

FADING POSTMODERN SUBJECTS

Stephen Pinter

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.

I

Nietzsche's thought on health and illness provides a suitable introduction to this discussion of a post-Marxist politics. It seems that the central insight here is that, as Nietzsche would say, illness has progressed to the degree that our culture is not only unable to recognize that which may be a cure but, even if it would recognize it, health has deteriorated to the degree that it is virtually impossible to act on it. A further complication is the possibility that we are unable even to distinguish between health and illness. The one-dimensionality that permits this is perhaps the clearest sign of advanced disease.

A sign of cultural illness is, as Nietzsche would again say, a constant search for that which may pass as a cure. Culture develops a dependence on science to the extent that the technique developed by scientific reason is used as a point of departure for cultural thought. Culture integrates technique so as to make possible a dialectic of cultural thought which both begins and ends with a valorisation of the possibilities of technique as cure. The dialectical intervention of technique works to guarantee that the end result of the work will not represent any radical break from the original presuppositions.

Amor fati, on the other hand, develops differently. Leaving aside the dependence on reason, *amor fati* would recognize that there is indeed no cure possible. It recongizes the search for cures, for "final solutions," as symptoms of disease. Finally, *amor fati* recognizes the profound unreason

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of a thought which would place its presuppositions at the beginning of its work, simply in order to arrive again at these — but this time not as presuppositions, but as “facts.” The intervening process of cultural dialectic works both ways: it transvalues presuppositions into “facts,” and it retroactively confers fact value on the original presuppositions. Initial “facts” now emerge as proven “truths” upon which we may depend to cure us of illness.

That amor fati recognizes no cure does not mean that it does not recognize illness. Its value is precisely this: it is able to isolate symptoms of illness, but it does not attempt to reverse history by creating the possibility for a cure. It embraces history with the result that it does not attempt to deal dialectically with it. Above all, amor fati is a recognition of the futility and unreason inherent in any process that begins with the artificial hope or promise of cure. If it is possible, the only cure that amor fati would recognize is an excess of health that by its vigorous presence affirms life in the midst of sickness. The need for cure (or for salvation) is a sign of weakness, in that disease is revalued into virtue; the possibility for cure transforms weakness into the strength requisite for patience; and most appropriately in this case, the possibility for cure transforms dispersed, fragmented identity into elements of a clinical rehabilitating practice scattered across the social space, waiting to be integrated.

II

One would welcome Laclau and Mouffe's proposal for a new politics that aims at liberating identity from that which goes under the name of orthodox or essentialist Marxism. It would be hoped that this proposal would result in a practice that liberates cultural identity from imprisoning conceptions of necessity and also that this liberation would mean liberation from the need for cure. One would hope that Laclau and Mouffe's work would contain signs of strength that make superfluous mediating relationships that are connected with disease. It would seem that they are not yet ready for amor fati. We are disappointed, because along with burning plans for prisons, they present us with new ones — for hospitals.

The specific question to be asked of the theoretical work of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is: how is the new constitution of “subject” here proposed in fact different from a conception which Laclau and Mouffe claim to have made illegitimate? The task which they claim to have accomplished is nothing short of the overthrow of Marxist orthodoxy on the ground that it contains a self-referential conception of practice whose effect is no longer emancipatory but imprisoning. One would expect some fresh air to begin circulating among the ruins that they have shown us, but instead, Laclau and Mouffe set up a new self-referential construction

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peopled by post-modern "subjects." The legitimacy of this construction seems to be at least temporarily assured precisely because it relies on a "subject" whose function is simply to realise and affirm the "liberating potential" that is placed at both ends of this new self-referential construction.

That this does not immediately appear as weakness testifies simply to the fascinating effects of simulations. But perhaps the most significant disappointment is that this simulation is presented in a good faith that drips with the optimism possible only in a one-dimensional vision that ignores the parodic and tragic undersides of the very practice that it proposes. This one-dimensionality shows up in the fact that liberating practice, though it may dispense with orthodoxy, is shown in fact to require the construction of new mediating relationships that are simply the flip sides of their conception of the orthodoxy that they wish to critique. This pluralism of new relationships is seen to localise the fragmented elements of a new hegemonic subject whose potential for self understanding emerges with the combination of dispersed elements. But it turns out that, just as the elements of the hegemonic subject are scattered across the social, so too are elements of weakness scattered throughout this text. I will treat three of these here.

1: Overdetermination and Identity Construction

Overdetermination appears as a key determinant in the construction of identity in two instances that Laclau and Mouffe elaborate. The construction of the category "man" and the practice of feminism do, on the surface, illustrate the symbolic play of overdetermination in the construction of operational identity; they also reveal the indifference of overdetermination in that it is no respecter of history: it is unnecessary for contemporary identity to submit to constructions that were prevalent earlier. This flattening out of history into a one-dimensional terrain which provides only a metaphorical difference forms the ground on which the recognition and articulation of contingency emerge as the dialectical bases of the practice that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* relies on. This practice is strongly one-dimensional in that identity is freed from earlier, oppressive constructions only to be reinstalled into a space circumscribed by the bounds of an egalitarian negotiating strategy. This strategy is essentially dialectical in that it emphasizes the importance of subject positions: these are seen to be both the elements for and the products of negotiation; they exist outside of practice, but are at the same time the products of practice.

Laclau and Mouffe would argue that subject positions are the undersides of necessity or essentialism, in that they are categories of identity that have been ignored by the orthodox practice of linking identity directly

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with class position, and with relationships to production. Once this link is overthrown, identity is seen to be dispersed across the open social space, but subject positions remain more concentrated within this space. These concentrations thus provide the bases for the negotiation that is crucial to their strategy, but they are also seen to emerge out of this process. Their focus on the latter aspect of the process leads them to claim, wrongly, that subject positions do not exist prior to the negotiating process.

Their formula for practice reveals a critical dependence on precisely that which they claim to have overthrown: their elaboration of subject positions shows not so much the novelty of their proposal but rather the failure of their method to effect a radical break from this particular past. While they critique Soviet Marxism for being too imprisoning, they seem to be unaware that the underside of contemporary Marxism (the aspect that they privilege) is strongly characterised by clinical images. That subject positions are seen to exist at both ends of the negotiating process saves the possibility of practice. I would argue though that this method is a sign of weakness in that it illustrates Laclau and Mouffe's refusal or inability to consider the consequences of fully dispersed identity. This weakness not only saves the possibility of practice, it also requires the institutionalisation of subject positions within what is essentially a clinical practice.

2: The City and The Wilderness

Laclau and Mouffe differentiate between two types of contemporary struggle: that which occurs in the centres of advanced capitalism, and that which occurs at its frontiers. The difference between these two lies in the (pre)supposition that struggle in the centre is more fragmented than struggle in the frontier; struggles in the city are qualitatively different from those that occur in the wilderness. Just as subject positions emerge in those places that essentialism ignores, so too with frontier struggles: they have been overlooked by a myopic concern with "developed society," with the result that any possibility of learning from them has been minimized. Opening this possibility means that struggles in the city would develop along lines sketched by struggles in the frontier. As the city adopts the modes of frontier struggle, the possibility for a unifying articulation is seen to emerge; this articulation holds critical hegemonic possibilities in that the combination and coordination of these struggles, along with the fragments of identity that they produce, will result in a totalizing hegemonic articulation.

But is this differentiation between city and wilderness not simply a too-easy nostalgia? How real is any difference that may exist between these two? And if any difference is illusory, how can a practice that claims contemporary validity base itself on a nostalgic and illusory differentiation?

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In arguing the distinction between wilderness and city in American classical philosophy, Michael Weinstein hints at problems with this distinction in the work of Josiah Royce.¹ Weinstein argues that the city is that space in which the morality of human community is operative; the wilderness, on the other hand, is the state that God has left, driven out by the doubting of meaning and identity. Royce exhibits one of the problems in maintaining the centrality of this distinction by having, as Weinstein states, "taken many of the blessings of the city with him into the wilderness."² The obvious question: how valid is the conception of wilderness that Royce is seen to rely on, if he is unwilling or unable to experience it as precisely that state in which the mores of the city have no necessary meaning, operational or otherwise?

Keeping this blindside of Royce in view, we must ask of Laclau and Mouffe whether their reversal of Royce's thought (in this case, carrying the difference of the frontier into the city) does any service to comprehending and guiding struggles in the city with the requisite specificity and attentiveness. Leaving aside for the moment the possibility that there may be only an illusory difference between these two modes of struggle (after all, why not one-dimensionalize this?), Laclau and Mouffe must somehow account for the possibility that their understanding of *both* "central" and "frontier" struggles may be inadequate, and does no necessary service to either.

3: Partial Identity — For What?

It should be no surprise that the discussion of identity contained in Laclau and Mouffe's work is not very different from the two discussions outlined above. Rejecting essentialist identity constructions as metaphorical, they go on to claim that the only identity that may be established with any materiality is in fact partial identity. This partial identity is said to be somewhat equivalent to the construction of a Derridean centre: this category is a functional node within which and through which identity is materially and discursively captured and defined. It is material precisely because it may only be established as partiality, a fragment similar to other fragments dispersed across the social. It is material identity because it exists only discursively, outside of any totalized (metaphorical) construction. But their concept of this node, while being the flip side of essentialist identity construction, is at the same time caught within the bounds of the inflexibility that they seek to overthrow.

The scattered weakness of Laclau and Mouffe's position shows itself again here. All that must be asked of them is: leaving aside the claims of metaphorical essentialism, why is identity constructed as partial? When this "for what" question is asked, and when the one-dimensionality of their claims against essentialism is removed, we are left with this: Identity must

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be seen as partial because it is our thought that these partialities cannot survive on their own. This realization will make all identity aware that it must be hegemonically integrated; this is now possible because we have made egalitarianism the sign of our thought. This is the liberating potential that we are waiting for our subject to discover. It may be more appropriate to say that they have made egalitarianism the sign of their weakness. But, perhaps as Nietzsche would say, this egalitarianism is now the perverted sign of a diseased strength.

Recalling Weinstein on Royce, we need not go much further to see that the blurring of the distinction between wilderness and city (with the resultant inability to recognize the wilderness for what it is, and for what it does not promise) is the same blurring that affects the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Their unwillingness to face the possibilities that they themselves bring up with the dispersion of identity means simply that they have refused to confront the possibility that any practice which does not realize the precariousness of its existence (especially one that announces the death of identity) in the face of the absence of the mores of the city, can only be a practice that weakens its participants, leaving them anesthetized subjects working in a quarantined space, wanting more narcotic.

III

There remains more to be said of the post-modern subject as Laclau and Mouffe describe it. We have seen that their work on subject positions compromises possible understanding of the dispersal of identity. We have also seen that subject position is that category that is ignored by Laclau and Mouffe's conception of essentialist Marxism. They then go on to call the appropriation and re-definition of subject position by identity the entry of the contingent into the social. This optimistic appropriation is a sign of the one-dimensionality of their work, in that they refuse to deepen the conception of the contingent that they present. I would argue that there exists at least one other dimension to the contingent, and that its addition would serve to deepen understanding of the post-modern and post-Marxist subject that Laclau and Mouffe present.

Not all individuals who enter the wilderness . . . will find a treasure there that will allow them to re-enter the community with a special gift. They may not encounter any god there and may suffer instead the despair described by such modern existentialists as Soren Kierkegaard and Miguel de Unamuno.³

What Weinstein refers to here finds a strong echo in Michel Foucault's understanding of language and the death of God in man.⁴ The announce-

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ment of this death is simultaneously the announcement of the death of the unified subject known as "man." The response to this, at least in Foucault, is the invasion of this highly problematic and uncertain space by a speech and a language which seeks to save itself from a death (not Laclau and Mouffe's optimistic "contingency"), which now carries absolutely no promise or resonance.

Foucault writes: "writing so as not to die . . . or perhaps even speaking so as not to die is a task undoubtedly as old as the world."⁵ For Laclau and Mouffe, language is both telling and showing; it is material writing and speech, as Foucault also writes. But what is the purpose of this language, this speaking? Is it, as Laclau and Mouffe claim, the production of a partial subject in the face of radical contingency? Or is it closer to being, as Foucault would say, an effort to push death back by the space of just one more word, to prolong life by the time of just one more letter, by just one more "articulation"?

We must see Laclau and Mouffe's presentation of articulation in a double sense. For them, articulation is that practice which stands just at the intersection of the necessary and the contingent. It is that practice that is able to subvert the one or the other by the space that it is able to open in either. But the vision of hegemony-sign is too blinding for Laclau and Mouffe to see the point that Foucault makes. The contingent, or negative identity, is not the reservoir of quasi-accessible meaning that may be articulated to subvert necessity; the contingent, this shadow which cannot be escaped, is nothing but the death which permeates discourse since the announcement of the death of God. As Laclau and Mouffe would say, but in a profoundly different sense:

. . . the limit of death opens before language an infinite space. Before the imminence of death, language rushes forth, but it also starts again, tells of itself, tells the story of the story, and discovers the possibility that this interpretation might never end.⁶

Laclau and Mouffe's post-modern subjects are asked to equate egalitarianism and contingency. This may be possible, but it would seem impossible to equate the continual collapsing of identity and contingency, something that they are also called upon to do. Their vision of the articulating post-modern subject leads to the suspicion that they may be hiding from this subject the fact that it would have continually to appropriate present identity: a frenzied linguistic existence that attempts to produce itself materially in the face of an overdetermination that washes history away from the subject.

We may take overdetermination as meaning that the subject is to be cut off from its own history. This history will exist merely as a ground on

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which negative identity may be generated.⁷ But as there is no particular necessity for the subject to have anything to do with its own history, this may be just as well removed from the subject itself. One of the results of this is that the subject's history may be manipulated, and even erased. If we are to hold with Laclau and Mouffe that material existence is also linguistic existence (ie. articulation as appropriation as existence) then we must also hold that the "post-Laclau and Mouffe-subject" may very well find itself erased by a history that it no longer has any necessary claim to. In a drama similar to that traced by Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation* (where the institutionalization of madness is a sign of the de-authoring of what emerges discursively as the "madman"), Laclau and Mouffe provide the ground on which the de-authoring of their own subject takes place. The institutionalization of a totalizing hegemony, the point at which this resolves itself into its own space, carries with it the same consequences as the psychiatric institutionalization of madness. This de-authoring, this amputation of the subject from its own history is compromised by implanting an impulse in the subject to be continually appropriating and articulating identity. But once the control of the subject's history is no longer in its own hands, we may wonder how real any production of negative identity may actually be. The articulation of this negativity may just as easily become a symptom that requires adjustment or treatment. In the flattened terrain of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, all difference may be illusory.

The destruction of the identity that Laclau and Mouffe critique, as well as the destruction of the identity that they would propose, recalls Nietzsche on health and illness. The inability to distinguish between these two is the sign of an afflicted and an afflicting reason. The same is true of the reason that goes into Laclau and Mouffe's post-modern subject. Their reason may lead us to believe that the collapsing of this identity is the collapsing of all identity. But then this is nothing but the debilitating effect of an attempt at de-authoring the subject, at removing it from responsibility, and of amputating its history. What's left is the strength of resistance and the responsibility of an *amor fati*.

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Notes

1. Michael Weinstein, *The Wilderness and the City* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), Ch. 1.
2. Weinstein, p. 6.
3. Weinstein, p. 5.

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4. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), Cf. "Language to Infinity", pp. 53-68.
5. M. Blanchot, quoted in Foucault, p. 53.
6. Foucault, p. 54.
7. Michael Weinstein, *The Tragic Sense of Political Life* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), "History and Intra-History".

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