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Who Practices Hegemony?: Class Division and the Subject of Politics

John Rosenthal

Today, on “the Left” and in the domain of theory, a choice is being posed: class politics or radical democracy? And yet, as with any allegedly exhaustive polarity, the choice as formulated is not an innocent one, for the terms of which it is comprised are only bound together by the force of a normative hierarchy. We are by all means “free to choose,” but there is a right choice and a wrong, which is to say that, however we may choose, the very fact of the opposition will have already done the choosing for us. Within the range of this “choice,” class politics was never a real alternative at all, but merely a nostalgic dream imagining the complexities of contemporary political antagonisms under the form of the harsh frontiers of an incipient capitalism. And if we who dream this dream, we who operate in the political imaginary of “Marxism,” were only to awaken, we would discover that we have closed ourselves into a “class ghetto,” isolated from the terrain on which politics takes place today. A novel variation on this theme is the recent suggestion that the way out of this “ghetto” has already been given in the “ghetto” itself, that a careful examination of our inner-city

landscape will reveal the presence of an ambivalent conceptual monument indicating the path to be taken—that is, the theory of hegemony. In their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have returned to guide us along this subterranean path through the theoretical discourses of twentieth-century Marxism, in the seeming hope that at the end of the line we too will have emerged from out of our “class ghetto” into the shining metropolis of “radical democracy.”

For Laclau and Mouffe, the work of Gramsci, as the Marxist theorist of the superstructures *par excellence*, represents a particularly significant stop along the conceptual itinerary leading away from class isolationism, but insofar as Gramsci continues to comprehend the terrain theorized as superstructural, there remains an “inner essentialist core” to his “thought” which will have to be renounced if the logic of hegemony is to realize all its “deconstructive effects.”¹ In Laclau and Mouffe’s estimation, it is not enough that the Gramscian conception of hegemony requires a class to “come out of itself,” to transcend any narrow corporatist identification in order to articulate the political demands of other “social forces” and thus consolidate an historical “bloc.” Laclau and Mouffe insist that a class must come so far out of itself as to *be no longer a class*. What they attempt to call into question is the very notion that the participants in the hegemonic relation should retain any class identity whatsoever. If, as they argue, the “crisis of Marxism,” which opens the theoretical lacunae that the concept of hegemony is called upon to fill, was itself brought on by the actual historical fragmentation of a working class whose unity had allegedly been postulated as an economic datum in the “classical paradigm,” why then should the effort at political recomposition involved in hegemonic articulations still be understood as the recomposition of a *class*, rather than a new social agency given in the very process of articulation itself? As Laclau and Mouffe formulate this “dilemma” of Marxian orthodoxy: “the economic base is incapable of assuring class unity *in the present*; while politics, the sole terrain where the present unity can be constructed, is unable convincingly to guarantee the *class* character of the unitary subjects.”² The continued identification of the subjects of hegemony with classes is then seen as a theoretically

1. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Kammack (London: Verso, 1985), 69.

2. *Ibid.*, 36-37.

undermotivated piety, binding the moment of political articulation to movements the direction and sense of which are given *a priori* at the level of the economic base, and thus excluding the possibility of theorizing the political in its specificity as an autonomous terrain. “Faced with the rationalism of classical Marxism,” Laclau and Mouffe write, “the logic of hegemony presented itself from the outset as a *complementary* and *contingent* operation, required for conjunctural imbalances within an evolutionary paradigm whose essential or ‘morphological’ validity was not for a moment placed in question.”³

This was, no doubt, often the case, and more so than ever, as we shall see, in certain passages from Gramsci. But in developing their criticisms Laclau and Mouffe simply *assume* from the outset that the entire categorial edifice of classical Marxism and more particularly the concept of class are *exclusively* to be comprehended within such a narratological framework, constituted by a normative schema of historical totalities and the positing of a determinate agent whose conscious political activity will realize the transition between them—namely, the proletariat, “the ‘we,’” as Lukács put it, “which is the subject of history, that ‘we’ whose action is in fact history.”⁴ Nor is it that Laclau and Mouffe object to narrativized meta-history as such, but only to the peculiar form taken by *Marxism* when narrativized. They reject not the understanding of history as a process *undertaken* by subjective agencies, but only that the responsibility for the process should be monopolized by any one actor; they reject not the story, but only that the story as told should have but a single protagonist. (In this sense, we might say that Laclau and Mouffe represent a strangely ambivalent “post-modern” moment in the philosophy of history: the re-thinking of historical agency under the form of *melange*.)

Surely, by now, we cannot but agree with Laclau and Mouffe that the search for a fundamental agent of history is—not only in fact, but in principle—condemned to fail. But, whether or not a wide assortment of Marxists, as well as “post-,” anti-, and simply non-Marxists, have involved themselves in this sort of endeavor, we have still to ask whether the Marxian analytic is essentially tied to the postulation of some such subjective archimedean point of history, or whether, to the

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 145.

contrary, we are prevented from even thinking the *specificity* of a Marxian object of knowledge by demanding that it respond to the criteria of a problematic of historical agency at all.⁵ The irony of Laclau and Mouffe's critical stance is that, while with considerable display they abandon the search, they never depart from the confines of *this* problematic which gave to the search its conceptual motivation in the first place. They never cease to interrogate their "Marxism" as to "the characteristic modes in which it has conceived the agents of social change . . . , and the privileged points for the unleashing of historical transformations"; and then—predictably—they never cease to be disappointed when the answers come back that classes are the "agents" and that class antagonisms, as determined at the level of relations of production, are "the privileged points."⁶ But perhaps these are not the questions one should be asking.

In delineating their conception of a "democratic practice of hegemony," in opposition to the "authoritarian practice" which they attribute to the "whole Leninist tradition," Laclau and Mouffe stress that "what is being implicitly challenged is the identification between social agents and classes."⁷ And certainly we shall have to allow that the discourse which operates to locate "concrete individuals" as supports within a complex structure of the relations of production is not the exclusive nor even the principal discourse through which "social agents" come to consciousness of and carry out their political activity. But this only suggests that there was already a confusion of analytical levels involved in Laclau and Mouffe's allegation that such an identification has been a necessary attribute of "classical Marxism." For it is, at least, not altogether obvious that theorists using the term "class" within the Marxian tradition have been primarily engaged in providing sociological descriptions of the actual self-identification of "social agents," or, if you will, of particular subject-positions discursively constructed within the never finally instituted boundaries of "the social."⁸ Whatever one

5. For having posed this question—and, I would even risk saying, for having answered it—we are, of course, indebted to the work of Althusser, most notably in his essay "The Object of Capital," from Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970).

6. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 2.

7. *Ibid.*, 58.

8. This is not to deny that certain self-proclaimed "Marxists" indeed have and consequently today command considerable institutional resources for phone surveys

may think of Lenin, it is difficult to believe that in his theoretical activity he ever sought to meet the needs of bourgeois sociology for a comprehensive “action theory.”

By thus dismantling the system of Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical pretensions, we need not, I think, deny the cogency and interest of their introducing discourse-analytical categories, as derived chiefly from Foucault, into the discussion of political agency—that is, provided one has specified as the level of analysis the conscious struggle for “power” or against “subordination” conducted among actors whose identity, while it is susceptible to subversion and reconstitution within the struggle itself, is nonetheless still an identity *for themselves*, that is, *their* identity. Such an approach, which manages to comprehend the *conduct* of politics as precisely a question of identities *put at risk*, rather than of a contest between actors whose identities (and hence “interests”) are already given, represents a welcome contrast to the uncritical objectivism which has characterized, for example, so many of the recent theoretical panegyrics to the so-called “new social movements.”⁹ Nevertheless, we do need to consider whether a discourse-analytical approach to political agency has not simply missed its field of applicability when it attempts to relegate “class” to the status of but one potentially efficacious hegemonic subject among others,¹⁰ since the concept of class in Marxist theory is indeed a *concept* and not just a name given to some already existing self-identified “social agent.” What I want to suggest, then, is that an allegedly class-based identity will not be so easily assimilated to Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis of the construction, subversion, and recomposition of subject-positions within a general field of hegemonic articulations because the place of “class” within Marxist theoretical discourse has not primarily been that of a *subjective* identity, but rather of a *conceptual* identity, which is precisely *trans-*, or better, just *not* subjective. In other words, “the

aimed at establishing whether the working class thinks it’s the working class. For Laclau and Mouffe’s consideration of “the social” as an effort at symbolic construction, see the section entitled “Articulation and Discourse,” particularly the passage beginning, “If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a *society*, the social only exists, however, as an effort to construct that impossible object” (112).

9. For Laclau and Mouffe’s own analysis of the seemingly ubiquitous NSMs, see the section “Democratic Revolution and New Antagonisms” (159-71).

10. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 65.

proletariat” cannot be understood as a subject-position constructed in a discourse of class in the same sense as, for example, “women” can be understood as a subject-position in a discourse of gender, or “blacks” as a subject-position in a discourse of race. This distinction is even grammatically marked for us—in English, by the presence or absence of the definite article indicating the singular: we speak of “*the* proletariat,” rather than simply “proletarians,” because the category in question is not given by the summation or articulated totality of proletarianized subject (hence, we are dealing here with a mass term). On the other hand, we speak of “women” or “blacks,” rather than “the women” or “the blacks,” because the categories in question are given as positions within types of discourse which function precisely to determine *individuals*. (What is crucial about these latter is that they operate in the “unsutured” space of the social to *inscribe subjects qua* sexed subjects or *qua* racial subjects. But can an analogous operation be justifiably imputed to some supposed “classist” discourse?)

We need to begin to struggle again with the question with which Marx himself was still struggling at the end of his life: “what makes a class?”¹¹ And by this question I mean to understand *not* “what makes a class” in an empirical or practical sense, that is, what historical processes or political initiatives result in the formation of self-identified class subjects,¹² but rather “what makes a class” in a categorical sense, that is, what are the set of theoretical distinctions that allow us to determine the specificity of that conceptual identity we call “class,” as

11. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: Vintage, 1981), 1025.

12. Recently, we have heard much talk of the proletariat having “made itself.” I suppose this argument is intended to salvage the element of “human agency” in historical process from the dangerous “scientistic” deviations of “Marxist structuralists.” If the proletariat did, in fact, “make itself,” given the traditional Marxian understanding of what constitutes the specific conditions of existence of the proletariat, this was a rather misguided undertaking on its part. But, apart from contemporary debates in England and perhaps the States, it is difficult to think of any allegedly “Marxist” theorist who would have found it important to assert such a position. More characteristic has been the attempt to grasp the political initiative of the proletariat *as* proletariat in the present, as the capacity precisely to *unmake* itself. One could recall, for example, Lukács’s words in *History and Class Consciousness*: “The proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating itself, by creating the classless society through the successful conclusion of its own class struggle. The struggle for this society, in which the dictatorship of the proletariat is merely a phase, is not just a battle waged against an external enemy, the bourgeoisie. It is equally the struggle of the proletariat *against itself*” (80). As we shall have occasion to note, Gramsci adopts a similar position.

opposed to “group,” or “sex,” or “race,” or “family,” “species,” etc. It is only on the condition of not asking this question that Laclau and Mouffe can cash their claim to having “gone beyond” class and so “radicalized” the concept of hegemony by recognizing the “unfixity” of all social identities. But if, as I have suggested, “class” was never a “social identity” in the same way as the others that Laclau and Mouffe attempt to embrace in their “radically pluralist” conception of politics, then the analysis of hegemony that continues to allude to the class-positioning of the participants within a hegemonic relation will not so much be guilty of any “essentialist *a priori*ism,” as of simply being a different sort of analysis than that which Laclau and Mouffe have in mind. Indeed, if one is to discover an “essentialism” at work here, it is precisely in Laclau and Mouffe’s expectation that every conceptual object can be tried before a single tribunal, the operative assumption of their argument being that the objects of theory are nothing more than *real objects theorized*. Nor is this assumption altered one bit in its epistemic structure by the admittedly thoughtful addition that these objects might themselves be symbolically constituted. Hence, in their conception, the “working class” is to be understood as but one “autoconstitutive” subject-position among a “plurality of identities,” each accorded its rightful place and granted the “principle of its own validity” within “the project for a radical and plural democracy,” which, “*in a primary sense*, is nothing other than the struggle for a maximum autonomization of spheres.”¹³ Since, however, the theoretical discourse which posits the conceptual identity of “class” does not thereby presuppose the existence of a class entity constructed in the discursive forms of any actual empirical subjects subsumed under that category—which is to say, in more classical terms, it does not presuppose that a class “for itself” *already* exists in the empirical concrete of politics—then the coherence of conceiving the “working class” as inhabiting some independent “sphere,” to be lined up alongside a multiplicity of other “spheres” and to be “done justice to” in the “radical democratic project,” is seriously cast into doubt. (Moreover, even if one were generous enough to admit such a notion, one would in so doing restore theoretical sanction to the formation of exactly the sort of “class ghetto” from which Laclau and Mouffe claim to be forcing a rupture in formulating their “radically democratic alternative.” Since working class “rights” would

13. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 167.

correspond to the autonomous sphere of, let us say, economic subject constitution, the political activity of the class as class would take on the form of a defense of particularist interests, the only innovation being that in “the project for a radical and plural democracy” these interests would be recognized on some other plane—one knows not where—as “valid.”) What we are confronted with here is an odd sort of empiricization of discourse, a welcome dismantling of the polarity opposing the discursive to the allegedly extra-discursive, but a dismantling which just as surely guarantees that the object of knowledge will appear under the sign of the objectivity for which it precisely gives a knowledge as its more crudely naturalist ancestors.¹⁴

In requiring that the question “what makes a class?” be posed, we should then be able to establish the specific difference which characterizes the problematic comprehending hegemonic articulations as an aspect of class division; we should be able to establish, in short, just how it *matters* theoretically who practices hegemony. As we have seen, Laclau and Mouffe’s complaint against the Marxist attempts to theorize a logic of hegemony is that “the hegemonic link” is conceived “as external to the class identity of the agents”¹⁵; hence, whether it be understood as hegemonizing the *tasks* “properly” pertaining to another class or the other “social forces” themselves, the class belonging of the hegemonic subject is never called into question. Even in Gramsci, where the conception of hegemonic practice as “class alliance” is ultimately

14. Laclau and Mouffe understand their own analytical framework as implying, along with the dismantling of the “discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy,” “the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition” (110). If this is so, the latter opposition is abandoned at the expense of “thought,” and in the direction of “reality.” “The real” continues to operate unimpeded as an approachable horizon in their argument: the sole tribunal alluded to above. Hence, in the preferred terms of every empiricist accusation against theory, the Hegelian totality is censured for reducing “the real to the concept,” and Marxian orthodoxy, “the concrete. . . to the abstract” (97, 21). It would perhaps be more precise to argue that Laclau and Mouffe—somewhat unwittingly—reconceive the real as discursively structured. Now, if one attempts to comprehend this position in terms of some alleged contest between Marxism and structuralism, it might appear as a regrettable consequence of Laclau and Mouffe’s “structuralist” or “post-structuralist” tendencies. The fact is, however, that those “structuralists” and especially “post-structuralists” who have made any theoretical claims at all concerning the real—such as Lacan and Althusser—have certainly not claimed *this*, since in their formulations, “the real” as opposed to “the symbolic,” “the real object” as opposed to “the object of knowledge,” function as epistemological *limit* concepts.

15. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 55.

discarded and new categories, such as that of the “national-popular collective will,” are introduced to think the results of such practice, even here the “game” of hegemony is allegedly still restricted to a “game” played among *classes*.¹⁶ Such a class-referred limitation upon hegemonic articulations was, according to the Laclau and Mouffe view, inevitable given the supposed “dualism” endemic to all classical Marxism that the concept of hegemony had to cover over. “If the revolutionary subject establishes its class identity at the level of the relations of production,” they argue,

its presence at other levels can only be one of *exteriority* and it must adopt the form of “*representation of interests*.” The terrain of politics can only be a superstructure, insofar as it is a terrain of struggle between agents whose identity, conceived under the form of “*interests*,” has set itself up at another level.¹⁷

Another stake which thus invariably comes into play when we attempt to establish the specificity of the category of class as it relates to the practice of hegemony is the very manner in which the relation between the economic and the political is conceptualized. The position from which Laclau and Mouffe address their criticisms is symptomatic of a tendency to regard the two as separate domains of actual human activity, and then on the basis of this assumption to accuse “Marxism” of limiting the “autonomy” of the latter by asserting the determination of the former. In this view, there is only “autonomy” or “determination,” and where “determination” holds sway, “dualism” necessarily follows, since it is only in respect to some alleged relation between the separate domains that their difference is converted into a “void.” Now, regardless of whether this spatializing approach does not in fact find (precisely because of the assumptions it *shares*) a legitimate object of criticism in certain currents of Second International Marxism, what our discussion so far already suggests is that the concept of class as distinguishable from that of any subjective identity will not have even been coherently apprehended where the assumption is that it must be “represented” on some other “level” in order to have political effects. We

16. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 69, and Antonio Gramsci, “Brief Notes on Machiavelli’s Politics,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), 125-33.

17. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 20.

would do well then to begin our investigation into the specific theoretical conditions of a class-embedded conception of hegemony by returning briefly to a text in which Laclau and Mouffe claim to discover this “void” (fissuring the terms of Marxian theoretical discourse) opening up in an exemplary manner: Rosa Luxemburg’s analysis of the 1905 Russian Revolution in *The Mass Strike*. This text will afford us an additional heuristic benefit as well, since in his *Prison Notebooks* Antonio Gramsci has also read it for us and has suggested criticisms which conflict markedly with those of Laclau and Mouffe. By attempting a reading of these readings, we might start to gain our bearings on the manner in which the competing conceptions of hegemony and its practitioners each involve a differing theoretical comprehension of the mode according to which the political and the economic relate. And this being the case, we might find that whereas a “void” could well open up between separable “domains,” there is no place for it “between” distinct *instances*; we might find that what has been sought for so long at some “level” apart from the economy was to be discovered—precisely through the concept of *class*—at the very level of the economy itself: namely, politics—not all of it, not politics as such, but at least a politics to be pursued.

In Rosa Luxemburg’s “spontaneism,” Laclau and Mouffe seem to believe they have unearthed the seeds of a theoretical innovation—albeit one which has not (until now) been allowed “radically” to realize all of its effects. In their reading, the novelty of Luxemburg’s analysis in *The Mass Strike* lies not so much in the frank recognition of a multiplicity of points of rupture in the revolutionary process as in the attempt to theorize the peculiar mode of recomposition that enables the revolution to claim each of these fragmentary struggles as its own. “Here,” write Laclau and Mouffe,

the mechanism of unification is clear: in a revolutionary situation, it is impossible to *fix the literal sense* of each isolated struggle, because each struggle overflows its own literality and comes to represent in the consciousness of the masses, a simple moment of a more global struggle against the system . . . Thus, in a revolutionary situation the *meaning* of every mobilization appears, so to speak, as split: aside from its specific literal demands, each mobilization represents the revolutionary process as a whole; and these totalizing effects are visible in the overdetermination of

some struggles by others. This is, however, nothing other than the defining characteristic of the symbol: the overflowing of the signifier by the signified. *The unity of the class is therefore a symbolic unity.*¹⁸

Now, we can note at once a certain ambiguity in this argument. If the conclusion is to follow that “the unity of the class is a symbolic unity,” then “the class” must, in effect, serve as sign token: the signifier in relation to which the multiplicity of individual heterogeneous struggles represents the “overflowing” signified. Laclau and Mouffe’s reconstruction of Luxemburg’s account, however, suggests precisely the *opposite* relation. As argued, it is rather each isolated struggle which serves as the token standing in for a whole complex of struggles, unified in Luxemburg’s, so to speak, meta-level reflection under the name of “the class struggle” as a whole.¹⁹ “The unity of the class” is not, then, a “symbolic unity,” but rather precisely the theoretical unity attributed to the complexity of an “overflowing” and overdetermining signified which is brought into relation with any fragmentary instance of struggle as its metonymic condensation. In short, “the unity of the class” is *the signified*. (Which is not to deny that here as elsewhere “the signified” is itself already a signifier, and that thus in a metonym we are dealing with, as Lacan puts it, “a word-to-word connexion” and not a connection between “word and concept” or “word and thing.”²⁰)

In order to clarify the background of theoretical relations that lends to Luxemburg’s “spontaneism” its distinctive character—and to indicate the manner in which such “spontaneism” eludes both the praise and the criticism that Laclau and Mouffe direct towards it—we would do well now to distinguish between “the unity of a class” and (political) “*class unity*.” The former, as suggested above, will have to have been constituted on *some other plane* than that of its metonymic condensation

18. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

19. See Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions* (New York: Harper, 1971), 79: “There are no two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and a political one, but only one class struggle.” We should stress that if we are consistently to follow along in the attempt to understand the relation between isolated struggle and complex of struggles on the model of the sign, then “class struggle” functions here not “as” the signified, but rather as the *name* given in a meta-linguistic discourse to the signified.

20. See Jacques Lacan, “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 156.

in political struggle, if it is even to be available for any such symbolic appropriation (indeed, this non-coincidence of planes is the very condition of so-called “overdetermination”). The latter, on the other hand, must, as Laclau and Mouffe rightly insist, emerge from the political struggle itself, insofar as we understand by such “class unity” the articulation of a plurality of political antagonisms *in terms of* the class belonging of the contestants. Neither can this political “class unity,” however, *simply* be a question of “the consciousness of the masses,” or, in the classical Marxian expression, of the existence of a class “for itself,” since what would thereby precisely be *excluded* is overdetermination, the identity of the struggle being instead given in the single autonomous act of articulation. Rather, for there to emerge any such political awareness of class, there must already be presupposed as operative not some additional *a priori* “class unity” (imposing itself according to endogenous economic laws), but the unity that assigns to the structural locus of a class any specifiable identity at all, that is, “the unity of a class.” The peculiarity of Rosa Luxemburg’s “spontaneism” proceeds from her eliding of this distinction. Whereas for a Lukács, for instance, there could be a hiatus between what he called “the actual, psychological state of consciousness of proletarians” and “the class consciousness of the proletariat,” for Luxemburg no such hiatus is possible, since both terms are identical as but “phenomena” of a single undifferentiated historical agency: “the revolution.” In this view, the political activity of a “class conscious” proletariat is virtually *entailed* by the self-same movement that establishes on the level of the economy its character as class. Hence, the moment of political class unity can be expected to erupt spontaneously on the basis of this more inclusive and economically unified historical process. “If . . . the Russian revolution teaches us anything,” Luxemburg concludes, “it teaches us that the mass strike is not artificially ‘made,’ not ‘decided’ at random, not ‘propagated,’ but that it is an historical phenomenon which, at a given moment, results from social conditions with historical inevitability.”²¹

The problem here is not then, as Laclau and Mouffe go on to suggest, that Luxemburg deploys two irreconcilable “logics”: one, a “logic of spontaneism,” theorizing the symbolic articulations through which political identities are “spontaneously generated,” and the other, a

21. Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, 16-17.

“logic of necessity,” guarantying by the imposition of “laws” of economic development that, at least in the long run, these identities will accede to a class character. Luxemburg’s spontaneism is not, as Laclau and Mouffe would have it, regrettably “limited” by some “logic of necessity”—rather, as we have seen, it is precisely the theoretical *consequence* of such a logic. As operative in her argument, “spontaneism” and “economism” do not represent two independent and antithetical principles, each establishing a limitation to the effects of the other as its “negative reverse”; rather they represent a *single* principle viewed under distinct aspects.²² This conceptual dependency of political “spontaneism” upon an “iron economic determinism” had already been pointed out by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, wherein he dismisses Luxemburg’s analysis of the 1905 revolution as “out and out historical mysticism.” For its allusion to his own favored military metaphors of political struggle, Gramsci’s discussion is worth citing at some length:

[Rosa] in fact disregarded the “voluntary” and organisational elements which were far more extensive and important in those events than—thanks to a certain “economistic” and spontaneist prejudice—she tended to believe. All the same this little book [*The Mass Strike*] . . . is one of the most significant documents theorizing the war of manoeuvre in relation to political science. The immediate economic element (crisis, etc.) is seen as the field artillery which in war opens a breach in the enemy’s defences Naturally the effects of immediate economic factors are held to be far more complex than the effects of heavy artillery in a war of manoeuvre, since they are conceived as having a double effect [sic.]: 1. they breach the enemy’s defences . . . ; 2. in a flash they organise one’s own troops and create the necessary cadres—or at least in a flash they put the existing cadres (formed, until that moment, by the general historical process) in positions which enable them to encadre one’s scattered forces; 3. in a flash they bring about the necessary ideological concentration on the common objective to be achieved. This view was a form of iron economic determinism, with the aggravating factor that it was conceived of as operating with lightning speed in time and space. It was thus out and out historical mysticism, the awaiting of a sort of miraculous illumination.²³

22. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 13.

23. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 233.

Any spontaneous unification of the class as a class political actor can hardly then be understood as a contingent product of an effort at symbolic articulation in some autonomous terrain of pure politics; as Gramsci indicates, it is precisely the “spontaneous” character of such an anticipated unification that derives from its being subsumed as but a political moment within a more general historical process set in motion at the level of the economy. We should note Gramsci’s device of repeating the adverb “*fulmineamenti*,” rendered here by the expression “in a flash,” in order to give emphasis to this conceptual linkage of allegedly “spontaneous” political unification with the politically unencumbered action of “immediate economic factors”: “*in a flash* they organize one’s own troops and create the necessary cadres—or at least *in a flash* they put the existing cadres . . . in a position to encadre one’s scattered forces; . . . *in a flash* they bring about the necessary ideological concentration on the common objective to be achieved.” Whereas in the Laclau and Mouffe reading, one would have had to assimilate Luxemburg’s “spontaneism” to what in Gramsci’s system of metaphors is called a “war of position”—a molecular struggle in and on the political superstructures to “encadre one’s forces” and counteract the hegemonic apparatus of the dominant class—Gramsci himself demonstrates convincingly that such “spontaneism” is, to the contrary, only possible on the condition of thinking politics in a peculiarly exaggerated fashion as a “war of manoeuvre,” with the political superstructures seen to collapse on the first blast from the economic “artillery,” or, to recall another metaphoric, to step obediently aside so as to make way for “His Majesty the Economy striding along the royal road of the Dialectic.”²⁴

As suggested above, what is at issue here, right from the start, reacting upon any attempt to develop an analytic of political unification that continues to allude to class positions, is the very manner in which the relation between economics and politics is understood. In Rosa Luxemburg’s account, the political moment cannot possibly be accorded any autonomy, since it is precisely that: just a *moment* via which the economy realizes the historical imperative of its own reorganization. In contrast, by explicitly introducing the concept of hegemony into his analyses, Gramsci begins to theorize the opacity of the political and the ideological to any imperative established solely on the level of the

24. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Random, 1969), 113.

economic base. Nonetheless, if here too we find that this analytic is “limited” in its scope, this limitation proceeds not so much from some theoretically unmotivated “essentialism” which continues to identify the political contestants in the game of hegemony with fundamental economic classes (since, insofar as Gramsci discusses political actors at the level of their ideological or discursive constitution, he in fact does *not* make any such identification) as from a conception of historical process which continues to identify *the economy* as the very arbiter of historicity, of what *counts* as an historical event. In Gramsci’s writings, the political and the ideological super-structures will begin to take on a substantiality that they wholly lacked in Luxemburg’s analysis, but when brought into relation with the economy as “factors” in the linear historical trajectory that it alone determines, such substantiality will be reduced to but the density of a medium which offers resistance. Here still, the Economy strides along his “royal road,” but now with the one notable complication that his ministers Politics and Ideology might be duplicitous in the performance of their assigned tasks.

Evidence of this historicizing operation can be noted in the very form taken by Gramsci’s criticisms of what he himself understands as an “economistic” eschewal of hegemonic politics. “In such modes of thinking,” he writes,

no account is taken of the “time” factor, nor in the last analysis even of “economics.” For there is no understanding of the fact that mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic phenomena, and that therefore, at certain moments, the automatic thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed, or even momentarily broken by traditional ideological elements—hence that there must be a conscious, planned struggle to ensure that the economic position of the masses, which may conflict with the traditional leadership’s policies, are understood. An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies—i.e. to change the political direction of certain forces which have to be absorbed if a new, homogenous politico-economic historical bloc, without internal contradictions, is to be successfully formed.²⁵

This passage could be read as ample confirmation of Laclau and Mouffe’s

25. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 168.

allegation that in Gramsci's conception,

class hegemony is not a wholly practical result of struggle, but has an ultimate ontological foundation. The economic base may not assure the ultimate victory of the working class, since this depends upon its capacity for hegemonic leadership. However, a failure in the hegemony of the working class can only be followed by a reconstitution of bourgeois hegemony, so that in the end, political struggle is still a zero-sum game among classes.²⁶

As argued by Gramsci, "political initiative" only arrives on the scene in order to "liberate the economic thrust," in order to set about resolving a difficulty presented by the non-conformity of "ideological phenomena" to the historical needs of the economy. The "automatic thrust" of the economic factor might be "slowed down," "obstructed," or "even broken," but mobility itself remains a prerogative of the economic base. In this regard, Gramsci's reference to the "'time' factor" is especially symptomatic, since his analysis implies that hegemonic articulations can do no more than accelerate or delay an historical process, the linearity of which, as measured against the standard of the organization of production, remains undisturbed.

Nonetheless, by reading Gramsci in terms of the supposed "double void" which they ascribe indiscriminately to *all* Marxian theoretical discourse, even as an essential predicate thereof, Laclau and Mouffe are once again both too kind and too harsh in their assessment: too kind because they suggest that the Gramscian logic of hegemony, its terrain of operation specified as the field of ideology, is radically severed from any simple "class reductionist" perspective which would comprehend the entirety of hegemonic relations as but a super-structural phenomenon emerging in the service of fundamental interests constituted at the level of the economy; and too harsh because they still maintain that *internally* every hegemonic formation is, in Gramsci's conception, articulated around a fundamental class as its "single unifying principle."²⁷ Whenever Gramsci makes an effort to relate the practice of hegemony to movements at the level of the economy, that practice is not in fact accorded any autonomy, except, perhaps, that severely

26. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 69.

27. *Ibid.*, 69.

limited “autonomy” alluded to above—the autonomy to comply or to resist. But Gramsci does not consistently make such an effort, and when he doesn’t it becomes clear that the internal logic of hegemonic articulations is not itself necessarily tied to, let us simply say, *economic* categories (as opposed to “economistic”). (If this leads one to conclude that there could be perfectly valid analyses of hegemonic relations which were not “Marxist,” I can see no reason to object. But for an analytic to be *not* Marxist does not suggest that it is “Post-” Marxist.) And yet perhaps even this formulation of the problem lends itself too easily to a continuist appropriation. Perhaps one should simply concede that there isn’t any single “logic of hegemony” theorized in Gramsci’s writings, and suggest that the attempt to grasp a series of heterogenous pieces of text and analytical sequences under the sign of such a unified logic has, not surprisingly, resulted in a massive confusion of levels; this confusion, becoming peculiarly active in Laclau and Mouffe’s case, has then rediscovered itself as a “double void” systematically producing dubious theoretical effects in the read text, and has thus managed to denegate its character as itself an effect of that discontinuous text’s *reading*.

Insofar as Gramsci’s analysis of hegemonic relations operates at the level of the political agent’s self-identification, or, better put to avoid the sociologistic overtones, at the level of the constitution and re-articulation of subject-positions within a general field of discursive practices, the analytic establishes *no necessary relation to categories derived from the economy whatsoever*; hence, as we shall see, a specifically class-articulated subject-position simply cannot be attributed the *logical* priority that Laclau and Mouffe suggest it is. Where a certain privilege is accorded to a class identity, this is not a function of the analytic as such, but rather of the peculiar conjuncture out of which the analytic is being coaxed, as well as the position taken up by Gramsci’s theoretical engagement *within* that conjuncture—since, after all, the effort at theorization is itself politically invested, and it is only in the terms of *particular* discourses that determinate political disjunctures can be comprehended and forced.²⁸ But—more importantly, for our present

28. It is remarkable that writers such as Laclau and Mouffe, who in an effort to “correct” Marxism have drawn so heavily upon Foucault, would consistently disregard this dimension of theoretical engagement when evaluating the work of Marxist theorists. One could recall Foucault’s own comment that “theory does not express, translate, or

purposes—the thematic of hegemony is not always or exclusively tied to this level of analysis within Gramsci’s writing. Thus, in order to recapture the heterogeneity of textual moments in which such a thematic emerges, we might introduce a distinction between what I will call a strategic or *political* analytic deployment of hegemony, in which hegemony is understood as a politico-discursive *practice*, and a *social analytic* deployment of hegemony, in which hegemony is understood as a social-reproductive *instance*, and hence necessarily bears some relation—and the issue then is of what sort—to the instance of the economy.²⁹

As this distinction pertains to Gramsci’s discussion of “economism” cited above, we could say that Gramsci there suggests the social-reproductive *background* against which the strategic practice would have to take place. A “political initiative” is necessary, he argues, in order to absorb “certain forces” within an “homogenous politico-economic historical bloc,” that is, a politico-discursive *practice* of hegemony has to be undertaken in order to articulate a new hegemonic formation. But, without entering into the details of such a practice, Gramsci attempts only to justify its necessity, to respond to the question of why it must be undertaken. And the answer he suggests is that such an initiative is

serve to apply practice: it is practice. . . , it is an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power, and not their illumination from a safe distance. A ‘theory’ is the regional system of this struggle” (Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. and trans. Donald Bouchard [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977], 209).

29. In this latter social analytic usage, hegemony as an element of a more general dynamic of social reproduction is an exclusive function of the state, corresponding to the activities on the terrain of “civil society” (as opposed here to “government” or “political society”) by which it organizes the consent of subaltern groups: what Gramsci calls “the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes” (*Prison Notebooks*, 258). What is notable here is not so much that Gramsci sometimes identifies the operation of hegemony with the interests of “the ruling classes” as that he often skips over class altogether and, ignoring the requirement that peculiar *relations* of production be reproduced, regards hegemony as if it operated on the behalf of *the productive forces themselves*. Hence, one finds throughout the *Prison Notebooks* remarks such as the following:

. . . Educative and formative role of the State. Its aim is always that of creating new and higher types of civilisation; of adapting the “civilisation” and the morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production; hence of evolving even physically new types of humanity. (242)

This line of reasoning will arrive at its most drastic theoretical consequences in Gramsci’s virtual apologias for Taylorisation in “Americanism and Fordism.”

made necessary by the “lagging behind” of “mass ideological factors” in respect to “mass economic phenomena,” that is, because as an ideological instance of social reproduction, hegemony has *already* operated such as to win over the consent of those “forces” within an existing hegemonic formation, whatever the *actual* state of contradictions at the level of the economy might be. No doubt the stake in this hegemonic struggle—the “certain forces” alluded to—should be understood, in terms of Gramsci’s immediate political concerns, as the poor peasantry, the issue of whose political allegiance first led Gramsci in the years just preceding his incarceration to pose the question of “the hegemony of the proletariat.”³⁰ We should notice, however, that in the cited passage the moment of hegemonic rearticulation is not itself theorized; its necessity, given certain political ends, is established, but its mechanism is left indeterminate. Hence, the question of the class-identification of the hegemonic subjects at the level of the discursive practices that constitute the *process* of their hegemony does not here arise at all.

Laclau and Mouffe have argued that in his earliest writings on the topic, particularly in “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” (1926), Gramsci’s formulations remain tied to a notion of hegemonic practice as the building of class alliances.³¹ Yet, insofar as he attempts to determine the actual conditions of this practice, I think even in this early text we can find some anticipations of the subsequent efforts to locate the contest for hegemony within a more general field of ideological articulations, of struggles over what he will later call “intellectual and moral” as opposed to merely “economic and political” unity.³² Thus, for example, Gramsci emphasizes that:

The proletariat, in order to become capable as a class of governing, must strip itself of every residue of corporatism, every syndicalist prejudice and incrustation. What does this mean? That, in addition

30. The impression that Gramsci is here alluding to the place of the peasantry in an anti-capitalist “system of alliances” can only be reinforced by a reading of the conclusion to this note, in which Gramsci considers whether the unaligned forces are to be assimilated by force of arms (i.e., “coercion”) or by “compromise” (the properly hegemonic moment). “If the union of the two forces is necessary in order to defeat a third,” he writes, “the only concrete possibility is compromise. Force can be employed against enemies, but not against a part of one’s own side which one wishes to assimilate, and whose good will and enthusiasm one needs” (168).

31. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 66.

32. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 181.

to the need to overcome the distinctions which exist between one trade and another, it is necessary. . . to overcome certain prejudices and conquer certain forms of egoism which can and do subsist within the working class as such, even when craft particularism has disappeared. The metal-worker, joiner, building-worker, etc. must not only think as proletarians, and no longer as metal-worker, joiner, building-worker, etc.; they must also take a further step.³³

Though Gramsci goes on to formulate this further step in less drastic terms—"They must think as workers who are members of a class which aims to lead the peasants and intellectuals"—one could, reasoning on analogy with the first "step" taken, conclude that they must no longer (at least exclusively) "think as" proletarians—a conclusion which would no more lead us to deny that on some other level they are nonetheless identifiable *as* proletarians, than would the conclusion that the metal-worker must "think as" a proletarian lead us to deny that *s/he* is nonetheless still a metal-worker. The point is that for Gramsci the very possibility of a political practice of hegemony is *already* predicated upon what Laclau and Mouffe will describe as the subversion of given social identities by the establishment of "chains of equivalence" cutting across subject-positions,³⁴ and what Gramsci himself refers to more simply (and perhaps less precisely) as "posing all the questions around which the struggle rages . . . on a universal plane."³⁵ The sectoral interests of metal-worker, joiner, and building-worker are dissolved in their equivalence as proletarians; the differences separating northern Italian proletariat from southern Italian peasantry are dissolved in their common antagonism to the unitary regime of capitalist accumulation characterized by a bloc of northern industrialists and southern landowners.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci develops more explicitly and at length this necessary connection of hegemonic practice to the dissolution of particularist political identities, and hence their "absorption" into an "historical bloc" (as opposed to what might be understood on

33. Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings, 1921-1926*, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: International, 1978), 448.

34. See Laclau and Mouffe in their section entitled "Equivalence and Difference," *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 127-34.

35. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 182.

a pre-discursive level as their combination in an “alliance”). Thus, significantly, in listing some paired indicators of the political “dual perspective,” he correlates to “the levels of force and consent, authority and hegemony,” those of “the individual moment and of the universal moment.”³⁶ The opening up of a field of hegemonic articulations he understands here no longer as a peculiar exigency of specifically proletarian politics, but rather (in the form of an historical hypothesis) as a generalized political legacy of the bourgeois revolutions. In a note on “The State,” Gramsci writes:

The previous ruling classes were essentially conservative in the sense that they did not tend to construct an organic passage from the other classes into their own, i.e. to enlarge their class sphere “technically” and ideologically: their conception was that of a closed caste. The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level.³⁷

Precisely what Gramsci distinguishes as the innovation brought about in the area of politics by the advent of the bourgeoisie is that, in contrast to, say, a feudal estate, the bourgeoisie *must* in its political activity deny its identity as a limited bourgeois subject of that activity, it must pose its claims “on a universal plane”—it must, in short, practice hegemony. (And a corollary to this observation is that in order to overcome bourgeois rule, the proletariat must precisely *counter* this already operative hegemony by undertaking its own hegemonic practice, that is, by articulating “chains of equivalence” subverting those established in the dominant formation, by posing its claims too on the terrain of what Laclau and Mouffe, far too sanguinely and with what are today particularly regrettable resonances, have termed the “democratic revolution.”) Thus, we find that where Gramsci undertakes to investigate the moment of hegemony, as it involves the identities constituted by the process of hegemonic articulation itself, there is not any assumption of the necessary fixity of class identities, or even—and this is the more pertinent point—of the necessary *fixation* of identities *in terms of* class, since, if there were, political actors would be compelled to

36. *Ibid.*, 170.

37. *Ibid.*, 260.

operate in a class-corporatist manner and there would simply not be any possibility of hegemony in the first place.

Nonetheless, Gramsci makes still a further historical claim as regards the bourgeoisie and its practice of hegemony. Whereas “the bourgeois class poses itself as an organism . . . capable of absorbing the entire society,” whereas it “poses itself” not *as* the bourgeois class at all, but as the very movement of the universal in its self-apprehension, in fact the bourgeoisie cannot realize its pretensions. It strikes a pose, but it is in fact just “a poser” since the capable pose does not reflect its actual capacity, which is only to say, try as it might, the bourgeoisie can never become something *more or other than* the bourgeoisie: it “is ‘saturated’: . . . it not only does not assimilate new elements, it loses part of itself.”³⁸ And while the limitation upon the bourgeoisie’s capacity for hegemonic articulation is just as certain as its need to make the effort, while every gesture it casts towards the universal mockingly returns to it as but a symptom of its particularity, Gramsci anticipates that out of the very space whose insolubility marks the limit of bourgeois hegemony might emerge the political activity of a class actually possessing the capacity to which the bourgeoisie had to, but could only, aspire: “a class,” he writes, “claiming to be capable of assimilating the whole of society, and which was at the same time *really able to express such a process*”; a “social group that poses the end of the State [that is, in its ‘coercive aspect’ since it will have been ‘absorbed by’ civil society] and its own end as the target to be achieved . . . i.e. divisions of the ruled, etc., and to create a technically and morally unitary social organism.”³⁹

Here, then, in the hypothesis of the bourgeoisie’s historical need to practice hegemony, coupled with its structural incapacity to do so successfully enough so as to eliminate its identity *as* bourgeoisie, we seem indeed to run up against the intractability of class categories to any modification by hegemonic articulations. The bourgeoisie may expand its boundaries, but it can never *surpass* them so as to erase the line of division that determines it in opposition to the proletariat as precisely and no more than the bourgeoisie. (What bittersweet irony that it is

38. *Ibid.*, 260. For an analogous argument, see Gramsci’s discussion of the role of the Jacobins in the French Revolution. “They created the bourgeois State,” he writes, “made the bourgeoisie into the leading, hegemonic class of the nation,” but they “always remained on bourgeois ground,” and thus with Thermidor, “the revolution . . . found its widest class limits” (79).

39. *Ibid.*, 260, 259 (my emphasis).

in fact *the bourgeoisie* that cannot work its way out of a “class ghetto.”) Gramsci does not *explain* this incapacity for us; he simply registers it as an historical datum: the bourgeoisie “is ‘saturated’: . . . [it] does not assimilate new elements.” But, rather than dismissing this persistence of class as the regrettable residue of some “essentialist *a priori*ism,” we might take the risk of inquiring as to the conditions *under which* class identities could be understood as resistant to any purely hegemonic initiative (which in no way would imply that it is exclusively or even principally classes that undertake such initiatives). We should recall the form of Gramsci’s hypothesis: it is that the bourgeoisie opens the field of hegemonic politics and must continually operate within this field; but insofar as hegemony involves precisely the putting into question of given social identities, one will be compelled to admit that the subjects of hegemonic practice understood at the level of their discursive constitution will not necessarily have a class character. A class might *have to* practice hegemony, but to hegemonize *as* a class would simply imply either a limited or an unsuccessful attempt. Nonetheless, Gramsci suggests that through every hegemonic articulation—even those which can be understood as contributing to bourgeois domination, whether or not some fully self-aware bourgeois subject also understands them as such—the identities articulated around class division seem always to re-emerge. We can now show Gramsci the courtesy of determining *why* this should be so.

In order to pursue this inquiry, we will have, at long last, to abandon the sphere of hegemonic relations. This follows from everything I have written thus far in attempting to establish the specificity of this sphere and precisely the *non-necessity* that the identities articulated within it have a class character. To reiterate: a hegemonic formation might be “practically articulated” in terms of class (as far as any pure analytic of hegemony is concerned, this is a contingent possibility, *not* a logical necessity), but for a class identity even to be so deployed, the identity of class must itself be derived from *some other sphere*—or, if one prefers, from some other discursive plane, wherein a partial fixation must *already* be supposed to have taken place, if it is even to have constituted elements available for displacement. We are here again traversing the distance separating “class unity” from the “unity of a class,” and in order to arrive at a theoretical comprehension of this latter unity, we shall have now to develop our analysis at the level of the economy.

This is not to deny that a moment of hegemonic articulation is always operative in the maintenance of this economic space as well; but it is to deny that the *instance* of the economy can be strictly *identified with* the ideological instance of hegemony. Economic processes can never be understood exclusively in terms of the discourses through which individuals come to consciousness of themselves as the *agents* of those processes, since there are material identities and structural loci not present to such discourses (and this is especially the case within capitalist relations) which can nonetheless be theoretically determined as among their conditions—all of which is but another way of saying that relations of production are not reducible to relations *between people*. If, in insisting that the “constitutive logic” of the economic space is “itself hegemonic,” Laclau and Mouffe leave one to understand that the economy is nothing more than what its subjects think it to be, then we can only conclude that no, the constitutive logic of the economy is not hegemonic after all.⁴⁰

To formulate, then, the question that Gramsci fails to ask: what is it that condemns the bourgeoisie, which must in its political activity benefit from a, so to speak, “self-effacing” practice of hegemony, to be rediscovered at the end of the hegemonic day as at the beginning as precisely still the bourgeoisie? The answer can only be found in the very concept of bourgeoisie as functional support of a peculiar social structure of production, that is, not in its character as a self-understood bourgeois class—a bourgeoisie “for itself”—but rather in its character as the *class of capitalists*. And by “class of capitalists” we here comprehend not any strictly demarcated group of biological individuals, but rather the structurally located position of economic activity which operates *at the behest of capital*, that is, economic value in the process of its expansion, by a) purchasing the elements of this expansion (constant capital and variable capital) on the market in the material form of means of production and labor-power and combining them in the (value) production process and, b) securing the conditions of this expansion such that each subsequent circuit of money capital will discover anew its elements likewise available for purchase—that is to say, by securing that the conditions of capitalist production are *reproduced* in the very process of this production taken as a whole.⁴¹ Now, if capital is simply

40. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 69, 77.

41. See Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: International, 1967), 566:

unthinkable, except on the condition of the availability of labor-power on the market as an alienable commodity, then the incapacity of the capitalist class to “absorb the entire society” within a hegemonic formation and so close the space around which it is determinable *as class* follows as a necessary consequence of its very identity as an attribute of *capital*: capital “personified.” The availability of labor-power for purchase implies the existence and reproduction of a class of laborers as specifically *wage-laborers*, that is, as separated “from all property in the means by which they can realize their labour,” and hence compelled to alienate the only commodity at their disposal: their ability to labor itself.⁴² The perpetuation of this separation of labor-power from the means of labor’s realization is, as Marx puts it, “the *sine qua non* of capitalist production.”⁴³ Hence, a capitalist class cannot *be* a capitalist class and fail to reproduce the division which separates it from wage-labor. This is not to suggest that all political identities must emerge upon or be reduced to this fundamental class division; but it is to suggest that *within* capitalist relations of production, and in spite of all efforts at hegemonic rearticulation, this division is at least irreducible.⁴⁴

Of course, insofar as we here comprehend class as an aspect of the concept of capital—that is to say, insofar as we comprehend the divide between capital and wage-labor as a polarity necessarily embedded in the peculiar social structure of production which is the condition of capitalist accumulation—we shall certainly have to accept the encouragement of Laclau and Mouffe and renounce “the category of the subject as a unitary, transparent, and sutured entity.”⁴⁵ As already indicated, there is nothing in our conception which would guarantee that the division in the concept of capital will anywhere be reflected as an integral division between wholly isolate groups of “concrete individuals,” neither in their discursive constitution as self-knowing “social agents,” nor *even* in their distribution among the positions of economic

“It is only because his money constantly functions as capital that the economic guise of a capitalist attaches to a man.”

42. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 714.

43. *Ibid.*, 571.

44. See *ibid.*, 578: “Capitalist production, therefore, under its aspect of a continuous connected process, of a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation: on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage labourer.”

45. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 166.

activity inscribed within the very structure of capitalist relations of production. If we were ever concerned with such individuals, or if theory is obliged always to pronounce its opinion upon the status of the subject, then we can only admit that, at least in the capitalist “center,” the division at the heart of capital is as often a division *within* people as a division among them, that in the “advanced industrial societies of the west,” a broad segment of the population at once enjoy and suffer the ambivalent status of “hybrids,” serving capital *both* as exploitable resource *and* as agent of exploitation. But, then again, maybe the constitutive purity of some anthropological subject has never here been at issue, since the *concept of class* as a *relation* embedded in a peculiar social structure of production can simply *not be thought* within the confines of any subjective identity, since the concept of class is precisely what requires us to reject not only “the category of the unified subject” but the category of the subject *altogether* as the unifying foundation of all analysis. Hence, one notes the hollowness of the claims of this “radical democracy” which, by situating political struggle squarely in the field of hegemonic articulations, announces itself as an “alternative” to “class politics,” for, although it is predicated upon the “renunciation” of the category of a *unitary* subject, it never for a moment departs from the conceptual plane of *subjectivity*, and thus remains strangely beholden to what it feels the need vigorously to “renounce.” If the sphere of hegemonic relations within which subjective identities are formed and subverted is the only acknowledged focus of analysis, then it is hardly surprising that “class politics” will appear as the phenomenon of some mysterious “essence”; as I have argued throughout, on this level, the conceptual identity which *is class* is nowhere to be found.

By casting our own analysis on the level of the economy, and so providing ourselves with the theoretical means to determine the specificity of class division, we have not uncovered some “rational substratum” on the basis of which the subjects of hegemonic practices in the political superstructures are assigned their identities, nor have we managed to locate the “unique space in which the political is constituted.”⁴⁶ On the contrary, by analyzing class division out of the very *concept* of capital, what we find is that the space of the economy is itself shot through

46. *Ibid.*, 76, 152.

with political antagonism, that far from being the autonomous instance uniquely determining processes at other “superstructural” levels, the economic *is* determinant only insofar as the other instances can be understood as participating in *its* constitution, and this is precisely the reason that we are here dealing with overdetermined *instances* rather than isolable domains of activity. Laclau and Mouffe recognize this incidence of political struggle within the space of the economic as well, but they do so as if it were just “there to be recognized,” existing in the empirical-concrete of politico-discursive practices, but regrettably obscured by the Marxian “fiction” which “conceived of labour-power as a commodity” in order to secure the “strictly endogenous” working out of economic laws of motion.⁴⁷ Their prejudgment that “Marxism” and “Marxists” have always been desperately scheming to guarantee an immanent dynamic to the development of the productive forces, thus fixing the ground of necessity upon which the contingency of politics could be allowed to emerge, compels them simply to *reinvent* Marxian economic theory wholesale, according to the phantoms haunting their own “post-Marxist” imaginations. Had they interrogated the *concept* of capital as it is developed by Marx, they would have discovered, as we have, that this political instance is indeed among its *conditions*. Marx didn’t have to contrive the subsumption of labor-power under the commodity form as a theoretical convenience; to secure the availability of labor-power as a commodity is an imperative that *capital* must meet if it is even to perpetuate the relation that it presupposes. In this sense, the capital/wage-labor division is precisely the *political*

47. *Ibid.*, 78, 76. The notion that the treatment of labor-power as a commodity could ever have served such a theoretical function is only possible on the slightly outrageous assumption that “labor-power” and “the working class” are *the same thing* (see what Laclau and Mouffe have to say about Harry Braverman on p. 79). Moreover, the criterion that Laclau and Mouffe themselves use allegedly to distinguish labor-power from a commodity—that its use-value is not “automatically effective from the moment of purchase”—assumes an entirely colloquial conception of commodities, operative not anywhere in Marxist theory, but rather among individual consumers of Department II goods. Labor-power is certainly not unique from commodities, nor even the unique commodity, in that the realization of its use-value is conditioned by other factors besides purchase; this holds equally well for capital goods in general. Finally, that Mario Tronti’s observation that working class struggles can modify the composition of capital is supposed to be news to “Marxists,” as Laclau and Mouffe suggest, will seem nothing short of astonishing to any “Marxist” who has bothered to read volume one of *Capital*, particularly the section entitled “The Struggle for the Normal Working Day.”

ground upon which the economic processes of capitalist accumulation could emerge.⁴⁸

But the divide that separates wage-labor from capital is not only the trace of a politics which must be supposed already to have operated; it also delineates the configuration of a political space that the very process of capitalist production taken as a whole must continually re-open. "In the history of capitalist production," Marx writes, "the determination of what is a working day presents itself as the result of a struggle, a struggle between collective capital, i.e., the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e., the working class."⁴⁹ The degree of exploitation is, of course, not given by any endogenous "laws," but that a struggle over the degree of exploitation occurs is only thinkable on the condition that we find the economic categories to determine the space of indeterminacy within which this struggle takes place—on the condition, that is, that we comprehend the antagonistic political identities embedded in the very structure of economic exploitation. Proletarian class politics does not then emerge triumphantly *on the basis of* the economy; proletarian class politics is *the politics of the base*. In its greatest generality as a politics to be pursued, proletarian class politics would be neither the defense of sectoral interests (trade-unionism) nor the safeguarding of some proletarian identity (since it is precisely *the bourgeoisie* that can be depended upon to secure such an identity); rather it would be the effort to dismantle the very antithesis that determines the proletariat as but a moment in the life of capital. Other politics—and surely there are others—may or may not participate in the struggle to overcome capitalist relations of production. Proletarian class politics is nothing but this struggle.

48. For the development of an argument analogous to my own here, see Etienne Balibar's "Marx, the Joker in the Pack (or the Included Middle)," *Economy and Society* 14, no. 1 (February 1985): 1-27. See also the resume that Marx himself provides of his analyses in *Capital*, vol. I: "We saw . . . that in order to convert money into capital something more is required than the production and circulation of commodities. We saw that on the one side the possessor of value or money, on the other, the possessor of the value-creating substance; on the one side, the possessor of the means of production and subsistence, on the other, the possessor of nothing but labour-power must confront one another as buyer and seller. The separation of labour from its product, of subjective labour-power from the objective conditions of labour, was therefore the real foundation in fact, and the starting point of capitalist production" (70).

49. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 235.