

Embattled Legacy

“Post-Marxism” and the Social and Political Theory of Karl Marx

by
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The theoretical crisis in political science and sociology resulting from the collapse of the paradigms that have organized the intellectual activities of these disciplines since the postwar years has opened a void that has become the battleground of a host of new theories and epistemological approaches. Yet, the throne left vacant by “structural-functionalism” in Western sociology and the quick exhaustion of the “behavioralist revolution” in political science is, some 30 years later, still embarrassingly empty. The numerous candidates scrambling for the succession have so far been unable to conquer the realm, although some of these theoretical contenders, such as the “rational-choice” approach, have managed to penetrate almost everywhere. However, the incurable theoretical and epistemological flaws of this approach permit us to anticipate that its future in a discipline as millenarian as political science will be not very bright and in all likelihood short.

One of the candidates for the throne, certainly not the strongest but still significant, is “post-Marxism.” The tremendous transformations experienced by capitalist societies since the 1970s, combined with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the “popular democracies” of Eastern Europe, brought to the foreground the so-called crisis of Marxism and the necessity of its radical overhauling. One of the most ambitious proposals in this regard is post-Marxism, conceived of as a synthesis of the theoretical legacy of Karl

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Marx with some of the most valuable contributions of intellectual traditions and disciplines alien to Marxist socialism.

The work of Ernesto Laclau constitutes one of the most important contributions to the development of post-Marxist thought. According to the opinion offered by Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in the preface to the Spanish edition of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radicalisation of Democracy*, the theses developed in this book—originally published in London in 1985—have “been since then at the centre of a series of debates, simultaneously theoretical and political, which are currently taking place in the Anglo-Saxon world” (1987a: vii). Without disparaging the importance of his reflection, this assertion seems an exaggeration. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the theses in question caused a certain agitation in some Latin American academic circles—especially in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico—and to some extent in England. However, in the heartland of the “Anglo-Saxon world,” the United States, they have so far gone largely unnoticed, as they have in Continental Europe and parts of Latin America. On the more political side, the incidence of post-Marxist theorizing in the political debates and practices of the parties and social movements that make up the São Paulo Forum or the government of Nelson Mandela in South Africa—to use two of the examples mentioned in the work of Laclau and Mouffe—has been scarce. And despite their greater ideological affinity with the post-Marxist program, the recent doctrinal “updating” of the British Labour Party and the creation—out of the remains of the old Communist party—of the Party of the Democratic Left in Italy bear very little relation to the “deconstruction” of Marxism carried out in that work and in other, subsequent texts by Laclau (1990).

In any case, post-Marxist theorizing poses many interesting challenges, and it has acquired sufficient influence in the social sciences to justify a careful examination of its major conclusions. In his time, Gino Germani observed that one of the most blatant distortions of academic life in Latin America was that the extraordinary diffusion enjoyed by the criticisms addressed to a given author or intellectual current—in his case, Talcott Parsons and the American “scientific sociology”—was seldom accompanied (much less preceded) by similar efforts devoted to studying the nature, extent, or implications of the thought thus criticized. Germani's (1967: 19) comments reflected his astonishment at the widespread popularization of the criticisms (doubtless correct) by C. Wright Mills of the Parsonian model in a situation in which the latter was scarcely known to Spanish-speaking readers.¹ Thirty years later the absurdity still persists, but now in reverse: whereas in the rebellious 1960s it was established thought that was obliged to fight for a place in the ideological debate, in the conservative 1990s it is Marxist theorizing that, in countries

like Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, for instance, has been driven to the fringes of the theoretical controversy. As a result, most of the younger generation of social scientists ignore the social and political theories of Karl Marx while showing a good deal of acquaintance with the latest intellectual fashions of the time, among them post-Marxism. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union, intellectual debate in Latin America was supplanted by a boring monologue—mostly framed in neoliberal terms—of minimal intellectual interest and even less practical importance. In this regard, a serious discussion of the post-Marxist perspective could help to foster an exchange of ideas that has for too long been missing.

Given the limitations of my professional background, I will restrict myself to examining the sociological and political theses that appear to me to be central to Laclau's argument. The abundant references in his texts to the contributions of Wittgenstein, Lacan, and Derrida lie outside my field of competence, and it is for specialists in linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and philosophy to analyze the applications that Laclau has made of these contributions to political theory. Having made these exceptions, it is now appropriate to enter the complex narrative labyrinths of his work and evaluate the results of his efforts.

THE POST-MARXIST PROGRAM

On repeated occasions, Laclau and Mouffe made an effort to indicate the nature and theoretical and practical content of their foundational program for post-Marxism. As was to be expected, the starting point could only be the crisis of Marxism. Yet, in contrast to the view of many of the most pitiless critics of this tradition—who establish the date of its presumed death at some imprecise moment in the 1970s—for our authors “this crisis, far from being a recent phenomenon, has its roots in a series of problems with which Marxism found itself faced since the time of the Second International” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: viii). The problem, in consequence, comes from far off, and in exploring the texts of Laclau and Mouffe one reaches a surprising and certainly paradoxical conclusion: as a matter of fact, Marxism's protracted death lasted almost a century!

Although such a radical thesis as this one had already appeared in “practical form” in some of the articles that our authors had written in the 1970s, it is in *New Reflections* that this line of thought is set forth in its most radical form. The resonance of some arguments of the conservative right—especially Popper (1962) and von Hayek (1944)—is thundering, especially when Laclau holds that the ambiguity of Marxism “is not a deviation from an untainted

source but dominates the entire work of Marx” (Laclau, 1990: 236). But what ambiguity is he talking about? That which juxtaposes a history conceived as “rational and objective”—the result of the contradictions between productive forces and the relations of production—to another history dominated, according to Laclau, by negativity and contingency, that is, the class struggle. In his reply to an interview conducted by the journal *Strategies*, he said (1990: 182) that

precisely because that duality dominates the ensemble of Marx’s work, and because what we are trying to do today is to eliminate it by asserting the primary and constitutive character of antagonism, this involves adopting a post-Marxist position, and not becoming “more Marxist,” as you say.

The eradication of this ambiguity, supposedly inherent in Marx’s theory, is therefore an essential objective of post-Marxism, and to achieve it Laclau is prepared to throw out the baby with the bath water. This whole operation rests on his very peculiar understanding of Marxist theory, according to which the “primary and constitutive character of antagonism” is absent or, at best, poorly formulated (1990: 182). His proposal is therefore as simple as it is radical: faced with a shortcoming as inadmissible as this, the only sensible choice is to subvert the categories of classical Marxism! The thread of Ariadne to crown this subversion—says Laclau—is to be found in the recognition of the generalization of “unequal and combined development” in late capitalism and in the rise of “hegemony” as a new theoretical category. In Laclau’s interpretation the concept of hegemony is absolutely fundamental for an appropriate understanding of the constitution of the social from the complex ensemble of dislocated and dispersed social fragments resulting from the unequal and combined nature of capitalist development. This operation, we are warned, would be condemned to failure if the vices of philosophical essentialism—and the ineffable “classist reductionism” that accompanies it—were not first thrown overboard, if the decisive role played by language in the structuring of social relations were ignored, or if it were decided to advance in this undertaking before first “deconstructing” the category of the subject (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: vii-viii).

It should be noticed that the radicalism of this program of subversion of classical Marxism led our authors, who regard themselves as innovative successors of Marx, to condemn the theory of the latter in terms harsher and more radical than those of the American neoconservative Irving Kristol. For the latter, the death of socialism “has tragic contours” insofar as it exhausts a civilized debate, on the basis of arguments that are serious although unacceptable from a bourgeois point of view, in relation to the functioning of

liberal capitalism (1986: 137). Curiously, Laclau and Mouffe's condemnation of the incurable "errors" of Marxism is even more categorical than that found in John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, in which the conservative pope recognizes (as our authors do not!) "the seeds of truth" contained in that theory. In contrast, they are closer to a fellow countryman of Pope Wojtila, Leszek Kolakowski, who from the coarsest of right-wing positions argues that Marxism was "the greatest fantasy of our century," a theory that "in a strict sense was nonsense, and in a natural sense, a commonplace" (1981: 523-524). It seems interesting to compare these diagnoses on the meaning of Marxism in an attempt to locate with greater accuracy the ideological terrain on which the whole theoretical edifice of post-Marxism is constructed, undoubtedly situated to the right of His Holiness. One may wonder: in an ideological context as tilted to the right as this, is post-Marxism perhaps just another name for a kind of neoconservatism?

If this is the theoretical terrain on which the elaboration of Laclau and Mouffe is established, are there any salvageable, recoverable "remains" of classical Marxism? If so, what can be done with them, and what may be their final destiny? The response of our authors borrows a metaphor from Buddhist philosophy to suggest that just as the four rivers that flow into the Ganges lose their names when their waters mix with those of the sacred river, the future of the variety of Marxist discourses can only be its dilution in the sacred river of radicalized democracy, "bequeathing some of their concepts, transforming or abandoning others, and diluting themselves in the infinite intertextuality of the emancipatory discourses in which the plurality of the social takes shape" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 5).

POST-MARXIST ARGUMENTS

Having reached this point, it seems convenient to examine more carefully the specific arguments that nurture this program of demolition of classical Marxism—piously called "deconstruction" by Laclau and Mouffe—and its replacement by a theory of "radicalized democracy." In this section, we will therefore analyze some of the principal justifications for seeking to "subvert" the central categories of classical Marxism.

SOCIAL CONTRADICTION AND CLASS STRUGGLE IN MARX

The starting point for the post-Marxist critique is the irreparable contradiction that supposedly shatters the entire theoretical project of Karl Marx: on the one hand, the vision brilliantly synthesized in the prologue to the *Con-*

tribution to the Critique of Political Economy, in which it is established that historical movement is produced as a result of the contradictions between the productive forces and the social relations of production, and on the other hand the assertion that made the *Communist Manifesto* famous and that establishes that the history of all societies is the history of class struggle. The thesis advanced by post-Marxism is that “the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is a contradiction without antagonism” while “class struggle, for its part, is an antagonism without contradiction” (Laclau, 1990: 7).

How should we understand this riddle, which is based on the radical incomprehension that our authors manifest in relation to classical Marxism? At the point of defining the central concepts of their theoretical framework, Laclau and Mouffe fail to offer many clear ideas. An inspection of Laclau’s work in its entirety allows us to conclude, however, that in his theoretical model the “contradiction” does not rest on the nature of social relations—which, to avoid superfluous polemic, are always manifested through the mediation of a language—but is rather a purely discursive creation. According to Karel Kossik (1976) this is why when Marxist dialectics reproduces the contradictory character and the “negativity” of the real as a mental construction or as a “concrete thought,” positivist social scientists consider this just another nineteenth-century superstition.

In effect, to think with Marx that social reality is the “synthesis of multiple determinations,” that is, the “unity of the contraries,” is an intellectual operation that goes far beyond the limits of an epistemological tradition accustomed to moving within the sterile confines of formal logic: only black and white exist, as do night and day; there are no grey tones, and dusk and dawn are just myths of the ignorant. Precisely; the rejection of dialectic thought explains (at least in part) why, on examining the phenomenon of populism in a previous book, Laclau can arrive at a conclusion such as the following: “It can be seen, thus, why it is possible to describe as populists simultaneously Hitler, Mao, or Perón” (Laclau, 1978: 203). The misery of positivist thought in capturing the complexities of the real is blatant in the foregoing example, and so are the limits of post-Marxist dreams.

Trapped by his own epistemological premises, the only escape route left to Laclau in an effort to account for the contradictory nature of the real is to propose that the contradictions of society are merely discursive, that is, not anchored in the objective nature of things. The conclusion: the contradictions of capitalism become, through the art of post-Marxist discourse, simple semantic problems or linguistic quarrels. The structural bases for social conflict evaporate in the all-encompassing melody of the discourse, and, incidentally, in these unfortunate conservative times, capitalism is legitimized

in the eyes of its victims because its built-in oppressive features suddenly acquire a circumstantial nature.

Even so, let us accept for the moment the author's reasoning and ask ourselves why there is no antagonism in the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production. The answer is that according to Laclau, antagonism implies an external condition, factual and contingent, that has nothing to do with what in the Marxist tradition constitutes the "laws of movement" of a society. Let us see how Laclau (1990: 9) puts the case:

To show that capitalist relations of production are intrinsically antagonistic would therefore mean demonstrating that the antagonism stems logically from the relationship between the buyer and the seller of labor power. But this is exactly what cannot be done. . . . it is only if the worker resists such an extraction [of surplus value] that the relationship becomes antagonistic; and there is nothing in the category of "seller of labor power" to suggest that such resistance is a logical conclusion.

From this he concludes (1990: 6):

Insofar as an antagonism exists between a worker and a capitalist, such antagonism is not inherent to the relations of production themselves but occurs between the latter and the identity of the agent outside. A fall in a worker's wage, for example, denies his identity as a consumer. There is therefore a "social objectivity"—the logic of profit—which denies another objectivity—the consumer's identity. But the denial of an identity means preventing its constitution as an objectivity.

So anxious is our author to fight the "classist reductionism" and the multiple essentialisms of vulgar Marxism that he ends up falling into the trap of "discursive reductionism." In this renewed version, now sociological, of transcendental idealism—certainly pre-Marxist, instead of post-Marxist, and not just chronologically speaking—the discourse is construed as the ultimate essence of the real. The external and objective social reality exists as long as it becomes the object of a "logical" discourse that gives it its "life's breath" and, incidentally, swallows and dissolves the conflictive nature of the real. Capitalist exploitation is no longer the result of the law of value and of the extraction of the surplus value but takes shape only if workers can represent it discursively or if, as Kautsky used to say, someone comes "from the outside" and injects class consciousness into their veins. The capitalist appropriation of surplus value, as an objective process, would thus not be sufficient to indicate antagonism or class struggle unless the workers rebelled and resisted that exaction. At the same time, and as we have seen in the second quotation, what is at issue is not the production of social wealth and the

distribution of its fruits but rather a nebulous worker “identity” as consumer—à la Ralph Nader— that would be frustrated by a nasty employer.

At this point it is not idle to recall that these themes had already been addressed in the writings of the young Marx on Proudhon and therefore can scarcely be regarded as problems arising from a significant innovation in the field of social and political theory. In fact, for Marx antagonism was the decisive characteristic of the contradiction between wage labor and capital, but this in no way presupposed the presence of the working class as a preconstituted “subject,” as an eternal essence predestined by a caprice of history to redeem humanity. In Laclau’s deconstruction there seems to be no difference between the teachings of John Calvin (and his theory of predestination) and the theoretical construction of Marx. Precisely because the latter was not Calvinist, he wrote that

The domination of capital has created for this mass common interests and a common situation. Thus, this mass is already a class with respect to capital but is not yet a class in itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle. (Marx, 1985: 158)

A few years later, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx would complete this idea, saying that the objective conditions for the “class in itself” are only the starting point of a long and complex process of class formation that has no assurance of success and that also requires as a minimum a clear consciousness of its interests, organization at a national level to overcome the fragmentation and dispersion of local struggles, and a political instrument capable of guiding that struggle (Marx and Engels, 1966: 318).

These ideas, which are repeated over half a century in innumerable texts of Marx and Engels, deny the automatic and fatal character of the constitution of the proletariat and give rise to a small digression. Who in fact is the adversary against whom Laclau and Mouffe are debating? Is it the best Marxist tradition, or have they perhaps embarked on a struggle against the “canonized” version of Marx’s work perpetrated by some Academy of Sciences (a struggle that is of course perfectly valid and acceptable as long as these texts are not confused with Marx’s thought)? No one could seriously discuss the neoliberal theory of Friedrich von Hayek by arguing against the propaganda articles published during the cold war by the *Reader’s Digest’s Selections!* We will return to this later, but it seems to me that one of the serious problems with the arguments of Laclau and Mouffe is precisely their constructing a “caricature” of Marxism and then cheerfully proceeding to demolish it on the pretext of its “deconstruction.”

SUBORDINATION, OPPRESSION, DOMINATION

In any case, and returning to the thread of our argument, it seems to me that the key to deciphering the conceptual trap into which Laclau falls is found in the last chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, in which there is a lapse that is not merely conceptual but of decisive theoretical importance. It is there that the authors introduce the concept of “subordination,” alluding to the conflictive nature of social life, and when they examine the conditions under which subordination “becomes a relation of oppression, and thereby constitutes itself into the site of an antagonism” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 153) some of the theoretical problems that undermine their ambitious edifice are brought to the surface.

“Subordination” exists for Laclau and Mouffe where “an agent is subjected to the decisions of another—an employee with respect to an employer, for example, or in certain forms of family organization the woman with respect to the man, and so on.” Relations of “oppression” are a subspecies within it, and their specificity relates to the fact that “have transformed themselves into sites of antagonisms.” Finally, relations of “domination” are the totality of relations of subordination, which are considered illegitimate from the perspective of an external social agent and as such “may or may not coincide with the relations of oppression actually existing in a determinate social formation” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 154). The central problem, in the judgment of Laclau and Mouffe, is to determine how relations of subordination may become relations of oppression. Given the crucial nature of this passage (1985: 154), it is convenient to reproduce it at length:

It is clear why relations of subordination, considered in themselves, cannot be antagonistic relations: a relation of subordination establishes, simply, a set of differential positions between social agents, and we already know that a system of differences which constructs each social identity as positivity not only cannot be antagonistic, but would bring about the ideal conditions for the elimination of all antagonisms—we would be faced with a sutured social space, from which every equivalency would be excluded. It is only to the extent that the positive differential character of the subordinated subject position is subverted that the antagonism can emerge. “Serf,” “slave,” and so on do not designate in themselves antagonistic positions; it is only in the terms of a different discursive formation, such as “the rights inherent to every human being,” that the differential positivity of these categories can be subverted and the subordination constructed as oppression.

This statement raises a number of questions. In the first place, one’s attention is arrested by the vigorous idealism that impregnates a discourse in which

the antagonism and oppression of serfs and slaves, for instance, depends on the existence of an ideology that may rationalize it. Had this been true, the slaves of antiquity and the serfs of the Middle Ages would apparently have been ignorant of the fact that their “subordination” to masters and lords concealed an antagonistic relationship until the moment at which a discursive apparatus revealed to them the miserable and oppressive conditions of their worldly existence and the objective conflict that confronted them with their exploiters. However, history does not register too many cases of slaves and serfs beatifically satisfied with the existing social order: in one way or another they had some measure of consciousness of their exploitation, not least because of the physical marks that they bore on their own bodies. Moreover, independent of their degree of intellectual sophistication, some form of discourse always existed that took responsibility for rationalizing their conformity and submission or, on the contrary, for fanning the flames of rebellion. The consequence of Laclau and Mouffe’s argument is that exploitation exists only where there is an explicit discourse that strips it naked before the eyes of its victims. But, as Engels shrewdly noted, this is a rather exceptional situation. The peasant struggles in Luther’s Germany, for instance, “appeared” to be a religious conflict related to the Reformation and the subordination to the Church of Rome and completely unrelated to the earthly oppression that the princes and landed aristocracy exercised over the peasantry. However, Engels went on, those struggles were the symptom of class antagonisms that the decay of the feudal order had only exacerbated. If the peasants embraced the cause of the rebellion, they did so less because of the 95 theses nailed by the Augustine monk to the door of Wittenburg Cathedral than because of the exploitation to which they were subjected by the German landed nobility (Engels, 1926: chap. 2).

In any case, if we accept the validity of Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation, we should also accept that before that original and enigmatic moment marked by the appearance of democratic or egalitarian discourses. What apparently ruled in classist societies was the serene grammar of subordination. How are we to understand, then, the millenarian history of rebellions, revolts, and insurrections carried out by serfs and slaves long before the appearance of sophisticated arguments in favor of equality—fundamentally in the Enlightenment—or calling for the subversion of the social order? It seems necessary again to distinguish, as did the young Marx, between the conditions for the existence of a class “in itself” and the ideological discourses that, with different levels of realism and adequacy, expound before their eyes the objective character of their exploitation and allow them to become a class “for itself.” The history of popular rebellions is infinitely longer than that of socialist, democratic, and/or egalitarian discourses and doctrines. The generalized sentiment—

diffuse and, often, only obscurely prefigured—of injustice has accompanied the history of human society from time immemorial. Laclau and Mouffe might have done better to bear in mind the wise words of Barrington Moore (1978: 49), a writer whose affinity with Marxist thought is undeniable:

During the turmoil in the 1960s and the early 1970s a number of books appeared in the United States with variations on the title of *Why Men Revolt*. The emphasis in this chapter will be exactly the opposite: on why men and women do not revolt. Put very bluntly, the central question will be: what must happen to human beings in order to make them submit to oppression and degradation?

Stated differently, the distinction between subordination, oppression, and antagonism has a formal slant that in large measure obscures the concrete analysis of relations of subordination in “really existing” societies (not those that only exist only in the imagination of the post-Marxists). As Moore reminds us, subordination does not exist without its counterpart, rebellion, despite the fact that the latter may be expressed in a primitive and mediated fashion, displaced toward celestial spheres apparently disassociated from the sordid materialism of civil society. It is the denial of this fundamental reality that causes our authors to sustain (1985: 154) that

Our thesis is that it is only from the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination that the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality.

Given that the democratic discourse would only start to be elaborated from the mid-eighteenth century on, how are we to understand the historical development of social struggles from Classical antiquity until the Enlightenment? Or is it perhaps the case that there was no struggle against “the different types of inequality” until the moment in which Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his celebrated *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* in 1755? Historiographic chronicles would strongly disprove this thesis, pointing to the fact that from the remotest antiquity there is incontrovertible evidence of popular struggles and rebellions against so-called subordination.

SHADES OF AMERICAN STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM

At the same time, it seems appropriate to underline the undoubted family resemblance between the argument of Laclau and Mouffe and some of the

clearest expressions of the American functionalist sociology of the 1950s, especially with respect to the work of Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore on social stratification and Talcott Parsons's conceptions regarding the "social system." For the former, social stratification is a mere technical imperative through which "society, as a functioning mechanism, must somehow distribute its members in social positions and induce them to carry out the tasks inherent to those positions" (Davis and Moore, 1974: 97). There is no room—just as there is no room in the theoretical scheme of Laclau and Mouffe—for the possibility that this apparently innocent "distribution of tasks" may depend in many ways on the existence of a system of social relations that establishes—and not strictly on the basis of democratic criteria and procedures, or by mere discursive art—who produces what, how and when, and what part of the social product he receives (cf. Wood, 1995: 19-48, 76-107, 204-263; 1986).

The similarities between the conception of Laclau and Mouffe and that of Talcott Parsons, whose conservative slant and apologist tendency for capitalist society are well known, are even more pronounced. The stubborn insistence of our authors that relations of subordination cannot be antagonistic coincides with the Parsonian conception of social order in terms of the pre-eminence of a solid consensus on fundamental values. In this peculiar vision, dissent and contradictions can be interpreted only as "social pathologies" produced by failures in the process of socialization or by ruptures in semantic chains that impede mutual comprehension. In effect, to the classic Hobbesian question how social order is possible Parsons responds by pointing to the symbolic system: order is possible because of an agreement on fundamental values. In modern industrial societies conflict, although "endemic"—as Parsons said in a revealing medical metaphor—is always marginal and in no way compromises the basic structure of the system. This approach has been criticized (and not only by Marxist authors) for not only "evaporating" social classes, social conflict, and the structural bases of social life but also postulating an inadmissible fragmentation of the social totality into a multiplicity of watertight compartments—the famous Parsonian "subsystems": the economy, politics, culture, family, and so on, functioning entirely independently of one another. But Parsons's "grand theory," as C. Wright Mills called it, was also severely questioned by writers of liberal inspiration such as Ralf Dahrendorf (1958), who from the mid-1950s identified with notable precision the insuperable limitations and incurable lack of realism of a theoretical approach that—in its fundamental characteristics, although expressed in different language—now reappears in the work of Laclau and Mouffe.²

In synthesis, according to Parsons modern societies (which, of course, are supposed to be capitalist and developed) are perfectly integrated, and only

the presence of an external agent—the “villain” referred to by Dahrendorf, which introduces the virus of discord into the utopian Parsonian society, or perhaps the nebulous “discursive exterior” of Laclau and Mouffe—can cause the natural and consensual subordination of the majority to the domination of the ruling class to be replaced by antagonism. The same criticism that Dahrendorf made of Parsons—of envisioning a society that is fantastically “overintegrated,” one in which conflict is absent and, when it occasionally appears, due to the workings of some external factor—is pertinent to the theoretical model developed by Laclau and Mouffe, except that now the role of villain, reserved in Parsonian theorization for certain imperfectly socialized groups such as “extremists” of diverse tendencies and enemies of private property and the American way of life, is occupied by the benign “subversive power of the democratic discourse.” Thus, this ratifies the external and circumstantial nature of antagonism and conflict in a capitalist social formation dominated, as Laclau and Mouffe say, by the logic of positivity (1985: 155).

To the above must be added the insistence, of clearly Weberian parentage, on conceiving of “social action” or social relations in an isolation as splendid as it is illusory, independent of their structural frameworks and fundamental determinations. The corollary of this operation is that society becomes a mere methodological artifact, the result of capriciously reintegrating into a concept a complex mesh of analytical categories potentially capable of being combined—as Weber argued—in an infinite variety of ways. The “thread of Ariadne” alluded to by Laclau and Mouffe predictably culminates in throwing a pious mantle of oblivion over the phenomenon of exploitation in class societies, capitalist and precapitalist alike, which thus disappears as if by magic from the social scene, leaving in its place an aseptic “subordination” that in its abstraction makes exploiters and exploited, rich and poor, alike. The solid exploitative nature of social relations in class societies—which, of course, is not immediately obvious—is rapidly dissolved into the thin air of the new discursive reductionism, with which—as if it were a trivial detail!—the inherent injustice of capitalism becomes something adjective and occasional, and the struggle for socialism—whose strategy should supposedly be enriched by the wisdom of our authors—quickly evaporates in the arid labyrinths of post-Marxist discourse into an innocuous call for “radicalizing democracy.” We thus regress, therefore, to the classic positions of Weber, who, despite not being cited in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (together with Parsons), projects the full, formidable weight of his theorization onto the supposedly novel theoretical reconstructions of post-Marxism.

In reality, the withering away of class oppression behind an extraordinarily abstract concept of social action is an operation that the author of *Economy and Society* had already concluded long before Laclau and Mouffe were

born. It is the same old wine but poured into the new bottles of post-Marxism: if there is exploitation, it is surely incidental and in all likelihood transitory, with, as Weber said, have no necessary connection with the complex and indeterminate structures of modern capitalism. The specificity of capitalism as a mode of production is also rapidly diluted, while, on the other side, the idea is put forward that in reality the late capitalism of the end of the twentieth century is, as Fukuyama says, “the end of history” or, as Parsons claimed in the wake of Durkheim, the final stage of a heroic and millenarian voyage from the primitive horde to “modern” (capitalist) society.

Thus, from Marxism, conceived as the concrete analysis of concrete totalities, we pass to an undifferentiated pseudo-totality, merely expressive and invertebrate, in which the structuring of the social is the result of an enigmatic discursive operation carried out by the creative potency of language or discovered, as in Weber, by the perspicacity of the creators of heuristic “ideal types.” In reality, the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe too closely resembles a tardy reelaboration of the Parsonian sociology of the 1950s in a “post-modern” wrapping. Is this the oft-mentioned “supersession” of Marxism?

A POST-MARXIST, NON-GRAMSCIAN CONCEPTION OF HEGEMONY

On the basis of the above argument, the centrality assumed by the question of hegemony in the theoretical model of Laclau and Mouffe is fully understandable: it is the conceptual tool that permits the reconstruction of an image of society beyond the illusory fragmentation of the social so that a discourse relating to society can be intelligible. However, and as is to be expected in the light of the itinerary of their reasoning, the concept of hegemony arrived at by Laclau and Mouffe is to be found on the other side of the borders of Marxism as a social theory. This is not wrong in itself: others have used the word “hegemony” in a sense that has nothing to do with Marxism, giving rise to an interesting theoretical discussion and an illuminating comparison of explanatory potentialities (see, e.g., Keohane, 1987; Nye, 1990; and, for a critique of these, Wallerstein, 1985; Boron, 1994). What does introduce an unacceptable element of confusion—and let us remember that science progresses through error but not through confusion—is the fact that Laclau and Mouffe seek to refer the fruits of their theorization on hegemony to an ancient trunk, Marxism, which at this point is completely foreign to them.

In fact, for our authors hegemony is a vaporous “discursive surface” whose relationship with Marxist theory is defined in these terms: “Our principal conclusion is that behind the concept of ‘hegemony’ lies hidden something more than a type of political relation complementary to the basic categories of Marxist theory” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 3). What is it, then? As

noted earlier, according to Laclau and Mouffe the concept of hegemony involves nothing less than “a logic of the social” that is incompatible with the central theoretical categories of Marxist theory. The reason the concept of hegemony holds a privileged position in this construction is therefore understandable: it is the only theoretical instrument capable of rearticulating the disjunctions, fractures, and cleavages produced by the unequal and combined development of capitalism. Yet, while the word “hegemony” is the same, the concept alluded to in post-Marxist discourse is entirely distinct from that developed by Antonio Gramsci. In his fundamental essay on the founder of the Italian Communist party, Perry Anderson reconstructed the history of the concept of hegemony from its obscure origins in the debates of Russian social democracy to its flowering in the *Prison Notebooks* of the Italian theorist (cf. Anderson, 1977). The incorporation of that concept into Marx’s political and social theory crowned in the sphere of complex superstructures—politics and the state, culture and ideologies—the analyses that had remained incomplete in Chapter 52 of *Das Kapital*. For our authors, in contrast, the concept of “hegemony” serves to certify the insolubility of the hiatus between classical Marxism and post-Marxism, for it supposedly refers to a logic of the social radically different from the one posed by Marx (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 3). Thus (mis)understood, “hegemony” is a conceptual tool permitting the passage from Marxism to post-Marxism. In their own words (1985: 4):

At this point we should state quite plainly that we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain. It is no longer possible to maintain the conception of subjectivity and classes elaborated by Marxism, nor its vision of the historical course of capitalist development, nor, of course, the conception of communism as a transparent society from which antagonisms had disappeared.

This being the case, why do Laclau and Mouffe constantly trace their elaboration back to a theoretical and conceptual apparatus such as Marxism? If Marxism poses a logic of the social irreconcilable with that arising from their peculiar argumentative discourse, the epistemological status of post-Marxism is reduced to a banal fact: the boundary between Marxism and post-Marxism is established chronologically. In the minefield of the social sciences this may not sound too absurd, but undoubtedly no one has considered applying the term “post-Einsteinian” to a theoretical model in physics simply because it was developed after Einstein, especially if it enthusiastically rejected the central premises of the theory of relativity and posed an interpretive model antithetical to that theory. In this case, the prefix “post-” refers to mere temporal succession, obscuring the fact that in reality we are speaking of a rupture and

abandonment instead of the continuity, creatively renewed and much further developed, of a theoretical project.

Of course, there is nothing wrong in this, and Laclau is right when he points out the absurdity of arguing that Aristotle “betrayed” Plato or that Hegel did the same with Kant and Marx with Hegel. But intellectual innovators must be perfectly clear about the new terrain and boundaries on which they found their theoretical enterprise to avoid unnecessary confusion and futile controversies. Nobody thinks of Plotinus as a “post-Aristotelian” philosopher or Thomas Aquinas as a “post-Augustinian” one, because in both cases the philosophical theories of the successors radically departed from those of their predecessors. Taking another, more modern example, it makes sense to consider Jacques Lacan a towering figure of “post-Freudism,” because all his theoretical developments are predicated on Freudian theory, but would it be equally appropriate to regard B. F. Skinner as a “post-Freudian”? Not at all, because the latter’s theory is based on a radical negation of the very central tenets of Freud’s theory. By their own account, Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism relates to Marx in a manner that is much more similar to Skinner’s relationship with Freud than to Lacan’s. The radical incompatibility they persistently claim to exist between their theorizing and Marx’s logic of the social displace their elaboration toward an entirely different theoretical field—which could be extremely fertile and deserves to be appreciated in its own terms—about which it could safely be said that it is completely alien to Marxism. This theoretical hiatus is clearly recognized by Laclau when he asserts that the category of “hegemony” is tantamount to a “starting point of a ‘post-Marxist’ discourse within the theoretical field of Marxism” and one that allows the social to be thought of as the result of “the contingent articulation of elements around certain social configurations—historical blocs—that cannot be predetermined by any philosophy of history, and that is essentially linked to the concrete struggles of social agents” (Laclau, 1990: 184).

We are thus in the presence of a neostructuralist discourse that starts from a criticism by Althusser concerning the “specific efficacy” of the superstructure but assumes the fundamental nucleus of Althusser’s proposal concerning ideology. This is, in the interpretation of the author of *For Marx*, a “practice which produces subjects,” with which the bases are formed for a reinterpretation, in an idealistic vein, of a brand of Marxism that presents itself, however, in the guise of a supposed “antireductionist” renovation or, in Laclau’s most recent works, as the founding manifesto of post-Marxism. In its positive formulation, this position is expressed as the creative recovery of the Gramscian theme of hegemony, understood, of course, from the

Althusserian conception of ideology— which obliges us to imagine a Gramsci who exists only in the minds of Laclau and Mouffe.

In effect, which Gramsci are we talking about? A Gramsci who, as our authors note, considers ideology not a system of ideas or the false consciousness of its actors but an “organic and relational whole, incarnated in apparatuses and institutions that weld together, on the basis of certain basic articulative principles, the unity of a historical bloc,” thus foreclosing the possibility of a “superstructuralist” vision of culture and ideology. Yet, Laclau and Mouffe err, however (*a*) in their assumption that in Gramsci political subjects are complex and nebulous “collective wills” and not the fundamental classes of a capitalist social formation and (*b*) in their rejection of the fact that in Gramsci the ideological elements articulated by a hegemonic class necessarily have a class character (1985: 67).

It is precisely for this reason that, a few pages later, Laclau shows his despair in the face of the persistent Marxism of Gramsci, for whom all hegemonic discourse always relates—even though via a long chain of mediations—to a fundamental class. This “hard nucleus” of Gramsci’s thought constitutes an insurmountable obstacle for the pretensions of post-Marxism, for the idealist axiom of the indeterminacy of the social—or, better, of its determination through discourse—is smashed against what Laclau (1990: 69) calls an “incoherent” conception of Antonio Gramsci, given that in this theoretical scheme

there must always be a single unifying principle in every hegemonic formation, and this can only be a fundamental class. Thus, two principles of the social order—the unicity of the unifying principle and its necessary class character—are not the contingent result of hegemonic struggle, but the necessary structural framework within which every struggle occurs. Class hegemony is not a wholly practical end result of the struggle, but has an ultimate ontological foundation . . . so that in the end, political struggle is still a zero-sum game among classes.

It would take too long to expose the unbridgeable abyss that separates the Marxist concept of hegemony from that which characterizes the work of Laclau and Mouffe (but see Borón and Cuéllar, 1983). For the Italian theorist hegemony has a class basis and, as a politico-ideological phenomenon, is strongly rooted in the soil of material life. Neither does religion create men nor do hegemonic discourses create their historical subjects. Certainly, it would be monstrous to assert that for Gramsci the production of hegemony is automatically or mechanically separated from the development of the productive forces. His numerous essays on the traumatic constitution of bour-

geois hegemony during the Italian Risorgimento clearly demonstrate the highly contingent nature of this process. At the same time, his observations on the constitution of the proletariat as an autonomous and conscious social force reveal that for him this is a long, open-ended, dialectical series of events. It is the historical practice of class struggle that will eventually bridge the gap between the class “in itself” and the class “for itself,” and in this transition there is nothing either mechanical or predestined. Moreover, prior to the autonomous constitution of the proletariat as a social force—an uncertain outcome in any case—it is simply unthinkable to expect the rise of a counter-hegemonic project capable of replacing that of the bourgeoisie.

Thus, contrary to the position of the fashionable post-Marxist formulations, Gramsci never ceased to note that hegemony was firmly anchored in the realm of production. With a sensitivity that saved him from any risk of reductionism, he sustained that “if hegemony is ethical-political it cannot fail to be economic too, it cannot fail to have its basis in the decisive function exercised by the ruling group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity” (Gramsci, 1966: 31). Hegemony, as Gramsci said in another of his writings, is political leadership and “intellectual and moral direction.” Yet, this supremacy is not a lucky outcome suspended in thin air but has deep roots. In Gramsci’s own words, hegemony “is born in the factory.” Therefore, it arises in the original terrain of production, although Gramsci noted that to achieve its full development it must transcend the frontiers of its primitive environment. And even Weber coincides with Marx in affirming that in the world of production the crucial social formations are social classes. It is for this reason that the hegemony of a class and the historical bloc founded on its hegemony are faced in their materialization with limits imposed by economic conditions, without this signifying, of course, that these limits are conceived in a determinist, absolute, and exclusive sense, that is, “reductionist.” The Gramscian conception has nothing to do with economism or, even less, with the idealism of Laclau and Mouffe’s theorizing, which holds that the discourse invents its own “earthly supports.” Yes, the problem of hegemony could be posed in such terms, but this is not the right approach to the issue, given its reductionist one-sidedness, and this way of addressing the problem goes well beyond the limits of historical materialism and is therefore impossible to anchor in Gramscian soil.

Thus, post-Marxist deconstruction closes its circle by totally mystifying the concept of hegemony, being susceptible to the same criticism that the young Marx (1968: 33) addressed to Hegelian idealism:

Hegel grants an independent existence to predicates, to objects. . . . The real subject appears afterward, as a result, while it is necessary to begin with the real

subject and consider its objectivisation. The mystical substance becomes, thus, the real subject, and the real subject appears as distinct, like a moment of the mystical substance. Precisely because Hegel begins with the predicates of the general determination instead of beginning with the real being (subject), and as he needs, however, a support for these determinations, the mystical idea becomes the support.

To summarize, the allegedly post-Marxist “renovation” of the theory of hegemony has much more in common with Hegelian idealism than with the Marxist tradition, and it remains to be seen how far a theory thus framed may go. Up to now, what post-Marxism has done is arbitrarily select certain themes of Gramscian thought, “reinterpret” them in an idealistic key, and use them as the cornerstones of a social theory that is in the antipodes with regard to Marxism and, far from “superseding” Marxism, ends up in a theoretical regression to the Hegelian concepts of the state and politics. Laclau is right when he joins numerous Marxist theorists who have proposed a radical reevaluation of the crucial role of ideology and culture, factors for which vulgar Marxism has demonstrated an unjustifiable disdain. However, his attempt founders on the rocks of a “new reductionism” when his criticism of the classist essentialism and the economism of the Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals ends in the exaltation of the discursive as a new Hegelian *deus ex machina* of history. There is no such a thing as a virtuous reductionism.

MARXIST “FRAGMENTS” AND THE MECHANISTIC LOGIC OF DECONSTRUCTION

Throughout his works, Laclau has considered himself “within” Marxism. At this point in his intellectual trajectory, and bearing in mind the distinctive features of the conclusions he has reached, it is necessary, for the sake of theoretical accuracy, to identify as clearly as possible the theoretical place in which post-Marxism should be located. In this sense, the late Agustín Cueva’s criticism of some Latin American post-Marxists is entirely pertinent. Cueva ironically observed that the expression “post-Marxist” conveys the incorrect impression of a theoretical development that simultaneously continued and surpassed Marx’s legacy, when in reality it refers to the production of a group of writers who at some stage of their lives had, by and large, been Marxists but no longer were. In this sense, concluded Cueva (1988: 85), post-Marxists should in reality call themselves “ex-Marxists.” However, it is obvious that in this regard Laclau will not easily give ground, despite the fact that in the works we have examined he has taken pains to prove that the contradictions of his thought with that of Marx are

irreconcilable. Hence, after issuing Marxism's "death certificate," Laclau confidently assures his readers that he has kept the best spoils of the deceased. In his own words, "I haven't rejected Marxism. Something very different has occurred. It's Marxism that has broken up and I believe I'm holding on to its best fragments" (1990: 201).

In the face of the boldness of this assertion, it is necessary to make two observations. First, on the "breaking up" of Marxism, assimilated by Laclau to the disintegration of the USSR and the so-called popular democracies of Eastern Europe, it doesn't take a professional historian to confute this assertion by pointing to the time-honored "relative autonomy" that social theories and doctrines have shown in relation to the historical and structural contexts in which they originated. On this point the inconsistency of Laclau's thought is blatant: how can a writer as obsessed as he is with the poverty of reductionism fall into reasoning as reductionist as the ones he has so passionately criticized? The greatness and vitality of Greek philosophy did not vanish with the decadence of Athens; Christianity survived first the fall of the Roman empire, which had proclaimed it its "official religion," and later the decay of the feudal order and so-called Christendom; liberalism, for its part, did not succumb despite the dramatic transformations experienced by bourgeois society after the second half of the eighteenth century and the advent of monopoly capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Of course, there are changes in the concrete functions of these ideological systems, but they endure and persist. Why should Marxism be the exception, especially if one takes into account that its theoretical development has been far more related to the vicissitudes of the capitalist societies than to the so-called construction of socialism in the former USSR? This does not appear to be a serious argument. Marxism as a theoretical corpus has already demonstrated a notable capacity to survive the atrocities and bankruptcy of the political regimes and parties founded in its name. Moreover, in the realm of social theory there has been in recent years a healthy reawakening of interest in the ideas of the Marxist tradition, something that has already become apparent in Western Europe (and, to a lesser extent, in the United States and Latin America) and is reflected in the increasing number of journals and publications, as well as scholarly events of all sorts, dedicated to the topic, a surprising oddity for those who hastened to proclaim the death of Marxism. The best demonstration of the error of Laclau's thesis is his obsessive reference to an object that, according to his own words, has disintegrated and no longer exists. In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes recalled with his usual sarcasm that nobody argues with a dead body and that those who do only certify with their obstinacy the vitality of the presumed corpse.

Second, the phrase “holding on to its best fragments” is typical of the way in which positivistic thinking attempts to appropriate reality. Gyorg Lukács once indicated that what characterizes Marxism, what constitutes its original distinctive feature, is not the primacy of economic factors, as is believed by those who assimilate it to the coarsest versions of materialism, but rather “the viewpoint of the totality,” that is, the capacity to reconstruct in the abstraction of thought the contradictory, multifaceted, and dynamic complexity of the social reality (see Lukács, 1971: 27). Fragmenting thought is incapable of understanding reality in its totality: it decomposes the parts and hypostatizes them as if they were autonomous and independent entities. Ergo, economy, sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, and history are constituted as autonomous and separate “social sciences,” each of them offering its rather useless specialized “explanations” for illusory fragments of the social—the economy, the society, culture, politics, and so on—that in their isolation lack any real substance.

Laclau is convinced that he has appropriated the “best fragments” of Marxism, but one cannot fail to notice that many scholars have declared themselves incapable of discovering which fragments these are, while others affirm the impossibility of establishing a meaningful correspondence between the theoretical construction he and Mouffe have begun and the intellectual tradition founded by Marx.³ At the same time, the pretension of conserving the unidentifiable “best fragments” of Marxism is incompatible with Laclau’s assertion that what is important “is the deconstruction of Marxist tradition, not its mere abandonment.” In this same section of his interview with *Strategies*, Laclau sustains—this time rightly—that “the relation with tradition should not be one of submission and repetition, but of transformation and critique” (1990: 179).

Now, two issues should be raised regarding these statements. On the one hand, to what extent can social theories be “deconstructed” and—like some children’s toys—“reassembled” time and again, creating in each opportunity different constructions, with figures, shapes, and patterns? Post-Marxists seem unaware that this entire intellectual operation rests on an untenable mechanistic assumption: the idea that theories are mere collection of pieces and fragments—the “building blocks” of the textbooks of positivistic methodology—that, like wooden beams, nuts, and bolts in children’s construction sets, can be recombined ad infinitum. Would the “deconstruction” of Hobbes make possible the invention of Locke? Could Rousseau be “deconstructed” in such a way as to give birth to James Madison? Would a “deconstructed” Marx emerge as a hybrid of Derrida, Hegel, Lacan, Parsons, Weber, and Wittgenstein? In terms of philosophical and theoretical analysis this makes no sense at all.

On the other hand, and leaving aside the serious doubts regarding the meaningfulness of the whole “deconstruction” enterprise, nowhere in Laclau’s work is there any demonstration that the Marxist tradition had become an obstacle to creativity and the inscription of new problems. Again, with whom is Laclau contending? Anyone objectively and dispassionately examining his work and respectful of the intelligence and systematic nature of his reflection can only reach the conclusion that he is locked in a sterile and anachronistic polemic against the worst deformations of the Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals and, especially, against the diverse manifestations of the Stalinist Vulgate. Thus, it is little wonder that when Laclau (1990: 204) thinks of Marxism he imagines it in the same terms as the notorious Academy of Sciences of the USSR did, as

... a theory . . . based on the gradual simplification of class structure under capitalism and on the increasing centrality of the working class [and which proposes] to see the world as fundamentally divided between capitalism and socialism, with Marxism the doctrine of the latter.

The question is this: What serious Marxist theorists would recognize themselves in a caricature such as this? Who would volunteer to defend such simplicities? Laclau offends his intelligence and that of his readers when in his eagerness to criticize Marxism he becomes the mirror image of the official Academy of Sciences scholars who in the name of “socialism” razed the countries of the East with their manuals. In these theoretical monstrosities they caricatured the history of political thought by saying, for instance, that Jean-Jacques Rousseau was merely an “ideologue of the petty bourgeoisie” and, because he was ignorant of “the existence of the class struggle,” was forced to resort to an “abstract” concept of “people” to speak of political sovereignty. These distinguished “academics”—many of whom have surely today become vociferous propagandizers of neoliberalism—characterized Machiavelli as “one of the first ideologues of the bourgeoisie” and accused him of asserting that the “basis of human nature [is] ambition and greed and that men are evil by nature” (Pokrovski et al., 1966: 215-222, 144-145). Regrettably, Laclau proceeds in a similar fashion with Marxism: he constructs a straw man, a veritable caricature—a theory that is reductionist, economist, objectivist, and so on—and then proceeds to destroy it. And then what?

THEORETICAL RENOVATION OR THEORETICAL DILUTION?

It is hard to know why Laclau has concentrated on the withered branches of the tree, leaving aside those that have become green again and or the few

others that are blooming. The assimilation of Marxism and vulgar Marxism—which mirrors the other, more ominous equation between Marxism and “really existing socialism”—becomes suspicious when throughout Laclau’s work he pays little or no attention to some promising theoretical developments experienced by Marxism in the past 20 years. How is it possible that the work of theorists and scholars of the stature of Elmar Altvater, Perry Anderson, Giovanni Arrighi, Etienne Balibar, Rudolf Bahro, Robin Blackburn, Samuel Bowles, Robert Brenner, Alex Calinicos, Gerald Cohen, Agustín Cueva, Maurice Dobb, Florestan Fernandes, Jon Elster, Norman Geras, Herbert Gintis, Pablo González Casanova, Eric Hobsbawm, John Holloway, Frederic Jameson, Oskar Lange, Michel Löwy, Ernest Mandel, C. B. MacPherson, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Michel Kalecky, Ralph Miliband, Nicos Mouzelis, Antonio Negri, Alex Nove, Claus Offe, Adam Przeworski, John E. Roemer, Pierre Salama, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, Göran Therborn, E. P. Thompson, Immanuel Wallerstein, Raymond Williams, Jean-Marie Vincent, and many more have passed unnoticed by him? For none of these writers does the Marxist tradition appear to have been an obstacle to the inscription of the novelties of their time in the corpus of the theory or to the discovery of the stimuli and challenges to creativity that characterize a fertile and lively intellectual tradition. Unfortunately, Laclau appears to have been unaware of these possibilities.

On the contrary, both he and Mouffe consider it necessary to found post-Marxism in order to purge the old tradition of the dead weight that has poisoned the well of classical Marxism. However, throughout their extensive work there is an acute dearth of valid and convincing arguments to support this view. Beyond their intricate rhetoric all that remains is a disappointing commonplace: a rephrasing of the anti-Marxist critique of the mainstream American social sciences, occasionally spiced with some insightful observations that nonetheless are incapable of correcting the gross interpretive distortions that undermine the post-Marxist program in its entirety.

Yet, Laclau argues that there is a good political reason to speak of post-Marxism: why shouldn’t we convert Marxism into a “vague political term of reference, whose content, limits and extent must be defined at each juncture,” thus following in the tracks of the treatment of liberalism or conservatism? Diluted by the magic of postmodernist ideologues, Marxism would then become a “floating signifier” as mysterious as it was innocuous, which would open up the possibility of constructing ingenious “language games” on the condition—as Laclau prescribes—that through those games the theorist “does not claim to discover the *real* meaning of Marx’s work” (1990: 203-204). The objective significance of this operation has a glaring clarity: to wipe out Marxism—and, by extension, socialism—as a liberating

utopia and as a project of social transformation, diluting it in the neoconservative magma of the “end of ideologies.” In this sense, the “reactionary” implications—an expression that Laclau uses all too frequently to describe his opponents—of this argument are as evident as they are astonishing, especially when one recalls that they are intended to be a contribution to the development of a socialist strategy for our epoch. These implications are clearly exposed in the initial pages of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, when in the preface to the Spanish edition (1987a: ix) the authors assert that that book proposes a

redefinition of the socialist project in terms of a radicalisation of democracy; that is, as an articulator of the struggles against the different forms of subordination—of class, sex, race, as well as those others opposed by ecological, anti-nuclear and anti-institutional movements. This radicalised and plural democracy, which we propose as an objective of a new left, falls within the tradition of the “modern” political project formulated since the Enlightenment.

No socialist could disagree with a proposal aimed at the radicalization of democracy, provided that the achievement of this goal did not involve denying the need to overcome capitalism, an objective which not even Edouard Bernstein—“revisionist” but socialist in the end—was willing to abandon. However, this paramount goal is precisely what has completely evaporated at the end of the labyrinthine journey of Laclau and Mouffe, when they wind up proposing a “radicalized and plural” democracy as the supreme objective of a supposed new left. Thus the theoretical-political circle they have traced is closed: after beginning with an epistemological criticism of vulgar—reductionist and essentialist—Marxism, it concludes with a quiet capitulation in which the essential objective of socialism, the substitution of capitalist society for a more just, humane, and liberating one, is silently filed away for the sake of an ethereal deepening of democracy. From a criticism of Kautsky and the “official Marxism” of the USSR our authors end up embracing a form of Tony Blair’s “third way.” Without stating it openly, they share the thesis of Francis Fukuyama and the modern right, which consecrates capitalism as the final stage of human history. Thus, the supposed “renovation” of Marxism is so meticulously carried out, and with such earnestness, that the “renovators” finally go over to the other side: along their journey, they jettison the critique of capitalism and the need to build a socialist society, becoming the sibylline apologists of the former.

This becomes crystal-clear when one examines the significance of their concept of “radicalized democracy.” In the first place, it seems rather strange that a theme such as this could be posed and argued for without reexamining

the thoughtful comments that Rosa Luxemburg, from the heart of the Marxist tradition, made on this issue.⁴ A reflection such as that of Laclau and Mouffe, as if they were Adam and Eve on the first day of the world's creation, is of little assistance to their self-declared proposal of critically renewing Marxist thought. In the second place, the proposition of our authors is at the very least vague and at times dangerously confusing. How are we to understand the proposal that "the task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 176).

Laclau and Mouffe teach political science in England and cannot be unaware that the possibility of "deepening and expanding" liberal-democratic ideology stumbles against the rather strict limits that condition this ideology. How could one possibly overlook the fact that democratic liberalism is closely intertwined and articulated with a structure of class domination and exploitation in whose bosom it was developed and whose fundamental interests it has diligently served for three centuries? Here the "instrumentalism" of Laclau and Mouffe recalls the veritable caricature of Leninism that they construct with the aim of dispatching it later without remorse—except that their new "instrumentalism" supposedly belongs to a benign variety that does not awaken in them the slightest preoccupation. Do they really believe it is possible to separate liberalism from "possessive individualism" (1985: 175)? If this were the case, surely the history of democracy would have been much more peaceful; it would have been sufficient to undermine, little by little, the contingent and ancillary links between liberalism and class exploitation for the liberal bourgeois to have awakened one fine day as radical democrats. Why, if liberalism has a 300-year history, is democracy a fragile and recent acquisition of some capitalist societies? Why did a timid form of democratic liberalism take so long to appear? Is it just because it had not occurred to any one to think of the radical democratization of liberalism? Or is it perhaps because the task of "deepening and expanding" liberal democracy in a "radicalised and plural" direction confronts structural and class limits and therefore requires what Barrington Moore (1966) called "a violent break with the past" or, in less elegant wording, a revolution? In order to avoid a byzantine debate, why didn't Laclau and Mouffe point to a single example of a "radicalised and plural" democracy in contemporary capitalism?

Laclau can formulate these proposals concerning the unbounded ideological elasticity of liberalism because his post-Marxist vision of the world prevents him from perceiving society as a totality, and the "funnel effect" of his theoretical perspective precludes his taking notice of the connections that exist between discourses, ideologies, modes of production, and structures of

domination. The resulting radical and insuperable fragmentation of social reality means that in the vast terrain of his fertile imagination everything is possible, even the transformation of liberalism into a democratic ideology in which, through the mediation of “language games” and “floating signifiers,” all the classist, sexist, racist, linguistic, religious, and cultural slants and biases quintessential of liberalism from its origins would simply vanish into thin air. Not even so illustrious a conservative as Tocqueville, not to mention Max Weber, believed this possible.⁵

Should we therefore reject the proposal of “deepening and extending democracy” so dear to Latin American post-Marxists? By no means, but this program requires posing the issue in terms other than the ones suggested by Laclau and Mouffe. First of all it is necessary to have a realistic assessment of what bourgeois democracy really means. Without this, the entire proposal rests on a dangerous illusion. In this connection, the reflections of Rosa Luxemburg (1970: 393)—already in prison and attentively following the first steps of the Russian Revolution—are extraordinarily important for Marxist theory because, contrary to what our authors propose, they recover the value of democracy without embellishing the capitalist society or jettisoning the socialist project:

We have always distinguished the social kernel from the political form of bourgeois democracy. We have always revealed the hard core of social inequality and lack of liberties which is hidden under the sweet wrapping of equality and formal liberties. But not in order to reject the latter, but rather to impel the working class not to resign itself to the wrapping but to conquer political power; to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy, not to eliminate democracy.

The proposal of Rosa Luxemburg, therefore, creatively overcomes, on the one hand, the traps of vulgar Marxism—which because of its unqualified rejection of bourgeois democracy ended up repudiating the very idea of democracy and justifying political despotism—and, on the other hand, the bankruptcy of post-Marxism, which capitulates ideologically, dissolves, and is complacently re-created in a liberal form. What is required instead is neither contempt nor surrender but a simultaneous negation, recovery, and superseding—an authentic *Aufhebung*—in which socialism appears as giving birth to a new form quantitatively and qualitatively superior to democracy and not, as in the proposal of Laclau and Mouffe, as the simple “socialist dimension” of a vague and gauzy “radicalised democracy” (1985: 201). In this case, socialism would be downgraded to the rank of a mere facet of a nebulous “superior form” of democracy that, despite all the overwhelming evi-

dence to the contrary, our authors imagine it possible to construct leaving capitalist exploitation unimpaired.

We cannot do less than reject any attempt to liquidate socialist ideals and utopia. As I have already explained elsewhere (Borón, 1995: chap. 7) this is not an attempt to deny the unprecedented gravity of the crisis of Marxism, but it would be senseless not to ask oneself if this is not a transitory ebb tide rather than the definitive decline of socialism. It is too soon to know, although so far we have no convincing evidence that the failure of attempts to construct a socialist society could signify the definitive eradication of one of the most beautiful and noble utopias ever engendered by the human species. As John E. Roemer put it in a provocative and extremely controversial essay, the failure of a particular socialist experiment—the Soviet model, “which occupied a very short period in the history of mankind”—does not mean that the long-term proposal of socialism (a classless society) is doomed. This mainstream view, which Roemer regards as “myopic and unscientific,” not only conflates the inglorious failure of the Soviet experiment with the final destiny of the socialist project but radically underestimates the effective, surely indirect, accomplishments stemming from the Russian Revolution in its faulty attempt at realizing the socialist utopia (1994: 25-26):

Socialist and Communist parties formed in every country. I cannot evaluate the overall effects of these parties in organizing workers politically and in unions, in the antifascist struggle of the 1930s and 1940s, and in the postwar anticolonial struggle. It may well be that the advent of the welfare state, social democracy, and the end of colonialism are due, through this genesis, to the Bolshevik revolution.

These sobering remarks reinforce the opinion that there are plenty of good reasons to believe that the euphoria of the neoliberal ideologues—which today appears all-pervasive—is destined to be brief, bearing in mind the signs that already speak of the precariousness of the capitalist “triumph.” How are we to forget that in the past 90 years the bourgeoisie has announced on three occasions—the *belle époque* of the turn of the century, the roaring twenties, and the 1950s—the “end of ideology,” the termination of class struggles, and the final victory of capitalism? Everyone knows what happened thereafter. Why should we now believe that we have reached “the end of history”?

In any case, a crucial question remains: Can Marxism face the formidable challenge of our time, or must we turn to the vagueness and sterility of post-Marxism to find the values, theoretical categories, and conceptual tools that will allow us to navigate its stormy waters? Marxist theory has what it takes to emerge successfully from the present crisis, provided that Marxists refuse to

entrench themselves in the old traditional certainties, closing their eyes to the lessons drawn from this first cycle of socialist revolutions. To face the crisis positively it will be necessary to open everything to discussion, and I think that the most lucid minds of contemporary Marxism have clearly manifested this disposition. What is to come is a renewed, dynamic, and plural Marxism—acutely envisioned by Raymond Williams (1989) and Ralph Miliband (1995)—with its face turned toward the twenty-first century and open to all the great themes of our time. The poetic anticipation of Marcelo Cohen, which refers to the creative, diffuse, and profound presence of Marxism in the contemporary world, nicely captures its legacy, its promise, and its immense possibilities (1990: 24):

I am the unburied voice of Marxism. . . . only some of my avatars lie buried under the rubble of the Berlin Wall. Others fall back before Polish images of the Virgin. But spiritually, to express it in that way, I am still everywhere. My breathing saturates the life of the world, not only the West. . . . I have been used, like almost everything, to perpetuate social nightmares and monstrosities of the imagination. I have been invoked to torture. . . . I have given words to name what today continues to wound, I have nourished the nerve, the proud rage, the critical shrewdness. . . . And I have offered openings, fantastic interpretive narratives, wide theoretical hallucinations that have fed rebel fantasy and intelligent pleasure. For soccer lovers: I am a fine mid-fielder who creates inexhaustible play. And nothing more. Debate with me will go on and on. I will not be the cement for perverse constructions, but rather mobility and suggestions; I foresee new metamorphoses. He who wishes can receive me. And he who does not, fuck off!

NOTES

1. This is not the place to examine either Germani's controversial ideas on this matter or their evolution during the years of his "academic exile" at Harvard. It seems pertinent, though, to make two short comments: First, not a few of Germani's remarks on Mills and related theoretical issues have to be understood in the context of an ideological debate against, on the one hand, the most reactionary expressions of the Argentine right (which opposed the so-called scientific sociology because of its allegedly atheist, communist, materialistic, and subversive tendencies) and, on the other, a dogmatic left that dismissed Western sociology as pure "bourgeois ideology" lacking any scientific value even at the descriptive level. Second, the direction in which Germani's thought evolved should be taken into account. While many of his harshest "left-wing critics" became fervid—and some of them shameful—neoliberals, Germani moved exactly in the opposite direction, ending his days as a vitriolic critic of "free-market" economics and mainstream Western social science.

2. The "left-wing" critique of Parsons is to be found essentially in the work of C. Wright Mills.

3. For an assessment of the relationship between Laclau's work and Marxism see, e.g., Mouzelis (1987, 1988), Geras (1988), and Wood (1986). Laclau and Mouffe's principal defense is presented in their "Post-Marxism Without Apologies" (1987b).

4. I have examined some of the implications of Rosa Luxemburg's thought for this matter in *State, Capitalism, and Democracy in Latin America* (1995: 189-220).

5. A lucid examination of the social limits of liberalism can be found in Metha (1990). On the shallowness of the Weberian conception of democracy, see Lukács (1967: 491-494).

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