

Interrogating post-Marxism: Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault, and Žižek

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ABSTRACT

According to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, our postmodern era and its correlate political problematic requires a shift in positing socialist strategy. Their wager is that by shifting away from essentialist Marxism, and towards a post-Marxist theory of hegemony which they adapt from Gramsci, the analytic for overturning contemporary hegemony will take the form of a radical democratic politics. My contention is that in shifting away from essentialist Marxism through their post-structuralist deconstructive stance, Laclau and Mouffe overstep and make their analytic for socialist strategy impotent. In order to show where Laclau and Mouffe have gone wrong I use primarily the work of Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek in order to demonstrate how a post-structuralist theory of ideology need not be a post-Marxist theory of ideology.

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Chapter 1

Capitalism Disavowed

In Slavoj Žižek's article in the *London Review of Books*, "Resistance is Surrender" he sets out the parameters for the options available to the Left today. He argues, "[t]oday's Left reacts in a wide variety of ways to the hegemony of global capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy" (Žižek 2007). These ways include many recognitions of the futility of the struggle against hegemony at present, and several maneuvers to avoid confronting concentrated power. Among these are: reformism, or resistance from the 'interstices', or bombarding the state with infinite demands. Other positions do not view the struggle as futile, and instead try refocusing the field of struggle on every day practices, or enacting the determinate negation of capitalism, or taking "the 'postmodern' route, shifting the accent from anti-capitalist struggle to the multiple forms of politico-ideological struggle for hegemony, emphasising the importance of discursive re-articulation" (Žižek 2007). For Žižek, all "these positions are not presented as a way of avoiding some 'true' radical Left politics – what they are trying to get around is, indeed, the lack of such a position" (Žižek 2007). This last attempt, Ernesto Laclau's 'postmodern' route is the one which will be analyzed here.

The focus of the present writing is an interrogation of the postmodern shift from class struggle to the multiplicity of ideological struggles (race, gender, etc.) for hegemonic space, using Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as its exemplar. The question then to be asked is, *how* is post-Marxism and radical democracy—as terms that embody this shift—an effort to cover up the lack of such a position? The answer is found in Laclau's presentation of his theory of hegemony. This writing seeks to clarify exactly where Laclau has gone wrong, what from a theory of hegemony should be salvaged, and what should be left behind. In order to

do this, Laclau's work will be positioned primarily against the work of Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek, to flesh out exactly what would qualify simultaneously as both a productive theory of ideology and, not a direction towards a hegemonic 'true' radical Left politics in the postmodern era, but a direction which aims at addressing the source of this 'lack' of a position. The inquiry to be undertaken is then, to what extent can a supplementation of the favorable aspects of Foucault's theory of *discourse* and Žižek's theory of *ideology* serve to bring a concrete critical position to Laclau's own theory?

My position is that there are some aspects of Laclau's axiomatic ontology which are adequate to posit a direction for socialist strategy today, but that there are also clear failures which may or may not be inherent to the theory. It is the purpose of this thesis to see if the necessary supplementation to the theory undermines key tenets of the theory, or whether they are compatible. Politically, this thesis is in an effort to better apprehend the current problematic of how to strategize a socialist movement today ideologically in the countries in the advanced phases of capitalism and liberal democracy. What I will set out to prove is that Laclau's theory of hegemony is insufficient, in that it does not politicize the economy, but that if one can reassert the importance of economic determination using that theory, one will have a view to achieving a truly radical democracy with the proper historical trajectory in mind. Thus the two main interrelated aspects to be addressed are *political* (radical democracy/post-Marxism) as well as *theoretical* (theory of hegemony/Discourse Theory). In order to set up these successive critiques I think it first necessary to flesh out a sufficient background to the theory of hegemony. This will take the form of: moving beyond the current literature, giving the historical background which a theory of hegemony disavows, and finding the direction the paper takes as a result of these factors.

Theoretical Deadlock

Why then use Foucault and Žižek to critique Laclau in a direction that advocates socialist strategy? In short, because these author's theories have tenets which allows for a progression beyond entrenched positions in theory. In Beverly Best's "Strangers in the Night" she identifies an "almost conventionalized opposition " between Marxist and Post-Marxist positions, with the concern that a reification of dichotomies associated with each position has generally led to "instances of stagnation in social/political/cultural theory" (Best 1999 p. 1). Best has tried to breach the conceptual impasse which has stemmed from this deadlock between Marxist and post-Marxist positions, articulating a conjunction of Laclau and Fredric Jameson. But still, this impasse seems to persist. Indeed, we find today that contemporary Marxists will accept many of the terms on which Laclau distances himself from traditional Marxism, accepting the general necessity of moving beyond orthodox essentialist Marxism. However I claim they refuse the term 'post-Marxism' because of this shift to the postmodern relativity of ideological struggles, the shift away from the primacy of class struggle (Eagleton 2007 p. 219). This refusal, or at least warranted hesitation, can be best exemplified by attitudes towards Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and Laclau's subsequent writings more broadly. I would argue here that this anxious posture by Marxists is due primarily to the aforementioned postmodern shift to the contingent struggle for hegemony, which I claim is a result of Laclau's disavowal of the "'necessary' relation between forms of consciousness and social reality"—as this dissolves any effort to designate agents of struggle (Eagleton 2007 p. 220). Thus the production of the position of post-Marxism should be thought of as what Fredric Jameson refers to as the symptomatology of the new mode of production--that is, it can only be understood as situated in the society of Late capitalism.

Jules Townshend maps out Laclau and Mouffe's efforts since and including *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as comprising two different moves via Gramsci, a *war of manoeuvre* and a *war of position*. Laclau and Mouffe's war of manoeuvre is seen at the attempted "demolition of the 'essentialist' core of Marxism" while the war of position consists of building up intellectual allies and supporters, a more "dialogic approach" (Townshend 2004 p. 275). The demolition of the essentialist core of Marxism is best seen through the somewhat polemical exchange between Norman Geras and Laclau and Mouffe. I take this exchange to be the primary exemplar of the deadlock between Marxist and post-Marxist positions, so it is worthwhile examining on what points the difference lies. Geras criticizes *Hegemony* on three related levels, the methodological, ontological, and the normative. Methodologically, he "stresse[s] explanatory variation in Marxism from determination to relative autonomy", asserting that "production and class relations could be 'primary' explaining a 'great deal'" (Townshend 2004 p. 272). Ontologically he rejects their denial of the discursive/non-discursive dichotomy, arguing that they elide the distinction between thought and material reality, which simultaneously denies the existence of any objective reality to the effect that there can be no check on the truth of discourses. Normatively, he argues that with the rejection of 'objective interests', Laclau and Mouffe cannot identify useful criteria for "identifying and measuring exploitation and oppression", hence this sort of relational anti-essentialism "could support any kind of politics" (Townshend 2004 p. 273).

In "Post-Marxism without Apologies", Laclau and Mouffe respond on the same three levels. Methodologically, they assert the logical incompatibility of determination and autonomy, and note that 'relative autonomy' simply manifests the limit of this incompatibility. Ontologically they emphasize that the truth or meaning of an object can *only* be possible in a discursive context, and reassert that they are not naïve enough to believe that objects exist only

within discourse (using here Heidegger's *being*, Derrida's *text*, and Wittgenstein's *language games*). Normatively, they assert that objective interests can only be discursively construed, but that one can prefer one type of society over another pragmatically, "preferring 'for a variety of reasons' the 'verisimilitude' of a particular alternative that is open to debate" (Townshend 2004 p. 273). As a result of this exchange, certain criticisms were not fully exercised by Laclau, hence there exists an unchallenged remainder. Townshend asserts that Laclau and Mouffe could have been more thorough, that they did not fully exercise Geras' claim on the respective three levels. Methodologically "there could be some form of explanatory primacy of material factors" (Townshend 2004 p. 274). Ontologically, Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on the discursive nature of truth production did not answer Geras' effort to get at the testing of "*explanation and causality* that appeals to or aspires to objectivity" (Townshend 2004 p. 274). Normatively, their deconstruction of essentialism does not mean that we cannot apply an uncertain criticism to foundationalism, that essentialist claims can "be grounded in 'verisimilitude' too" (Townshend 2004 p. 274).

Laclau and Mouffe's war of position takes a less polemical tone, and a more productive dialogic one, exemplified best through Butler, Laclau, and Žižek's collection of dialogical essays, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Here, the atmosphere is one in which the theoretical affinities of post-Marxism are stronger between the three, and the primary goal is to enhance the theoretical rigor of their respective political projects. Some of Žižek's primary criticisms of Laclau are on the historical ramifications of anti-essentialism, as well as the primary structuring effects of capitalism; the two being seen as coextensive with a view to socialist strategy. Žižek argues that,

Now we've reached the state that basically we've acknowledged everything is contingent, everything is historicist, historicized, but this very fact brings us to some kind of—how should I put it—eternal present of relativization of everything where the proper historical tension is lost—which is why—in order to continue their struggle, [Laclau and Butler] have to exaggerate all the time – essentialism is not yet dead, it's still here, patriarchal authority is still here – and so on and so on, only in this way can they avoid asking the very simple question – what if their historicism (in the sense of for Judith Butler every sexual identity is a historical contingent product, for Ernesto Laclau every political identity is a contingent discursive product)... to ask the question, but what are the specific historical conditions of this very view of radical contingent historicism? (Žižek 2008).

This sort of view of universal history is strictly correlative to capitalism's production of the multiplicity of subject positions from which Laclau founds his radical democratic project. Thusly for Žižek, Laclau and Butler's radical contingent historicism must be seen as a product of a new mode of production. This new 'Postmodern politics'—while it “repoliticizes” a series of domains previously considered ‘apolitical’ or ‘private’; the fact remains, [...], that it does *not* in fact repoliticize capitalism, because *the very notion and form of the ‘political’ within which it operates is grounded in the ‘depoliticization’ of the economy*” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 98).

The methodological, ontological, and normative issues which the surrounding literature raises are, in my view, under-theorized. Whether it's Jason Glynos and Jacob Torfing works from the 'Essex School', or Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler's critiques and rebuttals in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*—the literature surrounding *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and subsequent publications has been either what Townshend refers to as the anti-

essentialist ‘war of manouevre’ or the dialogic theoretical/political ‘war of position’. As noted above, one of Geras’ claims is that Laclau and Mouffe inadequately deal with the relation between thought and social reality, subsuming both under the discursive field. Terry Eagleton shares this same criticism, claiming that they inappropriately deviate from Foucault’s theory of discourse, resulting in the inability to ask where social ideas come from. This claim has not been thoroughly unpacked in relation to the work of Foucault and Laclau. This is then one critique of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. Another critique will deal with Laclau’s leveling of the field of ideological struggle, attaching no ‘necessary’ relation between social actors and the systemic effects of capitalism. My response to this will be to see to what extent Laclau’s own theory, pushed in new directions by Žižek, can provide a critical theory which maintains the historical tension and allows for the primacy of class struggle. My position will then be an original sort of combination—to see the ramifications of Laclau’s deviation from Foucauldian discourse; and to see how Žižek has supplemented Laclau’s own theory of hegemony to great effect (due to a deeper attachment to Lacanian categories); and the productiveness of these two critiques in fostering a deeper historical sense of socialist strategy at the level of ideology. The purpose of the following chapters will be to flesh out what sort of deeper understanding of the deficiencies and prospects of Laclau and Mouffe’s position can be had, and what direction is to be taken for a theory of ideology that is properly historically grounded. This will be done through axiomatic readings of both Foucault’s own theory of discourse, as well as Žižek’s theory of ideology. Before developing these arguments however, I think it necessary to examine exactly what sort of historical trajectory surrounds Laclau’s work. We can think of the production of the *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* through a series of inter-related developments.

Safeguarding Orthodoxy

In Ernesto Laclau's short article, "The Philosophical Roots of Discourse Theory", he asserts that Discourse Theory (as the philosophical-ontological base for a theory of hegemony from which Laclau's political stance is derived from) has come out of three philosophical developments with one thing in common. Analytical philosophy, phenomenology, and structuralism had as their object the referent, the phenomenon, and the sign. In taking these respective objects, these traditions all had "an initial illusion of immediacy, of a direct access to things as they are in themselves", but through their development, these illusions had 'dissolved', to the point where "discursive mediations [ceased] to be merely derivative and became constitutive" (Laclau 2001 p. 1).

Within Discourse Theory, the task is to accurately describe objects with a new awareness of the nature of the discursive constitution of objects, whether partial or total. Laclau's theory of discourse has passed through three developments, exemplified with Wittgenstein (analytic philosophy), Heidegger (phenomenology), and Barthes, Derrida and Lacan (post-structuralist critique of the sign), with the latter critique of the sign as that which Laclau and Mouffe identify as the primary foundation for their theory of hegemony. The main tenets of this critique are thus constitutive of Discourse Theory as "a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated" (Torfing 1999 p. 85). This definition is arrived at through two related movements, first through the deconstruction of structure, and secondly through the deconstruction of 'atomized social elements'. That is, firstly, we can no longer talk about determination—"in the absence of a complete totalization a structure exists only as a field of signification within which an ambiguous and temporary order is established by a multiplicity of mutually substituting centres" (Torfing 1999 p. 86). Secondly, the same principle of

deconstruction is applied to the atomization of social elements; there can be no totalization by which the field of identity is exhausted. This is to say, both the character of ‘structure’ and the character of atomized social elements like the ‘subject’ or ‘identity’ are never eternally fixed, and always in play.

While Laclau and Mouffe’s philosophical underpinnings certainly seem to offer a theory which has no determinate political option, they explicitly claim that their politics is one of radical democracy, thus the move from Marxism proper to post-Marxism. In Laclau and Mouffe's response to Geras' criticism of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* they rearticulate their historical understanding of the political coordinates of their post-Marxist intervention. This history includes Classical Marxism—grounding strategy in the working class, the recognition of the contingency of this claim, and efforts to remedy. They note three types of responses to the Second International classic Marxism,

the *Orthodox Marxists* affirmed that the tendencies of capitalism which were at odds with the originary Marxist predictions were transitory, and that the postulated general line of capitalist development would eventually assert itself, the *Revisionists* argued that, on the contrary, those tendencies were permanent and that Social Democrats should therefore cease to organize as a revolutionary party and become a party of social reforms; finally *revolutionary syndicalism*, though sharing the reformist interpretation of the evolution of capitalism, attempted to reaffirm the radical perspective on the basis of a revolutionary reconstruction of class around the myth of the general strike (Laclau and Mouffe 1987 p. 98).

This predicament of the “uneven and combined development” of capitalism forced agents to assume tasks more in the realm of hegemony than those of the traditional working class. Thusly,

for Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci's concept of hegemony led Marxism away from essentialism and into 'language games' and the 'logic of the signifier'. Due to Communist political orthodoxy and intellectual repression, the transition to post-Marxism had to look elsewhere for the intellectual currents from which to strategize. The problem here is that in looking outside that tradition they are forced to draw on currents rooted in Late capitalism. In responding to problems within traditional Marxism, with a view to strategy from discursively constructed democratic subject positions, they miss the point. The point is that (in thinking about the two mass democratic projects of modernity) both the political imaginaries of the Communist Party and the nation-state system fell prey to contradictions inherent to the economic and social conditions of modernity. That, even if socialist strategy today is going to be an ideological one, without the use of essentializing discourse, it still has to deal with contradictions intrinsic to that discourse. In this respect Susan Buck-Morss has it right, "If the era of the Cold War is over, it is perhaps less because one side has "won" than because the legitimation of each political discourse found itself fundamentally challenged by material developments themselves" (Buck-Morss 2002 p. 39). Indeed, while Laclau and Mouffe assert the rule for intellectual work as an "obstinate rigour" which "leaves no space for sleights of hand that seek only to safeguard an obsolete orthodoxy" they fall prey to the alternative, that is, safeguarding "that ideology known as (post-)structuralism" (Laclau and Mouffe 1987 p. 79; Eagleton 2007 p. 219). Here we can think also of Terry Eagleton's insights into the political ramifications of deconstruction, that Laclau and Mouffe's vehement anti-essentialism "provides you with all the risks of a radical politics while cancelling the subject who might be summoned to become an agent of them" (Eagleton 1981 p. 485). The anti-essentialist contingent historicism which Laclau and Mouffe deploy in strategizing then lacks its necessary correlative, the insight of a re-construction of discursive

arrangements. The *logic of equivalence* speaks to the hegemonic construction of identity, but it lacks the adequate concreteness with which to understand forward momentum towards socialist ends, which mediations are necessary, and which should be bracketed aside.

Positing the Continuous

In putting the post in post-Marxism Laclau and Mouffe fall prey to that which follows with a ‘break’ from capitalism rather than the continuities which persist in it. Laclau and Mouffe refer to the “structural transformations of capitalism that have led to the decline of the classical working class in the post-industrial countries” and the “increasingly profound penetration of capitalist relations of production in areas of social life” as the most important of the historical transformations which guide their position (Laclau and Mouffe 1987 p. 80). However, we can think of two important and overlapping descriptions of the postmodern period—David Harvey’s and Frederic Jameson’s. Both descriptions treat the term ‘post-industrial’ as invalid, in favor of a more continuous approach to the transition of capitalism from the ‘modern’ to ‘postmodern’ periods.

Firstly, I believe it is worth enumerating David Harvey’s points on the descriptive features of capitalism (informed by Marx) which can be seen as continuous from the post-war period through today. While these features may be descriptive of other forms of political hegemony, the emphasis here is on the underlying continuity of the features of capitalism which are unchanging in the face of the surface-level change in the mode of production in the transition from modernity to postmodernity.

- 1) “Capitalism is growth-oriented. A steady rate of growth is essential for the health of a capitalist economic system, since it is only through growth that profits can be assured and the accumulation of capital to be sustained. This implies that capitalism has to

- prepare the ground for, and actually achieve an expansion of, output and growth in real values, no matter what the social, political, geopolitical, or ecological consequences.”
- 2) “Growth in real values rests on the exploitation of living labor production. [...] This implies that labour control, both in production and in the market place, is vital for the perpetuation of capitalism.”
 - 3) “Capitalism is necessarily technologically and organizationally dynamic.[...] [O]rganization and technological change plays a key role in modifying the dynamics of class struggle, waged from both sides, in the realm of labour markets and labour control.[...] Furthermore, if labour control is fundamental to the production of profits and becomes a broader issue for the mode of regulation, so technological and organizational innovation in the regulatory system [...] becomes crucial to the perpetuation of capitalism” (Harvey 1989 p. 180).

Thus it can be seen that the continuity between the period in which traditional Marxist analysis had best described, and the postmodern (post-1973) period in which Laclau and Mouffe have produced their work, rests on dynamic responses to the question of “how the overaccumulation tendency can be expressed, contained, absorbed, or managed in ways that do not threaten the capitalist social order” (Harvey 1989 p. 181). If this is where the continuity lies, wherein does the discontinuity present itself? For Harvey, the transition from Fordism to Flexible Accumulation properly achieved in 1973 marks the break, not between industrial and post-industrial society, but between the modern and postmodern periods. The postmodern period does not mean the end of industrial forms of production. Hence this shift is thought of through a duality not necessarily as infrastructure-superstructure but rather production-consumption. That

is, on the production side, the limits of Fordism are made manifest, and more flexible labour processes, markets, products and consumption patterns, sectors of consumption, financial services and markets combined with higher rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation emerge. The correlative consumption is marked by an aesthetic instability, which “celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and commodification of cultural forms”, in short, planned obsolescence (Harvey 1989 p.156).

Fredric Jameson, in a similar vein, finds the economic and cultural preparations of the postmodern period as chronologically differentiated. The economic preparations of postmodernism began in the 1950’s, while the “psychic habitus of the new age” demands the “absolute break... achieved more properly in the 1960’s” (Jameson 1991 p. xx). The crystallization of these two levels, of the economic system and the cultural ‘structure of feeling’ is thus somehow sedimented in 1973, with the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, the end of wars of national liberation, and the beginning of the end of traditional communism. The transition from modernism to postmodernism then can only be understood for Jameson through a series of epicycles, economic, cultural, and their combination. That is, “people become aware of the dynamics of some new system in which they themselves are seized only later on and gradually. The dawning collective consciousness of a new system is not exactly the same as the coming into being of fresh cultural forms of expression” (Jameson 1991 p. xix). Hence the preconditions for the new cultural ‘structural of feeling’ “pre-exist their moment of combination and crystallization into a relatively hegemonic style”, a prehistory chronologically differentiated from the economic one (Jameson 1991 p. xix).

So here we can understand properly the position of Laclau and Mouffe in producing a work in which the traditional working class of modern, or even Fordist periodization, is no

longer viable. However, the celebration of the postmodern late twentieth century as a more diversified and democratic opportunity for emancipatory discourse involves a misrecognition of the continuities which persist—the problem of overaccumulation, the containment and absorption of the contradictions of capitalism, and the persistence of that vampire which “always rises up again after being stabbed to death” (Žižek 2007). So what is the appropriate theory of ideology to match this postmodern period?

Ideology in the Postmodern

In Jason Glynos’ “The Grip of Ideology” he rearticulates what both Žižek and Laclau take as their starting point in contemporary times, notably, the end of ideology thesis. He argues that, post-1989, we must accept the prevalence of the Fukuyama dream of the end of history, the end of ideology (Glynos 2001 p.193). There are two paths we can take from this position, either accept the thesis, and attempt to negotiate political positions from within a liberal-democratic capitalist order, or on the other hand, view this end of ideology as the example *par excellence* of the strength of ideology today. From this latter position we can generate vulgarly two more positions, that of the more modern attribution of this effect to a false consciousness with an inherent reference to objective truth, or the only critical position really available to us today, that of unmasking reality as a historically contingent fiction, and to “recognize that Real in what appears to be a mere symbolic fiction” (Vighi and Feldner 2007 p. 142). In the first occasion we can simply think of Marx’s quote in *Capital*, ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’, which rests upon a “kind of basic, constitutive naivety” (Marx and McLellan 1999 p. 45; Žižek 1989 p. 28). Today, however, the strength of the critique of ideology (as a concept) is to be found as a result of “philosophy’s ‘linguistic turn’ in the third quarter of the twentieth century” after which we can no longer prop up ideology against “a true objective knowledge—a knowledge that can

be grasped by means of a seemingly transparent linguistic medium” (Glynos 2001 p. 193). This point is most notably evaluated in reference to Foucault’s abandoning of the concept of ideology, which for him always had to stand opposite something supposed to count as ‘truth’ (Foucault 2000 p. 119). The alternative for Foucault was to speak rather of ‘discourse’ and ‘truth regimes’, an alternative developed further but also deviated from by the Discourse Theory of Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Foucault 2000 p. 132). But Foucault’s was not the only position which shared this impetus away from objective truth “Wittgensteinian language games, Heideggerian post-phenomenological hermeneutics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, [and] Derridean deconstruction [...] have all in their way contributed to today’s so-called era of ‘post-foundationalism’” and it was these developments which informed Laclau and Mouffe’s strategizing (Glynos 2001 p. 193).

Therefore, the category of misrecognition or false or distorted consciousness cannot be abandoned for Laclau however. In one sense it can, the one that relies on objective truth as within human reach. But, abandoning the concept in itself is “not an option for theories that adopt a critical perspective on society” (Cooke 2006 p. 8). For Laclau, false consciousness is the belief that historically concrete representations can constitute fully the empty signifiers to which they refer. For Laclau, this is equivalent to essentialism and naturalizing of particular historical arrangements, the suturing of notions of ‘freedom’ or ‘justice’ to particular objects. Thus,

We cannot do without the concept of misrecognition, precisely because the very assertion that the ‘identity and homogeneity of social agents is an illusion’ cannot be formulated without introducing the category of misrecognition. The critique of the ‘naturalization of meaning’ and the ‘essentialization of the social’ is a critique of the misrecognition of their true character. Without this premise, any deconstruction would be meaningless

(Glynos 2001 p. 196).

Laclau shifts the emphasis from what might be an Adorno-style critique (reliance on an epistemological arrogance in which a privileged view point is necessary) to an ontological formal approach. That is to say, Laclau moves from the risk of an ‘ethical authoritarianism’ in which true consciousness is available only to the theorist, to a view in which true consciousness is ideological mystification at its best; and within Laclau’s particular post-structuralist ontology, any effort to fully constitute ‘truth’ is subject to deconstruction. Both Laclau and Žižek use this formal approach, which “is axiomatic in the sense that it is not susceptible to empirical proof [...] and can only be judged on the basis of its theoretical and analytical productiveness” (Glynos 2001 p. 195).

The next step then in offering a productive post-structuralist critique of ideology is in its application. If misrecognition can indeed be identified without recourse to an objective truth, what sort of behavioral change in the action of the subject can be seen when the ‘actual’ scene of power is revealed? In other words, “why is it that patterns of (oppressive) behavior persist even when the contingency that underlies sedimented power relations has been pointed out” (Glynos 2001 p. 199). For Žižek, this problematic has the structure of a fetishistic disavowal. Deepening the Marxian formulation of “they do not know it, but they are doing it”, Žižek posits “they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it” (Žižek 1989 p. 33). That is to say, if the misrecognition is on the side of knowledge (they know not what they do), we cannot explain why social agents act or fail to act in certain ways which we would have suspected them to. On the other hand, if the misrecognition is on the side of action (they know what they are doing, and do it anyway), the story becomes much more interesting. In the same way that for Laclau the distortion is primary, in Žižek’s Lacanian vein, fantasy, the distortion is

what structures our very social reality.

Let us take for example Astra Taylor's film *Examined Life*. In it we see Žižek articulating this very ideological problematic at a garbage disposal site. For Žižek, this location is key to understanding the fantasy that structures our social reality itself. It opens with Žižek claiming "this is where we should start to feel at home"... "part of our very perception of reality is that *this* [trash] disappears from our world" (Taylor 2008). Thus the only way to confront ecological catastrophe (as well as the proliferation of other catastrophes that cannot be put in check within a capitalist system) is through the shift of this very social reality itself, through traversing the fantasy. Again here we must emphasize again that the trick is not to refer to some truth that will alter the coordinates of our reality, for a Lacanian a reference to the *Real* simply means pure meaningless fiction, as opposed to the symbolic structures of meaning which govern our reality itself. The trick is rather to articulate struggle on this ideological level itself.

Moving Beyond the Deadlock

The conceptual impasse which Best notes above between Marxism and post-Marxism is not an arbitrary one. The position of this paper is that the task is to, as she notes, move beyond it. But while Best's work emphasizes the affinities and distinctions between the two in order to move beyond, this work will take the dialog between such positions and attempt to remedy Laclau's post-Marxist theory in a way which takes Geras' criticisms with a large grain of salt. I will not engage directly with Geras or orthodox Marxism but rather show how Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist critique need not be as strategically ineffective as it now appears in distancing itself from the former—that a *post-structuralist strategy need not be a post-Marxist strategy*. The criticisms will not be predicated solely upon the Marxist tradition, but will also rely on a post-structuralist vein, using both Žižek and Foucault. This is an effort to show that one

does not have to subscribe exclusively to one or the other, the Marxist tradition, or a post-structuralist critique, but that an articulation can be made with regards to socialist strategy today necessarily employing both in order to comprehend the direction the Left must take today in constructing a hegemonic politics which is properly historically grounded. What is the proper historical grounding then? When Laclau and Mouffe refer to post-industrial society as the necessary break with the continuity of capitalism, they misstep. Post-Marxism is an effort to respond to this break, linking a post-structuralist theory to the type of subject positions which are produced in this period—through the equation of the logic of identity formation to the logic of the discursive level. However, post-structuralism does not necessitate this link with the post-industrial. If we are to value the insights of post-structuralism for political analysis, the object must be to attempt this analysis without losing the benefits of the categories of traditional Marxist analysis—without losing sight of the historical processes—the continuities of capitalism emphasized by Jameson and Harvey—the continuities which prompted Laclau and Mouffe’s move away from essentialism in the first place. Hence we can say that with greater attention to these continuities, the Marxist critique of Laclau today should be, ‘we too want radical democracy, but we can show you how to do it better’.

Chapter 2

Radical Contingent Historicism

In order to flesh out the problematic of Laclau's theory of hegemony we must roughly sketch out a schematic for the transformation of the concept of the critique of ideology. In the first case—as with “classical Marxism”—we have the notion of ideology which is able to be criticized predicated upon a truth external to that ideology (Laclau, 1996). If we take this through Foucault's theory of discourse, we have a notion of discourse which is supposed to appear in its pure description, immanent to that positivity without recourse any external truth. But the problem with this, and—exactly what has led Laclau to call this point the ‘death of ideology’-- is that, with Foucault, “the frontier dividing the ideological from the non ideological is blurred, and as a result, there is an inflation of the concept of ideology which loses all analytical precision” (Laclau 1996 p. 2). For Laclau, two things result from this death, the simultaneous historical incommensurability and the structural equalization of discourses, and the loss of meaning for terms such as misrecognition, or distortion. But can we not say the same thing about Laclau's own theory of ideology, *his* discourse theory? Terry Eagleton claims that Laclau's “category of discourse is inflated to the point where it imperializes the whole world, eliding the distinction between thought and materiality. The effect of this is to undercut the critique of ideology –for if ideas and material reality are given indissolubly together, there can be no question of asking where social ideas actually hail from” (Eagleton 2007 p. 219). So here we have similar criticisms of the inflation of ideology, and inflation of discourse, respectively. But, I think that neither of these criticisms get at exactly what is at stake. We must continue through the transformation of the critique of ideology before we can flesh this problematic out, however.

Laclau's move away from Foucault, and from the 'death of ideology', to his own 'resurrection' of the critique, involves the assertion that distortion is *constitutive of ideology*. "The issue then is not how to eliminate terms such as illusion and misrecognition, but how to redraw their boundaries through an articulation to a new ontology—an ontology which involves positing the socio-symbolic order as lacking" (Glynos 2001 p. 196). The opposition is then not the traditional one, which might be read as the primary meaning and its distortion by power interests, but "between substance and non-substance" (Glynos 2001 p. 197). "In other words, epistemological incapacity is transformed into the positive ontological conditions of politics and political subjectivity" (Glynos 2001 p. 197). So here we can see that for Laclau, the necessary move from Foucault to avoid this sort of postmodern relativity of positions in which there is *only distortion*, where the concept of distortion is meaningless because of the lack of any external accessible truth, is to shift the ontological terrain. So why is it, that Eagleton claims that this move "undercuts the critique of ideology"? And why is it, similarly, that Laclau sees Foucault's position as unable to critique ideology? The reasons are clearly different. It seems that Eagleton is criticizing Laclau for the violence his new ontology does to the understanding of thought, ridding itself of the historical grounds of its own production. Laclau's criticism is that Foucault's discourse offers no critical position, as the relativization of discourses involves no critique of distortion.

In this chapter I will argue that the non-requisite theoretical moves which Laclau takes in order to shift to this new radical-contingent-historicist ontology both damage the critique of ideology from a socialist standpoint—as well as lack a critically aware position of enunciation. This is to say that the move from one ontology to the next is analytically valuable, but where Laclau then went from that intervention is ill conceived. In order to show how this intervention is

mistaken I will proceed through a number of criticisms of aspects of Laclau's theory which I take to be analytically unproductive. With this in mind, I believe it is necessary to proceed through a number of issues that can be taken up with regards to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. The result of these discussions will hopefully lead to a fuller understanding of what might be the necessary analytic and critique of ideology for positing socialist strategy today. My position is that without finding theoretical solutions to these particular issues, *Hegemony* offers little in the way of theoretical tools or direction for socialist strategy. These issues will be addressed according to the following structure:

- I) Laclau's critique of Foucault as the 'death of ideology' can be better taken up by Žižek. In Žižek's discussion of Foucault's historicism, he articulates that instead, one should focus on *historicity* (Žižek 2007).
- II) Terry Eagleton's critique of Laclau is that Laclau and Mouffe inappropriately deviate from Foucault in no longer maintaining his distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive, eliding the distinction between thought and material reality (Eagleton 2007 p.219).
- III) In Etienne Balibar's *Politics and the Other Scene*, he argues that considering every identity as a construct in the same general sense necessitates a leveling of the variable historical processes. If Foucault can be criticized for the relativization of discourse, then Laclau can be criticized for the universal historicizing of the discursive articulation which constitutes all identity, and leads to its relativization (Balibar 2002 p. 155).
- IV) Resurrecting the critique of ideology, Laclau has used post-structuralism in order to posit a new ontology which resuscitates the critique of ideology today. But

from what critical position does one speak, if distortion is constitutive and the ‘constitutive outside’ is not within the socio-symbolic order? Is Laclau’s radical democratic project which wants to institutionalize this ontology politically viable, or should we follow Žižek in asserting that there the theory is tied to its politics by a ‘half-acknowledged umbilical cord’ (Žižek 1989 p.89)?

On Historicity

Laclau calls Foucault’s theoretical move the ‘death of ideology’—but I think we can say that Laclau falls prey to some of the same problems which he has criticized Foucault for. In this way, I would like to address a problem central to both Laclau’s theory of hegemony, as well as Foucault’s theory of power. That is, Laclau falls prey to the same historicist tendencies which Foucault does. One can see the surface level problem with this assertion. We could say that surely Laclau and Mouffe do not fall prey to historicism, isn’t the whole point of his anti-essentialist deconstruction to render all identities contingent symbolic fictions, to historicize them? Isn’t it just that, to acknowledge even their own position of enunciation as historically limited by a specific socio-symbolic discourse? But this universal aspect of the theory of hegemony is precisely the problem. In doing this sort of universal historicizing Laclau and Mouffe find themselves unable to account for their particular theory.

For Žižek, “every version of historicism relies on a minimal ‘ahistorical’ formal framework defining the terrain within which the open and endless game of contingent inclusions/exclusions, substitutions, renegotiations, displacements, and so on, takes place” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 111). Instead of this formal historicist framework being the driving force as Laclau would have it, what sets in motion history for Žižek is *historicity*. Thus “the truly

radical assertion of historical contingency has to include the dialectical tension between the domain of historical change itself and its traumatic ‘ahistorical’ kernel *qua* its condition of (im)possibility” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 112). Hence, the difference between historicism and historicity is that historicism posits the endless field of ‘play’ within the same field of (im)possibility, while historicity “makes thematic different structural principles of this very (im)possibility”(Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 112). This very view of radical contingent historicism shared by Laclau and Mouffe turns into the very ideological closure they had sought to avoid. Basically the same criticism can be given here of Foucault. As Vighi and Felder note, “With the surplus dimension of the Real missing, all we can do [...] is [...] describe the workings of discourse and power-knowledge, and feel encouraged by the fact that what we are facing is merely a historically contingent setting which might have been, and thus could be, utterly different” (Vighi and Feldner 2007 p. 27).

Why is it then that both Foucault and Laclau, as historicists, miss this key dimension which reveals the paradox of being caught up in the very workings of the discourse they describe? For Žižek, the theoretical edifices of these authors lack the concept of the Real, and this lack in the theory leads them to their inadequacies in linking their theory to a determinate political option, or an ‘ethico-political act’. On this point Žižek resorts to Derrida to examine these two cases. Both focus on this position of enunciation as unaccounted for in the theory. In Žižek’s “Cogito, Madness, and Religion: Derrida, Foucault and then Lacan”, he brings up the familiar polemic between Foucault and Derrida on the status of madness in Descartes. Žižek claims, with regards to Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, that Derrida finds the discussion of Descartes’ *Meditations* as the key to the entire book—“ the sense of Foucault’s project can be pinpointed in these few allusive and somewhat enigmatic pages” (Derrida, 1978 p. 32). Derrida

argues that Descartes does not *exclude* madness, but rather brings it to its *extreme*. In the *Meditations*, Descartes asserts that all we perceive is not true, but a universal dream, an illusion. Yet, in this delusion, *I* can still *think*—thus Descartes’ familiar *cogito*, I think, therefore I am.

Foucault asserts that this understanding is based on the exclusion of madness, with unreason as its support. “It was in relation to unreason and to it alone that madness could be understood” (Foucault 2001 p. 83). Derrida’s reproach is that, against this historicism, and rather through deeper textual analysis, that madness is indeed present in Descartes (Derrida, 1978 p. 34). For Derrida, “the universal doubt, where I suspect that the entire world is an illusion, is the strongest madness possible” (Žižek 2007). For Žižek, Derrida’s move is that of *ex-timacy* (a Lacanian pun on intimacy), rather than direct exclusion. (*Ex-timacy* is likened by Žižek to the character of the common Stephen King novel, specifically the notion of the undead. It is easy for one to speak of the dead, they are simply not alive. However, it is much more interesting to speak of the undead, that which is alive *only as dead*. For Žižek, the undead is the monstrous excess of the living. We can think again here of the distinction between the human and inhuman. It is not that the inhuman are not human, but rather that monstrous excess that has to be limited by humanity as such). For Derrida, what reason tried to master is madness as unreason (as the monstrous excess inherent to reason itself), while for Foucault reason is grounded in the exclusion of madness. This has the logical form of the distinction between affirming a non-predicate (unreason) versus negating a predicate (not reason). For Žižek, the more difficult philosophical task is one of *extimacy*, this excess inherent to reason itself.

While Derrida reads into Descartes a foundational madness, this abyss of freedom central to all philosophy, Foucault asserts instead a historical reading which is bound up with power relations and the non-discursive. Foucault argues that Derrida’s resaying of the text is determined

by his inability to think the outside of philosophy, that he is positing “the invention of voices behind texts to avoid having to analyze the modes of implication of the subject in discourses; the assigning of the originary as said and unsaid in the text to avoid placing discursive practices in the field of transformations where they are carried out” (Foucault 1979 p. 417). What can be seen here is the clear debate between textual and archaeological forms of analysis, which boils down to the distinction between the discursive and non-discursive form of analysis. Derrida argues that through archaeological analysis, Foucault cannot account for his position of enunciation, while Foucault argues that through textual analysis, the historical conditions which allow for such a text are disavowed.

What then is the solution to this sort of deadlock? It can be found in Žižek’s reading of Derrida in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, titled “Against Historicism”. Žižek writes,

We should always bear in mind this delicate Derridean stance on account of which he avoids the twin pitfalls of naïve realism as well of direct philosophical foundationalism. [...] What is deeply symptomatic in Derrida is his oscillation between, on the one hand, the hyper-self-reflective approach which denounces the question of ‘how things really are’ in advance [...] and, on the other, direct ‘ontological’ assertions about how *difference* and *archi-trace* designate the structure of all living things (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 232).

Thus the paradox between the two levels, that “the very feature which forever prevents us from grasping our intended object directly is the feature which connects us with the basic proto-ontological structure of the universe”, the Real. This is what is lacking in Foucault and Laclau, this paradoxical self-reflectiveness, yet willingness to assert the impossible necessity of a

philosophical foundation. Foucault attempts to escape both, while Laclau only attempts to escape the former.

Bracketing Foucauldian Distinctions

In order to arrive at Laclau's theory of hegemony in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we must first note how such a theory was made possible by post-structuralism. Two related movements are here worth noting, firstly the deconstruction of structure, and secondly the deconstruction of 'atomized social elements'. That is to say that Laclau and Mouffe reject any structure which is a completely closed totality, in which all of its 'elements' are reduced to 'moments' of the structure. In such a structure, or system, or 'articulated discursive totality', two characteristics derive. First, "everything is so necessary in it that modification of the whole and its details reciprocally condition one another" and secondly, "necessity derives [...] from the regularity of a system of structural positions" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 p. 106). In such a situation, argue Laclau and Mouffe, no relation can be contingent, or external, as "the identity of the elements would then be specified outside the relation itself" rendering "the practice of articulation" impossible (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 p. 106). This then leads the authors to the conclusion that, if contingency and articulation are possible, it is because this situation is never the case. But why exactly is this not the case, why can we not speak of a sutured totality? Derrida argues, "if totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance [...], but because the nature of the field [of language] [...] excludes totalization" (Torfing 1999 p. 86). Language excludes totalization because the field is in effect, that of play, or the infinite substitution of centres.

For Laclau and Mouffe, the discursive level is constituted by this field of play. Because it exists in this field of play, an ‘articulated discursive totality’ is only a structure in which the “transformation of the elements to moments is never complete” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 p. 106). Its centre is not fixed, but contingent, historical, and therefore precarious. Whereas with structuralism we had events which were inexplicable in the terms of structures, and therefore conceived as hazards, or errors—now we have with post-structuralism a more contextual and relational approach, which emphasizes the ‘structurality’ of structure, its nature that of the field of language. Within this precarious structure, or ‘discursive formation’ we have a precariously sutured centre, which can be substituted, and moments of that structure, which are simply elements which have been subjected to the process of articulation. Furthermore, “the creation of a relative structural order is conditional upon the exclusion of a constitutive outside which threatens the relative order of the structure and prevents an ultimate closure” (Torfing 1999 p. 86). So now we may begin to understand how a theory of hegemony might function. Hegemony, as conceived by Laclau and Mouffe at the discursive level, is the struggle for political power through discursive re-articulation, the battle for the ideological constitution of identities through this sort of discursive subjectivization within various particular social formations. In a purely structural way, we can say that hegemony involves the transformation of elements into moments of that discursive formation, hence their articulation within the order. As any order necessitates a constitutive outside, hegemony as an operation involves constant re-articulation, rendering these threatening outside elements as somehow moments of the hegemonic formation, now seen as ‘necessary’ to its systemic functioning.

Let us take an example from Foucault. In his lecture on psychiatric power from *21 November 1973*, he describes the isotopic nature of disciplinary power in order to distinguish it

from sovereign power. For a disciplinary apparatus to be isotopic it means that it must have its “well defined place; it has its subordinate elements and its superordinate elements”, with the movement in the system produced through a “regular movement of examination , competition, seniority, and suchlike”, and it is a system in which there is “no conflict or incompatibility between different disciplinary apparatuses” as they possess these formal properties which allow the somatic singularity to pass from one apparatus to another interchangeably” (Foucault, Lagrange et al. 2008 p. 52). However, in this system, “isotopic means above all that the principle of a distribution and classification of all the elements necessarily entails something like a residue. That is to say, there is always something like “the unclassifiable”” (Foucault, Lagrange et al. 2008 p. 53). So, much like hegemonic order in its positivity begets a constitutive outside, so a disciplinary regime produces this residual set of individuals who cannot be assimilated. The mentally ill are then “the residue of all residues, the residue of all the disciplines [educational, military, police]” (Foucault, Lagrange et al. 2008 p. 54). “So the necessary existence of residues is, I think, a specific characteristic of this isotopy of disciplinary systems, and will entail, of course, the appearance of supplementary disciplinary systems in order to retrieve those individuals, and so on to infinity” (Foucault, Lagrange et al. 2008 p. 54). Here we can see Foucault’s properties of disciplinary power emerging, those of anomie and the norm. This system is anomizing in that it has its margins, and always has to produce the discarding of individuals on the margins. The system is normalizing in that it is always “inventing new recovery systems, always reestablishing the rule” (Foucault, Lagrange et al. 2008 p. 54). Disciplinary systems are characterized by the “never-ending work of the norm in the anomic” (Foucault, Lagrange et al. 2008 p. 54). This is how we should understand hegemony. Discursive formations always have to produce a constitutive outside, a residual, a margin. The operation of

hegemony, or what can be called the totalizing effects of ideology, rely on the constant reincorporation of these residuals, the constant bringing into the fold of ‘elements’, and through their articulation, resign them to ‘moments’ of that particular formation. For Laclau and Mouffe, however, these ‘residuals’, are what constitute *antagonism*. Antagonism is the ‘experience’ that bears witness to the “impossibility of a final suture” and the limit of the social to the extent that “the social only exists as a partial effort for constructing society” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 p. 125).

So we can see here the post-structuralism at work in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. But to what extent does this theory rooted in post-structuralism and the ‘logic of the signifier’ bracket aside certain productive distinctions? The one I would like to focus on here is Laclau and Mouffe’s riding roughshod over Foucault’s own theory of discursive formations—through their abandonment of the distinction between the discursive and non-discursive. It is clear in Foucault’s early works and lectures that he placed an emphasis on setting forth an archaeological method, with his later work focusing on genealogies. While Foucault did indeed shift the focus of his analysis, he never did abandon his theory of discursive formations which marked his early work. His later work has been interpreted by Jacob Torfing as performing a methodological shift, closer to the post-structuralism of Laclau and Mouffe. But I claim that this sort of interpretation risks making the same mistake Laclau and Mouffe make, and does away with Foucault’s distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive, on account of the fact that both discursive and non-discursive practices are structured along the lines of a discourse, and thusly can ‘only be conceived of as discursive articulations’. My position, and it is one shared by Terry Eagleton, is that the non-discursive practices may well be organized like a discourse, but still, they are practices (Eagleton 2007 p.219). Foucault’s aim with his

archaeology, and Laclau and Mouffe's aim with discourse theory are, of course, two separate strategies. We can clearly see what the stakes are for Laclau and Mouffe are in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the deconstruction of Marxism and its' supplanting with a theory of radical democracy. Foucault's stakes are, it seems, more complex, and perhaps more ambitious. What then are these stakes?

In Foucault's inaugural lecture at the College de France he set forth the terms on which his future research would build. His hypothesis is that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role it is to avert its powers and its dangers to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (Foucault 1970 p. 218). "True discourse, liberated by the nature of its form from desire and power, is incapable of recognizing the will to truth which pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself upon us for so long, is such that the truth it seeks to reveal cannot fail to mask it" (Foucault 1970 p. 219). Foucault's task then, is to analyze the control and delimitation of discourse—both externally and internally—and to reveal the desire and power at work within it which has been masked for so long. By externally, Foucault means the non-discursive complexes which determine the conditions of existence of true discourse. By internally, he means the internal rules "where discourse exercises its own control", concerning "classification, ordering, and distribution" (Foucault 1970 p. 220). With this distinction in mind, it can be said Foucault's earlier work (*The Archaeology of Knowledge, The Order of Things*) will be focused on the internal rules, while his later work (*Discipline and Punish, History of Sexuality*) on genealogy will concern the external work of power and desire. This distinction between external and internal will henceforth be known as the distinction between the non-discursive and the discursive, respectively.

Now let us begin with Laclau and Mouffe's reading of this distinction. They quote Rabinow and Dreyfus,

[Clinical medicine must be regarded] as the establishment of a relation, in medical discourse, between a number of distinct elements, some of which concerned the status of doctors, others the institutional and technical site from which they spoke, others their position as subjects perceiving, observing, describing, teaching, etc. It can be said that this relation between different elements (some of which are new, while others were already in existence) is effected by clinical discourse, it is this, as a practice, that establishes between them all a system of relations that is not "really" given or constituted *a priori*; and if there is a unity, if the modalities of enunciation that it uses, or to which it gives place are not simply juxtaposed by a series of historical contingencies, it is because it makes constant use of this group of relations (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983 p. 53).

As previously noted, Laclau and Mouffe argue that if these non-discursive complexes are analyzed (institutions, techniques, productive organization), "we find more or less complex forms of differential positions among objects, which do not arise from a necessity external to the system structuring them and which can only therefore be conceived as discursive articulations" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 p. 107). My position is that this "only" conception is a huge bracketing aside of Foucault's project, and that it in turn renders Foucault's theory unproductive. However, if we read Foucault without the overly incessant preoccupations of post-structuralism, we can see that he uses 'discourse' as a particular type of formation distinct from these non-discursive complexes for a number of reasons, and the productivity of his analysis is an effect of this distinction and its historic relations between the two types of formations.

Foucault's 'discourse' is an analysis of those speech acts considered serious by their context. It may be true that the non-discursive complexes do not arise from some external necessity, but this does not make them discursive in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault seems to say that these serious speech acts are the product of relations which organize, and that these relations have the most weight (in his early work), especially with respect to what he wants to avoid, the perpetuation of the will to truth as we have come to know it. Hence this distinction which preserves materialism is what enables Foucault to render visible those forms of desire and power at work in discourse, and to follow Nietzsche, Artaud, and Bataille, in attempting to "remould this truth and to turn it against the truth at the very point where truth undertakes to justify the [exclusions it rests upon]" (Foucault 1970 p. 220).

Just as Laclau and Mouffe have set forth their own concept of discursive formations as distinct from those 'necessary' closed structures, so have Dreyfus and Rabinow distinguished Foucault's own concept of discursive formations from those formations typical of structuralism. Both atomistic structuralism and holistic structuralism operate in different ways from Foucault's discursive formations. Atomistic structuralism describes a system in which the "elements are completely specified apart from their role in a system", while in holistic structuralism "a possible element is defined apart from the system, but what counts as an actual element is a function of the whole system of differences in which the given element is involved" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983 p. 53). Apart from these typical forms of structuralism we have Foucault's archaeological formations, or what Dreyfus and Rabinow call 'archaeological holism'. Archaeological holism asserts that "the whole determines what can count as even a possible element" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983 p. 55).

That is to say, in determining what counts as a serious speech act in discourse, “the whole verbal context is more fundamental than its elements and thus is more than the sum of its parts. Indeed, there are no parts except within the field which identifies and individuates them” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983 p. 55). So we can see, in strict homology with Laclau and Mouffe, that Foucault’s discursive formations, and furthermore his non-discursive complexes, are structured along the lines of a discourse. The key difference between Laclau and Mouffe’s reading of Foucault, and Dreyfus and Rabinow’s reading is that in the latter, the distinction is preserved through a broader understanding of Foucault’s line of argument as regards discourse—not simply the structure of discourse. Our task then is to see exactly what this distinction has allowed Foucault to do analytically, and what the bracketing aside of this distinction has allowed Laclau and Mouffe to do, in regards to socialist strategy.

Leveling Historical Processes

In Etienne Balibar’s *Politics and the Other Scene*, in his discussion of ‘universality as fiction’ he writes,

I want to avoid the common idea that every identity, be it personal or collective, could be considered a ‘construct’ in the same general sense, because this classical relativistic view—so it seems to me—leads to a leveling of the historical processes which create and hierarchize forms of identity and individuality, so that some become more ‘basic’ than others and form a common background to their becoming complementary or incompatible (Balibar 2002 p. 155).

One would hope Laclau and Mouffe had shared a similar sentiment, but it is not to be found in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Instead what we find is identities which are never fully

constituted, always precarious, and never essential, never natural. What is the effect of thinking of identity in this way? The effects are exactly that which Balibar seeks to avoid in his own writing—the elision of the various levels of identity, some more basic than others, and all the effect of historical processes in some way or another. For being a radical historicist theory, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony offers very little in the way of an analytic which allows us to assign identities to the confluence of historical processes.

Let us examine a quote by Gramsci.

Two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all this fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not without consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and a direction of will, with varying efficacy but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity (Gramsci, Hoare et al. 1971 p. 326).

One can imagine Laclau and Mouffe's reading this passage—as almost strictly homologous to their reading of Foucault's passage in which he separates the discursive from the non-discursive. They might argue that the 'implicit' consciousness as an effect of the determinations of capitalism can only be thought of as discursively construed, and therefore no different from the 'explicit' realm of everyday practices, the realm of hegemony—and to keep this distinction would be essentializing the teleological narrative of the working class. That is to say,

‘contradictory consciousness’ would become simply a hegemonic ‘consciousness’. The effect of this reading is one in which Gramsci’s period of crisis becomes simply the logic of politics—the impossibility of closure—the kind of period which Laclau and Mouffe seek to institutionalize. What this brackets aside being able to talk about determination or objective interests in any sense. Laclau and Mouffe are far too reticent in this sense for their analytic to be productive.

With Laclau “there is no logical and necessary relation between socialist objectives and the positions of social agents in the relations of production” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 p. 87). The relation between the two is a hegemonic relation. Thusly a “variety of other points of rupture and democratic antagonisms can be articulated to a socialist ‘collective will’ on an equal footing with workers demands. The era of ‘privileged subjects’ in the ontological, not practical sense—of the anti capitalist struggle has been definitively superseded” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 p. 87). What would a ‘privileged subject’ be in the practical sense? This is a question left unanswered by *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*—which leads one to wonder where exactly the *Socialist Strategy* aspect of the book is supposed to kick in. The book’s obsession with avoiding the a priori and the God-given determinations of a traditional teleological Marxism is bound up with its failures to posit anything that might look like a strategy. Any nuanced look into determination and objective interests or subjects in a position to resist are drowned in the logic of anti-essentialism. One might wonder if such a nuanced look is possible. Well, it has already been done.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams takes up the question of determinism—which, for those attempting to bring Marxism into a terrain which rejects the teleology as well as the historical necessity of a deterministic economy, is clearly contentious. Williams sees a tension within the interpretation of Marx. He looks at two separate quotes from Marx and

Engels, “In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will... a definite state of development” and “the mass of productive forces accessible to men determine the condition of society” (Williams 1977 p. 85). Through an analysis of these excerpts Williams introduces a distinction into the concept of determination—he separates ‘determination’ into ‘determination as historical objectivity’ and ‘determination as abstract objectivity’. Firstly, *historical objectivity* as “the conditions into which at any particular point in time, men find themselves born, thus the ‘accessible’ conditions into which they ‘enter’” and secondly, *abstract objectivity*, as the “determining processes is ‘independent of their will’ not in the historical sense that they have inherited it but in the absolute sense that they cannot control it; they can seek only to understand it and guide their actions accordingly” (Williams 1977 p. 85). Williams notes that traditionally, opponents of Marxism have used the outdated sense of abstract objectivity in rejecting economic determination—and we can see with Laclau and Mouffe that this is the sense which they reject wholly. This rejection has led to the emphasis on *overdetermination*, which is closer to historical objectivity.

The full concept of overdetermination, sees determination as “never only the setting of limits” but also the “exertion of pressures” (Williams 1977 p. 87). Thusly for Williams the value in the concept of overdetermination is its effort to avoid the abstract sense—to avoid the “isolation of autonomous categories but at the same time to emphasize relatively autonomous yet of course interactive *practices*” (Williams 1977 p. 88). But here Laclau and Mouffe would interject, arguing that relative autonomy simply manifests the limit of the logical incompatibility of determination and autonomy. But Laclau and Mouffe here still fall into the trap of a criticism of abstract determination—and display their theory’s incapacity to conceive of this limit. We can

think of this incapacity on terms of the previously mentioned failure of historicity. In positing a theory of radical contingent historicism, they manifest the limit of their theory in not being able to situate it in a historical process which ‘determines’ the conditions of its production, or even in Foucault’s terms, its conditions of existence. In the same way they are unable to conceive of an explanatory variation in the more nuanced concept of *historical objectivity*.

Laclau and Mouffe’s failure to conceptualize determination and explanation of historical processes within the theory is linked to the failure to conceive of objective interests. Again, this has been worked out already, by Terry Eagleton. As Eagleton notes, Laclau and Mouffe rightly reject the conceptualization of objective interests they subscribe to, as objective interests automatically supplied to you by your position within the relations of production. However, there are more nuanced ways of understanding objective interests, and these are more in line with Williams’ historical objectivity. For Eagleton, objective interests mean “a course of action which is in fact in my interests but which I currently do not recognize as such”—a phrase which alludes to the inaccessibility of “valid, discursively framed interests which do not exist for me right now” (Eagleton 2007 p. 217). Thus, the recognition of these objective interests implies that once I am in a position to acquire these interests I can then look back upon my previous situation and recognize that I would have had the current interests at that time if only I had been in a position to do so. That is, if I had been free of whatever coercion or misrecognition was structuring my beliefs at the time. Because Laclau and Mouffe, with their anti-essentialist obsession, have been reticent towards anything ‘given’ or inherent to identities, and interests predicated upon a certain condition, they again can say nothing practical about strategy today. As Eagleton notes, “If there is no ‘necessary’ relation between women and feminism, or the working class and socialism,

then the upshot would be a disastrously eclectic, opportunistic politics, which simply drew into its project whatever social groups seemed currently most amenable to it” (Eagleton 2007 p. 218).

Now we can see how to do a proper reading of Gramsci’s quote on contradictory consciousness. It may be that first we can assert with Laclau and Mouffe that what Gramsci means by an ‘implicit’ consciousness, the more authentic one which is hijacked by the ‘explicit’ entails a sort of economic reductionism, is one in which working class interests are automatically supplied to them by their place in the relations of production. But if we take Williams and Eagleton, and use determination or objective interests with circumspection, we can develop a much more nuanced response to the crisis of the working class for Gramsci. We can then assert that subject positions in the relations of production do have an effect on interests, with more or less explanatory variation allocated to other historical processes, like those of the ‘explicit’ consciousness. This allows us to talk about a ‘contradictory’ consciousness, and discursively framed interests as a contestable hegemonic field, without resorting to ‘essentialism’ and yet still maintaining a kind of misrecognition involved. However, if we subscribe to the abstract conceptualizations of determinism and objective interests which Laclau and Mouffe do, we risk exactly the kind of leveling of historical processes which Balibar hesitates to perform. Furthermore, this leveling is what limits any sort of theory of socialist strategy today, at a time when practical directions are so sought for.

Maintaining a Critical Politics

I have tried to show in this chapter so far that in the resurrection of the critique of ideology, Laclau has moved to a critique of essentialism. As a result of this move, a number of important concepts for a Marxist critique of ideology have been bracketed aside, notably

determination, objective interests, and the placing of discourse within its conditions of possibility, as well as its conditions of existence. For Laclau, an ideological discourse is one that sees itself as realtigh, not acknowledging the ‘impossibility of society’ (Laclau, 2001 p. 111). This move to anti-essentialism is clearly an important one, which renders any critique of ideology predicated upon authenticism or the natural as invalid. However, once one has this radical historicist deconstructive move, what then does one posit? In other words, from what ‘discursively framed interest’ or position can one claim that one has misrecognized their previous interests or beliefs and rearticulate them as the product of a coercion or blindness. For Laclau and Mouffe, it seems, the only passage would be from an essentialist position to an anti-essentialist position. But as Eagleton notes, deconstruction can serve to legitimate the ruling ideology by cutting away the grounds from which anyone can speak,

In discovering that “men make history,” the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie kicked out from under themselves the very transcendental signifiers needed to legitimate that history ideologically. But this damage could be contained by a simple fact: in pulling out the metaphysical carpet from under themselves, they pulled it out in the same stroke from under their opponents (Eagleton 1981 p. 4).

What then, would the determinate political option be? It seems that with regards to the theory of hegemony itself, there is no necessary political option inherent to the theory. While Laclau and Mouffe are clearly in the business of radical democracy and deepening liberal democracy in the democratic direction—there seems no necessary correlate in the theory which falls on this side of the spectrum. As Žižek notes, there is nothing inherent to the theory that favors a democratic option over a totalitarian one.

In his criticism of Derrida, Laclau emphasized the gap between Derrida's global philosophical stance (difference, the unavoidable 'out-of-joint' of every identity, etc.) and his politics of *democratie a venir*, of openness towards the Event of irreducible Otherness: why shouldn't one draw, from the fact that identity is impossible, the *opposite* 'totalitarian' conclusion that, for that very reason, we need a strong Power to prevent explosion and guarantee a fragile minimum of order? [...] However, does the same not hold for Laclau himself? Why shouldn't one, from the notion of a hegemony which involves the irreducible gap between the Universal and the Particular, and thus the structural impossibility of society, opt for a 'strong' totalitarian politics that limits the effects of this gap as much as possible? (Žižek 1999 p. 239).

The theory's lack of a determinate political option would seemingly be a blessing if the ends were ostensibly linked to liberal democracy—but for Laclau, "deepening liberal democracy" means deepening it in the direction of radical democracy—which for him means expanding the limits of the 'political' in a particular political scene—not necessarily the prevalent institutionalized liberal democracy. However, this expansion of the space of the political still rests upon on the de-politicization of the economic—using the liberal state as its implicit horizon— and hence cannot be conceived of similarly across any given political system—especially not a liberal order—especially not for socialist strategy. So we can understand the theory of hegemony along the lines of reformist gradualist politics within liberal democracy—but not as that which could provide an even more radical socialist strategy which refuses to accept capitalism as 'the only game in town'.

What has necessitated this failure in the theory of hegemony to provide a determinate political option? As noted previously, it is a result of Laclau ignoring the dimension of the Real,

ignoring historicity. But I think the more interesting question here is to ask: what would a theory of hegemony have to do to incorporate socialist strategy as a political task? I have noted one, incorporating historicity, but the failures mentioned above also would have to be remedied. The obfuscation of the distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive would have to be re-articulated in a way which maintained historical tension. This then would relieve the leveling of historical processes which resulted from this obfuscation. In the same way, though, the reticence that Laclau and Mouffe claim towards Marxism and its categories of explanatory variation have to be re-incorporated in ways which stress their continuing importance. All this would seemingly get one back to the merits of Foucault's own theory, save for the ontological shift. That is to say, we still come up with a theory detached from its political option. How then can we talk about the acknowledgement of historicity as leading to socialist strategy? And is Laclau's 'resurrection' of ideology enough for a critical politics that seeks to uncover not just essentialism, but also relationships of power? For that we must turn to Žižek

Chapter 3

The Dimension of the Real: From Reformism to Revolution

In the previous chapter, I claimed that Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony offers no intrinsic political option, that for all its deconstructive criticism, still it seeks to describe any and all political formations. However, does not Laclau's own political project of a deepening of liberal democracy—a rather reformist radical democracy—claim legitimacy on the basis of the ontological structurality of the political, on the logic of hegemony? In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe put forth their post-structural ontology in which antagonism is constitutive and the impossibility of the final suture of ideology is its result. On these ontological premises they then link essentialism to totalitarianism, and anti-essentialism to democracy. The purpose of this chapter is to show in what ways Laclau's post-structural ontology does not in fact determine a reformist politics which simply advocates a deepening of liberal democracy—and in what direction this ontology needs to be pushed in order to determine the return to class struggle in positing socialist strategy. In order to show how Laclau and Mouffe's ontological shift (transforming epistemological incapacity into the condition of possibility for politics) in the critique of ideology can advocate a determinate position, I will show how Slavoj Žižek has maintained this same view of ideology in which distortion is primary—yet has linked it to both a concrete political option and activity through the use of Lacanian categories. The point here is that even if Laclau and Mouffe can deconstruct totalizing ideologies, if they can assert the primacy of distortion and the relativization of discourses, they still cannot account for the persistence of ideological attachment beyond these deconstructive procedures.

In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* Žižek argues that “Laclau’s jump from a ‘critique of the metaphysics of presence’ to anti-utopian ‘reformist’ gradualist politics is an illegitimate short circuit” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 101). Where then does Laclau’s failure—his ‘short circuit’—originate? Žižek claims again that this failure is one of historicity, in this case, it is the “dialectical paradox of ‘concrete universality’ *qua* historicity” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 101). He writes that if we read Hegel closely, we find that “in so far as every particular species that fully fits its notion, the very universal notion is transformed into another notion”(Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 99). Thusly, “in the relationship between a genus and its subspecies, one of these subspecies will always be the element that negates the very universal feature of the genus” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 99). What does this mean then for a theory of hegemony? It means, that the form of the *political* in which one of its subspecies, be it race, or sex, or class, is constituted, will be transformed upon the universalization of that particular subspecies. For Žižek, a “radical democracy that was actually ‘radical’ in the sense of politicizing the sphere of the economy would, precisely, no longer be a (political) democracy” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 100). So here we have the difference between reformism and revolution. For Laclau, the hegemonic logic implies that a particular subspecies always acts as the universal genus which masks the absent fullness of society as a sutured totality.

Since Laclau emphatically proclaims the impossibility of society (‘There is no society!’), the fullness can never be actualized, the universal notion can never actually be filled by its particular content (Laclau, 2001 p. 111). This then is the dialectical paradox that Žižek refers to, the particular ‘species’ that fully fits the universal notion of the ‘genus’ is never actualized, “it simply means that the limit of the impossible would be transposed on another level” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 100). In this case Žižek’s conclusion is that for Laclau, the antagonism is

double. It is impossible to represent the fullness of society in actuality, and also “on an even more radical level”, it is impossible to even articulate this very antagonism that structures society in a way which infinitely defers its final suture.

Žižek attempts this critique in a more articulate way in his recent book, *In Defense of Lost Causes*. Still chastising Laclau for the lack of anti-capitalist sentiment, as well as Laclau’s ignorance of his own position of enunciation in his theory, —Žižek argues that

Laclau is all too naïve in his critical stance of his assertion of the irreducible gap between empty universality and its distorted representation. But from the Hegelian standpoint, this gap can be overcome —not through the arrival of an adequate direct presentation of the universal, but so that distortion as such is asserted as the site of universality (Žižek 2008a p. 294).

So here we have again the theoretical failure behind the lack of a determinate political option. Laclau’s theory of hegemony is not wholly incompatible with revolution according to Žižek, it simply ignores the obscene aspect of historicism, which is historicity, the Real. It is this notion of the Real which allows for revolution to be comprehensible, without recourse to simply a ‘deepening’ of the political in its reformist mode, the Real radicalizes the space of the political itself. How then does an acknowledgement of the Real necessitate a radical anti-capitalist stance for Žižek?

One way he describes this phenomenon is through Freudian sexuality. The central event of the statement “there is no sexual relationship” thus determines the Freudian hypothesis. Notably that “sexuality is not just one among the possible innuendos of every speech—it is inherent to the form of connotation as such—symbolic castration sustains the very indeterminacy

of the space on which connotations can float around” (Žižek 2008a p. 294). This analogy then is strictly correlative to the space of the economy today. So here we can liken the Freudian and Marxist hypothesis to the same basic movement of the Real. “The economy—the social organization of production (mode of production) is not just one among several levels of social organization—it is the site of contradiction of the central social antagonism (there is no class relationship) which as such—spills over into all other levels”(Žižek 2008a p. 294). So for Žižek, when we talk about ‘true class politics’ we should not think of other aspects of society and culture such as the expression of politics in music as a secondary expression of the primary struggle. “It is wrong to say that the ‘central social antagonism’ (“class struggle”) is always expressed/articulated in a distorted/displaced way: it is the very principle of this distortion” (Žižek 2008a p. 294). Thus the move *from* politics *to* music as such, is overdetermined by the economic, but an economic cause which is never present in the field of its effects. In the same way that in Freudian terms we can say, “in the explosion of human symbolic capacities”, that “this explosion sexualizes sexuality itself” we can say that in the explosion of human productive capacities, this explosion economizes the economy itself (Žižek 2008a p. 293).

Over-rapid Historicization

So let us return to the problematic of ideology. As Laclau and Mouffe’s analytic claims, the naturalization and eternalization of historical particularities is to be deplored as ideological. However, this position is not wholly different from the Marxist one which deconstructs in the same way, “a state which depends on a concrete historical conjunction appears as an eternal, universal feature of the human condition” (Žižek 1989 p. 49). However, for Žižek—from his Lacanian perspective—“the most ‘cunning’ ideological procedure is the very opposite of eternalization—over-rapid historicization” (Žižek 1989 p. 50). This ‘over-rapid historicization’ is

what “makes us blind to the real kernel which returns as the same through diverse historicizations/symbolizations” (Žižek 1989 p. 50). Laclau is aware of the first ideological mystification, but not the second. In fact, he is guilty of the second. Hence, Žižek criticizes Laclau along these lines, implicitly, arguing “the fundamental gesture of post-structuralism is to deconstruct every substantial identity—to denounce behind its solid consistency an interplay of symbolic overdetermination—to dissolve the substantial identity into a network of non-substantial, differential relations” (Žižek 1989 p. 72). The real kernel which returns as the same, that which is disavowed in Laclau’s own theory, is for Žižek “the notion of symptom” as “the necessary counterpoint to [deconstruction], the substance of enjoyment, the real kernel around which this signifying interplay is structured” (Žižek 1989 p. 72).

Before we get into enjoyment, I think it necessary to take this point-counterpoint of deconstruction-Real/historicism-historicity once again into the economic realm. “[C]lassical political economy is interested only in contents concealed behind the commodity-form, which is why it cannot explain the true secret, not the secret *behind* the form but *the secret of this form itself*” (Žižek 1989 p. 15). So again we find that the secret of the commodity form itself can only be approached by bringing Lacan’s Real into the equation—which for Žižek is quite odd—because Lacan himself based his notion of ‘surplus-object’ (Real) on Marx’s surplus-value. The Real of capitalism cannot be gotten to through a deconstructive approach, it needs a Lacanian reading.

In socioeconomic terms, one is tempted to claim that Capital itself is the Real of our age. ... it is ‘real’ in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes themselves: the fate of whole strata of the population, and sometimes of whole

countries, can be decided by the ‘solipsistic’ speculative dance of Capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in a benign indifference (Vighi and Feldner 2007 p. 130).

How then does this ‘real’ determine the structure of material social processes? Vighi and Feldner argue that for Žižek, what allows the mode of production to act as the Real is the “mechanism of foreclosure” at work in commodity fetishism—a foreclosure which sustains the entire logic of capitalism. How does this foreclosure function? “[A]ny knowledge, or discursive field, hinged upon a mechanism of foreclosure, which is therefore its fundamental kernel, its disavowed ‘truth’. This means that the reality into which we intervene is always-already the product of our intervention” (Vighi and Feldner 2007 p. 129). In Žižek’s words this means that “in his particular-empirical activity the subject of course presupposes the ‘world’, the objectivity on which he performs his activity, as something given in advance, as a positive condition of his activity; but his positive-empirical activity is possible only if he structures his perception of the world in advance in a way that opens the space for his intervention—in other words, only if he retroactively posits the presuppositions of his activity, of his ‘positing’. This ‘act before the act’ [...] is a purely formal ‘conversion’ transforming reality into something perceived, assumed as a result of our activity” (Žižek 1989 p. 218). Thusly for Žižek, the commodity “is not merely the embodiment of social relations, but it actually represents an uncanny object endowed with magical/religious powers—and the more people deny this dimension, the more they are caught in the spell of the commodity” (Vighi and Feldner 2007 p. 132).

Traversing the Fantasy

It is from this ‘spell of the commodity’ which we can get to the Lacanian concept of enjoyment, or rather, which links the psychoanalytic process to the critique of ideology, one with

a determinate political option. In order to make this connection, I will briefly summarize Žižek's tracing of Lacan's development of the symptom. First we have the analysand, the psychoanalytic subject, which presents with a symptom. The aim of psychoanalysis is for the analyst to interpret the symptom, and give meaning to it, as the symptom is always addressed to the analyst. As the interpretation is made, and the analysand is made to verbalize this interpretation of his symptom, and thus be relieved of it, he is cured. The first problem that occurs here is that in certain cases the symptom persists beyond interpretation. This leads Lacan to add a second characteristic to the symptom, not only is it a coded message addressed to the analyst (or the big Other) to which meaning is conferred, it is also how the subject organizes its enjoyment—which is why it persists beyond interpretation. From here Lacan designates a new distinction, between symptom and fantasy, which divides the previous 'symptom' into two processes rather than one: interpreting the symptom, and going through the fantasy. The first step involves the former interpretation of the symptom, and the second involves going through the interpretation to the fantasy (as the kernel of enjoyment) which blocks further interpretation. Subsequently, "we must accomplish the crucial step of going through the fantasy, of obtaining distance from it" (Žižek 1989 p. 74). Thus the second problem arises for Lacan, as even through distancing themselves from their fantasy-formation—the key symptom still persists. So here we have a symptom which persists through both steps in the process, interpretation of symptoms, and going through fantasy. Lacan answered this problem with the concept of *sinthome*. The *sinthome* is the symptom which is "our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject"; it is the way we 'choose something (the symptom-formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe)' through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency

to our being-in-the-world” (Žižek 1989 p. 75). Thusly the completion of the Lacanian psychoanalytic process is identification with the symptom, or when “[t]he patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being” (Žižek 1989 p. 75).

So how does this process function in relation to ideology today? In order to understand this correlation I’d like to take the example of a practice called ‘shopdropping’, which is part of the sort of culture jamming anti-corporate/anti-advertising campaigns which exist marginally in New York City. Shopdropping is the practice by which artists-activists try to rejoin the labor and the product which have been ostensibly separated when we simply go to supermarket to purchase products. These activists set up workshops in which they show individuals how to create new labels for products such as two-liter bottles of Coca Cola. In these workshops, they create new labels for these Coca Cola products which maintain the barcode, but instead of original showing the corporate label—these shopdroppers re-sleeve the original item with their newly created label that depicts the original conditions of production of the product—for example, an image of a woman in a factory where it is bottled. They print out their respective labels with the barcode remaining the same as the original product so that the consumer will unwittingly purchase the item with the ‘shopdropped’ label and bring it home. Not only is this in an effort to rejoin the human element of the labor process and the product itself, it is also a way for art to disrupt the commercial world. What then, is the effect of this practice? On one side, those individuals involved must know they’re not exactly putting their bodies upon the wheels and gears of the machine. On the other, the consumer can surely see the effect of ‘shopdropping’ –the shock of seeing the relations of production, conditions of production, or humanity behind the commodity—whereas before there was simply a product.

The problem here corresponds to Žižek’s analysis of commodity fetishism, that “on an every day level, the individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are acting as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such” (Žižek 1989 p. 31). This is why supermarkets such as *Whole Foods* embrace this sort of practice (shopdropping), and not only embrace its *appearance* of ‘subversiveness’, but use that to reel in those ‘socially responsible’ yuppies who have both the finances and the will to purchase quality foods with labels depicting its authentic conditions of production, and feel good about it. They can embrace it because it is in fact, *counter-subversive*. Of course, *Whole Foods* does not embrace the *practice* of shopdropping itself—simply the marketing effect its type of labeling has. What is the effect of this re-labeling of the shopdroppers? To show the authentic origins of products so far removed from their original production. Do we not see more and more this sort of imagery in products at these sorts of supermarkets? In appearing to conform to the demands of the consumer in offering these sorts of products with ostensibly socially responsible origins, they appeal to this deconstruction of the product and the commodity. The problem then is that, while the commercial process appears to become more transparent, as individuals rationally know the “relations between people behind the relations between things”, still they act as if they are guided by that initial illusion. This is then the necessary link to the psychoanalytic process. Even though we distance ourselves from the fantasy formation— even though we acknowledge its masking of the real state of things, still, we *act* as if we did not know. Therefore, even if we do not take seriously the form of the commodity, the form itself—the fantasy formation—still structures our reality.

Again, this is why the anti-essentialist critique of ideology is insufficient, because it does not ask us to do more than distance ourselves from the fantasy, it only asks us to ‘shopdrop’ as such. The psychoanalytic approach is thus the necessary correlate. In short, there are “two complementary procedures of the ‘criticism of ideology’”: one discursive/deconstructive; and one which aims at “extracting the kernel of enjoyment, at articulating the way in which—beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it—an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy” (Žižek 1989 p. 125). It is this latter procedure that corresponds to Žižek’s tendency towards revolution rather than reformism. In only distancing ourselves from our fantasy, we still maintain the function of capitalism as Real through our approach to the “spell of the commodity”. Again, the secret of the commodity is not in the relations behind it, but in the form itself. So we can say that, in reaching his indeterminate political conclusion, Laclau has merely deconstructed, or interpreted the symptom and gone through the fantasy, but has not yet identified with the Real of his symptom, or sinthome. If he had identified with the sinthome, the Real of capitalism, he would have reached the conclusion that Žižek has in regards to historicity and the doubling of universality. Žižek would have us overidentify in a monstrous way with the form of the commodity itself, no longer having this cynical distance towards our belief, but rather embracing it, and as such realizing its role as that which “assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world”, and thus, giving ourselves the ability to renounce this sinthome which is penetrated with enjoyment (Žižek, 1989 p. 75). “This is why Žižek never tires of repeating that today’s crucial (and extremely problematic) ethical choice is between Bad and Worse: we either stay with our symptom (bad) or we try to annihilate it (worse). His ultimate ethico-political injunction is that we need to find a way to

bring about *the worse outcome*, the only one from which the symbolic/ideological field can be radically resignified” (Vighi and Feldner 2007p. 138).

So here we have three ways in which Laclau’s failure to necessitate a determinate political option is made manifest by Žižek in showing the *other* side of the critique of ideology. First, through a theory which is only linked by a ‘half-acknowledged’ umbilical cord due to an inattention to the double universality at work in his own theory; second, through an ignorance of the flip side of ideology—over rapid historicization; and third, with being unable to account for those who distance themselves from ideology, but still believe more than ever. All these failures are so many ways of being blind to the dimension of the Real in its many forms.

In thinking about ideology then we have Laclau and Mouffe’s initial move in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* of giving a post-structuralist critique of ideology which offers radical contingent historicism/deconstruction/anti-essentialism/primary distortion as its basic procedure. Through this procedure, we have the breaking down of the essentialist core of Marxism, as well as the removal of the traditional Marxist categories which allowed for the weight of historical processes, variable identity formation, and the primacy of class struggle. As their theory does not attempt to re-construct these analytic abilities for the critique of ideology, it is far from innocent in its post-structuralist move. Instead, the theory of hegemony offers a universal thesis about the structure of the political, theoretically ignoring the dimension of historicity/Real—politically refusing to acknowledge/historicize their own theory as rooted in the continuities of capitalism—the overaccumulation tendencies which exist beyond the post-industrial period in which Laclau and Mouffe set as their ‘necessary’ break with Marxism. Chapter 2 was meant to give direction to how to posit a necessary analytic for socialist strategy, through pointing out the theory of hegemony’s failures—which were primarily a result of a relentless radical contingent

historicism. In this chapter I have attempted to show the other side of the critique of ideology. That is—if Chapter 2 was an analysis of the deconstructionist/historicist aspect of the critique of ideology—Chapter 3 is an analysis of over-rapid historicization, the other side of the critique of ideology. I have attempted to show how this dimension is totally ignored by Laclau, and theoretically has led to an unnecessary political link to reformism and the deepening of liberal democracy. I have tried to show the many ways in which Slavoj Žižek has given constant attention to this dimension in Laclau's work—for the reason that it allows for the primacy of class struggle to be re-asserted within the same ontology—albeit with a more Hegelian reading. All this was in an effort to demonstrate how the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe, in their reticence from essentialist Marxism, have disavowed the driving factor for their move away from essentialism, the ostensible change in the capitalist mode of production from the modern to the postmodern periods. The two results of this disavowal is clear, the theoretical reification of the hegemony of global capitalism and its supplement, liberal democracy—as well as the invalidation of the theory as a viable analytic for socialist strategy.

Chapter 4

An Insufficient Strategy

The previous chapters have been an attempt to flesh out a discussion of what I believe are the key issues to be addressed for a post-structuralist, Marxist theory of hegemony—one with socialist strategy as its political aim. The object is to return to Laclau’s theory of hegemony all those things that it lost through its reticence towards both the categories of essentialist Marxism and the ‘death of ideology’—as well as restore to it the theoretical basis for a determinate political option. The theory as it stands without addressing these issues will remain impotent, and politically vacuous. In regards to socialist strategy, there exists a problematic still with regards to questions of the role of the state. In the introduction to Chapter 1 I gave Laclau’s postmodern route—the move from class struggle to the multiplicity of ideological struggles for hegemony—as the object of analysis for this thesis. But in Žižek’s identification and parceling of those many ways in which academics have tried to theorize struggle today in light of the hegemony of global capitalism and liberal democracy, there is a demarcated line between those who accept the hegemony, and those who seek to resist it—albeit in different ways. If this ‘postmodern route’ of the theory of hegemony was to resist global capitalism and its supportive state power—what then is Laclau’s understanding of resistance to state power today? One would assume that in the call for a ‘deepening’ of liberal democracy in the ‘democratic direction’ – a number of things are taken for granted. Notably, again, while Laclau’s theory which ‘deepens’ democracy within the liberal democratic order—which hails the newly emergent multiplicity of political subjectivizations which emerge in postmodernity, it still relies on the fact that we “do *not* ask certain questions (about how to subvert capitalism...about the constitutive limits of political democracy and/or the democratic state as such)” (Butler, Laclau et al. 2000 p. 99). Thus

we have a particular domain of the state, that which has precise interventions in the economic, which remains unpoliticized. Why then has the theory of hegemony taken this more reformist stance towards the state?

The Universality of the State

In order to understand this ‘deepening’ of democracy and avoidance of state confrontation we have to look once again to the politico-philosophical origins, this time to the origins of Laclau’s conception of a ‘people’. In his recent book *On Populist Reason*, he writes,

The articulation between universality and particularity which is constitutively inherent to the construction of a ‘people’ is not something which takes place just at the level of words and images: it is also sedimented in practices and institutions.[...] [O]ur notion of ‘discourse’ [...] involves the articulation of words and actions, so that the quilting function is never a merely verbal operation but it embedded in material practices which can acquire institutional fixity. This is the same as saying that any hegemonic displacement should be conceived as a change in the configuration of the state, provided that the latter is conceived, not in a restrictive juridical sense as the public sphere, but in an enlarged Gramscian sense, as the ethico-political moment of the community. Any state will manifest that combination of particularism and universality which is inherent to the hegemonic operation (Laclau 2005 p. 106).

So we can see here that Laclau takes his cue from Gramsci, for whom there is a particularity which claims to constitute universality, while this universality can exist only in its particular embodiment. This articulation of both instances—between universality and particularity which is “inherent to the construction of a people” is a theoretical move shared by

both Gramsci and Laclau. What then for Laclau is the wrong philosophical move? He notes two instances, the Hegelian instance and the Marxian instance. “For Hegel, the sphere of the state is the highest form of universality achievable in the terrain of social ethics: bureaucracy is the universal class, while civil society—the system of needs is the realm of pure particularity. For Marx, the situation is reversed: the state is the instrument of the dominant class, and a ‘universal class’ can emerge only in a civil society that is reconciled with itself—one in which the state ... has necessarily to wither away” (Laclau 2005 p. 107). For Laclau, the problematic part of both of these scenarios is that the universal dimension and the particular dimension are kept separate, and never articulated together, thus the actors involved never constitute ‘a people’. But what is left out of this reading of Gramsci, Marx, and Hegel? *The confrontation with the state*. This confrontation is left out philosophically through Laclau’s operation on one level of universality. What do I mean by this? Well, in Etienne Balibar’s discussion of *fictive universality* he articulates this point by tracing the development from hegemony of religious universality to political universality. Balibar argues that Hegel’s “dialectic of history had no other object than precisely explaining how one great historical ‘fiction’, that of the universalistic church, could be substituted by another historical ‘fiction’, that of the secular rational institutions of the state [...], with equally universalistic aims” (Balibar 2002 p. 156). The credit to both the Hegelian and Marxian readings is that they show the limit of the imagination of this level of universality. With the Hegelian, we have universality as the political form of the state, with more or less play of religious attachments and memberships within this form. With the Marxian, we have a universality which is predicated upon the idea that universality is only attained outside the state form. The merit of the two former readings is that they involve the state in a way which is viewed as precarious. Laclau asserts that his theory of hegemony works with any given political

order, arguing that “there are many more forms of radical democracy which do not pass through the liberal scene”, but this theory still necessarily relies on an avoidance of state confrontation, existing within only this one form of universality—the form of the state (Avgitidou and Koukou 2008 p.88). This stance towards the state is not simply one grounded a disavowed history of the development of the capitalist state, but also a product of the relativization of struggle within the theory of hegemony. Within the theory, there is no ‘necessity’ for socialist strategy to rely on a Marxist state takeover and ‘withering away of the state’. Due to this ‘contingency’ of the particular struggle which is raised to the level of the universal, any concrete confrontation of state or state apparatuses—of any techniques or mechanisms— get subsumed by the formal logic of hegemony and the discursive functioning of ideology. The site of universality for Laclau is always that of the state. Therefore, any particular hegemony which discursively constitutes that site necessarily operates within this framework. Within this framework, the socialist struggle can never get beyond the form of the state, as it is the universality of the state which allows the formal logic of these particular struggles to operate.

The Horror of the State

In his lecture from *Security, Territory, Population* on 1 February 1978, Foucault makes the point that there is a fascination with either the love or the horror of the power that the state exercises. One of the manifestations of the horror of the state is the reductive view which reduces it to functions such as “development of the productive forces and the reproduction of the relations of production” (Foucault 2009 p. 109). In this view—the state maintains a primary role as the apparatus which needs to be attacked. This, Foucault argues, is ill conceived. He claims, “the state [...] does not have this unity, individuality, and rigorous functionality, nor [...] this importance” (Foucault 2009 p. 109). What our attention needs to be turned to, or “what is

important for our modernity”, is not the state’s takeover, but rather the ‘governmentalization’ of the state (Foucault 2009 p. 109). Okay, that is all well and fine. But, if governmentality is important for our modernity, how is it manifest? “[G]overnmentalization of the state is a particularly contorted phenomenon, since if the problems of governmentality and the techniques of government have really become the only political stake and the only real space of political struggle and contestation, the governmentalization of the state has nonetheless been what has allowed the state to survive”(Foucault 2009 p. 109).

So in the first, hypothetical view, we have a reductive state which sought only to maintain and create the relations of production in a given society—what might be called the Althusserian view of the state. In Foucault’s view we have a state which seeks to maintain its own stability through governmentalization with “population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument” (Foucault 2009 p. 108). So if the implicit problem for Foucault, for our present, is governmentalization of the state—where then does resistance lie? If what is to be attacked is not this reductive view of the state as the concentration of power, but rather the ‘techniques’ and ‘tactics’ of governmentalization—where does power lie? I would argue that today, this ‘governmentality’ with stability as its object is what is taken to be the form of the state already—and thus the state is seen as the contested arena for those decisions of the management of population. However, while this sort of view of the state is surely valid, it need not entail the reticence towards confrontation of the state as a strategy. That is to say, the shift from a view of the state with an aim which directly serves the ruling classes by maintaining the relations of production—and thus represses, to one in which the state operates from a distance with certain

mild interventions—a more productive power—does not necessitate a view of the state as a sort of neutral hegemonic tool without a high concentration of power invested in it.

So we can see that, in contemporary times, it is not necessarily this reductive view of the state maintaining and reproducing the relations of production, —but rather that this governmentalization of the state is already accepted as ‘real-political’. Thus the question becomes, if we seek to avoid this game of population and stability and government, what then do we have recourse to? Do we then have to practice an anarchic resistance from the interstices, pointing out inability of the state reach our demands? Does complicity with the state, or seizing state power, simply renounce any universal ethical call for universal demands/ struggle —on grounds that it is steeped in governmentality? I think not. Is not the class struggle, unlike all those particular struggles struggling to deepen democracy within a liberal democratic container, antagonistic to this very form of the political itself? I think this problematic of whether or not to ruthlessly take state power, due to the success, growth, and relative stability of liberal democracy and global capitalism since the 18th and 19th centuries, has caused what Foucault might refer to as a ‘block[age] for historical reasons’ (Foucault 2009 p. 101). That is to say—these successes have led to the present reticent view of state takeover in Laclau’s work—and the naturalization of the form of the liberal democratic state as the form of universality. If there is one lesson to be learned from our present economic situation, it is that the governmentalized state has always had a role in shaping how the overaccumulation tendencies of capitalism are to be expressed—and how these expressions are simply more deferrals of consciousness of its contradictory nature. This is why the postmodern discursive re-articulation which Laclau and Mouffe advocate as resistance to global capitalism and liberal democracy offer little in the way of strategy. It is a resistance which seeks to deepen liberal democracy in the democratic direction, —but there is

something inherently wrong with this strategy; —it still maintains the ideological distance of the economic from the political which is characteristic of liberalism. It is a resistance which takes global capitalism and liberal democracy as a given. It is a resistance which does not confront state power, acknowledge the primacy of the economic, or necessitate concrete political action. Worst of all, the theory itself becomes the ideology of that which it purports to strategize against—making it a prime example of the ‘necessary’ relation between material historical processes and ideas which the theory disavows—offering a universal thesis about politics which cannot comprehend its own grounding in the phase of late capitalism. So here we can understand why the turn to post-Marxism and Laclau and Mouffe’s radical democracy is one of the particular responses to this hegemony, but not a valid response for the Left. If we do not take seriously the continuities of capitalism as that constant which underlies the theoretical changes from the modern to the postmodern periods, we risk overlooking what has returned as the same in the new, and we risk the type of theorizing which universalizes the present circumstances, disavowing any connection to the concrete historical circumstances which led to that theorization. Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony operates on a level which forgets its own conditions of production, forgets the Left’s political defeats, and forgets all those material factors of the” increasingly profound penetration of capitalist relations of production in areas of social life” which led to their theory in the first place (Laclau and Mouffe 1987 p. 80). If discursive re-articulation is going to have any merit—it has to keep in mind the ways in which to remain analytically productive while maintaining a self-aware and critical political position.

Direction

The goal of this writing is to bring to light all those failures inherent to Laclau's theory of hegemony in order to better understand why post-Marxism—as embodied in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and subsequent works—has not taken root as a viable text for positioning socialist strategy today. I have argued throughout that without certain necessary tenets of Laclau's theory of hegemony being supplemented by Foucault and Žižek, the theory fails to give concrete political direction or the critical ideological analysis that might lead to one.

This has been the result of a number of theoretical moves on Laclau's part. In waging a theoretical war against essentialist Marxism on post-structuralist grounds—Laclau has obfuscated and made impotent key Marxist categories of determination and objective interests, as well as eliminating any necessity of class struggle as the fundamental social antagonism—all this without attempting to rearticulate a post-structuralist version of the primacy of these categories. In performing an ontological shift from traditional ideology and Foucauldian discourse analysis to a post-structuralist ontology and critique of ideology—Laclau sweeps aside the necessary distinctions for critical political analysis of ideology—eliminating Foucault's distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive. As a result of this move, the historical processes of identity formation are leveled—rendering any critique of ideology ultimately groundless. All these results are borne of this ontological shift—but what about the shift itself?

In looking at this new ontology—this anti-essentialist theory and critique of ideology—we find that Laclau ignores the flipside of ideology noted by Lacan, over-rapid historicization. This particularly fatal mistake results in Laclau's lack of a posited critical politics inherent to his theory, his disavowal of the historical contingency of his *own* theory rooted in the society of Late Capitalism, his ignorance of the primacy of class struggle, as well as his ability to see beyond the

state form of universality itself. In moving beyond the deadlock between essentialist Marxism and post-structuralism, a re-articulation *must* be made which accounts for and remedies these failures. And in positing socialist strategy from a non-essentialist discourse, one must account for their position of enunciation while *actually* strategizing action with explicit ends.

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