

## THE NIHILISM OF RESISTANCE AND FREEDOM

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Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack. Thetford, Norfolk: Thetford Press, 1985.

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### I

How does one begin to understand possible forms of resistance to the prevailing forms of domination in our modern industrialized world? When faced with the increased commodification of our lives in the reified world of consumerism, the growing bureaucratization of human relations in centralized agencies of governance, and the expanding power of homogenizing mass media networks to reproduce human desire, what should be our response? And in particular, on what basis do we (re)conceptualize strategies of freedom for the human subject, given the above state of affairs?

A stimulating and provocative text has arisen from within Marxist circles which attempts to deal with these burning questions of our modern existence. This is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*.<sup>1</sup> It will be the attempt of this essay to critically examine the importance given to freedom and resistance by Laclau and Mouffe as they situate their analysis within the overall context of a discussion of the Gramscian inspired concept of hegemony. Methodologically, the analytical intent of this essay is to have Laclau and Mouffe respond to what can be designated as a general problematic of modernity.

At a very general level, this problematic can be characterized as a deep *lament*. It is a lament over a world that has increasingly lost its human face. With the increased commodification, bureaucratization, and massification

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of our social relations, there is a general feeling that the world is not an expression of our own humanity. Thus, we can empathize with Pascal when he cries out that "cast into the immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and that know me not, I am frightened."<sup>2</sup> In setting up our problematic, then, we can stand beside Benjamin in seeking to develop a critical theory that takes its stand against this human effacement. It is a stand rooted in sadness and melancholy over a world severed from the claims of human agency as that is tied to the very local bonds of embodiment. By framing the problematic in this way, we are linking criticism to a humanist project of self-understanding. The human attempt to "know" is the attempt to make sense of one's circumstances in order that the world outside of oneself which must be dealt with<sup>3</sup> may not be experienced as alien and foreign to one's concerns but, as Herder and the Romantics never tired of telling us, may be taken up as one's own.<sup>4</sup> This critical project of knowledge, which is an ancient form of "gnosis," is thus the attempt to understand the world as a *human* world.

It was Vico who reminded us that we pay respects to the first humans who designed order out of the chaos of the world, shaping it through the experience of their own bodies tied to family and village.<sup>5</sup> A founding element in the shaping of our modern problematic is a sadness over what can be seen as a process of forgetfulness in modern consciousness of those "first deeds" which are the ground of our humanity, a grounding in our ability to actively and freely give human bodily shape to our world as a means to our identity as individuals.

The specific analytical intent of this essay, then, is this: How does Laclau and Mouffe's discussion respond to the problematic presented above? How does their discussion tackle questions asked by a humanist critical theory that, at a very general but yet deep and existential level, laments the loss through increased commodification, bureaucratization and massification of an expressive humanity tied to body, earth and community?

## II

Let us now turn to Laclau and Mauffe's text to seek answers to our questions. Laclau and Mouffe's analysis functions on two levels. The first is a strictly theoretical level where they strongly reject the essentialism of traditional Marxian class analysis in favour of a view of social life derived from post-Saussurian linguistics. The second level, and one that subverts the first, is an historical argument which in fact situates their de-centered view of social life historically (as only a modern phenomenon) and thus inserts a teleology at the moment of its supposed departure.

Allow me to deal with the purely formal theoretical argument first. This discussion centers around six central concepts: overdetermination,

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articulation, equivalences, antagonisms, subject positions, and finally, hegemony.

In order to subvert the essentialism of an analysis which privileges class as an *a priori* principle lying outside the realm of human signification, Laclau and Mouffe wish to assert that all phenomena have their literality exploded from within by being *overdetermined*. Overdetermination is a concept developed by Althusser, but which originally comes from psychoanalysis, where it was used to deal with the metaphorical character of primary process thinking. Overdetermination is thus the language of the unconscious that seeks to subvert the claims of rational conscious thought which has the tendency to fix entities (such as class) within a purely formal set of co-ordinates.<sup>6</sup> This assertion of Laclau and Mouffe's, that there is a surplus of meaning at the heart of all human signification, means that the world which we dialogically deal with is not only "alive" but also "open." An object is never simply itself (as in rationalism), it is also a sign of, a repository for, something else.<sup>7</sup> This is what allows Laclau and Mouffe to make the affirmation of "the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity."<sup>8</sup> Any proclamation of the essential nature of a class-base or economic-base is shown to be misguided for "there are not two planes, one of essences and the other of appearances, since there is no possibility of fixing an ultimate literal sense for which the symbolic would be a second and derived plane of signification."<sup>9</sup>

This insight gains credibility if we are able to acknowledge that humans, in their quest to understand and make sense of the world, are symbolizing animals. Symbols function as mental images that do not "refer" to something else, but exist as concepts that represent the form of that which we are attempting to understand. Symbolization makes inward critical thought possible. But it is at the same time true that this symbolic significance is an integral part of the world we are discovering and attempting to make our own. Symbolic language as a qualitative and overdetermined praxis is not artificial, not added on to some so-called objective reality, but is entirely natural — it is the self-conscious fulfillment of reality itself.<sup>10</sup>

With this in mind we are able to understand why Laclau and Mouffe wish to assert that a social movement arises through the act of human symbolization. They call this an "articulatory practice"<sup>11</sup> — a human activity which discovers and asserts a set of *equivalences* between various phenomenon. An "articulatory practice" forms what they call, following Foucault, a discourse; a discourse that has the character of "regularity in dispersion."<sup>12</sup> This means that the articulated discourse of a social movement does not have its grounding in anything outside of itself, in any transcendental founding principle (such as class, economy, etc.), but is governed by its own articulatory activity, by the symbolic rules of formation

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inherent in it.

There is a limit, though, to any discursive articulatory activity, according to Laclau and Mouffe, preventing any social movement from achieving a totalizing effect on society. This limit is set by *antagonisms*. At the heart of any antagonism is the metaphor in its subversive phase. Antagonisms become the manner in which language subverts the attempts of any articulatory discourse from "suturing" the social world into a fixed space.<sup>13</sup>

A direct implication of a theoretical position that holds that the origin and character of a social movement cannot be derived from anything outside of human symbolizing praxis is that the category of the subject as a transcendental intending ground for social conduct is denied its centrality. Instead, human individuality is situated within the terrain of "subject positions" that only have status as part of discursive strategies.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of hegemony presents itself within this field. With the social characterized as an open set of floating signifiers, a hegemonic practice must actively articulate equivalences among heterogeneous subject positions against the force of antagonisms to form an always precarious discursive practice. To take a fairly obvious contemporary example, women's rights may be articulated on to ethnic rights into a discursive strategy trying to achieve hegemonic force. But this will be continually subverted by the existence of patriarchal relations in some ethnic communities.

### III

As I mentioned earlier, there is a second level of analysis at which Laclau and Mouffe's discussion of social movements works. This is an argument for the historical specificity of the above open-ended and unstable character of the social. It is their assumption that it is only with the Enlightenment notion of freedom historically evident in the French Revolution that an emergence of the polysemy of the social is allowed to take place. For them, the critical consciousness necessary to recognize the non-necessary character of any form of social arrangement was only possible when a completely radical notion of freedom was articulated in the European Enlightenment. It is only when individuals can think of a social identity completely severed from any traditional organic ties to time, place, or circumstance that a "relation of subordination" which takes the character of fixity can be discursively transformed, through critical consciousness, into a "relation of oppression," and thus an antagonism established which seeks to subvert that oppressive condition.<sup>15</sup>

There is an historical teleology at work here which I feel leads Laclau and Mouffe to obscure the internal dynamics of both modern and pre-

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modern society. We are presented with the classical sociological paradigm that sees a movement in society from simple to complex forms. Given their questioning of all *a priori* analysis, this surely is not a self-evident assumption. Was pre-modern society simple, hierarchical and fixed? Laclau and Mouffe simply assume the conventional opinion that it was.

The fit for Laclau and Mouffe between the theoretical and the historical arguments centers crucially around their privileging the Enlightenment notion of freedom. This notion of freedom is organically connected to the historical growth of industrialism. The creation — due to the influence of the French Revolution — of a new “political imaginary” that is “radically libertarian”<sup>16</sup> was dependent upon the ability of industrialism to sever people from old oppositions. For Laclau and Mouffe, industrialism exploded the fixed hierarchical oppositions of pre-modern society, forcing the struggle against domination to take new forms.<sup>17</sup> The levelling operation of industrialism allowed a truly democratic imaginary to surface, centered around “the rights inherent to every human being.”<sup>18</sup> According to Laclau and Mouffe, the French Revolution started this process. It called for the end of a hierarchical society founded on a theological logic of the “great chain of being.” There would now be no other reference point for struggles of freedom than “the people.”<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the full flowering of the egalitarian character of this movement could not take place as long as opposition to capitalism operated under a static, dualistic logic which divided the world into two camps: proletariat and bourgeoisie. Thus, when opposition to capitalism began to center itself around the activities of the labour movement, a binary opposition was set in place which, because of its discursive ties to the logic of capital, ended up not questioning the dominant forms of oppression in capitalist relations. This opposition become either reformist in character (in the struggles of the labour unions) or corporatist in character (as in the policies adopted by the 1st and 2nd Internationals).<sup>20</sup>

According to Laclau and Mouffe, genuinely radical struggles against capitalism, ones that are truly democratic and libertarian, cannot be based on the making of a unified working-class but must exist within the terrain of plural identities arising outside of the dualistic logic that is presented by many traditional Marxists.<sup>21</sup> They point out, drawing on Craig Calhoun’s analysis of the “reactionary radicals” of late eighteenth century Britain, that early struggles against industrialism reflect this plural character in that they were based on specific *historical identities* that lay outside of the binary logic of proletariat/bourgeoisie.<sup>22</sup> And they maintain that these struggles form a *continuity* with the recent struggles of what has been called the “new social movements” — feminism, ecology, ethnic rights, etc. These new struggles against recent forms of subordination are also plural in having their origins in diverse “subject positions.” With the post-WWII

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development of mature capitalism into a phase of increased commodification, bureaucratization and massification, a proliferation of struggles against these processes have arisen that are not unitary in character but must rely for their effectiveness on active, hegemonic articulation.

### IV

For Laclau and Mouffe, the continuity of the two sets of struggles mentioned above lies in their both being ideologically grounded in an egalitarian imaginary which finds its inspiration in the French Revolution. In criticism, it is our contention that Laclau and Mouffe have misread the sources of inspiration for these struggles. This is a misreading that calls into question their whole portrayal of freedom.

Their misreading starts with Calhoun. It is Calhoun's claim that the popular radicalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a resistance to new pressures in favour of a traditional way of life. He maintains that "in the early part of the industrial revolution, community was the crucial bond unifying workers for collective action."<sup>23</sup> Calhoun does not see the source of this resistance, as Laclau and Mouffe do, in a radical post-Enlightenment notion of freedom. Rather, it is his argument that it was "traditional values, not a new analysis of exploitation, that guided the workers in their radicalism."<sup>24</sup> These traditional values were what brought the resistance movement together, forming the "reactionary radicals," an association of skilled craftsmen, privileged outworkers, small tradespeople, subsistence farmers and small shopkeepers. The distinguishing factor of this group, according to Calhoun, was strong communal ties. The rights that they demanded were collective rights — rights of mutual aid and support, of just price and fair share — all things the new liberal economy was denying. These reactionary radicals were not, then, bonding with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to purge from their lives any local organic ties in order that they might realize the "real" and "true" freedom of self-consciousness. Quite the opposite. They were reacting against the violation of those local embodied ties to kin and community with the intrusion of modern industry.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, it is Calhoun's explicit desire to counteract this Enlightenment view of rational freedom with the real and potential radicalness of concrete community ties, the bonds that interconnect people in a direct visceral manner. He finds the development theoretically and practically of such bonds to be the most effective source of protest against the destructive nature of capitalism.

What Calhoun has said is extremely important in opposing the nihilism of the post-Enlightenment view of freedom and individuality, a view so forcefully articulated by Laclau and Mouffe. There is a significant

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philosophical point to be made from his analysis about the role of tradition and authority. As the philosopher of hermeneutics H. G. Gadamer tells us, the Enlightenment project was a struggle for a freedom from all prejudices. For Gadamer, this extremism is destructive in the most basic sense, for prejudices form the natural condition of all thought and action. They form the very historicity of thought and action, the initial directedness of our whole openness to the world. To displace them is to subvert effective meaningful action at its source.<sup>26</sup>

V

In much the same vein as Calhoun, Mikhail Bakhtin has called into question our whole post-Enlightenment inspired view that pre-modern society was fixed, hierarchical and static. In his book, *Rabelais and His World*,<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin alerts us in a remarkable way to the effective radicalism of medieval and Renaissance popular culture. And in contrast to Laclau and Mouffe's post-Enlightenment prejudice for an ungrounded and therefore nihilistic characterization of freedom, Bakhtin shows us how popular culture was able to overturn the pretensions of the dominant and high culture to fix and homogenize the world of meaning by concentrating on imagery natural to the material body and material earth. The claims of power in ecclesia and court must be debased and brought down to the level of the dying and decaying body/earth. But as most primitive cultures recognized, the imagery of death and decay is ambivalent. This imagery is at the same time regenerative, for with the death of the old comes the birth of the new. In the popular debasing imagery of the "lower bodily stratum," the bowel defecates and the bladder urinates and thus symbolizes death. But the "lower bodily stratum" is also the place of the womb and the site from which comes semen, which both symbolize the coming of new life. In the imagery of popular culture, power, as an abstract and monological force that seeks to overcome the freedom and relativity of ties to locality and time, must be actively displaced through the use of this ancient symbolism of the dying and regenerating body/earth.

It is on the basis of the above outlined sensibility that both Calhoun and Bakhtin can make the claim that the early struggles against industrialism grounded themselves in a view of freedom and individuality that emphasized ties to body, earth and community. These struggles have in their imagery very little continuity with the spirit of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, which saw freedom and individuality only in a destructive and nihilistic sense.

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### VI

With the above contrast between two views of resistance and freedom in mind, our critique of Laclau and Mouffe can become sharpened. It is our contention that Laclau and Mouffe, in their approval of the French Revolution's ideology of liberty and equality, end up endorsing a liberal rhetoric about the freedom of the individual. If we can view this rhetoric as a cultural code for the production of individuality, the founding trope about the "freedom of the individual" presents itself as a crucial focal-point for the intervention of the disciplinary powers of the modern civilizing project. As the work of Michel Foucault has demonstrated,<sup>28</sup> the isolation of the individual into a fixed analytical space, i.e., the bounded personality with specific rights, as opposed to his/her more amorphous or sliding character in pre-modern society (with respect to kin, community, ancestors, stars, plants, etc.) allowed the disciplinary powers of modern medicine, judiciary, social work, counselling, mental health, psychiatry, etc. to invest themselves in that demarcated space.

For example, when so much rhetoric was invested (and still is) in the autonomous, privatized nuclear family — severed from the "oppressive" claims of kin and community — one can quickly point out how historically this rhetoric served as an ideological tool where a code establishing the twin axes of husband/wife and parent/child, became the anchorage for the investment of a whole array of disciplinary strategies, from the medical doctor's authoritative claims for "child-care" to the psychiatrist governing and legislating "mental health."<sup>29</sup>

It was Nietzsche who was able to drive straight to the heart of the whole Enlightenment notion of freedom and expose its nihilistic character centered around "the will to power." As Jean Baudrillard, drawing on Nietzsche, has pointed out, the freedom of the Enlightenment was and is a vacuous freedom built on an "absence" which leads to the extinction of humanity itself into the radical semiurgy of a body-less culture.<sup>30</sup> It was only when humanity severed itself from its embodied ties in the Enlightenment that a truly disembodied power could take hold: the cybernetic high-tech power that is congruent with increased commodification, beauracratization and massification. Laclau and Mouffe's plurality of the social is in fact an accurate description of the present state of affairs. They are indeed correct: there is in our post-modern world increasingly little left outside of the floating signifiers of high-tech culture — very little of an expressive, embodied humanity.

Laclau and Mouffe are blinded to the fact that the French Revolution and the Enlightenment are integral to the development of the modern power/knowledge episteme, and that liberty, equality and freedom of self-consciousness are coded terms for the fulfillment of this modern civilizing



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project. They fail to see that power in our modern world no longer works on a representational logic, that it does not need any transcendental grounding, but instead functions most effectively in a revolving, synchronic network that is constantly internalized to form our very desires. (Who is the latest to speak in the name of our "freedom": the therapist, the lawyer, the fashion designer?) It is in a perspective like Laclau and Mouffe's, where the open-ended character of the social is sustained theoretically and encouraged politically and culturally, that power as a disciplinary code for a civilization that has fled in fear from the mortal claims of the body and earth can spin its web into an embracing network of interpellating sign-systems. Given the nihilistic flight from embodiment, community and tradition that informs this vision, a vision that is a lived reality for much of humanity, we cannot but be somewhat overcome with the haunting and frightening suspicion that the active ideology of our post-Enlightenment world is not freedom at all, but is instead that of a death-wish.

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Notes

1. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (Thetford, Norfolk: Thetford Press, 1985).
2. Blaise Pascal, quoted in Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 322.
3. This is a phenomenological insight into man's utter situatedness, that humans are placed in very particular circumstances that must be dealt with. This is in opposition to the solipsistic Cartesian version of consciousness. As Jose Ortega y Gasset explains:

No, life is not my mind, my ideas being all that exist. It is the contrary. From the time of Descartes western man has been left without a world. But to live means having to be outside of myself, in the absolute 'outside' that is the circumstance or world; it is having like it or not, constantly and incessantly to face and clash with whatever makes up that world.

*Man and People*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Norton, 1957), p. 48.

4. In the eighteenth century, the German Romantics attempted to repair the radical dualism they saw in Cartesian rationalism by putting forth a *philosophy of expression*. For Herder, the subject is still as for Descartes self-defining; that is, he or she is not related to an ideal order *out there*. Herder wished, though, to re-introduce the categories of human meaning and purpose for this subject by a process of *recognition*. Humans come to know themselves by expressing themselves in culture. Meaning, then, is not out there, but unfolds from the human subject through language. Cf. Charles Taylor, *Hegel!* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), "Introduction."
5. Cf. John O'Neill, *Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), esp. ch. 2.
6. Gregory Bateson, in a brilliant essay on the dynamics of conscious and unconscious thought processes, explains the relationship this way:

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Consciousness talks about things or persons and attaches predicates to the specific things or persons which have been mentioned. In primary processes the things or persons are usually not identified and the focus of the discourse is upon the *relationships* which are asserted to obtain between them. This is really another way of saying that the discourse of primary processes is metaphoric.

"Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art," *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Chandler, 1972), p. 140.

7. Cf. Owen Barfield, "The Rediscovery of Meaning," *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1977).
8. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 104.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
10. Owen Barfield, "The Rediscovery of Meaning." See also: George Herbert Mead, *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Merritt H. Moore (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1936), pp. 73-78.
11. Laclau and Mouffe, p. 105.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 154.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 157.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 157.
22. Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982).
23. Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle*, p. 7.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
26. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1975), p. 245.
27. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968).
28. All of Foucault's works are relevant to our discussion, but see in particular: *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970); and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).
29. Cf. Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).
30. Cf. Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Post Modern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1986).