



A Political Answer to Questions of Struggle

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review of:

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edition. London: Verso. (PB: pp. 240, £13, ISBN 1859843301)

Introduction

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (HSS) was first published in 1985. A new edition was published in 2001 with a preface by the two authors, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Last year Verso, their publisher, organised a seminar for the presentation of the new edition. The two authors with, amongst others Renata Salecl, Nancy Fraser, Robin Blackburn, Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, convened at the Tate Modern in London to discuss the impact and the significance of the book, sixteen years after its first publication. I participated in the seminar with two colleagues. We enjoyed very much such a live performance. It was indeed a ‘tasteful’ seminar. As a type of commercial, divulgatory activity, it was critical enough, passionate enough, academic enough. More than anything it was ‘red’ enough, reflecting the colour of the lecture theatre where the seminar was held. No blood shedding, no revolution, inside or outside the room, but an awareness that here there was something spelling out why we can still take action or, as Mouffe put it, why we can still stand up and ask ‘awkward’ questions. She meant by this the questions that cannot be answered within the dominant system, i.e. what is assumed as transparent, necessary status quo. Mouffe in particular forcefully elaborated this ‘questioning’ for displacing the ‘there is no alternative’ dogma. The example she discussed was globalisation. This provided an interesting illustration of a reality established by *necessary* market forces, corporate enjoyment, flexibility and general progress for all. She reminded us of the need to propose alternatives that can be built by displacing the terms of the ineluctable historical and economic necessity that seems to be at the ‘basis’ of the reality of globalisation.

While it is not the scope of this piece to enter into the details of the discussion at the Tate, I am just proposing a few hints that I think are important to understand their position in political theory and practice. Laclau and Mouffe offer a political answer to

the crisis of dominant, rationalistic narrative of the social, and try to propose a fresh view to the reality of political struggle and social change.

Their thinking, first jointly shaped in HSS in 1985, has been re-cast, in the introduction to the second edition, in the light of their subsequent more or less separate work (see Mouffe, 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Laclau, 1990, 1996; Laclau in Butler et al., 2000). So one finds specifications on social antagonism or the importance of the Master signifier or the retroactive role of decisions, etc. The most important aspect of the new preface to the new edition is their critique of those who wanted to reduce their work to that of 'identity politics'. In their usual hyperbolic way Laclau and Mouffe answer such reductions by rejecting the dichotomy 'redistribution' vs. 'recognition'. Unsurprisingly, they refute the notion of politics as either being a matter of political economy (with its essentialist notion of class-struggle) or a matter of struggles for the recognition of (particular) subjectivities, the so called 'identity politics' (Žižek, 1999: 3). This is one of their fundamental points – Laclau and Mouffe offer their theory of hegemony 'against' the simple dichotomy of either/or (see also Fraser, 1997).

The theory of hegemony is the 'centrepiece' of their original contribution, as a way out, or better in Lacanian terms, a way to 'live with' the deadlock engendered within and discursively expressed in, the opposition between Modernism/Postmodernism, structure/agency, Rationalism/Post-rationalism, global emancipation/micro (local) emancipation. And if it is (not) a matter of either/or one can consider that there is more than a chance to make a difference in the light of something that, as we shall see, they call radical and plural democracy.

To put it in other terms, Laclau and Mouffe attempt to demonstrate that once everything became discourse does not 'necessarily' imply any of the three reactions:

1. Retrieval from political activism and analysis and exercise of 'purist ironism';
2. Reduction of engagement to local, particularistic struggles; or
3. Re-placement of new foundation in the same transcendental guise that the (Derridean) Event displaced.

Rather, by addressing the ontological dimension of discourse they propose an understanding of politics as an hegemonic terrain in which the irreducible openness of the social is stabilised in articulations around Master-signifiers, which retroactively establish the meaning of the hegemonic formation itself, by *questioning* subjects in(to) an intelligible order (HSS, 2001: vii-xix). There are two points to be added to this condensed version of the new preface to their work. The first is the contingent character of the hegemonic articulation. Its necessity is established by means of the articulation itself, i.e. there is no transcendental order that guarantees that articulation. In particular, a hegemonic formation is achieved in the dialectic between logic of difference and logic of equivalence by which a (particular) subject occupies the (empty) space of the 'universal'. The second aspect to be considered is the condition of any hegemonic articulation, what we have described as the openness of the social. This is the inherently antagonistic character of the social which is the (impossible) discursive realisation of an irreducible negativity, a kernel that cannot be symbolised or better that 'presents' us with the limit of any symbolisation, i.e. a leftover to any order, codification,

structuration, legislation – what we understand as ‘objective’ social reality. Antagonism is in other words the condition *sine qua non* of hegemonic politics.

As is indicated in the title the point of the book is to rethink the *strategy* of the politics of the Left. In particular HSS answers “the necessity of redefining the *project* of the Left in terms of a ‘radicalisation’ of democracy” (ibid: xv). “Radical and plural democracy”, they continue, “was conceived as a new stage in the deepening of the ‘democratic revolution’, as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wide range of social relations”. This means that the Left should re-think its role, constructed following Marxism, around the interest of the privileged agent of social change (the working class), and work with(in) an hegemonic logic that would entail the creation of a chain of equivalences among democratic struggles against different forms of subordination (at work, as between sexes for example), in order to build a new hegemony. Such hegemony could not only counter and weaken, in defensive terms, the current liberal-capitalist complacency (Eagleton, 1995: 37) but actually displace it by showing how it is sedimented in relations of power. This is another way of pointing out why ‘redistribution’ and ‘recognition’ are not mutually exclusive. As they argue, such a move goes hand in hand with the creation of a new imaginary of what it means to live together in relations with others.

This is the theoretical/political apparatus that enables Laclau and Mouffe to re-inscribe ‘politics’ and struggle for emancipatory practices into the agenda. This is done by taking on board the anti-essentialist stance of post-structuralist critique. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is a political and social theory of clear post-structuralist inspirations that works for a political strategy. In other words, it is partisan and committed to a project of the Left, which in its institutional outlets is lost in a deep crisis or have embraced spurious and highly dangerous pragmatist views.

By rehearsing their arguments one can, on one hand, offer a reading of their ideas and on the other hand, indicate connections with debates in Organisation Theory. This is what I will do in the next few pages. In particular I refer to various criticisms of Laclau and Mouffe as a way of discussing the main points of their theory of hegemony and their notion of radical democratic politics. In the first part I touch upon the ‘curse of intellectual malady’ put on Laclau and Mouffe by (certain) ‘traditionalist’ reactions to their deconstructive endeavour (Geras, 1990). This is to discuss their work of the Marxist tradition and the significance of hegemony. Then I illustrate their notion of hegemony as a radicalisation of Gramscian thinking and the valence of deconstruction. This is to open up their view of politics and its relation to the democratic imaginary. In this process I consider the critique attached to the fear of relinquishing the ‘vision’ of ‘just society’ (Eagleton, 1996: ix) that is supposedly attached to anti-foundational knowledge. I also discuss their politics particularly in the light of criticism that sees their work as a continuation of the project of liberal capitalism while altering some of its traditional assumptions about the subject (Bertram, 1995: 85). In this process I refer mainly to HSS but also to other readings of their production.

Whose Marxism?

The main point of various criticisms, sometimes so fierce that they verge on becoming a personal attack (see Geras, 1990; Veltmeyer, 2000; and Hunter, 1988), are around their rejection of what Barrett, calls the “axioms of Marxism: particularly with regard to the relationships between class, ideology, and political discourse” (1991: 80). Using Laclau and Mouffe’s own metaphor, one can say that in 1985 this is realised by embarking on a journey that, by engaging with the concept of hegemony, ‘ends’, making explicit the emergency of a contingent logic of the political (HSS: 2) which displaces the teleological aspects of Marxism.

HSS traces “the genealogy of the concept of hegemony” (p. 7) ending up being a deconstruction of Marxist tradition. Via a dense analysis of the exponents of the Second and Third International, they recuperate, to use Derridean terminology, the structurality of this structure (Derrida, 1978: 280), demonstrating how Marxism was produced as a necessary and universal knowledge, as the science of ineluctable laws. On the one hand, this guaranteed the necessary character of the development of the social in the sense of a forthcoming class unity and the advent of a transparent power-free society. On the other, its adoption could ‘certify’ the reading of the social in the same direction. This means that all signs of variance from the expected ‘model’ of the social and inexplicable relations were read as contingent (but complementary) moments in the transition to what was the necessary unfolding of History (HSS: 19-22). This episteme, in most authors, had its centre in a deterministic, naturalist conception of the economy and/or in the ontological primacy of the working class as the privileged agent of struggle.

Hegemony: What's in a Name?

To clarify what has been defined as a caricatured and impoverished account of Marxism (Geras, 1990: 72), it might be useful to point out that their deconstructive endeavour centres on the history of Marxism as answer to its own crisis – the ‘why’ and ‘how’ the unity of the working class was proving problematic, making rather difficult the advent of the revolution against Capital in Western Europe; and why and how the revolution happened as it did in Russia. It is in this history that ‘hegemony’ emerged as the name for the *contingent*. Hegemony is the opposite of the ‘expected’, necessary unfolding of History. It was unnamed and negative in Western Europe. The fragmentation and disunity of the working class was signalled there as a mere transience, a *contingent* moment to be overcome via all sort of mediations and semi-autonomous mechanisms. It was positive and named in Russia; where ‘hegemony’ became the name of the new relation at the basis of what was then called the combined and uneven development of capitalism. Hegemony, however, was understood as a *complementary* moment that enabled the explanation of special, extraordinary empirical circumstances ‘external’ to the real nature of class relations (HSS: 49-54). Hegemony became, in other words, the condition of possibility (and at the same time, hidden impossibility) of Marxist readings of social reality as *historical necessity*. Hegemony is the supplement for contingency that, in Laclau and Mouffe’s reading, is not secluded to a moment of negativity of historical dialectic, a mere transition to a higher order of society, but an always already

present impurity of the contradictory coherence of Marxism as a discourse of the structuration of the social. This is their ticket for a theorisation of contingency, where the primacy of the political is proposed and theorised.

What has made possible the history of Marxism is the inherent duality and ambiguity in Marx's text between "the economic determinism and the ethical orientation of socialism, between economism and the primacy of politics, even between the scientific and ideological component of the theory" (Laclau, 1996: 67). In other words, the history of Marxism as a continuous attempt to clarify and escape, by means of introducing concepts such as 'mediation' and 'relative autonomy', the charges of class reductionism and epiphenomenalism (see Torfig, 1999). As Laclau and Mouffe argue, Marxists of the Second and Third International maintained intact a necessary view of history as rational totality. Specifically, they argue that Kautsky kept a strict materialist view based on the determinist relation of base/superstructure. Bernstein broke with this determinism and gave rise to a conception of widened autonomy of the political. This autonomy was conceived as contingent space for the working class that was, however, re-cast within a evolutionary conception of progress; Sorel with his Bergsonian and Nietzschean inspiration, totally left behind a conception of the necessary development of history based on the laws of economy or a *telos* of progress. He considered the social as *mélange* where relations were not following a determinate path, but where the 'will' of the agent was the most significant engine of change. The conception of struggle was moved in the political, contingent terrain. Nonetheless, Laclau and Mouffe argue, this had a unified character in so far as there was *one* myth of the social, the general strike, that could work as a horizon of identification of the working class.

It should, however, be clear that Laclau and Mouffe's work is not to seize Marxism or its tradition as the object of *their* antagonism because they see it as an obstacle to an unspecified 'socialist pluralism' that they supposedly advocate (cf. Clegg, 1989: 183). Rather their act is further reaching as is the notion of deconstruction they use. In other words, their book is not showing (their) antagonism to the Marxist tradition, as if one day they woke up after having worked strenuously within this episteme for years and were suddenly against it. But rather by deconstructing the duality, ambiguity and binding of the Marxist tradition or Marxist texts (Laclau, 1990; Laclau in Butler et al., 2000) they are making explicit, giving space, opening a surface of inscription to the antagonism of the social, i.e. a radical negativity that cannot be subsumed, relocated, absorbed in any episteme and order as such, nor in Marxism, nor in any structuration of the social. Deconstruction is not only a literary move but is an instrument for politics.

Turning back to hegemony, the name as theorised and developed by Gramsci is based on a proposition of the social and its subjects – the organic bloc and collective wills - as 'accomplished' in contingent articulations rather than as a fulfilment of something already present *in nuce*. In another words, Gramsci, for Laclau and Mouffe, breaks with dualism and a deterministic view of the social. Via a further radicalisation of his thinking, which passes through a critique of economism (HSS: 75-85), it is possible to rethink politics and 'reactivate', as they say, Marxist categories. Politics therefore becomes invested with the hegemonic logic through which social formation as 'discursive' formation are created and subjects maintained. This is for them an *existential*, i.e. regards not only the ontic, which can be studied in, for example, the

assurgency of new social movements that cannot be understood within Marxist categories, but is also a new 'ontological paradigm'.

It is by starting this journey that dislocatory events of the historical conjuncture in which the book was originally situated, like the crisis of social-democracy (i.e. cuts and progressive disappearance of the welfare state), the rise of neo-liberalism, the crisis of communism (which proved all its depth in the immediate following years), and the assurgency of new social movements – feminism, protest movements of ethnic, national and sexual minorities, anti-institutional ecology struggles, anti-nuclear movements – could be theorised in their specificity. Laclau and Mouffe describe as 'schizophrenic' those moments in which an increasing heterogeneity of the social could not be subsumed in the categories offered both by the classical Left or the liberal-conservative ethos that remained wedded to traditional (e.g. family, church, etc.) values. 'Dislocation' was the name given to such a condition in which a 'surplus' arises as the 'inexplicable' of a conjuncture, which is expressed in all sorts of unpredictable and unmasterable effects (Laclau, 1990). This is why, unsurprisingly, they end up concentrating their effort on recasting the traditional Marxist understanding of the working class as the privileged subject of social struggle. Within a hegemonic politics there is not an ontological or privileged 'agent' of struggle – an agent that pre-exists the struggle itself, but it emerges in a contingent articulation which 'names' the subjects of struggles, their enemies and their strategies. Obviously, recasting the social as discursive formation obtained in the contingent terrain of hegemonic politics loses the certainties (even feeble and proving more difficult to maintain, like the assurgency of the working class *qua* structurally determined 'subject') on which many Marxists find it still possible to think of social change and emancipation. This is why Laclau and Mouffe have been disregarded as revisionist, obscurantist and their intervention boxed as a product of an intellectual malady (Geras, 1990: 64, 71).

The Political

Anti-essentialism is the intellectual malady to which Geras refers (1990: 71). Re-reading the book today from beginning to end one can concede that 'anti-essentialism' appears as a heavy and tired trope. Although such a criticism was obviously not intended against the rhetorical implant of the book, it was a reaction to the profound challenge to the actual foundation and the status of Marxist and mainstream knowledge of the social. However, proposing and arguing for an understanding of reality as having no ground other than its own condition of structuration, with nothing external to itself – a transcendental – that could grant its validity, was, and still is, the most important contribution of the book. In 1985, it was also a theoretically fresh message.

It is important, however, to focus on Laclau and Mouffe's main attempt to propose a view that takes us into a radically new theorisation of the social. Laclau and Mouffe, in 1985, construct an apparatus that theorises the contingency we have described earlier, by questioning the Hegelian totality and developing Althusser's notion of overdetermination. The results of this operation is that the social is understood as openness that cannot ever be totally mastered and closed in a final suture (HSS: 93-

105). At that point their analysis meets with a number of contemporary currents of thought that can help them to face the consequences of having erased society as a valid object of discourse, i.e. a single underlying principle fixing – and hence constituting – the whole field of differences (HSS: 111). Laclau and Mouffe, building upon Derrida's critique of the sign, approach 'discourse' as an ontological tool pointing at the open, undecidable (yet decided) structuration of the social which never reaches a final moment of closure. Is this representable they ask? The answer is yes, and this (impossible) representation is antagonism. Antagonism is a subversion of the social as a positive, intelligible totality. It is the experience of the limits to any structuration, order, symbolisation, legislation. Antagonism shows the inherently negative, contingent feature of the social because it poses (and at the same time denies) the social as a full and positive objectivity/identity. In other words, the social always has a 'constitutive outside'. What antagonism stands for is the (im)possibility of representing an inherent lack, and the desire and anxiety of closure, which is, in other words, the (infinite) play of our condition of finitude (HSS: 122-127; Laclau, 1990; Laclau in Butler et al., 2000: 76-77). As we have pointed out earlier, Derridean as well as Lacanian moves are at work here, despite the dispute on the status (see Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000), for Laclau and Mouffe they point at the primacy of the political and its ontological valence. 'Being' does not have any metaphysical or transcendental origin or end but is constituted through this contingent (still necessary within its constitution) articulation – that is hegemony.

Laclau and Mouffe analyse the discursive construction of antagonism, highlighting how it is played in the terms of logic of equivalence and difference. This is because as Laclau (in Butler et al., 2000) puts it, this is the only raw material available: the differential structural location shaping the symbolic field (ibid: 77). The logic of equivalence is that of condensation in which the field is divided into us/them, creating the enemy against which (radically different) but equivalent subjects can struggle constituting themselves against the common enemy. The logic of difference is, instead, the emergency of identities established in their substitution with others. They call the first 'popular struggle' – colonised/coloniser, fascist/antifascist, etc. The second 'democratic struggles' such as the social movements of the Twentieth century: feminist, gay, anti-nuclear, anti-racist, etc. which are substitutions with the notion of equality of human rights. Their theory of hegemony works bringing these logics together making sense of how the social is 'criss-crossed by antagonism'. This view points at the plurality and multiplicity of relations of subordination that are, or can become, sites of antagonism and open the possibility of working for emancipatory practices.

Laclau and Mouffe are putting forward in all its implication the notion of the 'combined and uneven development' that was supposed to explain why certain classes were fulfilling a task that did not belong to themselves. In its first theorisation, as we have seen, these were considered a complementary moment that, as Laclau and Mouffe argued, in itself showed exactly the limits of the inscription, symbolisation that made it possible, i.e. Marxism. The 'task', that in onto-teleological politics is given from the outset to a 'specially chosen' subject of antagonism, in hegemonic politics, comes to the fore when the subjects emerge in the act of decision in which a (particular) subject incarnates the (universal) subject of struggle. In fact, arguably their theory of radical democracy and hegemony becomes more refined when articulated within the debate of

the particular/universal debate. The main point to be considered is that 'universality' is realised, maintaining that the object that occupies the (empty) space of the universal also always 'holds' its particular identity. To put it in the terms of the (im)possible decisions which are at the basis of hegemonic articulation, as Laclau has argued, the fact is that *this* decision is always still *a* decision (Laclau in Mouffe, 1996: 54-60).

What is important to consider is their argument of why this is not the site of another possible totalitarianism. We can do so by following their arguments that re-inscribe socialism within the imaginary of the 'democratic revolution' rather than seeing it as separate. However before discussing this aspect in more detail and linking it more directly to Eagleton's point of the need for a 'vision of just society', I would like to make a point on the notion of discourse.

Discourse or 'Just Talk'?

Perhaps it is obvious to many that opening up a theorisation of the contingent, undecidable, incomplete character of the social does not mean extinguishing the notion of structure asserting that we, suddenly, find ourselves living in a continuous fluidity where there is 'just talk'. The elaboration of a theory of discourse, in this particular instance with its deconstructionist/Lacanian insertion, does not imply that, for example, we could simply talk emancipation out of reality (cf. Acroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). As discourse theorists (Torfig, 1999), there has been an attempt to criticise Laclau and Mouffe's theory within a linguistic reduction of the concept of discourse and to inscribe them into the realism/idealism debate (Geras, 1987). Laclau and Mouffe clarify this point from the outset – defining discourse as a structured, meaningful configuration which combines linguistic and non-linguistic acts, and rejecting the distinction between discursive and non-discursive – but clearly it did not work. So they proposed, in 1987, another answer to such criticisms, that, as we know, are also directed to many in the field of Organisation Theory who would tend to use the word 'discourse'. I here briefly rehearse them, following Torfig's distinctions (1999: 95):

1. Discourse does not deny the existence of material reality. Referring to the social as discursive does not mean to extinguish the existence of social or natural objects. For example a stone can be constructed as a projectile or as an object of aesthetic contemplation, but it is still the same physical object.
2. Discourse is not a linguistic category. Laclau and Mouffe proposed Wittgenstein's example of laying bricks and also the one of football. Let's use the latter, funnier one. 'If I kick a spherical object in the street or if I kick a ball in a football match, the physical fact is the same, but its meaning is different. The object is a football only to the extent that it establishes a system of relations with other objects, and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the object but are rather constructed.
3. Discourse is about action as much as it is about meaning. Wittgenstein is used again, to include the performative as well as semantic aspect of any signification. In other words all actions have a meaning, and to produce and disseminate meaning is to act.

Political...Conclusions

I wish to focus on what are the implications and opportunities opened up by a theory that is built upon the contingency of the social and its political nature. Laclau and Mouffe have been almost considered heretics for having rejected the ontological centrality of the working class in the struggle for emancipation, for 'turning' to discourse and its limit in order to understanding the social and its structuration with its real effects. In summary, for having taken to its consequences a thorough anti-essentialism into Marxism as grand narrative. But their theory, it could be argued, is interesting and worth considering, exactly because of that. In this respect it is possible to find some connections with a long-standing discussion on the same issue in Organisation Theory. What has been described in the introduction as a 'deadlock of representation', and its implications for radical critique, has been addressed in Organisation and Management Studies in various debates – from Organisation Theory to the specificity of Labour Process Theory. Often the debate has been played within the Modernism/Postmodernism distinction. However, there has been very limited consideration of Laclau and Mouffe's writing. Moreover, when attention has been paid to their theory, it has been rehearsed in Foucauldian fashion (see Clegg, 1989; 2001; Willmott, 1997). It is indubitable that there are points of contact with the Foucauldian 'tradition', but there are also many points of disagreement – another paper would be the space for such a reflection.

What might be interesting at this point is, rather, to show more specifically how their theory contributes to such a debate. First of all, there is the question of on what ground can radical critique be accomplished when we do not have a (transcendental) ground on which this critique could be based (see Parker, 1995). The other obvious consequence of the 'missing ground' is that because we do not have such a ground we cannot speak of emancipation. To put it bluntly this is because emancipation is linked with the Enlightenment project which, imbued with rationalism, has shown the totalitarian seeds attached to any emancipatory project of human liberation and awareness (see Burrell, 2001). Following Laclau and Mouffe's arguments, however, radical critique and political engagement that work for emancipatory practice are not *despite* but rather *because* of what Parker calls 'epistemic impurity' (and its conditions). In other words, one should not conclude that the epistemological failure of classical totalising discourses should be transformed into an ontological condition of what is going on in our social world (Laclau in Butler et al., 2000: 301). The notion of emancipation in this type of political logic is obviously different from the idea of accomplishment of a power-free, transparent society. Nonetheless emancipation works as important, if not even as a fundamental 'horizon' for the elaboration of critique. Let's see the points that sustain this assertion.

The first point is that post-transcendental politics do not deny the existence of a 'ground'. Quite the opposite, as we have seen and will seek to clarify in the next few paragraphs. For any matter we can think or speak of, there is a 'ground' that is always there which is limited and always subverted. To put it in other words, to assert the contingency of any objectivity (the social) should not be taken as 'everything become contingent' where we find ourselves living in a fluid and dispersed and fragmented reality. This would seize contingency as mere 'absence of necessity', and negativity as

the opposite of full positivity, which would be re-posing the same metaphysical argument it is contesting but with an opposite sign, so to speak. Rather, as Laclau puts it, “contingency is the element of impurity which deforms and hinders its full constitution” (1990: 27). So the point is not the ‘replacement’ of a totally united, positive universe with a totally fragmented, negative one. But it is to consider the limits of any positivity (objectivity) showing how any objectivity is always contaminated, constituted as it is as decision taken out of a structural undecidability, rather than internal law of becoming. The social is not impossible but is (im)possible. Deconstruction shows the (im)possibility of the constitution of the social with the experience of the undecidables. It is by going through the undecidability of the social that decisions are taken, subjects emerge and practices are established/perpetuated (Laclau in Mouffe, 1996b). Therefore deconstruction becomes a fundamental instrument for politics as the “practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations” (HSS: 153).

The ‘Horizon’ of Democratic Emancipation

What is the connection between deconstruction as critical genealogy (Derrida, 1996), the conception of hegemonic politics and the project for rethinking (the possibilities of) emancipatory practices as strategies of the Left? Laclau and Mouffe develop this connection by going back to the significance of ‘democracy’. They embrace Lefort’s view that democracy, with the French Revolution and ‘the Chart of Rights of Man’, engendered a different experience of the institution of the social. Democracy, giving primacy to the will of the ‘people’, breaks with an experience of the social as an expression of something *extra*-social, a theological political logic – i.e. guaranteed/ordered/organised by the person of the ‘Sovereign’ – the unity of Power, Law and Knowledge. Obviously the experience of the social without a ‘Sovereign’, which provides a unity with its condition of existence in a metaphysical order, always carries risks with it. On the one hand, there is emergence of totalitarianism – the attempt to re-establish the lost ‘order’ and unity by ‘forgetting’ and denying its contingency and its negativity and ‘emptiness’, which could be represented as Order (vs. Chaos). And on the other hand, the production of a chaotic flux of social elements dispersed and fragmented. Democracy is understood to occupy a precarious point or space between these extremes. Fundamental to this understanding is that it is within the ‘democratic imaginary’ as Laclau and Mouffe call it, that new antagonisms could be articulated. New social movements can in this way be understood within their own specificity as an enlargement of the ideals of liberty and equality that were first systematically produced in the French Revolution – substitutions in a differential chain. So while Laclau and Mouffe see a certain continuity between the struggles against the *ancien régime* and the strive for recognition and egalitarianism, they also point out the discontinuity of new struggles that originate within the unmasterable dislocatory effects of capitalism (commodification of wider social relations, bureaucratisation, etc.).

This has two consequences. On the one hand, the socialist struggle can be considered as part of this democratic imaginary. In particular Laclau and Mouffe argue that socialism, in its Marxist connotation, replaced the equivalential logic of ‘people vs. *ancien régime*’, with a class distinction ‘labour vs. capital’. Class functioned as a nodal point for the creation of an equivalential chain in which very diverse subjects were articulated

as subjects of the struggle against Capital. However these struggles were different in various historical junctures (from Russia, to China, to Italy before the Second War World or in the late 1960s and 1970s), while class nonetheless became an ossified truth. This entails the idea that first there is 'class' (established as it was, at the level of the economy) and then the identification of subjects with their structural position, *hence*, class struggle. Or if you prefer, first there is class, then class interest and then 'recognition' of this interest. If this did not happen, it is because something went wrong in this process, such as ideological seductions of the ruling class, hence the introduction of 'false consciousness'. Laclau and Mouffe argue that 'class', understood in such ossified guise is based on the Jacobinian myth of a revolution that would find the social anew as a transparent and power-free society. However, this is not only an impossible concept because it would deny the very basis of its constitution, i.e. power arising by the incompleteness of the social. Furthermore 'class', as in proletarian class, has lost its historical value as a nodal point exactly because of its ossification of privileged, pre-existing subjects which has made impossible for other antagonisms to articulate themselves with it. In other words, not all antagonism could be re-absorbed at a class level.

It is, however, important to avoid some drastic reactions. On one hand, what Eagleton summarises as "the intellectual dishonesty of pretending that Marxism is a living political reality or that the prospects for socialist change, for the moment, at least, are anything but exceedingly remote" (1996: ix). The same disbelief, it seems to me, is felt by others in our field. For example, commentators in the labour process debate have abandoned the idea of revolutionary struggle and find themselves incapable, within a structuralist, economist frame, to even conceptualise struggles with a universal character rather than 'simple' local demands which can be manifested as mis-behaviours (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Or others, as Laclau's notes on Žižek reveal, are trying to recuperate 'class' as a more fundamental concept because "it takes place at the root of the capitalist system" (Laclau in Butler et al., 2000: 292). Again, *as if*, by default this would generate a possible 'identification' and hence a universal struggle. In other words, rejecting an ossified notion of class and a structuralist version of struggle (based on the assumption of an intrinsic antagonistic contradiction) does not imply an acceptance of the current status quo (neo-liberal capitalism). Rather it offers the opportunity for a new radical understanding of struggle that enables the reading of new subject positions that are coming into being proposing a varied and polymorphous anti-capitalism.

Laclau and Mouffe in fact re-cast socialism within the democratic imaginary and therefore as a dimension in the struggle for equality and liberty. They commend that the only alternative for the Left is to position itself within the horizon of what can be called radical and plural democracy. In this view capitalist relations of production are obvious sites of subordination maintained, as many studies have shown in different ways (the technologies of Human Resource Management and corporate culture, to give examples). However, relations of production are not by default sites of struggle. Antagonism can arise because of what subjects are (and can be) via all sorts of identifications that are available in the formation in which relations of production are and become intelligible. Talking of capitalism in abstract does not make sense. If we take as a target neo-liberal

capitalism then it is within an understanding of equality extended to the economic sphere that we can recuperate a notion in which capitalism is understood as exploitative.

Today there seems to be a growing number of people concerned with the distribution of wealth, self-determination of how to use land, resources, etc. These are struggles articulated against multinationals and neo liberal trade and, at the moment, they seem to have very little to do with the traditional 'working class'. Still they articulate an anti-capitalism in the name of fairness, justice and equality, challenging radically the basis of what parliamentary democracy has become – liberal democracy. They are calling, it seems to me, for a radical approach to democracy that, on one hand, Laclau and Mouffe help us to understand and theorise in its specificity. On the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe's ideas of hegemonic politics enter 'life', even if obviously they cannot ever be prescriptive about it. It would be reductive to explain these seeds of antagonism as another of those contingent moments of history. Even worse would be to develop an attitude, particularly for the Leftist that lived through the '68, of cynicism of the sort of 'have been there, done that'. In other words to reduce these struggles to the fantasies of a few thousand idealist youngsters. In Italy the movement that is going on in the streets by millions at the moment does not have a traditional class character as it is understood in Britain, still around the issues of waged labour a wider political subject might emerge that incarnates today very different demands. Probably so wide that it is not meaningful anymore, that is why some leaders have started to call for the idea of 'rights', a concept that, if associated in the mind of many with liberal views, comes to mean something very different in the strategic moves of the leader of the biggest Trade Union in Italy. The defence of the rights of few in the labour market comes to incorporate the universal notion of right for equality and freedom at work, in the public sphere of the media and in the decisions regarding the *res publica*. Gramsci has shown that the strongest ideas are not necessarily the ideas of the strongest, leaving us with the notion of collective wills, a concept that today makes more sense than in any other historic moment. The Left (whatever that might come to mean, here I am in the terrain of conjecture and vision) should have, when re-inscribed in the democratic imaginary, something to do with the articulation of such a will.

So as Laclau and Mouffe suggest, in the moment in which the 'end of ideology' has been 'accomplished', the Left should act strategically and displace the political horizon of neo-liberal politics, rather than simply accept the terms of the game and move to the centre of pragmatics politics with its cleansing of any notion of antagonism (the Third Way), or propose again a politics that, paraphrasing Barrett, clings to the hope that one morning the working class comes to its senses (1991: 61). The notion that Laclau and Mouffe wish to continue the project of liberal capitalism is totally misleading (cf. Bertram, 1985). Today's 'identity politics' should not be seen as functional to neo-liberal capitalism and looked at as mere 'distraction'. Rather, it should remind us of the many antagonistic fields that now are fragmented in particularistic demands, but that could be re-articulated by a politics of the Left working within the democratic imaginary that could re-create a new hegemony. When Laclau and Mouffe talk of the creation of a collective will it is always done within a particular understanding of the universal, as we have seen earlier. In other words what is at stake it is not the creation of a new 'solid foundation'. This is because the democratic imaginary, given that it is simply the equivalential displacement of the egalitarian imaginary to ever more

extensive social relations, as such is only a logic of elimination of relations of subordination and inequalities, therefore cannot be the 'founding' moment for the reconstitution of the social fabric. In the experience of democracy, the space of the 'Sovereign' is an empty one – a gap. However, and this is the other important aspect, this space is not suddenly cancelled out of existence but keeps functioning as the space of universality and necessity. This is where the radical theory of hegemony comes in, as equivalential chain in which different demands recognised themselves as equivalent in their fight against an enemy that in the plural democracy is transformed into an adversary (Mouffe, 1999), and in which one subject incorporates the role of the universal without nonetheless ever losing its own particularistic character. This is, in other words, the construction of the Gramscian collective will. This is, Laclau and Mouffe argue, the place for a real alternative of the Left.

Laclau and Mouffe create a surface of inscription for the strategy of the Left where deconstruction is the mode of a critical analysis for "grasping the nature of power relations and the dynamics of politics" (HSS: xix) and hegemony the logic for the establishment of social division on a meaningful basis (something that can be understood with Marx as a 'general crime' – see Laclau in Butler et al., 2000: 302) where the articulation of equivalencies (with the democratic imaginary) around Master signifiers retroactively establishes a vision of the type of organisation the social might have. This should be an answer for those, like Eagleton (1996), who worry that post-tele-ontological politics means abandoning the vision of a 'just' society, in other words assuming an anti-utopianism.

I find Laclau and Mouffe's work an extraordinary theoretical endeavour and a political auspice. Their work, so far, has been rather descriptive and highly theoretical, I do not personally consider this a pitfall, but many lament its very abstract level, and even Laclau himself has endorsed the criticism and is committed to restore the balance in his future writing. However, it seems to me that in the new preface they, more strongly than ever, pose the urgency for the Left to engage with hegemonic struggles, rather than being, as it has been so far, transformistically incorporated in the system. The challenge, given also the central stage that the far Right is taking in becoming the agent that is articulating the anxieties and insecurities of the privileged inhabitant of the 'Old World', needs to create a new articulation with democratic demands and a plural and democratic politics, which can offer a democratic rather than xenophobic point of identification. This is to be intended also to disrupt the generally unchallenged role of multinational companies that, as Laclau and Mouffe write in their new preface, with zealous impetus "attempt to impose their power over the entire planet" and call for "a vision about what could be a different way of organising social relations, one which restores the centrality of politics over the tyranny of market forces" (HSS: xix).

Obviously they are not prophets and it is obvious they cannot 'announce the messiah'. However, it seems to me clear that they are not aligning themselves with the neo-liberal agenda but, on the contrary they are amongst a few scholars who are proposing a theory of the social that can actually conceptualise a persuasive idea of struggle and social change without going back to an essential agent. In particular they recuperate the idea of emancipations which constructs, through political actions, the subjects which have to be emancipated. It is also proposing a way of why and how those who have identified

traditionally with the politics of the Left can still be actively involved in radical critique as part of the deepening of the democratic imaginary as well as counterpoising with outrage what is today proposed as the results of 'decisions' that did not have any alternative. We have seen much of these – from the 'war against evil' to the latest manufacturing company that moves to the Far East, to the managerialisation and privatisation of social services to the indifference for the collapse of forgotten states and population. This is not to be as we say in Italian *qualunquisti*, but it is to remind myself, if not others, that the situation is not OK! It is actually bad and deteriorating. Recuperating and radicalising the Gramscian notion of hegemonic politics, the radical possibilities of deconstruction, which places the project of the Left within the impossibility of the order that is nonetheless always there, is the incredibly powerful message of Laclau and Mouffe's work. Without falling into some misplaced voluntarism one can remember that unless we start working towards this logic, working with(in) the (im)possibility of the social, there is always someone else with more certainties and appealing promises that will be instituting the 'social' for us all.

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