing’ and remain what they are, they will have to say ‘everything’ and be criticized for reductionism. Or if, knowing they are not reductionists, they are unable to say ‘everything’, they must renounce the assumption of there being basic determinants (‘the premise of a sutured society’) and with it their Marxism. Put in still other terms, Laclau and Mouffe here deny to Marxism the option of a concept like relative autonomy. No wonder that it can only be for them the crudest sort of economism.

But why are we obliged by the inflexible alternative they define? We are not. It is the merest verbal edict, unsupported by even an attempt at persuasive advocacy. A length of chain secures me by the ankle to a stout post. This limits what I can do but also leaves me a certain freedom. I can stand or sit, read or sing. I cannot play a decent game of table tennis, however, and cannot attend social functions or political meetings at all. The chain not only limits me, negatively; it also compels me to certain actions. The way it is fixed to my leg, I must keep adjusting how it lies, otherwise it begins to hurt me. I must apply medicaments periodically to sores which develop around my ankle. And so on. Understanding my situation more or less, I say that I enjoy a relative autonomy: the chain and post are fundamental determinants of my lifestyle but they do still leave me scope for independent decisions. Now, what should I think of two passers-by, call them Chantal and Ernesto, who, hearing me so describe things, declare: ‘This is a dead end—conceptually. For, either the chain and post explain both the nature and the limits of your autonomy and the concept of “autonomy” is redundant; or else your situation is not determined by them?’ The reasoning is fatuous, it should be noted, irrespective of whether the

¹⁸ HSS, pp. 139–40, Emphasis added.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

chain is considered to be *the* fundamental, or merely *a* fundamental, determinant. It is the stronger of the claims that is relevant, *mutatis mutandis*, to what Marxists believe. But a tool need only be appropriate to the nature, and difficulty, of the task at hand. Against the austerity of Laclau and Mouffe's logic—a burden they impose on Marxism only, things becoming much more relaxed, as we shall see, on their own preferred 'discursive' terrain—this example is enough to show that, between explaining everything and determining nothing, there are real determinants able merely to account for a great deal. No Marxist has to choose, consequently, between the most extravagant economic reductionism and what the authors here commend to us, just plurality. She or he can recognize, for example, that there are genuinely distinct types of polity within capitalist societies, important differences in the form of the capitalist state; within limits, always some variety of possible political outcomes; and still argue that capitalist relations of production, and the configuration of classes they define, are primary to the explanation of such polities. Others, of course, can argue otherwise. Let them do so. This is no argument, just an absolutist stipulation.

Class Unity and Class Interests

Here is a second example. It arises this time from discussion of Rosa Luxemburg's *Mass Strike* pamphlet and the problem, which she addresses there, of the unification of the working class as a revolutionary force out of many heterogeneous elements. The heterogeneity, or fragmentation, is due to the existence of different categories of workers and of degrees of organization amongst them, the specificities of their prior experience or local traditions, the range of demands that motivate them and of struggles in which they are involved—to a diversity, then, of what are called 'subject positions' by Laclau and Mouffe. This is how the latter characterize the 'well-known alternative' Marxism confronts in the matter: 'either capitalism leads through its necessary laws to proletarianization and crisis; or else these necessary laws do not function as expected, in which case . . . the fragmentation between different subject positions ceases to be an "artificial product" of the capitalist state and becomes a permanent reality'.²⁰ It is another stark antithesis. *Either* pure economic necessity bears the full weight of unifying the working class; *or* we simply have fragmentation. In the one case, obviously, there can be no significant place for a socialist *politics*; in the other, class subjects are not any longer central, and politics, whether socialist or not, is truly in command, since it is here that the entire business of forging unities has now to be conducted. But why may we not think that between this devil and that deep blue sea there is something else: notwithstanding the wide diversity, a common structural situation, of exploitation, and some common features, like lack of autonomy or interest at work, not to speak of sheer unpleasantness and drudgery, and some pervasive economic tendencies, proletarianizing ones amongst them, and such also as create widespread insecurity of employment; all of this providing a solid, objective *basis*—no more, but equally no less—for a unifying socialist politics? Why may we not? Only because the authors say so: 'either . . . or', there is no other way.

²⁰ HSS, p. 13.

No wonder, again, that it is the most rigid economism that they present to us as Marxism.

The third example has to do with the ascription of objective interests. This last concept, according to Laclau and Mouffe, 'lacks any theoretical basis whatsoever', is 'little more than an arbitrary attribution . . . by the analyst'. It only makes sense at all within an 'eschatological conception of history'. Once more referring, in this connection, to the heterogeneity of positions within the working class, they express the following opinion. 'Here, the alternative is clear: either one has a theory of history according to which this contradictory plurality will be eliminated *and an absolutely united working class will become transparent to itself at the moment of proletarian chiliarism*—in which case its "objective interests" can be determined from the very beginning; or else, one abandons that theory and, with it, any basis for privileging certain subject positions over others in the determination of the "objective" interests of the agent as a whole—in which case this latter notion becomes meaningless'.²¹ The want of proportion in this is very striking. Its excess, indeed, prompts the thought of a dim, half-conscious worry somewhere in the minds of those responsible for it, that what they can offer on behalf of their chosen side of the dichotomy is feeble and will be seen to be so unless the other side of it is made to look impossibly bad—a thought which, as it happens, exposes the whole style of argument under review. In any case, we must believe not only that the working class can become 'absolutely united', not only, even, that it will then be 'transparent to itself'; we must believe this, in addition, under the description, 'the moment of proletarian chiliarism'. On such conditions we may employ the concept of objective interests, and otherwise not. But, of course, what we may actually believe in is the possibility of relative, and not absolute, unity: that a *large majority* of the working class could become *sufficiently* united. We may think that it could become, not 'transparent to itself', but *more clear* about what is wrong with the bourgeois social order, and *persuaded* of there being a realistic alternative to it. We may consider that the revolutionary transformation of that social order, painfully difficult of achievement, would be, not a religious consummation or advent, just the condition for a marked *improvement* in millions of people's lives. And on the strength of *this* judgement—that it would be an improvement, for their health and their welfare, their possibilities of self-fulfilment and happiness, and one they could themselves come to recognize and fight for—we may hold that we are entitled to speak of objective interests.

So, the sole absolutes here lie in the absolutism of these imperious dichotomies. It is an argumentative procedure the reader may like to remember. '*Tertium non datur!*' But only for us: it will be observed later on, by contrast, what sort of latitude Laclau and Mouffe can willingly tolerate—for themselves.

²¹ HSS, pp. 83–4. Emphasis added.

An Irreducible Dualism

The same impoverishing view of Marxism as is contained in these exemplary antitheses emerges more systematically in the account we are given of the tradition, writer by writer. I shall briefly summarize the main lines of this account. Its secret, however, is disclosed at the very start, in the Introduction to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. The concept of hegemony, it is announced there, denotes a relation incompatible with, rather than complementary to, the basic Marxist categories. This concept, which will be central to the theoretical construction the authors will for their part propose, which they want, in one movement, both to take and to free from the conceptual armoury of Marxism, introduces, so they argue, a social logic of contingency opposed to the necessitarian logic that is Marxism's own.²² The theme begets another, unavoidably. If hegemony and notions similar to it are incompatible with Marxist categories, then the presence of such notions in the thought of any particular Marxist must be the sign of an incoherence. They may be there, but they are not there with full theoretical legitimacy. However they may testify to the knowledge, insight, perspicacity or innovativeness of the thinker in question, they can do no credit to Marxism itself. In fact, they testify to the crisis, not the creativity, of the paradigm. The name of this theme, of this incoherence and crisis, is *dualism*. Let us try to get the measure of it, beginning, where Laclau and Mouffe do, with Rosa Luxemburg.

In the great movement of mass actions which she summed up in the expression, 'the mass strike', Luxemburg saw the possibility of a revolutionary unification. Their rolling, more or less spontaneous course would tend to transcend the division between economic and political aspects of the struggle, to generalize partial into more far-reaching and comprehensive demands, to overcome the aforementioned fragmentation of the working class. The conception so far, according to the authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, had much in its favour. Not only did it take as its point of departure the manifest realities of proletarian diversity and dispersion. It envisaged, also, a unifying process whose type is symbolic, because having to do with the flow and overflow of *meanings* as between one struggle and another. Said to be 'the highest point' of her analysis, this set Luxemburg's thought at a 'maximum distance' from Second International orthodoxy, far along the way towards recognizing the scope and nature of social contingency. But she could not go right through to the end. Had she done so, she would have had no reason to suppose the result of the unifying process to be a *class* unity. 'On the contrary, the very logic of spontaneism seems to imply that the resulting type of unitary subject should remain largely indeterminate.' Why could this subject not be a 'popular or democratic' one? What held her back, limiting 'the innovatory effects' of the logic of spontaneism, was her belief in objective laws of capitalist development. The two things, that logic and these laws, made up an 'irreducible dualism'. Here it is that we come upon the disjunction

²² HSS, pp. 3, 7.

already discussed: either pure economic necessity or permanent fragmentation.²³

The details will be different but the pattern always the same. From Kautsky to Gramsci, Max Adler to Louis Althusser, it will be dualism (and, of course, 'essentialism'), engulfing all of Marxist thought and not only that. Karl Kautsky, like Luxemburg well aware of the fragmentary tendencies and interests within the German working class, makes the party into a 'totalizing instance'. The vehicle of scientific Marxist theory, and vouchsafing thereby a mediating role to intellectuals, it constitutes 'an articulating nexus that cannot simply be referred to the chain of a monistically conceived necessity'; there is a space here for '*the autonomy of political initiative*'. However, this space, with Kautsky, is minimal, just the initial relation of exteriority between socialist theory and the working class. For, theory itself is the guarantor of an eventually unfolding necessity and conceives political identities, reductively, fixedly, as governed by the relations of production.²⁴ Antonio Labriola, on the other hand, proposes that the objective laws of history are morphological only, valid for the broad, underlying tendencies and no more; and so makes use also of 'other explanatory categories' in order to grasp the complexity of social life. But as he cannot derive these, dialectically, from the morphological ones, since that would be 'to extend the effects of necessity' back out again to embrace the whole, such categories—mark this—are '*external to Marxist theory*'. His proposal too, then, 'could not but introduce a dualism'.²⁵ In turn, Austro-Marxism goes rather far in restricting the scope of historical necessity, expanding that of 'autonomous political intervention', bringing, indeed, 'a strictly discursive element into the constitution of social objectivity'. Adler on Kant, Bauer on nationality, Renner on law—all contribute. But they fail, again, 'to reach the point of breaking with dualism and eliminating the moment of "morphological" necessity'.²⁶

Even those who reach the point, at least, of breaking with Marxism and are warmly commended for their astuteness in so doing, do not evade the long arm of this judgement. Though their treatment is not directly relevant to the account we are given of Marxism itself, it is relevant indirectly in showing just how difficult escape here can be. I will not, therefore, disrupt the sequence of this intellectual history by omitting them. Eduard Bernstein actually makes 'the break with the rigid base/superstructure distinction that had prevented any conception of the autonomy of the political'; achieves a 'rupture with orthodox determinism'. With him, 'the moment of political articulation' cannot, as it can with Kautsky, be reduced to movements of the infrastructure. Alas, this does not carry Bernstein far enough to avoid a form of dualism. He continues to allow, alongside the space of the free ethical subject, some residual space and truth to the causalities of orthodoxy. Worse still, he has replaced the 'essentialist connections' of orthodoxy with 'essentialist presuppositions' of his own: 'in this case, the postulate

²³ HSS, pp. 8–14.

²⁴ HSS, pp. 19–21, 25.

²⁵ HSS, pp. 25–7.

²⁶ HSS, pp. 27–9.

of progress as a unifying tendency'. The latter provides new '*totalizing contexts* which fix a priori the meaning of every event'.²⁷ Georges Sorel, by contrast, does *not* subscribe to an evolutionist belief in progress, recognizing possibilities of disintegration and decay. He sees Marxism, initially, as an ideological and moral force for the formation and orientation of a new social agent, the proletariat. Then, accepting the revisionist critique, he comes to substitute the notion of social *mélange* for that of objective totality and to conceive classes, not as structural locations, but as *blocs*, constituted through will, action, and open contestation with antagonists. This culminates in the idea of the general strike as a constitutive myth, with its components of sentiment, fiction and violence as solidarizing factors. In all, Sorel not only creates an area for contingency, as have the others, but tries also 'to think the specificity' of its logic. Has *he* made it, then? Has he escaped from the ubiquitous dualism? He has not. His 'politically or mythically reconstituted subject' is a class subject.²⁸

Trotsky, Lenin, Gramsci

Returning to Marxism's own story, we arrive with Russian Social Democracy at hegemony proper, a venture, at first too hesitant, across class boundaries. Marxism's problem in Russia, the problem of the Russian revolution, was not any longer only that of the political formation of a proletarian unity out of pre-existing diversity. It was the devolution to the working class of tasks of the bourgeois revolution, owing to the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie and in departure from the orthodox schema of stages. The theoretical result in the debates of the time was a novel relation (between proletarian agent and bourgeois tasks) called hegemony; 'a space of indeterminacy', expanding in scope from the Mensheviks through Lenin to a maximum in Trotsky. Having discovered and named this relation, however, the Russian Marxists contrived to make it 'invisible' again, reproducing within the theory of hegemony, it can by now be no surprise to learn, 'the spurious dualism' of the Second International. This was because the specifically Russian 'narrative' continued to be conceptually subordinate to the orthodox one—even in Trotsky, the theory of permanent revolution to the schema of stages—with the second providing a level and order of 'essences' that gave meaning to the first. What was connected in the hegemonic relation remained external to and unaffected by it: though devolving upon a proletarian agent, bourgeois tasks remained bourgeois; the identity of the agent, despite this new breadth of its task, was still seen as determined by its structural position, and class identity in general as 'constituted on the basis of the relations of production'.²⁹ The point, in fact, turns out to have compromised all of Leninism. To be sure, the Leninist tradition did emphasize how the conditions of uneven development in the imperialist era made hegemonic relations indispensable to the revolutionary struggle by complicating the map of pure class antagonisms; and hence insisted on the function of leadership within a class *alliance*, a decisively political bond across structurally

²⁷ HSS, pp. 29–36.

²⁸ HSS, pp. 36–41.

²⁹ HSS, pp. 48–54.

defined locations. But this relation was still conceived as an external one, leaving unaltered the class identities making up the alliance. Their interests were not formed, just *represented*, there. Instead of 'the efficacy of the political level in constructing social relations', consequently, politics was but 'a bare stage', the players upon it scripted from elsewhere.³⁰

It was only Gramsci, according to Laclau and Mouffe, who 'radically subverted' the foundations of this long dualist epic, moving beyond the notion of an external alliance of classes. By a broadening of the perspective from the political to the intellectual and moral plane—the terrain of ideology—Gramsci could think in terms of the forging of a *historical bloc*, which was 'a higher synthesis, a "collective will"', with a set of shared ideas and values across different class positions. Here, the hegemonic link was not concealed but 'visible and theorized', and the base/superstructure distinction transcended, and the guarantee of laws of history dispensed with. The social agents were no longer, strictly, classes, but such 'collective wills'. In Gramsci's analysis, we are told, 'the field of historical contingency has penetrated social relations more thoroughly than in any of the previous discourses: the social segments have lost those essential connections which turned them into moments of the stagist paradigm'; there is 'a new series of relations among groups which baffles [sic] their structural location within the . . . schema of economism'. But then again, perhaps not. For, Gramsci's conception was 'ultimately incoherent', not yet quite beyond 'the dualism of classical Marxism', inwardly 'essentialist' after all. His problem?—'the unicity of the unifying principle, and its necessary class character'. For him, that is to say, 'there must always be a *single* unifying principle in every hegemonic formation, and this [could] only be a fundamental class.' Determination by the economy had been reaffirmed.³¹

What, finally, of Althusser? Althusser is hoist with his own petard. With the concept of overdetermination he is said to have reached out potentially towards the understanding of a specific and irreducible type of complexity, a *symbolic* one in fact, entailing 'a plurality of meanings'. It implied that society could have no essence, since there was no possibility of fixing upon its ultimate 'literality' or sense. But 'a growing closure led to the installation of a new variant of essentialism.' Determination in the last instance by the economy, actually incompatible with the concept of overdetermination, was the thesis responsible for this; 'exactly the same dualism' was its result.³²

The Essence of the Story

Now, there is more than one way of looking at this tale of Marxism Laclau and Mouffe have told. The first is as a simple sort of intellectual game. I call it simple because the basic rules of it are clear and easy to grasp. You take some Marxist, any Marxist will do, and begin by

³⁰ HSS, pp. 55–62, 65.

³¹ HSS, pp. 65–9.

³² HSS, pp. 97–9.

showing how in deference to complicated historical realities he or she departed from a rigidly, an absolutely, determinist economism. This will not be difficult to show since even the most economic of them has allowed some efficacy, however small, to political and/or other non-economic instances, but in any case the distance he or she has travelled that way will give a measure of his theoretical insight, her recognition of contingency or indeterminacy, their relative success in groping towards an adequate idea of hegemony, and so on. You then nail the thinker in question for 'essentialism'. To do that, you need only catch them out in the use of a central Marxist category. Which Marxist category it is precisely—objective laws of capitalism, class or class interest, the forces or the relations of production—and its exact role and weight in the writer's thought, are matters of indifference. It is its bare presence there that counts. At some point, finally, you should work in a reference to the resulting dualism. As we shall see, certain features of the game are not quite so straightforward, indeed rather strange. But this much anyone can learn to play. You may try it with some other Marxist writers—Herbert Marcuse, say, or Isaac Deutscher—analyses of whom in this mode we have thankfully been spared.

A second angle of vision follows directly from this first. As it is no trouble to catch a Marxist at the use of Marxist concepts, such being what composes his or her Marxism, the reproach of 'essentialism' levelled here at writers in the tradition is just the reproach that they remained Marxists, nothing more. To show, for example, that notwithstanding her ideas about spontaneity, Luxemburg, and despite emphasizing the importance of political alliances, Lenin, and even within his theory of hegemony, Gramsci, continued to deploy a structural concept of class, only tells those interested what they already know. It does not demonstrate, as would be needed for the charge of 'essentialism' to have any bite, that Luxemburg, Lenin or Gramsci took the concept as explaining and resolving everything; show a conceptual inflation of class on their part into the originative source of all social and historical processes. Integral to Laclau and Mouffe's own argument, on the contrary, is that in the generality of Marxist writing the basic structural categories of Marxism were *not* used as all-explanatory and sufficient. For their users, then, they were not everything. But they were something. And more than that, of course, they were something crucially important. To say 'essentialism' merely on this account, however, is to be willing to find the vice wherever there are organizing explanatory concepts, where there is any kind of categorial priority. It is a long, firm step into the darkness.

Is more confirmation of such nihilism wanted than is provided by the repeated triggering in the text, at every conceivable sort of encounter with a basic Marxist category, of one of the manifold terms pertaining to 'essence' and 'suture'? If so, it is surely given by the fate at Laclau and Mouffe's hands of their chosen non-Marxists. Bernstein went so far as to repudiate historical materialism in its fundamentals. Nevertheless, we are cautioned, he believed in progress and this tended to endow other beliefs of his with a certain overall meaning. Sorel, then: he renounced both historical materialism and faith in progress. He clung, however, to the notion of the class subject. But, on the authors' account,

this was scarcely any longer a structural concept of class. Well . . . but it *was* still class! The word, as we know, can be written with a capital 'c' and behind the definite article. If Laclau and Mouffe mean to say no more than that class is unimportant, or at least not so important as Sorel in his way and the Marxists in theirs understood it to be, or that a confidence in progress such as Bernstein had is ill-founded, then naturally they have every right to try to make both the one case and the other, as indeed any case they may think they can give good reasons to prove. Their constant cry of 'essentialism', however, evokes some deeper kind of error, associated with conceptual unity or priority in themselves. As such, it resembles nothing so much as an obfuscatory curse.

Thirdly, in the light of their completed history of Marxism, we are better placed to judge the claim Laclau and Mouffe make at the beginning of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, that they 'have tried to recover some of the variety and richness of Marxist discursivity'.³³ I come back to the matter of richness in just a moment. As to variety, certainly there is some: Lenin is not Kautsky, Trotsky and Luxemburg are different from Gramsci, and this is reflected in what the authors tell us of them. But one is entitled to ask whether the variety has not proven, in the event, to be of a somewhat superficial kind. From beginning to end, all these writers were in exactly the same sort of fix, making repeated but vain attempts to get beyond unity and necessity towards plurality and contingency. Could a more simplistic story be imagined? One is not merely entitled but, in the given intellectual context, bound to ask whether this is not a reduction—of the breadth, the panorama, the continent, of Marxist thought. Laclau and Mouffe may have happened for once, but this time unwittingly and unwillingly, upon a genuine 'essentialist' essence: in their own words, when excoriating 'orthodoxy' for one of its several sins—reduction of the concrete, be it noted, to the abstract—upon 'an *underlying reality* to which the ultimate sense of every concrete presence must necessarily be referred, whatever the level of complexity in the system of mediations.'³⁴ Can a better instance of what they are talking about be cited than the story they have recounted of, and the game they have played with, Marxism? It is hard to think of one. Few, if any, of the Marxists they have taken to task made class so exhaustively the explanation of human existence as they have made 'essentialism' the explanation and meaning of the development of Marxist thought in its entirety.

One bad Althusserian chicken has come home to roost, here, with a vengeance. Whilst putting a considerable intellect at the service of defending historical materialism, Althusser in some ways also showed scant respect, scholarly or just human, for the tradition to which he himself belonged, a great many Marxist lives and ideas; subsuming the specificity and detail of them, their effort to grapple with difficult problems, under a simple, dichotomous division of the intellect and on the wrong side of it. This could not but affect some of those influenced by him and inheriting in a less auspicious political time such easy

³³ HSS, p. 4.

³⁴ HSS, p. 22.

and too clever disrespect for other Marxisms, both precursive and contemporary. If so many Marxist thinkers, so much of Marxist theorizing, fell beyond the line of intellectual salvation, must that not be because Marxism itself was deficient, inherently? Even in differing from him with this conclusion, they inherited from Althusser, also, something of the passion for closed certainties which he and they liked and like to castigate in others. Only, where he had sought to distinguish just one single, anti-reductionist truth from amongst all the varieties of Marxism, they have found all the varieties of Marxism to be distinct from the one anti-reductionist truth.

A Richness Impoverished

Fourthly, and the crux of the matter, we can see now how Laclau and Mouffe's is an impoverishing account of Marxist thought. To see it in all clarity though, we must look into the face of a conundrum. The two of them think nothing of the logical feat of charging Marxism with being both monist and dualist at the same time. Just where we might have expected a stern 'either . . . or', we get a conjunction: monism and dualism both. Actually, the connection is even stronger. More than a conjunction it is a species of entailment. *Because* it was monist, so the argument is, Marxism has had to be dualist. Unpacking this a bit: because in 'aspiration' or 'profoundly'³⁵—let us just say *in essence*—Marxism was monist whilst the world itself was not, Marxist theoreticians trying to come to terms with the world have had to utilize categories extraneous—*really*—to the theory they espoused and become dualists. This describes, once again, an uncomfortable Marxist predicament, a dilemma whose teasing shape we earlier had occasion to notice. Should one make use of any other concepts, then either they are linked 'dialectically' to those of class, the relations of production and so on, and the monism remains unbroken, or they are not thus linked and, consequently, are 'external' to Marxist theory.³⁶ It is either Kautsky or it is Labriola. The economist rigidity of a Plekhanov may be avoided only for the incoherence of a Gramsci to be the result.³⁷ Since all the more creative Marxist thinkers have tended towards this latter (dualist) choice, bringing into their discourse a logic of the contingent or idea of the symbolic, as it may be, that was foreign to the basis of their Marxism, it can be said that where the more orthodox were reductionists, the more creative were eclectics. And even they were reductionists. For, at the heart of their eclecticism the reductionism still lurked: in the phrase applied to Gramsci, an 'inner essentialist core';³⁸ a monism within a dualism. In this place, truly, there can be no salvation, other than by taking leave of Marxism altogether.

But it should be clear, in any event, how the effect of it all is radically to reduce the scope and content, the wealth, of actual Marxist thought: not the shrivelled thing Laclau and Mouffe give out as being its essence; actual Marxist thought as thought by actual Marxists. Much of this has

³⁵ HSS, pp. 4, 18.

³⁶ See text to n. 25 above.

³⁷ For Plekhanov, see HSS, pp. 23–4.

³⁸ HSS, p. 69.

simply been denatured, a whole swathe of arguments, themes, concepts and theory been transmuted and deranged. These are not, as one might previously have thought them, part of the development or deepening, the extension and inner differentiation—part of the richness, precisely—of Marxism. They are, so it transpires, incompatible with its monist and reductionist core. Richness of Marxist ‘discursivity’, therefore, they may be, if the term just refers loosely to the writings of people who happened to be Marxists. But they are a departure, strictly speaking, from Marxist *theory*, so many external supplements more or less *ad hoc*. They betoken not the richness but the poverty of it, and the resulting crisis, the dualism, the incoherence.

Now, there is one—very special—angle from which a certain, limited truth can be discerned in this. It is that once Laclau and Mouffe have finished with the concept of hegemony, it is, of course, quite incompatible with any kind of Marxism at all. It has become yet one more representative of an anti-materialist historical outlook in a very long line of them. Not only that: from the vantage point of this new idealism, one can obviously look back over the unfolding Marxist tradition and, so to speak, ‘pick out’, whether in Luxemburg’s thinking on the mass strike, or in Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, or in overdetermination (construed as ‘constituted in the field of the symbolic’),³⁹ intellectual features bearing a resemblance of sorts to one’s own current beliefs. But this picking out is not a taking or a freeing of what is integrally there, nor the location of genuine points of departure. It is a reading back. For all that it may satisfy some residual loyalty, or assuage a guilt perhaps, towards a now mostly despised intellectual past, it is merely a specimen of those procedures of teleological interpretation which Althusser criticized so effectively in his essay, ‘On the Young Marx’.⁴⁰ To use a term much employed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, it is a privileging of the present theoretical moment. Lacking a proper, historical sense of either measure or modesty, this privileging has led here to a view of the whole progression of Marxism since the turn of the century as being preparatory to the advent of Laclau and Mouffe. It is one thing, however, to read all these elements of rich so-called discursivity through the grid of a currently fashionable idea and, seeing them as weak anticipations of it, insightful representatives of a more knowing future, say that they are inconsistent with the Marxism of their authors. To establish in an intellectually cogent way that, in their own place and unadulterated shape, they really were incoherent with Marxist presuppositions, this is something altogether different.

Rosa Luxemburg

Let us consider just one case in a little detail, that of Rosa Luxemburg. It is certainly true that in her thinking on the mass strike Luxemburg puts forward the idea of a generalizing or unifying process, wherein partial conflicts, limited demands, sectional interests, will tend to expand

³⁹ HSS, p. 97.

⁴⁰ See *For Marx*, pp. 55–62.

through struggle and merge into a global revolutionary assault.⁴¹ This generalizing tendency, however, is only a summary idea, a brief formula behind which there lie, in her analysis, a whole complex of constituents, causal and experiential. These are at least some of them. First, direct participation in mass struggle is politically educative, there being things which people only learn from their own experience. Second, the collective weight of the proletariat is most effective politically when this class is actually 'assembled as a mass'. Third, a wave of vigorous struggles draws in hitherto unorganized and apolitical sectors of the working class without whose involvement a successful revolution is unthinkable. Fourth, and in consequence of this, such struggles do not endanger or weaken the existing organizations of the labour movement, as is feared by many trade-union bureaucrats; on the contrary, they extend and strengthen them. Fifth—crucially—economic and political dimensions of the overall conflict interact, intersect, run together.⁴²

In turn, this fifth point is itself only a concise formula, summing up a series of distinct arguments. How and why do political and economic aspects interact? First, demonstrations or other actions over economic grievances lead to clashes with police or troops, to arrests and deaths, so raising questions about the nature of the state and sparking off actions that are directly political in intent. Second, in the mass mobilization over economic issues the workers take and exercise in practice political rights, of assembly and free speech, more extensive than they have enjoyed before. Third, the reality and the atmosphere of sharp economic struggles create a favourable terrain for the influence of Social-Democratic agitation and political direction. Fourth, the workers derive from these economic conflicts a combativity or 'fighting energy' which is imparted to the field of political battle. Fifth, and in the opposite direction, political rights and freedoms formally gained from the state in consequence of earlier victories can be and are used in the work of strengthening trade-union organization. Sixth, the impetus of national or other large-scale political mobilizations, especially successful ones, is communicated to the more localized and partial economic conflicts, as workers, newly encouraged by such successes, become less tolerant of burdensome features of their social condition and take up 'the weapon lying nearest (to) hand'. Seventh, and as a result of this, general political battles sometimes appear to break up and disperse into smaller economic conflicts. Eighth, there is an all-round rise, economic and social, in proletarian conditions of life: better wages and shorter hours provide a basis for intellectual and cultural 'growth'; the despotism of the capitalist is eroded by workplace organization; expectations are aroused which may lead to new struggles if concessions won are subsequently withdrawn—effects all feeding into the further progress of the political struggle.⁴³

⁴¹ See my *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, NLB/Verso, Lonson 1976, pp. 111–31, especially pp. 120–1, 126–7.

⁴² For these five arguments, see 'The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions', in Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York 1970, respectively: 1) pp. 172, 176, 180–1, 199, 202–3; 2) p. 202; 3) pp. 192, 194, 196, 197–200; 4) pp. 165, 172, 176–8, 193, 196–7; 5) pp. 184–6.

⁴³ For these eight points, see *Ibid.*, respectively: 1) pp. 165, 166, 180; 2) pp. 166, 168; 3) pp. 170, 173; 4) p. 185; 5) pp. 177–8; 6) pp. 171–2, 185, 186–7; 7) pp. 170, 172, 179; 8) pp. 173–6.

Different readers will assess this collection of arguments differently and some may want to distinguish amongst them as to the persuasive force of each. However this may be, the important point here is that Luxemburg makes a series of empirical claims and draws a large number of causal and explanatory connections in doing so. One sort of event leads to another sort, this economic cause generates that political effect, a certain political activity or achievement helps, conversely, to strengthen a form of economic organization, a particular type of experience to reinforce commitment or deepen understanding. What do Laclau and Mouffe make of it all? This: 'in a revolutionary situation the *meaning* of every mobilization appears, so to speak, as split: aside from its specific literal demands, each mobilization represents the revolutionary process as a whole; and these totalizing effects are visible in the overdetermination of some struggles by others. This is, however, nothing other than the defining characteristic of the symbol: the overflowing of the signifier by the signified. *The unity of the class is therefore a symbolic unity.*'⁴⁴ Short work, indeed. Luxemburg, doubtless, understood something both of the power of symbols and of the symbolic moment in all great mass struggles. But to take her notion that there is a generalizing dynamic within the mass strike and the many hypotheses of fact, cause and effect which this notion embraced, and make them one with the overflowing of the signifier by the signified is a manifest deformation of her own conception. It is an inflation of the symbolic, in line with what *they*, the authors, today believe, but such as reduces that complex of economic, political and intellectual causalities and levels to an interplay of meanings simply, something *she* could not have believed in and in fact did not. If the operation allows Laclau and Mouffe to say that, for Luxemburg, the unity of the class, as also 'the mechanism of unification', is a symbolic one, that is only because they have allowed themselves to 'discover' themselves in her.⁴⁵

Of course, Luxemburg can then be given an intellectual pat on the back for what she has anticipated, but it is one she can do without, mere prelude as it is to the charge of dualism. Assimilated to 'a logic of the symbol', 'disruption of every literal meaning' and so on, her 'logic of spontaneism' is now antithetical to that of historical materialism with its 'fixations' of meaning. In a characteristic piece of Laclau-Mouffian discourse, the two logics are said to make up a 'double void' (rendered 'invisible' but not 'filled up' by being thought of as 'a confluence of two positive and different explanatory principles').⁴⁶ Whatever may be the interest of this particular claim, however, it is beside the point: irrelevant to showing how, not the logic of the symbol, but Luxemburg's genuine ideas on the mass strike are actually *incompatible* with a Marxist view of history. This is what Laclau and Mouffe need to show and do not. Nor is it clear how they could. Starting—no question about it—from the common structural, or economic, situation of the workers, Luxemburg simply argued that links between them would be forged

⁴⁴ HSS, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁵ Cf. Althusser: 'this method which is constantly *judging* cannot *make the slightest judgement of any totality unlike itself*. Could there be a franker admission that it *merely judges itself, recognizes itself behind the objects it considers*. . .' *For Marx*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ HSS, pp. 12–3.

and tempered, organizations created or strengthened, through a period of vigorous struggle, that they themselves would be educated politically, and the common capacities and weapons they possessed as workers be developed, by mass action. She thereby granted, certainly, significance and effectivity to political and cultural practices. But no good reason has been proposed why her hypotheses about these may not be regarded as complementary to fundamental Marxist principles of class and class interest. None, that is, unless we are to take for one that, irrespective of the theoretical record of actual Marxists, the Marxist paradigm is just 'pre-given' as the narrowest of economisms—as everything here has shown that for Laclau and Mouffe it is. In reality, it is well known, Rosa Luxemburg's mass strike arguments are of a type in no way foreign to Marxist thought. They are as old, generically speaking, as the tradition itself.⁴⁷

Practices of the Game

Considerations of space forbid as detailed a response to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy's* other exegeses but one or two brief comments may be offered to supplement the above. Taken as undifferentiated plurality and of *meanings*, the Althusserian concept of overdetermination is plainly incompatible with giving any kind of explanatory or causal priority to an objective economic structure. Likewise, if a Leninist emphasis on the critical importance of political alliances is seen as the spiritual harbinger of what Laclau and Mouffe for their part will one day mean by hegemony, this is just as incompatible with giving any kind of priority to class. Determination in the last instance by the economy, in the one case, and the fact that Lenin did give priority to class, in the other, can then be made to stand in for economic and class reductionism, the 'in the last instance' and Lenin's emphasis on political alliances (*and* organization and the rest) notwithstanding. You have a dualism. Thus, there is no problem in manipulating concepts so that they come to deputize everywhere for the same two antithetical essences. But what Althusser put forward was neither the single, omnipotent cause nor the mere multiplicity of meanings. It was a conception of the primacy of one type of structure within a group of structures, of a *hierarchy* of causalities of uneven weight. Whatever problems there may be with his central categories, an explanation is needed as to why *this* conception, of a plurality of levels but of differential causal importance, is incoherent

⁴⁷ A last 'detail' here. The authors write: 'Recently, a number of studies have discussed the fatalist or non-fatalist character of Luxemburgist spontaneism. In our opinion, however, these have given excessive emphasis to a relatively secondary problem, such as the alternative between mechanical collapse and conscious intervention of the class. The assertion that capitalism will mechanically collapse is so absurd that, as far as we know, nobody has upheld it.' As the only one amongst this 'number of studies' they actually cite is my own, I may be permitted to observe that the section of it to which they refer sought to show, with full textual documentation and a clarity, if I may say so, which leaves no room for misunderstanding, that Rosa Luxemburg upheld . . . the thesis that 'capitalism will mechanically collapse'; but why, *despite that*, she believed 'conscious intervention of the class' still to be necessary, since capitalist collapse would otherwise issue in barbarism. My arguments and interpretation of her texts might, of course, have been wrong. But it is indicative of Laclau and Mouffe's happy-go-lucky way with ideas that, without bothering to show that or how they were, they just *assert*, against them, that her 'statements concerning the inevitability of socialism are not simply concessions to the rhetoric of the time or the result of a psychological need . . . but rather the nodal point giving meaning to her entire theoretical and strategic structure.' HSS, pp. 42–3, n. 8.

and dualist. A more persuasive logic would be required for the purpose than the one we saw brought to bear in the question of relative autonomy and amounting to the assertion, 'Either one is all or all are one'. No other logic is it that dictates that if you think, with Lenin, that political alliances, and therefore politics, are important, you cannot in all consistency think that class, and therefore economic structure, are more fundamentally so; or, by contraposition, that if you do presume to think this, then in effect you reduce politics to being just 'a bare stage' and what have you.⁴⁸

In sum, the perverse entailment, 'Monism and, consequently, dualism', simply unravels, and from whichever end one wants. Marxism, according to the authors, is essentially monist and reductionist. From this they infer a dualism, which is to say incoherence, when handling the plain and abundant evidence that much of Marxism is not monist and reductionist. They seek, thus, to neutralize that evidence. But the whole exercise rests on one precarious premiss and this can be denied. Marxism is not *essentially* monist and reductionist. Some Marxisms have tended towards being so and others have not; to the contrary, have taken pains to avoid it. If the premiss is false, no conclusion is derivable from it. Alternatively, and starting at the other end, we may work a contraposition of our own. If the conclusion is false, then so must be the premiss: judging that there are non-reductionist Marxisms which integrate a number of levels or layers of explanation in a coherent—or, as is in the nature of these things, *more or less* coherent—way, we can affirm of them that, not being dualist, nor therefore are they, covertly, monist.

Let us finish looking at Laclau and Mouffe's treatment of Marxist ideas by just noting a couple of its more bizarre details, subsidiary practices of the game that further testify to the absence here of all sense of reasonable constraint. One such practice may be designated 'moving the goalposts'. Thus, in connection with his views on the exceptional role of the state in pre-revolutionary Russian society, Trotsky is taken to task because, faced with the 'economist' criticisms of the historian Pokrovsky, he 'fails to reply with a theoretical analysis of relative State autonomy in different capitalist social formations, appealing instead to the greenness of life against the greyness of theory.'⁴⁹ Now, never mind that the charge is based on nothing more compelling than tendentious quotation, a few lines pulled from an essay of 1922, brief reply to one of Trotsky's critics; that even there, cheek by jowl with those lines, making up the principal emphasis of the reply, there are some half dozen quite explicit formulations of the relative autonomy of the Russian state—'the relative, that is, historically conditioned and socially limited independence of the autocracy from the ruling classes'—as well as comparative reference in the matter to the states of Western Europe;⁵⁰ that Trotsky's full-scale expositions of the theory of permanent revolution, the only basis for a *serious* opinion about this, contain, in the

⁴⁸ See text to n. 30 above.

⁴⁹ HSS, pp. 52–3.

⁵⁰ See 'On the Special Features of Russia's Historical Development', in Leon Trotsky, 1905, London 1972, pp. 333, 338, 343–4. Readers may enjoy checking for themselves what I mean by 'cheek by jowl' here.

opening chapters of both *Results and Prospects* and 1905, precisely a theoretical analysis of those factors making for the pronounced autonomy of the Russian state, by comparison and contrast with its European counterparts.⁵¹ Simply leave all this aside. For, though Trotsky could not have known, we do and the authors themselves certainly should know, that the avenue he is upbraided for not having taken is described elsewhere in the book, in relation to other Marxists whom they allow did take it, as 'a dead end'.⁵² True, this is later in the book. But a dead end is a dead end, however late in one's discourse one says it. Why Trotsky should be measured by a standard adjudged, itself, to be but another species of Marxist failure is not altogether clear; unless the reason is just that finding any old fault will do.

Then there is the strangely arbitrary—quite difficult to master—practice of adjudicating between different 'essentialisms', displayed, this, in two very short paragraphs in which the relative merits and deficiencies of Bernstein, Sorel and Gramsci are assessed. A mere innocent in these things might imagine that Bernstein and Sorel, actually having broken with Marxism, will possess the advantage. We have already been told of the first of them, after all, that his 'true novelty' was to have recognized 'the autonomy of the political from the economic base'; and of the second ('the most profound and original thinker of the Second International'), that his strength was to have seen that 'social reality itself is indeterminate'—theoretical achievements which even Laclau and Mouffe find it hard to pin on the Marxist, Gramsci, in any straightforward way, and which are central components of their own current viewpoint.⁵³ Everyone who knows where it's really at these days, though, will know that Gramsci just *has* to win this part of the game: not because he towers over the other two as a thinker; but because, in a certain relevant left milieu, he confers a moral and intellectual legitimacy which they cannot. And this is how it happens. In the first of the two paragraphs, Bernstein is seen off on account of his idea of 'a general law of progress'. Absolute silence for the time being that Gramsci suffers from an 'essentialism' of his own; about him, only good things. In the second paragraph, following as the next one always does just one line later, Gramsci's weakness in that regard *is* mentioned and Sorel therefore given an edge for 'break(ing) more radically than Gramsci with the essentialist vision of *an underlying morphology of history*'.⁵⁴ With Bernstein out of the way and seemingly forgotten, this can now be said. Anyway, Sorel has an edge in the one respect only, since, where Gramscian hegemony 'entails the idea of *democratic plurality*, . . . the Sorelian myth was simply destined to recreate the unity of *the class*'.⁵⁵ Here, something else has been forgotten, albeit from fully five paragraphs previous in the text, something we earlier saw bring Gramsci down. Absolute silence, in *this* comparison, about 'the unicity of the unifying principle, and its necessary class character'.

⁵¹ See Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, London 1962, pp. 169–77; and 1905, pp. 3–11.

⁵² See text to n. 18 above.

⁵³ HSS, pp. 30, 41.

⁵⁴ HSS, p. 71. Emphasis added.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

It is difficult to escape the feeling of having found that ‘space of indeterminacy’ in which more or less anything can be said. This whole procedure too, however, has a perverse logic to it. The mantle of Gramsci is vital to a pair of ex-Marxists, so they may represent themselves as post-Marxists, even while lauding the ‘true novelty’ of pre-Marxist ideas.

Discourse

So much, then, for the account we are given of the Marxist tradition. Systematically diminishing as it is, it smooths the way for the inversion of Althusserian values the authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* wish to effect. If Marxist thought now stands against rather than for a necessary grasp of social complexity, that is more easily put across by presenting as Marxism what is less than Marxism, nothing but a wretched travesty in fact. Our survey of this concluded, we may move on. A deeper source of the same inversion of values—no justification for the interpretative travesty but explaining, perhaps, one of the psychological impulses behind it—lies in the ensemble of ideas for which the Marxist tradition is here renounced. In the night all cats are grey. Every Marxism, equally, will seem reductionist from a perspective in which the spheres of politics and ideology have become superordinate, in which, more generally, the ‘symbolic’ has expanded to be all-encompassing. The break with historical materialism so consummated, giving proper weight, in however measured a way, to history’s objective material bases must look like economism. But the question once more intrudes itself: why is this perspective post-Marxist and not the reproduction, as it appears, of something rather old and familiar? The answer is that it has a more voguish name; for this is the night of ‘discourse’.

I have already described the theoretical perspective now defended by Laclau and Mouffe as an idealism. A qualification is in order, however. They themselves do not willingly own to the description. There is, indeed, in their formulation of certain key arguments, an involution of thought and language symptomatic of their reluctance to acknowledge to themselves the simple consequences of the positions they put forward. What we have, therefore, is a shamefaced idealism. Let us look closely at two of its pivotal arguments.

(i) ‘Our analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. It affirms . . . that every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence.’ (ii) ‘The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of “natural phenomena” or “expressions of the wrath of God”, depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects

exist externally to thought, but *the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence*'.⁵⁶

About (i) it will suffice to point out that the 'insofar as' clause is mere pleonasm, a repetition masquerading as a clarification, or elaboration, of the statement it is appended to, and that a possible reason for this linguistic peculiarity is that the statement in question will not readily bear genuine explication without being revealed for the absurdity it is. Every object is constituted as an object of discourse means all objects are given their being by, or are what they are by virtue of, discourse; which is to say (is it not?) that there is no *pre*-discursive objectivity or reality, that objects not spoken, written or thought about *do not exist*. In (ii), the authors appear to step back from this absurdity, denying at first, and emphatically, that it is truly the meaning of what they say. An earthquake exists independently of my will. Very good to hear it, and showing a commendable sense of the real. But this is merely part of the 'now black, now white' style of reasoning commonly to be found in the propagation of what is against all reason and the expression of an all too understandable feeling of intellectual discomfort. Clear signs of warning follow directly on the firm denial. The earthquake's 'specificity' as an object is at once related to a discursive structure, and that in a formula putting back to back the 'constructions' of it as a natural phenomenon and as an act of God; putting on level terms, in other words, what it actually is and a superstition about it. Unless we are to assume Laclau and Mouffe just want to share with their readers the banality that there are different ways of thinking about an earthquake (or: different meanings conferred on it by its articulation within different discursive or symbolic fields), this again seems to suggest that *the sort of object an earthquake is*, not therefore merely the idea, but the reality of it, is determined by discourse. The concluding sentence of (ii) then sews up the whole 'yea and nay' argument good and proper. Once more the authors step back from the absurd: what is denied is not that objects exist externally to thought but a 'rather different' assertion. It is indeed rather different, but mainly—in fact, only—by being nicely obscure. Could an earthquake 'constitute itself as an object outside any discursive condition of emergence'? Leaving aside the eccentricity of expression which has an earthquake constituting itself, the only sensible answer to the question is: yes—if one does not think, for example, that earthquakes would cease to happen should humanity perish. But Laclau and Mouffe say no; this is exactly what they have been careful to specify as the true content of their denial.

A few lines later in their text all confusion is resolved, any lingering doubt over the meaning I have construed from the two quoted passages laid to rest. We learn here finally that 'the very classical dichotomy between an objective field constituted outside of any discursive intervention and a discourse consisting of the pure expression of thought' has been overtaken within 'several currents of contemporary thought'.⁵⁷ One need not accept the loaded way in which the second part of this distinction is formulated—for no discourse is *purely* thought—in order

⁵⁶ HSS, pp. 107, 108. The second emphasis in (ii) is mine.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

to insist that the first part of it is an absolutely indispensable principle, whether or not the authors still consider it to be 'in'. However frequently these may be denied, either in high philosophical argument or in popular assertion, a pre-discursive reality and an extra-theoretical objectivity form the irreplaceable basis of all rational enquiry, as well as the condition of meaningful communication across and between differing viewpoints. This foundation once removed, one simply slides into a bottomless, relativist gloom, in which opposed discourses or paradigms are left with no common reference point, uselessly trading blows. The most elementary facts of existence become strictly unthinkable without the aid of more or less elaborate theoretical sophistries. Was not the pre-human world 'an objective field constituted outside of any discursive intervention'—or did it have to await the appearance of humanity to 'construct' it? And *even* today, 'several currents of contemporary thought' notwithstanding, are there not realities of nature, both external and human, which are not merely 'given outside' every discourse (see (i)) but the material precondition of them all? Refuse this, anyway, who will. As a certain Marxist 'essentialist' long ago said, 'Once you deny objective reality . . . you have already lost every weapon against fideism.'⁵⁸

Laclau and Mouffe go on to repeat their contention about the aforesaid dichotomy in slightly different terms. 'The main consequence of a break with the discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy,' they argue, 'is the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition.' So much for the claim that all this has 'nothing to do' with whether there is a world external to thought, and with the realism/idealism distinction (see (ii)). For, a world well and truly *external* to thought obviously has no meaning outside the thought/reality opposition. And purporting to have gone beyond that opposition, apart from being, itself, a *very* old story, is precisely one of idealism's most typical forms. Its role, in the present instance, this supposed going beyond, is to mask from the authors the last absurd consequences, whose naked visage they plainly fear to see exposed, of the belief they have chosen to make their own: that all the world is discourse.⁵⁹

Hegemonic Articulation

Since our primary interest, however, is the sort of social and political theory this belief sustains, we may put the question of earthquakes behind us. We must examine the notion of *hegemonic articulation*, crux of what *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has to offer: a notion of the bringing together in a common formation or ensemble, and through discursive practices of politics and ideology, of diverse identities or subject positions, social sectors, movements and struggles. We may begin by laying out some basic definitions and theses. The authors 'call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.' A distinction is

⁵⁸ Lenin in 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism', *Collected Works*, Moscow 1960–1970, Vol. 14, p. 344.

⁵⁹ HSS, p. 110. And cf. the characteristically blunt opinion of the same Marxist 'essentialist', concerning 'the stupid claim to have "risen above" materialism and idealism, to have transcended this "obsolete" antithesis . . .' Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 14, p. 341.

proposed in this context between two kinds of entity: on the one hand, 'moments', whose identity is defined by their position within the 'structured totality'—or discourse—'resulting from the articulatory practice'; on the other hand, 'elements', which are constituted independently of it.⁶⁰ I return to this distinction shortly. The concept of hegemony, for its part, 'supposes a theoretical field dominated by the category of *articulation*.'⁶¹ It supposes, that is to say, a terrain that is *open* to these articulatory practices because marked by that disparateness, complexity and plurality which are their raw materials, which make them possible at all. A terrain already unified around some central essence, a closed or a sutured totality, would leave no room for such practices. The requisite 'openness' here, therefore, is the one we are familiar with, 'the incomplete and open character of the social'. This 'openness of the social is . . . the precondition of every hegemonic practice.'⁶²

It is acceptable to speak of a 'hegemonic *subject*' and of 'the subject of any articulatory practice',⁶³ but not in the sense of a constitutive or founding agent. 'Whenever we use the category of "subject" in this text', Laclau and Mouffe write, 'we will do so in the sense of "subject positions" within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, 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.'⁶⁴ Much the same can be said in the case of other important categories. Thus, 'every social identity' is 'the meeting point for a multiplicity of articulatory practices'.⁶⁵ And the direction or meaning of any 'social struggle', any 'movement', depends 'upon its forms of articulation within a given hegemonic context', or again, 'upon its hegemonic articulation with other struggles and other demands'.⁶⁶ We do not just look out, though, on a sort of ceaseless, uncatchable, discursive flux, mere featureless plurality of articulatory practices. The very idea of hegemony implies otherwise. 'Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre.' The 'privileged discursive points' that result from such attempts are called 'nodal points', and there can be 'a variety of hegemonic nodal points' in any 'social formation'.⁶⁷

Hegemonic practices 'operate in political fields crisscrossed by antagonisms'. Indeed, 'the two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them. Only the presence of a vast area of floating elements and the possibility of their articulation to opposite camps—which implies a constant redefinition of the latter—is what constitutes the terrain permitting us to define a practice as hegemonic.' The existence of 'two camps', where this comes about, is itself an effect and not a condition of

⁶⁰ HSS, p. 105.

⁶¹ HSS, p. 93; cf. p. 134.

⁶² HSS, pp. 134, 142.

⁶³ HSS, p. 135. My emphasis.

⁶⁴ HSS, p. 115.

⁶⁵ HSS, p. 138.

⁶⁶ HSS, pp. 86–7.

⁶⁷ HSS, pp. 112, 139; cf. p. 142.

hegemonic articulation. For, it is not 'a dichotomically divided political space' but rather a 'proliferation of . . . political spaces' that is 'a central characteristic of the advanced capitalist social formations'. It has been so since 'the beginning of modern times, when the reproduction of the different social areas takes place in permanently changing conditions'.⁶⁸

Now, even on the basis of what we have so far, there is much upon which comment might be passed. One could note again, for instance, how absolutely everything—subjects, experience, identity, struggles, movements—has discursive 'conditions of possibility', while the question as to what might be the conditions of possibility of discourse itself does not trouble the authors so much as to pause for thought. *These* conditions can be passed over in a parenthetical phrase, only to be cancelled out. Thus, because all experience depends on 'precise' discursive conditions, subjects are no kind of social 'origin', 'not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible'. The stroke of logic involved in this bears some scrutiny, at least by those who have an interest in the rhetoric of false argument. What it amounts to is: because *d* is a condition of *e*, one can deny that *p* is also a condition of *e*, even if *p* is also a condition of *e*.⁶⁹ We are confronted, in fact, and predictably enough given the way in which our simple—natural—earthquake was discursively gobbled up, with an overweening *social ontology*, itself without conditions, unlimited, unquestionable. In these respects, at any rate, it is not dissimilar to the Althusserian conceptual universe, populated by decree, from end to end, with 'practices'. As one of Althusser's early critics aptly wrote, 'It "happens" that everything is production . . . That is how it is.' So, too, it just 'happens' in the present case, but this time with discourse.⁷⁰

Between Elements and Moments

I want to concentrate critical attention, however, on two matters. In doing so, I shall seek to lay bare the intellectual vacuity of what Laclau and Mouffe put forth. Borrowing the expression with which they themselves favour Rosa Luxemburg, though trying to show that it has a force here which it lacked applied to her, I shall argue that at the heart of their book there is a 'double void': double, because empty, equally, of theoretical substance and of any genuine practico-normative specificity or direction.

Our point of access to the theoretical 'side' of this void is the distinction between elements and moments. Let us see what light it throws on the notion of hegemonic articulation. When considering the various subject positions, social identities, struggles and so forth which any particular

⁶⁸ HSS, pp. 140, 136–8.

⁶⁹ See text to n. 64 above. The argument cited there is of this form: 'Horses cannot, therefore, be the origin of stampedes of horses—not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render galloping possible—as all "galloping" depends on precise geographical conditions of possibility.' I criticize arguments of this general type, which by sleight-of-hand discount or minimize the role of 'subjects' and their powers, in Chapter IV of *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, Verso, London 1983—see, especially, pp. 106–8, 111–6.

⁷⁰ See André Glucksmann, 'A Ventriloquist Structuralism', in *New Left Review* (eds.), *Western Marxism—A Critical Reader*, NLB/Verso, London 1977, p. 285.

practice of hegemonic articulation puts into relation, what sort of entities are we dealing with and what is the nature of the ensemble they collectively compose? If this were to be thought of as a mere combination of *elements*, then by the distinction proffered their identity would be given *independently* of the articulatory practice itself and the relations between them, therefore, be *external* relations and purely *contingent*. Alternatively, if it were conceived as a structure or totality of *moments*, then the identity or meaning of these would be determined by their *place within* the articulated ensemble, thus by their relations to one another, and such relations be both *internal* and *necessary* ones. The choice, so defined, poses a difficulty of which Laclau and Mouffe are well aware. Neither alternative, in fact, will do.

For, to opt for the first would be to saddle oneself with ‘essentialist fixity’.⁷¹ This comes upon people in a thousand different guises. There is not only, as we already know, an ‘essentialism of the totality’, there is also an ‘essentialism of the elements’; and nothing is to be gained by replacing the one with the other. So, a ‘conception which denies any essentialist approach to social relations, must also state the precarious character of every identity and the impossibility of fixing the sense of the “elements” in any ultimate literality.’⁷² A heavy charge brought against the Marxist tradition, it will be remembered, was that where it recognized the importance of class alliances, it conceived these as mere relations of exteriority between independent agents of determinate identity. But ‘the very identity of classes is transformed by the hegemonic tasks they take on themselves . . . the notion of “class alliance” is . . . clearly insufficient, since hegemony supposes the construction of the very identity of social agents, and not just a rationalist coincidence of “interests” among preconstituted agents’.⁷³ The same, we have seen, goes for the meaning of all movements and struggles; and, as for any hegemonic task, ‘its identity is given to it solely by its articulation within a hegemonic formation’. The first alternative, then, is no good, just ‘a new form of fixity: that of the various decentred subject positions’.⁷⁴ It might appear to point us, by its deficiencies, towards the second alternative: that the hegemonic ensemble is a structure or totality of moments.

But that is no good, either. It would be a form of closure, simply one more sutured totality, with the hegemonic formation itself now conceptualized ‘as founding totality of its partial processes’.⁷⁵ If the idea of such a closure has been renounced for society as a whole—which is the meaning, incidentally, of the recurring formulations, ‘the impossibility of the object “society”’, ‘“Society” is not a valid object of discourse’, ‘“society” is impossible’, ‘the impossibility of “society”’⁷⁶—this is because it is renounced for the generality of the social, hence with respect to *every* social ensemble, large or small. It cannot be

⁷¹ HSS, p. 177.

⁷² HSS, pp. 116, 96.

⁷³ HSS, p. 58.

⁷⁴ HSS, pp. 86–7.

⁷⁵ See text to n. 10 above.

⁷⁶ HSS, pp. 99, 111, 114, 122 (and 130 and 136).

readmitted even to a more reduced social space without overturning the hallowed principle of anti-‘essentialism’. The very category of articulation would be placed in jeopardy by that. Nothing would be solved ‘if the relational and differential logic of the discursive totality prevailed without any limitation. In that case, we would be faced with pure relations of necessity, and . . . any articulation would be impossible given that every “element” would *ex definitione* be “moment”.’ As the authors also put it, ‘if articulation is a practice . . . it must imply some form of separate presence of the elements which that practice articulates or recomposes.’⁷⁷ This might appear, in turn, to point us back to the first alternative. But we have already been there and it led us here. We want the exit, if there is one, from an endlessly looping circularity.

And there is one. It is, at first sight, a model of elegant simplicity. The various constituents of a hegemonic formation are neither elements nor moments; they are something in between. Their status, according to Laclau and Mouffe, ‘is constituted in some intermediate region between the elements and the moments.’ This region, in which the ‘transition from the “elements” to the “moments” is never entirely fulfilled’, is also referred to, at one point, as a ‘no-man’s land’.⁷⁸ In fact, it is a marsh. The type of coherence characteristic of the hegemonic ensemble, distinct at once from that of a combination of elements and from that of a totality of moments, is designated by the concept of ‘regularity in dispersion’, and the beauty of this concept is that it allows you to say exactly what you want. It endows the articulated formation with just enough internality, so to speak, that you can rail against all fixity and exteriority of social identities with respect to one another when it suits you to do this; but not so much internality as will comprehensively suture that formation or prevent you from . . . *affirming* some fixity and separateness of social identities when it suits you to do that. The concept of ‘regularity in dispersion’ is tailor-made for facing all ways simultaneously.⁷⁹ Here are some examples of how it works.

Take, first, ‘fixity’. This has been a key target of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and, in the strictures they address to Marxist thinkers, the authors are very firm about it. ‘Unfixity,’ they say, ‘has become the condition of every social identity.’ A break with ‘orthodox essentialism’ must entail ‘the critique of *every type of fixity*, through an affirmation of the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity.’⁸⁰ But if there were truly *no* fixity, thoroughgoing social indeterminacy and that is all, there would be nothing more of consequence for the putative social theorist to say, a fact which Laclau and Mouffe have duly to acknowledge, with the concession, ‘a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic’. The polemical moment of their enterprise behind them and the constructive moment once begun, it turns out that ‘neither absolute fixity nor absolute non-fixity is possible’. *Some* fixity, then, is all right

⁷⁷ HSS, pp. 110, 93.

⁷⁸ HSS, pp. 107, 110–1; and cf. pp. 106–7, 113, 134.

⁷⁹ For what explication there is, and other appearances, of ‘regularity in dispersion’, see HSS, pp. 150–6, 135, 136, 142.

⁸⁰ HSS, pp. 85, 104. My emphasis.

after all.⁸¹ So it is with other pertinent categories. External relations, as between discrete social agents or struggles, have been severely criticized where Marxism was concerned and the constitutive, meaning-giving powers of hegemonic articulation asserted repeatedly against them. But then it comes about that these powers do not actually prevail 'without limitation by any exterior'. No, there is an 'irresoluble interiority/exteriority tension'; 'neither a total interiority nor a total exteriority is possible'.⁸² The same applies to necessity and contingency, that two-pronged stick wielded by Laclau and Mouffe to discomfort every writer whom they suspected of having toyed with it. More adept with the distinction themselves, they inform us, now, that 'necessity only exists as a partial limitation of the field of contingency'; and, also, that this relationship 'cannot be conceived as . . . between two areas that are delimited and external to each other . . . because the contingent only exists within the necessary'.⁸³ No question here, in any case, of a baleful 'dualism'. Society, finally may be impossible, as we are told half a dozen times, but discursive practices nevertheless have a stab at this impossibility by way of the structured totalities they severally articulate, and the effort is not altogether in vain. For, some fixity means some closure and some closure, obviously, a qualification of the much-emphasized 'openness'. So: 'If society is not totally possible, neither is it totally impossible.'⁸⁴

It seems appropriate at this point to remind the reader of the sharp alternatives with which Marxism was confronted. But here everything is permitted. It is perhaps not surprising, in the light of it all, that the authors themselves say of hegemony, at one place, that it is 'a type of relation that never manages to be identical with itself'; and again, in the flourish that concludes their book, that it is a 'game' which 'eludes the concept'. That expresses a deep, though probably unintended, truth about *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.⁸⁵

A Theoretical Void

To guard against one possible misunderstanding in this matter: it is not a question of wanting to impose on Laclau and Mouffe the sort of rigid choice they freely impose on others, by insisting in our turn that the identities and so forth which any hegemonic politics articulates must *either* be elements *or* be moments. If they would rather have them in between, so be it. These are then *modified elements*, their character and meaning constituted *in part* independently of the hegemonic political project itself and *in part* by the effects of this project upon them. That may not yet say very much but it does say something. Three observations are in order, however. First, some consistency and precision of usage is required. If this is how it is, then this is how it is, an 'intermediacy' between elements and moments; and one cannot therefore just play each end against the other, now speaking as if we had pure moments, and

⁸¹ HSS, pp. 111–2.

⁸² HSS, pp. 110–1; cf. pp. 133, 142.

⁸³ HSS, pp. 111, 114 (and 142).

⁸⁴ HSS, pp. 112, 129.

⁸⁵ HSS, pp. 86, 193.

now as if simple independent elements, according to convenience. But that is exactly what Laclau and Mouffe do, and they do it not only before introducing us to that 'no-man's land' in which all antinomies are renegotiated, but also afterwards. Thus, when they want, in their final chapter, to emphasize the virtues of pluralism against any domineering Marxist ambition, they tell us that 'Pluralism is *radical* only to the extent that each term of this plurality of identities finds within itself the principle of its own validity', and talk accordingly of 'the autoconstitutivity of each one of its terms'—a bit fixed and separate, one might think. Then, when it is the rights of hegemonic articulation that are to the fore again, which happens soon enough, we learn: 'there are hegemonic practices because this radical unfixity'—unscathed; despite the renegotiation—'makes it impossible to consider the political struggle as a game in which the identity of the opposing forces is constituted from the start . . . If the meaning of each struggle is not given from the start, this means that it is fixed—partially—only to the extent that the struggle moves outside itself and . . . links itself structurally to other struggles.' Black on the heels of white: and each way '*only* to the extent that'. The circle remains in place.⁸⁶

Second, the resounding hollowness of the critique of Marxism we have been offered is now exposed beneath its shell of words. Taxed many times over with conceiving social identities as constituted, or 'fixed', external to the—hegemonic—political project itself, Marxist politics has been asked to make way for a more authentic hegemonic, and radical, politics; only to find that this too, by its very nature as an articulatory practice, presupposes a certain fixity and exteriority of identities, 'some form of separate presence of the elements', amongst its conditions.⁸⁷ The difference, we will be told, is that in this case the fixity and externality are 'discursively constructed' ones. But that is just another circle. It was fixity and 'external alliances' that were the sins of Marxism and gainsaying them the apparent virtues of the proffered discourse theory. The argument looks somewhat different if it is only that the fixations external to any hegemonic politics are conceived by this *discourse* theory as—discursive. This throws us back on the idealist ontology pure and simple, and we have seen how feeble is the case which has been made for that. Or, it will be said, your (Marxist, 'classist', etc.) fixations are absolute ones, whereas ours are only partial and relative. But if the distinction is anything more than a coded repetition of the argument just dismissed, it rests upon the travesty of Marxism we earlier criticized: that it is a reductionism for which politics and ideology do not *really* count.

Third, this whole notion of hegemonic articulation, with its region intermediate between the elements and the moments, how much *does* it in fact say? We know from it that there is a plurality and variety of subject positions, all discursively constituted, that some of them can become the source of hegemonic practices—though none of them is structurally 'privileged' in this respect, the thing depending on 'a

⁸⁶ HSS, pp. 167, 170–1.

⁸⁷ See text to n. 77 above.

political initiative'⁸⁸—that these practices in turn modify their component elements and therefore subject positions, articulating and articulated alike, and succeed, some of them, in establishing hegemonic nodal points. What else? And does this knowledge help us to understand or explain anything *specific* at all? Are some hegemonic practices, for example, more likely than others to prevail, or to prevail in certain conditions, and if so, why or in what conditions? Would it be due only, or mainly, to the inherent 'attractiveness' of the discourses in play and, if so, what might be the criteria of *that*, given that any adjudication between discourses is itself another discourse, with no more purchase on an impossible objectivity than they? Would it have anything to do with material or other resources in different subject positions? Or with differential political capacities (and what would be the reason for these)? Would it depend on already existing structures, political or other, and if so, what would be the nature and scope of this dependence? Or must we just assume that openness and indeterminacy of the social mean, here, such a free play of discourses and articulatory practices that *any number* of outcomes is always possible, so that no particular outcome, no specificity, *can* be understood or explained? Whatever is, then, simply is, but, whatever it is, it can always be subsumed under the (re)description of the social world as a discursive plurality with some nodal points. It is hard to see how one could get any closer to complete theoretical vacuity.

By way of possible response, in any case, to questions of the above sort, Laclau and Mouffe offer next to nothing. I say 'next to' nothing because there is one gesture, and there are some strange apparitions, which may be considered relevant. The former consists of a bare announcement, at a couple of places, that not everything is possible, that the play or the flow of discursive practices is not entirely free (only free—of course!—of any a priori class character of struggles or demands'), that there *are* some 'limits'.⁸⁹ A qualification of total indeterminacy, this remains merely a gesture, however, because, unelaborated, it actually furnishes none of the desiderata of explanatory specificity, only promises some. As for the strange apparitions, these tend to pop up suddenly whenever the authors want to put something with a little more historical content into the empty shell of their own version of hegemony. We then get: 'advanced capitalism', 'the advanced capitalist social formations' and 'the social formation as an empirical referent' (sic); 'the capitalist periphery' and 'imperialist exploitation'; 'an intensive regime of accumulation', 'commodification'; and so on.⁹⁰ Is it necessary to say that these concepts belong to another theory? Nor is it clear what they are doing here: where society is not 'totally possible'; objective interests have no theoretical basis; and economism, or even the 'core' of it, is to be avoided at all costs. So is this a case of untamed 'survivals'? Or is it a case, rather, of needing concepts for what 'discourse' has banished, whenever reality intrudes upon the game? Or is it that, as the Introduction to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* barely hints, Marxist categories may still possess a 'degree of validity'—

⁸⁸ HSS, p. 65.

⁸⁹ HSS, pp. 86, 190.

⁹⁰ HSS, (in turn) pp. 133, 137, 136, 66, 131, 160, 161.

despite everything?⁹¹ Whatever the case, poor Bernstein, though: again forgotten. For allowing *something* to those categories, he was guilty of a dualism.⁹² Our authors are allowed whatever they may need on the given page.

Progressivity without Foundations

We may proceed now to the other, the practico-normative, 'side' of the double void their book contains. It can be located by considering just where, in all this, there is a basis for any *particular* political direction or orientation. Laclau and Mouffe will occasionally make use of a term like 'progressive', and seemingly align themselves with it, as they do with the project of the 'left', or, at least, of 'a new left'.⁹³ But what can 'progressive' mean for them? Of course, we all do have some rough and ready idea of its meaning, but that is because it forms part of certain established discourses—socialist, liberal, humanist, rationalist, and so on—in the context of which one can, with a little thought and analysis, identify its specific sense or senses. But one is not entitled simply to presume upon these discourses and deploy meanings that are parasitic on them, if, as is the case with the authors, one has rejected the very assumptions there that underpin these meanings. It does not seem a lot to ask of a book so obsessed with the constitution and fluctuation of all symbolic values that it should interrogate, and reflect upon, the content of such 'uni-directional' normative terms as it is willing to inherit.

Three standard possible bases of a putatively 'progressive' (or left) orientation are not available to Laclau and Mouffe. One is the notion of objective interests, satisfaction of which might serve as an index of social progress. The exercise of attributing these to social agents has been dubbed 'arbitrary' and the notion itself dismissed as being 'eschatological'. A second is 'reference to any *general* principle or substratum of an anthropological nature'—the 'anthropological assumption of a "human nature"'—and by implication, therefore, any conception of essential human qualities and needs. As is to be expected in a post-structuralist terrain, this sort of foundation for a meaning of progressivity is given short shrift. "Man" is a discursively constructed subject position,' it is asserted, and the range of its possible articulations 'infinite'. The only argument, if such it can be called, for the alleged infinitude is that a human 'essence' would be 'presumably a gift from heaven', the authors carefully ignoring alternative sources closer to the ground.⁹⁴ Thirdly, a concept of exploitation or something similar, in which trans-historical principles of justice or fairness are either explicit or presupposed, is also not a viable option. True, Laclau and Mouffe express themselves in favour of normative analysis and discussion involving 'justice' amongst other things. But it is clear, when they do so, that uppermost in their minds is a current *political* consideration: that of putting a healthy distance between themselves and so-called

⁹¹ HSS, p. 4.

⁹² See text to n. 27 above.

⁹³ HSS, pp. 86, 87, 168, and pp. 5, 169, 174.

⁹⁴ HSS, pp. 152–3, 116–7 (and 181, 188). On this, see *Marx and Human Nature*, pp. 96–7.

'classism'.⁹⁵ A theoretical perspective in which 'the era of universal discourses' has 'come to an end', can have no more room for a trans-historical, universalist notion of justice than it can for the concept of a universal human nature—always assuming some minimal effort of intellectual consistency.⁹⁶ Where, then, is the basis, or a meaning, for a direction we could call progressive, where, indeed, the basis for a specific direction of any kind?

A merely apparent basis is tendered to us in the definitions the authors give of subordination and oppression. 'We shall understand by a *relation of subordination* that in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of another—an employee with respect to an employer, for example, or in certain forms of family organization the woman with respect to the man, and so on. We shall call *relations of oppression*, in contrast, those relations of subordination which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonisms.' So, the subordination of slaves becomes an oppression if and when the relationship to the slave-holder becomes an antagonistic one, and the subordination of women likewise when feminism, as a movement against it, has the same 'antagonizing' effect.⁹⁷ Commonsensical and obvious as these definitions may seem at first sight, they are in fact completely useless, only gaining what semblance of plausibility they have from the examples appended to them. For, one is 'subjected to the decisions', on a perfectly regular basis, of all sorts of people: as, for example, of bus conductors, with regard to deportment on the bus; of neighbours, in respect of the kinds of exterior and garden and car they oblige you to see; and—in case that should seem footling—of employees, if you have them and they belong to a strong trade union; of democratic majorities, if you are a member, say, of some radical rightist minority which does not believe in democracy.

Let us now put this observation together with the notion of 'antagonism', since it is that which transforms subordination into downright oppression. I shall leave aside the fact that Laclau and Mouffe have themselves earlier argued, or at least appeared to argue, that this notion defies precise definition, 'escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language';⁹⁸ because what it actually comes down to is that a relation of subordination becomes an antagonism and hence an oppression when the discourse (or discourses) by which it is constructed is (or are) challenged by other discourses, when there is 'a discursive "exterior" from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted'. The position of a slave is rendered an antagonistic one only in terms of a discursive formation, such as that of human rights, in which the subordination can be 'constructed as oppression'.⁹⁹ One may note

⁹⁵ HSS, pp. 28, 174–5. Is this particular 'ism' meant to join those of racism and sexism, so making up a noxious trinity? If so, one ought to note the asymmetry involved in that extension. Racists claim the superiority of their 'race', and sexists claim or just live by the domination of men. 'Classists', in Laclau and Mouffe's usage, are not those who defend the power and privilege of a dominant class but, on the contrary, those who oppose this class from the standpoint of the class it exploits—thereby turning the latter, apparently, into a 'privileged subject'.

⁹⁶ HSS, p. 3; and cf. what is said about natural rights at p. 184.

⁹⁷ HSS, pp. 153–4.

⁹⁸ HSS, p. 125.

⁹⁹ HSS, p. 154.

how this completely relativizes what counts as oppression, so that a young child, for instance, cut off from all social contact, beaten and tormented, bewildered and without the concepts of any other 'legitimacy' than that of her tormentors, could not be said to be oppressed. But equally to the point here are the cases of people who will, now, be oppressed: a householder sponsoring the discourse that no one is entitled to impose the sight of an unkempt garden on those around them, and unlucky, in this respect, in the neighbours he has; capitalists firm in the conviction that trade unions ought to be outlawed; and so on. Slavery, apartheid, concentration camps, are all instances of oppression (when they are) and so too are cases like these.

This inference from the definitions tendered is so outlandish as to give rise to the suggestion that it cannot be what Laclau and Mouffe really mean. There are two possible responses to that suggestion. One is that it is up to them to say what they mean and this is *what they say*, together with some straightforward, unstrained derivations from it. A second, more charitable, response would be: quite so—this is probably not what they really mean. But, then, what do they mean? In fact, their definitions and examples of subordination and oppression trade on unspoken assumptions concerning *illicit power* or inequalities which are unjust, 'brutal',¹⁰⁰ or unacceptable in some other way. Illicit, unjust, brutal or unacceptable, however, according to what standard? By locating the meaning of oppression within so many discourses of mere antagonism and thereby scattering it to the four winds, they have robbed themselves of the very criteria they need here, objectivist, universal, or just plain determinate. Either way, therefore, whichever response is preferred, we are left with a normative vacuum. If we take the authors at their word, their concepts of subordination and oppression can supply no useful index of what is progressive, since the breadth of the first and the fluidity implicit in the second combine to merge together the ugly realities of real human oppression with mere vexations, cases of special pleading, the defence, even, of exploitation and privilege. And if we do not take them at their word, we are forced back upon the principles of *other* theories than their own, principles they have summarily rejected. Untroubled by the consciousness of any problem, Laclau and Mouffe may be happy on occasion to speak of 'the *arbitrary character* of a whole set of relations of subordination' being '*laid bare*'.¹⁰¹ But the kinds of normative foundation which would give sense, and specific content, to this judgement are precisely the ones they have forsworn.

Arbitrariness

The true arbitrariness, therefore, is that which the discourse of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* itself establishes and merely another face of the omnipresent 'indeterminacy'. It is hardly to be wondered at that this ends up producing a theoretical construct which could support *any* kind of politics. The authors themselves *say*—over and again—radical democracy, a point I return to presently. But why it should be that and a broadly 'progressive' politics rather than something of a different,

¹⁰⁰ HSS, p. 131.

¹⁰¹ HSS, p. 158. Emphasis added.

and reactionary, stripe, why such-and-such a discursive or hegemonic practice and not some other should be deemed worthy of any commitment, is unexamined and, in terms of their own theoretical categories, unfounded. That, simply, is how it is: one choice—a leap?—amongst a multiplicity of divergent discourses. Symptomatic in this regard is a passage in which Laclau and Mouffe reflect upon the political significance of Sorel's ideas. The anti-economist and 'mythic' emphases there, they acknowledge, led some of his followers to nationalism and thence to fascism. But it was, they argue, only one possible direction. He was also influential in the formation of Gramsci's thought, and the very perception of social indeterminacy that was his strength, though it could lead some to fascism, could lead in other directions as well; such as Bolshevism which Sorel himself enthusiastically welcomed. This 'indeterminacy' of direction is clearly offered to us as a form of reassurance. What is more puzzling is why it should be seen as reassuring, about a given set of ideas, that it can take those who subscribe to them just about anywhere.¹⁰²

I shall bring the case I have sought to make about the double void here to a conclusion with one other observation about arbitrariness. It is not difficult to project how Laclau and Mouffe, who have turned a *certain* (bad) Althusserian practice against its progenitor, could themselves be outdone by someone impressed by their methods of advocacy. For, these methods amount, as I have said, to this, that resort to any unifying principle(s) of explanation can be criticized and dismissed as an 'essentialism'. But it is in the nature of writing intelligibly and to some purpose that one imposes or tries to discover *some* kind of order. And even they, though their prose is in places impenetrably opaque, and for all the fudging and self-contradiction they go in for, and despite the hollowness of what they finally have to offer, do this. Their first and their last thought mere disparateness, plurality, they need, no less than we, a framework, a degree of order, some fixity, and so they have them: everything is discourse and the discursive is everywhere, such determinations as there are deriving from that. Well, then? 'They failed to recognize that here, compromising their bold venture towards a logic of contingency for the non-sutured space of the social, was just one more essence; behind disparateness, Discourse: reductive abstract within the manifold concrete; even in its protestations of openness, a new form of monist closure'—and so forth. The game is easily played and easily turned. 'Discourse', too, can be written with a capital 'd'. A *total* nihilism, unqualified chaos of factors and types—discourses, yes, but also other things of an inexhaustible, ineffable diversity—presumably follows. One may hope, however, to be spared this last deconstructive step. No matter what theoretical form it might take, it would be, in practical, political terms, pointless. Laclau–Mouffian indeterminacy, though a little way short of such 'completion', already yields the unfounded—arbitrary—choice of more or less whatever politics you want.

¹⁰² HSS, p. 41.

‘Democratic Imaginary’

It remains only to make some comment on the sort of politics the authors themselves plump for, pluralist-democratic, beyond ‘classism’, and striking, withal, some of the all too familiar notes of the newly-virtuous ex-Marxist. On democracy, I shall confine myself to two points, otherwise just referring readers to Ellen Meiksins Wood’s excellent critique of the theme’s treatment in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.¹⁰³ I preface them, however, by saying that I take it as *axiomatic* that socialism must be democratic, and neither point represents any departure from that. There is much more that needs to be said about it, of course, but reaffirmation of the axiom is necessary here because, though one might not guess this from Laclau and Mouffe’s book, it has been a *fundamental* and a *common* conviction of *very many Marxists of the last two decades*, inside that broad (and pluralistic) intellectual current to which the two of them have now bid such a shoddy farewell. It could be so, moreover, because none of us had to start from scratch; we could build on the experience of earlier generations of Marxists, renowned thinkers and rank-and-file activists alike. We knew—what the authors have evidently forgotten—and sought to strengthen and extend, the principles and sources within the Marxist tradition which, against both the forms and the pretensions of ‘actually existing socialism’, spoke insistently of socialist democracy: in Marx, from his earliest philosophical writings to the Paris Commune; in Trotsky, from the pluralist arguments of *Our Political Tasks* to the fight against Stalinism; in Luxemburg—incandescent—practically everywhere; *and* in Lenin, and elsewhere besides. The cover of darkness, either intellectual or contemporary-political, was not a necessary excuse.

In any case, as to the first point, Laclau and Mouffe’s text is liberally sprinkled with phrases of the sort, ‘more free, democratic and egalitarian societies’, ‘the project of a radical democracy’, ‘a radical, libertarian and plural democracy’, ‘a pluralist and democratic conception’, ‘a radical and plural democracy’.¹⁰⁴ Given that they also make reference to socialism’s negative record in this regard, to the point of suggesting that democracy has hitherto been foreign to socialism, one might have expected some elaboration of their own ‘radical’ democratic conception: something about institutional forms and procedures, structures and levels of representation, constitutional norms, and so on. In fact, there is under this heading but a single sentence. ‘The forms of democracy should therefore also be plural, inasmuch as they have to be adapted to the social spaces in question—direct democracy cannot be the only organizational form, as it is only applicable to reduced social spaces.’¹⁰⁵ That is all. For the rest, this virtual absence of institutional specification meets a need for them that must be met for every rightward-moving Marxist or ex-Marxist current. This is the need, while rightly emphasizing some continuity of *forms* and *procedures* between existing and projected democracies, to maintain a critical silence about necessary discontinuities, so

¹⁰³ See *The Retreat from Class*, pp. 64–70.

¹⁰⁴ HSS, pp. 1, 3, 4, 166, 176 (and 152, 167, 189, 191).

¹⁰⁵ HSS, p. 185.

lending credence, if not outright allegiance, to the eternal legitimacy claimed by the existing *state*.

The second point is that for all their criticism of Marxism's multiple simplifications, the authors themselves present a breathtakingly simple account of modern history. It can be summed up in a phrase: the extension of the democratic idea (or 'democratic imaginary' in their own parlance).¹⁰⁶ Born of the French Revolution and initially bringing with it a civil and political equality, it was then extended to struggles and demands over economic relations—which is why socialism is 'a moment internal to the democratic revolution'¹⁰⁷—then by feminism to gender relations, and so on. Whether or not the accumulated wealth of Marxist historiography need have anything to fear from historical explanation such as this, I shall take the risk of labouring a point by saying that it does look, again, remarkably like an 'essentialist' origin or centre—and like the progressive unfolding of the Idea, at that.¹⁰⁸

As for the 'retreat from class', this is undoubtedly where the potential appeal of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* lies and it will be responsible for whatever political resonance the book turns out to have. A would-be philosophy for contemporary, or new, social movements and struggles, it is overtly addressed to the variety of their concerns, whether of gender or ethnicity, ecology, nuclear power, war and peace.¹⁰⁹ It is perhaps unnecessary to linger over one obvious consequence of the foregoing critique, if this has any force: namely, that those for whom such are, quite properly, serious concerns would be wise to look elsewhere for a philosophical charter or theoretical basis—whatever their judgement of the strengths, weaknesses and theoretical potentialities of Marxist thought. There is a difference between providing a theory of, and for, these movements and struggles, something of intellectual rigour and substance, and simply leaning on them to gain support for a flaccid pose. It will bear repeating on Marxism's behalf, in this matter and these times, that though it has always viewed both the working class and the abolition of capitalist exploitation as strategically decisive to the goal of human emancipation, it set its face also from the very beginning against all forms of oppression, sexual, national, racial and religious, as well as economic. In that sense, it *was* and *is*, proudly and self-consciously so in the persons of its most clear-sighted representatives, a discourse of tendentially *universal* scope.¹¹⁰ The actual record, whether of Marxist theories or Marxist organizations, has often fallen far short of the broad aspiration, though this *too* can be simplified, to the extent even of becoming a reactionary falsehood; and Marxism has always had, and still has, a lot to learn from other, non-Marxist theories and outlooks. But if it is not a closed or final truth and must know how to live with a political and intellectual pluralism, it is also the case that any putatively radical discourse that just turns its back on Marxism

¹⁰⁶ See, e.g., HSS, p. 159.

¹⁰⁷ HSS, p. 156.

¹⁰⁸ See HSS, pp. 152–66.

¹⁰⁹ HSS, pp. 1–2, 87.

¹¹⁰ See my 'The Controversy About Marx and Justice', in *Literature of Revolution*, particularly pp. 42–3—or *New Left Review* 150, pp. 75–6.

will quickly reach its limits, limits continually recreated by capitalism and class. Worse still, if it should bend towards an easy and fashionable anti-Marxism.

For Laclau and Mouffe today, it is no longer possible to regard the working class as having a special, or 'privileged', connection with the struggle for socialism. They do allow, it is true, that there is no incompatibility here. But a fundamental interest in socialism is not deducible from any economic position: 'there is no logical connection whatsoever between positions in the relations of production and the mentality of the producers.' Other 'democratic antagonisms', what is more, are '*on an equal footing*' with proletarian ones in this regard. '(P)olitical practice constructs the interests it represents.'¹¹¹ If the argument were only that workers are not automatically, and by virtue simply of being workers, socialists, the authors should have saved themselves the trouble of it. The suggestion, however, that there is no stronger relation between socialism and the working class than there is between socialism and anybody else is an idealism—or indeterminacy, if one so prefers—run wild. The cavalier disregard it displays, in the name of discourse, for material realities, relationships and needs may be gauged by trying out the same sort of argument, as Laclau and Mouffe conveniently do not, on another pertinent 'subject position'. Could it conceivably be supposed that feminist discourses and struggles have no more particular connection with one kind of social agent than with any other? Or do they, rather, especially concern and involve women, basic source both of their existence and of their vigour? And is this not in consequence of *objective* features of the economic and social position of women? Here as elsewhere, material structures and determinants shape and limit what political practice can 'construct'. If socialism is still envisaged, internal moment of the democratic revolution or not, then the specific relation, of exploitation, that is *definitive of what capitalism is* still has to be abolished; and it is a mere fancy to think that the social agent subordinated by this relation could be anything but central to the project of its abolition.

The Ex-Marxist's Conscience

I shall conclude by simply registering some of the more lamentable themes of this book from professed (and so-recently-Marxist) radicals; themes which give reason to ponder just how far 'post-' is from straightforward *anti*-Marxism. First, there is deployment of a concept of 'totalitarianism' in its familiar Cold War sense as denoting something common to both 'a politics of the "left"' and fascism. Second, so far as this relates to the left, its source is located not in the—complex (and dire)—social conditions and histories of the anti-capitalist revolutions of this century but—more simply—within Marxist doctrine as such: in the 'attempt to establish a definitive suture', 'a point of departure from which society can be *perfectly mastered and known*'.¹¹² Third, the evolution of Leninism into its authoritarian, that is, *Stalinist*, sequel is likewise put down to a theoretical source. How is that evolution to be accounted

¹¹¹ HSS, pp. 84–5, 87, 120.

¹¹² HSS, pp. 187–8. Emphasis added.

for? 'Quite simply (!), by the fact that the ontological privilege granted to the working class by Marxism was transferred from the social base to the political leadership of the mass movement.'¹¹³ Old and well-known images of Marxism and Leninism: historical materialism, or just explanation, discarded, then, for what looks uncannily like common-or-garden anti-communism. Fourth, Laclau and Mouffé go so far as to conflate the whole of Marxism with its Stalinist, or authoritarian, forms by writing sometimes as though democracy was just *external* to it. They say at one point, for example: 'It is necessary to break with the view that democratic tasks are bonded to a bourgeois stage—only then will the obstacle preventing a permanent articulation between socialism and democracy be eliminated.'¹¹⁴ The statement exploits a critical ambiguity in the expression 'democratic tasks', but let this pass. As if a whole Marxist tradition itself has not always rejected the view and the bond that the authors now deem it necessary to break with. This is, well and truly, the new-found virtue of the convert.

Fifthly, finally, and by contrast with these prejudicial attitudes to Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe give us the warmest possible view of liberalism. 'It is not liberalism as such,' they aver, 'which should be called into question, for as an ethical principle which defends the liberty of the individual to fulfil his or her human capacities, it is more valid today than ever.'¹¹⁵ Let us just accept, as par for the course here, the sudden appearance of 'human capacities'. I will even affirm a certain, *partial* agreement with the sentiment expressed, not being one of those Marxists for whom there is a total gulf between Marxism and liberalism, and no continuity of common values at all. But, in its overall context, the above accolade is a disgrace. Liberalism, not the suffering, squalor and misery of actual, liberal, capitalisms, but the fulfilment of human capacities. And one, Karl Marx: did he not also have something to say about the realization of the individual's human capacities?

If this is what the authors have taken with them from the school of Marxism, one can only wonder what the next stop on their itinerary might be.

¹¹³ HSS, p. 56; cf. p. 59.

¹¹⁴ HSS, p. 58; and see also what is said about the 'communist militant' at p. 55 and about 'democratic rights and freedoms' at pp. 61–2.

¹¹⁵ HSS, p. 184.