

Discourses of revolutionary subject in contemporary Marxism.

Critical reflections through Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's oeuvre

Abstract

While within the framework of a New Socialist Strategy, the issue of communism has been the subject of a comprehensive debate among the most pioneering thinkers of contemporary Marxism, the equally critical issue of revolution and anti-capitalist struggles has not yet entered the heart of Marxist-influenced analysis of the late capitalism. This sounds like a paradox because it can't be properly understood how the transition to a communist society will take place, without prior political hegemonic articulatory discursive strategy of rupture with capitalism. From this angle, we will attempt in the present article to constitute the conditions of a (post) Marxist dialogue on revolution, revolutionary subject and anti-capitalism in the era of neo-liberal globalization through Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's oeuvre. For this purpose, we will take into account the relevant projects of important contemporary Marxist theorists as the well-known neo-Marxist geographer and anthropologist David Harvey; the Marxist-oriented sociologist and philosopher John Holloway; and last but not least the famous post-modern political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

KEYWORDS: *Marxism, Revolution, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, David Harvey, John Holloway, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri*

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Subject of politics, democratic revolution and radical plural democracy

The first traces of an articulatory and prematurely discursive theory of democratic revolution as a theory of 'the subject of politics' are detected in the concluding pages of *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (Laclau, 2011). In this sense, the *theory of populism* can be seen as the theoretical matrix of radical plural democracy; in other words, as the special way in which Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe understand the meaning of (democratic) revolution nowadays. "Therefore," Laclau writes, "the only social sector which can aspire to the full development of 'the people/power block contradiction', that is to say, to the highest and most radical form of populism, is that whose class interests lead it to the suppression of the State as an antagonistic force. *In socialism, therefore, coincide the highest form of 'populism' and the resolution of the ultimate most radical of class conflicts.* The dialectic between 'the people' and classes finds here the final moment of its unity: there is no socialism without populism, and the highest forms of populism can only be socialist". And he concludes: "The advance towards socialism can only consist, in that sense, in a long series of struggles through which socialism asserts its popular identity and 'the people' its socialist objectives. Socialist hegemony does not mean the pure and simple destruction of the

previous society, but the absorption of its elements into a new articulation. It is only when socialism has developed this articulating capacity that it comes to be hegemonic” (Laclau, 2011: p. 196-197).

By following closely the discourse theory and by paraphrasing Laclau, we could argue that the revolution as a general essentialist Platonic Idea that exists before the *popular-democratic interpellations* of a hegemonic socialist articulatory practice concerning social transformation is impossible. The impossibility of society means nothing less than the *impossibility of revolution*. Revolution in that sense is an *empty signifier* which acquires its specific meaning each time through the hegemonic articulations of populism (people) with socialism (social classes). Therefore “this dual reference to the people and to classes”, Laclau writes, “constitutes what we could call the *double articulation of political discourse*” (Laclau, 2011: p. 167). However to the extent where the articulations of a hegemonic populist socialist discourse taking place within the discursive field of undecidability and contingency both the content and the outcome of revolution can not be taken for granted. Behind this concept of revolution in Laclau and Mouffe’s oeuvre there is if anything an *anti-essentialist ontology of politics* (Janoski et al., 2005: p. 153). “But if we look” they point out, “for the ultimate core of this essentialist fixity”, meaning mainly *classism, statism, economism and productivism* (Torfing, 2003: p. 1-2), “we shall find it in the fundamental nodal point which galvanized the political imagination of the Left: the classic concept of ‘revolution’, cast in the Jacobin mold... The classic concept of revolution” they conclude, “implied the *foundational* character of the revolutionary act, the institution of a point of concentration of power form which society could be ‘rationally’ reorganized. This is the perspective which is incompatible with the plurality and the opening which a radical democracy requires” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: p. 177-178).

The anti-essentialist notion of revolution in Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist discourse theory leads the analysis in a very subtle conceptual distinction which has not been given the appropriate importance. A distinction which not only clarifies the specific content of democratic revolution but above all shows us that the discourse theory is not an idealistic and relativistic theory of meaning (Howarth, 2000: p. 111 and after) but a *realistic theory of power* and social antagonisms; or as excellent it has highlighted by Mouffe in terms of Carl Schmitt a *theory of friend/enemy* (Mouffe, 1999: p. 1-6 & 38-53). Specifically, the democratic revolution does not end with the anti-capitalist struggle but it leads to as the largest possible ‘extinction of all forms of subordination’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: p. 177-178). *Subordination*. This is the key word in the theory of democratic revolution of Laclau and Mouffe. “The classic conception” they point out, “of socialism supposed that the disappearance of private ownership of the means of production would set up a chain of effects which, over a whole historical epoch, would lead to the extinction of all forms of subordination. Today we know that this is not so. *There are not*, for example, necessary links between anti-sexism and anti-capitalism, and a unity between the two can only be the result of a hegemonic articulation. It follows that it is only possible to construct this articulation on the basis of separate struggles, which only exercise their equivalential and overdetermining effects in *certain* spheres of the social.” And they conclude as follows: “This requires the autonomization of the spheres of struggle and the multiplication of political spaces, which is incompatible with the concentration of power and knowledge that classic Jacobinism and its different socialist variants imply” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: p. 178).

In this sense, the democratic revolution is not a broad *anti-capitalist alliance*. According to the Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory the democratic revolution is an *infinite transformation* of identities of the subjects of politics who not as fixed and transcendental subjects but as *subject positions* meaning to anew continuously within the same process of dislocation and (re)articulation of hegemonic practices. In the twenty-first century and in the beginning of a *new political conjuncture* for the global capitalism, Mouffe, specifying the characteristics of radical plural democracy as a *new political philosophy* for the Left nowadays, writes as follows: “If the task of radical democracy is indeed to deepen the democratic revolution and to link diverse democratic struggles, such a task requires the creation of new subject

positions that would allow the common articulation, for example, of antiracism, antisexism and anticapitalism.” And she concludes: “For it is not a matter of establishing a mere alliance between given interests but of actually modifying the very identity of those forces. In order that the defence of workers’ interests is not pursued at the cost of the rights of women, immigrants, or consumers, it is necessary to establish an equivalence between these different struggles. It is only under these circumstances that struggles against power become truly democratic” (Mouffe, 2005a: p. 18-19).

Consequently, we could argue somewhat schematically that the democratic revolution is a *discursive equilibrium* between the *logic of equivalence* (articulation) and the *logic of difference* (dislocation). Mouffe calls this difficult balance *conflictual consensus*. This means that pluralism has some clear limits. It is very important to emphasize particularly this pre-condition of democratic revolution, precisely because it is the point where Laclau and Mouffe distinguish their political positions by the postmodern thinkers who lead diversity in the status of social chaos. Hence democratic pluralism does not mean ‘anything goes’. With no doubt *pluralism is limited by democracy*. “To avoid any confusion,” Mouffe writes, “I should specify that, contrary to some postmodern thinkers who envisage a pluralism without any frontiers, I do not believe that a democratic pluralist politics should consider as legitimate all the demands formulated in a given society. The pluralism that I advocate requires discriminating between demands which are to be accepted as part of the agonistic debate and those which are to be excluded. A democratic society cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries. The agonistic approach does not pretend to encompass all differences and to overcome all forms of exclusions...A line should therefore be drawn between those who reject these values outright...the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all...and those who, while accepting them, fight for conflicting interpretations” (Mouffe, 2005b: p. 120-121).

Laclau from 1990 onwards, which begins the third phase of his work, the phase in which he further develops his “post-Marxist approach through a deeper engagement with Derrida’s deconstructionist philosophy and Lacan’s interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis” (Scott, 2007: p. 156), formulates a coherent theory of the subject of politics which in fact is nothing more than a theory of democratic revolution; actually a theory of radical plural democracy in the late capitalism. The conceptual incision in this new phase of discourse analysis of the democratic revolution is due to the replacement of the dipole logic of equivalence/logic of difference from the axis *universalism/particularism*. The choice of this new terminology reflects substantially the rejection of the essentialist Enlightenment (Mouffe, 2005b: p. 123-125). Universality is no longer a metaphysical Essence. It is now an empty signifier; a field of unification of chains of equivalential democratic demands; the discursive limit of pluralism; the Barthean ‘zero point’ of the politics; the moment of the ‘madness of the decision’; the moment of the subject of politics; in final analysis the moment of democracy. Laclau calls it *regulated madness* and it is “the highest form of rationality that society can reach” (Mouffe, 1996: p. 54-58). “To reformulate the values of the Enlightenment” he summarizes, “in the direction of a radical historicism and to renounce its rationalistic epistemological and ontological foundations, then, is to expand the democratic potentialities of that tradition, while abandoning the totalitarian tendencies...of the ground of apocalyptic universalism” (Laclau, 1990: p. 83).

Democracy is the difficult equilibrium between universality and particularity. For Laclau “the condition of the deepening of the democratic process is a dispersal of power through a proliferation of differences. Instead of the universal task of a privileged historical actor, there is an increasing plurality of social agents who construct their demands from particular viewpoints, none of whom can claim to represent humanity as such. Whatever more universal values exist in a certain community will not be the expression of any pre-existing essence, but rather the result of a pragmatic and unstable construction which starts from a multiplicity of points on the social fabric. The eclipse of the radical ground of history, in which, as we have seen, Marxism, along with the whole of modernity, believed –

and the increasing fragmentation of present-day societies, are thus the preconditions for an advance in a democratic direction” (Laclau, 1991: p. 57).

But does this insurmountable divide between universalism and particularism renders democracy impossible? Is democracy a Utopian dream? Did the polarization between ‘totalitarian universalism and anarchic particularism’ lead democracy to an impasse? “My answer” Laclau points out, “is that the political games which one can play are not exhausted by referring to the extreme situations that these two poles represent. The gap between the limitation and particularism of all social agents and the need for a force which acts in the name of the whole community can certainly not be bridged, but this is precisely that makes democracy possible. For if the gap were bridged, one particular segment of society would have become, once and forever, the pure incarnation of the community’s universality.” And he concludes: “But if the gap cannot be bridged, any incarnation is going to be purely temporary, and this opens up the possibility of an alternation of different groups in power...This is the way in which democracy – the greatest political creation of the last two centuries – tries to mediate between universalism and particularism” (Laclau, 1991: p. 59).

The democratic revolution and democracy as the *presence of an absence* lead to a crisis of universalism and to a new form of universality which could be called *democratic universality*. This new kind of universalism is not based on a universal (working) class as reductionist Marxism argues. This based more on *universal values* which “are not the values of a ‘universal’ group, as was the case with the universalism of the past, but, rather, of a universality that is the very result of particularism. It is, in this sense, far more democratic” (Laclau, 1994: p. 5). This is precisely the paradox of democracy (Mouffe, 1999). “The universal is incommensurable with the particular, but cannot, however, exist without the latter. How is the relation possible? My answer is” Laclau points out, “that this paradox cannot be solved, but that its non-solution is the very precondition of democracy...if democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation. Society generates a whole vocabulary of empty signifiers whose temporary signifieds are the result of a political competition. It is this final failure of society to constitute itself as a society... which makes the distance between the universal and the particular unbridgeable and, as a result, burdens concrete social agents with the impossible task of making democratic interaction achievable” (Laclau, 1996: p. 35).

This revolutionary democratic interaction is that which ultimately allows Laclau look for the seeds of a *hegemonic universality* in the political discursive field of the Left today. The radical Left has to gather these seeds of particularism and articulate a *hegemonic strategy* against neo-liberal globalization. “Such a process” Mouffe points out, “cannot merely consist in separating the different elements whose discursive articulation is at the origin of those practises and institutions. The second moment, the moment of re-articulation is crucial. Otherwise we will be faced with a chaotic situation of pure dissemination, leaving the door open for attempts of re-articulation by non-progressive forces...It is therefore important” she concludes, “that the moment of de-identification, be accompanied with a moment of re-identification ant that the critique and disarticulation of the existing hegemony will go hand in hand with a process of rearticulation” (Mouffe, 2008: p. 4). In Derridean terms, the democratic revolution in the work of Laclau and Mouffe is *à venir*. The democracy is to come. This needs to become a kind of *democratic universality*. A conflictual consensus which would not devitalize the agonistic pluralism. A madness of the decision which would result in a minimum social rationality. “There is no future for the Left” Laclau concludes, “if it is unable to create an expansive universal discourse, constructed out of, not against, the proliferation of particularisms of the last few decades. A dimension of universality is already operating in the discourses which organize particular demands and an issue-orientated politics, but is an implicit and undeveloped universality, incapable of proposing itself as a set of symbols able to stir the

imagination of vast sectors of the population. The task ahead is to expand those seeds of universality, so that we have a full social imaginary, capable of competing with the neoliberal consensus which have been the hegemonic horizon of world politics for the last thirty years” (Butler et al., 2000: p. 306).

Co-revolutionary theory, social self-determination and counter-empire multitude

This *hegemonic democratic universality* implies for the Left a discursive articulation of the theoretical projects on the revolution, the revolutionary subjects and mainly the particular struggles in the late capitalism. In this section of the present article will map out the basic, in our opinion, theories of revolution and anti-capitalist movement in contemporary Marxism and we will attempt to summarize the critical similarities and differences, especially compared with Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of democratic revolution. More specifically, we will refer to the relevant theories of David Harvey, John Holloway and Antonio Negri with Michael Hardt.

David Harvey is a Marxist theorist of *anti-capitalist revolution* who, as Alex Callinicos writes, “offering an ambitious reconstruction of Marx’s entire theory of capitalist development...both applying and developing this conceptual structure by relating the experience of increased ‘time-space compression’ that...is constitutive of postmodern culture to the emergence of new forms of flexible capital accumulation. But one remarkable aspect of this theoretical project” Callinicos summarizes, “has been the sustained engagement that is has involved with the categorical framework of *Capital* itself” (Castree and Gregory, 2006: p. 47). Harvey, as Laclau and Mouffe, is looking through a close reading of *Das Kapital* a new militant strategy of understanding and overthrow of neoliberal capitalism. “In what ways” he asks, “is this text applicable to our own times?...in my view” he answers, “the neoliberal counterrevolution that has dominated global capitalism over the past thirty years has done to reconstitute globally those conditions that Marx so brilliantly deconstructed in the 1850s and 1860s in Britain. So in these readings” he concludes, “I insert some of my own commentary on the both the relevance of *Capital* to today’s world and the reading of the text that seems best to fit the tenor of the times” (Harvey, 2010: p. 14).

Therefore although Harvey notes since the early 1990s both the crisis of historical materialism (Harvey, 1990: p. 353 and after) and the necessity to reconstruct the Marxian political economy towards a *critical geography of capitalist accumulation* (Harvey, 2001: p. 237 and after) he remains faithful to the spirit of *Manifesto*. “How to build a political movement” he points out, “at a variety of spatial scales as an answer to the geographical and geopolitical strategies of capital is a problem that in outline at least the *Manifesto* clearly articulates. How to do it for our times is an imperative issue for us to resolve for our time and place. One thing, however, is clear: we cannot set about that task without recognizing the geographical complexities that confront us. The clarifications that a study of the *Manifesto*’s geography offer provide a marvellous opportunity to wrestle with that task in such a way as to reignite the flame of socialism from Jakarta to Los Angeles, from Shanghai to New York City, from Porto Allegre to Liverpool, from Cairo to Warsaw, from Beijing to Turin. There is no magic answer. But there is at least a strategic way of thinking available to us that can illuminate the way. And that is what the *Manifesto* can still provide” (Harvey, 2001: p. 392-393). Writing an introduction for one hundred and sixty years “to the day after Marx put the final touches to the *Manifesto*” he points out as follows: “This is what makes a contemporary reading of the *Manifesto* so astonishing, because the world the *Manifesto* describes has in no way disappeared” (Marx, 2008: p. 3-4).

In his book *The Enigma of Capital*, Harvey tries to reconstruct this strategic way of thinking as a *co-revolutionary theory* (Harvey, 2011: p. 228). The origins of co-revolutionary theory detect in a number of important books he published during the decade of 2000 in which he seeks out the *alternative strategies of escape* from the neo-liberal imperialism (Harvey, 2003: p. 169-180, Harvey, 2005: p.198-206).

Approaching in an extent the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, Harvey writes: “There is no proletarian field of utopian Marxian fantasy to which we can retire. To point to the necessity and inevitability of class struggle is not to say that the way class is constituted is determined or even determinable in advance. Popular as well as elite class movements make themselves, though never under conditions of their own choosing. And those conditions are full of the complexities that arise out of race, gender, and ethnic distinctions that are closely interwoven with class identities...The meanings in each instance have to be reinvented to deal with contemporary conditions and potentialities...The world is in a position to reject that imperialist gesture and refract back into the heartland of neoliberal and neoconservative capitalism a completely different set of values: those of an open democracy dedicated to the achievement of social equality coupled with economic, political, and cultural justice” (Harvey, 2005: p. 202-206).

This *global anti-capitalist revolutionary movement* incarnates in his last book the *Rebel Cities* into the conception of an *urban revolution*. “To what degree should” he asks, “anti-capitalist struggles explicitly focus and organize on the broad terrain of the city and the urban?” (Harvey, 2012: p. 115) The answer he gives relates in a wide terrain of anti-capitalist struggles beyond the narrow concept of working class hero and the meaning of work ‘within the walls’ of the factory and focuses on the geographical fabric of the city in a series of formal and informal actions of social antagonism and protest. “Work-based struggles” he writes, “from strikes to factory takeovers, are far more likely to succeed when there is strong and vibrant support from popular forces assembled at the surrounding neighbourhood or community level...the concept of work has to shift from a narrow definition attaching to industrial forms of labor to the far broader terrain of the work entailed in the production and reproduction of an increasingly urbanized daily life...the revitalized conception of the proletariat embraces and includes the now massive informal sectors characterized by temporary, insecure and unorganized labour” (Harvey, 2012: p. 138-153).

John Holloway starting from the school of Open Marxism (Bonefeld et al, 1992) formulates a theory of revolution which is based on a certain critique of the so-called Scientific Marxism. According to Holloway, the Scientific Marxism “has its roots not just in the authoritarian tradition of Leninism but in the positive concept of science which Engels established.” This had two major consequences for the Marxism itself and the world revolutionary movement. Firstly, it transformed Marxist concepts and revolution in a positive science following the epistemological model of the bourgeois science. “The concept of revolutionary theory,” Holloway points out in his key-book *Change the world without taking power*, «is much too timid. Revolutionary science is understood as prolongation of bourgeois science rather than a radical break with it.” Secondly, it subordinated the masses in the party. “The great attraction of Leninism” he concludes, “is of course that he cut through what we have called the tragic dilemma of revolution. He solved the problem of how those who lacked class consciousness could make a revolution: through the leadership of the Party. The only problem is that it was not the revolution that we (or they) wanted. The second part of the sentence “we shall take power and liberate the proletariat” was not, and could not be, realized” (Holloway, 2002, Chapter 7: p. 8-9).

Although Laclau and Mouffe criticize the Leninism and the fact that it failed to radically transform Marxism, creating through the vanguard party “fundamental obstacles in the way of Marxism’s grasping the true nature of political and ideological struggle” their final position differs from the Holloway’s position. For Laclau and Mouffe Leninism “limited to a theory of revolution, not attaining the status of a theory of society” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: p. 19). On the contrary to Holloway “the integration of Marxism into social science, far from giving it a secure home, actually undermines the basis of the categories which Marxists use...The understanding of Marxism as a theory of society gives rise to particular type of social theory which can be described as functionalist...By a strange twist” Holloway

continues, “Marxism, from being a theory of the destruction of capitalist society, becomes a theory of its reproduction” (Holloway, 2002, Chapter 7: p. 11).

The theory of revolution in the work of Holloway is a theory of *social self-determination*. Although the approach of revolutionary subject in Holloway has many elements that are related partially to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction, as for example the divided subject (“we are self-divided, self-alienated, schizoid”) and the “we-are-and-are-not working class” (Holloway, 2002, Chapter 8: p. 3 and 4), his position on the revolution is based on the rejection of the state and democracy. In that sense, the revolution in Holloway is a matter beyond “to the single aim of taking the power” (Holloway, 2002, Chapter 11: p. 7). “This multiplicity” he argues, “this cacophony of struggles and experiences should be respected, not channeled into a party, not focused on the winning of state power. The problem is not to take power, but...to create a different world” (Holloway, 2004: p. 48). By his own terms, revolutionary politics is “an anti-politics rather than a politics simply because it moves against and beyond the fragmentation of doing that the term ‘politics’ implies, with all its connotation of orientation towards the state and distinction between public and private” (Holloway, 2002, Chapter 11: p. 6).

For Holloway cannot be the challenge of radical democracy within the capitalist society, where the *doing* organized as alienated labor. “Democracy” he writes, “our democracy, is the struggle to create a self-determining society, a society, in other words, in which capital no longer exists. Democracy, our democracy, means revolution, not (or not just) revolution as a great event, but revolution as daily self-determination, daily rejection of capitalism, daily refusal to create capitalist domination” (Holloway, 2011: p. 5). From this point of view, he continues, “we have to start from the everyday nature of anti-capitalist struggle, to see that resistance to capitalism is an integral part of living in capitalist society. If we can’t do that, then the struggle against capitalism becomes inevitably elitist, and self-defeating” (Holloway, 2011a: p. 1).

Michael Rustin writes that Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* is a *postmodern theory of revolution* (Balakrishnan, 2003: p. 1). This theory presupposes a strategy of resistance to neoliberal globalization beyond the narrow limits of contemporary Left and the same time a theory of subjectivity where the inner and outer are becoming blurred. The name of the new enemy is Empire and the new subject of the revolution is the *global multitude*. Hardt and Negri’s theory of revolution is a theory of *counter-empire multitude* (Hardt and Negri, 2001: p. 45, 46 and 206). But what is the multitude? The answer given by Hardt and Negri is simple and clear: “the set of all exploited and subjugated, a multitude that is directly opposed to Empire, with no meditation between them...This is a *new proletariat* and not a *new industrial working class*. The distinction is fundamental. As we explained earlier” they continue, “‘proletariat’ is the general concept that defines all those whose labor is exploited by capital, the entire cooperating multitude...The industrial working class represented only a *partial* moment in the history of the proletariat and its revolutions” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: p. 393 and 402).

Hardt and Negri call this new proletariat the *militant*. “In the postmodern era” they summarize, “as the figure of the people dissolves, the militant is the one who best expresses the life of the multitude: the agent of biopolitical production and resistance against Empire. When we speak of the militant, we are not thinking of anything like the sad, ascetic agent of the Third International whose soul was deeply penetrated by Soviet state reason...We are referring, on the contrary, to something more like the communist and liberatory combatants of the twentieth-century revolutions, the intellectuals who were persecuted and exiled in the course of anti-fascist struggles, the republicans of the Spanish civil war and the European resistance movements, and the freedom fighters of all the anticolonial and anti-imperialist wars...Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis’s situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being. This is a revolution that no power will control – because biopower and

communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist" (Hardt and Negri, 2001: p. 411, 412 and 413).

Some conclusions

The contemporary Marxist debate on *revolution* is centered around the question of the *subject of politics*. According to Harvey the most important question is no longer the Leninist "What is to be done?" but the urgent question "Who is going to do it?" (Harvey, 2011: p. 215) In most contemporary Marxist theories of *social transformation* the critical challenge is the nature of the *revolutionary subject*. What is the dominant actor of social change in late capitalism? Massimo de Angelis speaks about the "explosion of the middle class" (De Angelis, 2010); Göran Therborn refers to "a coming middle-class century" (Therborn, 2012: p. 15); while interesting is the case of *precariat*, a new dangerous class-in-the-making "flanked by an army of unemployed and a detached group of socially ill misfits living off the dregs of society" (Standing, 2011: p. 7-8).

As is evident although most Marxists political theorists reject the primacy of the working class in the struggles against capitalism and neoliberal globalization, the differences in their approaches are largely ontological, epistemological and therefore constitutive. Regardless of whether these thinkers are more or less neo-Marxist, post-Marxist or post-modern; or if they are trying to emancipate themselves from Marx or return in the "real Marx", the fact is that presuppose a given starting point each time, focusing ultimately in the anti-capitalist social and political struggles. However the issue is not simple. To the extent that capitalism is understood in different terms the *revolution* and the *anti-capitalist strategy* are based on a central controversy which clearly separates Laclau and Mouffe's approach compared with the others. Laclau calls this theoretical category *universal desertion* and argues that it reinstates debate on revolution and anti-capitalism in the traditional level of reductionism and essentialism (Laclau, 2005: p. 223 and after).

According to Laclau this *radical immanence* leads to a transcendental emancipatory subject of politics that characterizes it a *blind alley* (Laclau, 2005: p. 238). In contrast of this transcendent, essentialist and fundamentalist classical Marxist ontology of the revolutionary subject, Laclau in his very important book on *Populist Reason* attempts to bring to the fore the subject of 'people' "not as a *datum* of the social structure", but "as a *political category*" (Laclau, 2005: p. 224). "The return of the 'people' as a political category" he points out, "can be seen as a contribution" to the expansion of our horizons, "because it helps to present other categories – such as class – for what they are: contingent and particular forms of articulating demands, not an ultimate core from which the nature of the demands themselves could be explained." And he concludes: "This widening of horizons is a precondition for thinking the forms of our political engagement in the era of what I called globalized capitalism...It is necessary to reconceptualize the autonomy of social demands, the logic of their articulation, and the nature of the collective identities resulting from them" (Laclau, 2005: p. 250).

The second critical point that differentiates Laclau's point of view compared to the other contemporary Marxist approaches on the subject of politics consists to the issue of *democracy* and *relations of representation*. For more theorists of radical Left today, democracy is merely a reflection of capitalism. This position is just the opposite of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory of democratic revolution (Panizza, 2005: p. 49). Democracy as *demos* is not the mirror of a pre-existing society. Democracy is precisely the ontological terrain of politics; the field where the social takes place as such ab initio.

"This conclusion" Laclau writes, "leads us to a last consideration. As far as we have politics (and also, if our argument is correct, its derivative which is populism) we are going to have social division. A corollary of this social division is that a section within the community will present itself as the

expression and representation of the community as a whole. This chasm is ineradicable as far as we have a *political* society. This means that the ‘people’ can only be constituted in the terrain of the relations of representation. We have already explained the representative matrix out of which the ‘people’ emerges: a certain particularity which assumes a function of universal representation; the distortion of the identity of this particularity through the constitution of equivalential chains; the popular camp resulting from these substitutions presenting itself as representing society as a whole. These considerations have some important consequences. The first is that the ‘people’, as operating in populist discourses, is never a primary datum but a construct – populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter. The second is that, as a result, relations of representation are not a secondary level reflecting a primary social reality constituted elsewhere; they are, on the contrary, the primary terrain within which the social is constituted” (Panizza, 2005: p. 48-49).

To sum up: for Laclau and Mouffe there is not something like a revolution per se, “but anti-capitalist effects that can derive, at a certain ruptural point, from the articulation of a plurality of struggles.” This *ontological negativity*, that has nothing to do with *ontic negation* of screaming in Holloway, means that this does not guarantee the progressive character of the formation of popular identities as an overdetermination of democratic demands (Laclau, 2005: p. 238-239). On the one revolution is never by definition and a priori anti-capitalist and on the other hand this *post-political* or *anti-political* vision adopted by contemporary Marxist approaches opens the door as has shown Laclau since the late 1970s to a *populism of the dominant classes*, as was historically Nazism (Laclau, 2001: p. 174); or as pointed out by Mouffe to a *right-wing populism* which undermines today the great values of democratic revolution: *freedom* and *equality* (Mouffe, 2005b: p. 66).

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