

Laclau and Mouffe's Hegemonic Project: The Story So Far

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This paper seeks to do two things: first, to map out in a broad way Laclau and Mouffe's intellectual development, since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985, and how they have created a following within academia; and second, to evaluate their 'hegemonic' endeavours so far. I argue that there is a place for a post-structuralist approach to the study of political ideologies and the 'political', but that the project as a whole is unlikely to achieve its intellectual and political ambitions.

Laclau and Mouffe's ground-breaking work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (hereafter *HSS*), published in 1985 (and republished in 2000), had lofty ambitions. It was written at a time when the Marxist left's 'imaginary' was (as it still is) in crisis in the West. The Marxist left had failed to grow in influence in the post-1968 period. Not merely was it unable to capture the imaginations of its traditional constituency – the working class – but it had also failed to impact upon the burgeoning new social movements, which in any case it regarded as peripheral to the class struggle. The growing irrelevance of Marxism as a political ideology seemed to be underlined by the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe and later in the Soviet Union. For Laclau and Mouffe, this political crisis was also theoretical. They hoped to recast the political strategy of the Marxist left through a critical examination of its theoretical foundations. This entailed an explicit rejection of a tacit 'essentialism'¹ and concomitant foundational arguments and categories that had seemingly propelled the Marxist left towards the totalitarian slopes. Thus, their theoretical and political ambitions were meant to work in tandem – as a theory of discourse as well as a political discourse in its own right. Although they rejected 'grand', totalising theories, their project, as established in *HSS*, was nevertheless broad in scope. It delved into issues of political methodology, ontology, epistemology and ethics, derived from post-structuralist paradigms and insights, whose political conclusions seemed to point unambiguously in a 'radical', 'plural' and 'democratic' direction.

Although Laclau and Mouffe's political ambitions have not yet been fulfilled, their activities within academia over the past two decades have not been in vain. Indeed, we could say (if a little artfully) that *in effect* they have been involved in a hegemonic operation loosely analogous to one of their intellectual forbears, Gramsci. Combating essentialism entailed a 'war of manoeuvre' against the Marxist left and a 'war of position' within academia that involved the construction of theoretical alliances and the fostering of young scholars sympathetic to their project. Within the academy, they have had some success in making anglophone political science/theory scholars aware of the significance of continental post-structuralism

for the study of politics. The time is ripe to take stock of their 'hegemonic' endeavours so far. After contextualising and briefly outlining some of their basic arguments and conclusions in *HSS*, which became their theoretico-political manifesto and founding document, I consider the success of their most significant 'wars' of 'manoeuvre' and 'position'. The underlying thread of my argument is that the outcomes of the various debates, interventions and discursive case studies of their followers show that, although the totality of their intellectual ambitions are unlikely to be fulfilled, they, and the post-structuralist current they represent, still offer modes of thought that can enrich our understanding of the 'political'.

Constructing Politico-theoretical Frontiers

Laclau and Mouffe's project in *HSS* stemmed from a deep theoretical and political dissatisfaction with orthodox Marxism. Theoretically, orthodox Marxism was unable to develop a plausible account of ideology: the base/superstructure version underestimated the extent to which *all* social relations were ideologically constituted, as well as the diversity and strength of non-class political identities, from populism to the new social movements. Indeed, for them, ideologies (or 'discourses', to use their preferred term, which explicitly combined linguistic and material/institutional practices and had no epistemic, 'false consciousness' connotation) possessed no 'class belonging'. Various attempts by Marxists to modify the base/superstructure model through the introduction of the concept of 'relative autonomy' never quite worked, if only because 'last instance' economic determination was an escape clause without coherent theoretical status. Yet, another escape clause of Marxist theory – 'hegemony' – they regarded as far more fruitful. Applying Derrida's deconstructive approach to the Marxist tradition from Plekhanov and Lenin through to Gramsci, they argued that 'hegemony' was in effect a Derridean 'supplementary' in dealing with problems arising 'outside' the base/superstructure 'text', in particular the lack of automatic correlation between the 'objective' social location of members of the working class and their identities. They followed through the logic of this 'supplementary' to construct a theory of contemporary politics so that 'hegemony' became a central rather than marginal concept (1985, pp. 7–91). Their quest to develop a more theoretically and politically satisfying account of ideology also led them to embrace other post-structuralist ideas of Foucault (his concept of discourse) and Lacan (psychoanalysis), as well as the semiotic structuralism of Saussure. They also borrowed from the later Wittgenstein, Claude Lefort and C. B. Macpherson. However, their (critical) indebtedness to self-proclaimed Marxists, especially Gramsci and Althusser, remained.

Rather than view discourses and the construction of political identities as epiphenomena of production relations, Laclau and Mouffe saw them as the outcome of hegemonic struggles that derived from an antagonism to be found at the heart of all contemporary social relations. In liberal-democratic, 'advanced industrial' societies, different forces competed to make their ideology or 'discourse' prevail and claim the right to speak on behalf of the 'people'. Although class antagonisms may exist under capitalism, they were not intrinsic to the system as portrayed by 'essentialist' Marxism, but were the product of 'discursive' or 'symbolic' *constructions*, whose roots were more deeply psychological than social, stemming from an

individual's desire for 'fullness', the result of a primordial 'lack' of a satisfyingly stable identity based upon a sense of oneness with the 'other'. According to Lacan's hypothesis, the full recognition by the 'other' of the self is always open to doubt (Lacan, 1977, pp. 1–7). Hence, the 'other' in all its symbolic forms can be blamed for the blocked identity (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 125), and hence the continuing possibility of antagonism. Since antagonism is the key to understanding the formation of identities through this self/other relation, and language and other forms of 'signifier' are always open to a multiplicity of meanings, the symbolic field is always susceptible to destabilisation. The conditions of possibility for hegemonic struggle are characterised by the conflict between two competing logics of 'equivalence' (discourses that stress a sameness of identities as a result of a perceived common 'negative', threat or enemy) and 'difference' (discourses where identities are constructed through non-adversarial, 'positive' differences) (pp. 127–34). Alliances constructed through 'chains' of equivalence in complex and highly socially differentiated, advanced industrial societies can easily be disrupted through the logic of difference. Hegemony involves competition between different political forces to get maximum support for, or identification with, their definition of 'floating signifiers', such as 'freedom' and 'equality' (terms which can assume different meanings, depending on whether they are 'articulated' in, for example, liberal or socialist discourse), or 'empty signifiers', such as 'order' or even 'democracy' (terms which can be invested with a variety of meanings because they have no inherent content and can serve to unite disparate movements).

A crucial anti-totalitarian corollary of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse-theoretic approach was that, unlike orthodox Marxism, the notion of 'objectivity' itself was problematic. Discourses, they held, could not be explained from an external Archimedean standpoint in terms of an extra-discursive, 'objective' economic reality that supported 'objective' (capitalist) interests, creating 'false consciousness' in the working class and to be revealed as such by the Marxist party armed with a monopoly on 'scientific' knowledge. Following Heidegger, they claimed that, although it existed external to thought ('existence'), the world could only be known and acquire meaning through discursive construction ('being') (Laclau, 1990, pp. 100–3; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 108). What made the language of political discourse in particular so slippery and protean was that it could never transparently reflect the desires of people, given their primordial 'lack', the existence of antagonism and the fact that all identities are relationally created as a result of differences. Political language could never simply correspond to, or represent, its 'object', and hence it was inherently symbolic or metaphorical in its attempt to fix meanings (1985, p. 111).

Politically, Laclau and Mouffe wanted to construct a 'nodal point' around 'plural and radical' democracy, building on the emerging political identities of the new social movements (as well as workers' movements), championing issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, peace and the environment, built on the experiences of those participating in them. Rather than a strategy of replacing liberal-democratic institutions, which had led to totalitarianism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, they called for a 'multiplication of spaces' within liberal democracy. Liberal democracy was there to be 'radicalised', by fulfilling the Tocquevillian 'democratic revolution', a process that begins through transforming relations of 'subordination' (where

individuals are subjected to the decisions of another) into those of 'oppression' (where these relations are now perceived as antagonistic and illegitimate) (1985, pp. 153–4). Thus, for theoretical and political reasons, they conducted a war of 'manoeuvre' against orthodox, 'essentialist' Marxism, and a war of 'position', searching for intellectual allies and building up a group of like-minded, 'radical democratic' intellectuals.

War of Manoeuvre

The war of manoeuvre, which can be defined as an intellectual zero-sum game, involved an attempted demolition of the 'essentialist' core of Marxism. Although Ellen Wood was the first to enter the field with a full-blooded defence of Marxism (Wood, 1986), Laclau and Mouffe concentrated their energies on a rebuttal of Norman Geras's critique (Geras, 1990).² This 'head to head' did much to illuminate the issues at stake, and in a sense, as we shall see, they were unable to exorcise fully the spectre of Geras's challenge. Leaving aside his defence of certain Marxist thinkers, Geras focused on methodological, ontological/epistemological and normative issues, which he assumed that Marxism, as broadly construed, had adequately dealt with, thereby not warranting the kind of rejection of its fundamentals as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe.

Methodologically, Geras did not defend the base/superstructure metaphor, or economic determination in the last instance, or essentialism as such. Rather, he stressed explanatory variation in Marxism from determination to relative autonomy (the state's autonomy limited by production relations), allowing for a variety of 'capitalist' superstructures and political outcomes. Production and class relations could be 'primary' explaining a 'great deal' (Geras, 1990, pp. 75, 131). Ontologically and epistemologically, he objected to what he perceived as their denial of the 'discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy' and the 'thought/reality opposition',³ which amounted to a rejection of a 'pre-discursive reality and an extra-theoretical objectivity', which, he argued, provided an 'irreplaceable basis of all rational inquiry' and were also the 'condition of meaningful communication across and between differing viewpoints' (p. 99). Thus, according to Laclau and Mouffe, an earthquake could be discursively construed, for example, either as a natural phenomenon or as an act of God, 'putting on level terms ... what actually is and a superstition about it' (pp. 98, 156–9). Their arguments, in effect, denied the existence of an objective reality, which rendered them philosophical idealists, with no 'external control' to check on the truth of relativised discourses. Geras rejected the notion that the aspiration to 'cognitive objectivity' shared by Marxists and those subscribing to the Enlightenment tradition implied claims to absolute certainty. This conflated the aspiration to truth, with an attitude towards it. Such an aspiration did not imply dogmatism, but always the possibility of revision in the light of new information and evidence, and therefore it was inherently democratic (p. 162). Laclau and Mouffe, of course, do appeal to an external reality in rejecting essentialism, which they argue misunderstands the real nature of the 'social' and the actual openness of history (p. 163).

Next, Geras held that Laclau and Mouffe's position was normatively and practically vacuous. Although they claimed to support a 'progressive' politics, their

anti-essentialism, which denied the notion of 'objective interests', an anthropologically grounded 'human nature' and human needs, as well as universal principles of fairness and justice, meant that they could not construct any useful criteria for identifying and measuring exploitation and oppression. True, they offered some kind of progressive criteria in proposing a distinction between 'relations of subordination' and 'relations of oppression'; but in making the latter relations discourse-dependent, relativisation sets in, ruling out the possibility that 'objectively' oppressive practices exist, irrespective of the discourse-generated consciousness of the oppressed or oppressor (Geras, 1990, pp. 110–13). As a consequence of all this, their anti-essentialism could support any kind of politics. Although they preferred humanist values, they could not provide any cogent reasons for their choice; and in talking about the 'discourse' of the 'democratic revolution', they were merely offering a discourse on a discourse (p. 150).

In replying to Geras's criticisms, Laclau and Mouffe, on the methodological issue, insisted upon the *logical* incompatibility of the concepts of 'autonomy' and 'determination', which the notion of 'relative autonomy' was unable to resolve (Laclau, 1990, pp. 112–18). They were constructing a more relational account of base/superstructure that avoided 'last instance' determinism, and allowed the 'superstructure' to penetrate the 'base'. On the interlocking ontological/epistemological question, they denied that, by obliterating the extra-discursive/discursive and thought/reality distinctions, relativism and idealism resulted. They did so by upholding Heidegger's distinction between the 'being' of an object, whose meaning was discursively constructed and open to change, and its 'existence' (something independent of thought), which as such has no inherent meaning. For example, an 'existing' spherical object has no meaning until it is put within a human context, say a game of football (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 100–5). The 'truth', or reality, about the 'being' of an object had necessarily to be constituted within a 'theoretical and discursive context', rendering the notion of truth or 'being' outside 'all context' meaningless (p. 105).

Laclau and Mouffe also responded to Geras's objection that their discourse theory meant they were unable to establish a defensible, 'progressive' value position. They had questioned whether 'objective interests' could be independent of an agent's consciousness. Rather, interests were discursively constructed, as 'precarious historical products ... always subject to processes of dissolution and redefinition' (1985, p. 118). Secondly, they rejected any foundational basis for preferring one society over another, since this smacked of absolute certainty, and a priori reasoning (p. 124). Nevertheless, one could reason pragmatically, preferring 'for a variety of reasons' the 'verisimilitude' of a particular alternative that is open to debate. Thirdly, they queried the notion that humanist values could be grounded upon a metaphysical essentialism. Instead, these values had to be 'constructed' by particular discursive practices. Thus, the production of 'Man' as a rights-bearer has been a recent phenomenon, and is an ongoing part of the 'democratic revolution', with the idea of equality slowly penetrating all aspects of human relations (including male/female relations) as described by Tocqueville. By the same token, in answer to Geras's argument that 'objectively' oppressive and exploitative practices could exist, they held that the worker/capitalist antagonism was not inherent in the process of surplus value extraction, as Marx proposed, but was the result of

discourses, especially democratic-egalitarian ones, 'outside' production relations (p. 126).

Although there were many loose ends and a number of misunderstandings and cross-purposes in this debate,⁴ Laclau and Mouffe's war of manoeuvre against Geras could have been more successful. They did not respond to his proposal that, in explanatory or normative terms, there could be some form of explanatory primacy of material factors⁵ or some kind of normative grounding in human nature, for example based on human needs (thereby admitting to the possibility that pragmatism could have some limits). On the epistemological/ontological issue, invoking Heidegger's existence/being distinction to highlight the meaning-giving properties of discourse along with the Wittgenstein language games approach, with the rules of football as a paradigmatic example, was not helpful either in proving the validity of an overarching or generic notion of discourse, or, alternatively, in helping to distinguish between different types of discourse. Geras's point concerned the nature and testing of *explanation* and *causality* that appeals to and aspires to objectivity, whereas Laclau and Mouffe focused on the *meaning* of various signifiers and human activities (which, in the case of religion, often appeals to the strength of belief). Thus, their response would have been more convincing if they had suggested that their task involved distinguishing between different *types* of discourse, rather than aiming for a discourse of meta-theoretical status.

Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe's thesis relies upon such a differentiation. Although they devote considerable effort to demonstrating at the *formal* level how 'objectivity' *within* political discourses is problematic, when they are in explanatory mode they appeal to 'objective' 'facts' to demonstrate the veracity of contingency-centred explanations, showing that ideologies have no 'class belonging', in contrast to 'essentialist' Marxism. They also explain the emergence of the concept of hegemony with reference to the facts of 'advanced industrial societies' and the existence of capitalism's 'combined and uneven development'. Of course, we can agree in a descriptive sense that the 'truth' or 'being' of any *object* by its very nature is discursively or theoretically context-dependent, but we have to distinguish between discourses that attempt scientifically to explain an 'external' reality, which require systematically organised data from, and often hypothetical reasoning about, that reality, and those such as aesthetic/imaginative or certain political discourses that have a clear symbolic dimension and do not require, or aspire to, agreed methods to demonstrate proof.

As for Laclau and Mouffe's anti-foundational defence of their politico-ethical values, this too suffered from various weaknesses. The implied triplet foundation-alism/certainty/dogmatism can be unpacked: foundational views do not have to be held with such certainty, and can be grounded on 'verisimilitude' too, and indeed can be open to change in the light of knowledge and argument, as Geras suggested. A more crucial difficulty is that we can agree with them that 'interests' *in fact* are historically constructed, but they do not entertain the possibility that they can be constructed through the use of arguments in opposition to *mistaken* beliefs. Moreover, whatever the potentially authoritarian dangers, such 'interests' can 'really' exist independently of an agent's consciousness, as a result of ignorance and/or superstition. Equally important, this 'descriptive' strategy also applies to value

choices: the existence of the discourse of the 'democratic revolution', or the fact that we live in a liberal-democratic political culture, is not a compelling reason for embracing it. Thus, a tension within their project is exposed in attempting to be a theory of discourse as well as a discourse in its own right, although, as we shall see, they formulated further arguments in favour of 'radical democracy'.

Some of the weaknesses of Laclau and Mouffe's position could have been avoided if they had made some tactical retreats through limiting the claims of their discourse theory – for example, by indicating that they were mainly attempting to deepen our understanding of the 'political' by exploring the nature of the ideological construction of political identities through the use of language and psychology, that they were concerned with the problem of 'meaning' rather than the truth claims of discourses, and that they were creating the 'ontological' conditions for classifying different types of *political* discourse. They could also have admitted that their theory aspired to 'cognitive objectivity' based upon reasoning and the assembling of empirical knowledge in terms of understanding the emergence, persistence and transformation of political discourses. In fact, as we shall see, their followers certainly did aspire to 'cognitive objectivity', even if some, but not all, of their theoretical premises were different from those of orthodox Marxism.

War of Position

Laclau and Mouffe devoted far more of their intellectual energies to building up intellectual allies and a group of supporters for their position than in fighting the 'essentialist' enemy. Their obviously dialogic approach is evident in Laclau's *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), Mouffe's *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (1996) and Butler, Laclau and Žižek's *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* (2000). After *HSS*, a clear intellectual division of labour emerged between Laclau and Mouffe, with each pursuing their particular interests – Laclau theoretically consolidating and developing the joint perspective of *HSS*, and Mouffe moving into political philosophy, 'articulating' and 'disarticulating' various concepts developed by thinkers close to their position.

Laclau

Laclau entered into friendly dialogues with Rorty and Derrida, only to discover the existence of profound disagreements.⁶ Although his exchanges with Žižek ultimately followed the same pattern, they were far more sustained and served to underline some of the difficulties already apparent in his interlocution with Geras. Earlier, there was a clear affinity between Laclau and Žižek through their shared recognition of Lacan's importance for understanding ideology (Laclau, 1990, pp. 249–60; Žižek, 1989, pp. 5–6, 87).⁷ Although clear theoretical differences began to emerge over the degree to which the Lacanian 'Real' (part of the human psyche that ultimately resists symbolisation) was analogous to capitalism (Laclau, 1990, pp. 205, 290, 291; see Callinicos, 2001, p. 389), as the debate progressed the sharpest contrast to surface was between Laclau's theoretical 'radicalism' and political 'conservatism' on the one hand, and Žižek's political 'radicalism' vis-à-vis capitalism and liberal democracy and theoretical 'conservatism' on the other. Žižek

wished unequivocally to transcend the present liberal-democratic capitalist order, whereas his theoretical 'conservatism' manifested itself in employing a Marx–Hegel framework, although his *political* commitment to Marxism as such was far from obvious.⁸ The strongest disagreements concerned the descriptive/value relation contained in Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony, along with the latter's possibly conservative inflection, and the Marxist–Hegelian (and perhaps Leninist) analysis and critique of liberal-democratic capitalism by Žižek.

Žižek held, echoing an earlier critique by Simon Critchley (1998, pp. 806–9), that Laclau's theory of hegemony relied on an '*unreflected gap between the descriptive and the normative*' (Butler *et al.*, 2000, p. 229, Žižek's emphasis; compare Žižek, 1999, p. 174). Hegemony was descriptive and value-neutral and did not contain the 'ethico-political choice' of 'radical democracy'. Furthermore, did it allow for the full play of contingency, or did it work only within the existing capitalist and liberal-democratic horizon? Laclau seemed to conflate the struggle for hegemony within a certain horizon and the 'more fundamental exclusion that sustains this very horizon' (1990, p. 108). In effect, it naturalised the existing liberal capitalist order, thereby obfuscating 'concrete historicity *qua* the change of the very global structuring principle of the Social' (p. 112).

For Žižek, the best way that this 'global structuring principle', and the possibility of changing it, could be understood was through Marx's political economy (1999, p. 98). Capitalism created conditions for emergent '*dispersed-contingent-ironic-and so on, political subjectivities*' (p. 108), especially through a process of 'deterritorialisation' (a Deleuzian term, derived from Marx, referring to the process by which spatial and conceptual structures are broken down by capitalism, and which can be 're-territorialised'). 'Capitalism' was not an essentialist 'anchor' limiting the scope of hegemonic struggle, as Laclau proposed, but its '*positive condition*' (p. 319). Although not ruling out the need for identity politics, he championed anti-capitalist struggles and wanted a suitably updated version of 'class struggle'. Its absence merely indicated the victory of one side. This implied that class struggle 'secretly overdetermines' other struggles through the creation of the 'empty place' to be hegemonised and involved prior secret privileging and inclusions/exclusions (p. 320). He claimed that capitalism would experience 'new "contradictions"', leading to its 'self-cancellation', through the creation of its own 'gravediggers' (p. 329, note 11), who consisted of all those marginalised in the New World Order, especially in the Third World, as well as all those excluded in the First World.

Thus, Žižek still wanted to retain at least quasi-Hegelian and Marxist ontological presuppositions (with a Lacanian 'Real'). He thought Hegel's dialectical framework could help resolve the universal/particular problem, allowing for both sides of the couplet to have a genuinely fluid ontological content in understanding the 'systemicity' of capitalism, in contrast to Laclau's account, which saw it as an 'inconsistent composite of heterogeneous features' (1999, p. 225). This framework was embodied in the notion of a 'dialectical totality' in relation to understanding the contemporary 'logic of Capital'. Thus, the Hegelian logic of the 'retroactive reversal of contingency into necessity' could be applied to capitalist development.⁹ Capitalism 'retroactively posited its own presuppositions' and 'reinscribed its con-

tingent/external circumstances into an all encompassing logic that can be generated from an elementary conceptual matrix (the "contradiction" involved in the act of commodity exchange, etc.)' (p. 225). If capitalism was perceived as a 'dialectical totality', its contingent effects could create a historical 'necessity,' resulting in a new 'concrete universal', to use Hegelian parlance, involving the resignification of political democracy, human rights, and so on, in a 'non-capitalist context' (p. 225). Žižek hoped that, by employing key Hegelian and Marxist categories, he could keep utopian ideas alive (pp. 325–6).

In response, Laclau denied that his concept of hegemony involved an illicit fact/value separation, with no clear link between its 'descriptive' status and the 'value' of radical democracy. He sought to demonstrate this linkage by introducing a distinction between the 'ethical' and the 'normative'. All hegemonically constructed 'normative' orders entail 'ethical investments' – the impossible but necessary desire for fullness and universality. Given the ineradicability of antagonism and the fact that universality has to be represented by an incommensurable particular, there can be no 'logical transition' from the ethical moment to a particular normative order (1990, p. 81). Rather, hegemony entails the unending interplay of 'contingent decisions' between the 'ethical' ('ought') and the 'normative' ('is'). Thus, the question of the grounds for choosing one 'option' (decision) over another was 'not relevant' (p. 85). Crucially, if totalitarianism or particularism were to be avoided, there had to be democracy, the only form of hegemony that 'permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations', keeping open the 'gap between the ethical moment and the normative order' (p. 86).

Laclau also had fundamental doubts about Žižek's retention of Marxist categories of 'capitalism', 'class' and 'class struggle', which rested on the traditional base/superstructure metaphor. Thus, Žižek's view of capitalism's 'systemicity' relied upon the old-fashioned 'myth' of the 'self-enclosed economic space', rather than being seen as the product of 'partial hegemonic stabilizations' and contingent forms of symbolisation (1990, p. 291), which made the relations between component elements unstable (p. 293). Thus, the Hegelian a priori notion of retroactive reversal, whereby contingency was transformed into necessity, was unable to appreciate the depth to which the 'economy' depended upon contingent, 'external' ideological constructions. As for class identity, this was ideologically constructed outside the 'base' of production relations like any other identity (p. 202). In any case, there had been a 'drastic fall' in the working class in terms of its absolute numbers and its organisations, and new forms of social stratification had emerged, not corresponding to Marxist analysis (pp. 206, 299). Today, there was a real problem in establishing criteria with which to identify the working class (pp. 297–8). On another empirical question concerning the idea of anti-capitalist class struggles, Laclau stated that workers' struggles were not necessarily anti-capitalist, and anti-capitalists were not necessarily workers (pp. 202–3). Under conditions of modern capitalism, of the 'imperialist chain', anti-systemic struggles were not necessarily located within capitalist production relations (p. 203). The danger with the class-struggle approach was that it anchored the moment of struggle around 'sectoral identity', ignoring the fact that any 'meaningful' struggle involved a transcending of such identity, as in Gramsci's idea of a 'collective will' (p. 210). To achieve such a transformation of consciousness, the non-class-based language of 'empty

signifiers' was far more appropriate. Politically, the real problem with the base/superstructure approach was that it put an 'a priori limit' on what was achievable through mass action (p. 292), and avoided a number of concrete questions concerning the democratisation of liberal political institutions, the relations between the market and social control of the productive process (p. 293), and the state regulation and democratic control of the economy to mitigate the worst effects of globalisation (p. 206). Laclau called for a war of position in contrast to Žižek's war of manoeuvre. At bottom, Žižek's was 'empty talk' (pp. 206, 289), refusing to say with what he would replace capitalism and liberal democracy, and this led to 'political quietism and sterility' (p. 293).

Retrospectively, we can see that a unified, Laclau–Žižek theoretico-political position was unsustainable. Their paths crossed, but their minds did not meet. Theoretically and politically, Laclau had gone 'beyond' Hegel and Marx, whereas Žižek saw both thinkers as vital for providing a direction for contemporary radical politics in suggesting a historical-teleological structure not far removed from the *Communist Manifesto*. Leaving aside their conflicting political objectives (perhaps both 'undecidably' utopian in different ways), how convincing was Laclau's response to Žižek? On the normative issue, Laclau's 'ethical investment'/'normative order' distinction is in effect a repetition in other terms of his theory of hegemony with incommensurable decisions made to fill the 'lack', and therefore remains explanatory/descriptive of the 'political' with no obvious value-orientation. His other main argument was that at least democracy can be justified on the grounds that it is a system that recognises its own contingency through allowing different forces to become hegemonic, unlike particularist or totalitarian forms of representation. This presupposes a preference for contingency and is unlikely to persuade those committed to particularist or totalitarian values. We are also left with the uncomfortable question that democracy, although 'it' might recognise its own contingent foundations, is still based upon a set of rules that *limit* contingency – and what precisely is the argument for preferring this set of rules? The implication of this line of questioning does not assume that Žižek's own value radicalism is any better grounded, since it relies heavily on Marx's questionable historical teleology, avoiding ontological and deontological (universalist-derived) arguments that Geras considered normatively crucial.

This brings us to Laclau's opposition to Žižek's championing of orthodox Marxist categories – capitalism, class and class struggle – because they supposedly rested on the crude base/superstructure metaphor, thereby ignoring the fact that all socio-economic structures are discursively constructed. Žižek's use of Hegel's notion of 'retroactive reversal of contingency into necessity', when applied to capitalist development, showed the extent to which social, economic and political institutional structures mattered to him in creating revolutionary agencies oppositional to the liberal-democratic capitalist status quo. He had a dialectical stance towards questions of structure and agency. Laclau, on the other hand, uses institutional or 'material' structural explanations – for example, 'advanced industrial societies' or 'capitalist relations' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 161) – to account for the 'dislocation' of *symbolic* structures, but he does not follow through the logic of this by contemplating how such forms of explanation help understand the 'sedimentation' of new symbolic structures; rather, they are merely the outcome of ill-defined

'hegemonic' struggles. Apart from his desire to keep history as an open road, this structural hesitancy may be the result of an underlying tendency to dissolve structures into discourses, because institutions, including the 'economy', are seen primarily as discourse-dependent. Thus, any dialectic between institutions and discourse seems to be absent (especially if, by their definition, the former is subsumed under the latter), whereas Žižek, at least *in principle*, despite his crude (if playful?) espousal of Marxist categories and however questionable his empirical assumptions, wants to maintain a space for this to occur. This absence is clear in Laclau's account of identity formation, which occurs outside production relations. The possibility that, for example, workers might choose egalitarian discourses on his account would appear to be arbitrary, having little to do with their experience of the effects of capitalism *within* production relations. Unsurprisingly, he can reject the notion of class struggle because the relationship between 'objective' class relations and identity formation is for him wholly contingent. Although he notes that these relations have become more complex in the modern world, this is not a good reason for writing them off as providing an important framework for making the language of politics more intelligible, even if their role in identity formation is problematic. Thus, much political discussion within capitalist societies is shaped by issues of income/wealth distribution and the needs of capital accumulation (for example, New Labour's 'Third Way' 'rights'-with-'responsibilities' discourse). By the same token, although he does not want to 'anchor' any struggles in the 'base', we get little sense of what might constitute the structural limits of any struggle (do new social movements by themselves have the potential strength to overthrow capitalism?). Oddly, this would seem to lead to some form of utopianism that Laclau seeks to avoid.

Mouffe

Mouffe's war of position involved a move into the normative territory of contemporary political philosophy. Whereas Laclau focused more on the 'discourse of discourse', she was more concerned to formulate and promulgate the discourse of 'radical democracy'. Her constant theme was that contemporary political philosophy was not really *political* philosophy, because it did not focus on the 'ethics of the political' involving conflict and collective action within a political association. Rather, it was moral philosophy dealing with questions of rational individual action (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 113, 147). It failed to understand 'the political', and the need to 'domesticate' it through 'agonistic pluralism'. She derived her notion of 'the political' from the conservative/Nazi Carl Schmitt, who held that the ineradicability of passion-driven, human conflict led individuals and groups to define themselves as 'friends' and 'enemies', as a 'we' and as a 'them', in constructing their identities (pp. 2–3). Yet, Schmitt had no understanding of how liberal democracy could transform (or 'domesticate') 'enemies' into friendly 'adversaries' (p. 4), so that 'the political' could become 'politics' (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 101–2). Liberal democracy's primary virtue lay in legitimising and transforming human conflict into something less destructive, by creating an 'agonistic pluralism' that acknowledged the 'paradox of democracy' – the impossible promise to eliminate conflict, especially between the 'logics' of equality and liberty (pp. 4–5). Thus, she argued

that modern liberal-democratic citizenship consisted of a 'common political identity of persons' with differing conceptions of the good, who subscribe to the values of 'liberty and equality for all' (1993, pp. 83–4). Within this ethos, 'radical and plural democracy' involved challenging all forms of subordination by extending liberal and egalitarian values into new areas of social existence, as experienced by the new social movements (pp. 70–1, 84).

We can now look briefly at Mouffe's critical appropriation of various frameworks of contemporary political philosophy. She had sympathy with Rawls's position, especially with his argument that modern democracy, in prioritising the 'right' over the 'good', contained no 'single substantive common good' (Mouffe, 1993, p. 55) and also with his 'progressive' idea of 'justice as fairness' in opposition to neo-liberalism (p. 52). However, his 'perfect liberal utopia' failed to recognise 'the political', in at least three senses (p. 51). First, in assuming that all differences could be relegated to the private sphere through the construction of a procedurally based rational consensus, he ignored the possibility that conflicts over political values were unresolvable (p. 49). Indeed, conflict in the public sphere over the meanings of liberty and equality was the defining mark of the liberal-democratic regime. He left no space for the indeterminacy required for the modern democratic process to operate successfully. Secondly, this rationalistic process of relegating dissent to the private sphere was in itself in effect a covert political manoeuvre, entailing the construction of a 'we' in opposition to the 'them' of a 'constitutive outside' that excluded non-liberals (pp. 140–1; compare 2000, pp. 24–30). Thirdly, in assuming that a rational public consensus was possible, he conflated political and moral philosophy that focused upon individual morality. He was thus unable to construct an 'ethics of the political'. This dealt with the ethical consequences of being a member of a political association, which meant that, in a liberal democracy, political principles involved irresolvable conflicts over the meaning of liberty and equality for all (1993, pp. 56, 113). She later mobilised similar arguments against Habermasian-inspired theorists of deliberative democracy. They wanted to create procedures that would generate a rational consensus. Thereby, they ignored the endemic nature of human conflict and the fact that 'social objectivity' and social identities are constituted by power/hegemony relations, rendering the quest for harmony and transparency illusory (2000, pp. 95–100).

Mouffe sympathised with the communitarian critique of Rawls's initially abstract individualist position of the 'disembodied subject', but rejected Sandel's and MacIntyre's anti-liberal, Aristotelian conception of the common good that excluded a plurality of views (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 30, 32). Nevertheless, she endorsed not only Walzer's 'modern' notion of 'complex equality' (based not upon a universal abstract principle, but on Western liberal-democratic culture and institutions), but also Taylor's 'modern' liberal-friendly communitarianism (pp. 33–6).

Political philosophy's role, Mouffe concluded, was not in deciding which notion of justice, equality and liberty were true, but in 'proposing different' interpretations (1993, p. 115). This brings us to a crucial point: she strongly resisted the implication that her overall argument was relativist or nihilist. She maintained that distinctions between justice and injustice and so on, could always be made, but only from the standards provided by a particular tradition. An 'external', universal

standpoint was impossible (p. 15). And modern democracy was not based upon a relativist conception of the world, but upon a 'certain set of "values"' (1992, p. 12; 1993, p. 132). Indeed, a Wittgensteinian defence of liberal-democratic principles as 'constitutive of our form of life' was appropriate (2000, p. 66). Although, following Foucault, the distinction between validity and power (as well as logic and rhetoric) had to be collapsed, this had no nihilistic inference, because within a given 'regime' of truth, there were still rules of argument, which could be respected in contrast to those who wanted merely to impose their power (1993, p. 15). Furthermore, not only did liberal democracy capture the 'undecidable character' of modern politics, its very contingency meant that it was precarious, and as a 'conquest' it needed to be protected as well as deepened (pp. 133, 145).

How successful was Mouffe's attempt to place their idea of 'radical and plural democracy' within contemporary political philosophy? Her criticism of Rawls's attempt to depoliticise differences of belief through confining them to the private sphere is well taken, as is her point that, in not highlighting the importance of the passions and antagonism, political philosophy ends up as moral rather than political (see Newey, 2001). But there still remains the question of whether we can privilege the 'political' over the 'moral', and indeed 'passion' over rationalism, especially if we want to domesticate the 'political'. Issues of individual morality may be crucial in judging acts of power performed by elected representatives, and the 'moral' philosophy of Rawls or Habermas may provide an important benchmark in evaluating public policy or the decision-making process and in assessing the extent to which institutions of power distort or inhibit the possibility of reasoned discourse. If the 'political' has no moral basis to it, then we might see it in nihilistic terms, which Mouffe wants to avoid. Indeed, the question is whether she offers sufficient theoretical resources to support her plea for an 'agonistic pluralism'. The perfectionist and deontological liberals that she criticises are able to mount strong arguments in favour of forbearance and toleration, either based upon human needs (a recognition that other human beings might have common needs that are expressed differently) and capacities (especially human being's epistemological limitations that create doubt, stemming, for example, from the contingency of knowledge context) or arising from a logic derived from the intrinsic nature of morality itself. Thus, an argument could be offered showing how her notion of the 'political' *requires* moral philosophy, and Rawlsians or Habermasian deliberative democrats, by appealing to 'fairness' and 'ideal speech situations', could be seen as going some way to provide a 'talking cure', helping to bring about an 'agonistic pluralism'. However, this kind of strategy may be deficient on its own to achieve this, as would Mouffe's, without proper attention given to favourable socio-economic structural and cultural conditions.

Another difficulty is with Mouffe's defence of liberal-democratic principles, which in eschewing any form of foundationalism ('positive' ontological or rationalistic) appeals to the 'facts' of pluralism that exist in modern democracy (1993, p. 133). This regime supposedly reflects the deep-seated nature of human antagonism and impossibility of creating a society without a 'we' and a 'them'. The problem is that, if these facts did not exist, as in deeply 'sedimented', organic or totalitarian societies, we have no recourse to foundational arguments justifying pluralism as intrinsically good. Interestingly, she concedes that there is a need for liberal democracy

to be justified by something more than its procedures, for it to be grounded on some form of 'substance' or 'homogeneity' that induces the desire to discuss differences with an opponent and not use brute force (p. 129). But for her, this desire comes from a common adherence to contingently created liberal-democratic principles, not from, for example, a recognition of a 'common humanity', albeit an historically and culturally mediated one. In other words, her anti-foundational argument rules out even a 'weak' foundationalism derived from some kind of interaction between invariant and 'objective' human capacities (including a capacity to recognise and identify with the sufferings of others) and the discursive (history, culture).

The problems arising from the lack of a foundational core intensify as we move to Mouffe's construction of a radical and plural democratic 'frontier' within liberal democracy, which fixes the 'floating signifiers' of liberty and equality for all into 'moments' in the struggle to overcome all oppressive social relations. These difficulties are suggested by at least one inconsistency – her call for political philosophers to propose different interpretations of justice, equality and liberty (1993, p. 115), rather than 'true' ones.¹⁰ Yet presumably, the arguments of the new social movements – the embodiments of 'radical democracy' – are by implication 'true', seeking to overcome power-created, 'sutured' or 'naturalised' relationships of subordination. The deeper problem is that the spectre of relativism is never far away. Her (and Laclau's) original argument in favour of 'radical and plural democracy' was derived from Tocqueville's notion of the 'democratic revolution', whose implications are that this should be 'deepened'. To this, she added C. B. Macpherson's immanent critique of liberalism, which employed the 'symbolic resources of the liberal democratic tradition' (p. 72). Although we may wish to expose an immanent contradiction between liberal democracy's professed goals and its actual practice, we still need some form of justification of these goals, otherwise we succumb to a logic that suggests we adhere to the values of any society we happen to be brought up in – liberal democracy for the liberal democrats, fascism for the fascists, communism for the communists, and so on. Denying charges of relativism or nihilism that imply either a toleration of, or an indifference to, all values on the grounds that she explicitly prefers liberal (and radical) democratic ones is not persuasive. Their anti-foundational, aleatory logic makes their value choice random, based upon a *de facto* (rather than an argumentative) adherence to certain cultural norms. And although their preference for radical democracy means that they cannot be construed as nihilists, the question can be turned around: do they offer robust arguments against nihilism? By avoiding any form of foundationalism, her advocacy of 'radical and plural' democratic discourse was only likely to convince those who were already predisposed to such values. Another difficulty in moving from liberal democracy to 'radical democracy' is that 'radical democrats' may not want to play by the liberal-democratic rules, especially if they see liberal democracy as fundamentally 'capitalist' democracy. This calls into question Mouffe's claim that one of liberal democracy's virtues is the creation of an 'agonistic' politics.

The Essex School

Whatever the problems that have been outlined so far in their wars of position and manoeuvre, Laclau and Mouffe had far more success in nurturing young co-

thinkers, whose recent publications show that they have, in a sense, come of age and are worthy of the sobriquet 'Essex School'. The school extolled the virtues of 'discourse theory' (Smith, 1998; Torfing, 1999; Howarth, 2000), and most members moved 'ontically' 'downstream' to apply Laclau and Mouffe's 'ontological' concepts of 'logics' of 'difference' and 'equivalence', 'dislocation' and the like to the analysis of specific political ideologies,¹¹ although a few attempted 'upstream' minor theoretical refinements.¹²

Confining our discussion to *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis* (Howarth *et al.*, 2000), which showcases the work of the Essex School, an underlying tension can be detected. This reflects both Laclau's and Mouffe's structural hesitancy and their reluctance to distinguish clearly between meaning-giving and explanatory or 'scientific', 'objective' discourses already alluded to. This tension can be seen in the differences of emphasis and methodological concern, suggesting the deployment of 'thick' and 'thin' or 'minor key' (McLennan, 1996, pp. 54–6) versions of discourse theory. The 'thick' either explicitly or implicitly deny the importance of socio-economic factors (the 'base') in shaping the discursive field. 'Thick' theorists stress the overdetermining importance of discourse in moulding the 'political'. 'Thin' theorists, on the other hand, are more prepared, implicitly or explicitly, to acknowledge the possibility of a greater constitutive role for socio-economic factors and 'interests', in effect making themselves more amenable to a greater methodological pluralism.

An example of the 'thick' version is Barros and Castagnola's study, which aims to banish 'economic' and institutional explanations altogether in their account of the stalemate in Argentinian politics between Peron's departure in 1955 and his return in 1973. They attribute it to the nature of Peronist discourse, especially the notion of citizenship, which combined political and social rights, the logic of which was to present 'social issues as permanent disputes', thereby preventing a 'win-win' situation from emerging (Howarth *et al.*, 2000, p. 34). Although the authors acknowledge the importance of the Peronist trade unions in Argentinian politics, which presupposes 'economic', capitalist production relations, they do not ask why Peron's discourse resonated so deeply among the members of these trade unions: could it have had something to do with their sense of permanent social, political and economic powerlessness – with the material 'conditions of possibility'. Rather, they imply that, if only Peron's discourse had been different, the deadlock could have been avoided.

Howarth *et al.* (2000), on the other hand, employ a far 'thinner' version of discourse analysis in their explanation of the failure of the 'Vegans and Volvos' alliance to stop the construction of Manchester Airport's second runway in the 1990s. They articulated discourse theory with other more conventional political science paradigms, such as Dunleavy's (1991, Ch. 5) theory of group identities. Interestingly we get an acceptance of the idea of self-interested maximisers, which are 'produced by and functional to existing market orders' which seems to resemble a Marxist explanation (p. 56). And we are presented with one fairly conventional explanation for the campaign's failure – the 'structural imbalance of resources' between the contending forces, involving financial and emotional costs (p. 67). Yet they also gesture towards discursive explanation when they refer to the 'absence of an empty signifier' to strengthen the 'Vegans and Volvos' coalition, in contrast to the

pro-runway's 'Greater Britain, Greater Manchester' (p. 65). Thus, we are offered the possibility of a far more rounded account, employing diverse methodological tools.

Many of the other studies are open to *potentially* 'thin' interpretations inviting a similar approach. They focused almost exclusively on the nature of a specific political discourse, identifying its emergence (black consciousness movement in South Africa, French fascism, feminism in Chiapas, 'lesbigay' discourse in Hong Kong, Green ideology, social-democratic discourse in Romania), its persistence (the Mexican revolutionary 'mystique') or its changes (republicanism in Northern Ireland and Kemalism in Turkey) – concentrating mainly on the 'what' rather than the 'why' question.

The 'thinness' of these accounts could, of course, be interpreted as a weakness, in the sense that little attention is devoted to *explaining* the emergence, persistence and changes in these discourses in terms of political (and state) institutions and material conditions of 'possibility'. Yet if the task in hand is more modest, concerned with *identifying* emergences, changes and persistences, which involves the application of Laclau and Mouffe's categories of 'hegemony', 'dislocation', 'subject position', the logics of 'equivalence' and 'difference', 'floating' and 'empty' signifiers, 'myths' and 'imaginaries' (as well as Derridean deconstructive methods), then we should view such an approach as a necessary, if not sufficient, element of scientific endeavour. We may after the 'what' want to turn to the 'why', which can involve different types of explanation. Although psychoanalytical, Lacanian explanation is implicitly preferred by many discourse theorists, Laclau and Mouffe in *HSS* and elsewhere, as well as Howarth and Griggs, have (imperfectly) factored in more obviously materialist forms of analysis. Indeed, Torfing of the 'Essex School' warns against any 'totalising master methodology': discourse theorists within the constraints of anti-essentialism must remain 'methodological bricoleurs' (1999, p. 292). Nevertheless, the problem remains of integrating these different approaches, which offer genuine insight into discursive phenomena, in a way that avoids a bland 'factor' framework. Laclau's concept of 'dislocation' obviously attempts a more integral approach, but as discussed earlier, it does not endow 'material' factors with a consistent presence. Moreover, 'dislocation', like 'hegemony', often seems to refer to a discursive state of affairs rather than an explanation. The danger with 'thick' discourse analysis, on the other hand, is its resistance to more conventional political methodologies that do not have to be construed as rigidly essentialist, and its overemphasis on the performative/symbolic strengths or weaknesses internal to a political discourse ignores the 'external' institutional or material 'conditions of possibility'.

Conclusions

We cannot, at this moment, assess with certainty the likely effectiveness of Laclau and Mouffe's project in transforming the study of politics methodologically, ontologically, 'ontically' and normatively. From the foregoing, we can see that their wars of manoeuvre and position against essentialism in all its guises have had mixed results. Their quest to demolish essentialism (as well as concomitant foundational arguments) in all its forms through constructing a model of politics based upon contingency created 'voids' or 'deficits' that they had varying degrees of

success in filling. Perhaps the most problematic 'void' attached to ethical justification in eschewing 'positive' ontological and de-ontological foundations. Moving from the 'is' of antagonism, contingency, hegemony, 'undecidability' and 'lack' to the 'ought' of 'radical democracy' was a limited success. The shadow of *value* relativism, which denies the possibility of a standpoint from which to make cross-cultural evaluations, was never far away. Their original arguments in favour of *radical* democracy, based upon Tocqueville's 'democratic revolution' and later Macpherson's idea of immanent critique, were not particularly robust: the 'fact' of a 'democratic revolution' does not provide grounds for supporting it, and immanent critique relies on the assumption that we value consistency and that we cherish the proclaimed ideals of a given society. Similarly, with reference to their later justification, merely because a radical democrat more clearly acknowledges the contingent foundations of their values is not in itself a good reason for endorsing them: an awareness of our own mortality, for example, may prompt us to try to live our lives to the full, or it may not, if we have a suicidal disposition. We would also want to see the justification of democratic rules that limit contingency. At best, contingency and relativism can *aid* an argument in favour of openness, fostering toleration and 'doubt' (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 112).

At one level, Laclau and Mouffe's defence of *cognitive* relativism, which makes our perceptions of the world discourse-dependent and denies the meaning-giving potential of an 'extra-discursive' reality, is equally problematic: their theory of hegemony is intended to be objectively 'true', exploring the process of symbolisation and exposing how discourses become 'sedimented' through their hegemonically created 'naturalisation', thereby denying their own historical contingency. In effect, their contingency argument rests on some version of a correspondence theory of truth (identities have not corresponded to Marx's class relation theory), as well as the essence/appearance distinction (discourse/ideology consists of forms of naturalisation in order to make up the Lacanian 'lack'). And just as we might want to say, following Howarth (2000, pp. 113–15), that there are accounts of a particular discourse that are 'truer' than others, we might also say, following Geras, that particular discourses themselves are truer than others in providing explanations of the world. Thus, rather than aim for a generic notion of 'discourse' based on Heidegger's being/existence distinction, perhaps to avoid misunderstanding it is better to talk about discourse(s). We ought, then, to make a basic distinction between 'sedimented', 'sutured' and 'naturalised' hegemonically contaminated discourses concerned especially with symbolic *meanings*, and scientific *explanations* (which, of course, is not to suggest that they cannot become part of a politicised, hegemonic construction) that attempt to understand this process as well as other social and natural processes, that are open to refutation through reason and experience.

If these arguments are accepted, then perhaps it is easier to recognise the strengths of Laclau and Mouffe's project as a method of studying political discourses, which has indeed been the main focus of the Essex School. Categories such as 'hegemony', 'antagonism', the 'logics' of 'equivalence' and 'difference', 'floating' and 'empty signifiers', 'myth' and 'imaginary' offer a way of naming or identifying processes that can be mapped (compare Norval, 2000; Howarth, 2002) and then explained. Explanations may have a psychoanalytical (indeed, Lacanian)

character, but they may include more Marxist, materialist-inspired ‘conditions of possibility’, clearly evident in *HSS* and more oblique in the concept of ‘dislocation’. In other words, more rounded accounts of discursive formations may be more persuasive if an explicitly ‘thin’, as opposed to a ‘thick’, theory is adopted so that political effectivity is not attributed solely to the performative nature of a particular discourse. We may want to know why a particular ‘empty signifier’ was more effective in terms of its ‘non-discursive’ conditions of emergence, or transformation. In other words, perhaps there ought to be a more porous frontier between contingency-centred and, for example, structuralist or rational choice explanations through a process of ‘articulation’, when combining the ‘what’ and ‘how’ with the ‘why’ (Finlayson and Valentine, 2002, p. 15)

This is not to claim that the project’s value lies exclusively as a heuristically conceived research programme. It also has important contributions to make to political ontology in encouraging the adoption of post-structuralist, Althusserian, Gramscian, psychoanalytical and feminist insights into the nature of the ‘political’, underlining the inherent ambiguity of much political language, the multifaceted nature of human antagonisms and identities, and the penetration of ideology (the symbolic) into all social relations by insisting that meanings are not separate from such relations and are in some (but not all) ways constitutive of them (compare Hay, 2002, p. 238). This emphasis on the inherent instability of these relations over time helps to bring ‘history’ into political science (without in any way denying the importance of material, structural factors insisted upon by Geras, Žizek and others). These insights clearly have ramifications for the study of politics and for traditional methodologies, if narrowly conceived. Yet as we have seen, traditional methodologies, epistemologies, ‘positive’ ontologies and ethical theories, including a non-deterministic Marxism, cannot be abandoned out of hand, otherwise the danger is that discourse theory will follow the way of all fads – a paradigm that implodes through its own undisclosed fundamentalism.

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Notes

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- 1 Especially ‘economism’, holding that ideological phenomena were only intelligible in terms of an economic ‘base’ without noting that it too was only made possible by such phenomena, and ‘classism’ that viewed identities as necessary manifestations of a class ‘essence’.
- 2 Laclau (1990, pp. 221–4) also responded to Mouzelis’s (1988) critique that they had under-theorised the institutional dimension.
- 3 See also Osborne (1991, pp. 207–10).
- 4 For example, Geras underlined the explanatory suppleness and complexity of Marxism, whereas Laclau, starting from the Althusserian problematic, focused on whether Marxism constituted a rigorous science that could satisfactorily combine relative autonomy with ‘last instance’ determinism in explaining ideology.

- 5 They admitted that there is 'practically no domain of individual or collective life which escapes capitalist relations' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 161), seeming to unwittingly concur with Geras's Marxist notion that production relations have some kind of explanatory 'primacy', or what we might term a material 'conditions of possibility' explanation, and to unwittingly answer the question of why workers are more likely than capitalists to choose egalitarian discourses.
- 6 Rorty complained of their highly abstract 'over-philosophication of leftist political debate' (Mouffe, 1996, p. 69) and their Derridean concept of 'decision' that ultimately rejected the possibility of rational deliberation (p. 70). Derrida, contrary to Laclau, wanted a greater integration of the 'ethical' and the 'political'. Because violence is 'irreducible', politics through stabilising power relations and establishing rules is necessary to enable an 'ethics' of friendship, involving a 'responsibility' to the 'other', to develop (pp. 84–5).
- 7 However, see Zerilli (1998, pp. 12–14), who suggests that, even on this issue, there were *in effect* profound differences between them.
- 8 For example, see Žižek (1998, 2002, p. 295), where property relations are no longer held to be of critical importance.
- 9 In more concrete terms, this dialectical concept of 'retroactive reversal' is not as odd as it seems. For example, the pre-capitalist family could be viewed as functional to capitalism in terms of fostering the sexual division of labour (Barrett, 1988, p. 249).
- 10 Another couple of inconsistencies could be added. Firstly, her characterisation of liberal democracy is usually in terms of a tension between liberty and equality (1992, p. 14; 1993, p. 72; 2000, p. 5), but sometimes between democracy and liberty (2000, pp. 38, 150). Secondly, she claims to have given up on the idea of a 'radical alternative to the capitalist system' (1992, pp. 1–2; 2000, p. 15), but the egalitarian logic of her own position, endorsing the democratisation of the capitalist economy, could easily lead to just such an alternative (1993, p. 98).
- 11 For example, Smith (1994), Norval (1996) and Howarth *et al.* (2000).
- 12 For example, Norval (in Howarth *et al.*, 2000, pp. 224, 231), Howarth (2000, p. 124), Devenney (2002, pp. 191–2) and Stavrakakis (1999). Stavrakakis notably attempted a psychoanalytic grounding to the democratic 'ethic' through Lacanian theory, abandoning 'fantasmatic politics' of the 'ethics of harmony', with its totalitarian implications (1999, pp. 118–19). Instead, he argued for an 'ethics of disharmony' that involved 'identifying with symptom' (p. 136). However, 'traditional' ethical discourse becomes important if we are going to judge *which* 'symptoms' we *ought* to identify with, assuming that all forms of symbolisation spring from the impossible search for fullness.

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