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Post-Marxist Theories of Political Action:
A Critical Review of Two Paradigmatic Proposals

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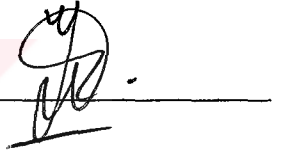
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Acknowledgement

Writing in the night, at a time, when a country was about to invade another to make it more "democratic", John Berger had accurately depicted the pain of living in the present world:

In the interminably repetitive speeches, announcements, press conferences and threats, the recurrent terms are Democracy, Justice, Human Rights... Each has been trafficked, stolen from humanity... For us to live and die properly, things have to be named properly. (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2003)

It is at such a time that I was lucky enough to have people around me to remind the proper meaning of words such as love, support, friendship, and honesty.

I am grateful to all of them: Zeynep Gambetti, a brilliant advisor, a fountain of energy, and a major source of inspiration; Ayla Falay, a mother whose affection, understanding and support is the motor of all; Suha, an embodiment of patience to never ending complaints and a heart, always loving, caring; Biriz and Oytun, who have proved so many times that the English language needs an apt word to capture the meaning of "dost". And Şevki Falay, a father, who could only be so present in his absence.

Finally, the Blob, without which none of this would even have been thought of.

ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims to provide a preliminary investigation and an evaluation of Post-Marxist theories of political action in the age of globalized capitalism. Given the shifting epistemological and ontological premises, what kind of a proposal does Post-Marxism offer in terms of political action? Is it as liberating as it aspires and claims to be? The answers to these questions are interrogated through an analysis of the works of those authors, who have become most representative of the Post-Marxist position and stand out as the leading figures in shaping the debates in contemporary engagements with the legacy of Marx. Socialist strategy as a discursive struggle for hegemony as articulated in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and the "plea for Leninist intolerance" extended by Slavoj Žižek constitute the two paradigmatic proposals under review. The main hypothesis of this thesis is that for any viable theory of political action the category of the subject and how it is conceptualized plays a crucial role.

KISA ÖZET

Post-Marxist Siyasi Eylem Teorileri: İki Paradigmatik Önerinin Eleştirel Bir İncelemesi

Aslı Falay Çalkıvık

Bu tezde küresel kapitalizm çağında Post-Marxist eylem teorilerinin eleştirel bir değerlendirmesi sunulmaktadır. Değişen epistemolojik ve ontolojik önermeler ışığında, Post-Marxist yaklaşımlar siyasi eylemi nasıl kurgulamakta? Söz konusu kurgular iddia edildiği kadar özgürleştirici ve dönüştürücü olabilir mi? Marx'ın günümüz koşullarında yeniden düşünülmesi tartışmalarında önsıralarda yer alan kişilerin eserleri incelenerek bu sorulara bir yanıt aranıyor. Bu bağlamda Ernesto Laclau ve Chantal Mouffe'un sosyalist strateji olarak ortaya koyduğu hegemonya kuramı ile Slavoj Žižek'in 'Lenin'i Tekrarlama' önerisi eleştirel bir incelemeye tabi tutuluyor. Tezde öne sürülen temel iddia, herhangi bir siyasi eylem kuramı için özne kategorisinin ve bunun kurgulanış şeklinin son derece büyük önem taşıdığı yönündedir.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to provide a preliminary investigation and an evaluation of Post-Marxist¹ theories of political action in the age of globalized capitalism. The choice of this topic is informed not solely by a theoretical concern about the implications of various conceptualizations of political action and agency for the field of political philosophy. Taking Marx's eleventh thesis as its guiding light, this investigation is inspired by a practical political concern about the possibilities of radical social change and how this could be brought about in the contemporary world.

Such a concern makes it crucial to attend to the particular historical context for political action, namely the socio-economic transformations taking place on the world stage and the novel political configurations that are emerging at the global level. The most prominent feature of the contemporary era is the rise of liberal, capitalist ordering of social, economic and political systems to almost uncontested hegemony. While hailed by some as the dawn of a new, "post-ideological" era and the "end of history", for

¹ Post-Marxism in this text is employed as a concept to describe a specific line of political analysis that incorporates epistemological premises and central assumptions of post-structuralism in its recasting of Marxist social and political theory.

others, it represents a period of radical restructuring for capitalism and power relations on a global scale.

Empire by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) is one of the most recent attempts at diagnosing the trends brought about by the global reach of capital and at formulating a road to overturn the structures of exploitation and domination. The concept of "empire" in this text is used to capture the new global logic of rule that is emerging on a global scale.² According to the authors, the formation of this imperial sovereignty corresponds to none other than "the realization of a properly capitalist order" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.9). By tracing the roots of the reconfiguration of the paradigm of rule at the global level to the transformations taking place in "the means and forces of the production of social reality" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.22), Hardt and Negri make an important intervention to the globalization debates from a historical materialist perspective.

Although the theoretical groundings of the arguments and the political solutions proposed by Hardt and Negri may be

² As a conceptual tool "empire" extends the claim that in the contemporary era not only the locus of sovereignty has shifted away from the nation-state, but also the nature of sovereignty itself has undergone transformation (Hardt and Negri, 2000). In this respect, empire represents a single logic of rule that is based on de-centralized, de-territorialized networks of command rather than hierarchical, territorially defined systems of control and domination characterizing modern sovereignty.

very problematic in certain respects³, nevertheless, they do offer a powerful illustration of the extent to which the capitalist relations of production have penetrated into the social organization of societies. The book demonstrates how the process of this global "social transformation that increasingly subjects human beings, their social relations and practices, to the imperatives of capital accumulation" (Wood, 1997, p. 554) has both widened and deepened its grasp.

This transformation has also sparked novel initiatives of resistance and struggle. The anti-globalization protests at the 1999 summit of the World Trade Organization in Seattle and the vast demonstrations against the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001 have been followed by the formation of the World Social Forum (WSF) at Porto Alegre. Hailed as a development of historical significance, the WSF has been described as the offspring of the historic Bandung Conference⁴ (Hardt, 2002).

These developments once again reinvigorated debates about Left politics, about the idea of radical social transformation and politics of emancipation, and about the meaning of political agency in an era when the logic of the capitalist

³ The publication of Empire has led to a whole industry of reviews of this influential book. For a good introduction to the debates surrounding *Empire* see Balakrishnan, G. (2003) and Dean, J. and Passavant, P.A. (2004).

⁴ Held at Bandung (Indonesia) in April 1955, this conference is regarded as the first demonstration of the growing diplomatic significance of the Third World with the emergent non-alliance movement (Graham and Newnham, 1998).

market "not only regulates human interactions but also seeks directly to rule over human nature" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.xv). One major current of thought taking part in these debates is represented by those thinkers, who base their analysis on a Marxism with a new face. What could be categorized as Post-Marxism, these theoretical attempts to come to grips with the contemporary socio-economic and political developments bear the imprint of the major overhaul of basic assumptions, categories and theories of political analysis that have been on the agenda since the 1960s.

At the root of this development lies the advent of post-structuralism⁵, which has opened up the way to a radical questioning of ontological essentialism⁶ and epistemological foundationalism⁷ in social and political analysis. It represents the abandonment of the Enlightenment optimism about the possibility to achieve objective knowledge of phenomena through the use of reason. Claiming that knowledge constructs

⁵ While acknowledging the fact that it would hardly do justice to subsume the multiplicity of positions within post-structuralist thought under one umbrella (see Callinicos, 1985), it is nevertheless possible to point out to some common assumptions and themes that characterize the post-structuralist agenda.

⁶ The essence of something is the ensemble of necessary characteristics, which constitute its identity. Essentialism posits that the nature of things are defined by universal, atemporal qualities. Discourse theory, which provides the framework for Post-Marxist approaches, is built on an anti-essentialist ontology and argues for the impossibility of a pre-given, self-determining essence (Torfing, 1999).

⁷ Foundationalism consists of the attempt to give universal grounds and absolute justifications for the truth of the claims made about knowledge and values. Discourse theory is founded on an anti-foundationalist epistemology, arguing that it is impossible to make absolute truth claims (Torfing, 1999).

its own object of study, post-structuralism retreats from any pretensions to positivism and lays bare the relations between knowledge and power. Hence, systems of meaning, discursive conditions of possibility and the specificity of socio-historical contexts become the focus of analytical attention.

Post-structuralism, as an outgrowth of the "linguistic turn", highlights the constitutive nature of language. In this framework, language is elevated to a foundational status. In this respect, it is regarded not only as a distinguishing feature of human beings, but also as the constitutive dimension of human relationships.

The precursors of post-structuralist approaches can be found in the works of thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss, who are categorized under the theoretical movement of structuralism (Cahoone, 2000). Conceiving language as a system of differences, Saussure argued that meaning is not a matter of the relation between a word and an object as the referential theory of meaning would argue, but is produced through the interrelation between signifiers themselves.⁸ By positing the autonomous status of linguistic structure in this way, Saussure was dismantling "the myth of the given" which posits that reality is directly

⁸ For example, the word teacher only means what it does because the words "school", "student", etc. exist.

given to the subject - i.e., consciousness has direct access to it (Callinicos, 1985, p.89). In a similar vein, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss criticized the appeal to history and culture as a given fact. Instead, he asserted that these are not simply given, but constituted through the agency of the historian.

Post-structuralism represents both a continuity and a break with the structuralist framework since it incorporates some of the latter's crucial insights, while rejecting other fundamental assumptions. In this respect, while post-structuralism embraces the view of language as a system of differences, it fully rejects the scientific pretensions of structuralist thinkers⁹ and the concomitant tendency to reduce heterogeneity and difference to the effects of an invariant structure (Storper, 2001).

Post-structuralism conceives language and discourse as the constitutive dimension of social life and repudiates the claim that social structures can be external to and independent of the discursive realm. Highlighting the relation between forms of discourse and relations of power, it hails the end to rational inquiry into truth. The "will to truth" becomes a form of "will to power" (Foucault, 1980). Hence,

⁹ "For Levi-Strauss, structuralism was a scientific method for studying differences between cultures, in the hope of one day achieving a more genuinely universal understanding of human nature" (Lilla, 1998).

claims for scientific neutrality becomes untenable since there can be nothing outside of the power/ knowledge nexus. In the words of Foucault (1995):

Power produces knowledge... There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (p.27)

Another radical assertion made by post-structuralists concerns the illusory nature of a unified self. The humanist belief that there is a universal essence of "man", which is a timeless attribute of all human-beings, is replaced with a view of the subject as produced through acts of power, molded by the techniques and knowledges applied to it (Rabinow, ed., 1994). Hence, a pre-constituted, self-transparent subject (i.e., the subject of cogito, a conscious self that possesses a positive essence, which exists prior to its context) gives way to a de-centered or split subject."¹⁰ In short, rather than taking the subject as its point of departure, post-structuralism transforms the subject itself into a question.

Emphasizing the contingent, undetermined nature of reality, post-structuralism is also characterized by a general aversion to meta-narratives (total explanations) of social

¹⁰ The theme of the de-centered subject will be taken up in the second chapter during the discussion of Lacanian psychoanalysis in connection with the theory of Slavoj Žižek.

reality. Contrary to modernist interpretations that depict history as the progress of the human mind, it is argued that history is not a linear, uniform process of the unfolding of a single essence. Instead, post-structuralists emphasize the openness and variety of historical trajectories.

With its focus on the fluidity of social contexts and the power of language in constructing subjectivity, post-structuralism is embraced by Post-Marxists as a possible way to resolve the theoretical puzzles that are induced by "an increasing gap between the realities of contemporary capitalism and what Marxism could legitimately subsume under its own categories" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.viii). The authoritarianism of existing socialist societies, "the failure of Marxism's designated revolutionary agent - the working class- to act as a class" (Hunter, 1988, p.885) and the widening agenda of radical politics (such as feminist, environmentalist and gay liberation movements) are counted as the major reasons behind the search for alternative ways of dealing with the questions raised by this rift between radical theory and radical politics.

The reception of post-structuralist insights had important consequences for Marxist theorizing. At the focus of Post-Marxists' attack is "essentialism" (Laclau and Mouffe,

1987, p.99). This critique can be unbundled and analyzed at two interrelated levels.

As a history of philosophy, the essentialist tendency in Marxism is found in the assertion that there is an absolute truth of history: the logic of the development of productive forces constituting the essence of historical development. Consequently, history becomes a teleological process progressing towards an inevitable end-point (namely, the collapse of capitalism and the dawn of a classless society). In contrast, for Post-Marxism history cannot be conceived as the unfolding of a true essence. Rather than a view of history as animated by objective laws, history is regarded as a social construct, the trajectory of which is shaped and reshaped by continuous interventions.

In terms of socio-political analysis, Post-Marxist critique takes as its target what Torfing (1999) identifies as "economism" (p.20). One aspect of economism concerns the treatment of legal, political and ideological elements forming the super-structure as an epiphenomenon of socioeconomic dynamics (Torfing, 1999, pp.20-25). Despite recurrent attempts to break with this deterministic logic (from Lukacs' emphasis on the primacy of class consciousness to Althusser's model which envisions the "relative autonomy" of specific instances), Post-Marxists claim that none of these efforts

rescue politics and political agency from being subsumed under the demands of economic structure.

Economism is also discernible in the form of "class reductionism" (Torfing, 1999, p.25). In this respect, all distinct ideological, legal, and political forms are perceived as the manifestations of a single essence - namely, the contradictions between the social classes of capital and labor (Torfing, 1999). In contrast, Post-Marxists see no necessary alignment between social identities and interests of political agents and their class positions in an economic structure. As a result, the working class loses its privileged place as the agent of emancipatory political action. A coherent collective agent able to act on the basis of its pre-existing, objective interests is substituted with variety of political subjects whose interests are socially constructed through discursive practices.

Some scholars, such as Norman Geras (1988), view such a rethinking of Marxism as a wholesale rejection of it - as a project plagued by theoretical inconsistencies and a normative void (see also Geras, 1987), others regard it as an important, yet, failed attempt to address the reductionism inherent in all Marxist discourse (Mouzelis, 1988).

Rather than assessing Post-Marxism in terms of the degree to which it remains loyal to Marxist premises, in this thesis

I aim at a genuine engagement with this theoretical framework on its own terms and provide an immanent critique of its propositions. With immanent critique what is implied is a method of analysis, which measures the object, not according to some external standard, but by putting it to test on its own ground and "evaluating its adequacy as an expression of the goal towards which the dynamic is tending" (Raduntz, 2002, ¶25).¹¹

The aim in this thesis is not to provide a comprehensive investigation of all aspects of Post-Marxism. Nor the ambitious goal of reviewing all the different positions and perspectives pronounced by various thinkers who can be situated within the Post-Marxist camp. On the one hand, the thesis takes as its point of departure a very specific concern, which was spelled out in the opening paragraph of this introduction: namely, the question of radical politics and political agency in the contemporary era. Hence, it revolves around a very specific question: Given the shifting epistemological and ontological premises, what kind of a proposal does Post-Marxism offer in terms of political action? Based on "less ambitious in eschatological and epistemological

¹¹ A prime example for immanent critique is offered by Marx, through his attempt of contrasting the self-understanding of bourgeois society (for instance, freedom of exchange) with the consequences of bourgeois practice (violent dispossession of labor power) (Raduntz, 2002)

terms" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p.80), is it also as liberating as it aspires and claims to be?

On the other hand, the terrain upon which this question will be grappled with is also narrowed down. This choice is not made as a matter of convenience, but rather stems from a sincere concern in providing depth instead of spurious breadth to the discussion. Hence, the thesis is focused on the works of those authors, who have become most representative of the Post-Marxist position and stand out as the leading figures in shaping the debates in contemporary engagements with the legacy of Marx. Consequently, it investigates two paradigmatic proposals for a Post-Marxist theory of political action: Socialist strategy as a discursive struggle for hegemony as articulated in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and the "plea for Leninist intolerance" extended by Slavoj Žižek (2002).¹²

Self-identified as Post-Marxists, Laclau and Mouffe describe their project as an attempt to "reread Marxist theory in the light of contemporary problems through a deconstruction of its central categories" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.ix). Their contribution lies in the new direction they give to Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony by incorporating the

¹² The following overview of the arguments of these thinkers is designed to serve as an introduction to their theoretical models. The points raised will be further elaborated and clarified in the next two chapters.

insights of post-structuralist theory. Arguing, along with Foucault, that discourse constitutes the objects of its knowledge, Laclau and Mouffe analyze "the social" in terms of the discursive construction of reality. The social is characterized by multiple points of power, subordination and antagonism (around race, sex, class, etc.), which cannot be reduced to a single site such as the economy. Consequently, Laclau and Mouffe argue that emancipatory politics should seek to support the fragmented struggles of particular identities within a framework of radical democracy. In this respect, hegemony becomes a central concept in the formation of collective subjects since it is through the hegemonic practices that a multiplicity of identities, subjectivities and demands are articulated into a common project.

While sharing some of their key assumptions, such as the gap between identity and identification and the "incompleteness of the social" (i.e., that there is no last instance defining the social), Slavoj Žižek rejects their claim that identity politics is the key to the realization of the universalist goals and ambitions of emancipation (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). This results from his conceptualization of the subject and his account of what constitutes the failure of any identity to achieve full determination. Rather than clinging onto the post-modern

disavowals of the subject, he uses the insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis to develop a theory of the subject in his account of political agency. Associating multiculturalism and what comes under the rubric of identity politics with the cultural logic of multinational capitalism, he proposes a project for political emancipation that rests on the notion of the "authentic act" (Žižek, 1997; 1999d). Depicting capitalism as the "Real" - "the unrepresentable kernel of being" (Žižek, 1999d, p.223) of our time, he asserts that what needs to be done is to repeat Lenin's radical gesture of redefining the ideological field of late capitalism, rather than succumbing to the calls for particularist struggles over identities (Žižek, 2002).

The main hypothesis of this thesis is that for any viable theory of political action the category of the subject and how it is conceptualized plays a crucial role. As I aim to demonstrate, the insistence of Žižek to preserve the category of the Cartesian subject and his assigning of political agency to the "self", which cannot be subsumed within a discourse allows for the possibility of emancipatory political agency. This endows the call for a Leninist intolerance with the possibility of avoiding the twin dangers of theoretical inconsistency and political resignation that haunts Laclau and Mouffe's proposal of hegemony as a socialist strategy.

However, although retaining the subject of political action enables Žižek to overcome these difficulties, the way it is conceptualized as the split subject may be no less problematic on its own terms.

This thesis is composed of two main chapters. The first chapter starts out with a discussion of the shared theoretical assumptions by these thinkers. In this respect, the ontological landscape of politics characterized by a radical incompleteness and the elevation of the political to the founding moment of society will be discussed. It will be followed by a section, which lays down the basic contours of Laclau and Mouffe's project for political practice. The chapter will conclude with a critical assessment of their proposal and a preliminary discussion of the way in which the theoretical framework provided by Slavoj Žižek can escape the paradoxes that Laclau and Mouffe encounter.

The application of Lacanian theory to the field of political analysis as elaborated by Žižek constitutes the theme of the second chapter. After contextualizing Žižek's work within the current historical conjuncture, I will discuss his conceptualization of universality, politics, and freedom. It will be followed by a section that focuses on the way in which he deals with the questions of the subject, political subjectivity and ethics.

The thesis will conclude with a discussion of the potential impasses that a conception of the political agency based on Lacanian psychoanalysis may encounter.



Chapter I:

SUBJECT and POLITICAL ACTION

"Does the self still exist? If not, whose human rights are we defending?"¹³ This ironic question posed by a group of human rights advocates can be employed in the service of a particular anxiety in the field of political philosophy following the deconstruction of the "I" of political action under the epistemological premises of the linguistic turn: If the self doesn't exist, then whose emancipatory action can we talk about? If the "I", the subject of political change is always-already subjected to and determined by the hegemonic social mechanisms, then whose agency is apt to bring about radical social transformation?

Through an interrogation of this question, I will argue for the following hypothesis. Due to their equating the agent of action with the "subjectivated subject" (Gambetti, 2002) the concept of emancipatory politics in the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe faces an impasse: While they posit politics as ontologically prior to and constitutive of the social, political action gets reduced to an instrumentalist logic confined within the boundaries of the

¹³ This question was posed in the letter of invitation addressed to a distinctive group of speakers participating in the Oxford Amnesty Lectures held in 1992 (Johnson, ed. 1993).

social, never playing the constitutive role it is purported to have.

In contrast, Žižek can escape this paradox precisely because in his framework the category of the "self," the subject of political action is not exhausted by the category of the socially constituted subject. To put it differently, his positing of a subject before subjectivation enables the concept of politics to retain its properly constitutive role without being reduced to an instrumentalist logic.

This chapter is organized under four subsections. The first section will explore the basic epistemological and ontological assumptions shared by these scholars. The conceptualization of society as a fundamentally dislocated structure and the assertion of the political nature of ontology figure among the most important features of their philosophical investigations and political analysis. In the following two sections, I will focus on the theory of hegemonic politics advanced by Laclau and Mouffe and provide a critical discussion of the nature of political action they derive from these ontological premises. My main concern will be to demonstrate that political action envisioned within this model stands in a paradoxical relation with the nature of the ontology they assert. The final section will be devoted to a preliminary discussion of Žižek's theoretical framework, which

will be further elaborated in the next chapter. Here, I will focus on the way he deals with the category of the subject in relation to the political agency and try to demonstrate how his conceptualization can by-pass the impasse that haunts the model elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe.

i. Ontological Landscape of Socio-politics: From Society to the Political

The social and political analysis of Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek is commonly identified as a discourse theoretical approach (Torfing, 1999; Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). The major feature of discourse theory is its acknowledgement of language and discourse as the constitutive dimension of social life. It emphasizes the symbolic dimension in the constitution of political identities and the determination of their terrain of political contestation. Rather than treating social structures as objectively given, discourse theoretical approaches view them as historical and contingent outcomes of political struggles.

The main assumption of discourse theory is that "all objects and actions are meaningful and that their meaning is conferred by historically specific systems of rules" (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p.2). In other words, the same objects and actions can hold different meanings and interpretations

depending on the way they are articulated within a specific discursive configuration. This assumption constitutes the premise upon which the whole social space is conceptualized as discursive and, hence, constitutes the ground for basing social analysis in the investigation of discursive formations.¹⁴

The notion about the impossibility of fixing the meaning of a given phenomenon is based on an understanding of language and interpretation elaborated by such figures as Saussure and Wittgenstein. In these models, each element in a system gains its identity through its differential relation to other elements within that system. Hence, every act of signification involves the totality of the system.

Laclau and Mouffe extend this insight into the impossibility of fixing the meaning of any given element to cover all identity formations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In other words, not only linguistic identities, but identities associated with all signifying structures (i.e., all social structures) are defined in terms of a differential system (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; 1987). In their model, this

¹⁴ In this respect, a discourse theoretical approach to social analysis stands in sharp contrast, for instance, with behaviorism since the latter espouses that it is possible to analyze and explain social phenomena by only observing the behaviors of actors without taking account of the meanings associated with them.

structuring principle in identity formation is referred to as the logic of difference (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.127-134).

Before going onto discuss the implications of conceptualizing society, all social configurations as discursive, the concept of discourse itself needs to be clarified. Discourse is defined as

...a social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between objects and practices, while providing (subject) positions with which social agents can identify. (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p.3)

For instance, a forest standing in the path of a proposed motorway may be understood and represented differently within different discursive configurations: within discourses of economic modernization it may be regarded as an obstacle and a disposable means to build the motorway to increase trade and achieve economic growth; whereas, within an environmentalist discourse it may represent an essential element of the ecosystem (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, pp. 2-3). In each of these cases, the discourses constitute the identity and the meaning of the element in question and identify subject positions (such as developers or eco-warriors) within them.¹⁵

¹⁵ It is important to notice that both linguistic (such as speech, writing) and non-linguistic elements (physical objects, nature, etc.) are part of a discursive formation. This is related to a conceptual differentiation made between the being (esse) of a thing and the thing as an entity (ens) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, pp.84-86). As Laclau and Mouffe emphasize

This point about the historical and contingent nature of discursive formations becomes most clear, for instance, in the case of social identities: in different historical or geographical contexts the same physical attributes may be valid to be called a "woman", but what it *means* to be a woman as a social identity - which is established through the medium of social discourse - will differ since "the fund of interpretative possibilities available to social agents" will be different in specific societies (Fraser, 1992, p. 178). To give the example used by Fraser (1992), interpretative possibilities for a late-twentieth century American would overlap very little with that available to the thirteenth-century Chinese woman (p.85).

The notion of discourse employed in this approach to social analysis is developed by Michel Foucault and is derivative of the way in which he theorized about power.¹⁶

(against the accusations that discursive character of an object puts into doubt its very existence), being of a thing, which is defined as historical and contingent, refers to its specific articulation within a discourse. Since all identities are in a differential relation with each other, the being of a thing cannot comprise a fixed essence. As a historical construct, being is always precarious and incomplete. In contrast, entity stands for a phenomenon's mere physical existence.

¹⁶ As mentioned above, Foucault asserted an immediate link between the exercise of power and production of knowledge. He elaborated the concept of "discourse" (collections of utterances governed by specific rules, which determine what can be said, by whom, with what effect) to study the power/ knowledge nexus as manifested in the disciplinary fields of human sciences. In his later works, he would extend the use of this concept, applying it to the analysis of power relations in modern societies. In contrast to traditional accounts, which depict power as something inhibiting and repressing, in Foucault's model power is viewed as **productive**. Discourses in this general scheme of power relations are

However, in their use of discourse theory, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) move a step further by dissolving the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices (pp.107-110). What can be identified as non-discursive complexes (namely, institutions, techniques, productive organizations, etc.) are also included within the discursive totality.

The consequence of this modification is that society itself is conceptualized as a discursive formation. This assertion (i.e., the claim that all meaningful conceptions of society are discursive) means that nothing positive can be said about society since it does not have an essence that can be directly accessed. It lacks an ultimate signifier with which to make it complete.

By stating that discourse is coextensive with the social, Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek thereby renounce a final closure of the social (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Torfing, 1999).¹⁷ As Laclau and Mouffe argue (1985) society as a self-defined, enclosed totality cannot be a unit of analysis since "society

productive in the sense that they construct not only objects of knowledge, but also subject positions (for individuals as well as for institutions) within that discourse. For a discussion of Foucault's concept of power and discourse see Rabinow (Ed.), 1994 and Hindess, 1996.

¹⁷ Within structural linguistics, relationship between signifieds (meanings) and signifiers (words) are stable and predictable. In post-structuralist analysis this link between the signified and signifier is forever disrupted: the signifier refers, not to a stable referent (signified), but to another signifier, making the latter a signified. Ultimately, this leads to a "non-representational" view of language since the signified is always transitory becoming itself a signifier (i.e., what is signified through language is never transparent) (Callinicos, 1985)

is not a valid object of discourse. There is no single underlying principle fixing - hence constituting the whole field of differences" (p.111).

Hence, every social totality is defined as a precarious system of discursive differences, characterized by a radical incompleteness. To put it differently, the social can never be represented in fullness and this is precisely why the socio-symbolic order is defined by a lack.¹⁸

This is a proposition that aims to remedy the problems encountered in certain Marxist accounts about the way in which different realms of the social (economic, political, ideological, etc.) interact.¹⁹ As Laclau and Mouffe note (1987):

There is no last instance on the basis of which society can be reconstructed as a rational and intelligible structure, but rather the relative efficacy of each

¹⁸ "Lack" or "loss" is a concept appropriated from the theory of subject developed by Jacques Lacan. Within the Lacanian psychoanalytic model, during each stage in the development of the psyche, the subject suffers a lack (self-loss), from the moment of its birth, through the process of its first recognition of the self (as an alienation in the mirror) till the moment when it enters into the symbolic order (as an alienation in language). It is never possible for the subject to return to a primordial point of original fullness.

¹⁹ One such account can be found in Althusser's base/superstructure model. In this model, the political is a superstructure determined by a base, which consists of the relations of production. Although Althusser devised this model to assert the "relative autonomy" of the politics from the economic sphere, he nevertheless asserted that the what goes on in the former is determined "in the last instance" by the latter (Althusser, 1962).

sphere depends on the unstable relation of antagonistic forces which entirely penetrates the social. (p.94)

Within the theoretical framework of Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek, both the society and the subject are characterized by this fundamental incompleteness, this "absent presence", which escapes the possibility of symbolization. Their meaning and identity are constituted through historical and contingent processes of identification that can never be finally completed or represented (Daly, 1996). This lack, which attests to the ultimate lack of meaning, is referred to as the "Real"²⁰ in Žižek and "antagonism" in Laclau and Mouffe.

As a result of the assertion of the radical incompleteness of both the given world and the subject that undertakes the construction of that world, discourse is elevated from being an epistemological question to a question of ontology (Glynos, 2001). In other words, the opposition is no longer between representations of society and society as such, but between representations of society and the failure of representation itself (Glynos, 2001, p.197). This point becomes most clear when Žižek writes (1989):

The subject cannot grasp Society as a close Whole, but this impotence has, so to speak, an immediate ontological

²⁰ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Real stands for what cannot be symbolized and as such "corresponds to the limits, and limitations of language" (Kay, 2003, p.168).

status: it bears witness to the fact that Society itself does not exist, that it is marked by a radical impossibility. (p.178)

In other words, an "epistemological impotence" (the impossibility of establishing an absolute truth about the object of knowledge (i.e., society and the subject) transforms into "an ontological impossibility" (the defining feature of the object itself) (Žižek, 1989, p.178)

The elevation of discourse to an ontological level amounts to the emancipation of the political (Stavrakakis, 1999, pp.71-75). Since the formation of discourses involve the exercise of power, the political comes to be defined as what brings the social into being. This is because the constitution of discourses involves the exclusion of some possibilities and the structuring of the relations between different social agents. Any representation of reality involves a constant struggle of power and interpretation. Hence, the political is elevated to an ontological level. It becomes the constitutive and subversive dimension of the social order because:

The political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and

that determines our very ontological condition (Mouffe, 1993, p.3)

While politics is defined as antagonistic fights as they take place within the already institutionalized reality (hegemonic struggles between already constructed political projects), the political is no longer considered as a separate social domain, but is conceived as the very set of contingent decisions that ground the social. This contrast between politics and the political as the moment of pure antagonism is depicted by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in a very lucid way when they write:

Politics as a practice of creation cannot be located at a determinate level of the social, as the problem of the political is the problem of the institution of the social, that is, of the definition and articulation of social relations in a field criss-crossed with antagonisms. (p.153)

The logic of antagonism entails a double limit: it constitutes both the "limits of objectivity" since antagonism sets the boundaries for the discursive formation of society and "the limits of society" since it prevents society from fully constituting itself as an objective and fully intelligible reality (Laclau, 1990; and Mouffe, 1985, p.125).

Instead of antagonism, Žižek uses the notion of the "Real" to refer to the (im)possibility of the socio-symbolic order to constitute itself as a totality (Žižek, 1994). Žižek adopts this notion from Lacan, who uses the term in a number of ways to describe the formation of subjectivity - the subject's becoming aware of itself as a distinct entity and its entry into the symbolic order (the order of language) (Sarrup, 1988).

To sum up, the defining feature of the discourse theoretical approach used by Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek is the *political* nature of ontology that is based on the idea of the radical incompleteness of the social and the impossibility of finding an ultimate grounding for truth claims.

ii. Laclau and Mouffe's Proposal for a Theory and a Political Practice

Laclau and Mouffe position their intellectual project as a response both at the level of theory (against the impasse of Marxist theorization since the mid 1970s) and at the level of political practice (problems confronted by socialist strategy under the conditions of late capitalism) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.viii-ix). It is an attempt to recast the central categories of Marxist theorization through a deconstructive re-appropriation of this intellectual tradition so as to

provide an understanding of the new antagonisms and the new issues faced in contemporary societies, which lie beyond the conceptual grasp of the traditional Marxist categories. The reflection of this theoretical endeavour on political practice takes the form of a prescription of "radical democracy" as the most viable alternative for a socialist strategy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 149-194; Mouffe 1992, pp.1-16).

As a theoretical project, Laclau and Mouffe relate the possibility of articulating a post-marxist project to the philosophical advancements, which are made since Marx's day, with the works of thinkers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987). Furthermore, developments in various other disciplinary fields such as linguistics (starting with Saussure and the development of structural linguistics) and the insights provided by psychoanalysis (the works of Sigmund Freud and later by Jacques Lacan) has enabled to break with philosophical essentialism that Marx could not have accomplished within the 19th century matrix of philosophical thought (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, pp.87-88).

As a political project, Laclau and Mouffe point to the historical transformations that have taken place as the reason for the necessity to rethink the socialist project. In this respect, they identify three crucial historical

transformations and their effects as the factors that has provided the impetus: the decline of the classical working class due to the structural transformations of capitalism; the new forms of protest - as evidenced in the new social movements in advanced industrial countries and the mass mobilizations in the third world- which has been spurred by the dislocatory effects of increasing penetration of capitalist relations of production in ever so widening spheres of social life; finally, the discrediting of the model of societies put into effect in the countries of 'actually existing socialism' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p.80).

Within the intellectual trajectory of Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy as the product of this endeavor to rethink Marxism represents a breaking point (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). For, this work represents the first attempt to reformulate Gramsci's concept of hegemony through a discourse theoretical approach. Proceeding from a critique of essentialism, Laclau and Mouffe deconstruct Marxist ontology in which all identity is reduced to a class essence and society is conceptualized as something whose true substantive nature we can access directly. In this respect, the significance of Laclau and Mouffe's work stems from their deconstruction of the economic space, revealing that the "truth"

about the economy is as much a social construct as any realm of the social.

As discussed above, in Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical model, the political moment is assigned primacy within their social ontology. Discourses, together with the identities and interests produced through them, are inherently *political* entities that involve the construction of antagonisms and the exercise of power. The social systems are depicted as having a fundamentally political character in the sense that they are always vulnerable to those forces that are excluded in the process of political formation (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000).

It is this social ontology, which enables Laclau and Mouffe to "get rid of the last essentialist remnant in Gramsci" (Torfing, 1999, p.36). It is argued that in his conceptualization of hegemony, Gramsci still retained the economy as an objectively given, non-discursive sphere of the social and the nature of the political struggle was defined by this so-called objective reality, assigning political agents their interests and identities. However, for Laclau and Mouffe the space of the economy is itself structured as a political space (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 76-7). In it, as in any other level of society, those practices characterized as hegemonic are fully operative. At the level of society, there

is no objective basis to assign the economic sphere a privileged place among other spheres constituting the social. Given the premise that there is no last instance on the basis of which society can be reconstructed as a rational and intelligible structure "the relative efficacy of each sphere depends on the unstable relation of antagonistic forces which entirely penetrates the social" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p.94).

The same goes at the level of political subjects. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the thesis of "false consciousness" is premised on the idea that interests are objectively given - that "social agents have interests of which they are not conscious" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p.87). This is based on the assumption that social agents are not part of a process in which their interests are constructed; they merely recognize them. However, as they note, interests are also socially constructed by a historical process that takes place through ideological, discursive, institutional practices (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; 1987).

The elevation of the primacy of the political moment (hence, the assertion that there is no such thing as an ahistorical, pre-given, objective realm of "the" economy) translates into the claim that nothing definite can be said about the nature or logic of capitalism either. In other

words, one cannot predict whether the contextual character of capitalism will be articulated as a neoliberal, a socialist or even as a fascist construction. What goes on within the economic sphere is not the outcome of the internal logic of capitalism, but the result of political struggles.

In conceptual terms, this is a consequence of their abandonment of the concept of "contradiction" in favor of "antagonism" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.122-127). Contradictions, which drive the dialectical process, are objectively given and impose a logic of necessity, inevitability. What distinguishes a relation of antagonism from a dialectic contradiction is that the former is not a calculable outcome of a structural contradiction (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.-152-159).

As a corollary to this point, they introduce the distinction between three types of relations, which involve the exercise of power - subordination, oppression, and domination (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.153-154). A relation of subordination is defined as "that in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of another"; whereas, a relation of oppression stands for "those relations of subordination, which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonisms" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.153). The crucial point that should be highlighted in this distinction is that, in Laclau

and Mouffe's model, there is no oppression per se; it is brought into being only through discursive articulations, which construct a relation of subordination as one of oppression. To give an example, "serf" or "slave" do not in themselves designate antagonistic positions. It is only in terms of a different discursive formation such as human rights that this subordination can be constructed as an oppression (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.154). Likewise, it is only with the advancement of the democratic discourse that the relations of inequality between sexes can give way to a political project such as feminism.

One of the most important implications of this analysis is that class struggle transforms into an antagonism without a contradiction (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). Since nothing objective can be said about the relation between labor and capital, it is only through its transformation into sites of antagonism that it can be constructed as a relation of oppression.

The way in which Laclau and Mouffe deal with the theoretical question of the emergence antagonism holds crucial importance for the way they formulate the practical political question of political action and agency. One point that can be made in advance is that oppression and the emergence of an antagonism - hence, the possibility of political agency - is

defined at the level of political identities. In other words, antagonism turns into a social experience within which particular identities face an enemy deemed to threaten or negate the very being of the social group in question (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.122-127). Political action takes effect through the politicization of identities of social agents. In other words, it is at the level of "political subjectivity" that agency takes effect. For example, "it is because a peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from his land" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.125). To put differently, the peasant is not a totality with a self-contained and stable identity. The identity of the peasant is forged through its antagonistic relationship with the landlord qua Other, which negates its identity.

As a corollary to the way they define antagonistic struggles (i.e., its socially constructed nature), political identities do not have an essentially objective character either. They cannot be determined prior to the context in which they emerge. Since the distinction between real and false interests or needs around which social agents are formed is bound up with the effort to define social reality, political struggle thus becomes a process with an

intrinsically symbolic dimension in which objectivity itself is part of the contest.

Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of political identities and agency is very much bound up with their approach to the question of subject and subjectivity. In this framework it is no longer the subject that is the originator of political action; rather, agency is derived from the multiple "subject positions" that a subject occupies (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.115-122). Before clarifying what is meant by "subject positions" and "political subjectivity", it is first necessary to understand how Laclau and Mouffe handle the category of the subject.

With regards to the subject, Laclau and Mouffe make two important propositions. On the one hand, their view of the "subject" relies on the anti-foundationalist critique of the individual as depicted by the Enlightenment and humanist traditions, which attribute the subject a strictly constitutive role, designating it as the origin of social relations.²¹ In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe posit that "subject as such" is itself a discursive construct and that it cannot

²¹ This view of the 'transcendental subject' is based on the assumption that there is such a thing as the essence of 'Man'. The "Cartesian subject" is one such account which views the individual as a rational and conscious actor who can understand the basis for his action. As discussed above, the anti-humanist critique dispenses with the category of the 'transcendental subject', demonstrating the impossibility of its unity and homogeneity. Laclau and Mouffe directly incorporate this anti-humanist position on the subject into their framework.

be the origin and basis of social relations. The crucial point that needs to be emphasized is that, as they criticize the essentialist conception of the subject, they *totally* dispense with this category. In the place of the subject they substitute the concept of subject positions. This is stated most explicitly when they write that the subject whenever employed is used "in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 p.115).

On the other hand, since every individual is inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations (not only relations of production, but also social relations of sex, race, nationality, etc.), each individual is described as occupying a multiplicity of subject positions. For instance, no one is simply a "woman" or a "man"; s/he is a worker, a mother/father, a Muslim, etc. all at the same time. Consequently, instead of a homogenous subject with pre-given, objective interests, what we have is the de-centered subject, who is the "locus of many subject positions" (Mouffe, 1988, p.90) and who gains stability, identity through ideological practices.

The discursive nature of subject positions prevents the a priori determination of the exact relationship between them (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.115-116). In other words, just as the subject is the locus of multiple subject positions, which

subject position will come to occupy a predominant role will depend on the social context within which these subject positions are articulated.²²

While the concept of "subject positions" accounts for the multiple forms by which agents are produced as social actors, how they experience their social relations, the concept of "political subjectivity" refers to the way in which social actors act (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p.13). As discussed in the previous section, the subject is defined by a "lack" which can never be mastered within the socio-symbolic order. As Howarth and Stavrakakis also note (2000), the flip side of the idea of the subject as lack is "the recognition of the fact that the subject is always attempting to cover over this constitutive lack in the level of representation, through continuous identification acts" (p.35). Hence, political subjectivity is constituted through these processes of identification with socially available discursive constructions such as ideologies.

This particular way of conceptualizing political subjectivity is the reason why hegemony plays such a crucial role since hegemony, rather than taking pre-constituted identities as the starting point of politics, emphasizes the

²² In other words, "one is not always a woman in the same degree" (Fraser, p.178). The degree to which one's womanhood will figure centrally will depend on the social context that the individual is immersed in.

construction of identities through politics. Political identities are constituted through the hegemonic process of "articulation"²³, which unify a multiplicity of demands (subject positions) around a generalized antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.134-145).

Political action through hegemonic articulation creates political and ideological frontiers among different political groups and constructs the very social entities, which have to be emancipated through political action (Laclau, 2000, p.306). It involves the articulation of different identities and subjectivities into one common project, thereby generating "chains of equivalence" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.127-145). Particular identities are unified ("hegemonized") by constructing chains of equivalence amongst their different demands and by positioning them against an oppressor. The sense of threat generated by this process modifies the identity of the group, causing it to lose its differential character in relation to other groups within the chain and permits it to be placed alongside them in a common space.

As mentioned above, social totality is conceptualized as a contingent outcome of discursive struggles. It does not constitute a closed frame, but is open to new interpretations,

²³ Articulation is defined as "any practice that establishes relations among elements within a signifying chain such that they gain a certain meaning and their identity is modified as a result" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.105).

new representations all the time. It is the hegemonic practices themselves, which constitute this frame itself (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.302-306).

What triggers the struggle for hegemony is the process of dislocation. Dislocation refers to the social process through which the contingent nature of these discursive constructs become visible (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.144). It is a moment of radical instability, which "creates a lack at the level of meaning" (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p.13). As such, dislocation opens the way for generating new discourses to master this lack anew.

An "empty signifier" plays a crucial role in the hegemonic practices of articulation and the emergence of the new collective wills. An empty signifier is defined as a sign (i.e., concepts such as justice, freedom, and order) that loses its particular reference and comes to stand as the symbol, the unifying theme that articulates a variety of identities and demands (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.209-211). They are "empty anchoring points on the level of social imaginary" and it is their empty character that universalizes a discourse, making it the surface of inscription of a plurality of demands (Butler, et al., 2000, p.210). In the process of social struggle, through a hegemonic move, one particularity, a specific social group tries to

present itself as the incarnation of this "absent fullness" as the unique social agency able to embody the universal demand alluded by the empty signifier.

An example provided by Laclau can help to clarify these theoretical points (Laclau, 1995, pp.153-155). In this example Laclau refers to the universalization of the popular symbols of Peronism in the aftermath of the coup, which overthrew the Peronist regime in 1955. During the following two decades, the ruling governments were incapable of meeting the rising demands of popular masses. These demands came from different groups, each asking for a different thing. However, through the particularity of their demands something equally present in all of them (i.e., the fact that they all opposed to the regime) was expressed. In other words, this equivalence among the groups did not embody an a priori unity; rather, the relation of equivalence emerged when the demands they extended were rejected by the ruling regime. As the chain of equivalence widened, the need for a general equivalent representing the chain as a whole increased. Under these circumstances Peron, who was sent in exile after the 1955 coup, was in a perfect position to become the "empty signifier" since he could assume the function of universal representation for all of these popular demands against the regime.

What is crucial for this conceptualization is the idea that a politics of particularity inherently involves a moment of universality (Laclau, 1995). In other words, when a particular group raises a particular demand, this should never be viewed as particularistic because it will always invoke a universal normative ideal that will have relevance for all other demands and struggles. However, this universal ideal exists only as pure, abstract form. For example, the word "justice" (at the level of form) evoked by the oppositional forces against a ruling regime can resonate both with a group asking for a rise in the level of their wages and another group asserting the equal right to education.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this section, what has instigated Laclau and Mouffe to reconceptualize the Gramscian concept of hegemony is not only a theoretical concern, but just as importantly, a political necessity stemming from the need to accommodate radical politics to the realities of the day.

According to Laclau and Mouffe the contemporary era is defined by two interrelated movements almost in a dialectical fashion, which one is surprised to find in their strictly post-structuralist framework. On the one hand, the new relations of subordination are effected through a triple process: commodification of social relations brought about by

the penetration of the logic of capitalist accumulation into increasingly numerous domains of individual and collective life; bureaucratization of the state and the imposition of multiple forms of vigilance and regulation; and homogenization of social life with the expansion of the means of mass communication (Laclau and Mouffe, pp.159-175).

On the other hand, each new form of subordination has led to the expansion of the field of conflictuality and the emergence of new political subjects: commodification has invoked political resistance within the very coordinates of the emergent consumer society (productivism, consumerism, and urbanization leading to environmental movements, struggles over the provision of services etc.); bureaucratization, by politicizing social relations previously conceived as private, has opened the way for movements which voice more demands from the state (such as the 'Welfare Rights Movement'); finally, homogenization of social life is accompanied by the resistance of the very targets of this culture (such as the rebellion of the young who are constructed as a specific category of consumer) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.159-175).

All these developments have led to the dispersion of subject positions and the emergence of new political subjectivities, which cannot be subsumed under the class category. Their proposal for a project of "radical democracy"

through hegemonic struggles follows from this social diagnosis (Laclau and Mouffe, pp.149-171). The notion of the "democratic revolution" plays a pivotal role in this respect.

The dislocations caused by the emergence and expansion of capitalist relations of production has been paralleled by the creation of a new form of collective imaginary - what Laclau and Mouffe (1987) name as the "democratic imaginary" (p.104). This new form, which is based on the principles of equality and liberty, is the product of the democratic revolution, initiated with the French Revolution and the declaration of the Rights of Man. Starting with the anti-capitalist struggles and culminating in the new social movements of the contemporary era, all these struggles against the incursions of capitalism and the proliferation of new forms of subordination have employed the democratic discourse.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the democratic discourse prevents the stabilization of the novel forms of subordination as difference. In this way, it allows the formation of collective struggles around the empty signifiers of equality and liberty. Consequently, their proposal for a project of radical democracy is the project of "radicalizing" the moment of democratization by creating an "expansive hegemony" a chain of equivalences between all the democratic demands voiced through the plurality of struggles and producing a collective

will of all those subjects struggling against subordination (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp.176-193).

A couple of striking points emerge from this social analysis and political prescription for the Left. It is argued that "it is impossible to specify a priori surfaces for the emergence of antagonisms" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.180). Hence, they do not privilege any particular struggle over another. Furthermore, instead of a revolution that seeks to replace the liberal democratic order with a completely new form of political society, it is asserted that what is needed is to extend and deepen the basic principles of the democratic tradition. The democratic revolution, in a sense, is seen as a pebble thrown into the water, creating the potential for the emergence of ever expanding waves of democratization through the proliferation of radically new and different political spaces. From this it is concluded that, what the Left needs to do is to create an expansive discourse constructed out of, not against, the proliferation of these particularities, of the plurality of subjects as the effects of this democratic tradition (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000).

iii. Politics of Identity as the Politics of a Ceaseless Present

For Laclau and Mouffe, identity politics embodied in the new social movements provides the conceptual and practical horizon upon which a politics of emancipation becomes a theoretically apt category and a politically relevant project in the contemporary era. They argue that the way to freedom and emancipatory political action passes through the formation of alliances and coalitions within the framework of particularistic struggles in the name of an absent universal. In other words, identity politics exemplifies the form and the nature that emancipatory politics should adhere to in terms of both the goals of the struggle and the strategy to pursue those goals.

Politics of hegemony entails the articulation of new forms of subjectivity, thereby, the constitution of new forms of political agency. Political agency emerges as an effect of subject positions and political action is conceptualized as a dwelling, a movement within the discursively constructed socio-symbolic universe, which is always-already there. To put it differently, political agents speak the words they are themselves spoken to through the hegemonic social mechanisms.

As outlined above, the moment of dislocation in the social structure, which puts social identities into crisis,

unleashes the processes of identification when political subjects are forced to identify with certain political projects and the discourses they articulate. Since it is in this process of identification that political subjects as agents are created, what accounts for change, then, is the "freedom of the structure" (Laclau, 1996, p.18) and not of the subject of action since the latter "is bound to seek its own identity and existence in categories, relations and terms that are not its own making" (Butler, 1997, p.2).

Precisely because of this, the political moment in hegemonic politics, can never be a moment of generating new words, new vocabularies, but only a moment of re-negotiating the historically and socially produced meanings. Identity politics, with its emphasis on the here and now - the ceaseless today imposed by the existing parameters of liberalism and capitalism - can only bring about "innately contextual and historically specific, hence limited forms of freedom" (Brown, 1995, p.7).

Laclau and Mouffe's project of radical democracy equates the goals of political action with the "effort to obtain new rights and to defend endangered ones." (Mouffe, 1988, p.96) Emancipatory struggles take the form of asserting one's demand for recognition of one's particularity and for the right to preserve that particularity through the legal measures made

available under the liberal rights regime (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1988).

The problem with this analysis is very well elaborated by Wendy Brown, who, drawing from the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault, demonstrates the paradoxical relationship between the concept of freedom and identity and how rights sought by identity "for itself" become "in themselves" a means of administration (Brown, 1995). When political action is reduced to the extension of rights claims for politicized identities, politics becomes an instrument for "healing the pains" of social identities without transforming the structuring principle that grounds the social and affects the fabrication of these identities in the first place.

A similar point is also raised by Žižek in his discussion of the flaws of "historicism" (Žižek, 1999d; Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000). While *historicism* deals with the endless play of substitutions within the same field of (im)possibility, *historicity* proper makes thematic the structural principles of this very (im)possibility. In other words, historicism takes what exists (what is actual) as what is real, instead of inquiring into the historical conditions that grounds it. When political action founds itself on historicism - what Žižek refers also as "precipitate historicization" (Žižek, 1999d, p.72), it gets caught within

the coordinates of one's own historical horizon. In the case of identity politics, political action is confined to the assertion of one's particular identity against the threat posed by the Other to that identity within the antagonistic relation. Hence, it takes its cue from an immediate negation of the Other. As Žižek points out, such an assertion does not provide the ground to examine how the identity of one's own position is actually *mediated* by the Other, thereby failing to question the structuring principle of the socio-historical order (Žižek, 1999d, p.70-124). In other words, it resembles the case of a "worker who wants to survive as a worker without a capitalist" (Žižek, 1999d, p.72). Rather than a liberation from that identity, it leads to its assertion. To put it differently, the freedom it allows for is a freedom *in* and *through* particular identities and not in spite of them.

Consequently, within the political space that identity politics opens up, politics is deprived of the constitutive role that Laclau and Mouffe confer to it. It gets reduced to an instrument, becoming merely a means for the negotiation and mediation between political subjectivities around an empty universal. When the political identities of agents are entrapped within the constraints of socially determined categories, political "acts" mutate into a mundane "activity" of confirming identities (Žižek, 1999d). Such a political

space can accommodate the re-articulation of identities, but never the redefinition of the political horizon within which those identities are articulated. The political, as a moment of openness and undecidability, transforms into an instance of dwelling within a "ceaseless today" (Argin, 2003, p.80). Within such a conceptualization, politics cannot enable political actors to break themselves from the "imprisonment of their private experiences" (Arendt, 1998). Consequently, the particularistic struggles get entrapped within the immediacy of today and preclude the political from ever becoming a moment of reflection on a collective future.

iv. Reclaiming the Subject

As will be argued below, Žižek can escape the theoretical impasse that Laclau and Mouffe face by his assigning of political agency not to the subject positions generated by social structures, but to the subject, to the self. By employing the Lacanian category "the Real", which is "the unrepresentable kernel of being", he de-links the "subject of enunciation" from the "enunciated subject" (Žižek, 1993, pp.9-44). This conceptual move leaves him with the room to maneuver and develop a theory of emancipatory political action that can transcend the boundaries imposed by the discursively constructed limits of agency permitted by subject positions.

An obstinate refusal to dispense with the category of the subject is one of the main sites of disagreement that sets Žižek apart from not only Laclau and Mouffe, but also from a wide network of academic powers, who constitute -in the words of Žižek (1999d) - "the holy alliance to exorcize the specter of the Cartesian subject" (p.1).

Drawing from the theories of Jacques Lacan, he argues for "an empty, non-substantial conception of the Cartesian subject" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.226). Žižek defines the subject as the empty place, the irreducible void that remains when "all the richness of the different modes of subjectivation, all the fullness of experience present in the way the individuals are 'living' their subject-positions" (Žižek, 1989, p.174) are subtracted.

Consequently, the Lacanian subject cannot be reduced to an effect of the non-subjective processes of subjectivation (i.e., the socio-symbolic processes that constitute the subject as a social agent). The self is not a compilation of how individuals live, experience their positions as 'subjects', 'actors' (Žižek, 1989, p.174). To put it differently, the agency that says "I" (i.e., at the level of enunciation) is always in excess of "everything that I positively am" (i.e., at the level of enunciated content)

(Žižek, 1993, p.40). The category of the subject, the self cannot be exhausted by the subject positions it occupies.

This claim stands in sharp contrast to the approach elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe, who identify the subject with subject positions. On the contrary, the subject for Žižek is precisely that which remains when all the socially determined aspects, all the discursively constituted layers are peeled off. In this sense, the self is the "zero-point of humanity" (Žižek, 2001b, pp.74-81).

As a corollary to the assertion that the subject cannot be reduced to the processes of subjectivation, political agency derives from this self, this "void" that can never be fully represented within the given socio-symbolic structures. In other words, contrary to Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek derives political subjectivity and agency, not from the subject positions, but from this subject, which is "an answer of the Real" (Žižek, 1989, p.178).²⁴

A properly political subject emerges through the "act", when political agents redefine themselves and symbolize what cannot be symbolized within the given coordinates of the existing power relations (Žižek, 2002). The moment of the authentic political action is conceptualized as "the moment of

²⁴ Žižek adopts the category of the Real from Lacanian psychoanalysis. See footnote 9. This concept will be further explored in the next chapter.

constitution of subjectivity as such" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, pp.123-124). It is the moment when political subjects *redefine* themselves.

What is important to notice here is that, for Žižek, unlike Laclau and Mouffe, real political struggle takes place at the level of subjects and not between subject positions. This is closely connected to the political nature of ontology since:

Politics is not a consequence of the pre-political gap in the order of Being or the non-coincidence of the social-subject with itself. Social-subject itself is never complete and self-identical. Consequently, the social-being itself is always-already based on a (disavowed) gesture of politicization and, as such, thoroughly political. (Žižek, 1999d, p.169)

Real antagonism, then, is not an opposition, which takes place within the established symbolic universe. In other words, in a real antagonism, what is at stake is not the symbolic difference between already constituted subjects (at the level of symbolic determination - the level of enunciated content), as Laclau and Mouffe would have it (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). Rather, real antagonism involves a contradiction between "the void of the subject's pure being-for-himself" (i.e., position of enunciation) and "the

signifying feature which represents him for the others" (i.e., the enunciated content) (Žižek, 1993, pp.131-133). And it is precisely this radically political nature of the subject and the political agency assigned to it (instead of the political subjectivities effected through social structures) which allows the political to retain its constitutive role.

The political moment proper requires the subversion of the existing discursive horizon and the enactment of a new discursive terrain because "radical antagonism means not only that it is impossible to represent the fullness of Society, but also the *impossibility to represent this very antagonism/negativity* that prevents Society from achieving its full ontological realization" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.100). Since the political is conceptualized not as a specific social domain but the very set of contingent decisions that ground the social, the political moment par excellence arises when the very structuring principle of society, the fundamental form of its social pact is called into question. Consequently, rather than solving 'a variety of partial problems' through particularistic struggles, what is required is a universal struggle, which can bring about a global transformation; a transformation that would transform "the very fundamental structural principle of society, as

happened with the emergence of the democratic invention" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.93).

This point could be rephrased by revisiting the argument extended by Laclau and Mouffe, in their discussion of the tension between the "logic of difference" (society as a differential symbolic structure) and the "logic of antagonism" (society as 'impossible', thwarted by an antagonistic split). When they conclude that the Left should endorse the struggle for hegemony around an empty universal within the horizon constituted by the democratic invention (the project of radical democracy), what Laclau and Mouffe oversee (or refuse to acknowledge) is that the terrain on which these particularistic struggles will take place (the logic of difference as operative) is always-already contaminated by the disavowal of a particular content (the logic of antagonism). In other words, they do not "distinguish between contingency *within* a certain historical horizon and the more fundamental exclusion/ foreclosure *that grounds this very horizon*" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.108). For, the political (contingent struggles for hegemony) becomes "operative in so far as it undergoes a minimum of naturalization (of the antagonistic split)" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.100).

Reviewing the criticisms raised by Žižek against identity politics may be helpful in clarifying his stance towards the

conceptualization of politics and political agency and how in his framework politics retains its ontologically privileged place. According to Žižek, political agency derived from particular subject positions, as is the case with identity politics, can never open up a properly political space because politics proper cannot be reduced to a process of re-signification - a matter of resistance to the socially given (Žižek, 1999d; 2002). Particularistic struggles, rather than creating the very set of alternatives, amount to choosing from the already constituted alternatives. For this reason, remaining within the parameters of identity politics deprives politics of its dignity, turning the political realm into a "spiritual animal kingdom" (Žižek, 2002, p.549). In such a conceptualization of political agency, political subjects ground the authority of their speech on their status as victims of circumstances beyond their control, namely the socially determined processes of subject constitution. In this sense, politics of identity speak the language of "victimization" and, instead of providing the ground to call into question the social edifice, it turns politics into a "politics of police" (Žižek, 1999d, pp.198-205) In other words, politics becomes an instrument for the administration of social matters, while remaining within the framework of existing socio-political relations (the order of being).

Rather than being a moment that allows for the emergence of an authentic inter-subjective community, politics transmutes into a process of addressing and redressing the injuries of social identities through legal expertise, rational calculation and management within the existing field of possibilities. Not the dignity of man, but the ability to experience pain, which man shares with animals becomes the fundamental ethical criterion (Žižek, 2002).

This point raised by Žižek about the contemporary "post-political era" - when politics gets reduced to an activity of "policing" and protecting the lives of "endangered species" becomes the sole aim of political action - mirrors a similar concern shared by Hannah Arendt about "the rise of the social" and the way in which politics turns into a means of administering the "behavior" of man in the modern era (Arendt, 1998). According to Arendt, when the realm of the social takes over the political realm of the public sphere, what constitutes the substance of politics is not what is unique to individuals, but what is common to all of them, namely their biological necessities as human beings. Politics, then, starts to be thought along strictly utilitarian criteria, as a means to ensure the biological sustenance of human beings.

Identity politics brings about a de-politicized view of society since from this perspective "every particular group is accounted for, has its specific status (of victim) acknowledged through measures destined to guarantee social justice" (Žižek, 1999d, p.208). Hence, asking to be recognized for a particularity or for a right deprives political actors from the potential to transcend the coordinates of their specific situation and to speak for a universal wrong that could invoke the restructuring of the entire social space.

Crucial for this analysis is Žižek's understanding of social antagonism and his differentiation between "horizontal differences" and "vertical antagonism that cuts through the social body" (Žižek, 2001d). The logic of "horizontal differences" is based on the view that society is constituted by a variety of horizontal differences of an equivalent and complementary nature. It is equivalent to saying that "big bad dinosaurs" and "small oppressed ones" appear different, but deep inside they are ultimately the same (Žižek, 2001d, p.64). As such, horizontal differences take place within the established symbolic universe and the ultimate aim of politics becomes renegotiating the limits of inclusion/ exclusion so that the symbolic field will be more and more open to the voices of those who are excluded from the public discourse. Politics of identity operates along this logic, which sees a

variety of "horizontal" differences that a political organization should take responsibility for maintaining.

Žižek proposes that what this occludes is the possibility of a "vertical antagonism". "Vertical antagonism" is defined as that which cannot be represented within the given symbolic order (Žižek, 2001d, pp.98-99). Hence, it designates "a position for which there is no place in the public space" (Žižek, 2001d, p.99). Ultimately, we are not all the same underneath our differences.

Contrary to identity politics, a properly political act would be one that insists upon revealing antagonisms rather than differences of identity. For Žižek, class antagonism is this specific antagonism in the age of global capitalism.

To sum up, Žižek points to the category of the subject, rather than subject positions, as the potential sight for emancipatory political action and agency. As will be discussed in greater detail below, the subject becomes a political agent by making an ethico-political decision and committing itself to the "act". Political agency through an "authentic act" brings into being "a properly political space against the onslaught of all embracing social body" (Žižek, 1999d, p.196). Consequently, politics, rather than being leveled out as an instrument of contingent mediations between an empty universal

and particular elements, retains its ontologically primary status as constitutive of the social.



Chapter II:

POLITICAL ACTION AND REVOLUTIONARY ETHOS

In the previous chapter, I tried to illustrate how the project of Slavoj Žižek can escape the paradox faced by Laclau and Mouffe with respect to the constitutive role of the political by adhering to a conception of political agency, which derives not from the subject positions, but from the subject. Within Žižek's theoretical framework the subject of political action is no longer the "subjectivated subject" of the existing socio-symbolic order (i.e., subject is where ideology fails), but the self that can transcend the coordinates of that order. By reclaiming the subject, it becomes possible to free political agency from the limits of already constituted, available discourses that govern existing reality. As such, the subject of political action becomes endowed with the capacity to open up a political space where it becomes possible to transcend the order of being and to "change the coordinates of the very field of meaning" (Žižek, TOT, p.132).

In this chapter, I will elaborate further on those aspects of Žižek's political thought that relates to these points and provide an account of the way in which Žižek's unique interpretative blend of Hegelian dialectics, historical

materialism and Lacanian psychoanalysis enables him to articulate a theory of political action that can avoid the trap, which Laclau and Mouffe cannot avoid, but fall into. As I will try to demonstrate below, while Žižek incorporates the definition of antagonism provided by Laclau and Mouffe, the twist he introduces to the heart of this concept by identifying it as "social antagonism qua Real" constitutes a crucial theoretical move which enables him to formulate an account of political agency (in the form of the "act") animated by a revolutionary ethos.

This chapter is composed of three sections. I will start out with a discussion of the socio-political analysis provided by Žižek and highlight the points, which differentiate his stance from those of Laclau and Mouffe. In the following section, I will explore the theoretical and conceptual elements, which provide the framework for this analysis. The category of the subject, the concept of universality and the relation between ethics and politics will constitute the pivotal points of this discussion. In the concluding section I will tie the points raised to a discussion of Žižek's conceptualization of political agency and clarify why Lenin is embraced by Žižek as the exemplary political figure.

i) Globalized Capitalism and the Political Scene

The ideological "denkverbot" (prohibition to think) that prefigures the current constellations in the academic and political imaginaries is a recurrent issue that keeps surfacing in Žižek's writings (Žižek, 1999b; 2002). According to Žižek, this fundamental "denkverbot" is none other than taking literally Fukuyama's thesis that we have reached the end of history and that capitalism and liberal democracy constitute the ultimate horizon of our political experience. In Žižek's (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000) own words:

Proliferation of new political subjectivities, the demise of essentialist fixation, the assertion of full contingency occur against the background of a silent renunciation and acceptance: the renunciation of the idea of a global change in the fundamental relations in our society and the acceptance of the liberal democratic order which remains the same, the unquestioned background. (p.326)

With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet experiment, what gets lost from the political debates is the issue of alternative projects for the socio-political ordering of our societies. Although it would be naïve to assert that the actual experiments with a socialist model has been true to the pronounced goals of socialism, it is nonetheless important

to realize that as a historico-political project it posed a challenge to its ideological "other" - namely, liberal, capitalist society. That is why Žižek aims to remind us again and again that contrary to the claims that we have entered a "post-ideological" era, what we are witnessing today is the prevalence of one ideological (liberal, capitalist) project over others:

A couple of decades ago, people were still discussing the political future of humanity - will capitalism prevail or will it be supplanted by Communism or another form of 'totalitarianism'?... Today, we can easily imagine the extinction of human race, but it is impossible to imagine a radical change of the social system - even if life on earth disappears, capitalism will somehow remain intact. (Žižek, 1999a, p.14)

According to Žižek the disappearance of economy as the fundamental site of struggle is the primary manifestation of this ideological denkverbot (Žižek and Daly, 2004, pp.144-145). As we have seen in the previous chapter, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the economy is only one among multiple discursive terrains within which political struggles take place and that it is not possible to privilege one specific struggle (class politics) over others.

Consequently, the main political question that sets Žižek apart from Laclau and Mouffe is his emphasis on the need to revisit the Marxist critique of political economy and his depiction of class struggle as the specific antagonism, predominating over all other social antagonisms (Žižek, 1999d, pp.347-364; Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, pp.316-326). Contrary to the claims that, to save the legacy of Marxism, one has to renounce its economic essentialism (the notions of class struggle, the role of proletariat, socialist revolution, etc.) and maintain only its "messianic emancipatory potential" (Žižek, 1999b), Žižek asserts that any prescription for a radical political project has to take into account the fact that "capitalism is not just a historical epoch among others" (Žižek, 2001c, p.1) and that class struggle is not merely one form of identity politics.

Žižek's perspective on contemporary capitalist globalization as "a force of radical de-territorialization" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.329) is very close to the analysis provided by Hardt and Negri (2000) in their book, Empire. As briefly discussed in the Introduction, Hardt and Negri (2000) employ the concept of "empire" to capture the new logic and structure of rule materializing with the emergence of a global market and global circuits of production. It is a rule that "operates in all registers of the social order"

(Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.xv). In a similar vein, Žižek asserts that in the contemporary era, capital dominates all aspects of life, "colonizes the last resorts hitherto excluded from its circuit" (Žižek, 1993, p.10). It unleashes the forces of de-territorialization, penetrating all those domains of social life hitherto excluded from its sphere, imposing the commodity form as the generating matrix of subjectivities.

According to Žižek, the generalization of hegemonic form of politics is itself dependent on this specific socioeconomic process (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). It is contemporary global capitalism with its dynamics of 'de-territorialization', which has created the conditions for the demise of essentialist politics and the proliferation of new multiple political subjectivities.

In this respect, Žižek inverts the formula provided by Laclau and Mouffe: the proliferation of political subjectivities should be taken, not as a cause, but as a symptom. As discussed above, the latter, by observing the multiplicity of subjectivities on the political scene, conclude that this plurality necessitates a hegemonic politics of articulation around an empty universal and that no particular struggle can play a privileged role since they all contribute equally to radicalizing the democratic moment.

In contrast, what Žižek does is to call into question the historical status of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). According to Žižek, it is the contemporary nature of de-territorializing capitalism - which promotes the conception of subjectivity as the site of an ensemble of discursively constructed subject positions and of multiple forms of identification that opens up the horizon for a politics conceived as a struggle between multiple subject positions. In other words, the proliferation of political subjectivities is a symptom of the contemporary logic of globalized capitalism, which breeds on difference and multiplicity, promotes fluidity and contingency.

In the introduction he has written to the 150th Anniversary of the Communist Manifesto, Žižek contends that, far from disproving Marx's diagnosis about the social costs of the logic of capital, globalized capitalism attests to the fact that the fundamental lesson of the critique of political economy is valid more than ever:

The fate of whole strata of the population and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by the "solipsistic" speculative dance of Capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in a blessed indifference to how its movement will affect social reality. (Žižek, 1999c, ¶8)

Although Žižek acknowledges the transformations, which render problematic the traditional notion of the working class (such as the growing structural role of unemployment, the definitive split between intellectual and manual labour), he nevertheless resists subscribing to the claims that the working class is dead (Žižek and Daly, 2004, pp.147-148). Class antagonism, for him, is the specific antagonism, which predominates over all other social antagonisms (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, pp.319-320). Here, he relies on the idea that the economy is not simply one among the social spheres, but has "a proto-transcendental social status." In this sense, the Capital is the Real of our era: the basic neutral structure, which persists in all symbolizations. According to Žižek, the economic sphere provides "the generative matrix for phenomena which in the first approach has nothing to do with the economy... At the level of form, the capitalist economy has a universal scope" (Žižek and Daly, 2004, p.147).

The question to be asked, then, "does the assertion of particularity, difference allow the emergence of a counter-hegemony to the forces of capitalist globalization?" Contrary to Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek's answer to this question is a straightforward "no!" because the logic of identity politics works precisely within that specific horizon and aims nothing

more than the pursuit of particular issues whose resolution is to be negotiated within the rational global order, allocating to a particular component its proper place (Žižek, 1999d, pp.215-221). It fits very well within the frame of the post-political logic of global capital that promotes the commodification of identities and reduces politics to a process of rational negotiation of interests:

The conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties who compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats and liberal multiculturalists: via the process of negotiation of interests a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. (Žižek, 1998, p.992)

The universality opened up by global liberal capitalism and its corollary identity politics is "false" to the extent that it is a universality founded upon a disavowed violence for it silently precludes the sphere of the economy from politicization (Žižek, 1998; 1999b). What neo-liberal ideology attempts to do is to neutralize capitalism by presenting the outcomes of its systemic violence as if winning and losing is simply a matter of chance and sound judgment in a neutral market place (Žižek, 1998).

According to Žižek, what is at stake for the Left is to open up the political space of "true" universality, which can

only happen through the politicization of this foundational violence and the articulation of universal demands that are 'impossible' within the existing space of the World Order (Žižek, 1999d, p.200).

By calling into question the historical status of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony, Žižek highlights the necessity to distinguish "contingency within a specific horizon and the more fundamental foreclosure that grounds this horizon" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.108). The question Žižek addresses to Laclau highlights the stake in the debate very clearly:

What is the status of the 'generalization of the hegemonic form of politics' in contemporary societies? Is it in itself a contingent event, the result of hegemonic struggle, or is it the result of some underlying historical logic, which is not itself determined by the hegemonic form of politics? (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.319)

This question points to a tension - a paradox as a matter of fact - that can be found in Laclau and Mouffe's theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987). Re-visiting one of their arguments about the "historicity of being" can bring to light this tension at work when they write:

In societies which have a low technological development ... the 'language games' or discursive sequences, which organize social life are predominantly stable. This situation gives rise to the illusion that the being of objects, which is a purely social construction, belongs to things themselves. It is only in the contemporary world, when technological change and the dislocating rhythm of capitalist transformation constantly alter the discursive sequences which construct the reality of objects, that the merely historical character of being becomes fully visible. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p.97)

If the "historicity of being" becomes visible (hence, the necessity of politics of particularity arises) thanks to the dynamics of capital, then can we say that hegemonic form of politics based on contingency is itself contingent? In other words, would the political action described through the theory of hegemony hold only in societies where the "technological change and the dislocating rhythm of capitalist transformation" have reached a certain height? If so - if the theory of hegemony is *contingent* historical constellation), then how can it be generalized to account for politics as such?

According to Žižek, the politics of hegemonic articulation itself needs to be historicized: the hegemonic

form of politics as the struggle among multiple subject positions does not constitute the structuring principle of the political space; rather, the emergence of such a political space is contingent upon a specific historical constellation - namely, socio-economic processes entailed by capitalism (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). At a theoretical level, the challenge then is to reconcile this assertion about capitalism without losing sight that the political moment is constitutive of the social - that the social is not a closed totality.

Žižek does this by incorporating the Lacanian concept of the Real - the constitutive exception, the "thing" that is "nowhere given in positive entity, none the less functions in its very absence" (Žižek, 1994, p.22).²⁵ Hence, he designates capital as the "transcendental a priori of historicity" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.320) and class struggle as the Real of our era:

Class struggle is none other than the name for the unfathomable limit that cannot be objectivized, located within social totality, since it is itself that limit which prevents us from conceiving society as a closed totality. (Žižek, 1994, p.22).

²⁵ The paradoxical nature of the Real - how a negative limit functions as a positive condition - will be explored in relation to the subject and universality in the following section.

The structure of reality itself materializes an attempt to cope with this Real of antagonism. As will be elaborated below, the "logic of antagonism qua real" (Žižek, 1994) parallels the structure in the constitution of subjectivity: just as the constitution of social reality involves the primordial repression of an antagonism, the subject too is defined by its relation to the Real, to that unrepresentable abyss, to what remains non-symbolized. It is also this "absolute constant", which "remains the same in all possible universes" (Žižek, 1994, p.25) - that which can never be symbolized - prevents the subject's full immersion in the socio-symbolic order: subjectivity emerges precisely at the point where ideology fails. Hence, it opens up the possibility of "denouncing the content of our immediate experience as 'ideological'" (Žižek, 1994, p.25) - i.e., as a 'reality' materialized in the attempt to cope with the 'repressed' real of antagonism- and enacting a utopia.

ii. The Real of Antagonism and of the Subject

As overviewed in Chapter I, Žižek's theoretical framework is built upon some common presumptions shared with Laclau and Mouffe. The concept of "antagonism" constitutes the main point of convergence between these thinkers. Just like Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek asserts the political nature of social ontology

through his definition of the social as constituted by an irreducible limit that prevents it from fully constituting itself as a positive entity. In the words of Žižek (1994) "What we experience as reality is not the "thing itself"; it is always-already symbolized, constituted, structured by social mechanisms" (p.21). The statement that "the reality itself has the structure of a fiction" (Žižek, 1994, p.21) aims to capture precisely this point; the fact that what is given objectively is actually mediated by symbolic representations.

Despite this common point of departure, as seen above, Žižek reaches a very different conclusion in terms of political analysis by clinging onto the basic insight of historical materialism and identifying history as the history of class struggles (Žižek, 1994). According to Žižek, class struggle is the only struggle that can be truly universal.

In developing this thesis, he gets aid from three figures, which at first glance constitute a very odd combination for any kind of coherent theorization: the primary figure of German Idealism (Hegel), the father figure of historical materialism (Marx), and the most prominent philosopher of unconscious (Lacan). From the insights he draws from these thinkers, he develops a theoretical framework

within which the paradoxical nature of the Real bears its imprint on the subject and social reality.

Žižek opts for a non-substantial concept of the subject, which he develops by integrating the insights of German Idealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Žižek, 1993). According to Žižek what is common to both of these traditions of thought is their emphasis on "negativity as the fundamental (and ineradicable) background to all being" (Žižek and Daly, 2004, p.3). In the Enlightenment tradition the subject is identified with the "light of reason": the self-transparent, conscious entity, which is the source of all meaning in the world. Contrary to this humanist view of the subject, Žižek argues that in both German Idealism and psychoanalysis subjectivity emphasize, not the conscious ego, but the "negativity" that is inherent to and constitutive of the subject (Žižek, 1993; Žižek and Daly, 2004). Subjectivity is viewed as "an ongoing attempt to impose symbolic integrity against the ever-present threat of disintegration and negativity" (Žižek and Daly, p.3).

In Lacan, this negativity is embodied in the "Real", which is described as one of the three 'registers', which organizes the human psyche (Sarrup, 1988). According to Lacan, language offers itself as the medium through which human beings constitute themselves as subjects (take part in the

socio-symbolic universe), know others and the world. However, language also emerges as an obstacle it is also the medium for a social given: the already constituted symbolic universe with its own culture, laws and prohibitions (Sarrup, 1988, pp.12-14).

Against the essentialist conceptions of the subject, which equates subjectivity with a conscious ego and gives full autonomy to it, Lacan argues that, not only the "ego" and the "self" are not identical (hence, one cannot equate subjectivity with the conscious ego), but a stable ego itself is an illusion, a product of the unconscious (Stavrakakis, 1999, pp.13-39).²⁶ As such, he elevates Freud's idea of the *Ich-Spaltung* (the split between the conscious and the unconscious) to a constitutive aspect of subjectivity.

According to Lacan, the formation of subjectivity and the entrance into civilization as a speaking subject represents an irretrievable loss/ lack of the original fullness in the realm of the Real - the reality which can never be known, which lies beyond language (Sarrup, 1988). It refers to the moment when the infant is still in the mother's womb when there is no sense of self, no sense of its body as a coherent whole. After the infant is separated from the mother's womb (the first

²⁶ This constitutes one of the points that sets Lacan apart from Freud. Although Freud introduces the idea of a subject divided between the id and the ego, he nevertheless entertains the belief that the unconscious can be brought under the control of the conscious (Dews, 1987).

loss), it is to suffer a second loss during the "mirror stage", when the first sense of self and otherness starts forming as the infant (mis)recognizes the image in the mirror as itself. Through an identification with this reflection (the Other), the infant internalizes this ideal representation - the formation of the *imaginary* ego. The irreducible gap between the imaginary unity in the mirror reflection and the infant's own experience of himself leads the infant to seek a stable identity through linguistic representation. The subject has to enter the symbolic structure to be able to designate itself as "I". However, the symbolic (linguistic representation) is itself structured by the principle of difference, of Otherness, of Lack since language is nothing but the endless play of signifiers. That is why Lacan in his description of the self says "I am the quest for myself" since "there is no subject except in representation, but no representation captures us completely" (Sarrup, 1988, p.15).

One of the crucial points made by Lacan is his eradication of the division between "self" and "society" through his conceptualization of language as the mediating link that is constitutive of both the so-called "subjective" and the "objective" (Stavrakakis, 1999, pp.40-70). It is consequently the very structure of language that brings the two to the same level - "what is true at one level becomes is

also true at the other" (Stavrakakis, 1999, p.41). The impossibility to produce stable, fixed meanings through language leaves an irreducible gap, which becomes the constitutive feature of both the subject and the object, giving rise to unending attempts at identification and representation with the Real constituting the limits of signification.

It is important to notice that the Real for Žižek is not a substantial entity - a positive transcendental obstacle. Rather, the Real is purely an a priori negativity; it is "a purely inherent obstacle" to the symbolic order (Žižek and Daly, 2004, pp.65-79). What gives the Real its paradoxical nature is that this "negativity as such has a positive function" (Žižek, 1989, p.176). The Real is by definition paradoxical because it both precedes the symbolic order but is also a product, a left-over of this process of symbolization; the Real is both that which lacks nothing but also a hole, a gap in the middle of symbolic order (Žižek, 1989, p.169-171).

The Lacanian notion of the subject that Žižek incorporates into his theory is defined by this paradoxical nature of the Real: at its very heart the subject is also defined as absolute negativity. It is the "subject of the signifier" since it can never fully represent itself in the symbolic - "find a signifier which would be his own" - yet it

is precisely this failure of representation, which is its positive condition: the subject itself is "nothing but the failure of symbolization" (Žižek, 1989, p. 175; Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.120). Consequently, what we call "self", the subject is a dynamic category, a ceaseless movement of impossible attempts to achieve full ontological integrity, which are doomed to failure since the Real resists symbolization). The subject is "the ontological gap as well as the gesture of subjectivization" (Žižek, 1999d, p.159).

It is this "self-relating negativity," which constitutes the subject as such, endows it with radical autonomy and prevents it from being reduced to an effect of subjectivation. In other words, the "truth" about the subject cannot be found in actuality (in the order of being). Having from the very outset "something in the subject that resists its full inclusion into its life-world context" (Žižek, 1999d, p.63) provides the extra-discursive ground for the subject to emerge as "a pure self-positing activity" (Žižek, 2004, pp.69), which creates the world as it creates itself. Žižek uses the formula of "substance as subject" to capture this aspect and to assert that subject is not external to substance (reality), but constitutive of it (Žižek, 2004, pp.60-74).

He develops this point apropos of Kant, whom Žižek regards as the first philosopher to detect the crack in the

"ontological edifice of reality" by his distinction between the empty form of "I think" and the thinking substance, the thing, which thinks (Žižek, 1993, pp.45-82). The Kantian notion of the subject qua pure, substanceless 'I think' (what will be termed later by Lacan as the "subject of enunciation") is the first step to capture the paradoxical nature of the subject as inaccessible to itself in its capacity as a real substance (Žižek, 1993).

According to Žižek, it is Hegel, who carries this Kantian insight to its proper conclusion and supplements it by demonstrating that "the limitation of our knowledge is the limitation of the very object of our knowledge" (Žižek, 1999d, p.55). In other words, the crack running through the subject is correlative of the 'crack' in reality: "subject is the name for a crack in the edifice of Being" (Žižek, 2004, p.45). In contrast to Kant, with Hegel cogito becomes correlative to the whole of reality. Reality and consciousness are depicted as caught up within a process of constant movement whereby the "subject relates to substance (reality) like Becoming (act) versus Being (result): subject is the "absolute unrest of Becoming" (Žižek, 2004, p.69). It this negativity, the limit, the "lack" in the logic of the subject's being that allows for its radical autonomy and endows it with the capacity to emerge as a political actor who can make a "properly political act"

that can change the very structuring principles of the symbolic order.²⁷

It is because the subject of political action is the "subject of the signifier" and not the "subject of the signified" (i.e., subject as the bearer of multiple subject positions, as the effect of non-subjective processes of ideological interpellation) that the subject can "suspend its full identification with its socio-symbolic identity and act as if this identity is unimportant, a matter of indifference" (Žižek, 2004, p.51). In other words, what is important in terms of political agency is, not the symbolically constructed identity of the subject, but the way the subject constitutes itself as a political agent. This is possible because, as we have seen above, the subject - not only never fully recognizes itself in the interpellative call of ideology - is the very resistance to interpellation (to the symbolic identity provided by interpellation) (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.115). The subject is where the ideology fails. In short, subject can never be reduced to subject positions.

The consequence of such a notion of the subject is that it is at the level of the subject and not the subject position that politicization proper takes place. For Žižek, political

²⁷ As will be demonstrated shortly, it is the same exception, the negativity at the heart of universality that opens up the space for the gesture of "true universalization".

subjectivization is ultimately a matter of making an ethico-political choice and assuming full responsibility for the world as it exists.

The same paradoxical logic of the Real is also at work in Žižek's conceptualization of universality: the universal becomes correlative with its exception. Just like the self, in the case of universality, too, what appears as a limit turns into a condition of possibility.

Žižek's differentiation between false and true universality constitutes another point departure from Laclau and Mouffe's theory. As we have seen in the previous chapter Laclau and Mouffe describe the struggle for hegemony as a struggle between particular contents to fill out the empty space of universality. For Žižek, however, universality can never be an empty, neutral framework because it always relies on a primordial exclusion of a specific content (Žižek, 1999d; Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000).

In developing this argument Žižek deploys Hegel's notion of "concrete universality" to emphasize this short circuit between the universal and the particular, which asserts that universality is always over-determined by part of its content and that the articulation of each particular position involves the assertion of its own mode of universality (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). The example of "religion" used by Žižek can

illuminate the notion of concrete universality (Butler, et al., 2000, pp.315-316). When it is said that the genus of religion is divided into its particular species (such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) what is important to notice here is that each of these particular species involves its own notion of what religion is 'as such' and its own view on (how it differs from) other religions. In their debate among themselves, a Christian and a Muslim would, not only disagree, but also *disagree about their disagreement*. This is because each particular has its own universality, its own notion of the whole and its own part within it. Therefore, there can be no neutral universal ground that would serve as the medium for these particulars; no impartial position to apprehend religion as such. The question, then, is not only which particular content hegemonizes the empty universality, but also "which specific content has to be excluded so that the *empty form* of universality emerges as the battlefield for hegemony" (Butler, et al., 2000, p.110).

The commodity form in Marx's analysis is also helpful in understanding how the universal is located in the particular and how each particular leaves its trace on the form of universality (Kay, 2003, p.40). In Marxian terms, the commodity form is defined as the good, which can be exchanged for money. However, in order for this definition to be

operative, money has to be exempted: all commodities can be exchanged for money, except money itself. What universalizes the commodity form is the fact that there exists one commodity, money, which is the exception to the set. It is precisely in this way that the very *form* of universality (commodity) is always rooted in a particular content (money).

Another example employed by Žižek to clarify the notion of the "exception constitutive of the Universal" is Marx's notion of exploitation (Žižek, 1999d, pp.180-181). Marxian concept of the surplus value demonstrates how "exploitation" is not opposed to "just equivalent exchange": workers are exploited not because they are not paid the full value of their work; *they would still be exploited when they are fully paid*. Here, exploitation functions as the point of inherent exception: one commodity (the workforce) is exploited precisely when it is paid its full value.

In each universality, then, there is one negative point at which it is hegemonized in a different way from how it is usually hegemonized. This negative point, this 'crack' in the universal stands for the truth of a certain situation since it is the embodiment of this exception; the point of foreclosure, the knot, which sustains the symbolic order (Žižek and Daly, 2004, p.160).

It is important to notice here how Žižek complicates the picture by conceptualizing the relation between the universal and the particular not simply as a dyadic interaction, but as a dialectical process among three levels. Going back to our previous example of exploitation, these three levels are the empty Universal (justice), the particular content, which hegemonizes it (bourgeois notion of 'just and equivalent exchange') and the individual, the *singular* which undermines this hegemonic content (exchange between labour and capital) (Žižek, 1999d, p.181).

The proper critique of false universality mobilizes this tension inherent to the fixed form of established universality itself by seizing on the singular, the exception (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000). It is this negativity, this point of singularity at the heart of the universal that opens up the way for political agency. Politicization proper involves the seizure of this point of short circuit between the universal and the particular - the "singular universal" - and force its universal implications so as to produce a new symbolic universe, a new historical order.

iii. Political Subjectivity and Revolutionary Ethos

Žižek argues that what is precluded/ disavowed in the existing global order is the very possibility of politics

proper - politicizing the fundamental foreclosure/ exclusion that establishes the political space (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 2000, p.223). In other words, the false universality opened up by capitalist globalization allows particular demands to be voiced, but forecloses the possibility of speaking for the singular universal. Capital sets the ultimate limit to resignification in the hegemonic struggles of particular identities since these particular struggles take the capitalist market economy and the liberal political regime as the unquestioned background and demand solely for compensation from the existing order. If politics proper is defined as the moment when the structuring principle of the social edifice is questioned, then the post-political universe of global capitalism gentrifies precisely this dimension of the political (Žižek, 1998).

Žižek locates the real antagonism, not between capitalist globalization and particularity, difference, but between "globalization" and "true universality," the "universality" at work in democratic politicization (Žižek, 1999d, 171-244). Here, Žižek works with Ranciere's notion of politics, equating politics with democracy. Contrary to thinkers such as Habermas, political struggle proper is defined, not as a rational debate between multiple interests, but as the democratization of the political space brought about through

the struggle of the excluded parts of the social body for their right to be heard and recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner. Politicization proper occurs when those parts of the society who occupy a subordinated place within the existing social edifice, not only demand to be heard on an equal footing with the reigning power, but also present themselves as the "singular universal," as "the immediate embodiment of society as such, in its universality, against the particular power interests" (Žižek, 1998, p.988).

Hence, politics proper designates the moment at which a particular demand is not simply a part of the negotiation of interests, but aims at something more: it starts to function as the singular universal, which asserts the global restructuring of the entire social space (Žižek, 1999d). What this means is that political struggle involves a rupture, a break in the order of being; it brings about the overhauling of all hitherto existing categories and challenges existing conventions and ordering principles. In this type of political subjectivization a part of the social body rejects its subordinated place in the social-edifice and its demand can only be accommodated through the dissolution of the existing order of being and the establishment of a new one.

That is why Žižek labels this form of politics "the politics of universal truth" since the point of exception

stands for the "lie" of the existing false universality (Žižek and Daly, 2004, p.160). This is so akin to what Marx says in his very early writings.²⁸ In the words of Žižek:

Proletariat stands for universal humanity not because it is the lowest, most exploited class, but because its very existence is a living contradiction - it gives body to the fundamental imbalance and inconsistency of the capitalist social as a whole. (Žižek, 1999d, p.225).

Consequently, for Žižek, leftist universalism requires the "assertion and identification with the point of exception/exclusion of the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality" (Žižek, 1999d, p.224).

Žižek's notion of politics is, by definition, interconnected with the concept of freedom. Emphasizing the creative moment of politics, Žižek contends that only through an authentic political act can "actual freedom" be realized. Here, Žižek makes use of Lenin's differentiation between "actual freedom" and "formal freedom," the latter being the operative logic of a pragmatic approach to politics (Žižek, 2002, pp.543-544). Formal freedom, which amounts to choosing between the existing alternatives, takes the limits of what is given as the limits to what is possible. In contrast, "actual freedom" is defined as creating the very set of alternatives.

²⁸ For such an account see particularly Marx, 1978.

It entails "the capacity to transcend the coordinates of a given situation, to posit the presuppositions of one's activity, i.e. to redefine the very situation within which one is active" (Žižek, 2001a, p.3).

Actual freedom can be realized through an authentic act, which is defined as a radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of a given field. A true act of resistance will "disturb the phantasmic core" of the symbolic order, thereby constituting itself as an "authentic act" (Žižek, 1999d, 266). It accomplishes what within a given symbolic universe appears to be impossible; yet changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility. This is why authentic politics is the "art of impossible" because "it changes the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellations" (Žižek, 1999d, p.199).

When political agency is conceptualized as transcending the given parameters of the social, politics becomes an event, a "truth event", which creates the space within which what could not be represented in the existing socio-symbolic universe can make an appearance (Žižek, 1999d, pp.125-170). Through political action, subjects can enter into "authentic communication," that is, solidarity in a common struggle, which enables each to "discover that the deadlock that hampers

me is also the deadlock that hampers the other" (Žižek, 1999d, p.220).

It should be noted that although Žižek pinpoints capitalism and the economy as the fundamental sights of antagonism in the contemporary era, he leaves the category of the proletariat empty in his writings. In other words, he does not specify beforehand the agents of revolutionary political action. In Žižek's theoretical framework, the question of "who" remains an ethico-political issue, not a matter of objective sociological analysis. In this respect, Žižek renounces any essentialist conceptualization of politicization - i.e., "politicization is never directly inscribed into one's objective social position" (Žižek, 1999d, p.225). He draws no determining causal connections between the "'working class' as a social group and the 'proletariat' as the militant fighting for universal Truth" (Žižek, 1999d, pp.226-227). The opposing sides in the antagonism are not given objectively. Instead, engaging in the class struggle relies upon a "subjective act of decision", it requires assuming a "subjective stance" and acting in the name of the Universal. Hence, political subjectivity involves an ethico-political decision. Before the subject intervenes in reality it must

...accomplish the purely formal act of converting reality as something which is objectively given into reality as

'effectivity', as something produced, 'posited' by the subject. (Žižek, 1989, p.218)

Rather than conceiving itself as the passive victim, the subject has to assume full responsibility for the symbolic structure, which confers on it the role of the victim.

Here again we can contrast Žižek's approach to politicization with the politicization at work in identity politics where the political subjects voice their grievances, narrate their version of events from their individual subject positions (Žižek, 2002). The ethico-political dimension at work in identity politics consists of constructing a space in which this multitude of narratives can coexist. What is suspended in this course of political action is the dimension of "truth" that is at work in politicization proper. This not an objective truth, but truth as the singular universal.

As discussed above in relation to the concept of universality, within each context there will always be a point of exception that stands for the universal truth of some situation and proper politicization involves the assertion of the right to truth by calling into question the concrete existing universal order on behalf of the exception. It is the ethico-political act that involves an encounter with the Real, with the foundational violence that structures the existing

socio-symbolic universe, the repressed a disavowed truth of the social totality.

Probably the best way to grasp how Žižek approaches to the question of political agency is to investigate why he retrieves Lenin as an exemplary figure. At the outset, it should be emphasized that Lenin serves not as a substantial, but as a formal figure (Žižek, 2002). In other words, it is not a matter of repeating what Lenin did under those historical circumstances and applying his formula to the contemporary constellations. Rather, it is a matter of repeating his *formal* gesture, how he constitutes himself as a political actor. That is why Žižek refers to this as retrieving "Lenin-in-becoming" (Žižek, 2002, p.553).

One of the striking features of this account is the way in which Žižek posits a political act as a defining feature of being human, relates this to human dignity. He gives the example of a rat, which - once humanized - forever runs after the unattainable object (Žižek, 2002, pp.549-550). This unattainable object can be interpreted as the impossible Truth about society, about *the* utopia. Because society is not a fully intelligible entity, contrary to the assertions of all totalizing discourses, the key to Truth about society is impossible to attain. That is why the human condition is

probably tragic: reaching out to something that forever flees its grasp.

But it is precisely this tragic dimension of human life what renders human beings with dignity: it is the striving to go beyond simple life, beyond the question of mere survival. The humanized rat is human to the extent that it seeks to attain, not something that will keep it biologically alive. In a similar vein, in the properly political act, what is at issue is not "bio-politics" (Foucault, 1990), a politics that reduce the question of the political to the question of mere survival, a matter of administrating bodies. In a properly political act, the quest is not simply for survival. The moment of the act is the moment when the "miracle of freedom" (Žižek, 1994, p.27) shows its face:

Freedom designates the moment when the 'principle of sufficient reason' is suspended, the moment of the act that breaks the 'great chain of being' of the symbolic reality in which we are embedded. (Žižek, 1994, p.27)

That is why the criterion for the act is not outside itself. Neither an ahistorical principle - as in the case of an ethics based on universal norms, which informs identity politics - nor an appeal to a future condition - the "success" of the act (Žižek, 2002, p.558). The only criterion is the act

itself, "the urge of the moment is the true Utopia" (Žižek, 2002, p.552) - the urge that is manifested in Lenin's gesture.

For Žižek the revolutionary act is a matter of reasserting, just like Lenin, a demand for actual freedom, in realizing oneself as a subject of freedom while constituting oneself as a political subject:

Revolution is not experienced as a present hardship we have to endure for the happiness and freedom of the future generations, but as the present hardship over which this future happiness already cast their shadow. In it we already are free while fighting for freedom, we already are happy while fighting for happiness. (Žižek, 2002, p.559)

Concluding ReMarx

As explored above, within Žižek's theoretical framework, it becomes possible to conceive of political action as a definitive intervention in the order of being. Unlike Laclau and Mouffe's notion of hegemonic articulation, political actors are not simply reduced to being the bearers of an a priori symbolic structure, but are active creators of it.

Yet, a crucial question remains: Although the subjects can act, how will the political subjects act together? The conception of the subject as pure self-relating negativity enables to conceptualize political action that can transcend the given order. However, within this conception, political subjects emerge not in their relations to each other, but in a vacuum with the suspension of the symbolic structure. What ties the political agents together is not their relation to each other in their capacity as speaking beings; they relate to each other to the extent that they don't speak. In this sense, the revolutionary moment is mute; political subjectivities exist in their utter singularity. The only mediation that links the subjective wills is provided by the "enemy" (the capitalist enemy). It is an external link that connects the actors together - a position which comes

strangely close to Laclau and Mouffe's model of logic of equivelance.

Furthermore, if political action is identified with revolution, overthrowing of all established meanings and changing the coordinates of an order, since the new order would also rely on a disavowed content - its own point of singular universal - would this mean that we need constant revolutionizing? One can find the hints of this in Žižek (2004) when he writes:

What is infinite is the ACT of going-beyond. We have here the opposition of becoming and being, of act and result. If we look at the results, there is no infinite; infinite is the subjective urge to go beyond, the creative "in-between" of two repetitions. Is this not a topic we encounter from art to politics? The fixed result always betrays us; what matters is the movement. (p.69)

In other words, "the day after" is forever disavowed. If movement is the defining feature of political existence, then, one wonders how a political community can exist under the conditions of total instability or whether such a community would not take on totalitarian overtones.²⁹

²⁹ For a depiction of totalitarian domination as a condition of "permanent instability" see Arendt, 1966.

Discourse theoretical approaches, by highlighting the plurality, contingency and historicity of human existence, reveal the political nature of being. However, as explored above, in Laclau and Mouffe's framework this leads to a paradoxical outcome: Despite the assertion of the political nature of ontology, the end result is de-politicization. Equating political subjectivity with subject positions leads to the reification of the social. Political action gets reduced to contingent re-articulations among particularities, never reaching the level of its notion.

In contrast, Žižek - by retaining the category of the subject and revealing its utterly political nature - manages to come up with a theory of political action, through which it becomes possible to conceptualize political agency as an intervention in the order of being. The category of the Real becomes the groundless ground for political action and a universal struggle. Yet, this time we are confronted with the problem of a subject conceptualized as pure self-relating negativity: Given the impossible nature of all identity, political action becomes entrapped within the circular logic of critique and deconstruction.

In one of his latest works, Žižek highlights a very important point by stating that the major political question in the contemporary era is how to revolutionize an order whose

very principle is constant self-revolutionizing (Žižek, 2004, p.213). In this respect, Žižek's major contribution lies in his exposition of the ideological universe of capitalism and highlighting the dangers of "retreating from class" - in an unwarranted hurry to embrace the emergent plurality of political subjectivities.

In an era of capitalist triumphalism, one of Marx's principal insights - the critique of capitalism - is relevant more than ever. However, the legacy of Marx cannot be confined to the conceptual tools he has provided in understanding the nature of capitalism as a social formation. In his works, deconstructive critique is integrated with the constructive moment of conceptualizing an alternative to the existing order. In this respect, discourse theory with its assertion of the impossibility of suture and the lack of identity as the constituting principle of all identity comes dangerously close in confining the role of political theory to an exclusively critical one at the expense of being strategic.

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