

## **POSTMODERN POLITICS AND MARXISM**

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### ***Abstract***

*The article is a critical and introductory analysis of postmodern political philosophy and political sociology in general and postmarxism, a brand of the general postmodern theorizing, as well as a critical review of a postmarxist study, Laclau and Mouffe's, "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy". The postmodern approaches to social and political phenomena, the article shows, can be seen in its rejection of the modern premises, which is accepted by mainstream Marxist theory, that social relations have a centre and base and can be understood and changed scientifically. The postmarxist circles within this general approach, the article shows, reject the validity and significance of class theory and socialist revolution as suggested by the mainstream Marxism.*

### **1. Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Postmodernism**

The most decisive role in the development of structuralism, poststructuralism and finally postmodernism has been played by new French intellectual studies after the Second World War. After the war, France was "still largely agricultural and suffered from an antiquated economy and polity". In the post war period, the country witnessed a rapid modernization process. This was accompanied with interesting developments of social and philosophical theories. Finally, the social and political uprising in 1968 gave a "dramatic sense of rupture" symbolizing old French revolutionary tradition. The turbulent events behind 1968 were student movements and workers strikes. New theoretical studies focused upon "mass culture", "the consumer society", technology, and urbanization. The new social relations were theorized first by the conception of "postindustrial society", which was borrowed

from the USA. Mass culture and consumer society were analyzed through Anglo-Saxon theories<sup>1</sup>. Up to that time, dominant theories in France had been marxism, existentialism and phenomenology. However, semiotics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in early twentieth century attracted intellectual circles and was first applied to anthropology by Lévi-Strauss. In marxism, Althusser theorized a structural marxism while Lacan studied for a structuralist theory of psychoanalysis of Freud. The terminology was composed of "codes", "rules", "common system", "parts and whole". Structures are ruled by "unconscious codes and rules". Social phenomena were defined by linguistic and structural terms such as rules, codes and system. In theoretical circles, there emerged a "structuralist revolution"<sup>2</sup>.

In structuralist marxism of Althusser, the main aim was to "eliminate the concept of the subject", which was only a "linguistic construct". "[T]he subject itself was constituted by its relation within language, so that subjectivity was seen as a social and linguistic construct". Nonetheless, structural analysis tries to reveal "objectivity, coherence, rigour, and truth, and claimed scientific status for its theories"<sup>3</sup>.

Poststructuralism attacked these scientific premises of structuralism. Structuralism reproduced the "humanist notion of an unchanging human nature" and all universal structures of humanism. Unlike structuralism, poststructuralism accepted a "historical view which sees different forms of consciousness, identities, signification, and so on as historically produced and therefore varying in different historical periods"<sup>4</sup>.

A common point between structuralism and poststructuralism is the rejection of the concept of "the autonomous subject". The latter emphasizes the productivity of language dismissing "closed

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1 Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory-Critical Interrogations*, (London, the Macmillan, 1991), 17.

2 Ibid. 18.

3 Ibid., 19.

4 Ibid., 20.

structures of oppositions"<sup>5</sup> and "the instability of meaning". Thus, it implies a "break with conventional representational schemes of meaning". Meaning is "produced not in a stable, referential relation between subject and object, but only within the infinite, intertextual play of signifiers"<sup>6</sup>. Poststructuralism seems to suggest an extreme form of relativism rejecting all kinds of claims on objective and universal knowledge, any ontological division between structure and agency, as well as cause and effect or determinant and determined.

As for the development of postmodern theory, we should remember the results of the 1968 events. This last social uprising in Western Europe takes attention to the concrete politics. First of all, student movements produced a debate on the production of knowledge and bureaucratic characteristics of universities. This attention would be theorized by Michael Foucault as an existence between power and knowledge<sup>7</sup>. Theoretical and practical politics was common for many intellectuals, who would be poststructuralist later. Moreover, general interest was on everyday life, subjectivity, differences and social marginality. In this atmosphere, the subject of the Enlightenment, which was "spontaneous", "rational", "autonomous", created an incompatibility in the face of fragmentation and differentiation just like the ubiquity of power. In this context, structuralism and poststructuralism focused upon the constitution of the subjects, subject positions and identities. Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian theory of ideology are produced for the possible solutions to these questions<sup>8</sup>.

In the concrete arena of politics, new social movements which emerged in the United States and Europe were the signs of a "micropolitics" as the "authentic terrain for political struggle". They imply various sources of power and oppression, which could not be reduced to labor exploitation<sup>9</sup>. "In place of the hegemony

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5 Ibid., 20.

6 Ibid., 21.

7 Ibid., 23.

8 Ibid., 24.

9 Ibid., 24.

of the proletariat, they proposed decentred political alliances<sup>10</sup>. Radical forces of micropolitics entailed "postmodern principles of decentring and difference" by introducing new possibilities of "politicising social and cultural relations, in effect redefining the socialist project as that of radical democracy"<sup>11</sup> as Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*<sup>12</sup> tried to develop.

Postmodern theory, like poststructuralism to a large degree, uses "discourse theory", which "sees all social phenomena as structured semiotically by codes and rule, and therefore amenable to linguistic analysis, utilising the model of signification and signifying practices". Theorists of discourse concern the "material and heterogeneous nature of discourse". Some (like Foucault, for instance) focus on the institutionalization of discourse, the viewpoints and subject positions and their supposed power relations. Discourse is a place of struggle for hegemony and ideology production<sup>13</sup>. But not every postmodern theorist is a "linguistic idealist" for whom everything is reduced to discourse and "whereby discourse constitutes all social phenomena, or is privileged over extra-discursive material conditions"<sup>14</sup>.

An attack on the subject of humanism and privileged status given to linguistics are the common points of structuralism and poststructuralism. However, the scientific claims and premises of the former is the division point for the latter. And, poststructuralism is "a subset of a broader range of theoretical, cultural, and social tendencies which constitute postmodern discourses"<sup>15</sup>. Postmodern attacks on modern science and philosophy produce a "postmodern science", which "refers to a break with Newtonian determinism, Cartesian dualism, and

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10 Ibid., 24-25.

11 Ibid., 25.

12 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy-Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London-New York, Verso, 1992).

13 Best and Kellner, *Postmodern*, 26.

14 Ibid., 27.

15 Ibid., 25.

representational epistemology"<sup>16</sup>. According to postmodern theorizing, we can argue that even scientific knowledge is just a discourse produced by the scientific community who considers itself capable of doing scientific divisions between object and subject, structure and agency, cause and effect.

We can suggest that a postmodern Marxism or postmarxism is impossible since Marxist theory hitherto has been based on determinist realist ontology that assumes that reality exists outside of the consciousness and a dialectical reflection theory of epistemology which assumes that reality is reflected into mind, both of which support the idea that scientific, objective and universal knowledge is possible.

## **2. From Marxist theory to Postmarxism**

Before dealing with postmarxism, I summarize the basic premises of the *classical* Marxist theory, which is wanted to be revised or changed into postmarxism or postmodern Marxist politics and social theory, so that the reader can follow the theoretical strategy of postmarxism.

One of the main purposes of Marxist inquiry is to demystify capitalist social relations. For this, it assumes a fundamental division between substance-essence and surface-appearance, which is assumed as a sine qua non of scientific activity. Appearances in capitalist society are contaminated by the ideas of hegemonic classes in a way that the essence of relations is rendered invisible in the eyes of ordinary individuals. For this, the ideological conception of reality, which is the ideas of dominant class, is fundamentally different from the objective conditions of concrete reality. For this, Marxism distinguishes conception of the social reality, subjectivity, from objective conditions, objectivity. Objective conditions are out of the control of individuals and hence are subordinated by the spontaneity of the social, that is, the law of history and structural laws of change.

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<sup>16</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern*, 28.

These kinds of differentiations have to do with realist-materialist ontology of Marxism where all fundamental divisions of the capitalist social relations are revealed. In this sense, Marxist ontology is based on dichotomies. However, materialist knowledge is completed with dialectics at the epistemological sphere by which dichotomies are transformed into thesis-antithesis relationship. This implies a passage from existence to becoming, a passage from entity to process, from objective reality to the knowledge of this objectivity. The passages as such give a unity of existence and becoming, the very unity of theory and practice, which is called praxis. The unity achieved is a *theoretical* practice or a *practical* theory.

For Marxism, something which is not determined is not existed. In this sense, determinism is opposed to metaphysics, which is speculative in the context of indeterminacy. Existence is possible by determination, but determination is only possible with becoming, which is nothing but a process of change and transformation. This is why materialist ontology must be changed into an epistemology of dialectic materialism in a way that division between ontology and epistemology is accepted only in the methodological purposes and is rejected as an organic division.

In Marxist theorizing, structural analyses tackle with objective conditions which are historically existed, in other words, historically determined. But this historical determination, any structural temporality, exists only within a historical process. Actually, determinacy is ever being processed, so that objectivity can become subjectivity and vice versa. If so, it is such a reciprocity and simultaneity which rejects any organic division between determinacy of existence and resultant becoming. However, capitalist social relations do not permit us to conceive this organic unity of existence and becoming and act in that way. This is what is implied by the concepts of alienation, mystification and fetishism in broad sense. For this reason, organic unity is changed into an organic division within capitalist social relations in a way that organic unity of the base and superstructure, essence and appearance become separated.

However, at this point the question is how essence is revealed and represented, in other words, how the unity of ontological base and epistemological form is realized. But, the question is ill-defined at the very beginning because Marxism deals with what is hidden and what is possible within capitalist social relations rather than trying to discover a continent of fixed and absolute truths. In this sense, Marxism, at the very beginning accepts the social and historical character of truth and truth production in a way that power concentrations within social relations form the acceptability of truths. In this sense, knowledge is inherently ideological, so is science. At this point, it should be accepted that Marxism is also another unity of ideology and science since it tries to produce alternative truth for alternative power concentrations, without which production of knowledge goes back to the sphere of scholastics.

For the same reason, the representation problem changes into the question of correspondence between theory and practice and into the problem of praxis formation. Such a correspondence, reciprocity and unity are dialectic relationships of the internal and external, of the existence and becoming. In dialectics, existence depends upon becoming in a continuous process. For something to be existed it must become in a process of continuity and exactly at this point, contradictory logic of the unity of existence and becoming is witnessed. An existence of a contradictory relationship must exist only by producing itself through a continuous process of dialectics in a way that contradictory relationship continues in an ever changing process. Contradictions are transferred from its original existence to the different plains and this transferring process makes all becoming, and all unity of existence and becoming always contradictory. It is seen that contradiction is something which must be determined at the very beginning of a relationship and continue itself in a dialectic process. If so, the dialectic and contradictory character of existence, a relationship, are the very mediation between ontological and epistemological spheres and sine qua non of a Marxist theory of praxis and the interconnection point of dialectic materialism (epistemology of contradictory relationships) and historical materialism (acknowledgment of the ever transferring processes of contradictory social relationships).

Briefly it can be stated that the mainstream of Marxism requires the so-called dialectical materialism as the analyses of reality and its reflection to mind as well as ever-transference of the contradictions and conflicts into higher and wider spheres of their developments. For Marxists, knowledge and science of "real" is possible and reality demonstrates itself with contradictions and conflicts of the social life. In addition, for political life, there are indeed the sources of conflicts as well as the centers of political life. Hence a revolutionary struggle can be planned and realized in terms of the power centers and the sources of contradictions and conflicts. Postmarxism therefore can be seen not as neo or postmarxism but as a sort of non-marxism, or negation of Marxist theory's ontological and epistemological bases in general.

### 3. Postmarxism

Laclau and Mouffe<sup>17</sup> proclaim that they are "now situated in a post-Marxist terrain". Even though post-Marxism can be used as a description of all recent marxist theoretical development which is directly influenced either by poststructuralist epistemology or postmodern theory in general, we have only one proclamation as such. What Laclau and Mouffe<sup>18</sup> try to develop is a strategic theory of radical democracy, which, for them, could be possible only by going beyond Marxism. Nonetheless, they "remain wedded to many modern political values"<sup>19</sup>.

Postmarxism is a socialist theory derived from by postmodernism-poststructuralism. Its theoretical attempts to produce a strategy for a radical and plural socialism, which is not peculiar only to Laclau and Mouffe, could find out a various insights from the Marxist tradition itself. Sim<sup>20</sup> sums up these Marxist insights, in turn: Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, in which Marxism is seen only as a method rather than a doctrine. Methodology was the single criteria for orthodoxy<sup>21</sup>; t he work of the Frankfurt

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17 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 4.

18 Ibid.,

19 Postmodern, 31.

20 Stuart Sim, (ed.), *Post-Marxism - A reader*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

21 Ibid, 3-4.



School, which does not accept the primacy of economic base and hence shifts the interest from politics and political economy to philosophy, aesthetics; similarly Gramsci's conception of hegemony, argues Sim, "suggests that the realm of ideas can be even more important site of ideological contestation than the strictly economic world of the base"<sup>22</sup>.

Adorno's notion of "negative dialectics" prefigures the *deconstruction* and Derrida's work. Negative dialectics implies that contradiction "resists resolution" and Adorno and Horkheimer's criticisms of Enlightenment is not so far away from those of postmodernists and poststructuralists. *Dialectics of Enlightenment (also the name of their collective study)* could result in the predictions of either universal enlightenment or fascism<sup>23</sup>. In addition, Marcuse's work, *One-Dimensional Man* implies that in the cultural terrain of post-war America, where marxist conception of class was not useful. For Marcuse, middle classes were also the victims of exploitation like working class<sup>24</sup>.

Another conception of postmarxism is suggested by Docherty<sup>25</sup> as a possibility to escape from the results of "totalization and unjust homogenisation"<sup>26</sup> of "grand metanarrative"<sup>27</sup> proposed by Marxism, which is influenced by modernity and Enlightenment. Hence, postmodernism-postmodernism is not a new theory but "after theory".

### *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: a proclamation of postmarxism*

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is an explicit proclamation of postmarxism by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe<sup>28</sup>. The book tries to develop a new theory of political strategy for a more democratic and radical socialis. The central conception of this

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22 Ibid., 4.

23 Ibid., 5-6.

24 Ibid., 6.

25 Thomas Docherty, *After Theory-Postmodernism/Postmarxism*, (London and New York, Routledge), 1990

26 Ibid., 214.

27 Ibid., 207.

28 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 4.

politics is erected upon old Russian and Italian questions of hegemony. However, the concept is attributed far more meaning and it is extended from its original contexts to postmodern condition of politics.

The concept of hegemony is the "fundamental nodal point of Marxist political theorisation". "The logic of hegemony presented itself from the outset as a complementary and contingent operation"<sup>29</sup> and "provide(s) ... anchorage from which contemporary social struggles are thinkable in their specificity, as well as permitting us to outline a new politics for the Left based upon the project of a radical democracy"<sup>30</sup>.

Laclau and Mouffe observe that the concept of hegemony belongs to "a context dominated by the experience of fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulation between different struggles and subject positions". It implies "a withdrawal of the category of 'necessity' to the horizon of the social"<sup>31</sup>. In the concrete sense, class action becomes impossible in the face of fragmentation and social struggles lose their class character. The "unity of class" means only a "symbolic unity", which is observed and tired. Instead, Rosa Luxemburg<sup>32</sup>, who proposes "symbolic overdetermination as a concrete mechanism" for the unification of class<sup>33</sup>.

Actually, the question was a split between the theory of Marxism and practice of socialist struggle. This split, which is "a clear symptom of crisis"<sup>34</sup> is responded to first by Kautsky and then Lenin by giving a privileged role to intellectuals<sup>35</sup>. This is the "formation of Marxist orthodoxy"<sup>36</sup>. The Second response was Bernstein's revisionism, which proclaims "the autonomy of political

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29 Ibid., 3.

30 Ibid., 4.

31 Ibid., 13.

32 Ibid., 8-12.

33 Ibid., 11.

34 Ibid., 14.

35 Ibid., 20, 25.

36 Ibid., 19.

from the economic base". His notion of "ethical subject"<sup>37</sup> is a new transcendental subject out of economic necessity, in fact. Berstein, like Luxemburg, saw the importance of the formation of different subject positions, for example citizenship and "nationalisation of working class"<sup>38</sup>.

Another response to the crisis of socialist politics comes from George Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism. Sorel replaces the conception of social class with "blocs", "poles of reaggregation", "elements aggregating and condensing the historical forces". Possible unity of class is translated in to "will of certain groups to impose their conception of economic organisation"<sup>39</sup>. He defines the class unity at the political level rather than the objective system. The war and struggle is the condition of becoming class and hence the place of class identity formation<sup>40</sup>.

However, an adequate answer would come from Antonio Gramsci. He creates a new system from Sorel's conception of "historical bloc" and Lenin's conception of hegemony<sup>41</sup>. He also broke down determinism far more than revisionism and answered the problems of crisis of Marxism with his "war of positions"<sup>42</sup>.

Hegemony emerged "in a historical terrain where contingency arose from the structural weakness of the bourgeoisie to assure its own task"<sup>43</sup> and working class was attributed an alien task. "This anomalous relation was called hegemony"<sup>44</sup>. However, Leninist hegemony means political leadership within the class alliance between working class and peasantry. Unity in the alliance does not affect the class identities because classes have different and even opposite interests. This was an "exteriority of

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37 Ibid., 34.

38 Ibid., 35.

39 Ibid., 38.

40 Ibid., 39.

41 Ibid., 42.

42 Ibid., 36.

43 Ibid., 49.

44 Ibid., 50.

the hegemonic link” and was inherently authoritarian<sup>45</sup>. “Ontologic privilege granted to working class by Marxism was transferred from the social base to the political leadership of the mass movement”. Authoritarian politics emerged from different democratic demands. “A limited actor-working class-was raised to the status of universal class”<sup>46</sup>. What occurs is the transferring of the ontological centrality of the proletariat to the “epistemologic privilege” of “one sector”, who “knows the history”<sup>47</sup>. By doing so, democratic potential of the hegemonic politics was lost in favor of an authoritarian socialism.

For an articulation between democracy and socialism, Laclau and Mouffe suggest the following principles should be accepted: 1) Hegemonic tasks transform the class identities; 2) Politics is not the representation field of interests; 3) Identification between classes and social agents is impossible<sup>48</sup>. Marxist-Leninist theory holds that relations of production are the terrain of class constitution ” and that presence of classes in the political field can only be understood as the “representation of classes”<sup>49</sup> and should be rejected. The alternative should be more democratic, which requires the acceptance of the “structural diversity of the relations” and the unity as the “result of political construction and struggle” rather than that of the “principle of representation” and unity as an “expression of underlying essence”. What should be done on the part of the working class is to “articulate around itself a number of democratic demands” basing upon its own political initiative rather than any privileged structural position<sup>50</sup>.

At this point of the critique of Leninism, Laclau and Mouffe appreciate the merits of Gramsci. He replaces the Leninist notion of political leadership with intellectual and moral leadership. His conception of politics and hegemony implies an articulation ” <sup>51</sup>

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45 Ibid., 55.

46 Ibid., 56.

47 Ibid., 58.

48 Ibid., 58.

49 Ibid., 55.

50 Ibid., 65.

51 Ibid., 65.

and goes beyond the Leninist class alliances<sup>52</sup>. His understanding of leadership entails a "collective will", which is established through ideology as organic cement in the form of "historical bloc". This ideologically organized historical block is embodied within institutions and apparatuses through a number of articulatory principles. By doing so, Gramsci surpasses rigid base-superstructure dichotomy. Nevertheless, leadership is still attributed to the hegemonic class. However, Gramscian ideology is not reductionist due to his perception of "collective will", and "ideological elements articulated by a hegemonic class does not have a necessary class belongings"<sup>53</sup>. Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe argue that in Gramsci there is an "ultimate ontological foundation" in class hegemony". This sets "a limit to the deconstructive logic of hegemony"<sup>54</sup>. Whatever his drawbacks are, his socialist strategy as the "war of positions", like "collective will", is not constrained within class struggle and accepts that identities are not fixed but change in process<sup>55</sup>. His concept of hegemony perceives social complexity and the plurality of historical subjects<sup>56</sup> in a way that politics become "articulation". Nevertheless, these all cannot rescue Gramsci from class reductionism<sup>57</sup>.

For a better conception of hegemony, which is the logic of "articulation" and "contingency", Laclau and Mouffe challenge the positive conception of the social by developing their perceptions of "antagonism and hegemony". First of all, they need the term of "overdetermination". But, in its Althusserian usage, they cannot find any "contingent variation" but only "essential determinism". In Althusser's structuralist marxism, "the difference is not constitutive and the social is unified in the sutured space of a rationalist paradigm". Althusser's "rationally unified totality" does

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52 Ibid., 66.

53 Ibid., 67.

54 Ibid., 69.

55 Ibid., 70.

56 Ibid., 71.

57 Ibid., 85.

not give rise to "articulation"<sup>58</sup>. Hence, it is faced with only "simple determination" rather than "overdetermination". In addition, even internal criticism of Althusserian structuralism, as in the case of Hirst and Wooley, could not escape from this fate with their "non-essential character of links uniting the elements of the presumed totality". They replaced "essentialism of the totality" with "essentialism of elements"<sup>59</sup>.

*Articulation and Discourse:* Laclau and Mouffe's attacks towards "reductionism", "essentialism" and "rationally unified totalities" like "object 'society' "<sup>60</sup>, "fixidity" of social identities, "sutured society", "privileged subjects", and so on, can be revealed in their full meanings from their theory of articulation and discourses. Articulatory practice (articulation) establishes a relation among elements giving rise to a "discourse" as a "structured totality". During this articulatory process, elements are transformed into moments<sup>61</sup>. A discursive formation has a "type of coherence", which is close to "regularity in dispersion". It is not "unified" but emerges as "an ensemble of differential positions". Here, "it constitutes a configuration"<sup>62</sup>. Laclau and Mouffe make note that "transformation of elements into moments is never complete" because discursive formation is not a "sutured totality" and already for this reason "contingency" and "articulation" can be possible<sup>63</sup>.

Laclau and Mouffe reject discursive-non-discursive dichotomy since "every object is constituted as an object of discourse" and "specificity" of objects "depends upon the structuring of a discursive field"<sup>64</sup>. What non-discursive is in fact "discursive

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58 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*;99 and for a critique of such postmodern interpretations of Gramscian theory, see Ercan Gündoğan, "Conceptions of Hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's Southern Question and the Prison Notebooks", *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry*, Vol.2, No. 1 (November 2008), 45-60, in <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/newproposals>

59 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 103

60 Ibid., 99.

61 Ibid., 105.

62 Ibid., 106.

63 Ibid., 106-107.

64 Ibid., 108

articulation" as in the cases of organizations and institutions. It is an establishment of a relation between different elements<sup>65</sup>. Actually, what is offered to us is "indissoluble totality" between language and the actions" as in the meaning of Wittgenstein's "language games"<sup>66</sup>. In Laclau and Mouffe's sense, "the practice of articulation", accordingly, "cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured"<sup>67</sup>. Here, we understand that in Laclau and Mouffe the base-superstructure dichotomy is completely the same with the linguistic, non-linguistic dichotomy. To them as long as we have such a dichotomy we face reductionism and inevitably, we use a theory of manifestation" , which is the epistemological position of Marxism, in fact. If so, Laclau and Mouffe accept a non-materialist epistemology even though they apply to a sort of realist ontology. For example they say that in Marxism "the field of ideologies", "thought under the concept of 'superstructure'" "was an a priori unity vis-à-vis the dispersion of its materiality, so that it required an appeal either to the unifying role of a class (Gramsci), or to the functional requirements of the logic of reproduction (Althusser)". However, in articulation, there is no "place of constitution prior to, or outside, the dispersion of the articulated elements"<sup>68</sup>.

Discourse "as a relational totality" is "incomplete" and it is "pierced by contingency" like every totality. Similarly, "the "society" as a "sutured and self-defined totality" is not a "valid object of discourse" since "there is no single underlying principle fixing-and hence constituting-the whole field of differences"<sup>69</sup>. This field of differences (identities) cannot be fully fixed because it is the "field of overdetermination". "The social cannot be reduced to the interiority of a fixed system of differences, the pure exteriority is also impossible". Neither "absolute fixidity" nor

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65 Ibid., 107.

66 Ibid., 108.

67 Ibid., 109.

68 Ibid., 109.

69 Ibid., 110-111.

"absolute non-fixidity" is accepted<sup>70</sup>. Although Laclau and Mouffe state that discourse is a "structured totality"<sup>71</sup>, they quiscard the conception of structure in a way that "centre-transcendental signified-...is abandoned"<sup>72</sup>. Here, their discourse theory is far more strengthened since if there is no central, originative and transcendental signified, "everything become discourse" and "the play of signification" is extended infinitely. Similarly, they quote in Derrida, saying that there is no law for the "constitution of structure" but "a process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence". Laclau and Mouffe, at this point, attack also towards the concept of "social", which "only exists...as an effort to construct that impossible object", that is, in the "intelligible and instituted forms of a society". Accordingly, discourse is also an attempt but to "dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre". It is hegemonic when we have "privileged discursive points of this partial fixation", in other words, "nodal points"<sup>73</sup>. We can argue that Laclau and Mouffe suggest exactly a network type of conception of the social relations in the place of structural metaphors by introducing all two dimensional surface relations through discursivity, nodal points, fixation, articulation. Articulatory practices already construct certain nodal points by beginning from "the openness of the social" and "constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity"<sup>74</sup>.

*Subject:* Subject as a category is meaningful only in the context of subject positions within a "discursive structure"<sup>75</sup>, which is the "field of a dispersion of subject positions". Nonetheless, despite this dispersion together with detotalisation and decentralisation of certain positions, there emerges an overdetermination, which has "systematic effect"<sup>76</sup>. So, any differentiation with its multiplicity

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70 Ibid., 111.

71 Ibid., 105.

72 Ibid., 112.

73 Ibid., 112.

74 Ibid., 113.

75 Ibid., 115.

76 Ibid., 117.



and heterogeneity is constructed as a system of subordination-domination. For example, sexual differences are overdetermined in the form of sexual division and constructed as a "sex/gender system" and woman is produced as a category. However, this does not imply "there is a single cause of feminian subordination" because there is such a thing as "feminian essence" but "a common element which has strong overdetermining effects in terms of the sexual division"<sup>77</sup>. There is no essence but an "imaginary signification" which results in "concrete effects in the diverse social practices", which are autonomous and unevenly developed social practices<sup>78</sup>.

If so, since there is no essence of the subjects as in the cases of femininity or class, interests are not represented in political practice, but it is political practice which "constructs the interests it represents"<sup>79</sup>. Nonetheless, dispersed subject positions caused by the very absence of society do not permit any consolidation of separate positions because there is a "game of overdetermination among them that reintroduces the horizon of an impossible totality". It is understood that game of overdetermination" is actually the "game" for "the hegemonic articulation"<sup>80</sup>.

*Antagonism:* Laclau and Mouffe argue that Marxism confused antagonism with contradictions<sup>81</sup>. "The dialectics is a doctrine about the essentially contradictory nature of the real, not about the empirical existence of contradictions in reality". In this sense, contradiction does not imply an "antagonistic relation"<sup>82</sup>. They define contradiction as an impossibility in which something cannot be its opposite (it is because A is fully A that being not A is a contradiction). However, antagonism means that "presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally my self". Antagonism "constitutes the limit of every objectivity" whereas in contradiction we have "an equally definable relation among

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77 Ibid., 117-118.

78 Ibid., 118.

79 Ibid., 120.

80 Ibid., 122.

81 Ibid., 123.

82 Ibid., 124.

concepts". If there is a limit for objectivity, there emerges an antagonistic relation, which is witnessed as the impossibility of "a final suture". The more interesting definition is that "antagonisms are not internal but external to society" since they "constitute the limits of society"<sup>83</sup>.

For Laclau and Mouffe, identity is "purely negative". "To be something is always not to be something else"<sup>84</sup>. So, we understand from their account that antagonism is related with identities and negativity of identities gives its meaning to social. "The social is penetrated by negativity-that is, by antagonism- it does not attain the status of transparency, of full presence, and the objectivity of its identities is permanently subverted". Constitution of the social stems from this "impossible relation between objectivity and negativity". Exactly at this point, when they consider "the structuring of political space, from the points of view of the opposed logics of equivalence and difference", they observe that antagonisms cannot "totally" "dissolve the objectivity of the social", either<sup>85</sup>. Logic of equivalence refers to the "simplification of political space" while that of difference expands and increase scomplexity, resulting in far more instability and antagonisms. As can bee seen, the logic of difference is dominant in advanced industrial societies where "the proliferation of points of antagonisms permits the multiplication of democratic struggles", which "do not tend to constitute a 'people', and where the political space is not divided into two "antagonistic fields". The logic as such produces "democratic subject positions", which cannot be centralised", a situation, they state, described by "organic crisis" by Gramsci<sup>86</sup>, and which cannot have "clear-cut' politics of frontiers"<sup>87</sup>. In advanced industrial societies, the logic of equivalence which refers to an organic crisis, we see an enwidening of "the field of articulatory practices", which is "the general field of the emergence of hegemony", where "'elements'

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83 Ibid., 125.

84 Ibid., 128.

85 Ibid., 129.

86 Ibid., 130-131.

87 Ibid., 133.

are not crystallised into 'moments' <sup>88</sup>. On the other hand, for hegemony, "articulatory moment is not sufficient" but also, hegemony should be in a "confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices"<sup>89</sup>, which requires "equivalence and frontier effects"<sup>90</sup>.

Laclau and Mouffe try to reveal a new and radical Gramsci from old Gramsci. His conception of "historical bloc" is interpreted as "a social and political space relatively unified through the instituting of nodal points and constitution of tendentially relational identities". They claim that Gramsci's "historical block" coincides with their concept of "discursive formation"<sup>91</sup>. But, both conceptions of "historical bloc" and "war of positions" must be redefined within an antagonistic and plural terrain of political spaces where we have "a variety of hegemonic nodal points" rather than one centre. There is no single hegemonic centre around which social formation is structured as Gramsci insisted, even though some nodal points may be "highly overdetermined". This "highly overdetermined" nodal points imply "a condensation of a number of social relations and thus, become the focal point of a multiplicity of totalising effects". And, if we have no any centre and we cannot reduce the plurality of social into any underlying unitary principle, there will be "an automosation of spheres and forms of struggle"<sup>92</sup>. In this sense, for Laclau and Mouffe, debate on relative autonomy of the state (or something else) has no validity since relative autonomy conception depends upon the assumption of "sutured society" and of the acceptance of an underlying unitary principle<sup>93</sup>.

However, in the absence of any hegemonic centre in the face of "an autonomisation of spheres and forms of struggle", how do autonomy and subordination become meaningful? They claim that both of them are meaningful if the antagonisms of "hegemonic

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88 Ibid., 134.

89 Ibid., 135.

90 Ibid., 136.

91 Ibid., 136.

92 Ibid., 139.

93 Ibid., 139-140.

practices" "in the field of articulatory practices" are considered. "The autonomy of the state as a whole-assuming for a moment that we can speak of it as a unity-depends on the construction of a political space which can only be the result of hegemonic articulation". But, this hegemonic articulation as a political space is valid only "for the degree of unity and autonomy existing among the different branches and apparatuses of the state". Autonomy is already is "a form of hegemonic construction"<sup>94</sup>.

*New Social Movements:* All conceptual equipment Laclau and Mouffe up to now have tried to develop from their deconstruction (of Leninist tradition and structural marxism) and reinterpretation (of Gramsci) of classical Marxist theory is based on the claim that in advanced industrial societies, political conditions of socialism strategy have completely changed. The very expression of this radical change is seen in the formation of "new social movements". Their all attacks towards class politics come from this definition. Their emphasis on autonomy (emergence of different subject positions), and hegemony, which has no class content any more and is conceived only as "a type of political relation"<sup>95</sup> and discourse as a "structured totality"<sup>96</sup> caused by articulatory processes, and their attempts to detotalise society together with decentralization of class positions from theory and politics are all strategic attempts to theorize new social movements and define the place of such movements in radical democratic politics. However, the concept of hegemony is the central one around which all theory is constructed. The effects of hegemony "emerge from a surplus of meaning which results from an operation of displacement"<sup>97</sup>. Its logic does not account for "the totality of the social" and its formation is not based on the "specific logic of a single social force". Like other forms of power, which are "constructed in a pragmatological way and internally to social, through the opposed logic of equivalence and difference" hegemonic power cannot be foundational (Laclau and Mouffe say

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94 Ibid., 140.

95 Ibid., 141.

96 Ibid., 105.

97 Ibid., 141.

that "power is never foundational")<sup>98</sup>. Hegemony is not caused by "an irradiation of effects from privileged points"<sup>99</sup>. Accordingly, insofar as hegemonic power is not foundational, it also will not constitute a centre. Laclau and Mouffe argue that "The problem of power cannot...be posed in terms of the search for the class or the dominant sector which constitutes the centre of a hegemonic formation, given that, by definition, such a centre will always elude us"<sup>100</sup>.

*Some Remarks:* In Marxist tradition, all attempts to go "beyond Marxism" creates a sort of division between so called orthodoxy and so assumed revisionism. This is not surprising when we consider that Marxism is not only an academic activity but a theory to change capitalist social relations through socialism. As Lenin stated somewhere, all philosophical debates have political results. But, is there any philosophical result of political conditions? I think that Laclau and Mouffe's book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* can be handled only in this perspective. If we attack towards this notorious proclamation of postmarxism on the ground of reactionary advocating of merits and power of classical Marxism, we have to confront the results of twentieth century socialism and see the impossibility of socialism in the advanced industrial societies at least as imagined in the tradition.

A famous critique of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* came from Geras<sup>101</sup> in his New Left Review article Post- Marxism? The criticism was based upon the definitions of an intellectual move from structural marxism to ex-marxism, which always distorted Marxist tradition in theory in particular. There may have been some problems in practice of the theory but theory itself was not inherently problematic.

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98 Ibid., 142.

99 Ibid., 141.

100 Ibid., 142.

101 Norman Geras, "Post-Marxism?" *New Left Review*, No: 163, (1987 May-June), 40-83 and reply of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies", *New Left Review*, no: 166, (1987, November-December).

I think that this sort of criticism repeats the failure of postmarxism in a symmetrical way. Postmarxism theorizes a socialist strategic possibility in a new political environment, which is highly contingent. It is sure that this theorizing attempt would suffer from this contingency and replace "one sided necessitarian logic" with "one sided contingency logic"<sup>102</sup> and even the worst, with an "absolute contingency"<sup>103</sup>. The solution must come from a new synthesis which could theorize contingency through a development of Marxist theory of class and capital accumulation. Otherwise, any critique of postmarxism will be in a reactionary mood without going beyond the correct but unproductive definitions of "new revisionisms"<sup>104</sup>.

Within the internal development of Marxist tradition, spatial phenomena have been the most central question in theory and practice. Newly conceived importance of spatial phenomena does not only rescue the tradition from post-modern attacks of contingency but also demonstrates all clues for the possibility of socialist politics. It is true that first implicit conception of the spatiality of capitalism and of socialist strategy exists in Gramsci's writings<sup>105</sup>. In Gramsci, the southern question does not only imply different interests of rural populations subordinated by the interests of northern urban blocks, but also different political space articulated into the north through an organization of power relations at the national level through a direct mediation of southern intellectual blocks. In addition, in his prison notebooks, Gramsci<sup>106</sup> drops the division of the state from civil society and achieves a sort of cobweb conception of society and the state in

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102 Nicos P. Mouzelis, *Post-Marxist Alternatives- The Construction of Social Orders*, London, Macmillan, 1990); 21-22.

103 Ellen Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism-Renewing Historical Materialism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52.

104 Ellen Wood, *Democracy*, 256.

105 See article The Southern question in Antonio Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed.: R. Bellamy, Translation: V. Cox, Cambridge University Press, 1994 and its development in - Hapishane Defterleri, Tarih, Politika, Felsefe ve Kültür Sorunlari Üzerine Seçme Metinler, (*Prison Notebooks- Selected Writings on the Problems of History, Politics, Philosophy and Culture*), Translation: K. Somer, (Istanbul, Onur Yayinlari, 1986).

106 Gramsci, *Mapishane Defterleri (Prison Notebooks)*.

which central power of hegemonic class is diffused in to all space of social relations.

Another attempt for the Marxist theorization of contingent social and political environments came from Lefebvre<sup>107</sup>. Lefebvre's "urban revolution thesis" is based upon his theory of "production of space", which explains the survival reasons of capitalism into the twentieth century. Increasing commodification of physical and social spaces and fragmentation of living spaces in the form of core and periphery implies a new form of exploitation and residence points and new conditions of class alliances. However, Lefebvre's theory does not acknowledge industrial base of urban revolution and his spatial conceptions of capitalism are not integrated with Marxian theory of class struggle and capital accumulation. An integration of spatial phenomena into classical Marxism would not be possible until David Harvey's studies on uneven geographical development of capitalism, capitalist urbanization and urban consciousness<sup>108</sup> and finally his works on the postmodern cultural, economic and intellectual condition<sup>109</sup>. His theory of urban class formation and his conception of urban consciousness directly deal with the same questions posed by Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*<sup>110</sup>. Differentiation of social spaces through creative destructive logic of uneven geographical development of capitalism results in ever transferring of fundamental contradictions of capitalism into different spheres of social life. There are some fundamental and derivative forces of class structuration, which does not express itself in the form of class polarization. Actually, the connection point between contingency and Marxian theory of capital

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107 Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism-Reproduction of the Relations of Production*, (USA, Macmillan, [1973] 1976) and - *The Production of Space*, (Oxford, Blackwell, [1974] 1998).

108 David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*, (London, Edward Arnold, 1973); *The Limits to Capital*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1982), *The Urbanization of Capital - Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization*, (Baltimore, Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985a), - *Consciousness and the Urban Experience- Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization*, (Baltimore, Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985b).

109 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity - An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989) and - *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, (Cambridge and Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

110 *Hegemony*.

accumulation and classes is not seen in the process of urbanization of capital in which neither capitalist class nor working class is seen as the united antagonistic forces. Enemy disappears with and through space.

Urban class alliances emerge to prevent and develop existing assets and positions in the face of production, circulation and realization of capital. Participants of an alliance have plenty of origin and exactly for this reason; an alliance is unstable and vulnerable to the winds of capital circulation. The very need to compete with capital requirements gives the urban class alliance politics a relatively autonomous character. Actually, in this politics, neither economic interests is interested in political form, nor, interests are constructed directly politics. The former reduces politics into economic interests whereas the latter sees politics as a sphere of production of interests.

Furthermore, Harvey's conception of urban consciousness completes his analysis of urban alliance politics. Elements of urban consciousness formation are individuality, community, the state, family and class. It can be seen that class is only one locus of consciousness and organization, which can emerge or not. But this does not mean that classes can have any central position within socialist theory and practice. The fact that workers do not or cannot easily organize themselves as a class will not render socialism classless politics. In addition, any attack upon class politics and any attempt to decentralize working class from socialist theory should recognize the class content of capitalist social relations even if we accept that there is no hegemonic center as Laclau and Mouffe claim. In their analysis, state is not a centre even in their conception of hegemonic articulations. Jessop claims that just as the society is impossible in Laclau and Mouffe, "common juxtaposition between 'state' and 'society' ", or couplet "state - civil society" becomes meaningless<sup>111</sup>. Jessop asks whether the state exists<sup>112</sup>. The answer is positive, but, the state is de-statized, in fact. Because Laclau and Mouffe's deconstructive

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111 Bob Jessop, *State Theory-Putting the Capitalist State in its Place*, (Pennsylvania, University Park, the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 292-293.

112 Jessop, *State Theory*, 292.



logic often turns into anarchist destruction, there is no institutional analysis<sup>113</sup> of power in their work, either

In their comparison of advanced industrial societies with the periphery of the capitalist world, third world, they use the terms "imperialist exploitation" and "brutal and centralized forms of domination" for the context of the latter<sup>114</sup>. In addition, while Laclau in his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*<sup>115</sup> clearly explains he accepts the Marxist labor theory of value and definition of capitalism as "a system of production based on wage labour"<sup>116</sup>, he goes on to say that "antagonism is not established *within* capitalist relations of production, but *between* the latter and the identity of the social agents-workers included-outside of them". Antagonism is not "*inherent to the relations of production*"<sup>117</sup>. Laclau's explanation reveals *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy's* main problem and their failure to theorize it: differentiation of production and reproduction spheres and accordingly work-residential differentiation of capitalist urban space; hence the differentiation between primary and secondary exploitation processes<sup>118</sup>. Labor is exploited not only in the work place, but also laborers face various secondary forms of exploitation out of work. Moreover, an individual is not only in the loci of individualism, but also in those of community, family, the state and also class.

The last correction to Laclau and Mouffe's postmarxism can be made as regards with their key concept *antagonism*. In marxism, the term refers to a condition in which any compromise, any consent or patience begins to disappear in a way that a contradictory relation turns into an open war on the eve of a possible critical rupture from accumulated quantity to a new quality. In this sense, any conflict points may become

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113 Mouzelis, Post-Marxist, 25.

114 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 131.

115 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, (London-New York, Verso), 1990.

116 Ibid., 221.

117 Ibid., 221.

118 David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital-Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization*, (Baltimore, Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985a).

antagonized provided that contradictory content of the relation destruct the implicit consent. This is why Gramsci defined hegemony as a consent armored by force<sup>119</sup>, which is a completely alien conception to the writers of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

#### **4. A Conclusion**

The article has shown that although it is true that social and political relations have a postmodern condition with their uncertainties and contingency, they can be understood by Marxist theory and changed by its acceptance of main exploited classes into socialism through class struggle, on the contrary of a postmarxist suggestion as exemplified by Laclau and Mouffe. Validity and significance of this theory, that is, historical materialism, needs to be reasserted by developing a theory of "historico-geographical materialism" as suggested by David Harvey since the 1970s and Henri Lefebvre. Contingency of postmodern conditions of social and political relations can be understood only by developing much more, such a theory, which points to the spatialized aspects of capitalist relations that are seemingly not understandable and changeable by the mainstream Marxist theory as suggested and implied by postmodern Marxist thought<sup>120</sup>. This challenging theory not only deconstructs the philosophical foundations of the Marxist theory such as dialectics, determinism, and realism but also undermines Marxist politics based on the conception of class interests and class struggle aiming to abolish capitalist class relations through a socialist revolution that starts with the seizure of the bourgeois political power. It is because this theory argues that significance of class interests and class struggle is replaced by the new social and political movements that have no center and coherence. Consequently, a state or centre of political power no longer exists

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119 Gramsci, *Hapishane Defterleri (The Prison Writings)*.

120 For the development of historico-geographical materializm, the reader can apply to my book: Ercan Gundogan, *A Theory of Capitalist Urbanisation: David Harvey*, (Germany,VDM Verlag, 2009) as well as my frequent attempts to develop this theory in, Ercan Gundogan, *Marxian Theory and Socialism in Turkey, A Critique of the Socialist Journal Aydinlik*, (Germany,VDM Verlag, 2009).

to be seized by a socialist class struggle, putting aside a theory that would be based on such a conception.

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