

The political ontology of post-Marxism

Hélène Samanci

Thesis submitted to Queen Mary, University of
London, for the degree of Master of Philosophy

September 2012

Abstract

Since the 1970's and the emergence of so-called 'identity' struggles, we have seen a proliferation of political theories aiming to articulate the traditional movement of the working-class with these struggles and thus provide new strategies for the left. The work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe has been central to attempts to revise traditional Marxist theories on the centrality of the worker's movement. Influenced by the structuralism of Saussure and Lacan, and by Derrida's critique of structuralism, they have sought to develop an alternative strategy based on a post-structuralist conception of the social world. This thesis endeavours to show how this transition between structuralism and post-structuralism has been made in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, with a particular focus on the political and strategical implications of that transition as a contribution to theorising the articulation of struggles and of identities. Secondly, it attempts to compare and confront the hegemonic strategy and the so-called post-hegemonic strategy influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical work. Through a close examination of works within the field of radical democratic thought, and in particular through an exploration of the opposition between Ernesto Laclau's 'ontology of lack' versus Andrew Robinson's and Simon Tormey's 'ontology of abundance', the thesis casts new light on the most recent debates within radical democratic currents. The philosophical debate is also completed by the analyses of the political translations of these different ontologies such as Peronism and the Zapatista movements and enriched with Toni Negri and Michael Hardt's theory of the Multitude. The contribution of this thesis is hence to map out and clarify some of the most important problems and debates concerning the question of the 'unity' and 'fragmentation' of the oppressed, and develop some tools in order to evaluate the best strategies for emancipatory social change.

KEY-WORDS: Post-Marxism, Post-structuralism, Laclau, Mouffe, Deleuze, Guattari, Radical Democracy, Ontology of Lack, Ontology of Abundance, Social Movements.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my two supervisors Madeleine Davis and Matteo Mandarini for their constant help and patient support throughout my studies. Without their detailed corrections of my work, this thesis would not have been completed. I also would like to thank James Dunkerley for being my supervisor when Madeleine was on leave. His generous advice helped me a lot during the most difficult part. Lasse Thomassen has also been a great help. He clarified my research questions and gave me the most pertinent references.

Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Abstract | 3 |
| Acknowledgements | 5 |
| Introduction | 8 |

CHAPTER ONE

Crises of Marxism

| | |
|---|----|
| I.i. Overview | 18 |
| I.ii.a. Bernstein and the autonomy of the political | 19 |
| I.ii.b. The revisionist theses | 24 |
| I.iii.a Gramsci's theory of ideology | 28 |
| I.iii.b. Hegemony and class reductionism | 31 |
| I.iv. Althusser and the concept of overdetermination | 35 |
| I.v.a. Laclau and Mouffe's conception of the social field as a discursive field | 40 |
| I.v.b. Laclau and Mouffe's anti-dialectical thought | 48 |

CHAPTER TWO

Precursors to and influences on Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic thought

| | |
|--|----|
| II.i. Overview | 51 |
| II.ii. Derrida's critique of structuralism | 52 |
| II.iii. The Saussurean influence | 59 |
| II.iv. The concept of antagonism | 64 |
| II.v. The Lacanian influence | 68 |
| II.vi. The post-Marxist strategy of hegemony | 77 |
| II.vii. Concluding remarks | 83 |

CHAPTER THREE

Ontology of Lack vs. Ontology of Abundance

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| III.i. Overview | 84 |
|-----------------------|----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| III.ii. Radical democracy and the rise of the New Social Movements | 86 |
| III.iii.a. Rational consensus vs. politics of dissensus | 89 |
| III.iii.b. The Habermasian theory of rational consensus and its critique | 91 |
| III.iv.a. The Ontology of lack | 96 |
| III.iv.b. The threat of psychosis and the need for order | 98 |
| III.v.a. ‘The ontology of abundance’ | 104 |
| III.v.b. Productivity and positivity: Deleuze and Guattari | 107 |
| III.vi. The political vocation of philosophy..... | 112 |
| III.vii. Conclusion | 123 |

CHAPTER FOUR

The impact of the ontologies of Lack and Abundance for political strategy

| | |
|---|-----|
| IV.i. Overview..... | 123 |
| IV.ii. Representational vs. post-representational politics: Populism as Politics..... | 125 |
| IV.iii. A basis and an illustration: Peronism | 128 |
| IV.iv. Populism as a political logic | 131 |
| IV.v. Robinson and Tormey’s counter-example and the ethical commitment to post-representational politics..... | 133 |
| IV.vi. The Zapatist struggle vs. populism: a radical critique of power..... | 137 |
| IV.vii. Lasse Thomassen’s interpretation of the Zapatistas’ movement..... | 145 |
| IV.viii. Hegemony vs. exodus and desertion; an overview | 150 |
| IV.ix. Strategies of exodus and desertion and the postmodern Caesura | 151 |
| IV.x. Critiques of Hardt and Negri’s concepts | 159 |
| IV.xi. Concluding remarks | 163 |

General conclusion

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| i. Overview | 165 |
| i. The ontological question | 170 |
| iii. Ethics and Politics | 171 |
| iv. Two post-Marxisms?..... | 173 |

Bibliography.....

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the genesis, development and consequences of the intellectual and political work of prominent ‘post-Marxist’ theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, co-authors in 1985 of *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, who claim to renew leftist critical thought.

The post-Marxist authors’ project takes root in the idea that the Marxist theoretical system collapsed once and for all with the Berlin Wall. Although some attempts to reconstruct Marxian and Marxist thought exist, they claim that we are presently experiencing a ‘post-Marxist’ period, following the ‘Marxist’ period of the 1960s and 1970s, which were two decades of great class struggles. For Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, classical Marxist categories such as ‘class interests’, ‘revolution’ etc., have become unsuitable for explaining the changes which have taken place in the social and political spheres of contemporary capitalist societies. Indeed, according to these authors, classical Marxist categories have become inadequate to ‘the task of understanding the radical openness of the social and the rise of new, non-class-based actors and social movements’ (Thoburn, 2007, 79).

‘Post-Marxism’ is for them a label indicating both a process of re-appropriation of the Marxist tradition (*post-Marxist*) and a process of going beyond this tradition (*post-Marxist*) (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 9). This necessity to go beyond traditional Marxism is the consequence of an alleged gap between today’s existing social categories and those which can be subsumed under classical Marxist categories, the latter being considered as no longer able to account for the changed order of society (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 10).

This proclaimed surpassing of classical Marxism is based on – amongst other things – the following observations and arguments:

1. The appearance, during the second half of the twentieth century, of new forms of struggle which do not tally with class struggle (minority struggles, identity politics).
2. That, as a result, political subjects are no longer fully defined by their affiliation to a class. The proletariat is no longer the historic subject of the emancipation of all the oppressed.
3. The fragmentation of political identities and the multiplicity of identities become principles of social analysis. The political alternative to capitalist society must be thus thought on the basis of the fragmentation of struggles and multiple antagonisms (of class, race, gender, etc.) which traverse the whole social field.

Mouffe, who was in the mid-60s a socialist student, chief editor of two minor socialist journals and a member of the left faction of the Socialist Party of Belgium, moved to Paris where she attended Althusser's seminars and was involved in the seminar which gave birth to *Reading Capital* (Laclau, 1990, 197), before moving to Colombia from 1967 to 1973 where she was a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the National University. Laclau was a member of the Socialist party of the National Left of Argentina since 1963, in which he was part of the leadership and the editor of the party's weekly, *Lucha Obrera* (Worker's Struggle) for several years. He left the party in 1968 because of disagreement with its politics and according to Laclau its class-reductionist approach which constituted an obstacle to a full understanding of the emerging mass phenomena, whose clearest expression was the rise of Peronism. It was at this time that he began to study Althusser and Gramsci in whose works he found key concepts and tools – such as 'hegemony' and 'overdetermined contradiction' – against 'mainstream Marxism' (Laclau, 1990,

199).

How did these post-Marxist authors succeed in building their theoretical systems on such sociological, philosophical and political hypotheses? Why did they feel the necessity, starting from a Marxist framework and vocabulary, to build a new theoretical structure upon ‘the ruins of Marxism’¹? To successfully complete my project to critically map out and answer these questions, I shall discuss several subjects and authors. Laclau and Mouffe’s ‘Post-Marxism’ and radical democracy contain indeed many different influences from different periods. Concepts such as ‘democracy’ or ‘hegemony’ refer to a set of concepts that preceded their integration within the post-Marxist framework. My task being one of intellectual history, I intend to identify the nature and the content of these influences first, second to analyse the context of emergence of such concepts, and third to challenge them by contrasting these concepts with alternative thoughts, to finally decide what intellectual tools militants can practically use in their global struggle against oppression. So with this work I hope to contribute to the clarification of the theoretical underpinnings of some of the most important debates currently going on in the political field.

My dissertation has two sections. The first section is divided into two chapters and is devoted to the genealogy of Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism. Chapter 1 deals with one of the major problems posed at the end of the nineteenth century during the first crisis of Marxism. I show that central to

1 During a conference in Sorbonne, on March 19th, 2008, entitled ‘Refaire la gauche’, Achille Mbembe, a post-colonial studies thinker, insisted on the necessity of renewing the thought of the critical left on the ‘ruins of Marxism’.

post-Marxism is the issue of the nature of base and superstructure,² and the relation between objective economic conditions and political subjectivity, to which first Bernstein, Gramsci and Althusser – among many others – attempted to provide answers. What will be called ‘Marxism’ throughout the thesis is not related to Marx’s work directly but to its interpretation by theorists of the Second International, mainly leaders of the German Socialist Democratic Party (SPD³). After the death of Friedrich Engels in 1895, the party divided into three main trends. The majority of the party defended a centrist line – the orthodox position – around the figure of Karl Kautsky whose political strategy was subordinated to the laws of capitalist development. Another trend in the right wing of the Party was constituted around Eduard Bernstein – the revisionists – who developed a strong critique of the naïve and simplistic ‘dialectical materialism’ attributed to the orthodoxies.⁴ One of the central issues that divided them concerned the political strategy needed to bringing about social change. The political unity of the working class being the main goal of the strategy, the question was to know whether the political unity of the working class was a direct consequence of its social and economic

-
- 2 The terms of base and superstructure were first established by Marx himself, in the famous Preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* written in 1859 where he states that: ‘in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general’ (Marx [1859], 1992, 424-428).
 - 3 The SPD is the main party of the Second International. He took his name in 1891 during the Erfurt Conference (see Tudor and Tudor, 1988, 7). It is the result of the unification of two organizations (the first merge occurred on May 22-25, 1875 in Gotha): the ADAV, *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein*, founded in 1863 by Ferdinand Lassalle, and the SDAP, *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei*, founded by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht in 1869 and closed to Marx. Social democrats participate from 1871 onwards to parliamentary elections, in the Reichstag. Starting with 2 deputies in 1871, they become the first political party in Germany in 1912 with 34.8 % and 110 seats.
 - 4 The third trend or the Left wing of the party was represented mainly by young partisans such as Rosa Luxemburg. See Steenson G. (1991) and Gay P. (1962) for more details.

homogeneity as the orthodox position argued, or if this unity had to be constructed, as the revisionists argued, in other words if the movements of the infrastructure determined the movements of the superstructure or if the superstructure was autonomous and had its own history. In their major work *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe seized upon this debate. In order to overcome the crises of Marxism, they produced a new conception of social identity, which, whether economic, political or ideological, is entirely constructed in and by discourse. By radicalising the notions of the autonomy of the political of Bernstein, of Gramsci's hegemony and Althusser's overdetermination, Laclau and Mouffe abandon the whole base/superstructure framework, and claim that in the context of overdetermination, which led to the concept of 'discourse', ideologies if considered as discursive constructions cease to be superstructures, in the sense that there is only superstructure, were replaced by discursive practices. They claim that the dichotomy between base and superstructure is itself irrelevant since it doesn't really exist, and the dualism characterising this dichotomy must be overcome. The question of the autonomy of the political defended by Bernstein, through a progress compared to the orthodox economist tendency that linked economic catastrophe to revolutionary subjectivity, is not relevant anymore.

Chapter 2 analyses the post-structuralist influences on Laclau and Mouffe's thought and explores their key concepts of 'antagonism', 'empty signifiers' and their post-structuralist concept of hegemony. The key idea is that Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism in general attempts to give a theoretical justification to their commitment to pluralism, a pluralism which they argue was completely denied in Marx's theory of emancipation and its underlying Hegelian notion of dialectic and totality. For Hegel indeed, the development of a contradiction present in a situation brings about a change that negates the initial unity of its content. The new content negates what preceded it but was

always already present within it. Unity and negation are hence the two first moments of Hegel's dialectic. The third moment of the dialectic is the negation of the negation or *Aufhebung* (A is not non-A). It is not a return to the first moment of the dialectic but a higher synthesis creating a totality where the contradictions have been partly resolved.⁵ I will show that one of the principal aspects of post-Marxism will be the rejection of Marxism's Hegelian ontology and history of philosophy,⁶ whose weaknesses are considered to be central to the crises of Marxism. Firstly I show how the Derrida's critique of structuralism as well as his deconstructionist method helped Laclau and Mouffe to produce their archetypal conception of open identities. The Derridean ontology of difference, *i.e.* the assumption that in the absence of a structure, which is a centre or origin or a transcendence, which would be a 'central' *presence* able to fix meanings, everything becomes discourse, allows Laclau and Mouffe to argue that identities are constantly renegotiated. It means that there is no *a priori* subjectivity attached to a group and that when an identity has been created, it has been created contingently, it remains fragile and can be undone. Secondly, I outline another major influence on Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism: the theorist of structuralist linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure, whose main claim is the arbitrary character of the sign and the relational character of the meaningful character of the sign. For these radical democrats, political identities operate in a way homologous to the sign as understood by Saussure. It means that there is no fixed or positive identity *before* the articulation with other elements of a chain, that is for example, the identity of the working class is not *a priori* socialist until its demands are connected to other democratic socialist demands, hence it refuses the vulgar

5 For more information, see the introduction to Hegel's *Science of Logic* [1831], 2010.

6 Marx partly applied Hegel's dialectic to the understanding of historical changes. For him, the contradiction between 'the forces of production' and the 'relations of production' explained the genesis as to why society periodically changes its form. From this contradiction emerges the material bases for the development of new forms of society (see Marx [1844], 1992, 279-400).

Marxist notion of objective interests. Nevertheless, rejecting Saussure's structuralism that considers language as a closed system and thus characterized mainly by its immutability, Laclau and Mouffe re-establish the openness of language as well as the openness of any other social object, and affirm the precariousness of such totalities. This allows them to develop the central notion of 'antagonism' as a constitutive outside which prevents structuralist totalisations, closed identities and total objectivity. The third part of the second chapter is devoted to the third influence on post-Marxism: Lacan. I outline that the Lacanian theory of the subject plays the role of the justification of the necessity of an articulation between identities and demands, that is of an order, if there is only social fragmentation and no structures to which we could refer to build a rational unified discourse of emancipation. The theory of the master-signifier answers to the problem of the articulation of struggles and the arbitrariness of the hegemonic subject. In the end of that chapter, I show how Laclau and Mouffe synthesise these elements in order to provide a new theory of hegemony as a descriptive analysis of power relations within 'society'. I go on to argue that the three influences on Laclau and Mouffe's thoughts can be understood in terms of an 'ontology of lack'. This ontology of lack is inseparable from their political commitments to hegemonic and populist forms of doing politics. I show that the ontology of lack is used as a way to consolidate the defence of a radical constructionism and the precariousness and openness of social identities.

The second section starts with Chapter 3 where Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist fundamental 'ontology of lack' is exhumed and contrasted to the so-called ontology of abundance. The opposition lies in the different interpretations that one camp has of the specific nature of radical difference. They reflect two philosophical imaginaries of lack and abundance, and the study of one cannot proceed without the study of the other one lest the exposition be incomplete and partial. Having explained the problems raised

during the crises of Marxism and the solutions suggested by Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism in my two previous chapters, in this third chapter I examine more closely the principal critique of these solutions within the post-structuralist field. As an introduction I focus on Mouffe's critique of the Habermasian notion of consensus. This allows me to expose her emphasis on the conflictual nature of politics influenced by the Schmittian concept of the political. I show that the notion of dissensus, linked to the notion of antagonism, is what differentiates Laclau and Mouffe's theory of radical democracy from other radical democratic theories and what is characteristic of the ontology of lack. For a better comprehension of the politics of dissensus, and therefore of articulation, I discuss Laclau's theory of empty signifiers and his conception of the hegemonic nature of construction of identities *via* their centring effects. In a second part, I analyse in more detail the so-called ontology of lack, whose main idea is that 'being' is characterized by the failure to constitute itself as a ground due to its fundamental *manque-à-être*. I recall how this peculiar ontology acts like a justification of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of the hegemonic construction of identities. In the third part I focus on some critiques of the ontology of lack from methodological and political perspectives. I oppose it to the philosophy of 'abundance' as in the thought of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which in contrast to the idea of the ontology of lack thinks of being as that which overflows, which focuses on the production of desires and affirms the priority of politics over ontology. I then critique recent claims of there being a symmetry between the Lacanian concept of ontological lack and Deleuze and Guattari's so-called ontology of abundance and argue, like Deleuze and Guattari, in favour of an ethical and practical idea of philosophy. I finish the chapter by discussing the Deleuzian conception of the political vocation of philosophy as a creative activity whose aim is to bring about 'new earths and new people', in other words imagining utopias, in contrast with Laclau and Mouffe's own statements on the danger of utopias.

Chapter 4 explores the link between such ontological imaginaries and political practices, in other words how different political practices stem from these ontologies or at least how they relate to each other. The dichotomy between abundance and lack can be understood politically as the dichotomy between hegemony and autonomy in terms of political strategy. I will illustrate this with Laclau's theory of populism on one side and on the other side Robinson and Tormey's Deleuzian interpretation of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. I will show that the movements supported by the defenders of the ontology of abundance value forms of organisation that are not based upon traditional political channels (such as unions, parties etc.) but function rather like the alter-globalist mobilisation on the basis of autonomist movements. For this purpose, I shall confront the ethical commitment of Tormey and Robinson to a post-representational politics and to the Deleuzian concept of the multiplicity underlying it, in contrast to the ontological impossibility of post-representation defended by Thomassen. The question is whether we can organize outside a representational system, or whether representation is constitutive and what the political implications of that are. I argue that the universalising tendency of Thomassen to generalize 'representation' and to interpret the Zapatistas 'mask' as evidence for that can fall under the post-colonial critiques of Western modernity developed recently. Finally the discussion broadens to include an analysis of Michael Hardt' and Antonio Negri's theory of the multitude and its singular blend of Marxian method and post-Marxist strategic claims for exodus and desertion. This study is justified by the fact that it highlights a position close to the one of Robinson and Tormey and to the Deleuzian perspective but from a totally different approach that gives to post-Marxism another meaning. I confront the Laclauian hegemonic concept of emancipatory politics with Negri and Hardt's position which is close to Robinson and Tormey's but based on materialist assumptions. Influenced by Left Communism, Negri and Hardt state that with the caesura of the post-

modern paradigm, struggles and organisation cannot be based on the modern pattern typical of Laclau's thought anymore, but on a completely new one. By this exposition, I analyse how Robinson, Tormey, Negri and Hardt have judged Laclau and Mouffe as having insufficiently criticized and broken with the traditional vision of power contained within Marxism and Structuralism, that they have nevertheless constantly criticised. With this chapter I hope to show that a radical utopian politics is possible without necessarily being totalitarian.

Chapter 1

Crises of Marxism

I.i. Overview

In this chapter, I will show how the aporiae of the economist vision of historical processes at the end of the nineteenth century favoured the development of Laclau and Mouffe's constructionism, and how the primacy of politics developed by Bernstein has been progressively transformed and has laid the foundations for Laclau and Mouffe's conception of the entire society as a superstructural field.

This chapter has four parts. The first part retraces the lines of the first crisis of Marxism where the main issues are posed. The second part will focus on the solutions brought by Gramsci with two fundamental ideas: 1) the idea that base and superstructure are two elements of the same organic totality 2) the idea of hegemony introducing a relative autonomy of ideology regarding class positions. The third part focuses on Althusser's thoughts on the idea of the relative autonomy of superstructures and the determination in the last instance of the economy, as well as the key concept of overdetermination that points to the existence of simultaneous factors in the production of the same event. Finally the last part analyses how Laclau and Mouffe take up this debate and produce a completely new post-Marxist theory, abandoning the whole base/superstructure model. By outlining this history I hope to show that there is a progressive movement towards a conception of the independence and contingency between the class position of a group and its political subjectivity

from Bernstein to Althusser, which leads to post-Marxism's radical constructionism.

I.ii.a. Bernstein and the autonomy of the political

Let us first contextualize the first crisis of Marxism and the rise of Bernstein's revisionism. In the 1880s and 1890s, there was a general impression of imminent catastrophe in the SPD characterized by the conviction as to the imminence of the social revolution. This impression was reinforced by the spectacle of the Great Depression of the capitalist system. Because of the profound recession since the 1870s in which the system seemed to have entered, many German social-democrats were indeed expecting a general collapse of society and the consequent advent of socialism.

The Great Depression was a systemic crisis lasting from 1873 to 1895 and was characterized by a strong economic slump. The billions of marks of indemnity paid by France to Germany after its defeat in 1870 had helped to provoke financial speculation which ended in a full-scale crisis. 'The speculation mania came to a dramatic end in 1873. In a few days three hundred bankruptcies were announced and there were an epidemic of suicides' (Williamson, 1998, 169). The financial crisis and the fall in the value of shares was followed by a decline in industrial output. In 1875, mining companies were in difficulties throughout the country and prices fell, sales dropped, wages were reduced and unemployment rose (Williamson, 1998, 170). This long depression which continued until 1890 partly explains the rise of the worker's movement and trade-unionism. During the economic crisis, Germany was ruled by Otto Von

Bismarck, chancellor of the German empire from 1871 to 1890. He was confronted from the beginning of his reign by the rise of the Social Democrats. The success of the new party was indeed phenomenal. In the elections for the Imperial Parliament in 1877, it gained more than half a million votes and thirteen seats, which made it the fourth largest party in Germany. Bismarck feared this new strength growing inside the State. Using as a pretext two assassination attempts against the Kaiser, Bismarck imposed the first of a series of anti-socialist laws making the SPAD⁷ an illegal organisation; laws which lasted until 1890.

On the intellectual level, the idea of an imminent advent of socialism was corroborated by more scientific convictions and an underlying philosophy of history, characteristic of the Marxism of the Second International: dialectical materialism, which was to be popularised by Stalinism. Its main idea was that history evolves according to natural laws leading inevitably to the collapse of the capitalist system. With their interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic the orthodox position hoped to have found the laws of development of human history. This conception was widespread within the SPD within which Karl Kautsky was enjoying great authority. Kautsky was the editor of *Die Neue Zeit* created in 1883 where he published the *Socialist Programme* in 1892. His detractors denounced the positivist element of his thought, positivism being characterized by the will to produce the same coherence and certainty in sociology as in the natural sciences, its vocation being not only to classify social phenomena in order to elucidate the development of given societies, but also to predict in a positive manner their evolution.⁸ The publication in 1859 of

7 The name of the SPD before 1891.

8 In the 47th lesson of the *Cours de philosophie positive* (Comte, 1908, V.IV, 132), Auguste Comte, using for the first time the word 'sociology', writes that it is equivalent to the already introduced expression 'social physics' pointing to this part of natural philosophy that referred to the positive study of the ensemble of fundamental laws proper to social

Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* had also deeply transformed the conception of human history as a social phenomenon. According to Terence Ball, the controversial link between Marx and Darwin must first be attributed to Engels⁹ and was disseminated by later Marxists as evidence for their theory's 'scientific' status. The first comparison between Marx's and Darwin's works had been made in Engels' speech at Marx's graveside in 1883: 'Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history' (quoted in Ball, 1979, 470). These comparisons were then repeated once in 1888 in Engels' preface to the English edition of the *Communist Manifesto* and a third time in 1895 in *The part played by labour in the transition from Ape to Man*. This comparison was reiterated in Lenin's early works (1894), in Turati (1892) and Labriola's works, Aveling in 1897, in 1894 by Buchner, Woltmann in 1899, and synthesised by Kautsky in 1906. The common view of all these Marxists was that human history should be regarded as a branch of natural history. Hence intention, purpose, teleology were completely out of their considerations. For Kautsky there was an identity between natural phenomena governed by laws and social phenomena which rest on the predictable movements of the infrastructure. Social phenomena were considered to be linked with causality and necessity.

In the fifth chapter of the *Socialist Programme* written in 1892 that he considered as a commentary on the Erfurt Programme, Kautsky proposed a theory of the simplification of social antagonisms and of the social structure and radicalised some of the theses found in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*:

phenomena.

9 This is the thesis of Terence Ball, 1979, 469-483.

- 1) The *concentration* of private property into capitalist hands;
- 2) The *proletarianisation* of the middle classes;
- 3) The *impoverishment* of popular classes; all of these composing infrastructural movements following strict and necessary laws, whose trajectories can be predicted by Marxist science. These trajectories were supposed to lead irremediably to the unity of the working class and bringing about in society as a whole a revolutionary transition to socialism.

Kautsky stated that the system's natural law describing the proletarianisation of the middle classes and the progressive division of society into two antagonist classes would lead to the breakdown of capitalist society. He interpreted literally the idea that it is on the basis of increased misery that there must arise the will to contest capitalist society and of 'working class resistance incessantly growing and more and more disciplined, united and organized by the mechanism of capitalist production' (Marx, 1965, T.5, 1163). This Marxist position admits that the unity of the working class is already given, and would be the necessary result of the infrastructural movement. However for Marx and Engels, the situation was even more complex; since *The Poverty of Philosophy* they had recognized, by introducing the difference between *class in itself*, linked to objective organisation, and *class for itself*, linked to subjective consciousness, that the unity of the proletariat is never given but is created by a long political process of unification. The mechanical conception of Kautsky becomes an orthodoxy as soon as facts didn't verify this catastrophist vision of society. It is indeed the economic factors as well as the new political situation – the resignation of Bismarck in 1890 – that mainly explains the emergence of

revisionism.¹⁰ Whereas the Bismarckian period was marked by a long economic depression, in 1985 Germany entered into a new phase of prosperity. The country underwent a new burst of economic growth, a ‘golden era of the world economy’, during those three decades before the First World War which were characterized by constant economic growth and the formation of monopolies and cartels following the depression of 1873. Indeed, many industries such as cement, textiles and chemicals formed cartels which helped to stabilize prices and production.¹¹ Revisionists like Bernstein would claim that Kautsky did not grasp that the system was transformed and was turning into so-called ‘organized capitalism’ or monopolistic capitalism and maintained that the changes in collective production were superficial.¹² The appearance of the premisses of organized capitalism disrupted the structuration of society; instead of the unity expected by Kautsky, one saw the fragmentation of society into different social layers, because the increasing parcellisation and division of tasks rose continuously.¹³

A new epoch of capitalist prosperity began and this newly emerging situation completely destroyed the optimism for a ‘final crisis’ of capitalism leading to socialism. Moreover, the capitalist crisis led to a number of transformations which resulted in a fragmentation of the working class and a decomposition of its politico-ideological unity. Within Marxist political currents, divergent interpretations of these changes emerged which had consequences for political

10 See Laclau and Mouffe, 2001.

11 See Williamson, 1998, 49. ‘The long crisis passed and capitalism survived. It overcame the crisis by transforming itself. Learning from the drastic effects of competition on prices and profit margins, capitalism reacted by adopting the path of monopolistic development. Capitalism entered the great depression into classical nineteenth century form of a competitive economy; it emerged at the end of the century with a radically altered physiognomy’ (Colletti, 1974, 58).

12 See for example, Kautsky, 1899, 37. See also Kautsky, 1900, 149.

13 For more details on the crisis of Marxism, see Kouvelakis, 2001 and Colletti, 1974, 59.

and strategical organisation. The question of the unity of the working class was central as this unity was considered to be the key to its fight for socialism and victory. The question was therefore to know whether the homogeneity of the working class, despite the transformations of the capitalist system, was guaranteed by sociological hypotheses such as the growing proletarianisation of the middle classes and the progressive simplification of class structure under capitalism, as Kautsky argued, or if the changes which took place within the social and political spheres due to capitalist reorganisation invalidated these hypotheses of homogenisation and simplification and that consequently other means to obtain the unity of the working class had to be found. This issue raised another fundamental and more general problem that went beyond the debate between revisionists and orthodox Marxists: is the politico-ideological unity of the working class a direct consequence of the objective condition of the working class or does this politico-ideological unity have to be constructed? In others words, does the political have autonomy vis-a-vis the economy, or do the economic factors determine necessarily the movements of the political?

I.ii.b. The revisionist theses

These crucial questions were seized upon by Eduard Bernstein who developed his views partly in a series of articles published in *Neue Zeit* from 1896 on, under the heading 'Problems of socialism' and partly in a polemical exchange with the English socialist Bax (see Tudor and Tudor, 1988, 140-173) and subsequently in *The Preconditions of Socialism* published in 1898. In this book, Bernstein systematically attacked the entire framework of Marxist orthodoxy on four grounds: philosophical, economic, social and political. These attacks were an attempt by Bernstein to prove that the false predictions

about the breakdown of society were not accidental to Marxism but essential, intrinsically linked to the theoretical failures of Marxist theory and to its underlying conception of the world. But rather than attributing these failures to Kautsky's Marxism, he accused Marxism in general and historical materialism of responsibility for them. More precisely he argued that the 'breakdown theory' descended directly from the 'fatalism' and 'determinism' of the materialist conception of history. The expectation of an imminent and inevitable catastrophe of bourgeois society, brought about by purely economic causes, reproduced, according to Bernstein, the inherent limits of any materialist explanation, in which matter and the movements of matter were the cause of everything (Colletti, 1974, 63).

For Bernstein, if the movements of matter follow a mechanical logic of necessity and if ideas and other human productions are determined by the movement of matter, it follows that human history is a chain of predetermined events (Bernstein, 1993, 12). Pushed to its limit, historical materialism leaves no place for liberty as nothing can escape causality. That is why the materialist is a 'Calvinist without God' (Bernstein, 1993, 13). In Bernstein's words, instead of being imposed by God, predestination is the product of matter. Everything is determined in advance by a given matter and the power relations of its elements. Bernstein thus rejects Marx's affirmation in the preface to *A contribution to the Critique of Political economy* that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' because this conception reduces human beings to the living agents of historical forces (Bernstein, 1993, 13-14). Objectivity does not apply to economic facts because they are caused by human agents (Bernstein, 1900, 17). Indeed, economic facts tally the field of the will, because in the economic field human beings act according to their own subjectivity, hence there isn't any objective necessity. That is why the defenders of this objective necessity often see inconsistent and contradictory

practical consequences. The mechanical, economist and workerist drifts Bernstein sees in historical materialism is for him due to the Hegelian ontology that introduced the category of necessity into the comprehension of social history. It was in this *philosophical context* that Bernstein first referred to Kant to replace the ‘Hegelian ontology’ to which he attributed Marx’s mechanicism and determinism. Indeed he identified the loss of individuality and subjectivity in Second International Marxism with Hegel’s dialectic.

Bernstein challenged above all the idea of a ‘scientific socialism’ and saw two main obstacles to its foundation. Firstly, Marxist economic theory is objectively unable to prove the inevitability of socialism as a result of the breakdown of the capitalist system. Socialists indeed never managed to prove the existence of a direct causal link between such a breakdown and the rise of socialism. The second obstacle to the possible scientific character of socialism is the existence of and the role played by human volition in the socialist movement. Socialism for Bernstein has more to do with human needs, emotions and volition than with ‘objectives’ forces of factors. To illustrate this point, Bernstein writes:

Ce n’est pas le fait brut qu’est la plus-value qui prouve la nécessité d’une transformation socialiste de la société; c’est plutôt la désapprobation de cette plus-value par les masses, le fait qu’elle soit ressentie comme exploitation, qui prouvent que l’ordre actuel est insupportable (Bernstein, quoted in Lidtke, 1976, 357).

He proposed to replace ‘scientific socialism’ by a ‘critical socialism’ inspired by Kant’s epistemology based on the limits of knowledge and importance of ethics. He adds that if socialism was a historical objective necessity, then socialist parties would be useless (Bernstein, 1900, 18). Against Plekhanov’s

and Kautsky's emphasis on economic base and objective factors, Bernstein's solution consisted in the integration of both determinism and volition in its alternative theory of the rise of socialism. He considered that as long as socialism was based on objective factors, orthodox Marxists could pretend to scientificity; but in practice subjective elements frequently intervened. In particular he argued socialism contends incompatible elements with science for it is the doctrine of a particular class: the proletarian class. Bernstein solution is hence quite simple. Rather than challenging the foundations of the dual approach, he proposed to keep the dichotomy between objective and subjective factors present in Second International Marxist thought with which, according to Colletti, he shares 'a vulgar and naive conception of the economy' (Colletti, 1974, 63), and to introduce between them a balanced causal effect.

Against the reductionist theses of Kautsky and the orthodoxy of the party, Bernstein and other revisionists developed the idea that it is within the framework of an autonomous political activity that the fragmentation of the proletariat into different wage layers will be transcended, and not only within the scope of infrastructural movements. That is the novelty of Bernstein's argument. When Bernstein tackles the problem of superstructures, his attitude is thus very new:

Sciences, arts, a whole series of social developments are today much less dependent on economics than formerly, or, in order to give no room for misconception, the point of economic development attained today leaves the ideological, and especially the ethical factors greater space for independent activity that was formerly the case (Bernstein, 1978, 15).

Bernstein advocates giving a greater autonomy to superstructures and emphasizes political action as a means to overcome the infrastructural

fragmentation of the working classes. We will see that the three fundamental ideas brought by Bernstein will be found in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism namely 1) the critique of Hegelian dialectics and the rejection of historical materialism 2) the importance given to contingency and human action in politics and finally 3) the autonomy of political action in bringing about the conditions for social change.

I.iii.a Gramsci's theory of ideology

It was not until the 1920s that the concept of ideology began to be considerably enriched. In this section I will highlight how, with Gramsci's conception of ideology and his conceptualisation of hegemony, one could consider that the politico-ideological unity of the working class had to be constructed on a symbolic level.¹⁴

The popular support given to the fascist and Nazi regimes in Europe raised new problems for Marxists. Wilhelm Reich in Germany and Antonio Gramsci in Italy for example participated in the important debate in communist parties regarding the nature of popular support for fascism. Communists and socialists were convinced that impoverished masses, thrown into unemployment by the general impoverishment of the after-war period, would embrace the socialist fight against capitalism. However, the illusion that impoverished masses

14 Gramsci and Bernstein belong to this tradition of thinkers who acknowledge that the crises and transformations of the capitalist system itself led to the fragmentation of the working class, first during the period of the passage from industrial and entrepreneurial capitalism to 'monopolistic' and 'managerial' capitalism, and second during the Fordist and Taylorist moment characterized by the rationalization of labour, the parcellisation of mental and manual labour and the separation between conception and execution (see Gramsci, 1971, 279).

would get involved was based on Kautsky's economist prejudices according to which the movements of the base determine the movements of the superstructure. This theory proved unable to explain, in terms of strict and simple causality between economy and ideology, why the impoverished masses didn't become more radically left-wing, but shifted towards the far-right. It is on the basis of this crucial problem that Gramsci works out his theory of superstructures. Here, I would like to recall simply the major advances Gramsci realized before focusing on the second crisis of Marxism, on Althusser and on post-Marxism.

Gramsci's theory of ideology can be found in the *Prison Notebooks*, compiled between 1926 and 1937 while he was incarcerated in Mussolini's prisons for being one of the leaders of the Italian Communist party since 1922. In the seventh notebook, Gramsci writes that one must struggle against what he considered to be a 'primary infantilism', but one nonetheless accepted as a fundamental postulate of historical materialism, the mistaken practice of presenting any fluctuation of politics and ideology as an immediate expression of the economic structure (Gramsci, 1983, VII, 188). Indeed Gramsci was well-aware that 'people combat historical economism in the belief that they are attacking historical materialism' (Gramsci, 1971, 163). Again, in the seventh notebook, Gramsci attacks Croce's critique of historical materialism, which that latter had accused of having rehabilitated 'theological dualism' by separating the structure or base from the superstructure (Gramsci, 1971, 172). Gramsci writes that this separation must be understood dialectically, as thesis and antithesis, and thus any accusation of theological dualism is superficial and meaningless (Gramsci, 1983, 172). Base and superstructure must be understood dialectically, since they are two 'realities in movement' each having their own effects, and while interacting, having some effects on each other. Thus Gramsci breaks radically with mechanicism, for which the law of causality, the search for normality and regularity characteristic of a vulgar

evolutionism is substituted with the historical dialectic. Gramsci hence claims to follow Marx and his third thesis on Feuerbach: ‘the materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself’ (Marx, 1845). That means there is a reciprocal interaction between the educator and the environment, and this reference aims more globally to recall the unity of the historical processes of reality. For Gramsci, base and superstructure are in an internal relationship within the same totality. While Bernstein advocated a replacement of the Hegelian dialectic by a Kantian ethics in order to overcome the crisis of orthodox Marxists’ mechanicism, Gramsci argues in favour of a return to Hegel.

However there are two types of ideologies (Gramsci, 1971, 377); arbitrary ideologies on the one side and organic ideologies on the other side. The latter, by penetrating the masses and by organizing them, have a real efficacy on the corresponding structure. The importance of ideology comes from the fact that it is the field where social beings evolve and become conscious of their position and start to struggle against it. The dialectical unity between base and superstructure forms a ‘historical bloc’. In the historical bloc, the material forces ‘are the content, and ideologies the form’, this distinction between content and form being purely pedagogical, since material forces without form would be historically inconceivable and ideologies without material forces would only be ‘individual fancies’ (Gramsci, 1971, 377). In other words, the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure forms a historical bloc, the result of their dialectical relationship in a particular historical situation.¹⁵

15 ‘Structures and superstructures form an “historical bloc”. That is to say a complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructures is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production. From this, one can conclude: that only a

When men, with their ideological struggles, carry out the existing conflicts in the material sphere between productive forces and relations of production, then a revolution or a reversal of praxis becomes possible. The existence of a layer of intellectuals constitutes the basis of all the ideological struggles. This is of great importance for understanding the possibility of ideological struggles; the layer of intellectuals, as a *separate* layer, forms an *efficient* superstructure. It becomes a cultural self-consciousness. However, by breaking away from the structural laws, far from being more closely united to them, ideology becomes capable of having its own history. This means that organic ideologies have their own history; they can not be considered as the passive reflections of the structure or of the economy. The most important element of this discussion is that Gramsci attempts to overcome Kautsky's and Bernstein's dualism by reintroducing dialectics in mainstream Marxism in order to overcome its crisis.

I.iii.b. Hegemony and class reductionism

Nevertheless, there is another aspect of economism Gramsci rejects, which is again revealed by the example of Italian fascism. As Daniel Guérin, a revolutionary syndicalist of that time asserts, while the Fascists were governing Italy from 1922, neither the socialists, nor the communists took this

totalitarian system of ideologies gives a rational reflection of the contradiction of the structure and represents the existence of the objective conditions for the revolutionising of praxis. If a social group is formed which is one hundred per cent homogeneous on the level of ideology, this means that the premisses exist one hundred per cent for this revolutionising: that is the "rational" is actively and actually real. This reasoning is based on the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process' (Gramsci, 1971, 366).

danger seriously, but understood it in the guise of an ‘identity between the diverse forms of the bourgeois domination, rigged out by the “democratic” label or by the “fascist” label. The consequences of this misunderstanding of the nature of fascism were serious: neither the socialists, nor the communists put up any resistance.’¹⁶ “What are our opponents doing?” mocked Mussolini in a discourse in the Chamber of Deputies in 1924. “Do they trigger general strikes or even partial strikes? Do they organize demonstrations in the street? Do they try to provoke revolts in the army? Nothing of the sort. They restrict themselves to press campaigns” (Mussolini, quoted in Guérin, 1999, 123.)¹⁷ The cynicism of Mussolini, although it is revolting and iniquitous, was unfortunately justified by the deplorable spectacle that the socialists and the Italian communists performed after 1922. For post-Marxist authors, to assert that fascism is a bourgeois ideology is to commit a double reductionism:

- 1) First, the meaning of the present is revealed by the content of an *a priori* doctrine
- 2) *Second, an ideology is reduced to the class position of the one who expresses it* (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001)

16 The same thing happened in Germany under the Nazi domination. ‘Le 7 février 1933, Künstler, le chef de la fédération berlinoise du parti, donne cette consigne: ‘Surtout ne vous laissez pas provoquer. La vie et la santé des ouvriers berlinois nous sont trop chères pour les mettre en jeu à la légère. Il faut les garder pour le jour de la lutte.’ ’ quoted in Guérin, 1999, 123. Communists neither organized any resistance. Torgler, one of the leaders of the German Communist Party, would confess afterwards that the struggle for elections came before resistance to fascism.

17 This is my translation. The original is: “Que font nos adversaires? raille Mussolini à la Chambre. Déclenchent-ils des grèves générales ou même des grèves partielles? Organisent-ils des manifestations dans la rue? Essayent-ils de provoquer des révoltes dans l’armée? Rien de semblable. Ils se bornent à des campagnes de presse” (Mussolini, 1924. in Guérin, 1999, 123).

The second aspect of this reductionism is the most interesting one. How can we transcend this reductionism theoretically? For post-Marxist authors, it is the Gramscian notion of hegemony which will enable them to draw a path out of the crisis. Gramsci showed that Fascism, far from being a bourgeois ideology, was the organic ideology which was formed around the bourgeoisie, more precisely around the landowners of the south of Italy and the industrialists of the North, which managed to create a large consensus which important parts of the population, even among the working class, gave their support to.

The concept of hegemony is intrinsically linked to the concept of ideology and lays the foundations for a non-economist interpretation of historical processes.¹⁸ The concept of hegemony has several levels to its elaboration. In 1926, in *Notes on the Southern question*, Gramsci introduces this concept in a discussion of an alliance between the working class and the peasantry. From 1919 onwards,¹⁹ Gramsci insisted on the importance of an alliance between the working class and the peasantry and on the essential role that the peasantry had to play in the proletarian revolution. However it is in *this text* that Gramsci introduces for the first time the necessity of an ideological leadership by the proletariat, its ability to create a consensus between the working classes, that is to say to obtain the ideological and political conditions for its hegemony to become possible. There is already in this text the idea that the proletariat has to rid itself of its corporatism in order to win over the Southern intellectuals to its cause, because for Gramsci, by winning over those intellectuals, one also rallies the classes with whom they are supposed to have organic links. However the question of hegemony is still Leninist for the proletariat leads the peasantry politically. It is in the *Prison Notebooks* that a typically Gramscian

18 See Mouffe, 1979.

19 See Gramsci, 2 August 1919, in Macciocchi, 1974, 135.

conception of hegemony can be found, relying on its intellectual and ideological dimensions. Gramsci suggests that hegemony does not apply only to the proletariat, but applies also to the bourgeoisie, as was the case during the French Revolution. The Jacobins were for him the incarnation of the Modern Prince of Machiavelli,²⁰ because they managed to convince the bourgeoisie to overcome its own corporatism and hence transformed it into a hegemonic class. Like the proletariat, the bourgeoisie must rely on popular support and not on a direct confrontation with the opposite class.

According to Mouffe's interpretation, Gramsci, analysing the different moments of political consciousness, distinguished three principal degrees (Mouffe, 1979, 180):

- 1) A first primitive economic moment within which a group develops its professional interests but not yet class interests.
- 2) A politico-economic moment within which the consciousness of class interests expresses itself, but only at an economic level.
- 3) The third moment is that of *hegemony*: the purely economic interests of the group are overcome and become the interests of other subordinated groups; this operation is fulfilled through ideological struggles when a combination of ideologies tends to impose itself on the whole social area, thus determining not only the unity of the economic and political goals, but also the moral and intellectual unity

20 In his commentary on Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Gramsci shows that the Prince cannot be a person but only a form of collective action and will, that means for the modern era, a party. Its task is to create a popular unity around a programme for radical change. It would also allow a moral and economic elevation of citizens. See Gramsci, 1971, 130.

at a universal level as opposed to a corporatist one, hence creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinated groups (Mouffe, 1979, 172).

An efficient hegemony or ‘expansive hegemony’ is thus the result of a direct and active consensus of the popular classes and of the hegemonic class, whose result is the creation of a *collective will*.²¹

With the theory of hegemony, the class identities at the level of the structure don’t correspond necessarily to the class subjects at the level of the superstructure. The creation of a common world conception prevents the latter from being attached intrinsically to a class identity (Gramsci, 1983, 228). Thus hegemony does not correspond, contrary to what one might think, to the imposition of a class ideology onto the whole society. In fact, a class who wants to become hegemonic has to ‘nationalize itself’, writes Gramsci, that is to say manage to create a ‘national-popular collective will’ (Gramsci, 1971, 130)²² so that the hegemonic class could appear as the representative of the general interest, and by doing so, could create the base of a massive support to this new ‘popular religion’. The theory of hegemony allows us therefore to think of ideologies as separated from any class belonging.

I.iv. Althusser and the concept of overdetermination

Following Gramsci but very critical of Hegel, Louis Althusser is the other major philosopher to have proposed a theory that blurs the frontiers between

21 This collective will is also created through the action of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971).

22 A national-popular will is a conception of the world, or a religion for Gramsci.

structure and superstructure, with its central notion of overdetermination. In his anti-Sartrean essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' for example, Althusser dismissed the humanist notions of subjectivity by arguing that any subject cannot pre-exist its ideological interpellation into class society. According to him, subjectivity is only 'constitutive' in the sense that it is simply an effect of ideology, for it is ideology that plays 'the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects' (Althusser, 2008, 45). Althusser's more general theory of ideology blends the orthodox position that sees the productive forces of society as directly determining all the other spheres of social, political and ideological life, and the more constructionist view of Gramsci that gives to the superstructure a 'relative autonomy' and a proper history. He tries to overcome what Croce was criticizing in economism, namely the 'theological dualism' that separates economy and politics as religious thought used to separate body and soul. This blend is the main cause of the tension we find in Althusser's work and which will be the basis of Laclau and Mouffe's rejection of structuralism.

The notion of 'overdetermination' developed by Althusser expresses the tension between the determination in the last instance of the economy and the relative autonomy of superstructures. Althusser borrowed this terminology from psychoanalysis where it is used to define how several simultaneous factors can contribute to the formation of symptoms (Freud, 1965, 182-183, 327-330, 341-343, quoted in Smith, 1984, 159). 'A dream, for instance, is said to be overdetermined if it has multiple possibly contradictory interpretations. It is in this sense of multiple sources of determination that make it susceptible to several possibly contradictory interpretations' as Smith summarises the matter (Smith, 1984, 159). Overdetermination refers therefore to a multiplicity of simultaneous determinations that converge on one single result whose causal factors cannot be reduced to only one of them. We can never observe the 'economy' as a factor in its 'pure state'. Althusser writes:

The economic dialectic is never active *in the pure state*; in “History”, these instances, the superstructures, etc. – are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes (Althusser, 1969, 96).

Hence, ‘in the last instance’ does not mean that there will be a time when the economy will be determinant, the other instances preceding or following it: ‘the last instance never comes’ because the structure is *always* the co-presence of all its elements and their relation of subordination (Poulantzas, 1987, 14). We could say that the repudiation of a monocausal model of base and superstructure relations is more than a rehabilitation of Marx and Engels dialectic, it is the outline of a ‘polyectic’ defining the complex or ‘overdetermined’ relationship between the various instances and the social whole.²³

23 Althusser in ‘Contradiction and overdetermination’ opposes the conception of the Hegelian contradiction and overdetermination. He explains that in the Philosophy of History of Hegel ‘we encounter an *apparent* overdetermination: are not all historical societies constituted of an infinity of concrete determinations, from political laws to religion via customs, habits, financial, commercial and economic regimes, the educational system, the arts, philosophy, and so on? However, none of these determinations is essentially *outside* the others, not only because together they constitute an original, organic totality, but also and above all because this totality is *reflected in a unique internal principle*, which is *the truth* of all those concrete determinations.’ (...) Then he continues ‘If it is possible, *in principle, to reduce the totality*, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society (Greece, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, England, and so on) *to a simple internal principle, this very simplicity* can be reflected in the contradiction *to which it thereby acquires a right*. Must we be even plainer? This reduction itself (Hegel derived the idea from Montesquieu), the reduction of *all* the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch (economic, social, political and legal institutions, customs, ethics, art, religion, philosophy, and even historical *events*: wars, battles, defeats, and so on) *to one* principle of internal unity, is itself only possible on the *absolute condition* of taking the

Althusser appealed to a famous letter of Engels to Bloch written in 1890 where Engels writes that according to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted' (Engels, 1972, 294). Attributing the preponderance to the infrastructural determination 'in the last instance', Engels continues: 'if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase' (Engels, 1972, 294).

Althusser claims then that:

It is *economism* (mechanism) and not the true Marxist tradition that sets up the hierarchy of instances once and for all, assigns each its essence and role and defines the universal meaning of their relations; it is economism that identifies roles and actors eternally, not realizing that the necessity of the process lies in an exchange of roles "according to circumstances". It is economism that identifies eternally in advance the determinant-contradiction-in-the-last-instance with the role of the dominant contradiction, which forever assimilates such and such an "aspect" (forces of production, economy, practice) to the principal role and such and such another aspect' (relations of production, politics, ideology, theory) to secondary role – whereas in real history determination in the last instance by the economy is exercised precisely in the permutations of the principal role between the economy, politics, theory, etc. Engels saw this quite clearly and pointed it out in his struggle with the opportunists in the Second International, who were awaiting

whole concrete life of a people for the externalisation-alienation (*Entausserung-Entfremdung*) of an *internal spiritual principle*, which *can never definitely be anything but the most abstract form of that epoch's consciousness of itself: its religious or philosophical consciousness, that is, its own ideology*. (...) It is why there is never for him any basic rupture, no actual end to any real history – nor any radical beginning. It is why his philosophy of history is garnished with uniformly "dialectical" mutations. This stupefying conception is only defensible from the Spirit's topmost peak (Althusser, 2005 [1969], 102-103).

the arrival of socialism through the action of the economy alone (Althusser, 1969, 213).

In another letter to Conrad Schmidt, Engels expresses an awareness of the autonomy of the state and ideology as factors independent of the economic base, hence capable of having their own historical development. He states that while 'economic' factors remain dominant, the 'ideological outlook reacts in its turn upon the economic basis and may, within certain limits, modify it' (Engels, 1958, 488-490). For Engels, there is thus more an interaction between base and superstructure than a causal relationship, which as we have seen is the starting point of Gramsci's thought on ideologies. However, the status of the economy as the determining factor 'in the last instance' is not unambiguous. Why is it necessary for Althusser to recall that it is the determining factor in the last instance while explaining that this last instance never comes? If the plan in which Althusser wants to inscribe his theory of factors was really immanent, the economy wouldn't have the status of determining factor in the last instance. Certainly, Althusser wants to minimize the role of the economy in determining the shape and nature of the whole structure and sometimes it seems that the economy is simply put on the same level as that the other instances. However, the importance of the other factors is ultimately limited by the ultimate primacy given to the economic instance. To say it differently, it is hardly possible to distinguish theoretically between primary causes without which an event could not have happened and secondary causes, which are merely circumstantial to the situation. 'The context of Althusser's discussion makes clear that every factor is absolutely contributory, so that we cannot abstract certain features from a situation and rank them in some relative order of importance. It appears that we must be content with a form of descriptive empiricism in which base and superstructure are accorded more or less status' explains Smith (Smith, 1984, 166).

Althusser tries to solve this tension by introducing a distinction between ‘determinant’ and ‘dominant’ instances of a social formation, already outlined in the previous quotations. While the productive base is the determinant instance, it is not necessarily the dominant one (Smith, 1984, 169). In *For Marx* (Althusser, 1969, 111) he explains that this distinction provides a ‘new conception of the structure-superstructure complex which constitutes the essence of any social formation’. For example, ‘in European countries of the Middle ages, religious relations appeared to be dominant. (...) But this does not contradict the principle that economic relations are still determinant if only “in the last instance”’ (Althusser, 1969, 111).

I.v.a. Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of the social field as a discursive field

Althusser’s work was a starting point for Laclau and Mouffe’s intellectual development in the post-68 era. The Parisian events of May-June 1968, and the spirit of revolt that came with it has had a strong effect on political thought; and the disparate, creative aspect of the revolt, the reappearance of the feminist and anti-racist movements and the withdrawing of young people from the Communist Party and its rigid and critical line regarding the events, have highly contributed to the rise of post-Marxist and post-structuralist thought.²⁴

24 Althusser’s personal response to May ’68 was clearly not a good way to convince young students to follow the path of his renewed Marxist theory. Convinced that the only way to influence the French Communist party was to retain some form of influence within it, Althusser followed the party line in denouncing the revolt of the students as ‘infantile’,

Laclau and Mouffe integrate to their own theoretical edifice the main elements we have studied here 1) The primordial importance given to the political by Bernstein over the economic 2) especially Gramsci's attempt to overcome Marxist dualism with a new conception of the relation between base and superstructure 3) the peculiar conception of multi-contradictions in a mode of production and the concept of overdetermination developed by Althusser. As I will show, the nature of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism shares many characteristics with Bernstein revisionism, that some of Marx's theses were not *accidentally* wrong but *essentially* flawed. It is however primarily the notion of hegemony developed by Gramsci that will be central to their theoretical framework. For them, it constituted a progress that tends to push forward the logic of contingency in the construction of political subjects. After Lenin, it is indeed Gramsci who has recognized the constructionist character of the hegemonic relation with the conception of a political, moral and intellectual leadership within an alliance of different classes or 'subject positions' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 11). Yet the political leadership can be based on 'a conjuncture of coincidence of interests in which the participating sectors retain their separate identity', but as Laclau and Mouffe write, 'the moral and intellectual leadership requires that an ensemble of "ideas" and "values" be shared by a number of sectors, or to use our own terminology, that certain subject positions traverse a number of class sectors' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 66-67). It is ideology which is material, which becomes the constitutive terrain of the relations. Political subjects are hence not strictly speaking classes but 'collective wills'²⁵ and the ideological elements articulated do not belong necessarily to one class in particular. The field of historical contingency thus penetrates the sphere of political subjects'

whose struggle only ended up strengthening bourgeois society (Johnson, 1972, 81).

25 Cf. Gramsci, 1971, 133.

formation: their forms and contents are no longer guaranteed by any historical law.

What differentiated Gramsci from Bernstein was that Gramsci, contrary to Bernstein, did not see the necessity of *abandoning* the Marxist framework in order to overcome these problems. He developed alternatively the concept of *hegemony*, which transforms the necessity of the *unity* of the working class as a precondition to revolutionary actions, into the necessity of the *articulation of dissimilar elements* capable of producing a collective will, that is a fusion between moral, political and economic objectives, and imposes a certain vision of the world within civil society. In other words, the concept of hegemony stipulated that, in order to seize power, bourgeoisie and proletariat have to gain popular support and consensus. A hegemonic class is a class which managed to articulate with its own interests the interest of others classes. For Laclau and Mouffe, two things are implied within the Gramscian theory of hegemony: the first one is that contrary to many economist and class-reductionist assumptions, the class character of ideologies is the result of hegemony itself, that is the result of the combination, or in post-Marxists' words, the *articulation* of a set of ideological elements which pre-exist in the sphere of civil society. A hegemonic class is not a class which has imposed its class ideology on other groups, but a class which has been able to connect to its hegemonic principle the majority of the ideological elements of a given society. 'In this way it has been able to create a determinate conception of the world and to establish a certain "definition of reality" which is accepted by those over whom hegemony is exercised' (Mouffe, 1981, 173).

The second implication of the Gramscian theory of hegemony is that the objective of the ideological struggles is not the destruction of the opposing conception of the world, but the 'disarticulation' of it, the transformation of it.

For Gramsci, to become hegemonic a class has to ‘nationalize’ itself, by creating a ‘national-popular collective will’: through this way, this class does not *take* state power, nor does it smash the existing state, but it *becomes* the state, which renders it capable to undertake historical actions of a revolutionary nature. From the Gramscian theory of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe retain this non-class reductionist conception of the ‘superstructures’ and its ‘enlarged’ conception of politics: first the fact that ‘it is the formation of [a] matrix of meanings at the level of diverse discursive formations which establishes the class character of the discourses which are produced from them. Therefore, there are no class ideologies which exist prior to their inscription in discursive practices, but it is these practices themselves which, according to the way in which they articulate certain elements, produce discourses which will play a major role in the reproduction of certain types of relations of production’ (Mouffe, 1981, 184).

Second that the ‘field of politics is coextensive with the “social” as such and all levels of society can be the loci of relationships of power and the terrain for political struggle’ (Mouffe, 1981, 184) and especially outside the traditional channel of politics. The third aspect they retain from Gramsci is attributable to the young Marx: that the hegemonic leadership must be democratic in both its aims and its practice and that democracy is the ‘terrain of permanent revolution begun by the bourgeoisie and concluded by the proletariat’ (Mouffe, 1979, 174). However, post-Marxist authors were confronted, at the end of the 60s, with a new parameter which was ignored by Gramsci: the rise of new forms of struggle and proliferation of identities which do not tally with the class struggle, namely minority struggles, LGBT struggles, feminist, anti-racist, ecological and other radical democratic struggles. As was said in the introduction, the target of Laclau and Mouffe is the construction of an inextricable solidarity, an articulation where each movement would renegotiate and transform its identity in contact with the other movements but which at the same time would preserve their autonomy within all these forms

of struggles, from the anti-capitalist, socialist struggle of the proletariat²⁶ to the feminist, anti-racist, minorities' struggles for equality to ecologist struggles and anti-authoritarian and anti-productivist struggles. By integrating these new identities to the classical notion of hegemonic struggles, they realized that a contradiction existed within the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Indeed, a hegemony can only be constituted in connection with both classes with hegemonic vocations in the capitalist system, due to their places and their functions in the production process: namely either the bourgeoisie for the hegemony of the ruling classes, or the proletariat for the oppressed classes. If we enlarge the Gramscian perspective to all the members of the 'exploited' in general, if we wish to establish an 'active' hegemony between them, we can achieve it only with the working class; its importance dominates all other classes without power. It is not by essence that the proletariat has to lead the other classes to socialism, but because the objective conditions of the capitalist system give to the proletariat a mission he is the only one able to lead.

'From this perspective, the emergence of the new forms of political struggle from the 1960s (...) could only be figured as somehow less fundamental to the struggles of the industrial working class, and socialist strategy could only be conceived in terms of building a collective project by winning over these "peripheral struggles" to the world historical interest of the proletariat' explains Mark Wenman (Wenman, 2009, 119). The idea of pluralism itself is put into danger, since there is no pluralism if there is not an *a priori* equality between subject positions. The Gramscian theory of hegemony implies hence for Laclau and Mouffe the existence of a hierarchy between the classes of the same alliance and a logic of exclusion rather than a logic of equivalence. By putting *a priori* the priority of the working class, does not Gramsci ruin the

26 'Every project for radical democracy implies a socialist dimension, as it is necessary to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are at the root of numerous relations of subordination' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 178).

capacity of this class to gather ‘other’ classes behind it? Can the theory of the hegemony according to Gramsci avoid the anti-democratic danger which implies the idea of centrality of the proletariat? How could we convince the other groups to join the working class, while considering that these groups have peripheral interests to those of the proletariat? The attempt to develop a coherent democratic theory of hegemony which would not imply the necessary existence of a class basis as the hegemonic principle leads post-Marxist authors to construct a completely new theoretical edifice. Incorporating these three Gramscian assumptions, Laclau and Mouffe claim thence that it is necessary to go further the Gramscian conception as it contains this contradictory statement which reintroduces the dualism of classical Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 69). The problem is that ‘for Gramsci, even though the diverse social elements have a merely relational identity – achieved through articulatory practices – there must always be a *single* unifying principle in every hegemonic formation, and this can only be a fundamental class’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 69). The class character of the unifying principle is thus not the contingent result of the hegemonic struggle but the necessary structural framework within which every struggle occurs. For post-Marxists, the deconstructive aspect of the hegemony as articulatory practices has not been driven to its ultimate consequences. In other words, within Gramsci’s conception, ‘the ultimate core of the hegemonic subject’s identity is constituted at a point *external* to the space it articulates’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 85).

A distinction between a discursive formation of identities and a non-discursive formation of the identity of the fundamental class is introduced, the latter finally constituting a ‘transcendental signifier’. Laclau and Mouffe reject this differentiation of planes, or this ‘interiority/exteriority alternative’. Although the hegemonic subject, ‘as the subject of any articulatory practice, must be partially exterior to what it articulates – otherwise, there would be no articulation at all, such exteriority cannot be conceived as that existing

between two ontological levels' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 135). Laclau and Mouffe criticize the fact that the frame within which hegemony can occur is necessarily and *a priori* a class framework, instead of being the practical result of struggle. In other words, the fundamental class' identity (proletariat or bourgeois) is constituted within another framework than the hegemonic field – or overdetermination field – which is economy. The economy is hence still thought of as a field separate from the political field which gives political identities to economic entities such as classes. The topographical vision of human reality is hence conserved, as the economy determines who are the true actors of the transformation of the world, whatever the type of society. Laclau and Mouffe write: 'The constitutive logic of the economic space is not itself hegemonic. Here the naturalist prejudice, which sees the economy as a homogeneous space unified by necessary laws, appears once again with all its forces' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 69). In order to break with this paradigm and to put each of the forms of oppression and politics on a par, Laclau and Mouffe recognize the necessity of deconstructing the notion of *a priori* dominant groups within hegemony, especially the idea of a subject *a priori* constituted by the economy with objective interests implying a necessary emancipatory revolution for the entire society; and this can be achieved through the abandonment of the base/superstructure model itself. As a consequence the identity of the proletariat is not given but itself the production of a political construction. There is no logical and necessary relation between socialist objectives and the positions of social agents in the relations of production; it follows that, from the socialist point of view, the direction of the worker's struggle is not uniformly progressive: it depends, just as with any other social struggle, upon its forms of articulation within a given hegemonic context (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 85-86).

The same critique of dualism is made against Althusser. On the one hand, Laclau and Mouffe show that the logic of overdetermination necessarily

introduces contingency in the nature of the political subject which is constituted. If there is overdetermination, which is a political process, political subjects are not necessarily class subjects, as no identity exists between infrastructural datum and political datum. This phenomenon of overdetermination implies a logic of contingency also because the global 'signifier' which gives a political meaning to social struggles is not determined in advance; hence the nature of the created subject from diverse and isolated elements is also not determined in advance. In other words, 'political recomposition [is] unable to found the necessary class character of social agents' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 98). If so, there could not be two planes, one of essences and the other of appearances 'since there is no possibility of fixing an ultimate literal sense for which the symbolic would be a second and derived plane of signification' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 98). This conception of the social as a symbolic order was nevertheless in contradiction with Althusser's claim of a determination in the last instance of the economy independently of the type of society concerned; the simple and unidirectional determination of the economy for all types of society is incompatible with the conception of relations between overdetermined instances.

For Althusser, the ideology of the dominant class is realized in ideological state apparatuses, but 'it comes from elsewhere' (Althusser, 1971, 185-186), namely 'from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practises, their experience of the struggle, etc.' In other words, the ruling ideology, realized within the Ideological State Apparatuses, is merely 'the reflection at the ideological level of a certain position within the relations of production at the economic level' (Mouffe, 1981. 171). Hence the ideological is determined by something which is not itself superstructural but rather social and in the last instance economic. The theory of ideologies has necessarily a class-belonging, in other words social classes are the bearer of structures and of superstructures. There is therefore a

dualism in Althusser's thought, characteristic of a rationalist paradigm for which the social is unified in a space sutured by the economic infrastructure, which escape the process of overdetermination.

I.v.b. Laclau and Mouffe's anti-dialectical thought

To the dualism which was the common denominator of various currents of Marxist thought, Laclau and Mouffe will hence oppose a *monist* vision of the social field, reducible to the field of *discursivity*. As such, they radically reject Hegelian ontology and the category of positivity, and rather create an alternative and fundamental vision of the openness of social and as a result, of articulation. For them, if everything is discourse (see chapter 2) the hegemonic force and the ensemble of hegemonized elements would constitute themselves on the same plane, which is the plane of the general field of discursivity.

The category of articulation which is so important for post-Marxism, supposes that the articulated elements can be separately identified, hence that the elements have a separate existence independently of the articulated totalities. Within the field of articulation, the elements are organized within a totality which is external to the fragments themselves, hence it is contingent; on the opposite side, in the field of mediation, characteristic of the Hegelian concept of totality, the organisation is internal to the fragments organized, and they are considered like necessary moments of a transcendent totality.²⁷ That is the

27 See for example the Romantic generation and Hölderlin in particular for the premisses of that conception.

definition of the dialectic.²⁸ By rejecting the impossible logic of mediation like Trendelenburg did before them, they reintroduce the logic of fixation which is the logic of articulation in the understanding of the world. To come back to the Hegelian dialectic, it means that ‘the negation is irreducible to any objectivity, which means that it becomes *constitutive* and therefore indicates the impossibility of establishing the social as an objective order’ (Laclau, 1990, 16). Indeed, if negativity ceases to be a moment of a higher positivity, it acquires an independent status and existence. To the system of logical transitions characteristic of the dialectical conception of reality, Laclau and Mouffe oppose a conception of contingent relation between objects and elements, and without the transcendence of the second moment of the dialectic, the identities of the elements become precarious and contingent and cannot be fixed in any ultimate literality.

The questioning of discourses such as Hegelianism, including Marxism which adopted the Hegelian point of view on difference and identity, leads to a reformulation of the notion of fragmentation that we already used many times: if there is no such totality whose elements are necessary elements transcended by this totality, then, within the social field, society understood as a sutured and closed space does not exist. Society does not constitute a sutured space and the social has no essence. As we have seen, the relations between the

28 Following Trendelenburg (1840), Laclau and Mouffe argue that Hegel’s ambiguous dialectic of the Real is an impossible operation that violates constantly the method that it itself postulates. In that case logical transitions become a series of contingent transitions. They write: ‘For him [Hegel], identity is never positive and closed in itself, but is constituted as transition, relation, difference. If, however, Hegel’s logical relations become contingent transitions, the connections between them cannot be fixed as moments of an underlying or sutured totality. This means that they are articulations’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 95). Indeed Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of the real keeps the Hegelian conception of identities as transition, relation and difference which is normally the negative moment of the dialectic, but reject the positive moment of the dialectic – the transcendence of these differences – which was the ground on which the concept of totality was lying.

elements are therefore contingent because the connections between them cannot be fixed as moments of an underlying or sutured totality.

We can thus talk of a growing complexity and fragmentation of advanced industrial societies not in the sense that, *sub specie aeternitatis*, they are more complex than earlier societies, but in the sense that they are constituted around a fundamental asymmetry. This is the asymmetry existing between a growing proliferation of differences – a surplus of meaning of the social – and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 96)

The originality of this reading is double: first, it means that the debates within revisionism did not consist in fact in discussing the reality of fragmentation within capitalism, but surreptitiously discussed the failure of dialectical or scientific ideologies to think fragmentation as a part of a higher unity; the first crisis of Marxism was a crisis of an ideology fissured by its incapacity to fix the flow of differences which is consubstantial with the real. In other words, Marxism and Hegelianism has always been incapable of grasping the pluralism inherent to the social, and always attempted to reduce it to a higher unity through a dialectical process.

Chapter 2

Precursors to and influences on Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic thought

II.i. Overview

The idea of an ontological fragmentation I evoked at the end of my first chapter echoes the post-structuralist theorisation of the ontological plurality of the social. In the current chapter I will explain this in detail. I place an emphasis on the key moments of the elaboration of post-Marxist theory rather than on its historical development.

In the first part, I discuss the short-term occasion which gave rise to the elaboration of a post-Marxist theoretical edifice during the 60s, namely the critique of structuralism as an essentialism and a more detailed analysis of the elaboration of the concept of discourse. Then I move on to examine the direct theoretical influences upon post-Marxism, in particular Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, Jacques Derrida's critique of the notion of totality, and Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject and identifications. Finally I analyse key post-Marxist themes, such as antagonism, and the logic of the signifier. I then show how these concepts are rearticulated all together and synthesized to produce a new democratic concept of hegemony.

II.ii. Derrida's critique of structuralism

Chapter 1 examined some of the problems perceived by Laclau and Mouffe as central concerning the traditional Marxist imaginary of the social as separated between the economic base and the political, cultural and ideological superstructures. I showed that the concept of base and superstructure as a dialectical unity in Gramscian thought was an attempt to overcome this dualism and had a great influence on Laclau and Mouffe's thoughts. The other great influence on the young Laclau and the young Mouffe was Althusser's structuralism; the elaboration of the concept of discourse is a direct response to its underlying 'essentialism'; I will here expose what this means and this will allow me to demonstrate the basis on which the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism has been made.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the failure of Althusserianism to overcome the two types of economism (epiphenomenalism and class-reductionism) is related to the 'myth of a unified society', based on the theory of the social as an intelligible and closed system of relations, a structural totality where the *economy* plays the role of *structural causality*, as we have seen in Althusser's theory of the determination in the last instance of the economy. The critique of such a conception is particularly clear and eloquent in a 1983 article by Laclau named *The impossibility of society*. There we find this main argument: the failure of structuralism and more broadly Marxism to elaborate a theory capable of explaining the specificity of the political is due to its fundamental essentialism. Laclau writes:

The structural totality was to present itself as an object having a positivity on its own, which it was possible to describe and to define. In this sense, this totality operated as an underlying principle of intelligibility of the social order. The status of this totality was that of an essence of the social order which had to be *recognized* behind the empirical variations expressed at the surface of social life. (Laclau, 1990, 90)

Indeed, what is presupposed within the Althusserian notion of mode of production and of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’, is that society is an intelligible object of knowledge, since it is a structural totality. That means we can actually know the essence of the phenomena by studying the strictly economic processes underlying them. The economy or the kernel of this totality or system of relations between elements operates as an underlying principle of intelligibility of the social order. Structuralism is hence contradictory: indeed, on one hand, it claims that the meaning of each element of the totality is relational,²⁹ that is to say defined *outside itself* (Laclau 1990, 90), but at the same time this intelligible object of knowledge – society – has an *essence*, according to Laclau, ‘the essence of the social order which had to be recognized behind the empirical variations expressed at the surface of social life’ (Laclau, 1990, 90). This essence is the economy, understood as the ‘real’ while the superstructures were considered as ‘appearances’. In other words as a structuralist Althusser recognized that any social identity is defined through relations with other elements in society and simultaneously, it transformed those relations into a system, thanks to its knowledgeable kernel: the economy. He thus fixed these identities in a system. But if every element is relationally defined, why has the economy always this privileged position of being the bearer of the other structures? Laclau and Mouffe simply refuse this dualism. To the society understood as a system of structures and as an

29 This will be particularly clear in our analysis of Saussure’s theory of linguistics.

intelligible object of knowledge, they oppose *the impossibility of fixing meaning and identities in a system* and hence the '*infinite of the social*' (Laclau, 1990, 90).

In chapter 1 we have seen that for Laclau and Mouffe everything is discourse. Derrida's critique of structuralist essentialism is in fact the basis of these post-Marxists' fundamental tools that allow them to elaborate a conception of politics as articulation of identities. The well-known deconstructionist method tracks down the desires for fully constituted meaning and grounds. It also gives a new light to the concepts of language and discourse which are central to post-structuralism. In his essay on *Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences* (1978 [1967]) Derrida identifies the paradox of essentialism in the following logical way:

The general model of essentialism assumes the existence of an underlying essential principle that structures the social totality by delimiting the play of meaning, *while itself escaping the process of structuration*. (1978, 278-279)³⁰

This centre of social structure – in Marxism the economy as distinct from the political domain – is supposed to govern the structuration of the structure while itself escaping this process: it is thus supposed to be at the same time within the structure and beyond it. Consequently it would be equivalent to a sort of 'transcendental signifier' whose exteriority could not be justified and which would act as the foundation of all the signified in a closed system. Derrida rejects any such transcendental meaning as a fiction and calls 'metaphysical' any thought system which depends on a principle or ground

30 See also Torfing, 1999, 19.

upon which a whole hierarchy of meaning would be constructed. The act of ‘deconstruction’ is the critical operation by which one can cast light on the ‘binary opposition’ used to define such first principles: these are commonly defined by what they exclude. For Derrida, binary oppositions represent a way of thinking typical of ideologies, which draw rigid boundaries between a superior and privileged term which belongs to the presence and to the *logos*, and an inferior one; for example: intelligible/sensible, soul/body, truth/falsity, self/non-self, sense/nonsense, objective/subjective etc. Deconstruction methods are used then to show how one term of an antithesis inheres within another.

Derrida argues that this tendency typical of ideologies relates to ‘centrism’ or to the desire to posit a transcendence which would be a ‘central’ *presence* able to fix meanings. But this desire is always unfulfilled for the centre does not exist as a fixed, autonomous locus but has rather to be thought *as an absence*. It is Derrida first who claimed that if such a transcendental signifier does not exist, or how ‘in the absence of a centre or origin, everything becomes discourse’ (Derrida, 1978, 280). Discourse is here defined as ‘a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated’ (Torfing, 1999, 85), or a field of infinite substitutions (Derrida 1978, 289). As we have seen above, the absence of a fixed centre extends infinitely the process of signification within the structure. Furthermore the always unfulfilled desire for this centre gives rise to the endless displacements and substitutions of this centre (Torfing, 1999, 40). This is because language in its nature excludes any totalizing attempt of the desire, because language lacks a centre ‘which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions’ contrary to the field of structures (Derrida, 1978, 289). As Derrida writes:

This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions

only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a centre which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. (Derrida, 1978, 289)

Complete totalisation, or closure is thus impossible: without a complete totalisation, a ‘structure’ exists only as a field of signification in which the order is temporary and threatened by a ‘constitutive outside’ which prevents an ultimate closure through totalisation. Adopting the thesis of Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe claim that:

If the *being* – as distinct from existence – of any object is constituted within a discourse, it is not possible to differentiate the discursive, in terms of being, from any other area of reality. It means that the *discursive* is the horizon of every object. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990, 105)³¹

In this passage of Laclau and Mouffe’s explanations, the coextensivity of the discursive with ‘any other area of reality’ seems to refuse the Kantian distinction between the noumena or the realm of the objective existence and the realm of phenomena which is the realm of being and representations. For Laclau and Mouffe, everything is constructed through discourse hence there is no grounds for the noumenal at all.

They write:

31 To avoid equivocation, let’s recall that for Laclau and Mouffe, the discursive is not an object among other objects, although concrete discourses are. The discursive is only a theoretical horizon (Laclau, 1990, 220).

Our analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. It affirms: a) that every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence; and b) that any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured under the form of discursive totalities. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 107)

As a logical consequence and as I have explained in Chapter 1, the concept of *discourse* entails that ideologies, if considered as discursive constructions, cease to be superstructures, in the sense that there is only superstructure. Social identity, whether economic, political or ideological, is entirely constructed in and by discourse. As a consequence the base/superstructure model, which were at all stages one of the main aspects of the various crises of Marxism, and which supposed a definition of the social as an object of knowledge from which one could extract some objective laws, is definitively abandoned.

The absence of a fixed centre extends the field and the play of signification infinitely (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 112). Assessing the consequences of these statements within the field of Marxist theory, classes no longer play their previous role of bearers of structure. Post-Marxist authors argue that structures exist, however they always have a precarious being, because they are essentially *discursively* constructed. This conception also destroys the idea of class interests. Although capitalism is a system of production based on wage labour, it does not necessarily mean that ‘antagonism is inherent to the relations of production. Antagonism is not established within capitalist relations of production, but between the latter and the identity of the social

agents – workers included – outside of them’ (Laclau, 1990, 221).

Here I would like to put into perspective the plural conception of the social with the Marxist conception of the social, as represented by the successive Internationals, in more detail. According to Laclau, traditionally, the notion of the ‘social’ was characterized by its homogeneity, because it could be reduced to economic processes whose direction was supposed to go towards its homogenisation. According to Laclau, if the notion of ‘social’ is defined relatively to its supposed opposite ‘individual’, ‘then the homogeneous and indivisible nature of community must be automatically accepted’ (Laclau 1990, XIII).

This social homogeneity assumed the function of the concrete embodiment of universality in Marxist discourse, and was guaranteed by sociological hypotheses such as the growing proletarianisation of the middle classes and the progressive simplification of class structure under capitalism. (Laclau, 1990, XIII)

Nevertheless this simplification did not occur and automatically, the homogeneity of the social was necessarily absent. The post-Marxist authors argue that this was from the beginning flawed because this whole conception was based on a misconception of what the social really was. The social is ‘infinite’ and essentially plural and these pluralities cannot be subsumed into a higher unity. This does not mean however that capitalism and oppression cannot be overcome, that without any unity the system cannot be changed. In fact radical politics is not subordinated to the quest for unity of homogeneity anymore, and the whole meaning of the radicality of politics is inverted: *if radicality does not result from the emergence of a unified subject who can*

embody the universal, it results from the irruption on the political scene of the multiple, fragmentary, partial and limited subjects composing the 'social'. Hence post-Marxism provides the most striking answer to the traditional problem of the realization of the unity of the oppressed studied in my first chapter. It is not the real unity of the oppressed which is a condition of possibility for the realisation of socialism, but actually it is their fragmentation.

II.iii. The Saussurean influence

To come back to the post-Marxist concept of discourse, the development of this concept has clearly absorbed the impact of Saussurean linguistics (Laclau, 2007a, 541). The principal impact of Ferdinand de Saussure's work is its theory of the sign, conceived as the combination of a sound image and a concept (Saussure, 1974, 65). In order to suppress the ambiguity of usage which generally designates by sign only a sound-image, Saussure decided to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified (*signifié*) and signifier (*signifiant*), while keeping the term *sign* to designate the whole resulting from the association of the signifier and the signified. For example, the sound image (signified) *arbor* in Latin is intimately linked to the concept of tree (signifier). The first major thesis of structural linguistics is that the bond between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary. There is no necessary or natural connection between the two. There is only a connection established by convention and tradition. One signifier can be replaced by another signifier for the same signified. Language is hence *form* and not *substance*, and 'that each element of the system is exclusively defined by the rules of its combinations and substitutions with the other elements' (Laclau, 2007a, 542).

To use Saussure's analogy, if I substitute the wooden pieces in a chessboard by marbles or even pieces of paper, I can still play chess as far as the rules governing the movements of the pieces remain the same. The only thing that matters in these substitutions is that 'the same value is attributed to it' (Saussure, 1966, 110). The most important implication of the arbitrary character of the sign is that each language 'articulates' reality.

It is through language that the objects that are meaningful for us are constructed. Each language divides up, categorizes, and makes coherent the totality of objects that is used by its corresponding language-using community. (A.M. Smith, 1998, 85)

Nothing exterior to linguistics determines the particular articulation of reality within a language. For example 'there is nothing in "nature" which determines where we should place a boundary between "green" and "blue" or "hill" and valley' (A.M. Smith, 1998, 85). There is not only a contingent link between the signifier and the signified, but language constructs also the signified in a process that is independent from the extra-linguistic (Saussure, 1966, 113).

This leads us to the other principle at the basis of structural linguistics which is that in language there are no positive terms, but only differences. Every meaning is relational; for example to understand the meaning of 'father' we have to understand the meaning of 'mother', 'son', etc.; consequently language constitutes a system in which no elements can be defined independently of the others (see Laclau 2007a, 542). The sign is arbitrary and the meaning is exclusively constituted through the relational differences obtained within a language. As Jameson claims:

Meaning is not a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified, between the materiality of language, between a word or a name, and its referent or concept. Meaning for Saussure is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier. What we generally call the signified – the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance – is now rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves. (Jameson, 1991, 26)

The link between Saussure and Laclau and Mouffe is that, as Anna-Marie Smith states, there is a homology between Saussure's conception of the sign and post-Marxists' conception of political identities (Smith, 1998, 87). The concept of articulation is based on the Saussurean theory of the sign. Political identities are constituted through articulation which is defined as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 105). These articulated elements have the same status as signifiers in Saussure's linguistics. To be more precise 'discourse' is the name given to the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 105). When some elements are articulated and hence produce a discursive totality, it means that every element occupies a *differential position*, thus its meaning is fixed relatively to the meaning of the other elements. In post-Marxist vocabulary, in an articulated discursive totality, 'every element has been reduced to a *moment* of that totality, all identity is relational and all relations have a necessary character' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 106). The identity of the elements cannot be specified outside the relation itself. However, contrary to the Saussurean conception of language as a totality of *necessary moments*,

discursive totalities never exist in the form of a simply *given and delimited*

positivity, the transition from the “elements” to the “moments” is in fact never entirely fulfilled because every relational logic of discourse is in fact limited by an “exterior”, which is constituted by other discourses (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 110 and 146).

This last point is extremely important as it is the main critique addressed to Saussurean structuralism, and joins the critique of Althusserian structuralism. Saussure is a structuralist, for him a language is a collection and multiplicity of signs constituting a system (see Saussure, 1974, 70). And Saussure claims about the characteristics of a system that ‘[it] is a complex mechanism that can be grasped only through reflection; the very ones who use it daily are ignorant of it’ (Saussure, 1974 in McNeil and Feldman, 1998, 301). That is explaining the ‘inability of the masses to transform it’ (...) ‘We can conceive of a change only through the intervention of specialists, grammarians, logicians; but experience shows us that all such meddling have failed’ (Saussure, 1974 in McNeil and Feldman, 1998, 301).

Hence the main character of language is its immutability:³²

Of all social institutions, language is least amenable to initiative. It blends with the life of society, and the latter, inert by nature, is a prime conservative force. (Saussure, 1974 in McNeil and Feldman, 1998, 301).

32 The principle of immutability does not mean that language does not evolve with time; it evolves because it is linked to a community of speakers (*une masse parlante*) whose relations are subject to change. In fact it is the principle of continuity ‘which cancels freedom’ which implies change, ‘varying degrees of shifts in the relationship between the signified and the signifier’ (Saussure, 1974 in McNeil and Feldman, 1998, 303).

We find the same problem of ‘immutability’ in Althusserian structuralism. In addition to the repressive apparatuses Althusser states the existence of a plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses³³ – the educational, familial, religious, the political, the juridical, the trade union, the communications and the cultural ISAs – which function primarily through ideology to secure the ideological conditions of the relations of production (Mouffe, 1981, 168). But by exercising its domination both by violence and by ideology, according to Mouffe the domination of the ruling class becomes almost total, and the possibility of historical change, therefore, becomes only conceivable as the destruction of these ideological state apparatuses. Althusser’s theory of ideologies invokes hence a paradoxical disappearance of politics: in the context of the omnipotence of dominant ideology and in the absence of a ‘*grand soir*’, any historical change becomes impossible. In the same way, if language or society are considered as systems, or as some closed system of relation, immutability becomes one of their prominent characteristics and it is hardly possible to get out of these systems. Linguistic change like social change is unlikely to happen, because a system is characterized by the continuity of its structure. If this does not constitute a problem for semiologists it does for radical left political theorists who try to ground theoretically the possibility of political changes and emancipation.

33 The same impossibility of change can be found in Althusser’s interpretation of the state. For him the Marxist theory of the state operates a distinction between state power and state apparatus. State power may be affected by ‘revolutions’, ‘coup d’état’ etc., without affecting or modifying the state apparatus. The bourgeois revolutions of 1830, 1848, the fall of the empire in 1870 in France, and the coup of 1958 etc., illustrate it perfectly (Althusser, 1984, 14). He sums up: ‘1) the State is the repressive State apparatus 2) State power and State apparatus must be distinguished 3) the objective of the class struggle concerns State power, and in consequence the use of the State apparatus by the classes (...) 4) the proletariat must seize State power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois State apparatus and, in a first phase, replace it with a quite different, proletarian, State apparatus, then in later phases set in motion a radical process, that of the destruction of the State (the end of State power, the end of every State apparatus)’ (Althusser, 1984, 15).

II.iv. The concept of antagonism

It is the theorisation of a *discursive exterior* or an *antagonism* that preserves Laclau and Mouffe from the *status quo* brought about by the structuralist point of view of social relations and of their immutability. If a discursive totality never exists in the form of a simple and delimited positivity, the relational logic is always incomplete and ‘pierced by contingency’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 110). This is in fact what makes articulatory practice possible.

There is no social identity fully protected from a discursive exterior that deforms it and prevents it becoming fully sutured. Both the identities and the relations lose their necessary character. As a systematic structural ensemble, the relations are unable to absorb the identities; but as the identities are purely relational, this is but another way of saying that there is no identity which can be fully constituted (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 111).

That’s why Laclau and Mouffe abandon the premise of ‘society’ as a sutured and self-defined totality and insist on the open character of discursive totalities. This also explains why they insisted so much on the necessity to overcome Marxist dualism and conception of the economy as the bearer of the other structures.

There is no single underlying principle fixing – and hence constituting – the whole field of differences. The irresolvable interiority/exteriority tension is the condition of any social practice: necessity only exists as a partial limitation of the field of contingency. It is in this terrain, where neither a total interiority

nor a total exteriority is possible, that the social is constituted. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 111)

Laclau and Mouffe transform the Saussurean sign as the name for a split, 'of an impossible suture between signified and signifier'. The fact that there is no ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be only partial fixations, thus every identity never manages to be fully fixed, and its fixity – its identity – is always *precarious*. That's why, for Laclau and Mouffe, the status of the elements composing a discourse is that of '*floating* signifiers', 'incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 113). The impossibility of fixing meaning in a sutured space because of the existence of this discursive exterior has some implications that we need to consider. It denies an identity by preventing its constitution as an objectivity, as a closed structural system. In other words this 'outside' negates the full identity of the elements articulated within a discourse. This 'exterior' or constitutive outside is not the reintroduction of the category of the extra-discursive, for the exterior is constituted by other discourses (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 146). This throws up an alternative according to Laclau:

Either the element of negativity is reabsorbed by a positivity of a higher order which reduces it to mere appearance; or the negation is irreducible to any objectivity, which means that it becomes *constitutive* and therefore indicates the impossibility of establishing the social as an objective order (Laclau 1990, 16).

The first part of the alternative – that the negativity is reabsorbed by a positivity – is found in philosophies of history such as the Hegelian one. With a concept such as 'cunning of reason' Hegel asserted indeed 'the rationality of

the real at the expense of reducing antagonism, negativity to an appearance through which a higher form of rationality and positivity works' (Laclau, 1990, 16). The second part of the alternative – the constitutive nature of the negative – can be found within Marxist texts through the idea of 'class struggles'. This privileges the moment of negativity as a basis of historical change. However, within Marxist theory the moment of negativity was finally reabsorbed through the process of the revolution and the rise of a communist society. With Laclau and Mouffe the negativity becomes *absolutely constitutive* because it cannot be a moment of a positivity. It 'blocks the identity of the "inside", in other words it blocks the identity of the elements from becoming absolutely necessary and introduces contingency in the constitution or destitution of these identities' (Laclau, 1990, 17). It becomes an *antagonism*, 'which prevents the constitution of objectivity itself' through the suturing of the discursive structure. In that sense Laclau can state the assumption in his text *Psychoanalysis and Marxism* that, with the discursive outside being constitutive and radical, *there is no Aufhebung*: negativity cannot be absorbed in an internal moment of higher unity as was the case in the Hegelian conception of the real (Laclau, 1990, 98).

Antagonism is a heterogeneous discourse that negates a given order, and is therefore the limit of that order, 'and not the moment of a broader totality in relation to which the two poles of the antagonism would constitute difference i.e. partial instances' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 126). The existence of a plurality of discourses grounds the definition of the social as an order which always fails to constitute itself as an objective order.³⁴ Antagonism is hence

34 Laclau and Mouffe distinguish antagonism from Hegelian contradiction and from Kantian 'real opposition' (*Realrepugnantz*, or principle of contrariety). The meaning of contradiction is understood here not in the sense that the real itself would be contradictory (as in the theory of the 'dialectic') but in the sense that contradictions exist *within* the real. In the case of contradiction and real opposition the two elements in the relation have fully

this *Other* which reveals the impossibility of any closure, and is the experience of the limits of the social and of objectivity' (Laclau, 1990, 17).

At the same time, as the identities are relational and would not be what it is outside the relationship with the force antagonizing it, the antagonism is also part of the conditions of existence of that identity (Laclau, 1990, 21). That's why the antagonizing force fulfils two contradictory roles at the same time: first it blocks the full constitution of the identity to which it is opposed and thus shows its contingency. On the other hand it is constitutive of that unfulfilled identity (Laclau, 1990, 21). Moreover as antagonism implies the existence of different antagonic discursive formations, it necessarily implies the existence of several spaces of representation. An entity is heterogeneous with another if they are in an antagonic relationship: each of them interrupts the space of representation of the other, hence what Laclau calls 'the inherent failure of representability' (Laclau, 2006, 106). In other terms, antagonism is an interruption in the design of language to fix the system of differences in a sutured totality. Antagonism is always the place of a taboo, of an unspeakable: 'antagonism escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language, since language only exists as an attempt to fix that which antagonism subverts'

constituted identities: contradiction and real opposition are objective facts. Laclau and Mouffe explain: 'It is because A is fully A that being-not-A is a contradiction and therefore an impossibility. In the case of real opposition, it is because A is also fully A that its relation with B produces an objectively determinable effect' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 124-125). On the one hand the opposition concerns concepts and in the other hand there is no real antagonic relations but a frontal opposition.

The situation concerning the logical implications contained within the antagonic relation is very different: far from being an objective relationship, antagonism is what reveals the limit of any objectivity: it is paradoxically a non-relational relation. 'How so? From the viewpoint of each of the two antagonistic forces, its opponent is not an objective presence, completing the fullness of one's own identity, but represents, on the contrary, that which makes reaching such a fullness impossible. This means that, as far as we remain within the perspective of each of the two antagonistic forces, the moment *stricto sensu* of the clash, far from being objective, indicates the impossibility of society reaching a full objectivity' (Laclau, 2006, 104).

(Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 125). In other words, the social is hence a permanent space of a reciprocal subversion between the attempt of objectivity and negativity. In a more general point of view, 'the social only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society' writes Laclau (Laclau, 1990, 92).

Combined together, the Derridean influence and the Saussurean influence produce a very peculiar conception of political identities. Not only do they have to be entirely constructed, but they are also purely relational, that is negatively constituted. A centre has to be produced (as an analogy a fixed definition of mother will fix the meanings of 'son', 'father' etc. in a differential system). And because there is no fixed centre but that discursive identities are always threatened by an outside which negates them, they can't ever be fully constituted within a sutured totality and their contents become perfectly open to a *variety* of equivalential rearticulations (Laclau, 2005, 42); this is a reality which, according to Laclau and Mouffe, *must be preserved* because the 'social' itself has an irreducible plural character, and any attempt to negate this plurality would be 'totalitarian'. The unity of the revolutionary subject through the action of inevitable economic processes was a precondition for the rise of socialism in orthodox Marxist thought; in post-Marxism, it is the opposite which is valuable: as we already seen, the promotion of differences and plurality is the condition for the expansion of the democratic revolution (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 166).

II.v. The Lacanian influence

The absence of a fixed centre extends the field and the play of signification

infinitely (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 112). For Laclau and Mouffe, this implies that if there is meaning, there have to be partial fixations, otherwise the ‘flow of differences’ would be impossible. In the social process, state Laclau and Mouffe, there is another movement which tries to limit this infinitude, to ‘domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order’ (Laclau, 1990, 91) or a structure. The social always excess the limits of the attempts to constitute society, but at the same time the impossible totality does not disappear. In the absence of any complete totalisation, a structure exists only as a field of signification within which a temporary order is constructed by a multiplicity of mutually substituting centres.

Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 112)

Why is there a necessity for the construction of temporary orders? As Žižek has asked: why is there something – a centre, an order – rather than nothing at all (Žižek, in Laclau and Zak, 1994)? In the recent works of Laclau and Mouffe, there has been a tangible Lacanian shift, mostly due to Žižek’s critiques of post-Marxist conceptions of subject positions as we find in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. This shift consists in extending the domain of negativity to subjectivity itself by defining subjectivity as the domain of the precarious character of any structuration (Laclau, 1990, 92). This allows Laclau and Mouffe to justify the necessity of a precarious centre to order fragmentations. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge the fragmentation of all identities, but at the same time they claim that fragmentation only leads to chaos, and from pure negativity one cannot extract any practice of politics and creation of common values. As Laclau writes:

Contingency and fragmentation are not the end of the matter, because a discourse in which the meaning cannot be fixed is the discourse of the psychotic. (Laclau, 1990, 90)

So what is the ground upon which one could make rest this necessary order which domesticates infinitude, which would not be an essence? For Laclau and Mouffe, the answer must be found within Lacanian psychoanalysis, and more particularly in its theorisation of the subject. Although antagonism plays this double role of negating the identities and preventing them from being fully themselves, at the same time it constitutes its identity by imposing its limits, and what is negated in social antagonism, according to Žižek, *is in fact always already negated*. The negation of the social antagonism is in fact always a *negation of the negation* (Žižek in Laclau, 1990, 249-254). What is negated in a social antagonism is *a subject of lack*, a split subject who is trying to establish itself as a fully achieved identity through *acts of identification* (Torfing, 1999, 52). The influence of Lacanian theory leads Laclau and Mouffe to conceive the social as structured around a ‘certain traumatic impossibility’ as Žižek stated it in an article of 1987, ‘around a certain fissure which *cannot* be symbolized’ (see Žižek in Laclau, 1990, 249). More precisely Laclau and Mouffe have transposed the Lacanian notion of the Real as impossible within the social field. The idea of the impossibility of society, which is grounded on ‘antagonism’ is the political transposition of the Lacanian notion of the Real as impossible.

It is because there is a lack which centres the subject that antagonism is constitutive. The aspiration of a political order is the negation of a negation

which is the negativity inscribed within the subject: its incapacity to be a totality. As I have mentioned above, the problem is to justify the negation of antagonism by the attempt to construct a centre. If we deny the existence of a structure, then we need to replace its ordering effect by something else. In Lacanian psychoanalysis it is the search for the *jouissance* which is at the basis of this research.

To fully understand this notion and its implications for politics within the post-Marxist framework, I have to analyse it in relation to the two other parts of the triptych Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. But first let's begin with the Lacanian theory of the subject as a lack, as the locus of an impossible identity, which tallies with the post-structuralist interpretation of Saussurean linguistics. The first subversion operated within the notion of the subject happened with Freud's theory of the unconscious, which denounced the modern 'cogito' as a basis to understand subjectivity as a pure mirage (see Stavrakakis, 1999, 15). Lacan, like the post-structuralists who reduce the subject to a set of subject positions, eliminates the *locus* of the subject but contrary to them he introduces an alternative definition of subjectivity.³⁵ From childhood, the human being lives the experience of fragmentation. First, during the 'mirror stage', a period from the sixth to the eighteenth month of life, the fragmentation experienced by the infant is transformed 'into an affirmation of its bodily unity through the assumption of its image in the order' (Stavrakakis, 1999, 17). But this jubilation provoked by the success of integrating this fragmentation into an imaginary totality is ended soon after by the continuous fragmentary character of the infant's experiences of its real body. The ego is the synthesis of an original 'inchoate collection of desires' then always an alien alter-ego (Lacan, 1993, 39 in Stavrakakis, 1999, 18). The infant's unity is hence imaginarily constituted through the identification with its own image,

35 Contrary to the classical views, the subject is not reducible to consciousness or to the *ego*.

which always contains within itself an element of difference, of otherness. In that sense, ‘every purely imaginary equilibrium or balance with the other is always marked by a fundamental instability’ (Stavrakakis, 1999, 18).

This alienating dimension of the ego is the reason for the failure of a stable identity. Nevertheless, the register in which the ego will be capable of acquiring a stable identity is the symbolic register to which belongs the field of linguistic representation. It is the symbolic which gives consistency to the ego and then creates a subject. The symbolic is a guide beyond the imaginary order; it is the register of language, and will be used by the infant to acquire a stable identity.

By submitting to the laws of language, the infant becomes a subject in language, (...) and hopes to gain an adequate representation through the world of words: the symbolic provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being. It’s on this basis that the subject recognises himself as being this or that. (Lacan, 1993, 179; Stavrakakis, 1999, 20)

If the symbolic creates the subject and if the symbolic is the field of language, then it is the *signifier* that creates an identity and hence determines the subject. Not only does the signifier determine the subject, but the subject comes into being by agreeing to be represented by the signifier. The symbolic order is constitutive for the subject. This is what Lacan describes as the ‘pre-eminence of the signifier over the subject’ (Lacan 1988, 51, see also Stavrakakis, 1999, 20). Becoming an effect of the signifier, the subject is in a certain way subordinated to the laws of the symbolic, which simultaneously acquires power. Regarding the relation between signifier and signified in Lacanian theory, I shall mention the fact that for Lacan – as was the case for Saussure –

meaning is produced by the signifier, and not by the signified, and thus the symbolic is the order of the signifier (Lacan, 1993, 292). The implications of the constitutive alienation in the imaginary and the symbolic for a theory of subjectivity are the following ones: the fullness of identity that the subject is seeking is impossible both on the imaginary and on the symbolic level. The subject is doomed to symbolise in order to constitute her or himself as such, but this symbolisation cannot capture the totality and singularity of the real body, the close-circuit of the drives. Symbolisation, that is to say the pursuit of identity itself, introduces lack and makes identity ultimately impossible' (Stavrakakis, 1999, 29).

Because alienation is constitutive of the subject, and that the constitution of subject is this movement towards an impossible identity, Lacan can state that an irreducible lack is inscribed within the subjective structure. Moreover, the determination of the subject operates as the constitution of a lack. *Identification* is the only possible solution to construct a stable identity, either on the imaginary or the symbolic level, and the subject of lack emerges through the failure of these attempts at identifications. Indeed, identifications cannot result in stable subjective identities for their only horizon is failure. Laclau writes:

The identification never reaches the point of a full identity; any act is an act of reconstruction, which is to say that the creator will search in vain for the seventh day of rest. (Laclau, 1990, 60)

This concept of identification is central in both Lacanian and post-Marxist theories. The condition of entry within the symbolic order is a loss, the exclusion of something through an act of decision; it is then a dual process: on

the one hand, in order to gain the symbolic world, we have to accept the symbolic laws of language, and then make a sacrifice and accept that symbolisation can never be total, and on the other hand, for Lacan this acceptance allows the subject to live a neurotic – normal – life, by entering the social world in which he or she can constitute him or herself as a desiring subject at the level of language. On the opposite side, the psychosis appears when the signifier fails to appear and when identifications within the symbolic order become impossible.³⁶

Laclau contends that it is the impossible return to unity and completion in a formal sense that the subject seeks through his identification with a subject position. *A priori* any content is theoretically capable of occupying that space. Because the subject is a subject of lack and his identity is marked with indeterminacy, he is caught in an endless and impossible search for completion and is thereby driven to perform an infinite series of identifications (Smith, 1998, 76). Only the phantasmatic realm offers a full conception of the social. How do we operate the passage from a purely subjective level (the Lacanian subject) to an objective level (the level of political identities)? Does not the objective domain of politics obey a different set of theoretical concepts and analysis? How can we ground a political theory upon a purely subjective theory? This is possible precisely because within Lacanian theory the individual/collective and subjective/objective bipolarities are deconstructed. Indeed, both the subjective (the subject) and the objective (the other) lack domains.

36 In Lacanian terms, the Name-of-the-Father that designates the primary signifier which supports the matrix of significations, and which destroys the imaginary relation of identification between the 'Mother' and the child, is not accepted and the psychotic cannot constitute himself as a subject of the signifier within the symbolic order. Then, the lack of the symbolic is covered by imaginary constructions which take the form of delusions (Stavrakakis, 1999, 32).

If I need to identify with something it is not because all my attempts to acquire it by identifying with a supposedly full Other are failing. Identification becomes thinkable only as a result of the lack within the structure, the structure of the social Other. The objective as a closed totality is a semblance; the objective Other is lacking (Stavrakakis, 1999, 41).

From a Lacanian perspective, those investments are made not because the signifiers have specific meanings that resonate organically within a given context, but because the ‘empty signifiers’ promise to deliver a jouissance, the primal unity and completion that was foreclosed at the entry into language. The objects of identifications have to represent a fullness to be attractive to the subject of lack (see Laclau, 1990, 63). Laclau especially, inspired by Lacan’s works and by Žižek’s critiques, has hence gone further than the theory of hegemony of Gramsci by emphasizing the formal character of hegemonic discourse. Laclau argues that the most important aspect of a hegemonic discourse consists primarily in the function of giving order and coherence to a social imaginary, and not in its content. This is due to the fact that a hegemonic discourse has a ‘filling function’ as it offers compensation to the subject of lack, who is condemned to the endless search for completion through identification. Laclau’s Lacanian shift could appear in this respect as a departure not only from post-structuralist theory, but also from the Gramscian tradition, for Gramsci insists that ‘a political discourse will only resonate with “the people” insofar as it organically resonates in some way with popular traditions’ (Smith, 1998, 80-81). However, Laclau does not completely reject the post-structuralist and Gramscian approaches, as he argues that if the contents of a political discourse are of secondary consideration in contrast to their formal characteristics (Laclau, 1994, 3) this implies that they still remain some significance. A hegemonic discourse must be more than the formal

embodiment of order itself.

This does not mean, of course, that any discourse putting itself forward as the embodiment of fullness will be accepted. The acceptance of a discourse depends on its credibility, and this will not be granted if its proposal clashes with the basic principles informing the organisation of a group. (Laclau 1990, 66)

By integrating the Lacanian justification of the necessity of order, not only do Laclau and Mouffe distinguish themselves from post-modernists such as Lyotard who only advocates practices of interruption, displacement and subversion (Lyotard, 1984, 16-17) or 'local determinism' as what make unique political practice possible, but they demarcate themselves from Deleuze and Guattari, for whom the processes of identification introduce a form of transcendence that leads to a form of repression of the singularities, inherently present in the social. As was mentioned above, the real is fragmentary, plural and heterogeneous but at the same time, a discourse which does not overcome this state of reality is the discourse of the psychotic. That's why a discourse is simultaneously an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to construct a centre. For Mouffe for example, 'any "extreme pluralism" that fails to value the construction of a "we", a collective identity that would articulate the demands found in different struggles against subordination, dangerously negates the political just as liberalism does with its illusions of neutral procedures and universal rationality' (Mouffe, 1996, 247, Smith, 1998, 146).

This adoption of Lacanian concepts is highly problematic, especially when Laclau in his latest works, separates the *content* of identification which is irrelevant, from the *function* of identification. In a text that I will analyse in

more depth in Chapter 3, Laclau (with Zak) argues that:

The content of a political discourse is almost irrelevant, for it is the formal framework of a political discourse that makes it compelling for “the people”. Various political signifiers may appear to operate differently, but they are all “empty signifiers”, blank spaces whose organisational form – and not its content – compels phantasmatic investments. (Laclau and Zak, 1994, 36)

This poses a number of ethical and political problems that I will develop in the following chapters; for Laclau, there is no particular discourse or no particular order that is better or worse in itself than any others. He doesn't appear interested in the wider ethical question as to the nature of the order chosen; on the contrary he claims that it is almost not relevant, since what is important is the function of the order chosen. This absence of ethics or normative commitment for a radical politics will be highly criticized by a number of theorists such as Robinson and Tormey who will accuse the theory of the ‘lack’ of being responsible for this normative absence. Before going on with the exposition of this debate, let's recall how the influences of Saussure, Derrida and Lacan altogether produce Laclau and Mouffe's unique post-structuralist theory of the construction of political subjectivities.

II.vi. The post-Marxist strategy of hegemony

The post-structuralist notion of hegemony is the true novelty of Laclau and Mouffe's political philosophy. The reinterpretation of Gramsci within a post-structuralist theoretical environment is what gives post-Marxism its originality

as regards the other post-structuralist currents. Introduced within the framework of an open system of relational identities, hegemony loses its 'essentialist' remnant, namely a fundamental class as its ultimate core and articulating subject. Hegemony is no longer to be conceived in terms of the unification of political forces around a set of interests previously constituted. Rather, hegemony involves the articulation of identities which are wholly constructed through discourse. As we have previously stated, no interests flow directly from one structural position. Subjects are constituted in a contingent way through the process of identification with subject positions. Hegemony is then defined as the articulation of floating elements in a process of confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices and therefore suppose phenomena of 'equivalence' and 'frontier effects' (see Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 135-136).

If everything is discourse, as we have previously explained, the hegemonic force and the ensemble of hegemonised elements would constitute themselves on the same plane, which is the plane of the general field of discursivity.³⁷ This means that for Laclau and Mouffe, the terrain in which the hegemonic articulation operates is itself the product of that articulation. Namely the dichotomisation of society into two camps or classes is itself the product of the hegemonic articulation. It does not pre-exist it as a necessary framework for the logic of articulation to arise. The main consequence of this radical constructivist interpretation of Gramsci is that we cannot predict in advance

37 'Hence, if the exteriority supposed by the articulatory practice is located in the general field of discursivity, it cannot be that corresponding to two systems of fully constituted differences. It must therefore be the exteriority existing between subject positions located within certain discursive formations and "elements" which have no precise discursive articulation. It is this ambiguity which makes possible articulation as a practice instituting nodal points which partially fix the meaning of the social in an organized system of differences' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 135).

which movement or group ‘will become the hegemonic agent, for this depends upon the specific conditions that obtain in a given historical formation’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 135). This is a departure from the traditional conception of the centrality of the proletariat but it is also a partial departure from the Saussurean theory of relational identities. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge that although subject positions are constituted through their differential relations, some of these relations have more force than others.

A single subject position may, in a particular context, become privileged such that the meaning of other subject positions becomes increasingly defined through their relations with that position. (Smith, 1998, 98)

This is this privileged position that is called in a post-Marxist framework a ‘nodal point’ or *point de capiton*. These nodal points, which act as ‘centres’ of a discursive formation, tend to *totalise several discourses so that their elements partially lose their floating character*. In the Gramscian framework a fundamental class always played this role of ‘centre’ in the constitution of a hegemony. Within a post-Marxist framework it is unpredictable and impossible to determine in advance which subject position will play this role. The primacy of some subject positions constituted in nodal points is furthermore always temporary and could always be interrupted by new articulations. There is always a risk of a subversion of an articulation, – as for example in fascism – and that is because a system thus created is never a closed totality of elements linked by necessary relations but an open formation where the identities of the subject positions are never completely constituted, but precarious and contingent (See Laclau, 2005).

Indeed, a hegemonic process tends to divide society between two camps or two great discourses. That is why Laclau and Mouffe, following Schmitt’s arguments, can affirm that the distinction *friend/enemy* is necessarily present

in the hegemonic process.³⁸ It is worth recalling now the main assumption we analysed in the second part of our chapter: the affirmation of the irreducible character of social plurality or division. Combined with the hegemonic characteristic of politics, it means that ‘radical democracy’, in the post-Marxist sense, is an unending process of articulation-rearticulation, an ‘unending war of position’, in which ‘politics’ can’t be annihilated and in which the attempt of closure and end of politics would be totalitarian (Mouffe, 1996, 24-25). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and its totalitarian forms of dictatorship, Laclau and Mouffe affirm that today the main totalitarian menace comes from the bureaucratic apparatus of modern democracies that accompanies the neutralisation and depoliticisation of the ‘people’. Indeed, the most fashionable liberal discourses today proclaim the ‘end of politics’ under the banner of ‘deliberative democracy’.

Rejecting the “aggregative” model of democracy as negotiation of interests which, with the development of mass democracy had become the standard consensus, contemporary liberals advocate a different view of the nature of the liberal-democratic consensus. They affirm that a simple *modus vivendi* is not enough, and that a democratic society requires a stronger form of consensus, a moral one, based on impartiality and resulting from rational deliberation. (Mouffe, 1999, 3)

Antagonism, that which precludes any form of rational resolution through deliberation is completely erased here. The denial of conflicts does not make them disappear. For Mouffe, ‘to recognize the constitutive role of power relations implies abandoning the misconceived ideal of a reconciled democratic society’ (Mouffe, 1999, 4). To avoid both the Stalinist form of

38 More specifically, Laclau and Mouffe name *popular struggles* as a particular form of hegemonic struggles where certain discourses tendentially construct the division of a single political space into two opposite fields (as opposed to *democratic struggles* where these imply a plurality of political spaces) (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 137).

totalitarianism and the totalitarianism of certain liberal discourses, Laclau and Mouffe affirm that, even in a socialist-like society, politics – which contains an ineradicable dimension of conflict – will continue to exist. Nevertheless, the political aim of Laclau and Mouffe is the construction of a society where antagonism would be replaced by ‘*agonism*’. In an antagonistic relationship, the two antagonists share no common grounds: they are antithetic and negate each other. Within an agonistic relationship, the two elements are not enemies but *adversaries*, that is they share a common symbolic ground and this is the condition of possibility of pluralism. As an alternative to socialism as the main project of the Left, the final project of post-Marxism is hence to construct an ‘agonistic pluralist democracy’.

The discussion above leads us to expose the project of Laclau and Mouffe’s radical democracy: ‘socialism is *one* of the components of the project of radical democracy, and not vice-versa’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 178), and the other components are anti-sexism, anti-racism, etc., and all other separate struggles who fight against domination and work for equality and liberty. This implies a decentralisation of the centre of power, and the proliferation of political spaces. This leads also to a reconsideration of revolutionary politics. Revolutionary actions are implied within the process of ‘war of position’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 178) but they must be considered as an internal moment of this process. Indeed for Laclau and Mouffe:

The classic conception of socialism supposed that the disappearance of the private ownership of the means of production, would set up a chain of effects which, over a whole historical epoch, would lead to the extinction of all forms of subordination. Today we know that this is not so. *There are not*, for example, necessary links between anti-sexism and anti-capitalism, and a unity between the two can only be the result of a hegemonic articulation. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 178)

It is the same thing with ecology: socialism is not necessarily linked to ecology. In a radical democracy project, socialization of the means of production cannot simply mean workers self-management but it must mean a social appropriation of production, ‘a participation of all subjects to decisions about what is to be produced, how it is to be produced, and the forms in which the product is to be distributed’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 178) and must be articulated to ecological struggles in order to construct an anti-productivist form of socialism. This leads to three drastic changes in the classical conception of ‘socialism’ as an emancipatory project: 1) we should today speak of ‘emancipations’ rather than ‘Emancipation’. ‘Any struggle is a partial struggle and none can claim to embody the “global liberation of man”’ 2) If struggles are partial, they nevertheless tend to extend to more and more subject positions, hence a proliferation of identities 3) There is a ‘de-universalization of the socialist project’, as socialism is just a part of the democratic revolution and must be articulated to other struggles, and these will vary from country to country. ‘For example, demands in a country subject to colonialist or racist subordination will not be the same as in a West European-style liberal democracy. The decomposition of the universalist project of one socialism would hence give rise to a variety of local “socialisms”’ (Laclau, 1990, 225).³⁹

39 The peculiarity of post-Marxism is hence to combine, in terms of a strategy of emancipation(s), both gradualism and revolutionary politics. Indeed, the project of radical democracy is gradualist for it is conceived as a piecemeal realisation but at the same time, the internal moments of this project can be of a revolutionary nature, can proceed by successive ruptures with the old forms of domination.

II.vii. Concluding remarks

Although the main goals and analyses of Laclau and Mouffe are shared by a number of post-structuralist thinkers – the refusal of totalitarianism and of the end of politics, the proliferation of political spaces, the decentralisation of the centre of power, etc., – some currents within poststructuralism refuse the hegemonic strategy defended by Laclau and Mouffe and their minimalist project for a social change. This is for example the case of thinkers who claim to be influenced by the radical thinkers Deleuze and Guattari, who have a totally different political imaginary. In the first section of my thesis, I have explored only one trend in post-structuralist political thought which is Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism. There is nonetheless another fundamental trend which stands opposed to it. This line of demarcation within post-structuralism can be understood as two different trajectories issuing out of contemporary French philosophy: 'a trajectory of transcendence, which includes Levinas and Derrida, and goes back through Husserl and Kant; and a trajectory of immanence, which includes Foucault and Deleuze, and goes back through Nietzsche to Spinoza' according to Giorgio Agamben (Agamben in Smith, 2003, 46). According to this typology Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony could be aligned with the trajectory of transcendence, due to their Lacanian conception of subject identifications, their conception of the antagonism as a transcendent other, the logic of the signifier and their conception of populist construction of identities, that I will analyse later. As such, it is the target of strong critiques by thinkers who attempt to think a strategy based on horizontal and non-representational practices.

Chapter 3

Ontology of Lack versus Ontology of Abundance

III.i. Overview

While the first two chapters focused on the theoretical and political explanations for Laclau and Mouffe's rupture with Marxism and structuralism, the last two chapters relate to the theoretico-political debates with and oppositions to other post-structuralist currents. The present chapter contrasts the 'ontology of lack' based on Lacanian psychoanalysis to the so-called 'ontology of abundance' based on Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy (see Thomassen and Tonder, 2005, 5-9). The analysis of the so-called 'ontology of lack' in contrast to an 'ontology of abundance' will allow me to situate more precisely Laclau and Mouffe's work in relation to other post-structuralist currents.

In the first part I will focus on Mouffe's critique of the Habermasian notion of consensus. First by discussing her emphasis on the conflictual nature of politics influenced by Carl Schmitt's conception of politics, I will show that the notion of dissensus, linked to the notion of antagonism, is what differentiates Laclau and Mouffe's theory of radical democracy from other ones. For a better comprehension of the politics of dissensus, I will explore in more depth Laclau's theory of empty signifiers and his conception of the hegemonic nature of construction of identities *via* their centring effects. In a second part, after having analysed the so-called 'ontology of lack' whose main

idea is that 'being' is characterized by the failure to constitute itself as a ground due to its fundamental *manque-à-être*, I will show in depth how this peculiar ontology acts like a justification of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of the hegemonic construction of identities. In the third part, I will focus on some critiques of the ontology of lack from methodological and political perspectives and oppose it to the philosophy of 'abundance' related to the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, which in contrast to the idea of the ontology of lack thinks of being as a flow, focuses on the production of desires and affirms the priority of politics over philosophy. I will then critique the recent claims of a symmetry between the Lacanian conception of ontological lack and Deleuze and Guattari's so-called ontology of abundance and will argue in favour of an ethical idea of ontology and philosophy like that of Deleuze and Guattari.

III.ii. Radical democracy and the rise of New Social Movements

‘Radical democratic’ currents adopted the thesis defended by Claude Lefort in his well-known book *L’Invention démocratique* (1981) according to which the ‘democratic revolution’ inaugurated by the French Revolution of 1789 has accomplished a profound mutation in modern societies especially at a symbolic level which implied a new form of the institution of the social. This key moment is to be found in the French Revolution because its affirmation of the absolute power of the people introduced something completely new at the level of the social imaginary. Indeed, the Revolution, by abolishing the *Ancien Régime* whose power was theologically grounded, has transformed the locus of power into an empty place; with the theological-political order suppressed, the reference to a transcendence guarantor of the unity of the society considered as a body disappeared too. As a consequence, the foundations of power, law and knowledge were no longer assured and this opened the space for an unending process of questioning. For Laclau and Mouffe, following the idea of Lefort, the ‘democratic revolution’ began with ‘this break with the *ancien régime*, symbolized by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, [which] would provide the discursive conditions which made it possible to propose the different forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 155).

The representation of the ‘centre’ of society disappeared and it inaugurated a society which couldn’t be controlled or apprehended, and in which the people, whose identity fluctuates, is proclaimed sovereign. In this democratic context only, the attempts at re-establishing the symbolic unity that democracy had

destroyed would be totalitarian (Lefort, 1981, 173). The idea of the people in a democracy implies the notion of the multiple, plurality, and alterity as well as the notion of equality between men. These mutations regarding the centre of power and the growing influence of the values of liberty and equality has a profound link with the rise of new social movements in the 60s. Indeed, with this unending process of questioning and because of the equalitarian imaginary, the democratic logic and discourse is destined to expand to groups other than just white, male men. For instance, although liberal enlightenments were not meant to include women, the discourse of equality found in the French revolution, i.e., the idea that all individuals are born free and equal ‘has permitted the subversion of other relations of subordination into relations of oppression by means of the construction of an antagonism’, such as that of the subordination of women to men. ‘In the case of women we may cite as an example the role played in England by Mary Wollstonecraft, whose book *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792, determined the birth of feminism through the use made in it of the democratic discourse, which was thus displaced from the field of political equality between citizens to the field of equality between the sexes’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 154). This interpretation is directly influenced by what Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out: ‘It is impossible to believe that equality will not finally penetrate as much into the political worlds as into other domains. It is not possible to conceive of men eternally unequal among themselves on one point, and equal on others; at a certain moment, they will come to be equal on all points’ (Tocqueville, 1985, Vol. 1, 115, quoted in Laclau and Mouffe, 2001 156).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the rise of so-called ‘new social movements’ since the 60s attests of this logic of expansion, the will to ‘expand equality into every area of life’, showing therefore the phenomenal multiplication of struggles which have been rendered possible by the democratic discourse. They also show the continuity between nineteenth century struggles and the

‘new social movements’ as they share the same democratic imaginary. As Laclau and Mouffe state:

The unsatisfactory term ‘new social movements’ groups together a series of highly diverse struggles: urban, ecological, anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional, feminist, anti-racist, ethnic, regional or that of sexual minorities. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 159)

But what has to be pointed out is:

the novel role they play in articulating that rapid diffusion of social conflictuality to more and more numerous relations which is characteristic today of advanced industrial societies. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 159-160)

Its main consequence is the challenge to relations of oppression and domination and the possibility of creating a politics of emancipations.

On the other hand, these new struggles have been constituted through their antagonistic relationship to recent forms of subordination, derived from the implantation and expansion of capitalist relations of production and the growing intervention of the state and are therefore in discontinuity with the previous movements. These new conditions characterizing late capitalism define different shapes of struggles, and as these new antagonisms are the expression of forms of resistance to commodification, bureaucratization and increasing homogenization of social life, ‘it explains why they should frequently manifest themselves through a proliferation of particularism, and crystallize into a demand for autonomy itself’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 164).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the pluralism contained within these struggles reveals the irreducible pluralist character of the social itself; and far from being a problem to resolve, it is on the contrary the sign of the ‘expansion and deepening of the democratic revolution’. As I have shown in Chapter 1 and 2, this defence of pluralism must be put in the larger context of Derridean post-structuralist currents of the rejection of Hegelian dialectics and of elaboration of a new conception of *difference*, with Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of ‘antagonism’ being a variant of it. For Derrida, contrary to Hegel, there is a supremacy of difference over identity ‘that is, that identity is always potentially disrupted by the differences within it that it cannot subsume’ (Little and Lloyd, 2009, 6). Identities are thus always multiple, precarious and none can pretend to absolute universality. It is linked to the existence of pluralism which is the condition of possibility of democratic politics. Democracy is intrinsically linked to pluralism and to preserve democracy is to preserve those differences which have been reduced in the past to a moment of a higher identity, unity, as it is conceived in the Hegelian conception of dialectics.

III.iii.a. Rational consensus versus politics of dissensus

According to Moya Lloyd and Adrian Little in their book *The politics of radical democracy* (2009), we can draw a broad classification of radical democrats who criticize the Marxist heritage of the left in two trends. All the various theories of radical democracy defend the extension of notions of equality and liberty to more and more areas of social life. These trends come from the crisis of the left and especially that of Marxism within the principal communist parties in the 60s and 70s, and with this crisis the notion of ‘radical democracy’ has tended to replace the word of ‘socialism’ which was perceived as too narrow and too centred on the dimension of economic work to the

detriment of new equalitarian demands expressed within new social movements. First of all, according to Iris Young, Moya Lloyd and Adrian Little, there is a broad group of radical democrats inspired in their critiques of Marxism by the theories of the Frankfurt School, mainly Adorno and Horkheimer mainly (cf. Young, 2000, 183, in Lloyd and Little, 2009, 2). This group is mainly formed by Claus Offe, Jean Cohen, Andrew Arato, Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser and Iris Young herself. The first group or ‘critical theory radical democrats’ emphasizes the possibility of a rational consensus, achieved through deliberation according to normatively grounded procedures; this is typical of Habermas’ work.

A second broad group of post-Marxist theorists are mainly inspired by the French post-structuralism of Derrida and Foucault, or by so-called ‘French Theory’, which is blended with typical Marxist analysis of the world (see Cusset, 2003). Post-structuralist radical democrats emphasize dissensus, conflicts, antagonism/agonism as the core of politics. Its members share ‘an emphasis on the primacy of the political, on the contingency of identity formation, and on the agonistic nature of democratic politics’ (Mark Wenman, 2009, 112). The second group includes Laclau and Mouffe of course but also Judith Butler, William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, Claude Lefort, Jacques Rancière, and Sheldon Wolin, even if this appellation would be rejected by some of them (Adrian Little and Moya Lloyd, 2009, 4). The two groups of post-Marxists are thus extremely different; they are opposed by a different conception of power. Indeed the first group considers that reason stands over power, and the second group considers that democratisation is the result of a force relationship embodied by hegemonic practices. A theoretical battle opposes one group to the other and Chantal Mouffe has been particularly active in the critique of Habermas’ notion of rational consensus (see her *The Democratic Paradox*). It would be useful here to look closer at Mouffe’s

critiques since this would allow us to display once again her definition of politics.

III.iii.b. The Habermasian theory of rational consensus and its critique

If we want a pacific society, writes Habermas, there is no other alternative than to construct politics on the principles of communicative action, or on the mutual understanding characteristic of rational consensus. According to Habermas, any interaction in fact presupposes communicative action, that is, some criteria of argumentation:

(a) the openness and full inclusion of everybody affected, b) the symmetrical distribution of communication rights, c) the absence of force in a situation in which only the forceless force of the better argument is decisive, and d) the sincerity of the utterances of everybody affected. (Habermas, 1999, 48, quoted in Thomassen, 2008, 17)

Following Mouffe's argumentation, Lasse Thomassen undertakes to show that not only is the presupposition of a rational consensus at the basis of communicative action contradicted by experience but mainly that this theory suffers from inherent limits, and impassable logical aporias.⁴⁰ For Mouffe, who, according to Lasse Thomassen, sometimes modifies the meaning of some Habermasian texts, the obstacles to the realisation of the ideal speech situation

40 Aporias are difficulties in a system which the system cannot solve with its own conceptual resources.

and to the consensus without exclusion that it would bring about, are inscribed within the democratic logic itself. Indeed, the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all matters of common concern goes against the democratic requisite of drawing a *frontière* between an 'us' and a 'them'. According to Thomassen, here Mouffe relies on Schmitt's argument that:

...since democracy involves the identity of rulers and ruled in the demos, democracy also requires the establishment of the limits of the demos, as well as the creation of an antagonistic frontier between "us" (the demos) and "them". (Thomassen, 2008, 26)

A deliberative democracy based on the notions of rational discourse and rational consensus is in opposition with true democracy which involves the exclusion of those who are not part of 'us'. Hence the democratic speech situation described by Habermas is impossible because of the constitutivity of antagonism in democratic politics. Seen in this light,

Habermas attempts the impossible, namely to create a universal "we" without a corresponding (excluded) "them". (Thomassen, 2007, 26)

In fact, argues Mouffe, dissensus and difference are the conditions of possibility of rational discourse; that's why a rational consensus would mean the end of discourse itself. Mouffe argues that:

Democratic consensus is conceived as an asymptotic approaching to the regulative idea of a free unconstrained communication, and the obstacles are perceived as being of an *empirical* nature. [In agonistic democracy] one

acknowledges the *conceptual* impossibility of a democracy in which justice and harmony would be instantiated. Perfect democracy would indeed destroy itself. (Mouffe, 2000, 137)

According to Thomassen, Habermas himself recognises the self-defeating character of the idea of a final and rational consensus, even as a conceptual possibility (Habermas, 1996, in Thomassen, 2008, 28). Not only does it contradict the central presupposition of rational argumentation, namely the openness to contestation of any norm or validity claim, but furthermore it would simply mean the end of human history. The aporia is thus that rational consensus is implied within communication but at the same time it means the end of communication. Does this mean for Mouffe that no consensus can ever be achieved on any political matter? It is not very clear if Mouffe talks of the guarantee of the possibility of conflicts or of their actual presence. Is a society in which the resolution of conflict is conducted by rational arguments impossible? Is the possibility of resolving conflicts a given or are any conflicts ever to be solved by means of irrational acts of decision?

Against the idea of a rational consensus in political life, Mouffe argues that what is truly constitutive of politics is irrationalism, acts of decision, and especially antagonism or the exclusion of other in the constitution of one's own identity rather than deliberation with the other as Habermas would argue. According to her Schmittian conception of the political and to her Lacanian conception of language, the terrain of the political is constituted through power, like language, which is framed by a set of unquestioned assumptions such as master-signifiers that makes all discourses conditioned by authority.⁴¹ For Mouffe, the idea of a neutral rational consensus free from power is flawed

41 I will focus on this point later.

conceptually because of the arbitrariness of language which is used within deliberation, and because politics fundamentally is a matter of conflict, exclusion and therefore violence. Mouffe explains:

The psychoanalytical “ethics of the Real” (Žižek) is, in my view, particularly suited to a pluralist democracy. It does not dream of an impossible reconciliation because it acknowledges not only that the multiplicity of ideas of the good is irreducible but also that antagonism and violence are ineradicable. What to do with this violence, how to deal with this antagonism, those are the ethical questions with which a pluralistic-democratic politics will forever be confronted and for which there can never be a final solution. (Mouffe, 2000, 139)

For Mouffe, the constitutivity of antagonism is intimately linked to the preservation of pluralism, which for her manifests itself through conflicts. She does not prove the universality for all time and all places of antagonism, but rather asks to ‘accept the permanence’ of it and of conflicts (Mouffe, 1995, 20) (see Robinson, 2004). Not only can antagonism not be transcended, but it also reveals ‘the essence of the political itself’ (Mouffe, 2005, 8) and the ‘*constitutive* and *primordial* character of negativity’ (Laclau, 1990, 180). As I have shown, this is influenced by her Schmittian definition of the political as the friend/enemy dichotomy. The constitution of a hegemonic bloc needs to define itself against an exterior, another group excluded to allow for the articulation to exist. This excluded element must be defined as the embodiment of negativity and disorder, and presented as ‘anti-space, as anti-community’ (Laclau, 1990, 69). Hence politics is based in Laclau and Mouffe’s minds on a necessary vertical process which involves necessarily representative politics. The concept of hegemony emphasizes indeed the necessity of representation and vertical relations of identity.

One question, or one paradox which will form the basis of the critiques addressed to Laclau and Mouffe in the third part of this chapter and in Chapter 4 can be raised. The notion of antagonism in Laclau and Mouffe's thought is playing an ambiguous role: indeed, on one hand its pure negativity unfolds on the rejection of the Hegelian conception of dialectics in which negativity was absorbed by a superior positivity and unity, and as a consequence differences and pluralities being not respected for what they truly are. Antagonism's role is thence supposed to preserve pluralism and differences. However, on the other hand, the necessity of articulation between differences leads to the construction of hegemonic blocs, with the presence of empty signifiers realizing the precarious unity of the blocs. Thus the pluralities internal to the antagonism are subsumed under a form of totality, albeit a precarious one, and a form of universalism is still constructed, destroying at some level a part of this pluralism. This tension between the preservation of pluralism and the erasure of it will be strongly criticized by others defenders of pluralism, as we will later see. Post-Marxists have a normative commitment to pluralism; Mouffe claims that it is the principle over which the future leftist politics must be constructed' (Mouffe 1996b, 246).⁴² However, the debate that opposes the politics of 'transcendence' on one side (including Laclau and Mouffe) and the politics of 'immanence' on the other (including Robinson and Tormey) focuses on this question of pluralism; both currents recognize the inalienable

42 This is also 'linked to the idea of a pluralist emancipation (as defended by Laclau in *Emancipation(s)*, 1994) founded on the egalitarian articulation of a series of social movements potentially universalistic, but with each resting on proper experiences and creating its own collective identities, inventing its own language to interpret the world and setting its own goals to transform it' (cf. Balibar, 2009, 7-8). 'Cet impératif est l'idée d'une émancipation pluraliste (ou d'émancipations) fondée sur l'articulation égalitaire d'une série de mouvements sociaux potentiellement universalistes, mais dont chacun repose sur des expériences et crée "ses identités" collectives propres, invente son propre langage pour "interpréter" le monde et fixe ses propres objectifs pour le "transformer": le "vieux" mouvement ouvrier bien sûr, dont les luttes contre l'exploitation ne sont nullement périmées, même si elles doivent s'adapter à des conditions nouvelles, mais aussi le féminisme, le mouvement écologiste, les revendications culturelles des "minorités" opprimées' (Balibar, 2009, 7-8).

existence of pluralism and differences within reality, but the dispute is centred around the question of knowing how one can develop a political strategy for a radical transformation of power relationships in our societies while preserving a part or the totality of these differences, and if one can or should compromise the existence or some levels of these pluralities.

III.iv.a. The Ontology of lack

In the following section, I shall show that Laclau and Mouffe's theory of empty signifiers and of articulations necessarily compromises pluralism, and this is what will be rejected by the philosophers of immanence who are bound up with an 'ontology of abundance'. For Laclau and Mouffe, it is the empty signifier that renders possible the hegemonic process, as in any discourse. These empty signifiers can be demands, such as 'peace, bread, land' as in Russia in 1917, principles such as the 'Rights of Man' in prerevolutionary France of 1789, or even leaders, as in the Peronist movement. An empty signifier, whether a demand, an idea, a discourse or a name, is a 'positive symbolic expression' around which different demands or actions crystallize in becoming hegemonic or popular (Laclau, 2005, 82). In other words, demands become hegemonic in a process of the articulation of these demands, when one of the social demands, while remaining a particular demand, is able to stand in for other social demands, speaking for the people universally.

One difference, without ceasing to be a particular difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. (Laclau, 2005, 70)

Hence the ‘catachrestical’ character of hegemony and of the political construction of the people. An empty signifier is empty in the sense that it can serve as a vessel for other social demands or represent them symbolically; but at the same time, the empty signifier, because it does not cease to represent a particular demand is never completely empty, ‘the remaining particular content of the empty signifier being “ontic” ... its discursive function in condensing signification of the people being “ontological”’. (Laclau, 2005, 87)

The existence of empty signifiers brings about a tension between on one hand the existence of difference and multiplicity and the concept of hegemony via the action of empty signifiers which implies a certain notion of universalism,⁴³ the transcendence of one’s particularities in order to create a united front between disparate struggles or demands. For Laclau this tension is a tension between two logics: the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference. In his words, ‘all identity is constructed within this tension between the differential and equivalential logics... this means that in the locus of the totality, we find only this tension. What we have ultimately, is a failed totality; the place of an irretrievable fullness’ (Laclau, 2005, 70). These comings and goings between absence and presence, absence being characterized by fragmentation and

43 The status of the empty signifier with the other components of the differential system; Laclau calls it ‘a name’ rather than a concept. Indeed the notion of a concept includes the idea of subsumption of each component, or rather the content of the concept is found without alteration in every component of the group unified by the concept; it means that the concept must somehow be a universal and that the part of it shared by the other component is a positive feature that unifies all of them; yet we have just seen that each pole of an antagonism is unified by the opposition of all the elements to the force with which they are confronted; that’s why it is impossible that the empty signifier could have a conceptual status. The issue of the empty signifier and its nominal character is mainly developed in Laclau’s *The populist reason*. Contrary to the conceptual idea of subsumption where the elements are unified by something they have in common, in the naming process, ‘the unity of the object is only the retroactive effect of naming it’ (Laclau, 2006, 109); it means that for Laclau the name is the ground of the thing. Hence Laclau’s Lacanian shift appears as a radicalisation of the linguistic turn in political philosophy.

presence by unity or fullness through hegemony is said to refer to the logic of the subject itself; its fundamental lack being filled through a process of identifications by contents that determine its shape, form and possible action. Laclau is assuming that every political identity knows one single law of construction which is the hegemonic logic with an articulatory principle. What is questionable is that he asserts that the process of overdetermination by which a particular word condenses around itself a plurality of meanings is a universal process, that means, it is true for the constitution of every identity.⁴⁴ What are the reasons for the necessity of such totalisations in Laclau and Mouffe's system? On one hand, the process of hegemony and therefore universalisation is closely linked to the context according to Laclau (historical, cultural, etc.) and explains why some signifiers can 'come to represent the whole and others do not' (Laclau 2005, 295). But when Laclau attempts to define the reason for such empty signifiers he explains the function of hegemony by Lacanian 'ontological' claims about humans' psychological functioning. Indeed, what would be a set of differences without the totalisation effect of master-signifiers, but psychosis? In the following paragraphs, I shall therefore argue that the reasons for Laclau and Mouffe's political pessimism about the impossibility of resolving conflicts must be found in their Lacanian conception of human psychology, and that to consider its pertinence or impertinence, one should first confront it with its political consequences.

III.iv.b. The threat of psychosis and the need for order

44 For him as we will see in Chapter 4, populism is the royal road to understand something about the ontological constitution of the political.

Against the threat of psychosis, people need and desire some forms of socio-symbolic order. This thesis is particularly clear in Laclau and Zac's article (1994) in the book *The making of political identities* edited by Laclau that I mentioned briefly in the previous chapter. Laclau and Zac begin by quoting *Dr Faustus* by Thomas Mann (Mann, 1968, 64-65, in Laclau and Zac, 1994, 11) in which we find the claim that freedom, which is another word for subjectivity, seeks 'shelter and security in the objective'. Freedom realizes itself in 'constraint, fulfills itself in the subordination to law, rule, coercion, system'; the result is a synthesis of the subjective and the objective, like in a piece of art in which a subjectivity expresses itself through organisation' (Mann, 1968, 184-185, quoted in Laclau and Zac, 1994, 11). Laclau and Zac focus then on the tension between subject and object and that leads them to theorize the 'subject of the lack' who finds its principle of organisation *outside* itself, echoing hence the opposition of Hobbes between the state of nature and the Leviathan (see for example Laclau, 2005, 88). Freedom or subjectivity, they write, needs an external determination to accomplish itself, something opposite to it.

Freedom (...) realizes itself through its identification with something that is its opposite, that is, with an objectivity than can only fulfil its identificatory role as far as it accomplishes the alienation of the subject. (Laclau and Zac, 1994, 14)

The object bringing order is said to accomplish simultaneously the alienation of the subject. We could wonder then why the 'freedom that fulfils itself in coercion is still freedom' and not simply a pure alienation as the authors ask themselves. Indeed, Laclau and Zac raise this problem in the beginning of their article but never really answer it directly, but by claiming that it is based on a psychological necessity. Despite this alienation, the identificatory act does not

suppress the subject's lack or nothingness. All identifications are precarious and, because the subject is originary and ineradicable lack, 'any identification will have to represent, as well, the lack itself' (Laclau and Zac, 1994, 15). Acts of identification are endless because the gap between the subject and the fulfilling object is never completely bridgeable; a perfect identity between the two is impossible. Moreover, the fulfilling role of the object can be compared to the role of the law, which do not take its power from rationality but by its mere existence:

If the law can fulfill this role, it necessarily follows that this role has to be its own justification, and that the latter cannot be granted by any *a priori* tribunal of reason. (Laclau and Zac, 1994, 15)

The filling function requires an empty place, and the latter is, to some extent, indifferent to the content of the filling, though this filling function has to be incarnated in some concrete contents, whatever these contents might be. (Laclau and Zac, 1994, 15)

Then, in the case of an anomic situation, what would be required would be the introduction of an order, *any* order, 'the concrete of which would become quite secondary.' Quoting Mann in *Lotte in Weimar*, where the novelist writes 'order and quiet are good – no matter what ones owes them' to justify the peace felt by Prussians during the Napoleonic invasion of Prussia, Laclau and Zac agree that human beings are 'by nature submissive' and 'need to live in harmony with outward events and situations' (Mann, 1968, 138, quoted in Laclau and Zac, 1994, 16).

As shown by the two authors, this conception is immediately connected to Lacan's own conception of the ego as 'an ensemble of successive imaginary identifications' (Laclau and Zac, 1994, 31) operating through two mechanisms: 'projection and introjection of the features of the "object" of identification'. We find in Lacan the two aspects exposed earlier namely 1) the alienation of the subject that internalizes the law as a condition for its existence and stability 2) that the constitution of his identity is at the same time a failure because of an asymmetry between projection and introjection, the outside never able to be the perfect mirror of the inside. This failure, this discordance, is said to involve anxiety and permanent renewing of acts of identification (see Laclau and Zac, 1994, 32). More generally, Lacan's basic thesis is that the unconscious is structured as a language and that existence is constructed around the repression of a fundamental, unrepresentable negativity, a void.⁴⁵ This is characteristic of the 'Real', and the 'Symbolic' tries permanently to fill this void.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the real is permanently haunting the symbolic and the void can never be permanently filled. The symbolic is constructed *via* master signifiers which create temporary centres and give the illusion of fully-fixed identities. Without the action of master signifiers, we would simply live in psychotic worlds, that's why the order is necessary and considered *a priori* as a good thing. As seen in the previous chapter, the Lacanian mirror stage is the site of a necessary alienation, as the infant who recognizes its image in the mirror begins a lifelong course of searching outward for identity. Here are the foundations of Lacan's pessimistic view on human beings, that 'there is something originally, inaugurally, profoundly wounded in the human relation to the world' (Lacan, 1988, 167), that 'life does not want to be healed' (Lacan, 1988, 233). Something is

45 By extension for Laclau *politics is structured as a language*. Language like politics is a set of differences in which one master-signifier plays the role of a centre that gives signification to the whole set. We can see here how much the Saussurean and Lacanian conception of language impacts on Laclau and Mouffe political theory.

46 cf. my second chapter.

intrinsically missing, as the castrated thing, which is another very important Lacanian idea.

According to Laclau himself,

The logic of hegemony and that of the Lacanian *object a* largely overlap and refer to a fundamental ontological relation in which fullness can only be touched through a radical investment in a partial object. (Laclau, 2006, 651)

In other words, the empty signifier is, in the Lacanian psychoanalytical terminology to which Laclau adheres, a partial object invested and hence transforming the system into a totality, which brings back the lost *jouissance*, of ‘the mythical wholeness of the mother/child dyad’ (Laclau, 2005, 114 quoted in Simmons, 2011, 208). Investments in empty signifiers are hence affective and their function is subconsciously to revive the lost primary unity, to fill the void although constitutive of the real:

Lacan’s *object petit a* is the key of social ontology, because both individual and political life are driven by a vain search for mythical fullness... the restoration of the Mother/child unity or in political terms, the fully reconciled society. (Laclau, 2005, 119)

The process being that unfulfilled demands are transferred to the empty signifier or partial object becoming the ‘rallying point of passionate attachments’ (Laclau, 2005, 115) and the space of popular identity. Transposed onto the political terrain, it means that against the threat of being dissolved into the chaos of the state of nature, society requires ‘the unicity of a

principium' (Laclau and Zac, 1994, 35), any order that would prevent it to fall into chaos or anomie.⁴⁷ This need of an order is, as we have seen, based on the configuration of the human subject itself. Politics, as the unconscious and as discourse, are in their fundamental structure authoritarian. Indeed Mouffe states:

Out of the free-floating dispersion of signifiers, it is only through the intervention of a master signifier that a consistent field of meaning can emerge. For him [Lacan], the status of the master signifier, the signifier of symbolic authority founded only on itself (in its own act of enunciation), is strictly *transcendental* (we underline): the gesture that "distorts" a symbolic field, that "curves" its space by introducing a non-founded violence, is *stricto sensu* correlative of its very establishment. (Mouffe, 2000, 138)

The conception of the subject as 'no-one' (Lacan, 1978, 72, in Bannet, 1989, 22) or 'nothing' is profoundly anti-humanist (Bannet, 1989, 23). It also presupposes that the basic structure of existence based on relations of power and domination cannot change, hence that a radically better world can hardly be constructed. Lacan's model of subject is opposed to every theory, since the seventeenth century, that sees the human as autonomous, free, responsible: the philosophy of the Enlightenment, Marxism, Existentialism and so on. As Eva Bannet explains: 'He [Lacan] insisted that there is no difference between exploiters and exploited in society, since they are both equally subject to the economy as a whole, and that there is no present possibility of a revolution which would not simply replace one tyrannical symbolic order by another, equally arbitrary' (Bannet, 1989, 23). Humans do not create anything, s/he isn't a free agent, neither are culture, society and language human creations, but rather 'an impersonal circuit into which each of us is integrated we will or

47 See also Laclau, 2005, 88.

no, which remains irrevocably alien to the subject' (Bannet, 1989, 34).

The core structure of the current system seems to be placed beyond challenge in Lacan's psychoanalysis and in Laclau and Mouffe's approach to politics: the concept of antagonism and lack reveal the submission of their approach to a so-called necessity of alienation that can find reactionary political correspondences. The legitimate question that Robinson asks is, as Thomassen has pointed out, what kind of political theory is possible from a post-structuralist perspective, if not a Lacanian one? (Thomassen, 2004, 559). Does this have to be based as Robinson argues on a politics of 'abundance' rather than a politics of 'lack'?

III.v.a. 'The ontology of abundance'

The first problem that arises as a consequence of the use of Lacanian theories in political theory, as Robinson does, is methodological. Indeed, the political discourse of the thinkers of lack is subsumed under a prior theoretical framework rather than being enlightened by this framework after a close analysis of facts and events. The analyses come to confirm already-accepted assumptions rather than being attempts to assess the theory itself. In the same trend towards the non-falsifiability of the theory, it is supposed that one has just to 'accept' the primacy of antagonism, that is to say 'the central ontological claim of the Lacanian edifice itself' (Robinson, 2004, 3). Mouffe demands for example that one accepts 'the negative aspect inherent in sociability', that 'violence is ineradicable' because hostility and violence constitute the nature of 'the political' (Mouffe, 2000, 132). If someone

challenges the existence of such an element of hostility, this must mean that one doesn't 'accept' one's own void as a subject. This would thus be an illustration of the symbolic trying to repress the real. The same applies to anyone, even to political thinkers or philosophers. Mouffe states, for example, quoting Stavrakakis:

“What lies beyond the successive conceptions of the good, beyond the traditional ethical thinking, is their ultimate failure, their inability to master the central impossibility, the constitutive lack around which human experience is organized.” (Stavrakakis, 1999, 129, in Mouffe, 2000, 138)

However, since such ontological claims cannot be scientifically proven but can only be argued and accepted in relation to some political aims, it cannot be a valid basis for political theory and political action. Laclau and Mouffe affirm the constitutivity of antagonism and as a consequence they fall into the trap they criticized as being the main problem within the orthodox Marxist tradition, which was essentialism. Robinson explains:

Rather than being treated as a contingent phenomenon, lack is turned into something akin to an essence, which can be used to explain social phenomena. (Robinson, 2004, 2)

This echoes Judith Butler's statement criticizing the transformation of single instances into universal facts: 'Are we using the categories to understand the phenomena, or marshalling the phenomena to shore up the categories "in the name of the Father"?' she asks (Butler, 2000, 152). This dogmatic approach to Lacanian psychoanalysis also reveals an ignorance of the different debates

traversing psychoanalysis itself. What Lacan describes is just one modality of human existence under specific contexts and in that sense his assumptions are themselves political, hence subject to contestations.

A second problem of the use of the Lacanian framework in political theory is ethical and political. The main consequence of this use is the affirmation that the structure of our current existence is not changeable, and that one has to accept exclusion, violence and dissensus as part of our social nature on the one hand, and a form of political submissiveness to a leadership on the other. Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism lacks any positive ethics that would be the basis of any politics that they would advocate. The only ethical strategy of Lacanian psychoanalysis consists in 'the symbolic recognition of the irreducibility of the Real' (Mouffe, 2000, 138). The political outcome of it is reformism, with a dismissal of forms of political relations other than the actual one based on violence. This anti-humanist core is blended with a paradoxical demand for emancipation and is simultaneously a claim about its radical impossibility. As Robinson and Tormey argue, the political logic of Laclau and Mouffe excludes the possibility of an overthrow, of a fundamental transformation of the world, and in reference to the activist slogan found in anti-capitalist movements throughout the world, for them *a radical other world is not possible*. Robinson and Tormey analyse it as a 'dystopian submission to the totalising logic of the dominant system' (Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 133). Robinson writes:

To be sure, an existing master-signifier can be replaced with a new one, but the basic structure of existence, including, crucially, the central role of violence, antagonism, and exclusion is beyond question. (Robinson, 2004b, 268)

Laclau and Mouffe indeed always emphasise conflict over and above its resolution. Political translations of Lacanian conceptions of human structure are therefore ‘about coming to terms with violence, exclusion and antagonism, not about resolving or removing these’ (Robinson, 2004, 3). Every attempt to create a society not based on these would be totalitarian, and as it would attempt to recreate the lost unity, they would deny this element of human nature. The necessity of preserving society against totalitarianism has paradoxically driven Laclau and Mouffe to essentialise lack and violence. The argument is that democracy is a better system than dictatorship or oligarchy for example because it embraces lack and avoids totalitarianism. All harmonious society or ‘fully reconciled society’ as Laclau and Mouffe call it, is treated as ‘fantasmatic’, that is the fantasma to fill the void of the real. A certain leadership is necessarily imposing its violence to create an order, and thus the basic political relations of oppression cannot really change. But we could also imagine a harmonious society which would find practical ways to prevent totalitarianism, by keeping permanently alive the mechanism of collective decisions acting for the principles at the basis of democracy (liberty and equality) but this would presuppose a minimal deliberative account of democracy which has no place in Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework. The political consequences of Lacanianism seem to a certain extent to be conservative and not turned towards radical emancipation.

III.v.b. Productivity and positivity: Deleuze and Guattari

Against this pessimistic and minimalist view of human emancipations, the political philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari offers a post-structuralist

alternative to Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony. They provide first an ethics equivalent to a *praxis* able to sustain a politics of their own, and on a theoretical level, they find a non-contradictory way to both defend their own conception of pluralism and differences and find a general immanent framework compatible with this defence. This alternative has been recently theorized as the 'ontology of abundance' in opposition to the 'ontology of lack' in the recent book *Radical democracy: between abundance and Lack* (2005) edited by Thomassen and Tonder. According to Olivier Marchart, author of an article in this book, the 'ontology of abundance, which emphasizes networks of materiality, flows of energy, process of becoming and experimenting modes of affirmation' is inspired by another vision of radical democracy that we can find in the works of Bennett, Connolly, Patton, and Widder to mention the most well-known ones. Deleuze and Guattari have been famous for having criticized Lacanian reductionism, that is the fact of reducing the experience of difference to a question of failure of the identificatory processes. Peter Hallward shows the incompatibility between Lacan's conception of the truth of the subject found in the symbolic, and Deleuze and Guattari's non-subject as a positive force of self-differentiation (Hallward, 2010, 40). The Lacanian subject is indeed the subject 'of unconscious speech' defined by castration and lack, and 'by its incorporation into a symbolic order that lacks any natural plenitude or positive orientation' (Hallward, 2010, 36). This incorporation is precisely the process of identification or determination theorized by Laclau in his article with Zac. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari's 'subject' is a *becoming*, located in an in-between, a non-localisable place (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 293). As a movement, it cannot suffer any representation that would fix it and can only produce an exclusive immanent plane, a flat surface where desire can flow. This field of immanence echoes the single dimension of reality described by Spinoza, the pure immanence of nature.⁴⁸

48 We can recall here Agamben's dichotomy between two trajectories, immanence and

Deleuze and Guattari proposed indeed the idea of rhizomatic relations, decentred and based on the participation of all rather than the hierarchical model of traditional representative and hegemonic politics. *Anti-Oedipus* is a work against the ‘Law’, the ‘Father’, both of these considered as a single determination of the life of the subject. This work sheds light on the opposite; on the positivity of desire and being in the context of a vitalist philosophy. The notion of rhizomatic relationships is opposed to what Deleuze and Guattari named the gesture of despotic signification, which has many names: hegemony for Laclau and Mouffe, the ‘Act’ for Žižek or the ‘Event’ for Badiou, which is equivalent to master-signification in Lacan’s work. Against Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari advocated ‘psychosis’ as a solution to the oppressive and authoritarian structures of contemporary societies, rather than considering psychosis as the zero-point of politics, a state of nature to use Hobbes’ expression.

Following Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari reject negativity as a problem taking root in representational thinking. According to Bergson, ‘negativity refers to a negative judgment’ hence not a reality.

Initially we experience reality in its full plenitude, in the complete affirmation of all that is, and to which, secondarily, is the negation of judgment is added. The negative judgment is the negation of a judgment that is originally positive. (Bergson, 1941, 286, quoted in Bolle, 2010, 8)

transcendence (Agamben in Smith, 2003, 46). This can also refer to Badiou’s own distinction between two different traditions of thought, ‘le paradigme “vital” (ou “animal”) des multiplicités ouvertes (dans la filiation bergsonienne)’ and ‘le paradigme mathématisé des ensembles, qu’on peut aussi bien dire “stellaire” au sens de Mallarmé’ (Badiou, 1997, 11).

One of Deleuze and Guattari's inspirations is Nietzsche's idea of affirmation. According to Nietzsche, the greatest powers of life are instinctive, elementary forces that are original and authentic. All negative and reactive forces should be eliminated in favour of a pure affirmation of life. The other major influence on Deleuze and Guattari's views on being is Spinoza, which we can find especially in *A thousand plateaux*, which justifies the recent denomination of 'ontology of abundance' I mentioned. For Spinoza as for Deleuze and Guattari, *being* equates with *desire* (*conatus*). For psychoanalysis, desire is understood as lacking an object. However Deleuze and Guattari argue that desire is not defined as a tendency towards an object, or a state of need that searches for fulfilment by an object (real or hallucinatory), but it is the *positive essence of every being*. The *conatus* is the tendency by which each thing seek to persevere in its being (see Spinoza 1677, III, 7, quoted in Bolle, 2010). Since desire lacks nothing, being lacks nothing. It is indeed really important to notice that for Spinoza this effort of persevering in its own being is 'the actual essence of the thing itself' (Spinoza, 1677, III, 7). Desire is the *conatus* that has become self-conscious, along with the will, *conatus* of the mind and appetite, *conatus* of the body. Spinoza concludes that:

For what has been said, it is plain, therefore, that we neither strive for, wish, seek, nor desire anything because we think it to be good, but on the contrary, we adjudge a thing to be good because we strive for, wish, seek or desire it. (Spinoza, 1677, III, 9, in Bolle, 2010)

In other words, the truth of the subject is not in the external object that would fill its nothingness or lack, as was the case in Laclau and Mouffe's conception of subjectivity, but is located within itself and equivalent to the *conatus*, or desire to persevere in its own being. Desire is hence a force *independent of*

objects: it is said to be a certain power to be affected. Following Spinoza, to the three poles of the Oedipal triangle, ‘father-mother-child’ present in the unconscious where desire is supposed to be repressed in the unconscious behind the curtains of a theatre, Deleuze and Guattari oppose a multitude of ‘desiring machines’. The unconscious is like a factory or a workplace that produces great varieties of desires (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). Because it has *not* its cause in an object, it is *not* linked to a lack. If desire equals the essence of each thing, then that means that *being itself* is productive and creative.

It follows from this conception that psychosis is not seen as a threat or as a loss of reality as it is the case in psychoanalysis and in the Hobbes⁴⁹ inspired political theory of Laclau and Mouffe. Deleuze and Guattari argue that:

...far from having lost who knows what contact with life, the schizophrenic is closest to the beating heart of reality to an intense point identical with the production of the real, and what leads Reich to say: “what belongs specifically to the schizophrenic patient is that... he experiences the vital biology of the body.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, 96, quoted in Bolle, 2010, 21)

Deleuze and Guattari are not trying to repress the desires of the psychotic but to extract life out of them. Even though this is difficult to accept as a thesis, what has to be retained is the defence of the creative power of composition, decomposition and recomposition. Indeed, linked to the *Ethics* of Spinoza, the *conatus* stands for the capacity to be affected; as such, it is the essence of each

49 The political translation of ‘psychosis’ would be the Hobbesian conception of the state of nature.

thing. When this capacity is transgressed, resumes Bolle, the body decomposes and dies. This decomposition however must not be understood as deficiency, as a failure for example, but as the extreme point of this capacity to be affected. Deleuze and Guattari oppose two types of desiring-machines, or two types of system of production of desires: ‘a paranoia machine, fixing and stratifying the flows of desire, having an affinity with fascism in its micro- and macro-social forms; and a schizo machine generating processes of deterritorialisation and which is revolutionary, proliferating flows and liberating desire’ (Patton, 2001, 1150). Hence what master-signifiers do is clearly on the side of the paranoia machine, because their essence is to create some totalisations.

III.vi. The political vocation of philosophy

In this section, I argue that even if we can find in Deleuze and Guattari’s work a defence of a Spinozist ‘ontology of abundance’, it would be misleading to take it as the exact counterpart of an ontology of lack. Indeed, what ‘ontology’ designates in the thought of many contemporary thinkers is subordinated to *political philosophy* in Deleuze and Guattari’s thought (cf. Patton, 2000, 230, 170). In fact Deleuze and Guattari subvert Laclau and Mouffe’s schema Ontology > Politics, and turn it into the schema Politics > Ontology. Political philosophy does not pretend to be true, it does not describe the primacy of negativity and the absence of ground for things and hypostatisation of a lack, but its aim is, like politics, to *shape* the real, *transform* existing thoughts and behaviours, ‘bringing out new earths and new peoples’. One common principle can be found in Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of philosophy and in politics that are inspired by them. The influence of Kantian morality on

Deleuze and Guattari's political philosophy is analysed in depth in Paul Patton's book, who demonstrates that 'we can properly take Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy to be a form of practical reason' (Patton, 2000, 139).⁵⁰ This is also linked to Spinoza's *Ethics*. Ethics for them – in particular for Deleuze – is to be understood as practice and the space of practice is the space of ontology, of practical composition of being (Deleuze, 1990, 270). The practical object of philosophy is to denounce all that is sad and 'those who cultivate and depend on sad passions, that enslave us, because all that involves sadness involves tyranny' (Deleuze, 1990, 270).

Ethics and politics are intimately linked in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy. This is exactly what Mouffe refuses. For her, this is typical of the type of pluralism she does not want to celebrate; namely a pluralism without antagonism, a positive pluralism 'of a friend without an enemy, of an agonism without antagonism (...)' This is to imagine that there could be a point where ethics and politics could perfectly coincide' (Mouffe, 2000, 134) whereas for her, violence and consequently limits to pluralism, are inevitable. The text *What is Philosophy* written by Deleuze and Guattari focuses on the inherently political vocation of philosophy. There, Deleuze and Guattari explain and try to demonstrate that the vocation of philosophy is *the creation of concepts* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 11). A concept is not a 'given knowledge or representation that can be explained by the faculties able to form it (abstraction or generalisation) or employ it (judgement)' explain Deleuze and Guattari

50 Kant distinguishes theoretical reason from practical reason by 'suggesting that theoretical reason is concerned with the knowledge of objects that are given to us by means of the sense, whereas practical reason is concerned with objects that we produce by means of action in accordance with certain principles' (Patton, 2000, 139). In practical reason, principles come before actions. As such, 'Kant revoked Machiavelli's separation between morals and politics, and by integrating political philosophy under the authority of pure practical reason re-created the old unity of morals and politics in a revolutionary new conceptual framework and on the basis of a revolutionary new theory of justification' (in Guyer, 1992, 343).

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 22). On the contrary, the ontology of lack's pretention is to discover a form of universal, thus it is very far off Deleuze and Guattari's constructionist conception of philosophy. In other terms, philosophy constructs its discourse, and does not neutrally discover objects or name phenomena. This conception is opposed to the traditional conception of philosophy as putting into light things preceding it. Plato for example created concepts, such as the One, or non-being, but posed them as representations of an uncreated that preceded him, although in fact the concept is 'self-referential; it posits itself and its object at the same time it is created' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 22). It does not mean that the concept is just an abstract idea, completely disconnected from reality. It does not come from nothing but has a history and relations with other concepts. It also has a tangible reality because:

The concept speaks the event, not the essence of the thing – pure Event, a hecceity, an entity. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 21)

Philosophy is not disconnected from reality because it constructs something *from* the real by focusing on *one* singular aspect of it, by extracting from it one event: consequently it is very similar to art in general, understood as a process of recreation of the world. Philosophy cannot hence pretend to embrace the totality of the real but only a part of it. If philosophy is considered as the activity of creation of concepts, which does not represent pre-given objects given in experience, it is also because concepts are action-guiding rather than descriptive. For Deleuze and Guattari, philosophy, with or without ontological claims, is already always an ethics.

Like all concepts, Deleuze and Guattari's concepts are normative in the sense

that they enable some influences and disable others. (Brandon, 2012, in Patton, 2000, 144)

Philosophers, theorists, choose to create the concepts that would guide collective actions and even individual actions. Not only is philosophy already always normative and provides general action-guiding for collective action, but it also provides action-guiding in the case of the individual.

[Concepts] are also normative in the sense that they provide a framework within which to evaluate the character of particular events and processes. They enable us to pose questions such as: is this negative or positive reterritorialisation? Is this a genuine line of flight? Etc. (Patton, 2000, 145)

For Patton as was the case for Foucault, *Anti-Oedipus* is a book of ethics (see Foucault 1977, xiii) which offers:

Individual guidance in identifying and avoiding all the varieties of ‘fascism’ that entrap our desires and bind us to the forms of power that maintain systems of exploitation and domination. In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari may be taken to provide rules for the conduct of a nonfascist life such as: pursue thought and action by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction rather than by hierarchization, and subdivision; prefer positivity over negativity, difference over uniformity, nomadic or mobile assemblages over sedentary systems, and so on. (Patton, 2000, 145-146)

As Foucault writes, *Anti-Oedipus* is an *Introduction to the Non-Fascist life* (Foucault in Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, xv) that pushes us to ‘withdraw

allegiance from the old categories of the negative (law, limit, castration, *lack*, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality.’ Foucault goes on and equates *Anti-Oedipus*’ message to these injunctions:

...prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic. (Foucault in Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, XV)

We cannot therefore confound science and philosophy. On what side must we put the ontology of lack, or the affirmation of the unquestionable lack characterizing subjectivity and the prelude to a necessary transcendental politics? The lack is clearly a concept, hence it is not referential, it is not a proposition, but it chooses to highlight something from the human experience that puts it on the side of ethics and politics and not on the side of “science” or absolute objectivity. No ultimate evidence can prove that this ontology is preferable to the Deleuzian and Guattarian conception of desire, or ‘ontology of abundance’. The determining argument is hence political: what kind of political relations we want to develop, which ones have to be deconstructed; these are the preliminary questions a political theorist has to ask before undertaking the development of an ontology that would insist on one aspect of facts and events, of reality. The role and function of philosophy is directly connected to the political aim of philosophy for Deleuze and Guattari, which is the production of utopias, because it is oriented towards the future where the future is understood in its potential difference from the present. The goal of the creation of new concepts should not just be the recognition of the existing state of affairs or the justification of existing opinions and forms of life, but the absolute deterritorialisation of the present in thought, explains Patton (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 99). Deleuze and Guattari state that:

...philosophy takes the relative deterritorialisation of capital to the absolute; it makes it pass over the plane of immanence as movement of the infinite and suppresses it as internal limit, turns it back against itself so as to summon forth a new earth, a new people. Actually, utopia is what links philosophy with its own epoch, with European capitalism, but also with the Greek city. In each case it is with utopia that philosophy becomes political and takes the criticism of its own time to its highest point (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 99).

Deleuze and Guattari hence manage to link the productions of utopias with the preservation of difference and plurality, whereas what was reproached by Mouffe and Laclau was the dangerous systematized thought of utopias that could and have been oppressive in the past.

III.vii. Conclusion

Before continuing in Chapter 4 to explore the political implications of the different 'ontologies' described in the current chapter, I will resume examining the main problematic assumptions emphasised.

In the first part of the chapter, I have shown that the main target of Mouffe has been Habermas' conception of rational discourse and rational consensus. Mouffe developed the dissensus aspect of politics, well evidenced by her Schmittian conception of politics. In her own theoretical edifice, the hegemonic centring via the master-signifier is the act of decision, that is, violence and exclusion. Andrew Knops has nevertheless noticed a contradiction, by showing that contrarily to her arguments, Mouffe's theory requires the possibility of, at least, a rational consensus 'not merely on procedural matters that frame democratic exchange, but also on the substance or outputs of that process – practical political decisions' (Knops, 2007, 3). That is, even the agonistic alternative to deliberative democracy developed by Mouffe is based on rational consensus, argues Knops, that is on commonality and shared values of equality, liberty and respect for others' beliefs and rights to defend them.

I have then explained that the exclusion of rational consensus is grounded on Laclau and Mouffe's idea of a 'constitutive Other'. The impossibility of a rational use of language excludes the possibility of a continuous deliberation.

This conception of language derived from Lacan admits the existence of ‘master signifiers’, which are also used to describe the arbitrariness of meaning and the fact that language is based on authority. Hence for Mouffe the idea of a neutral rational consensus, free from power, is flawed (see Mouffe, 2000, 137-138). The irrationalism of decision and its violence would be constitutive of politics, that means it would be true for all situations and all times. The terrain of the political is portrayed as constituted through power, making antagonism ‘ineradicable’ (Mouffe, 2000, 104).⁵¹ Apart from the problematic claim of having found the ‘essence of the political’ from the methodological point of view, is this not a problem for a theory which is targeting emancipation to conceive the oppressive way of doing politics as the constitutive construction of politics itself? Indeed, there is a tension between 1) the relations of oppression Mouffe wishes to fight, and 2) the acts of decisions and the dangers of reproducing relations of subordination. In other words, the aim of emancipation is the elimination of the oppressive use of power, but at the same time, it seems to be impossible to eradicate in certain configurations. The question of the institution or the group making the decisions is also posed. Mouffe translates the need of an order into the necessity of the existence of a state as solely capable of imposing control and creating this necessary order. The articulatory principle that is citizenship is particularly important, as it is not simply an identity among others: ‘to be a citizen is to recognize the authority of [political] principles and the rules in which they are embodied’ (Mouffe, 1993, 65, in Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 136). The state ‘must have primacy’ (Mouffe, 1993, 99, in Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 136). ‘To deny to the state as something “different and decisive” over and above associations, is to “deny” the “essence of the political”’ (Mouffe, 2000, 51-52, quoted in Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 137) whereas the state is considered by the followers of the ‘ontology of

51 Let us just remark that the Schmittian conception of politics of Mouffe is different from the Gramscian conception of hegemony which worked through consent and not coercion.

abundance' as an apparatus of 'capture' alienating desires of the individuals and of the groups.

For a second time, I have explained that Laclau throughout his works since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has developed the idea that politics is by definition the hegemonic process by which a master-signifier gives a meaning to a differential system of elements, and by doing so gives to it an identity and an order, and fixes a centre, though precarious and fragile. This hegemonic process of centring is synonymous with the action of the 'master-signifier' as regards others' empty-signifiers. This is for Laclau how particular and corporatist aims can be transcended and universalized on the basis of the equivalential relation some sectors establish with other subordinated sectors. The action of fixing meaning is the action of creating a new power around the hegemonic centre. It follows that for him too the elimination of power relations is impossible, and because antagonisms are constitutive of the social and of the political, a total emancipation is strictly impossible. Laclau's conception of radical democracy is traversed by the same paradox as the one found in Mouffe's work: on one hand it struggles for emancipation which involves the elimination of power, and on the other hand, it affirms that emancipation is necessarily contained by power because the essence of politics is to be hegemonic. In Laclau's work, (which is closer to the initial Gramscian conception of hegemony as a power based on consensus as compared to Mouffe's works) the only definition of politics can be found in its conception of populism as characteristic of the constructing of political identities. For him, as I will explain in Chapter 4, populism as the dichotomy of society in two antagonistic camps reveals the nature, the essence of politics itself: the exclusion of the other is its main character, and through the need for a master-signifier to build a hegemonic bloc, politics is conceived as a vertical relationship between led and leaders.

Mouffe supports these theses and adds, in relation to her own commitments, to the Schmittian conception of politics that individuals must submit to the master signifier, which is ‘founded only on itself’ and which is ‘introducing a non-founded violence’ without which ‘the [discursive] field would disintegrate’ (Mouffe, 1993, 138, quoted in Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 137), echoing the analysis of freedom in Laclau and Zac’s article based on two of Thomas Mann’s novels. Laclau’s conception of the social, of its ontology as he often writes, and Mouffe’s conception of antagonism find their exact translation in Lacanian psychoanalysis and is the major if not the only caution or argument to understanding politics and the social as irreducibly constituted around a lack, an antagonism that prevents the subject – individual or collective – to be totally himself.

At the opposite side of this ontology based on a conception of the identity of the subject shaped by an external object explaining the desire of the subject for that object, stands Robinson and Tormey’s interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘ontology of abundance’ which is characterized by the primacy of ethics on ontology. While Laclau and Mouffe took the psychoanalytic theory of the subject as a subject of lack as a basis for their political strategy, authors like Robinson and Tormey, Negri and Hardt (as I will show in Chapter 4) take Deleuze and Guattari’s thesis that the unconscious is machinic, that is productive and non-representational, as a basis for their political advocations. Founded on a Spinozist ‘ontology’ that claims the independence of desire from objects, it denounces the closedness of systems and celebrates alterity, differences without limits, not in their negative aspect but in their full positive sense, movements and process of decomposition-recomposition that leave no space for Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of the precarious fixation of identities and irreducible lack. It denounces the successive claims of the

alienation of the subject, through language and through politics, through everything symbolic. As such, it is profoundly anti-Lacanian, and opens up the perspective of a new humanism inscribed in a larger vitalist philosophy. Though the proposition of this alternative logic has a liberating effect for it opens the field of possibilities that Laclau and Mouffe had restrained, the question of the efficiency of the political translation of this model is posed, as well as its actual power to make substantive change happen in the political world. That is what I will try to look at in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

The impact of the ontologies of Lack and Abundance for political strategy

IV.i. Overview

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of the hegemonic construction of identities leads them naturally to encourage hegemonic forms of socialist practices in order to create a hegemonic radical democratic bloc. The articulation of struggles created would challenge the dominant hegemony of the ruling classes and within it various anti-equalitarian ideologies such as sexism or racism. My purpose in this chapter is hence to look at what kind of concrete struggles Laclau and Mouffe encourage and which struggles are for them destined to fail, on the basis of their ontology of lack. I will also look at how the defenders of the philosophy of abundance challenge politically the political theory of Laclau and Mouffe. I will look at the critiques of hegemonic forms of organisation with the example of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas with Robinson and Tormey (2006-2007) that I will oppose to the populist form of organisation by taking Peronism as an illustration.

This will allow me to confront post-Marxist strategic aims with the most recent contributions in terms of radical movements, through the concept of the globalisation of struggles and the appearance of new forms of organisation which are not based upon the traditional political channels (such as unions,

parties etc.) but function rather like the alter-globalist mobilisation on the basis of various networks, associative organisations, and autonomist movements. A good point of entry into this discussion will be the recent debate that opposed Simon Tormey and Andrew Robinson to Lasse Thomassen. I shall shed light on the ethical commitment of Tormey and Robinson to a post-representational politics and on the Deleuzian conception of multiplicity underlying it, and the ontological impossibility of post-representation defended by Thomassen. The question is whether we can organize outside a representational system, or whether representation is constitutive and what the political implications of that are. I will argue that the universalising tendency of Thomassen to generalize ‘representation’ and to interpret the Zapatistas ‘mask’ as an evidence for that can fall under the post-colonial critiques of Western modernity developed recently. Consequently, this chapter is mainly about strategic questions: what kind of organisation is possible in order to face the current oppressive and unjust system of relationships between individuals, groups and institutions? Whereas Laclau judiciously points out the fact that Robinson and Tormey are unable to explain how and why political identities are constructed, Robinson and Tormey reject Laclau’s ‘submissive gesture to the real’ and its anti-utopian political theory (Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 133). Whereas Laclau’s view can be pessimistic, Robinson and Tormey’s might lead to a form of passivity, as the conditions for the ‘horizontal’ movements they would like to see emerge could never been provided. I will also show the link that exists between the political strategy one embraces and the conception of power underlying these choices. In the last part of my chapter, I will enrich the debate and confront Laclau’s hegemonic conception of emancipatory politics to Negri and Hardt’s position which is close to Robinson and Tormey’s and clearly based on an ontology of abundance (a Spinozist ontology) but one based on materialist assumptions. Influenced by Left-communism, Negri and Hardt state that with the caesura of the post-modern paradigm, struggles and organisation cannot be based on the modern

pattern typical of Laclau's thought anymore, but on a completely new one. I shall expose and explain concepts such as 'multitude' and try to show the weaknesses and strengths of these concepts by confronting them with Laclau and Mouffe's critiques.

IV.ii. Representational versus post-representational politics: Populism as Politics

As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Laclau and Mouffe's main thesis stipulates that any political identity necessarily contains a lack which guarantees its radical openness. Any political identity is constituted through a hegemonic process, during which one signifier or social force (for example a constituted group such as workers) becomes the hegemonic representation of a bloc constituted by the articulation of other forces. The hegemonic process is hence a moment of identification of the articulated signifieds, where the empty signifier and the signified are placed in a relation of representation. If politics is necessarily a matter of hegemonic articulations, because of the existence of an ontological lack, it means that we cannot go beyond representation. I will explain this with the exposition of Laclau's theory of populism which illustrates in its purest form the process of hegemony. Indeed, for Laclau, *populist* movements are the quintessence of hegemonic processes because they presuppose very large equivalential links of demands and large communities. Benjamin Arditì has successfully summed up the six steps that structure Laclau's theory of populism:

- 1)When a series of social demands cannot be absorbed differentially by

institutional channels, they become (2) unsatisfied demands that enter into a relationship of solidarity or equivalence with one another and (3) crystallize around common symbols that (4) can be capitalized by leaders who interpellate frustrated masses and thus begin to incarnate a process of popular identification that (5) constructs “the people” as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of (6) demanding regime change. (Arditi, 2010, 489)

In contrast to ‘democratic demands’ which are demands that can be satisfied without challenging the system, popular demands are demands that have not been satisfied by the institutions, which couldn’t be absorbed by the institutional ensemble and which finish by challenging the existing order. The same process of creation of a precarious unity – the subject – through various identifications applies to political identities, through the articulations of demands. The creation of a chain of equivalence between demands leads to the creation of an antagonistic frontier that separates an ‘us’ and ‘them’ , where the two members of the opposition are said to be heterogeneous.

As I stated in Chapter 2, in *Hegemony and Socialist strategy* Laclau and Mouffe have exposed the tension between the logic of difference leading the demands to keep their differential nature and a form of autonomy, while entering in a relation of equivalence with the other demands (the logic of equivalence). Elements of the chain of equivalence are linked together by their common identification and subsumption under an empty signifier. An empty signifier is one of the demands that comes to represent each of the particular demands of the chain (all the others demands) under certain circumstances. Hence with the existence of empty signifiers a form of unstable universality is preserved. After several level of hegemonic process, of articulation between small unities to bigger unities, the result of the process is the creation of a

‘People’. In his book *On Populist Reason* (2005) where he proposes his fully developed theory of populism, Laclau starts by retracing the entire history of the notion of populism, or this creation of a people, discussing theories of mass psychology, crowd behaviour and Gustave Le Bon, Freud, and Tarde’s interpretations. Influenced by the Freudian breakthrough in this field (Freud, 1921) Laclau’s hypothesis is that there are two modes of social aggregation that enter into the composition of all social groups (Laclau, 2005, 58); the first one involves identification between peers as members of the group (the equivalential logic) and the other one the transference of the role of *ego ideal* (the phantasm of the real ego) to the leader. These are the two extremes of a continuum and many different configurations are possible between these two extremes, but usually both modes are present in populism.

There is a plurality of socio-political alternatives and their differences are explained relatively to ‘the degree of distance between ego and ego ideal’ . If that distance increases, ‘one will find a situation described by Freud with the identification between the peers as members and transference of the role of ego ideal to the leader and in that case the grounding principle of the communal order would be transcendent to the latter’ (Laclau, 2005, 58-59); if on the contrary the distance between ego and ego ideal is narrower, ‘the leader will be the object choice of the members of the group, but he will also be part of the group, participating in the general process of mutual identification. In that case there will be a partial ‘immanentisation’ of the ground of the communitarian order’. Nevertheless, despite this immanentisation, the general plan of identifications is always the plan of transcendence (Laclau, 2005, 58-59). The completely immanent field would be a case limit in which the breach between ego and ego ideal would be entirely bridged; we would have ‘the total transference – through organisation – of the functions of the individual to the community’ (Laclau, 2005, 63). A completely immanent organisation would be equivalent to ‘the various myths of the totally reconciled society which

invariably presuppose the absence of leadership, that is the withering of the political (...)’ (Laclau, 2005, 63). In other words, this kind of immanent organisation is a myth that can lead to totalitarianism. In a totally immanent field, antagonism, and therefore heterogeneity and conflicts, couldn’t exist. Fortunately for Laclau the fundamental ontological lack and the necessary identificatory processes which are the precondition to the hegemonic approach to politics cannot be overcome. In other words, the transcendental logic contained in the populist process cannot be overcome. Following the Freudian argument, Laclau continues and characterizes the investment in empty signifiers as affective, their function subconsciously being to revive the lost primary unity (as described in Chapters 2 and 3) for the subject for the groups; that’s why one can apply the tools of psychological analysis to the behaviour of groups. In other words, their function is to fill the void constitutive of the real; with this theory Laclau is reviving the tradition of mass psychology that he deployed in his book on populism. He repeats that ‘both individual and political life are driven by a vain search for mythical fullness... the restoration of the Mother/child unity or in political terms, the fully reconciled society’ (Laclau, 2005, 119). The unfulfilled demands are transferred to the empty signifier or partial object becoming the ‘rallying point of passionate attachments’ (Laclau, 2005, 115) and the space of popular identity.

IV.iii. A basis and an illustration: Peronism

The influence of Peronism is structural in Laclau’s thought; in fact it shapes all his work. Peronism was a peculiar political and cultural movement in Argentina during Perón’s exile, from 1955 to 1973. For Laclau, Peronism reveals something substantial about politics itself and construction of political

identities, and as we will see matches perfectly his model of the political construction of identities. Laclau uses the interpretation of Peronism as an extreme model also to explain how the creation of an almost unlimited chain of equivalences can lead to its own subversion. During the last years of the Peronist government at the beginning of the 50s and many years after, the stabilisation of the revolutionary process was recurrent in the Peronist discourse, and ‘the figure of the *descamisado* (literally shirtless) was being replaced by the image of the “organized community”‘ (Laclau, 2005, 214). According to Laclau who quotes a letter that Perón sent to his left-wing organisation in 1967, the PSIN (Socialist Party of the National Left, that he left in 1969), Perón believed in three stages of the revolutionary process: the first one was ideological preparation, which corresponds to the figure of Lenin, the second one was the seizure of power corresponding to the figure of Trotsky, and the third one was the institutionalisation of the revolution, corresponding to the figure of Stalin. Perón added that the Peronist revolution had to move from the second stage to the third.

After the military coup of September 1955, Perón was forced into exile to Francoist Spain; the new Argentinian regime was repressive and anti-Peronist; it dissolved the Peronist Party, intervened in the trade unions and forbid everything related to Perón; even pronouncing his name was forbidden. However the government needed the support of groups of Peronist politicians and was forced to engage in discussions with them: in that context the idea of a ‘Peronism without Perón’ has been propagated (see Laclau, 2005, 215). Perón in his exile was nevertheless resisting these attempts at ostracization contained in the idea of a ‘Peronism without Perón’. Laclau analyses: ‘the more repressive the new regime became, and the more its economic programme was seen as a sellout to international finance capital, the more the figure of Perón became identified with an anti-system popular and national identity (sic).’ He concludes: ‘a duel between Perón (from exile) and

successive anti-Peronist governments was starting; this would go on for seventeen years, and come to an end only with Perón's triumphant return to Argentina and to government' (Laclau, 2005, 215). For Laclau, Argentinian populism started to take shape with this duel, with two conditions that rendered it possible. First it was the ethnic homogeneity of Argentina that eased the spread of ideological events in the areas of the major urbanized cities Buenos Aires, Rosario and Cordoba, that facilitated the unity of the Peronist opposition.⁵² And second Perón in his exile was forced to abstain from any public political statements and the only statements that circulated privately in Argentina were subject to many different interpretations. Progressively, Perón, the leader, his words and statements were considered with more and more respect, even devotion. In order to keep this status of infallibility, Perón had to keep the silence and not to express himself too frequently (see Castagnola, 2002, 63). In this context, his word was indispensable to giving a symbolic unity to the various resistant Peronist groups: 'his word had to operate as a signifier with only weak links to particular signifieds', Laclau goes on: 'It is exactly what I have called empty signifiers', the Name 'Perón' being one of these master-signifiers (Laclau, 2005, 216).

A chain of equivalence was created between these Peronist groups all unified by the same desire to see Perón's return to Argentina. This explains why left-wing groups and right-wing groups that everything opposed could belong to the same side, and describe themselves as 'Peronist'. They could make alliances and together fight a common enemy. Left-wing Peronism included many organisations, from the *Montoneros* and the *Fuerzas Armadas Peronista* to the Peronist Youth, the Revolutionary Peronist Youth, *Peronismo en Lucha*, *Peronismo de Base*, and other Marxist groups. On the other hand Peronism was also a flag for anti-communist right-wing groups, such as the *Unions*

52 This analysis can also be found in James P. Brennan (ed.), 1998.

Obrera Metalurgica led by Augusto Vandor, who was committed to the ‘Peronism without Perón’ tendency, or the 62 *Organizaciones ‘de pie justo a Perón’* led by Jose Alonso and opposed to the right-wing unionist movement. The danger of that populism was that the link between the elements of the equivalential chain was very fragile since what really linked all these groups was only the tie with ‘Perón’ – the love of the Father that unites brothers for Freud – but with very different interpretations of what ‘Perón’ really meant. In 1969 social protest exploded with the violent seizure of the city of Cordoba by armed left-wing Peronist guerrilla groups, that extended to other cities. General elections were held in 1973 in which Peronism won a huge victory with the election of Hector Jose Campora, who had been named as Perón’s personal delegate and who was a left-wing Peronist; after that Perón could finally return to Argentina. With his return, Perón could no longer be a master-signifier, nor could the signifier continue to be empty. Finally some groups who were previously all Peronist became deadly enemies, as shown by the massacre of Ezeiza during which the Peronist left and right violently clashed. After the death of Perón in 1974, and instability growing, the country finally saw the establishment of a military regime in 1976, one of the most repressive regimes of the twentieth century.

IV.iv. Populism as a political logic

Laclau’s interpretation of Peronism highlights for him how every political identity is constructed. For him populism is not just a type of movement but a political logic, the logic that creates a precarious unity between groups unified by master-signifiers and in opposition to a common enemy. As Arditì argues, at first in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* hegemony was defined simply as

‘a political type of relation, a form, if one wishes, of politics’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 139); nevertheless by the end of the book Laclau and Mouffe’s temptation was simply to equate hegemony with politics *tout court*, with the idea that the ‘political is the field of a game called hegemony’. According to the convincing argument of Arditì, the same progression can be found in *On Populist Reason* not with the equation hegemony = politics but with the equation populism = politics. Laclau begins to write that ‘populism is quite simply, a way of constructing the political’ (Laclau, 2005, XI) and then he affirms: ‘by populism, we do not understand a type of movement, but a political logic’ (Laclau, 2005, 117, quoted in Arditì, 2010, 491) concluding with the statement ‘there is no political intervention which is not populist to some extent’ (Laclau, 2005, 154, quoted in Arditì, 2010, 491); a number of similar claims could also be quoted. We can easily rationalize such a conceptual extension by remembering the ontological grounds for such political logic. In Laclau’s theoretical system, every politics contains a populist form because: On one hand, a fundamental lack forecloses all definitive forms of totalisation, but on the other hand the fullness which is unachievable because of the constitutive lack is nevertheless *necessary*, the need for a transcendent principle of order being a fundamental need. Hence the logic of articulation is fundamental. For Laclau, the creation of an overarching unity through the articulation of various identities is the absolutely necessary precondition of political organisation.

As I already stated in Chapter 3, the real difficulty starts when Laclau equates populism with hegemony and to politics in general. Laclau claims the universality of the process of the constitution of groups through empty signifiers for contextual reasons that are transformed into a coherent ontology. This scientific problem of methodology is coupled to a political one: this can lead to progressive and reformist politics as during Perón’s reign; the problem is that its forms of authoritarianism and leadership still remain. The creation of

a people and the identifications it presupposes can indeed be criticized for the submissiveness and passivity the delegation of one's autonomy can lead to, as a condition of the symbolic unity of the 'people'. It can also lead in turn to a form of authoritarianism or paternalism where one leader take some or all decisions for the people he/she represents. Is the despotism of a leader or any other master-signifier the only future of human organisation? Does all social change require the sacrifice of individualities and of freedom? Laclau and Mouffe manage to keep clear of the danger of the institutionalisation of a populist movement and by its possible authoritarian drives by claiming the permanence of antagonism, conflict and dissensus. A perpetual movement of creation of antagonistic frontiers *via* the articulation between unsatisfied demands guarantee democracy and liberty and defends itself from totalitarianism. Nevertheless, even if one puts up antagonism as a rampart against authoritarian practices, this doesn't mean that the conditions will be united to avoid these practices. How do we stop the mechanisms of institutionalisation and the bureaucratisation implied by it if every politics necessarily takes a populist form? One of the consequences of institutionalisation is its halting of the revolutionary process and the way it can lead to the end of the dissensus, i.e. what Laclau and Mouffe are extremely critical of. How is the institutionalisation of populist movements to be avoided, and is that even possible?

IV.v. Robinson and Tormey's counter-example and the ethical commitment to post-representational politics

Even though Laclau and Mouffe seek to build a precarious and entirely constructed unity that could prevent any attempt of complete totalisation, some thinkers as well as activists reject their model of construction of chains of

equivalence and the vision of power it presupposes. Rather, they exhort the adoption of a postmodern vision of power, inspired by Foucault, and an alter-modernist vision of emancipation inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy developed in the 1970s and 1980s.

As seen in Chapter 3, Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey embrace the philosophy of abundance, and claim that verticality in politics, which is a consequence of representational politics, has to be fought since it does violence to the 'people' represented. They think that not only representational politics is not the only way of constituting political identities, but also that it *has* to be transcended, because it is not desirable: representational politics is violence imposed on singularity and difference and to consider that it is the only way of doing politics is simply a 'closure of perspective' (Robinson and Tormey, 2007, 131). This mistrust regarding representation is shared by the thinkers Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, the latter believing that representation is a 'corruption' (Negri, 2002, 134) and goes against the multiplicity characteristic of the 'multitude'. First I shall provide the philosophical arguments that Tormey and Robinson deploy to prove the urgency of going beyond representational politics. The reflections of Deleuze and Guattari on the necessity of going beyond representation is for them a very productive resource. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Robinson and Tormey link 'representation' to verticality and hence hierarchy. In turn, generally as theory is a way of shaping practices as well as being a reflection of them, the logic of representation is dependent on a system of practices which is vertical and thus reproduces the relations of domination that one wanted to challenge in the first place.

Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy claims that in reality sameness and identity are categories produced by the human mind⁵³ among other things, whereas only singularities and differences really exist. Difference is here thought as difference *in itself* and not in relation to a presupposed identity; hence it is radically opposed for example to a Platonist or Aristotelian type of philosophy. Sameness and identities are just the products of human mind, a way of apprehension of realities.⁵⁴ Similarly, a 'people' is just 'a collective category deployed rhetorically' (Tormey, 2006, 143) but in reality it is a collection of multiplicities. This is because differences remain difference through time, and are not superseded into a larger logic of identity as was the case in Hegelian dialectics. That's why it is logically impossible to represent singularity and difference without denying what they really are, and then doing violence to them. *Becoming* minoritarian, rather than *being* something, is the eternal process of affirmation of difference whereas the logic of representation is the negation of this logic. *Becoming* minoritarian is the contrary of being 'resubsumed or overcoded within majoritarian categories as a passive element of the same' (Tormey, 2006, 143). Singularity is,

an active process of differentiation in which the becoming-something is itself constitutive. It is for this reason that it cannot be represented without doing violence to its singularity. (Robinson and Tormey, 2007, 131)

For Robinson and Tormey, there is no constitutive lack, there is no negativity either, hence the hegemonic process of sacrificing pluralism is not necessary

53 The mind is one thing that produces such effects but not the only one. As we have seen, Lacanian psychoanalysis does, as does capitalism etc.

54 For a more detailed exposition of their reading of the history of philosophy, see Olkowski, 1998.

and can be avoided.⁵⁵ For the two authors, in each relation of representation there is a form of distortion and alienation, since every voice is irreducible to any representation; for them the extreme form of representation would be equivalent to totalitarianism. Robinson and Tormey are hence opposed to the traditional channel of doing politics such as parties, elections, etc., and generally to everything which includes in its organisation something vertical. They are consequently for the destruction of the State. Thomassen summarises the matter thus:

... either one organizes within a Party or with an overarching programme, [or] ... resistance is done horizontally, creating networks and spaces of resistance. (Thomassen, 2007, 114)

In other words, either one reproduces what was the problem in the first place, namely an alienating and disempowering system of representation on the model of a trunk or arborescent form of politics as Deleuze and Guattari would say – in contrast to their idea of the rhizome – or one tries to create spaces of resistance that respect singularities and subjects' becoming, and create relations of equality and democracy between the members of that space. Concretely it means that one should not put forward a programme for a better and more just world but rather one must create the spaces for the creation of new worlds, spaces of deliberation and collective decision. Such creations happen in social forums for example, or happened during the recent

55 Totally opposed to that definition of plurality is Laclau's theory of heterogeneity (Laclau, 2005, 223): 'Heterogeneity does not mean pure plurality or multiplicity as the latter is compatible with the full positivity of its aggregated elements. Heterogeneity in the sense in which I conceive it, has as one of its defining features a dimension of *deficient being* or *failed unicity*.' This deficient being is what is behind the logic of overdetermination and hegemony whereas in Deleuze's philosophy there is no such negativity that would render overdetermination necessary.

occupation movements, but mainly the model can be found in different kind of indigenous movements in Latin America mainly. Politics must be considered as a making process, during which decisions have to be taken in common with respect of each singularities. A politics of singularity or difference is hence opposed to ‘an identitarian politics in which the needs, interests or wishes of the majority are merely asserted – as in the case of traditional ideological politics, as well as the hegemonic politics associated with Laclau and his followers’ (Robinson and Tormey, 2007, 133). However, it is one thing to defend an extremely radical change and another to provide evidence of the practical efficiency of the path chosen for these changes. Throughout recent history, representative politics has been used to struggle against various oppressions and sometimes won battles against them. Could we imagine a mode of horizontal organisation resting upon the respect of differences and singularities but which would combine the efficiency of representative politics? Has a movement ever been capable of going beyond representation and created a form of organisation which would prove that hegemonic politics is not ‘the only game in town’?

IV.vi. The Zapatista struggle versus populism: a radical critique of power

Robinson and Tormey never answer this question directly; however they try to convince us at least that the possibility of overcoming representative and vertical politics is possible. The two authors advance an empirical falsification of the absolute character of representation by providing concrete examples of actual post-representational politics that are not constituted following the populist schema; with these examples, they hope to prove that other kinds of articulations and constructions of identities are possible. Indeed one counter-

example would be sufficient to prove that the validity of Laclau's theory of politics as populist is neither ontological nor universal.

Tormey and Robinson's argument is that there are actually indigenous communities who organize without representation, but on a dialogical, reciprocal or horizontal basis. The two authors interpret in particular indigenous peoples' organisation as networks of 'rhizomes'. The existence of other logics is a proof that Laclau and Mouffe have 'unduly constrained the field of the possible' (Tormey, 2006, 134) thus providing a pessimistic view of emancipation and of democracy. The analysis of other forms of organisation based on a horizontal articulation and on 'interconnection of rhizomes in a smooth space' (Tormey, 2006, 134) proves that another kind of political construction is possible. By taking examples of diverse indigenous forms of organisation, such as the *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* (OPM) against the violence of Indonesia, whose discourse reveals experiences of fullness which would pejoratively be called 'primitive' and who ask to be left outside the capitalist Indonesian system, Robinson and Tormey want to show that some indigenous experiences enter into contradiction with the supposedly universal human condition described by Laclau and Mouffe (see Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 143-144). Furthermore, this description appears to the eyes of the two critics like a typical Eurocentric gesture of universalizing from the particularity of some urbanised European societies. Even within European urbanised societies, some movements which function with immanent politics without hegemony cannot be taken into account by Laclau and Mouffe's conception of the political. According to Natalie Fenton, the multiplicity and politics of certain new social movements such as the anti-capitalist summit protest movements can also be seen as the realization of these rhizomatic types of organisation, that break with dominant structures and understandings of power in a post-hegemonic frame. 'New social movements are usually non-

hierarchical, with open protocols, open communication, and self-generating information and identities' she claims (Fenton, 2011, 180).

Their networks are often anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist, more organic and operate horizontally rather than vertically (Tormey, 2006) creating networks of resistance, in which the internet can be a tool and a model because of its participatory and interactive attributes.

This different conception of politics requires another definition of the social from that of Laclau and Mouffe, and a reconsideration of the politics of 'everyday life'. Robinson and Tormey argue that a lot of practices are actually resistant to the project of control pursued by the political elite and that many ways of action have been found against despotism in everyday practices 'without going through the processes of transcendental meaning-construction which for Laclau are necessary for political action' (Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 149). Those kinds of practices function without a signifier but they are not 'apolitical': in the sense of being without contestation, deliberation or power. The whole opposition between Laclau and Mouffe's conception of political strategy and Robinson and Tormey's conception is linked to a certain conception of power and how to resist to it. I shall analyze this in detail in the second part of my chapter, with the explanations of notions such as biopower and biopolitics.

The more developed example Robinson and Tormey take is the struggle of the Zapatistas, in Chiapas, Mexico. It is an example of an anti-capitalist struggle which for them is clearly post-representational and proposes a vision of an alter-modernity capable of transfiguring the usual ways of thinking and

practicing politics.⁵⁶ According to Robinson and Tormey, the Zapatistas attempt to elaborate structures, institutions and processes that go beyond representation. As Roger Burbach shows, many contemporary currents want to go beyond the politics of modernity (Burbach, 2001, 13) and create an alter-modernity, the Zapatistas movements being a clear example. For him it is the first ‘postmodern revolutionary movement’ (Burbach, 2001, 116). Burbach shows well how the Zapatista movement in Chiapas – based on the transformation of civil society, not on a simple seizure of state power – has managed to link anti-capitalist demands to feminist and ecological demands, even if they are far from being as radical as one might hope (see Goetze, 1997, quoted in Burbach, 2001). The urge of the Zapatistas for creating free spaces coincided with their demands for *self-determination*, and can be explained by the history of the forced assimilation to the liberal system and state they had to suffer for centuries. The ethnic solidarity, the difference of traditions, the class nature of these movements (peasants for the most part) shapes the form the movement takes and it cannot be reduced to autonomist movements as the West knows them.

First, we have to reconsider the Zapatistas’ rebellion and its origin within the context of the collapse of state socialism and of the emergence of alternative movements in Latin America (see Burbach, 2001, 105), but most of all we shall recall that the indigenous peoples in Latin America have a long history of governmental oppression, forced assimilation, expropriation of their commons – land and resources. The Zapatista movement occurred within a larger spectrum of peasant movements in Latin America, such as the landless

56 Alter-modernist movements are different from the anti-modernist movements who refuse modernity and demand that an identity is to be preserved (with the idea of an authentic identity) Alter-modernists movements demand the right to ‘become what we want’ rather than the right to be who we are (see Negri and Hardt 2009, 106). They advocate the constitution of alternatives rather than being conservative.

movement in Brazil, the struggles of the coca farmers in Bolivia, the rebellion of the Mapuches in Chile, and the Indian uprisings in Ecuador in the 2000s and many other struggles in the Andes. Nevertheless, the Zapatista movement has a profound originality linked to its demands that goes beyond the immediate demands of peasants, such as feminist and ecological demands. In its organisational form it is also an attempt to overcome the authoritarian tendency of past revolutionary movements such as the Cuban revolution, led by an 'avant-garde', or the Peronist movement, that both led to the institutionalisation of the revolution and the reproduction of many oppressive practices that one originally wanted to overcome.

As regards the internal history of Mexico, according to Jan Rus (Rus, 2003), the economic crisis that began for Chiapas' indigenous people between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s was the local manifestation of a larger crisis in the political-economic model that had governed Mexico since the mid-1930s. State and regional peasant organisations independent of the CNC (*Confederacion Nacional Campesina*, National Peasant Confederation) began to emerge in the mid-1970s. As the 1970s progressed, indigenous people (or *campesinos*, a notion including peasants and indigenous people) increasingly turned away from the CNC and state corporatism in favour of independent peasants' organisations such as the *Central Independiente de Obreros Agricolas y Campesinos* (Independent Confederation of Agricultural Workers and Peasants, CIOAC), the *Organizacion Campesina Emiliano Zapata* (Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organisation, OCEZ) and the *Union de Uniones* (Union of Unions, UU).⁵⁷ Most Indians in Chiapas were however not openly affiliated with these alternative organisations, because of the dangerous character of such affiliations.

⁵⁷ Complete name: (*Union de Unioned Ejudales y Grupos Campesinos Solidarios de Chiapas*, Union of Ejido Unions and Peasant Solidarity Groups of Chiapas).

Then a wave of migration affected the indigenous people. Since the 60s they have emigrated to the Lacandón forest. They found themselves in their new home very far away from any statist organisation, such the CNC, as well as from federal and state governments themselves. Although this meant for them a quasi-absence of state public service such as the construction of infrastructures, etc., it also left them a unique freedom for political and social organisations outside the corporatist model. As Rus states:

Independent coffee cooperatives that were organized regionally, for example, flourished. Colonias in the Lacandon also developed new types of political, social, and religious organisations different from those of their communities of origin. After just a few years, they were governing themselves through local, regional, and general assemblies, which they convened by means of a single organisation, the Union of Unions. (Rus, 2003, 12)

More generally, as the possibility of using legal channels to resolve their demands diminished after the mid-80s, ‘thousand of the migrants to the Lacandon jungle, as well as members of the communities from which they had emigrated, particularly in the highlands joined the Zapatistas. In the wake of the Zapatista Uprising, political mobilization among such people has, in turn, focused increasingly on the creation of autonomous municipalities and regions, and on developing permanent structure for governing themselves, free of the kind of control the state has always exercised over them’(Rus, 2003, 14).

The rebellion started on the 1st January 1994 against the Mexican government, with twelve days of combat against the Mexican Army. The Zapatistas had

also an army, the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN). Since 1994, thousands of Indians living in the highlands and the northern regions of the state as well as Zapatista communities in the rainforest declared the formation of *Regiones Autonomas Plurietnicas* (Pluriethnic Autonomous regions, RAP) and *Regiones Autonomas Zapatistas* (Zapatistas Autonomous Regions RAZ). From December 1994 to February 1995, the territory under EZLN control grew from four municipalities to thirty-eight as local people adhered to the cause and declared their townships *municipios libres*, free municipalities, that is, land outside government control.

One of the most original aspects of the Zapatista movement is their radical critique of power (see Khasnabish, 2010, 81-95); this in turn is linked to their demand for self-determination and interconnectedness, their demand for a world free of exclusion, division and violence. The Zapatistas have not themselves completely rejected ‘representational’ politics as such. Nevertheless, Simon Tormey in his article (Tormey, 2006) distinguishes what the Zapatistas actually demanded and what they practiced. The first element Tormey points out is the fact that the Zapatistas didn’t themselves claim to ‘represent’ the groups and peoples inhabiting Chiapas. The EZLN makes itself accountable to the *Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indigena* (Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee, CCRI) which were local and regional assemblies based on the principle of delegated democracy, which were in turn answerable to the thirty-eight autonomous municipalities that the Zapatistas helped to set up in 1994. The CCRIs were not, insists Tormey, sovereign bodies that ‘govern’ but were entirely subject to the views of the communities; they ‘lead by obeying’ according to the Zapatista slogan; Tormey remarks that this is beyond Marx’s *Paris Commune* model of ‘immediate recall and rotation to embrace the demand that delegates listen to each and every “*campanero*” who turns up’ (Tormey, 2006, 147-148). This principle of omnipresent

consultation of the Zapatista communities themselves created a great sense of solidarity and of communal cause, without the aim being the creation of a General Will or the creation of a People.

According to Tormey, the Zapatistas' communiqués have a strong sense of the impossibility of speaking in representational terms since there is an awareness of the huge differences between the various groups, communes, regions etc., hence the favoured expression is 'the peoples of the Chiapas', echoing the multiplicity that Deleuze thought of as positive and irreducible. *Subcommandante* Marcos didn't represent the indigenous people; he was simply a spokesperson for the indigenous among others, with no greater supplementary right or position than any other member of the community. Moreover, the Zapatistas had never already prepared a programme that should be imposed on other groups nor a vision of what society should be; they rather wanted to create the space where these kind of discussions could take place and common decisions be taken. This required precisely the abolition of representational practices. A lot of scholars have insisted on that precise point, along with the respect of differences, because it is really a shift compared to the previous rebellions in South America and to any self-claimed vanguardist rebellion (the Guevarist one for example) (see Neil Harvey, 1998).

To Marcos this is a different kind of political practice. It is one that insists that there are no *a priori* truths that can be handed down to "The People"; there is no doctrine that has to be learned or spelled out; there is only "lived experience." (Khasnabish, 2012, 83)

Zapatism is an 'intuition' for Marcos (see Khasnabish, 2012, 83) with no singular and transcendent truth. It is a political force that is concerned with the

means by which people can be ‘present’ as opposed to being represented, whether it be by political parties, ideologies, or the other familiar devices and strategies that have prevented voices being heard’ (Tormey, 2006, 151). Similarly In *The Second Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle*, Marcos declared (on behalf of the Zapatistas):

“We aren’t proposing a new world, but something preceding a new world; an antechamber looking into the new Mexico. In this sense, this revolution will not end in a new class, faction of a class, or group in power. It will end in a free and democratic space for political struggle.” (Marcos, quoted in Tormey, 2006, 151)

This also means that Zapatism encourages differences for themselves and recognizes multiplicity as essential to life, as a manifestation of justice and liberty; hence self-determination is advocated not only for the community but for individuals too, as the Zapatista slogan ‘*queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundo*’ (we want a world which holds many worlds) would suggest (Navarro, 1998, 162, in Khasnabish, 2010, 91).

IV.vii. Lasse Thomassen’s interpretation of the Zapatista movement

In the debate that opposed Simon Tormey to Lasse Thomassen, the latter, following Laclau and Mouffe’s argument, claimed that contrary to appearances, representation is constitutive, it has been constitutive even in the Zapatista movement. For him going beyond representation is neither possible nor necessary, neither is it possible to avoid a certain amount of exclusion and

verticality. After a re-exposition of Tormey's argument, Thomassen attempts in the second part of his article (Thomassen, 2007) to show that the Zapatistas can be subsumed within the Laclauian schema; first by explaining that Marcos cannot be just a spokesperson as he gives a voice to the voiceless; he had to add something to these missing voices. Quoting Thomassen:

Marcos and the Zapatistas add something to the voice-less in order for them to have a voice; the demands and identities are (also) constituted through this relation of giving-voice-to. For instance, the various demands stop being merely isolated demands and become simultaneously demands against "Power". The demands thereby lose some of their singularity and autonomy because they become dependent on their place of inscription within the Zapatista discourse, and they become associated with the other anti-"Power" demands (Thomassen, 2007, 116).

Here Thomassen attempts to show that the voice of Marcos acts as a signifier for the other voices and demands, creating a chain of equivalence between them and hence finding their unitary expression in that single voice. He tries to prove that representation is constitutive and hence that the relation of representation shapes and gives meaning to the actual form of the voice whose different components are articulated to produce an 'anti-power' discourse. Thomassen founds his argument especially on the Derridean conception of representation as a citation or reproduction, and as performativity, that is a creation of something new: 'Representation must both performatively bring something into existence and cite, as already existent, that "something" (an authentic voice, the will of the people, and so forth)' (Thomassen, 2007, 117); following the Kantian approach to representation, Thomassen adds: 'As such, representation is split between *Darstellung* (making present) and *Vertretung* (speaking for and standing in for)' (Thomassen, 2007, 117). The reason for that is the universality of language, which functions through syntagmatic

relations of combination and paradigmatic relations of substitutions (Thomassen, 2007, 115).

Firstly the problem with this analysis concerns its practical consequences. The attempt to subsume indigenous struggles into hegemonic struggles is in vain because their practices contradict Thomassen's argument: Indigenous struggles are beyond radical democracy because the demand of the protection of their commons (land, water, grazes) challenges the roots of the liberal framework and capitalism. They are anti-capitalist and anti-liberal struggles. Radical democracy advocates the radicalisation of current forms of democracy, that is a form of gradualist path towards more and more equalitarian relations. However, the Zapatistas do not demand inclusion within the liberal democratic framework but self-determination and political and economic autonomy from the state. Hence, whereas the logic of representation and the hegemonic logic could be considered as gradualist, corresponding to the re-articulations/disarticulations processes that do not question the conditions of these as such, indigenous struggles can be characterized as anti-systemic and in clear rupture with the liberal democratic framework.⁵⁸ Moreover, the concrete political practices of indigenous struggles are not representational but based on direct participation. The communities have no leaders; they are organized on a horizontal basis according to a logic of a consensus, and collective decisions. If the Zapatista struggles were truly following a logic of representation, Marcos would be a leader rather than a spokesperson with the delegation of power from the represented it presupposes. Secondly, by analysing the 'Mask' of the Zapatistas for example

58 Mouffe wrote many times that radical democracy was the radicalisation of democracy or the extension of it as it currently exists in the Western world. Radical democracy is 'the extension and deepening of the democratic revolution initiated two hundred years ago' (Mouffe, 1992, 1), and its strategy is 'a radicalisation of the modern democratic tradition' (Mouffe, 1992, 1).

as an actual master signifier, I suggest with Simon Tormey that Thomassen is not trying to see what is new in the Zapatistas' experience but tries to subsume these experiences to the logic of representation. According to Tormey, by trying to reduce different political phenomena such as Zapatismo to representational politics, Thomassen is trying to '*make phenomena fit into the model* to which he is, as a political theorist, wedded' (Robinson and Tormey, 2007, 136).

Finally, recalling the 'European gesture' of the universalisation of a Western singularity, many post-colonial thinkers would criticise Thomassen's attempt to impose a model characteristics of Western modernity on the Zapatistas movement and on the indigenous struggles for self-determination in Latin America in general. This attempt at universalisation that reproduces the attempt of the Enlightenment to impose one single view of human nature and of its fulfilment, can be criticised for the reification and essentialisation it induces, even if it essentialises an ontology of lack hence absence of ontologic ground. The decolonialist thinkers inspired by the twentieth century Martinican intellectual and activist Frantz Fanon (see Mignolo, 2005, XI) would argue that even 'democracy' with its Ancient Greek origin has to be decolonized and does not have anything in common with the democracy indigenous people practice in reality (see Mignolo, 2011). Mignolo could have shown how Thomassen's attempt to subsume the Zapatistas' struggles to the logic of representation and language is an attempt to apply a paradigm of knowledge that is based on the geo-historical location of Europe and that this would be an attempt at cultural imperialism. Instead, one needs to shift knowledge to a new terrain of *decoloniality* and propose to situate the argument 'within the decolonial paradigm of knowledge and understanding enacted by Waman Puma de Ayala (...) as well as other intellectuals after him belonging to the sphere of society that anthropologist Eric Wolf identified as '*people without history*'. All that we can read on the Americas is historically

located 'from a European perspective that passes as universal' (Mignolo, 2005, XII).

Whereas Robinson and Tormey depart from normative considerations on what the real should be like and try to find already existing movements that match their hopes, Thomassen departs from ontological statements and subsumes existing movements to the logic of representation. If we analyse some victorious progressive movements in the last twenty years, we see that horizontal and immanent practices within movements are not automatically condemned to failure and horizontally constructed movements can have their own means of defence, such as an armed faction, like in the case of the Zapatistas. One must also recognise that the condition that allowed the rebellion to flourish were exceptional, in the sense that the state's domination over the lands was already minimal when the Zapatistas took control of them. What is certain is that these kinds of movements cannot be situated in the mainstream political field, such as the elections, unions or parties. Rather, they must situate themselves in the immanent social field. However, if a space free from the state was given to people for a post-representational politics to be conducted, this wouldn't mean the resolution of all oppressive practices, and the result could be anything but socialism or anti-sexist or anti-racist practices. The question of articulation of demands would be crucial, since the existence of such spaces does not evacuate the political moment of struggling against oppressive practices that could be reiterated within those spaces. Post-representational politics must not be seen as the end of politics but rather as a mean to struggle against oppressive ideas and practices in a long process towards an equalitarian society.

IV.viii. Hegemony versus exodus and desertion; an overview

Now that I have outlined Robinson and Tormey's critique of the populist forms of organisation based on the ontology of lack, I can turn to what has been the most debated new theory in the leftist political circles, namely Hardt and Negri's theory espoused in their trilogy *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009). The debate between representational and post-representational politics tally in many ways the debates Negri and Hardt have provoked with Laclau. Negri and Hardt's position is singular in the sense that they claim to be communists while advocating completely new methods and strategies such as 'exodus' and 'desertion'. Their singular position which Richard Day characterizes as 'Autonomist Marxist' defends the actualization of horizontality in the present time with a communist society in perspective. With this, they seem to be radicalising what Tormey and Robinson advocate, namely a political action within the domain of immanent social practices where rhizomatic connections are possible, as well as a desertion from the state and its 'arborescent' model as Deleuze and Guattari have termed it. Nevertheless, Negri and Hardt's path of analysis differs completely from Robinson and Tormey's path which was empirical/ethical. Hardt and Negri link the strategies of exodus and desertion with a Marxist historical materialism. In the following part, I shall explain how their discourse is constructed showing first the influence of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, their explanation of strategies of exodus and desertion in terms of the historical consequences of the postmodern condition. I shall explain what the passage to postmodernity and to biopolitical production means and then confront Negri and Hardt's tactical arguments with Laclau and Mouffe's critiques.

IV.ix. Strategies of exodus and desertion and the postmodern caesura

For Negri and Hardt, Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist gesture is not radical enough, as it reproduces the modern conception of a transcendent power, to seize and transform from inside. Indeed for Negri, 'if we want to shatter the bourgeois capitalist conception of power, we must go beyond the modern conception of power itself' (Negri, 2008, 18). The modern conception of power is monolithic or analogical to a monotheist conception of power, with a single centre of contestation challenging it – a class or, the people. For Negri and Hardt, post-modern power is not centred as it was before. Hence the desire for a rupture and a break with the neoliberal order implies a different strategy than that which prevailed in the modern era. This new strategy must be a self-conscious leave-taking, or exodus, which is central to what Negri and Hardt call 'the constituent power of the multitude' (Negri and Hardt, 2000, 410). Paolo Virno explains that exodus is 'an engaged withdrawal', a 'founding leave-taking' that consists in a 'mass defection from the State' (1996, 197, quoted in Day, 2008, 249).

In *Empire*, Negri and Hardt write:

Whereas in the disciplinary era, *sabotage* was the fundamental notion of resistance, in the era of imperial control it may be *desertion*. Whereas being-against in modernity often meant a direct/or dialectical opposition of forces, in post-modernity being-against might well be most effective in an oblique or diagonal stance. Battle against the Empire might be won through subtraction and defection. This desertion does not have a place; it is the evacuation of the

place of power. (Negri and Hardt, 2000, 212)

In other words, contrary to the hegemonic forms of organisation, which is the attempt to change the centre of power from one hegemonic bloc to another, exodus is the desertion from the *loci* of power. What is very important to retain is that Negri and Hardt's advocacy of exodus and desertion as a strategy for emancipation is linked to what they claim to be the existence of a new world order and a change in the form of power and sovereignty itself. The new strategies for the left correspond to the new order that appeared with the post-modern caesuras. On this point, Hardt and Negri can be said to be post-Marxists too, but with a very different understanding of what post-Marxism is. Indeed, what Hardt and Negri try to do is to actualize Marx by changing the outdated Marxian theses rooted in the analyses of nineteenth century capitalist system and rendered meaningless in the context of the postmodern world; whereas for Laclau and Mouffe, these fundamental Marxian theses were inherently wrong and had simply to be changed by other ones.

As stated in the quotation above, one of the caesuras that led to the paradigm shift Negri and Hardt are attempting to theorize is the shift from a disciplinarian regime to a regime of control, under the management of the welfare state. This claim relies on Deleuze's commentaries on the passage from disciplinary society to the society of control in Foucault's work (see Hardt and Negri, 2000, 22-23), (see Deleuze, 1992). In the new form of sovereignty that appears with the shift to postmodernity in the post-nation state which is named 'Empire', the exercise of power is not centred anymore, it has infiltrated everywhere. This regime of control is namely 'biopower', in other words power's pervasion of the totality of life. 'Whereas discipline was an "anatomy-politics" of bodies and essentially applied to individuals, writes Negri, biopolitics on the contrary represents a kind of great "social medicine"

attempting the control of populations in order to govern their lack: life now belongs to the field of power’, explains Negri (Negri, 2008, 30-31).

Foucault and Deleuze believed that we were undergoing the transition from a modern society based on discipline to a postmodern society which works rather on control. This is ‘a progressive and dispersed installation of a new system of domination’ (Deleuze, 1992, 7). Disciplinary societies appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries and saw their height at the outset of the twentieth. Discipline relies on a functional and hierarchical control of space and time, prisons serving as the analogical model, which was also applied to the organisation of factories. The society of control differs from the disciplinary societies on four points 1) the aim is less to produce some corporal habits with the play of pain and pleasure than to provoke needs and desires, 2) secondly, the energy used for the control of individuals is more the energy of the controlled individuals themselves than the one of the institution. Institutions act not by coercion but with the ‘voluntary mobilisation’ (*mobilisation volontaire*) of individuals (Castel, 1981, 208), 3) the rules of control are internalized and they are lived as the natural consequences of a state of facts, and not as pressure coming from the institutions 4) personal interests cease to correspond to the interests of the institutions. Violence as a tool of domination progressively disappears to be replaced by the production of affects, self-violence and self-control (see Razac, 2008, 112-113). In economic terms, the new paradigm is said to be characterized by the Marxist concept of ‘real subsumption of society under capital’ (see Negri, 2008, 23) or colonization of every form of life by capital – the commodification of life – whose political structure is named biopower. The result is that the post-structuralist account of power is one of being immanently constitutive of social structures.

The analysis of biopower, capitalism’s total investment of life, and the

absolutely fetishized and commodified world as well as the totalitarian effects of biopower was already present in Lyotard, Baudrillard and Virilio's works. For Negri, these authors thought that there were nothing to be done but escape from alienation on an individual plane. Whereas for Negri there is a possibility of collective resistance because of the generalisation of oppressive practices. Beyond Deleuze and Foucault's influences, Negri and Hardt's idea that where there is exploitation, there is resistance takes root in the Operaista idea that 'capitalist development is subordinated to worker's struggles' and that therefore resistance comes first (See Tronti, 1971, 89 in Mandarini 2005, 193). It means that:

Not only does real subsumption of society under capital signify domination, writes Negri, [but] it also signifies, and we have already insisted on this point, the global emergence of contradiction, antagonism and their discrepancy. (Negri, 2008, 79)

Following the Operaista idea, Hardt and Negri emphasise resistance as ontologically prior to the powers of state and capital (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 64). Vidar Thorsteinsson explains that 'they maintain that the global emergence of Empire is not only the result of capital's own dynamics of expansion but a reaction to working-class struggles in the occident, national liberation struggles in the global south, and state socialism' (Thorsteinsson, 2010, 49; see also Negri and Dufourmantelle, 2004, 60). To fully understand this idea it is worth recalling the content of this Operaista idea in detail. Operaista ideas emerged in the 60s in journals such as *Quaderni Rossi* and *Class Operaia*. The main issue, especially for Mario Tronti, was that Marxists had for too long seen working class struggles as merely reactive to the development of capital. Mario Tronti radically inverts this relationship between labour and capital affirming that 'at the beginning is the working

class struggle' (Tronti, 1979, 1). Capital is said to be reactive and the working class struggles set the pace of the whole adjustments, adaptations and general development of capitalism. This is because capitalism's existence is based on the vital commodity on which the whole edifice is based: labour power. However, Hardt and Negri believe that there is a historical tendency of an increasingly 'immaterial' form of labour, which is 'biopolitical' in the sense that what it produces is not so much the 'means of life' but 'social life itself' (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 146). For Hardt and Negri, immaterial labour involves an increased 'feminisation of labour, a qualitative shift in the length of the working day, a growth in affective labour, and the rise of international migration' (Hardt and Negri 2009, 131-137).

The productive excess that is characteristic of immaterial labour is what Hardt and Negri call 'the common'.⁵⁹ The common is essentially an autonomous space, one that includes 'the languages we create, the social practices we establish, (and) the modes of sociality that define our relationship' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, 139) It is 'the sum of everything that the labour force produces independently of capital and against it' (Negri, 2008, 67). Hence, this productive 'excess' is the most significant aspect of immaterial labour, and it is this excess that 'enables the constitution of spaces of self-valorisation that capital cannot entirely absorb' (Negri, 2008, 43). The point of antagonism is not between capital and labour in the classical sense anymore but between capital and the common (see Thorsteinsson, 2010, 51). Similar to Marx's argument according to which the form of labour that emerged with capitalism gave rise to the proletariat and the subjectivity associated with it, the new form of labour that creates the common provides a new form of revolutionary

59 The true novelty of Negri and Hardt is the concept of the common: 'the common constitutes indeed the crucial element differentiating my theorization... from Deleuze and Guattari's theorization' (Negri and Casarino, 2008, 118).

subjectivity, namely the 'Multitude'. The multitude is brought about by the transformations of the nature of postmodern labour. It is exploited by capital as was the proletariat for Marx.

As Negri argues, the second meaning of the multitude is a *class concept*:

the class of productive singularities, the class of operators of immaterial labor. This class is not itself a class – it is rather the creative strength of labor as a whole. (...) The struggle of the working class no longer exists, but the multitude proposes itself as the subject of class struggle: to become this subject, it must be the most productive class ever invented. (Negri, 2004, 112)

Multitude comes hence to replace the traditional function of the proletariat as the class meant to liberate all the other classes, as the traditional 'subject of the revolution'. This simple enlargement of the subject of the revolution will be the target of strong critiques from Laclau and Mouffe. Just like in Marx, then, the antagonistic relation between the multitude and capital remains central in posing the possibility of revolutionary subjectivity. Resistance to capital alone, however, is not enough to constitute it. For Hardt and Negri, the key to understanding revolutionary subjectivity lies in the increasingly autonomous capacity of immaterial labour. The multitude has the capacities 'for self-organisation and cooperation' in social biopolitical production. Nevertheless the transition from one society to another is said to be non-spontaneous but has to be carried out through non-representative means. The material conditions of this transformation are partly found in the autonomy of biopolitical production (the autonomous production of the common); these are the 'economic capacities' of the multitude, and they are immanently 'expressed as political capacities' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, 365) For Hardt and Negri, because the excess that the multitude creates and that cannot be totally absorbed by capital is social life itself, this type of labour 'tends to produce the means of

interaction, communication, and co-operation directly...the creation of co-operation has become internal to labour and thus external to capital' (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 147). The politics of the multitude is hence immanently constructed by its economic activity and has the characteristics of it. The economic characteristics of the multitude match therefore the ethical commitment of Negri and Hardt to horizontal and autonomous practices.

Along with this definition of the multitude as a class concept, Negri claims that multitude also has a philosophical meaning and this meaning comes from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy:

The multitude is defined as a multiplicity of subjects. Here what is being challenged is the reduction to unity, which is to say the permanent temptation that has poisoned thought since classical metaphysics. The multitude is, by contrast, an irreducible multiplicity, an infinite quantity of points, a differentiated –an absolutely differentiated- whole. (Negri, 2004, 111)

Hence it is opposed to the concept of a people, as Robinson and Tormey have argued, which is a reduction of the multitude to an imaginary unity. The notion of people is, due to the new forms of possibility within the population, an obstacle to the full deployment of the potential of the multitude, not as a community gathered around a precarious point, such as a leader, but its multiplicity itself. 'The community is not a dynamic collection creation but a primordial founding myth. An originary notion of the people poses an identity that homogenizes and purifies the image of the population while blocking the constructive interaction of difference within the multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2000).

So in this context of a new regime of power, Hardt and Negri argue that the best strategy to really challenge the dominant system, since power is not concentrated in one point but rather is now thought as a network, is the exodus of the multitude. The multitude is an ensemble of singularities,⁶⁰ and the manner through which it is produced determines the strategy best suited to challenge the capitalist system i.e., it is created by the change in the form of labour itself.

Negri and Hardt compare the strategy of exodus to the war of position: they claim a “disarmed multitude” is much more effective than an armed band and that exodus is more powerful than frontal assault’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009, 368) and should be placed in a more global strategy of war of position.

Exodus in this context often takes the form of sabotage, withdrawal from collaboration, countercultural practices, and generalized disobedience. Such practices are effective because biopower is always ‘subject’ to the subjectivities it rules over. When they evacuate the terrain, they create vacuums that biopower cannot tolerate. The alterglobalization movements that flourished in the years around the turn of the millennium functioned largely in this way: creating breaks in the continuity of control and filling those vacuums with new cultural expressions and forms of life. Those movements have left behind, in fact, an arsenal of strategies of disobedience, new languages of democracy, and ethical practices (for peace, care for the environment, and so forth) that can eventually be picked up and redeployed by new initiatives of rebellion. (Hardt and Negri, 2009, 368)

60 The politics of the multitude is hence linked to ‘a discovery, deepening, and development of another heritage of modernity; a heritage that, instead of hiding difference behind identity and repetition, exalts it through the diversity of life’ (Negri, 2004, 74).

Hence the typical social movements that Negri and Hardt would defend are the World Social Forums, starting by the first one in Porto Alegre in Brazil, in 2002. Porto Alegre's forum was first thought as an alternative to the world economic forum. It united a great number of movements from civil societies as well as individuals from leftist parties from all around the world. The unity of the diverse groups is only the unity of the common goal they set and they built together.⁶¹ It is considered as the movement of the movements outside any alliances with economic or political power structures. It was said to be possible that the forum would be the mean of action of the multitude, giving birth to the democracy of the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2003, 10).

IV.x. Critiques of Hardt and Negri's concepts

The concept of multitude has attracted a lot of critiques from opponents including from Laclau and Mouffe. They see two main problems in Negri and Hardt's political thought: the spontaneism of the multitude's challenge to the dominant system, and secondly the class reductionism operating with this concept. We can find many affirmations in Negri and Hardt's work about the generalization of resistance, since they totally accept the Operaista assumption that where there is power, there is resistance. In the era of biopower and the

61 'Le second point frappant est que le réseau de Porto Alegre prend la forme d'un processus commun. Les connections sont transformées en discussions et le réseau se mue en une liste d'exigences et de projets. Identifier et construire ce que nous avons en commun est ce qui fait l'unité du réseau. Il n'est pas tant question de trouver un point d'unité ou d'identité, mais simplement de découvrir ce que nous avons en commun dans nos différences et d'élargir cette communauté en laissant nos différences proliférer' (Hardt and Negri, 2003, 8).

‘global extension of capitalist power over society’ one must have ‘the global spread of insubordination’ (Negri, 2008, 50). As the entire ‘cooperating multitude’ is today the new proletariat, it means that the multitude is this new collection of multiple forces resisting subordination. About this Negri writes that there is on one side the imperialism and colonialism of the 19th and 20th century and the permanence of biopower, and on the other side, beneath this power ‘an entire history of resistance, insurrectional movements, experimentations in cooperation and alternative solidarity, attempts at political and cultural autonomy, struggles, and utopian projects of liberation’ (Negri, 2008, 50).

Whereas in Laclau and Mouffe’s thought, resistance was already the result of a hegemonic articulation, in Hardt and Negri’s the multitude is already antagonistic, a heterogeneous and non-homologous entity, produced by the new forms of sovereignty emerging during the age of globalisation; for Laclau and Mouffe antagonism has to be constructed and nothing guarantees its constitution. Claiming that ‘wherever we find exploitation, we always encounter resistance, antagonism’ (Negri, 2008, 64) may be a pure tautology from Laclau and Mouffe’s perspective: if a situation is lived as an exploitation, that would mean that the antagonism has already been transformed from a relation of subordination to a relation of exploitation to be fought. The multitude is created without any political mediation; it relies on the form of labour which corresponds to it, namely immaterial labour. This cannot be accepted by Laclau and Mouffe. Laclau states: ‘according to *Empire*, it [unity] does not involve any kind of political mediation. Because it is only natural, according to the authors, that the oppressed revolt, their unity is simply the expression of a spontaneous tendency to converge. Unity, as a gift from Heaven, occupies in their theory the same place we attribute to hegemonic articulation’ (Laclau, 2005, 240). Laclau tries to explain where out of heterogeneity this unity comes from and for him it presupposes the

establishment of equivalential logics and the creation of empty signifiers; but in Negri and Hardt's thought, unity is built through action and the construction of a common, it is the result of the productive process of labour itself. The multitude has the capacities 'for self-organisation and cooperation' in social biopolitical production.

It is true that in Laclau and Mouffe's thought, we could perceive very clearly what were the concrete mechanisms of the creation of political unities, through empty signifiers. Whereas it is hard to imagine how a unity, or a relation to others can be constructed in a completely immanent plane. For Negri and Hardt the multitude is a set of singularities, but for them all singularities are relational: they can't exist apart from the relations they have with others within society; the political form of the multitude is immanently constructed within it.

The second critique that would be made by Laclau and Mouffe concerns the role of the multitude and its relation to the former category of 'proletariat' that Marxists used to use. The concept of multitude comes replacing the concept of proletariat as it was understood by Marxists and then for Laclau and Mouffe, Negri and Hardt's intervention remains locked in a classical Marxist paradigm. The different shape the concept of 'multitude' has in relation to 'proletariat' is a consequence of the change in work that began with the New Deal, a tendency towards the hegemony of immaterial work and globalization of economic processes, and the change of concepts such as nation-state, people, sovereignty (Negri, 2008, 22). It does retain some remnants of class-centric analysis identified with the task of the multitude. Furthermore, the 'multitude' is the result of an objective economic process: 'the concept of multitude follows from the relation between a constitutive form – of singularity, of invention, of risk, to which the entire transformation of labour and the new measure of temporality lead –, and a practice of power – the destructive

tendency of labor-value that capital must today enforce. But while capital used to be able to reduce the multiplicity of singularities to something organic and unitary (a class, a people, a mass, a collection), this process no longer functions. The multitude must necessarily be thought of as a nonorganic, differential and powerful (*puissante*) multiplicity' (Negri, 2008, 45). Laclau and Mouffe would disagree with that analysis as for them the objective relations of economy never led to the collection or unity (a class or people) it is always already a political construction. It seems that the multitude is the proletariat for-itself, which will bring a 'new global vision, a new way of living in the world' (Negri and Hardt, 2000, 214).

Whereas for Marxists of the Second International the development of capitalism was meant to lead to a unifying process of the proletariat, for Negri and Hardt, the post-modern paradigm of capitalism might conduct the multitude to a global resistance against oppressive practices. It is never clear what kind of struggles the multitude is concerned with, and in the case of purely social struggles (such as a demand for higher wages) resistance can hardly spontaneously transcend its corporatist moment, and this was exactly the thesis of Gramsci that to become political, demands have to be articulated to others, in a process of hegemonisation. With the task incumbent to the multitude it is not clear either whether it is really a collection of singularities or if it has a unique centre. On one hand, the multitude is indeed theorized as a multiplicity in Deleuzean sense, that is 'as a non identitarian formation of subjects in perpetual motion, sailing the 'enormous sea' of capitalist globalisation in 'a perpetual nomadism' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 60-61) or a creative constellation of powerful singularities; but on the other hand Hardt and Negri give the multitude a single task, direction and something like a centre. Indeed it will achieve certain goals for humanity as a whole and according to Richard Day, 'although it may be internally differentiated and fluid the task of the multitude – as it is envisaged by Hardt and Negri at any

rate – [it] is to counted one totalising force with another, to struggle for hegemony in the leninist sense of this term’ (Day, 2008, 152).

IV.xi. Concluding remarks

I have shown that Negri and Hardt share with Robinson and Tormey the Deleuzian interpretation of the epiphenomenal character of unity and identity where everything is multiple, different and singular. However, the arguments of Hardt and Negri in favour of rhizomatic organisation are very different from Robinson and Tormey’s argument. The focus is not the same: while for Robinson and Tormey, it is unethical to sacrifice plurality and multiplicities in the name of the creation of a people through hegemonic practices, for Hardt and Negri it also refers to the best strategy that is adapted to the shape of the postmodern world. Negri and Hardt nevertheless do not seem to avoid a certain amount of reductionism that Laclau and Mouffe’s have identified in classical Marxism. Laclau and Mouffe’s work has the benefit of making it clear that we cannot simply assume that something like ‘the multitude’ exists, nor can we hope to bring together the multitudes under a single sign without reproducing all that is bound up with the logic of hegemony (Day, 2008, 154).

One would nevertheless remark that the criteria of *practical efficiency* underlies one extreme discourse and another, without being explicitly deliberated, exposed, problematised in the texts of both Thomassen and Hardt and Negri. Many occurrences could be quoted here. At the end of Thomassen’s article (Thomassen, 2007), there is for instance an ambiguity between ontological reasons for defending representation and efficiency of a

form of government or presence of a leader. There is nevertheless a problem because in the notion of hegemony, there is already the idea that efficiency is precisely linked to the form of the political practices in play. The hegemonic practices aim to be hegemonic, that is provoke a change, become more powerful, control a wider range of relations; whereas horizontal practices think themselves as disconnected from practical efficiency, except in Hardt and Negri who try to link horizontal tactics to efficiency without being very convincing.

I have argued that transforming representation into a logic could be interpreted as a will to impose a model characteristic of Western modernity, but at the same time willing to impose horizontal practices at any costs would also be vain and could lead to a form of leftism, if it is done without consideration of any context or situation. Gramsci himself adapted tactics to situations, with the development of notions such as war of movement and war of position, each being destined to a specific context. This exigency of practical efficiency has a little link with ontology, and only indirectly; it rather has a tie with the idea of situation understood as the state of force relationships in question, the political traditions of a nation, the international climate and so on. A conjuncture of favourable situations can decide of the success of a movement, whereas the initial form of the movement is given by the principles or by the philosophy guiding the action.

General conclusion

i. Overview

In this conclusion I summarize the principal arguments of my thesis and make some additional remarks. My thesis analysed the genesis of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism politically and theoretically, confronted its underlying ontology of lack with the so-called ontology of abundance and showed how this could be translated into concrete political strategy.

The first crisis of Marxism was instigated by Bernstein's revisionism. The key issue concerned Marxist dualistic interpretation of the social world as composed of two fundamental elements: first the *structure* or the economic base, on which rises a legal and political *superstructure* and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. Orthodox Marxists of the Second International like Kautsky considered that the *class-consciousness* of the proletariat was dependent of its infrastructural unity. This was the condition that made the proletariat the subject capable of overthrowing the capitalist system and emancipating society once and for all. However, in the context of a growing economic fragmentation, as the seizure of power and the victory of the proletariat was subordinated to its *unity*, the new question was to know how to create this unity. If the politico-ideological unity of the working class was not a direct consequence of its social homogeneity as the Revisionists argued, then its politico-ideological unity had to be constructed. Gramsci and subsequently Althusser's contribution was to suppress the dualism of Marxism; the two authors developed the idea of necessary

ideological struggles to raise class-consciousness, and their purpose was to bring a new materialist theory of the social discarding the mechanistic idea of a determination of superstructures by the movements of the superstructures. Even so, as Laclau and Mouffe showed, these theories remained locked in the dualist paradigm and somehow they couldn't overcome the class-centric analysis and the reductionist approach (found in the theory of determination of the last instance of the economy) or conceptualize the real possibility of social change. To the dualistic approach which was the common denominator of the various Marxist currents, Laclau and Mouffe opposed a *monist* vision of the social field, reducible to the field of *discursivity*. The consequences were that revolutionary subjectivity couldn't a priori rely on any position in society. Not only did they claim that the proletariat wasn't the designated subject of revolution anymore but also they challenged the centrality of the quest for the revolutionary subject's unity. They recognized the ontological existence of pluralism and differences and consequently they argued that socialist strategy's first concern couldn't be the quest for unity anymore but the preservation of *pluralities* and *differences*.

Post-structuralist theories allowed the final break with Marxism and structuralism. Along with the Derridean and Saussurean influences, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic *ontology of lack* was a major influence on Laclau and Mouffe and gave them a means to consolidate their post-structuralist theory of hegemony. The ontology of lack explains, in the context of the social as a field of discursivity, why political subjects can only be temporary and how their precariousness is founded on the process of the creations of those identities: namely the endless processes of *identifications* through which particular discourses try to fill their fundamental lack. Although Laclau and Mouffe reject the traditional analysis of the revolutionary subject and acknowledge pluralism as an ontological principle, there is for them necessarily some precarious totalisations. Indeed, pluralism, fragmentation and differences are

not the end of the matter because a world in which differences would have no limit would be *psychotic*, hence impossible to live in. These totalities are constructed around precarious centres or empty signifiers similar to language in which the meaning of something is relationally constructed with the other's elements. Everything is constructed like language, in which *empty signifiers* becoming *master signifiers* block the flow of differences and freeze temporarily the meaning of each element of the articulated whole. Hence exclusion, violence and decisions by which an empty signifier becomes a master-signifier are inevitable aspects of politics and of the formation of identities. External heterogeneous discourses form *antagonisms*, they create frontiers between discourses. Antagonism is this other which reveals the impossibility of any closure. Because it is an irreducible negativity, the antagonism is strictly incompatible with the principles of dialectical logic. The process I have described implies therefore that the social is a transcendent field, and a transcendent field only will allow the hegemonic elaboration of identities.

An ambiguity traverses Laclau and Mouffe's work regarding the question of unity and plurality; they recognize this ambiguity as a tension themselves. Every subject or totality is constructed through a dialectic between the absence of essence and ground preventing it from being totally closed and on the other hand, the desire of full closeness. This ambiguity can especially be found in Laclau's theory of universality where this tension between absolute differences and unity is highlighted and takes the name of the tension between the 'logic of difference' and the 'logic of equivalence', between particularity and universality. The elements of a chain of equivalence are linked together by their common identification and subsumption under an empty signifier. An empty signifier is one of the demands that comes to represent each of the particular demands of the chain (all the other demands) under certain circumstances. As such, it becomes universal, or partially universal because it

stills remains open and is susceptible to be de-articulated or rearticulated within other discourse. Hence the possibility of totality is a 'horizon and not a ground' (Laclau, 2005, 71). This vain research for totality is founded on the Lacanian conception of being and subject, individual or collective, considered as an empty vase which tries to fill its void by identifying with something, an idea, a leader, or anything else.

Some authors criticize the tension between the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence in Laclau and Mouffe's work as being not radical enough in the acknowledgment and preservation of pluralism and differences. This current within post-structuralism rejects entirely the notion of totality, as a ground and as a horizon alike. For Robinson and Tormey, Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism remain locked in the classical paradigm of a single subject challenging a monolithic power. For them they just relocate the single centre of contestation from one unity to another, from 'Class' to '*People*'. The quest for political unity which has been central in the history of Marxism and which haunts the work of Laclau and Mouffe through the idea of a hegemonic construction of subjectivity, is hence entirely rejected by those thinkers. Accusing the ontology of lack of being the principal reason for such quest for totalisations, they base their critiques on an ontology of abundance and of a completely different vision of power and resistance inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's postmodern philosophy of singularities and becoming and Foucault's notion of biopower. Their interpretation of reality as a field of differences leads them to adopt an ethical position refusing the repression of these differences through hegemonic practices, hence criticizing Laclau and Mouffe's 'submissive gesture to the real' (see Robinson and Tormey, 2009, 133). While Laclau explains that populism is the royal road to understanding politics in general, this frontier that splits the social into two antagonistic camps and two master signifiers, Robinson and Tormey take the Zapatista movement as a way to consolidate their ethical commitment to immanent

politics and to prove that an alternative way of doing politics is possible. The quest for unity has been rejected for ethical reasons according to Robinson and Tormey, because it is incompatible with the political commitment to emancipation; this is intimately linked to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of ethics as practical composition and creation of being. In my fourth chapter I investigated Negri and Hardt's peculiar approach to this question. For them this quest is in vain, for it belongs to an imaginary which is outdated in the context of biopower. Radicalising the tradition of *Operaismo* blended with Deleuze and Guattari's conception of multiplicities, Negri and Hardt develop the idea that the practices of labour are fundamentally changing today, that their effects are increasingly biopolitical in the sense that they produce not only the means of life by social life itself. Life itself enters the circuit of capitalist production. The excess of immaterial labour is named the common and it produces an autonomous space within which a new social subjectivity is starting to emerge, namely the multitude. As such a constitution of a political subject is thought not as a hegemonic subject but as a multiplicity acting in an immanent and autonomous space; the alter-mondialist movement is seen hopefully as being the coming democracy of the multitude challenging the rule of capital. Revolutionary subjectivity cannot only be constructed in a transcendent plane like in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony, but also in an immanent one, preserving the multiplicities composing the multitude. Laclau and Mouffe have strongly criticised the class-reductionist aspect of the multitude; nevertheless the homology between the concepts of proletariat and multitude lies not in the content of these concepts but in the method that produced them. Like the proletariat, the multitude is defined through the form of its productive activity; however due to the modifications of the composition of labour brought about by biopolitical production, the multitude is an infinitely more expansive subjectivity than the working class (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 224). Also, whereas the working-class for-itself was characterised by its unity, the multitude is conceived on in contrast as a set of singularities and its politics must be one that respects its internal differences.

ii. The ontological question

The category of difference has been central throughout my thesis and rests on a radical critique of Hegelian ontology. The Hegelian ontology adopted by Marx and many Marxists, was turned ‘on his head’ to ‘discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell’ (Marx, 1990, 103); it understood the possibility of social change from the existence of contradictions and sublation of these within a given situation. Hegelian ontology has been accused of annulling differences by means of the principles of dialectic negation. The search for a new ontology has therefore been vital for contemporary political theory. In this thesis two strategies have been identified to overcome the perceived deficiencies of Hegelian dialectic and the consequent crises of Marxism. The first strategy was to replace it by an ontology of lack inspired by Derrida and Lacan and was characteristic of Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism. The aim and justification of this ontology serves mainly to ground the concept of antagonism, which guaranteed that every identity is pierced by contingency, precariousness and is constituted around a fundamental negativity. The second strategy was to replace it by an ontology of abundance, which, as was shown here, was politically much more radical than the ontology of lack. For the ontology of abundance, being, equivalent to desire, infinitively creates some singularities hence some differences, to preserve these and the flow of creation of being, the immanent field is hence necessarily the field in which politics must be done. The ontologies of lack and abundance are not driven by any teleology; as Negri writes, the theory of the multitude ‘has no illusions about invisible hands or final causes pushing history forward. It is a teleology pushed forward only by our desires and our struggles, with no final end point’ (Negri, 2008a, 41), hence revealing the subordination of ontology to prior political positions. We are finally left with two distinct

strategies for the left, namely the hegemonic strategy related to the ontology of lack on one side and the autonomist strategy related to the ontology of abundance on the other.

iii. Ethics and Politics

It has not been the purpose of this thesis to decide which theory and which strategies are the most convincing ones. There is however one point I would like to emphasize here and which I find to be a positive aspect of the thinkers of abundance, which is that the ontology of abundance introduces a fundamental ethical element which is almost totally absent from the ontology of lack. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe furnish a perfectly coherent theory for describing how political identities are constructed, providing a theory of the logic of the political through the conceptualisation of notions such as empty signifiers, internal frontiers and antagonism. However they remain neutral as to what form of frontier they would like to see established. The ethical ambiguity is quite clear in the text analysed in Chapter 3 (see III.iv.b) when Laclau and Zac explain the nature and function of the radical investment in empty signifiers without saying what kind of investments must or must not be privileged. The ethical commitment is missing and in fact the content of the attachments to empty signifiers is said to be ‘almost irrelevant’. According to Laclau, there is no particular discourse or no particular order that is better or worse in itself than any other. The only way one can determine this is through an analysis of the level of attachment a ‘people’ accord them. This is undoubtedly linked to Laclau and Mouffe’s minimal account of emancipations conceived as a deepening of the liberal tradition (see Mouffe, 1992, 1). A number of theorists have criticized Laclau and Mouffe’s ethical ambiguity (see

Geras 1987, 69, 76, 77; Rustin, 1988, 173, quoted in Harrison, 2011, 98), pointing out the absence of any normative basis for a politics of their own.

Robinson and Tormey adopt a totally opposite position; they develop positive and ambitious claims about emancipation, conceived as a radical break with actual oppressive practices. They subordinate politics to ethics, being faithful to the ontology of abundance which asserts the primacy of ethics over ontology. The entire critique of Robinson and Tormey as well as their commitment to horizontalist practices is based on ethical commitments to a domination-free world. As such they are radical utopians: for them utopia is not a totalitarian danger but a necessity of imagination to create means and ends that would bring about the end of exploitation and oppression. The orientation to this no-place must be made to conform and be adjusted to this domination-free utopian world and that's why they affirm that the true question is not whether the logic of representation is constitutive or not but whether we should sacrifice some singularities and pluralities in the name of practical efficiency of a political movement whose aim is to positively change the world.

In the light of this, Negri and Hardt's contribution is extremely interesting in that they try to add to the ethical commitment to horizontal practices that would respect the becoming of singularities composing the world, an analysis of the contemporary mode of production that would join with and give the material possibility of going towards this kind of society. As such they place themselves in the footsteps of Marx whose originality was precisely to link the ethical postulate of the realisation of socialism to the law of breakdown of the capitalist system, in other words to give to the socialist utopia a rational basis (as Maximilien Rubel has argued, in Rubel, 1948). This link between the normative commitment and the objective conditions is also the original

contribution of Hardt and Negri regarding the exclusively ethical position of Robinson and Tormey. As we have seen, Negri and Hardt insist that historical and social change must be understood on the basis of changing forms of labour (Casarino and Negri, 2008, 79). As such Negri and Hardt's theory of Empire and multitude could be seen as complementary of Robinson and Tormey's work; combined together the two theories would reinforce each other. What pre-Marxist socialists like Fourier or Owen did for example was to reject capitalism only on moral bases.⁶² However the existence of exploitation as the foundation of capitalism as discovered by Marx and the production of labour as setting the conditions for a transcendence of this system was the main contribution of Marx to socialist theory.

What would be interesting to explore in further research is how to test the efficacy of autonomous struggles and Hardt and Negri's theories by relating the theoretical debates to analyses of empirical cases, for instance debates within the recent 'occupy' movements. The question would be to see if it would be politically expedient to implement large-scale autonomous practices in advanced societies like northern Europe, where in contrast to Chiapas, the state is strong and omnipresent.

iv. Two post-Marxisms?

From the analyses undertaken, I can conclude that in fact what I have called post-Marxism in the introduction must be nuanced; we find ourselves with two kind of post-Marxism here; one represented by Laclau and Mouffe and the

⁶² The originality of Marx's discoveries are clearly expressed by him in a letter to his friend Weydemeyer (Marx, 5 March 1852, in Marx, 1983, 58).

other one by Hardt and Negri. The meaning of each is quite different. Laclau and Mouffe considered that some of the Marxian theses were originally wrong, such as the centrality of the working class and then of labour in the composition of revolutionary subjectivity. The task of Laclau and Mouffe was to provide a new theoretical framework in which the question of the articulation of struggles and identities would be primary and perfectly coherent with the theoretical analysis of the open nature of the social world. However, Negri and Hardt's post-Marxism remains partially faithful to the Marxian thesis of the centrality of labour in revolutionary subjectivity. Whereas in Marx, the proletariat was meant to lead the revolution towards communism, in Hardt and Negri this task is incumbent on the multitude. The idea is that Marx was not inherently wrong, but some of his assumptions were outdated and had to be renewed to be coherent with the new material conditions of post-modern society. This difference leads us to our first chapter and to Bernstein's revisionism in particular, whose continuity with Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism is now made clear. Nevertheless, while for Bernstein it was the whole Marxist edifice that had to be abandoned, for Laclau and Mouffe some of the Marxists' theses are still relevant for political strategies, as demonstrated by their continued use of the Gramscian concept of Hegemony.

Despite all the differences separating them, these two kinds of post-Marxism can be however subsumed under the category of post-structuralist thought, and share 1) a total rejection of Hegelian ontology and 2) a commitment to pluralism and to pluralist struggles. The notion of Hegelian contradiction was strongly criticized because it subordinated difference and plurality to identity and in consequence was incapable of thinking pure contingency but also becoming. Secondly, by their commitment to pluralism and difference, all the post-structuralist thinkers studied share a focus on struggles different from traditional class struggles. For Laclau and Mouffe class struggle is just one

moment in the more global struggle for radical democracy (see section II.vi). But for Negri and Hardt too, ‘overthrowing capitalist rule is not the only mode of revolutionary activity’ (Negri and Hardt 2009b, 2). In the debate between Negri and Hardt and David Harvey, Harvey reasserts the primacy of class, whereas Hardt and Negri affirm that race, gender and other identity struggles can be revolutionary (Hardt and Negri, 2009b, 1). Capital is not the exclusive axis of domination and they claim that strategies of alter-modernity are not based exclusively on class, are ‘not defined exclusively by their challenge to capitalist rule’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009b, 2), because ‘each axes of domination has its own specificity, as do the struggles that challenge them’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009b, 2). The expansive conception of the multitude indeed allows the inclusion of these struggles as potential revolutionary subjects as much as the economic struggles. Hence despite their differences, the commitment to pluralism, multiplicity and singularity in philosophy and in politics is what the post-structuralist political theorists share and this definitively distinguishes themselves from the Marxist tradition. From this point the crucial question which remains for us now is to know how concretely this could be translated into a conscious global political movement which would give a totally new, bright face to the politics of emancipations.

Bibliography

Althusser, Louis, 'The Object of Capital' in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, London: Verso, 1979.

Althusser, Louis, *For Marx*, London: Verso, 2005.

Althusser, Louis, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in Althusser, Louis, *On Ideology*, London: Verso Books, 2008.

Balibar, Etienne, 'Preface' to *Hégémonie et Stratégie Socialiste*, Paris: Les solitaires Intempestifs, 2009.

Badiou, Alain, *Deleuze*, Paris: Hachette, 1997.

Ball, Terence, 'Marx and Darwin, A reconsideration', in *Political Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Nov., 1979, pp. 469-483.

Bannet, Eve Tavor, *Structuralism and the logic of dissent: Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Bernstein, Eduard, *The preconditions of socialism*, ed. and tr. by Henry Tudor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Bernstein, Eduard, *Socialisme théorique et social-démocratie pratique*, ed. by Alexandre Cohen, Paris: P. V. Stock, 1900.

Bernstein, Eduard [1898], *Les Présupposés du socialisme*, Paris: Seuil, 1974.

Bernstein, Eduard, *Evolutionary socialism*, New York: Schocken, 1978.

Brennan, James P. (dir.), *Peronism and Argentina*, USA: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1998.

Bolle, Leen de (ed.), 'Preface' in *Deleuze and Psychoanalysis: Philosophical Essays on Deleuz's Debate with Psychoanalysis*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010.

Burbach, Roger, *Globalization and Postmodern Politics*, London: Pluto Press, 2001.

Butler, Judith, Laclau, Ernesto, Žižek, Slavoj, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality, Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso, 2000.

Butler, Judith, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism', in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, London: Verso, 2000.

Casarino, Cesare, and Negri, Antonio, *A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics; In Praise of the Common*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Castagnola, George, *Body of evidence: Juan Domingo Peron's discourse*

during his political exile (1955-1972), Ph.D dissertation, Colchester: Essex Univ, 2002.

Castel, Robert, *La Gestion des risques*, Paris: Minuit, 1981.

Colletti, Lucio, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

Comte, Auguste, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Paris: Ed. Schleicher, 1908.

Cusset, Francois, *French Theory*, Paris: La Découverte, 2003.

Day, Richard, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private, 2008.

Deleuze, Gilles, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, New York: Zone Books, 1990.

Deleuze, Gilles, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59, Winter 1992, Cambridge: MIT Press, MA, 1992, pp. 3-7.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *Anti-Oedipus*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *What is Philosophy?*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

Engels, Friedrich, 'Letter to Bloch, 21 September 1890', in *Historical Materialism (Marx, Engels, Lenin)*, Progress Publishers, 1972, pp. 294-296.

Fenton, Natalie, 'Multiplicity, autonomy and the mediated politics of new social movements', in Dahlberg Lincoln and Phelan Sean (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Studies*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Gay, Peter, *The Dilemma of democratic socialism*, New York: Collier Books, 1962.

Geras, Norman, 'Post Marxism?' in *New Left Review*, I/163, May-June 1987, pp. 40-82.

Gramsci, Antonio, *Cahiers de prison*, Notes by Robert Paris, Paris: Gallimard, 1983.

Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, tr. and notes by Quentin Hoare and G.N. Smith, New York: International Publishers, 1971.

Guérin, Daniel [1936], *Fascisme et grand capital*, Paris: Syllepse, 1999.

Guyer, Paul (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1992.

Hallward, Peter, 'You can't have it both ways: Deleuze or Lacan' in Leen de Bolle (ed.), *Deleuze and Psychoanalysis: Philosophical Essays on Deleuze's Debate with Psychoanalysis*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010, pp. 33-50.

Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2000.

Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio, *Multitude*, London: Penguin Books, 2004.

Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, 'The World Social Forum, or the Reinvention of Democracy', in Ponniah, Thomas and William F. Fisher, *Another World is Possible: popular alternatives to globalization at the World Social Forum*, London: Zed Books, 2003.

Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio, *Commonwealth*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009a.

Hardt, Michael, Negri, Antonio, 'Commonwealth: An Exchange', in *Artforum* 48: 3, Belknap Press, Nov. 2009b, pp. 210-221.

Harrison, Oliver, 'Revolutionary subjectivity in post-Marxist thought', Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2011.

Harvey, Neil, *The Chiapas rebellion: The struggle for Land and Democracy*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Hegel, Friedrich, *Science of Logic*, tr. and ed. By George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.

Johnson, Robert, *The French Communist Party versus the Students; Revolutionary politics in May-June 1968*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972.

Kautsky, Karl [1892], *Le programme socialiste*, Paris: Librairie des sciences économiques et sociales Marcel Rivière, 1910.

Kautsky, Karl [1900], *Le marxisme et son critique Bernstein*, Paris: P. V. Stock, 1900.

Khasnabish, Alex, *Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots to the Global*, London: Zed Books, 2010.

Knops, Andrew, 'Agonism as Deliberation – On Mouffe's Theory of Democracy', in *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol.15, Issue 1, March 2007, pp. 115-126.

Kouvelakis, Stathis, 'Crises du Marxisme' in *Dictionnaire Marx Contemporain*, Paris: PUF, 2001.

Lacan, Jacques [1954-55], *The Seminar; Book II: the Ego in Freud's theory and in the technique of psychoanalysis*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Lacan, Jacques [1955-56], *The Seminar; Book III: The psychoses*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, tr. with notes R. Grigg, London: Routledge, 1993.

Lacan, Jacques [1949], *Ecrits: A selection*, New York: Taylor and Francis, 1977, pp. 172-175.

Laclau, Ernesto, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London: Verso, 1977.

Laclau, Ernesto [1983], 'The Impossibility of society', in *New Reflections of the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso, 1990.

Laclau, Ernesto, *New Reflections of the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso, 1990.

Laclau, Ernesto, 'Introduction', in E. Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities*, London: Verso, 1994.

Laclau, Ernesto, *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso, 1996.

Laclau, Ernesto, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', in C. Mouffe (ed.)

Deconstruction and Pragmatism, London: Routledge, 1996.

Laclau, Ernesto, 'Discourse' [1993], in R.E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and T. Pogge, *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, pp. 541-547.

Laclau, Ernesto, *On populist reason*, London-New York, Verso, 2005.

Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a radical democratic politics* [1985], London: Verso, 2001.

Laclau, Ernesto and Zac, Lilian, 'Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics', in E. Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities*, London: Verso, 1994.

Lefort, Claude, *L'Invention Démocratique: les limites de la domination totalitaire*, Paris: Fayard, 1981.

Lidtke, Vernon, 'Eduard Bernstein et les prémisses théoriques du socialisme', in *Histoire du Marxisme contemporain*, Paris: Union Generale d'Editions, 1976.

Little, Adrian, and Lloyd, Moya (eds.), *The Politics of radical democracy*, Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2009.

Liotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Macciocchi, Marie-Antonietta, *Pour Gramsci*, Paris: Seuil, 1974.

Marchart, Olivier, 'The absence at the heart of presence: radical democracy and the "ontology of lack"', in Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen, *Radical Democracy, Between Abundance and Lack*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

Mandarini, Matteo, 'Antagonism, contradiction, time: Conflict and organization in Antonio Negri', in *The Sociological Review*, 53, 2005, pp. 192–214.

Marx, Karl [1867], *Le Capital* (Livre 1) in *Oeuvres, Économie*, t. I, Paris: Gallimard-La Pléiade, 1965.

Marx, Karl, 'Letter to Weydemeyer, 5 mars 1852', in *Marx Engels Collected Works Volume 39*, Progress Publishers, 1983, p. 58.

Marx, Karl [1867], 'Post Face to the Second Edition', in K. Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, London: Penguin Classics, 1990, pp. 94-103.

Marx, Karl [1859], 'Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' in Marx, K. *Early Writings*, London: Penguin Books, 1992, pp. 424-428.

Marx, Karl [1847], 'The poverty of Philosophy', in Marx, Karl, and Engels, Friedrich, *Collected Works*, Volume 16, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976, pp.105-206.

McNeil W. and Felman K.S. (eds), *Continental Philosophy, an Anthology*, London: Blackwell, 1998.

Mignolo, Walter D., *The Idea of Latin America*, London: Blackwell, 2005.

Mignolo, Walter D., *The Darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011.

Mouffe, Chantal, 'Introduction: Gramsci Today', in C. Mouffe, (ed.), *Gramsci and Marxist theory*, London: Routledge, 1979a.

Mouffe, Chantal, 'Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci', in C. Mouffe (ed.), *Gramsci and Marxist theory*, London: Routledge, 1979b.

Mouffe, Chantal, 'Hegemony and the Integral State in Gramsci: Towards a New Concept of Politics', in Bridges and R. Brunt (eds), *Silver Linings*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981.

Mouffe, Chantal (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, London: Verso, 1992.

Mouffe, Chantal, *The return of the Political*, London: Verso, 1993.

Mouffe, Chantal, 'Radical democracy or liberal democracy', in D. Trend (ed.) *Radical democracy: Identity, Citizenship and the State*, London: Routledge, 1996.

Mouffe, Chantal, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, London: Verso, 1999.

Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, New York: Verso, 2000.

Negri, Antonio, *Negri on Negri: in conversation with Anne Dufourmantelle*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

Negri, Antonio, *The Porcelain Workshop; For a New Grammar of Politics*, Los Angeles CA: Semiotext, 2008.

Olkowski, Dorothea, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Patton, Paul, in Gary Genosko (ed.), *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical assessments of Leading Philosophers*, London: Routledge, 2001, Vol. 3.

Patton, Paul *Deleuze and the Political*, New York: Routledge, 2000.

Poulantzas, Nikos, *Political Power and Social Classes*, London: Verso, 1987.

Razac, Olivier, *Avec Foucault, après Foucault: Disséquer la société de contrôle*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008.

Robinson, Andrew, Tormey, Simon, 'Beyond Representation? A Rejoinder', in *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 60, No.1, 2007, pp. 127-137.

Robinson, Andrew, Tormey, Simon, 'Is Another World Possible? Laclau, Mouffe and Social Movements', in A. Little and M. Lloyd (eds.), *The Politics of radical democracy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, pp. 133-157.

Rubel, Maximilien, 'Introduction à l'Éthique marxienne', in Marx, Karl, *Pages choisies pour une éthique socialiste, Textes réunis, traduits et annotés*, Paris: Éd. Marcel Rivière, 1948.

Rus, Jan et al. (ed.), *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous People of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003.

Saussure, Ferdinand de (1974), in McNeil, W. and Feldman, K.S., *Continental Philosophy, an anthology*, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998, pp. 297-304.

Simons, Jon, 'Mediated Construction of the People: Laclau's Political theory and media politics', in Dahlberg Lincoln and Phelan Sean (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Studies*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Smith, Steven, B., *Reading Althusser: an essay on structural Marxism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Smith, Daniel W., 'Deleuze and Derrida, Immanence and Transcendence: Two Directions in recent French Thought' in Patton, P. and Protevi, J., *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, London and New York: Continuum books, 2003, pp. 46-66.

Smith, Anna-Marie, *The Radical Democratic Imaginary*, London: Routledge, 1998.

Stenson, Gary, *After Marx, Before Lenin: Marxism and socialist working-class parties in Europe, 1884-1914*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991.

- Thomassen, Lasse, *Deconstructing Habermas*, London: Routledge, 2008.
- Thomassen, Lasse, 'Beyond Representation?' in *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 60, No.1, 2007, pp. 111-126.
- Thomassen, Lasse, ' "A Basic Closure of Perspective" '? Reply to Robinson and Tormey', in *Parliamentary affairs*, Vol. 60, No.1, 2007, pp. 138-142.
- Thomassen, Lasse, Tonder, Lars (eds.), *Radical democracy: between abundance and Lack*, Manchester: Manchester University press, 2005.
- Thomassen, Lars, Tonder Lasse, 'Introduction: rethinking radical democracy between abundance and lack', in *Radical democracy: between abundance and Lack*, Manchester: Manchester University press, 2005, pp.1-13.
- Thoburn, Nicholas, 'Patterns of Production; Cultural Studies after Hegemony' in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 24 (3), 2007, pp. 79-94.
- Thorsteinsson, Vidar, 'The Common as Body without Organs in Deleuze' in *Deleuze Studies*, Volume 4, December 2010, pp. 46-63.
- Tormey, Simon, ' "Not in my Name" ': Deleuze, Zapatismo and the Critique of Representation', in *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol.59, No. 1, 2006, pp. 138-154.
- Tronti, Mario, 'The Strategy of Refusal', in *Working Class Autonomy and the*

Crisis; Italian Marxist Texts of the Theory and Practice of a Class Movement 1964-1979, London: Red Notes, 1979, pp. 7-22.

Tudor, H, and Tudor, J.M. (ed.), *Marxism and Social Democracy, The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Wenman, Mark, 'Hegemony and Globalist strategy', in A. Little and M. Lloyd (eds.), *The Politics of radical democracy*, Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2009.

Williamson, David G., *Bismarck and Germany, 1862-1890*, London: Longman, 1998.

Wright, Steve, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London: Pluto Press, 2002.

Žižek, Slavoj, 'Beyond Discourse Analysis', in Laclau Ernesto (ed.), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso, 1990, pp. 249-260.

