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Marxism or Post-Marxism?

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*[1] and Norman Geras's lengthy review article ('Post-Marxism', NLR 163) raise issues which are at the heart of the ongoing debate on the stature and prospects of contemporary Marxist theory. Laclau and Mouffe's major thesis is that the core of all Marxist theory is based on a necessitarian, deterministic logic which emphasizes iron laws, a strict succession of stages, the inevitability of the proletarian revolution, and so on. This logic reduces complexity and leads to an essentialist view of the social and to a closed, monistic type of theoretical discourse. All attempts from Marx onwards to soften Marxism's deterministic core by stressing indeterminacy, complexity, the importance of agency, the relative autonomy of the political etc. are simply *ad hoc* additions to a theoretical edifice which, in its foundations, remains irretrievably monistic. In other terms, when Marxists, past and present, try to avoid determinism, they unavoidably fall into the trap of 'dualism' or eclecticism. Therefore

a deterministic closure of electicism/dualism is the grim dilemma of all Marxist theory.

For Geras, what Laclau and Mouffe see as the core of Marxism is simply a caricature, a systematic distortion of a theoretical tradition which, in the works of its most successful representatives, has managed to avoid reductionism and monistic closure without resorting to eclecticism or empiricism. Whether one looks at Marx's work or at the writings of Luxemburg, Lenin and Gramsci, one finds an emphasis on the fundamental importance of structural determinations emanating from the economy, these determinations operating not as an all-encompassing monistic cause leading to total closure, but as a framework both enabling and setting limits to what is possible at the level of politics and culture. Moreover, at the level of the whole social formation, the idea of primacy of one type of structure over other structures, or to use Althusser's expression, the idea of a hierarchy of causalities of uneven weight is neither monistic nor eclectic. It is only Laclau and Mouffe's conceptual manicheism which presents us with the 'determinism/electicism' pseudo-dilemma.

This paper will attempt to develop three related arguments: (a) One can defend the Marxist paradigm against the idea of monistic closure not only by reference to the empirical work of specific authors, but also, or rather more appropriately, by looking at the logical status and mode of construction of certain fundamental Marxist concepts, such as the mode of production. (b) The authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* replace the one-sided necessitarian logic that one sees in *dogmatic* Marxism with an equally unacceptable one-sided contingency logic, and that whenever they try to mitigate their one-sidedness they are led to dualism/eclecticism. (c) Contrary to Geras's position, there is a type of reductionism which is inherent in all Marxist discourse—although this reductionism is not as incapacitating as Laclau and Mouffe imply.

First of all, however, I would like very briefly to comment on some preliminary remarks in Geras's article which might create a certain confusion for the reader. At the beginning of his article Geras attempts, in a general way, to explain the recent trend of Marxists breaking with Marxism in terms of such considerations as 'pressures of age and professional status', 'the lure of intellectual fashion', 'the desire for recognition and originality', the wish to be an 'up-to-the-minute thinker', etc. Although he is careful not to link these remarks with the position adopted by Laclau and Mouffe, given that they immediately precede Geras's criticism of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, it is easy for the reader to assume that they are directly addressed to its authors. Two points are therefore in order. First, having followed quite closely Laclau and Mouffe's intellectual trajectory as well as their principled involvement in politics, I would like to emphasize at the outset that Geras's 'sociology of knowledge' remarks by no means apply to them. Second, and most important, what is really crucial in the context of a debate such as this is less to ascertain the reasons, conscious or uncon-

[1] E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London 1985. This article was written before their reply to Norman Geras appeared in NLR.

scious, behind an author's break with Marxism and more to establish the cognitive validity or non-validity of what he or she has to say.

I. Core Marxism: Closed or Open?

Moving now to my first main argument, I think that in order to deal with the issue of whether or not Marxism leads to a closed discourse, one has to start by distinguishing as clearly as possible a substantive theory from a conceptual framework—the latter, rather than providing a set of empirically verifiable and knowledge-producing statements on some specific issue, simply 'maps out the problem area and thus prepares the ground for its empirical investigation'.[2] This distinction between conceptual framework and substantive theory corresponds more or less to Althusser's distinction between Generalities II and Generalities III: Generalities II consist of conceptual tools which, when applied to 'raw' theoretical material (Gen. I), lead eventually to the production of full-blown substantive theories (Gen. III).[3]

Now, it seems to me that the issue of whether or not core Marxism is fundamentally a closed or an open system can only be settled in a satisfactory manner at the level of Generalities II. For given that, as Geras argues, in the Marxist tradition one finds both open and closed substantive theories (on the development of capitalism for instance), the problem is to ascertain whether it is the open or closed ones which are more congruent with the basic conceptual tools of the Marxist discourse. Contrary to Laclau and Mouffe's position, I will argue that if one looks carefully at these conceptual tools, *and particularly if one compares them with equivalent non-Marxist cases*, one will have to conclude that it is the closed rather than the open substantive discourses (Gen. III) which do violence to Marxism's fundamental conceptual apparatus (Gen. II).

In fact Marxism, more than any other paradigm in the social sciences, can suggest very fruitful ways of studying social formations from the point of view of both agency and institutional structure, both as a configuration of collective actors struggling over the control of scarce resources, and as a systemic whole whose institutionalized parts or 'sub-systems' can be more or less compatible or incompatible with each other. As David Lockwood pointed out long ago, Marxism combines a *system* and a *social* integration view of social formations.[4] It encourages, *without resorting to dualism*, the examination of incompatibilities between systemic parts or institutional ensembles (e.g. between forces and

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[2] See S. F. Nadel, *The Theory of Social Structure*, Vol. I, London 1962, p. 1.

[3] See L. Althusser, *For Marx*, Allen Lane, London 1969, pp. 183-90 and p. 251. It has to be admitted that it is not always easy to distinguish between conceptual framework (Gen. II) and substantive theory (Gen. III), in the sense that all statements contain both substantive and metatheoretical/methodological elements. However, depending on where the emphasis lies, a distinction can and must be made between theories whose predominant preoccupation is with how to look at the social world and theories which try to tell us something we do not already know about its functioning and structure.

[4] D. Lockwood, 'Social Integration and System Integration', in G. K. Zollschan and W. Hirsh, eds., *Explorations in Social Change*, London 1964. See also N. Mouzelis, 'Social and System Integration: Some Reflections on a Fundamental Distinction', *British Journal of Sociology*, December 1974.

relations of production) as well as the ways in which such incompatibilities lead or *fail to lead* to the development of class consciousness and class conflict. To use, as much as it is possible, Laclau and Mouffe's terminology, Marxism can help the student to raise questions about the impact of articulatory practices, struggles, antagonisms on *subject positions as well as the reverse:* that is, to raise questions about how subject positions (or roles, in non-Marxist sociology) cluster into larger institutional wholes, these wholes both shaping and setting limits to subjects' practices. In a nutshell Marxism allows the serious and systematic study of both the practice → subject position and subject position → practice relationship.

Thus, contrary to Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist approach or to action-oriented sociological theories (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, exchange theory, conflict theory), *subjects or agents in Marxist theory do not operate in an institutional vacuum.* Rather, their strategies or practices have to be seen within specific structural constraints, within institutional ensembles of whose (often incompatible) organizing principles agents may or may not be aware. On the other hand, in contrast to Parsonian functionalism, Marxism does not conceptualize agents as mere puppets of the system. Its conceptual apparatus is such that it leads one to look at collective actors not only as products but also as producers of their social world. Since Parsonian sociology, particularly in its macro-sociological dimensions, is based on a conceptual framework which *encourages* closure, it will be useful to develop further the comparison between Marxism and this highly influential paradigm in the non-Marxist social sciences. This will make clearer in what sense Marxist conceptual tools lead necessarily neither to monistic nor to dualist types of empirical analysis.

As has frequently been noted, Parsonian action theory (despite its label) systematically underemphasizes the voluntarist dimension of social life, portraying human beings as the passive products of the social system. In strictly Durkheimian fashion it keeps pointing out how society's core values, through their institutionalization into normative expectations and internalization into need-dispositions, shape human conduct—without showing the opposite process: how actors, and particularly collective actors, constitute and change society. The direction of influence is always from the system/society to the actor, never the other way round. This systemic bias becomes particularly pronounced when Parsons moves from analysis of the 'unit act' and 'alter-ego interaction' to the theorization of society as an all-inclusive social system.[5] On this macro-level of analysis actors are not merely portrayed as passive, they seem to disappear altogether. When in the empirical writings of Parsons or his disciples actors actually enter into the social scene, they do so *despite*, not because of, the Parsonian framework.

This is amply illustrated by the way Parsons conceptualizes society as a system. One need only consider his famous AGIL scheme, the fourfold subsystem typology (adaptation, goal achievement, integration, latency) with the help of which he analyses the functioning of all social

[5] See *The Social System*, New York 1957.

systems. Each of these subsystems corresponds to one of the four basic functional requirements that any system has to meet in order to survive as such. The adaptation sub-system, for instance, roughly corresponds at the level of society as a whole to the economy and consists of all processes contributing to the solution of the adaptation requirements—that is, to the securing of all the resources necessary for a society's survival. These processes are often dispersed among a variety of social groups and collectivities. What brings them together in the 'adaptation' box is that they have one characteristic in common: that of contributing to the same functional requirement or system need. The adaptation subsystem, therefore, is a strictly systemic category, in the sense that it is not founded upon and does not correspond to a concrete collectivity or agency. As a concept it is radically different from such agency concepts as a dominant class, a formal organization, or an interest group. It is true, of course, that sometimes Parsons treats subsystems as if they were collective actors, ascribing to them characteristics proper only to decision-making agencies.[6]

Collective Agencies

The reason why Parsons often treats institutional subsystems or even whole societies and their core values as mysterious anthropomorphic entities deciding and regulating everything on the social scene is, of course, that his functionalist scheme leaves no conceptual room for collective agencies as producers of their social world. In fact, each of his subsystems is further divided into four 'sub-sub-systems', and the process of the four-fold systemic division goes on *ad infinitum*. Within this bewildering onion-like scheme of systems within systems, *collective* actors vanish altogether. There are simply no conceptual tools allowing for their serious examination. As one moves from the individual role-player with his/her need-dispositions and role expectations to a macro-level of analysis, agency concepts are displaced by system concepts.

It will now be quite clear in what respects the Marxist paradigm provides more adequate tools of analysis. Marxists too, of course, like Parsonian sociologists, subdivide whole social formations into subsystems or institutional parts. For example, the three-fold subdivision into the economic, the political and the ideological involves system rather than agency categories. There is however a crucial difference between Parsonian and Marxist subsystems: Marxism conceptualizes the economic sphere in such a way that its institutional components do not lead, à la Parsons, to further systemic subdivisions. Insofar as Marxism views the economy as an articulation of modes of production, and insofar as the relations of production constitute the major feature of every mode, this key concept provides a bridge between a systemic/institutional and an agency/action approach. In fact the relations of production concept leads quite 'naturally', i.e. without any *ad hoc* switch between conceptual planes, from problems of institutional analysis to problems of 'strategic

[6] See on this point Stephen Savage, *The Theories of Talcott Parsons: The Social Relations of Action*, London 198-.

conduct' and vice versa.[7] For it requires no mental acrobatics to move from an analysis of how the technical and social division of labour allocates agents into different locations/positions within the sphere of production, to an investigation of the type of practices and struggles to which such structural positions lead or fail to lead. The sharper the focus on the way in which agents react to their class locations by trying to maintain or transform their situation *vis à vis* the means of production (or the means *in* production), the greater the concern with issues that *exclusively* concern Laclau and Mouffe: such as the manner in which subjects' identities and their perceptions of their 'real interests' are formed, the manner in which such self-identities and perceptions are fixed into 'nodal points', or subverted by the emergence of new struggles or antagonisms. The sharper, on the other hand, the focus on how subject positions or class locations cluster together to form larger institutional complexes, the more considerations of strategic conduct are 'bracketed' and the more institutional analysis comes to the fore, the type of analysis that is totally lacking in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. By 'bracketing' in this context is meant the temporary suspension of considerations pertaining to actors' skills, strategies, forms of consciousness etc.—a suspension which is necessary in order to deal in a non-cumbersome manner with the analysis of whole institutional orders and their interrelationships. In other terms, 'bracketing' does not imply an ontological belief in the thing-like character of institutional structures. It is simply a heuristic device for examining properties of the social which cannot be grasped by exclusive and direct reference to agency concepts.[8]

Of course, the balance between agency and institutional structure that Marxist concepts encourage has not always been maintained within Marxism. It has been broken either by ultra-voluntarist class theories that end up explaining all social developments in terms of the Machiavellian machinations of a dominant class; or, at the other extreme, by theories stressing structural constraints and contradictions to such an extent that actors are reduced to mere 'bearers of structures'. But despite all this, if one considers Marx's work as a whole as well as the mainstream Marxist tradition, it does provide the conceptual means for looking at societies both in terms of actors' collective strategies *and* in terms of institutional systems and their reproductive requirements. This is precisely why historians and social scientists influenced by Marx's work have produced more interesting and convincing accounts of long-term historical developments than those influenced by Parsonian functionalism or other brands of non-Marxist social theory. Leaving aside conventional historians who tend to turn their backs on all social theory, what insights has Parsonian functionalism or non-Marxist sociology to offer in the problem area of how complex societies are transformed? What

[7] For an elaboration of the distinction between institutional analysis and a 'strategic conduct' approach, see A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, London 1984, pp. 289 ff.

[8] It is precisely this type of bracketing that Laclau and Mouffe reject as essentialism. For them (as well as for ethnomethodologists and other phenomenologically oriented social theorists) any reference to concepts leading to structural/systemic rather than practice/agency considerations means *ipso facto* a reification of the social. However, as I will argue below, the price they have to pay for their excessive fear of reification is the incapacity to deal systematically with the overall institutional context within which specific articulatory practices are embedded.

contributions can be compared favourably with those of such Marxist-influenced writers as Barrington Moore, Hobsbawm or Braudel? Placed side by side with the historical investigations of Parsons, Eisenstadt or Smelser, for instance, their substantive superiority is so obvious that no further elaboration is necessary.

II. The Displacement of Institutional Analysis

Of course, for Laclau and Mouffe the distinction between subjects' practices and institutional structures is a spurious one. Among other things, they would point out that institutional structures do not emerge from nowhere. Like anything else pertaining to the social they must be viewed in a non-essentialist manner: they too are the result of discursive practices taking place in a plurality of political and social spaces which are characterized by openness, fragility, contingency, and so on. However, dismissal of the agency/institutional structure distinction—which one finds not only in Laclau and Mouffe's work but in various structuralist and post-structuralist discourses—creates more problems than it solves. For either it brings in through the backdoor (i.e. without acknowledgment or adequate conceptualization) the notion of institutional complexes and the way in which they limit/enable social action; or it consistently ignores them at the price of being unable to deal seriously with problems related to the constitution, persistence and long-term transformation of global social formations.

Let me elaborate this point further. To start with, despite Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on the intrinsically fragile, open, contingent and discontinuous character of the social, they do refer to cases where these characteristics hardly seem to apply: 'In a medieval peasant community the area open to differential articulation is minimal and, thus, there are no hegemonic forms of articulation: there is an abrupt transition from repetitive practices within a closed system of differences to frontal and absolute equivalences when the community finds itself threatened. This is why the hegemonic form of politics only becomes dominant at the beginning of modern times, when the reproduction of the different social areas takes place in permanently changing conditions which constantly require the construction of new systems of differences.'[9] So unless one considers a medieval peasant community as not pertaining to what Laclau and Mouffe call the 'social' (which would be absurd), then their ontological remarks on its openness and fluidity obviously refer to the 'modern' rather than the 'traditional' social. And even if one focuses on the former, it is not always as precarious and fragile as Laclau and Mouffe portray it. One does not have to adopt an essentialist position in order to stress the obvious fact that, from the point of view of specific subjects situated in a specific historical time and social space, there are always institutional arrangements which are easily affected by their practices and other institutional arrangements which are not. Of course, insofar as Laclau and Mouffe do not identify discourse with language (and I think, contrary to Geras, that they do not), then I agree with their view that *all* institutional arrangements, whether durable or not, are discursively constructed. *But there is absolutely no reason why one*

[9] *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (henceforth HSS), p. 138.

should link discursive construction with fragility and precariousness—labelling any reference to institutional durability as essentialist. For the core institutions of a social formation often display such a resilience and continuity that their overall, extremely slow transformation can be seen only in the very *longue durée*, needing to be assessed in terms of centuries rather than years or shorter timespans.

Consider, for instance, the strict separation of the ruler's or the civil servant's public position from his/her private fortune.[10] This institutional separation of the 'private' from the 'public' within the western European state took centuries to be firmly consolidated and today *seems pretty well irreversible*. To all intents and purposes, therefore, this structural feature, together with others of equal durability and resilience (the institutions of private property, of markets, of money, the institutional separation between management and ownership in modern corporations, etc.), constitute a core which enters the subjects' social milieu not as something to be negotiated or radically transformed, but as an incontrovertible given, as a relatively unshakable, durable institutional terrain.[11] This terrain both limits and makes possible specific articulatory practices, whose intended or unintended consequences may seriously affect more malleable and fragile institutional arrangements. The fact that laymen and even social scientists tend sometimes to reify a social formation's durable institutional orders (i.e. tend to forget that these are discursively constructed and reproduced) does not make them less durable; on the contrary, the 'natural attitude' to them further enhances their institutional resilience.

Now, what conceptual tools do Laclau and Mouffe offer to explore in a *systematic manner* the more resilient, slow-changing institutional features of modern capitalist societies? The plain answer is that they do not provide us with any such tools. Of course, on a highly philosophical/ontological level they do admit that contingency, openness and fragility have their limits. They talk, for instance, about necessity existing 'as a partial limitation of the field of contingency',[12] about the fact that 'neither absolute fixity nor non-fixity is possible', and so on.[13] But these highly abstract attempts to redress the balance are rather decorative, in the sense that they are not translated into the construction of specific conceptual tools (Gen. II) for systematic analysis of those aspects of the social which pertain to 'necessity' and 'fixity'. In fact, at the level of Gen. II the only serious theoretical effort is to reconstruct the concept of hegemony and to show how articulatory practices constantly construct and deconstruct self-identities, subject positions, nodal points, social and political spaces, and so on. But the conditions of existence of such practices, the ways in which practices are both sustained and limited by the more permanent institutional structures of capitalism are

[10] On the differentiation between state and royal household in Western Europe, see Otto Hintze, *Staat und Verfassung*, Göttingen 1962, pp. 275-320.

[11] Needless to say, the use of topographical metaphors when reference is made to durable institutional arrangements does not necessarily entail, as Laclau and Mouffe claim, any essentialist connotations. As I have already argued, the only thing it entails is a *temporary* methodological bracketing of considerations pertaining to the skills and awareness of subjects.

[12] HSS, p. 111.

[13] HSS, p. 121.

never spelled out. The closest Laclau and Mouffe come to delineating an overall context of articulatory practices and subject positions is in their talk of 'discursive formations' and the more general 'field of discursivity'.[14] But these notions are so vague and so inadequate to deal with the institutional complexities of modern capitalism that the two authors do not use them in any serious, systematic manner. In fact, when obliged to refer to the broad features of capitalist formations and their long-term transformations, they revert, as Geras has rightly pointed out,[15] to such conventional Marxist concepts as exploitation, commodification, the labour-process, civil society, capitalist periphery etc.—even the dreaded concept of 'society' slips in from time to time! How are the above concepts, which Laclau and Mouffe freely use, connected with discourse analysis? The connection is never made clear, and the gap between the two types of concepts creates a much more glaring dualism than that found in the Marxist texts that they so vehemently criticize.

Socialist Strategy

Needless to say, all these conceptual inadequacies have serious consequences for concrete issues of socialist strategy.[16] For instance, the authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* do not have the *theoretical means* to raise the problem of whether certain articulatory practices are more central than others and are therefore more likely to succeed in hegemonizing a political space. For them, as Geras has pointed out, there is nothing one can say in advance about the relative importance of certain subject positions, as far as socialist transformation is concerned. The justification they give for this type of agnosticism is that any attempt to privilege certain positions or practices leads unavoidably to essentialism. For Laclau and Mouffe, the crucial limitation of the traditional left is that 'it attempts to determine *a priori* agents of change, levels of effectiveness in the field of the social and privileged points and moments of rupture.'[17] But what they do not seriously consider, is the possibility of assessing the centrality of certain positions within a social formation without resorting to essentialism and without ascribing ontological or epistemological privileges to specific subjects. One can, of course, wholeheartedly agree with Laclau and Mouffe that there are no iron laws of history, no historical necessity for a proletarian revolution, no 'special mission' for the working classes, and so forth. But this does not mean that everything goes, that all social movements are on a par, for instance, in their chances of playing a hegemonic role in struggles that aim at a socialist transformation of capitalism.

To make a very obvious comparison, it is not difficult to see that the working class movement, however fragmented or disorganized, has greater transformative capacities and therefore better *chances* of playing a leading role in a hegemonic contest than, say, the sexual liberation movement. The reason for this has to do less with political initiatives

[14] HSS, p. 134.
[15] See 'Post-Marxism', p. 74.
[16] See HSS, pp. 149-92.
[17] HSS, pp. 178-79.

and articulatory practices than with the more central structural position of the working class in capitalist society. This centrality can be assessed in a non-essentialist manner through an analysis of the way in which the major institutional spheres are articulated within capitalism or through a macro-historical, comparative analysis focusing on systematic structural/institutional differences among capitalist, pre-capitalist and non-capitalist social formations.[18]

To be fair, Laclau and Mouffe seem to retreat from total agnosticism by admitting that not every articulatory practice is possible: 'This logic of the symbolic constitution of the social encountered precise limits in the persistence, at a morphological level, of the economistic conception of history. Once this has been dissolved, the overflowing of class bounds by the various forms of social protest can freely operate. (*Freely*, that is, of any *a priori* class character of struggles or demands—obviously not in the sense that *every* articulation is possible in a given conjuncture.)'[19] But if every articulation is not possible, how do we assess degrees of possibility, what makes certain articulations more possible than others? Here again *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* provides no answer whatsoever. The problem is neither posed nor answered. And this because Laclau and Mouffe do not have the conceptual tools for raising such questions. To repeat, for such questions to be raised one needs a conceptual framework which guides the student to focus on the relatively stable institutional structures of capitalism and the complex ways in which such structures both set limits and provide opportunities for strategic conduct.

Given the emphasis that Laclau and Mouffe put on articulatory practices, their position is in a sense the exact opposite of the Parsonian/Durkheimian approach criticized in the previous section. For their exclusive concern is not with how the Social System and its core values shape and limit role-players' practices, but with how practices constitute as well as constantly subvert the social. Parsonian functionalism, because of its neglect of collective actors, portrays institutional structures as reified entities regulating everybody on the social scene; Laclau and Mouffe, because of their excessive fear of reifying institutional structures, go to the other extreme and analyse practices in an institutional vacuum. The unresolved tension between the institutional system and practice/action-oriented approaches to the social is not, of course, new in the non-Marxist social sciences. Over-reaction to the essentialism found in certain types of teleological functionalism (including the Parsonian one) has a very long history in sociology. From this point of view *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, though in some crucial respects different,[20] has a lot in common with those interpretative sociologies (symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology) whose excessive fear of essentialism or reification has led them away from what should be a central concern of all social analysis: that is, how total social

[18] Such an attempt can be seen, for instance, in Marx's *Grundrisse*.

[19] HSS, p. 86.

[20] It is different, for instance, in terms of its exclusive focus on discourse analysis, its structuralist 'decentring' of the subject, its post-structuralist emphasis on the discontinuous, disorderly character of the social, etc.

formations are constituted, reproduced and transformed. It is precisely because Marxist conceptual tools, when flexibly used, can help the student to avoid the schizophrenic split between system-blind action theories and teleologically oriented system theories that Marxism still has something vital to offer on issues of long-term societal transformation.

III. The Relative Autonomy of the Political

But if Marxism can help us to avoid the reduction of institutional analysis to an analysis of strategic conduct (and vice versa), it is much less successful in avoiding the reduction of non-economic spheres to the economy—and this despite repeated Marxist statements about the relative autonomy of the state, the political, the ideological etc. Here it seems to me that Laclau and Mouffe are right: however the 'relative autonomy' of the political or the cultural is introduced into Marxist discourse, this is done in such a manner that we do have a type of dualism—although I see this dualism and its eventual resolution in a different manner from Laclau and Mouffe.

I will elaborate this point by focusing on the way in which Marxism conceptualizes the relationship between the economic and the political. At the risk of over-generalization I would argue that present-day Marxist theories put forward two equally unsatisfactory views of this relationship. The first consists of a straightforward reductionist approach whereby political phenomena are explained in terms of either the reproduction requirements of capital, or the interests and projects of the economically dominant classes. Since this type of reductive thinking has been extensively discussed and criticized in the relevant literature, I shall concentrate on the second approach which sets out to by-pass the reductionism of the first by laying particular stress on the 'relative autonomy' of the political sphere. Here the Marxist strategies for upholding the 'primacy of the economic' thesis, as Laclau and Mouffe correctly point out, are two-fold: *either* one ends up with a sophisticated monism by introducing some kind of 'determination in the last instance' clause; *or* one avoids monism by falling into dualism. In this latter case the political sphere is considered as ontologically different from the economic—in the sense that whereas structural determinations operate on the economic level, agency/conjunctural considerations prevail on the level of the polity. The economy is thus held not to determine political developments directly, but merely to delineate what is possible at the level of the superstructure. What actually emerges within these set limits will then depend on the *political conjuncture*—and this leaves no more room for a theorization of specifically political structures and contradictions.[21]

Now, this approach subjects the political sphere to a subtle and sophisti-

[21] For the adoption of such a theoretical position in the study of third world capitalist countries cf. John Taylor, *From Modernization to Mode of Production: A Critique of the Sociologies of Development and Underdevelopment*, London 1979, pp. 132 ff. For a more specific application to Latin America cf. D. Portantiero, 'Dominant Classes and Political Crisis', *Latin America Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1974. For a somewhat different approach which also leads to an empiricist treatment of politics, cf. P. Hirst, 'Economic Classes and Politics', in A. Hunt, ed., *Class and Class Structure*, London 1977; cf. also A. Cutler et al., *Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today*, London 1977.

cated downgrading. For while it is conceded that economic constraints or forces can no longer be regarded as the direct determinants of politics, it is proposed that political phenomena, although relatively autonomous, are not amenable to the same kind of analysis as economic ones. On the one hand economic phenomena can be accounted for in terms of the structural tendencies of the capitalist mode of production. On the other hand, as far as political phenomena are concerned, their fluid, transient or less 'material' character means that structural analysis must be entirely replaced with the study of the political conjuncture.

Here, then, we do have a qualitative, ontological difference between the economic and the political sphere, and *this ontological dualism has consequences at the level of Gen. II.* For the 'relative autonomy' emphasis does not lead to the creation of specific conceptual tools for the study of the political sphere proper. *Instead politics and the state continue to be defined in class/economic terms.* So what is given with the one hand at the level of substantive statements concerning the relative autonomy of the state, for instance, is taken away with the other at the methodological level by the insistence that the state *must* be conceptualized in economic, class terms. It is not surprising therefore that a century after Marx's death, with some significant exceptions, Marxists still have very little to show in terms of a non-reductive theory of politics. In contrast, for instance, to Parsonian functionalism (which has generated a sophisticated, albeit unsatisfactory, corpus of concepts for the study of political development in the work of Almond, Deutsch, Apter, Nettle, Eisenstadt and others), Marxism has no conceptual armoury of this type. What we usually call the Marxist theory of the capitalist state is in fact a theory not of the state *per se* but of how it contributes or fails to contribute to the reproduction requirements of capitalism.[22]

This situation creates problems. For if the state in capitalist formations is defined as an instrument of the economically dominant classes, or as performing the functions of capital, or even as an arena of class struggle, this evidently rules out the investigation of cases where the holders of the means of domination/coercion have the upper hand over the holders of the means of production, or cases where state policies hinder rather than promote the enlarged reproduction of capitalism. Needless to say, cases of this kind are all too common in the capitalist periphery, where civil society in general and classes in particular are weakly organized and where, very often, the logic of domination prevails over the logic of the market, or, to put it differently, the polity's reproductive requirements are relatively incompatible with those of the economy—in which case the latter give way to the former.[23] Given this, it is not at all surprising that Marxist analyses are much more successful when they focus on the long-term historical transformation of Western societies (where the capitalist mode of production has more or less imposed its dynamic on the whole social formation), than when they refer to the

[22] See A. Przeworski 'Ethical Materialism and John Roemer', *Politics and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1982, p. 290.

[23] For an analysis of such cases see N. Mouzelis, *Politics in the Semi-periphery: Early Parliamentarism and Late Industrialization in the Balkans and Latin America*, London 1986, Chs. 3 and 4.

capitalist societies of the periphery (where more often than not it is the state's logic and dynamic that predominate).[24]

The argument here is *not* that one cannot establish systematic relationships between political struggles and class contradictions or that the state in capitalist societies is entirely autonomous from the economy. Neither is the argument that predominantly political or other non-economic struggles (ethnic, generational, gender-based) are systematically more important than class struggles. Rather the argument is that Marxism, having failed to elaborate specific conceptual tools for the study of politics, *builds the alleged primacy of the economic into the definition of the political.* In that sense it is unable to study the complex and *varying* relationships between economy and polity, in a theoretically coherent and at the same time *empirically open-ended* manner.

Laclau and Mouffe's Solution

For their part, Laclau and Mouffe deal with the type of dualism just discussed in a very simple way: they reject the economy/polity distinction altogether. Politics in the broad sense of the term permeates all social spaces (there is a 'politics' of production, of the family, of the school etc.), and all distinctions between institutional spheres are discursively constructed. To start the analysis with 'pre-constituted' economic and political spheres in order to examine their alleged interrelationships is thus, in their view, to fall again into the essentialist trap. Politics should be seen not as 'a determinate level of the social but as a practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations'.[25] This solution to the dualism problem might be elegant but it is not very convincing or useful. First of all, the well-trodden idea that there is a *political* dimension in all social interaction—an idea which, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* is put in 'discourse' terms—is no reason to ignore or even to deny the existence, in all capitalist societies, of a differentiated set of institutional structures which have a *predominantly* political character: i.e., which are geared to the production and reproduction of the overall system of domination. The core institutional features of such a system (political parties, state bureaucracy, legislative and judiciary bodies etc.) can be distinguished, both analytically and concretely, from the core institutional features of the capitalist economy. The fact that we often use the term politics to refer both to a differentiated institutional sphere and to the 'political' as an inherent dimension

[24] I do not think, for instance, that it is entirely by chance that in the Marxist-oriented centre-periphery development literature Immanuel Wallerstein's scholarly work is the most representative contribution among studies focusing on the 'centre' part of the divide, whereas André Gunder Frank's highly schematic-formalistic writings are considered the most representative work on the periphery's capitalist trajectory. Neither is it accidental that there is no writer who has analysed the various developmental trajectories of the so-called Third World in a way which is at all comparable to the penetrating and insightful manner in which B. Moore, for instance, has traced the developmental routes of early modernizers. If Third World studies do not yet have their B. Moore or Wallerstein, this might have something to do with the fact that Marxist theory, which has been quite dominant in the field, does not have adequate tools for studying social formations in which struggles over the means of domination/coercion are often more important than struggles over the means of production. For an elaboration of these points, see N. Mouzelis, 'Sociology of Development: Reflections on the Present Crisis', *Sociology,* forthcoming.

[25] HSS, p. 153.

of all social situations is no good reason for rejecting the former in favour of the latter.

Moreover, as I have already pointed out, the fact that the distinction between economy and polity in capitalist formations is discursively constructed and reproduced, by no means implies that it is not extremely durable or that it does not constitute one of the foundational features of advanced capitalism. In that sense it is not at all true that the frontiers between the economic and the political are in constant flux, being the unpredictable results of articulatory practices. I would rather argue that the separation between the economic and the political (in the *specific* sense that in capitalist formations the economy is 'insulated' from *direct* political control), as well as the specific way in which the state massively intervenes in the economy both to maintain this separation and to boost the accumulation process, constitute permanent features of all advanced capitalist formations.[26] And one can argue this not on the basis of any essentialist notions of what Capitalism really is, but on the basis of comparative-historical research into the distinguishing features of capitalist and non-capitalist formations.

If the post-Marxist solution to the dualism problem that Laclau and Mouffe provide is unsatisfactory, can there be a more satisfactory solution within Marxism? Can there be a way of avoiding economic reductionism (or monism in Laclau and Mouffe's terms) without falling into eclecticism (or dualism)? In other terms, can Marxism overcome the 'monism versus dualism' dilemma while retaining a distinctive theoretical profile? For some theorists the idea of a non-reductionist Marxist theory of politics is a contradiction in terms—since a conceptual framework which deals with the political sphere in a non-economistic manner ceases *ipso facto* to be Marxist. For others, a non-reductionist Marxist theory of the polity is possible, provided one creates new conceptual tools which: (i) try to conceptualize non-economic institutional spheres in a way that does not build into their very definition (and hence excludes from empirical investigation) the type of relationship they are supposed to have with the economy; and (ii) try to avoid economism without falling into the compartmentalization of the political and economic spheres to be found in neo-classical economics and in non-Marxist political science, i.e. without abandoning such fundamental features of the Marxist paradigm as its holistic, political economy orientation and its agency–structure synthesis. In my view, this latter position should be seriously explored, particularly since, at the present moment at least, no alternative macro-sociological paradigm deals in a more satisfactory manner with the complex ways in which whole societies are transformed within the context of the world economy and polity.

In a way Laclau's previous work, particularly his *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*,[27] was a serious attempt to create such new conceptual tools within the Marxist tradition. For instance, his distinction between

[26] See on this point C. Offe and R. Volger, 'Theses on the Theory of the State', *New German Critique*, Vol. 6, 1975.

[27] Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, NLB, London 1977.

class and *popular* interpellations and antagonisms was an important step toward elaborating, in a theoretically coherent manner, the idea that not all political struggles should be conceptualized in class terms. Already there, however, the specifically political–institutional context within which popular interpellations and antagonisms are embedded was systematically ignored: while the mode of production constituted the structural basis of class interpellations and antagonisms, the structural basis of popular interpellations was the social formation as a whole.[28] What was missing was an *analytic* concept which could operate on the level of the polity in a way analogous to that of the mode of production concept on the level of the economy: for instance, the notion of a *mode of domination,* consisting of an articulation of specific political technologies (forces of domination) and specific ways of appropriating such technologies (relations of domination), could, if theoretically developed, provide the conceptual means for studying the complex linkages between the economic and the political in a logically coherent and empirically open-ended manner. This type of anti-reductionist strategy which would consist in analytically distinguishing not only political from class agents but also political institutional structures from economic ones was not taken in Laclau's earlier work. And, of course, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* not only the institutional context of macro-politics but also economic institutional structures recede into the horizon as articulatory practices come to occupy centre stage. The balance between institutional system and agency is now totally broken as Laclau and Mouffe join all those action-oriented theorists whose excessive fear of essentialism leads them to turn their backs on any serious examination of how global institutional orders persist and change.

IV. Methodological Holism and Authoritarianism

I would like to close this article by briefly discussing another major criticism of Marxism which one finds in a mild form in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and in a more extreme one in many ex-Marxists who have espoused libertarian political positions; this is the idea that Marx's notion of totality and his holistic orientation to the study of social phenomena are indissolubly linked not only with essentialism but also with an authoritarian or even totalitarian approach to politics.

That authoritarian conclusions can be drawn from Marx's varied oeuvre is undeniable. It is true, for instance, that in his more positivist or determinist writings society, as Laclau and Mouffe point out, is portrayed as a totality whose essence unfolds according to strict economic laws, these laws giving unity and firm direction to the social formation as a whole. Within this scheme of things the role of human agency is minimized, since the unity of the proletariat and its revolutionary role are inscribed in its very position within the division of labour, and guaranteed by the very laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. It is also true that this determinist, mechanistic conception of social development can easily be linked with a scientistic view of the

[28] Ibid., p. 166. For a critical review of this position, see N. Mouzelis, 'Ideology and Class Politics: a Critique of Ernesto Laclau', NLR, March–April 1978.

social, a view which tends to reduce moral and political problems to technical ones by naively asserting that there is a single 'scientific', and therefore 'indisputable', solution to every social conflict and antagonism. The underconceptualization of the political sphere proper, and Marx's vision of a stateless communist order immune from class antagonisms, only reinforce this type of pseudo-scientific bias which has provided fertile ground for all sorts of authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies and practices among Marx's epigoni.[29]

Neither the determinist/mechanistic nor the scientistic/authoritarian elements, however, can be considered as representing the core of Marx's thought; and, more important from our point of view, *none of these elements is intrinsically linked with a holistic conceptual framework*. In fact it is generally accepted that, unlike other nineteenth-century evolutionist theories, Marx's scheme of stages—which emphasizes the importance of class struggles as a fundamental mechanism of transition from one stage to the next—provides the conceptual means for avoiding a strictly unilinear, determinist view of development of the kind that is set out in the writings of Comte, for instance. Moreover, the very way in which the Marxist stages are constructed, each one being conceptualized predominantly in terms of the prevailing relations of production rather than the quantitative growth of the forces of production, again indicates the extent to which the Marxist categories point to the importance of struggles, to the divisional/appropriative rather than merely technological aspects of social life.

The best proof of this, of course, lies in Marx's own historical writings, where classes and class fractions neither play a secondary role nor are presented as following the 'logic of capital', puppet fashion. In fact the prominence of the relations of production in Marx's conceptual scheme is a strong guarantee against technicist–neutralist views of the social. And while it is true that the 'political' disappears in Marx's communist utopia, it is also true that his major contribution to classical political economy was precisely the systematic introduction of a *historical* and *political* dimension to the analysis of economic phenomena. It was the assertion that what most economists had hitherto considered as the natural, eternal laws of the market were in fact regularities based on historically specific struggles leading to specific forms of exploitation.

One could go on *ad infinitum* debating what weight should be attached to those aspects of Marx's work that are predominantly voluntarist–humanist, and those that underemphasize agency and stress structural determinations, the laws of motion of capital, etc. Yet it is of less consequence whether Marx's overall work is considered determinist, or whether a radical break is discovered between his early and late writings. What is more important is that Marx's work as a whole provides the *conceptual means* for looking in a theoretically coherent manner at social formations and their overall reproduction/transformation from both an agency and a structural/institutional point of view. This type of balanced holism does not *necessarily* entail a determinist, essentialist orientation

[29] For a detailed analysis of such connections, see I. Balbus, *Marxism and Domination*, Princeton, N.J. 1982.

to the study of the social; neither does it *necessarily* lead to authoritarian political attitudes. Methodological holism in itself is not indissolubly linked with assertions about the ontological nature of the social, nor with the degree of relatedness or non-relatedness of social institutions, nor with the type of political controls that do or should prevail in any specific social whole. At its best, a holistic framework merely proposes an anti-atomist strategy of investigation: it attempts to provide conceptual tools that guard against the study of economic, political and cultural phenomena in a compartmentalized, contextless or *ad hoc* manner. It provides, in other words, a language which, instead of erecting barriers, facilitates the study of the complex ways in which global societies are constituted, reproduced and transformed.