

# The closing of the age of Post-Marxism<sup>1</sup>

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The material conditions are getting better for a new leap forward of the socialist movement. In many countries, the working class now constitutes the majority of the population. With capitalism moving from one crisis to another, the discontent of this class is growing. However, the dominance of the political-ideological patterns peculiar to the neoliberal period is continuing. For example, forms of identity politics, in which everyone fights for their demands within their own autonomous field, have long been the “new normal.” Political practice has become synonymous with spontaneous protest and resistance acts.<sup>2</sup> Plurality is considered a virtue in itself, yet, magical moments of joint action between these plural identities (like the Gezi protests in Turkey) quickly wane. Without a concrete political goal, an explicit program, an organization to embrace this, and staff to implement it, what remains is just good memories.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised translation of my paper published in Turkish: “Post-Marksizm Çağı Kapanırken”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, no 50, Spring-Summer 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams use the term “folk politics” to characterize the understanding prevalent on the left in recent decades. According to the authors, this understanding, which has now become our “political common sense”, is a politics of defense focused on “building bunkers to resist the encroachments of global neoliberalism”. “The dominant tactics – protesting, marching, occupying, and various other forms of direct action – have become part of a well-established narrative, with the people and the police each playing their assigned roles”. Such protests have moved away from the goal of changing social structures, and politics has been reduced to an “ethical and individual struggle”. These are very striking and correct observations. But these two writers, who underestimate Leninist strategy, do not really offer an alternative to folk politics. (They also show their lack of interest in the issue by claiming that the vanguard party consists of “elite intellectuals” and citing Lars Lih as a reference – who, in fact, proves the opposite.) See, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, London, New York: Verso, 2015, p. 3, 6, 15, 236 n. 58.

## Revolutionary Marxism 2022

The “What is to be done?” question remains on the agenda as always with all its weight. No doubt, everyone has ready-made answers to this. Yet judging by the results so far, such rote answers are obviously insufficient.

The last forty years have shown that capitalism has no significant economic, political, or social promises to offer to humanity. In the past, when the labor movement and socialism were strong, large masses of people had managed to make some gains with great struggles. However, especially in the post-Soviet decades, these gains were substantially liquidated. We faced crucial setbacks in working conditions, employment opportunities, wages, retirement rights, housing, education, health services, and union rights. The devastating consequences of the unlimited expansion of the logic of capital became evident in almost every field. For example, we have seen that politics has degenerated completely, even democratic mechanisms consisting of voting every few years have weakened, and authoritarian-fascist governments have become widespread. Capital dominates social life, art, culture, and science to a large extent, and nature is destroyed brutally by the greed for profit.

This attack of capital which encompasses every area cannot be countered by an understanding that limits politics to protest and resistance. If those who hold political power can easily cancel the “gains” you have made with great effort over the decades, there is something wrong with this. Anything reversible when a change of government occurs does not count as an achievement. The only way for the working class and the oppressed to achieve permanent gains is to proceed with a “strategical” (that is, power-targeting) view and seize political power. The 20th century has proved that it will not be enough to do this in a single country or a group of countries. In short, the socialist movement cannot have a horizon other than revolution and world revolution.

However, in the last decades, we have witnessed the oblivion of that horizon even by the socialists. This development resulted from the worldwide defeat of the workers’ states and the workers’ movement. In a period of decreasing attraction to socialism and the decline of class-centered politics, we saw that the revolutionary line, now considered something outdated, was put on the shelf and even systematically despised by “socialists”.

We can call as Post-Marxism those “socialist” approaches that reject class politics and claim to have surpassed Marxism. To my knowledge, the term was first used in the 1980s by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to describe their own work. There may not be many who remember it today, but *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, published in 1985 (1992 in Turkey), was an ambitious book that introduced this movement to the whole world.<sup>3</sup> During the collapse process of the Soviet Union, socialists had for a while discussed Post-Marxism and its proposal, the “radical democracy project” (which demands the left to defend liberal democracy). Contrary to what its title might suggest, the book actually didn’t say much about the strategy socialists should follow. It described the process of hegemony but did

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<sup>3</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 2001 (2nd edition, hereafter referred to as *HSS* in the footnotes).

not clarify which political subject would establish it since the subject would also emerge from this hegemonic practice. Moreover, every attempt at hegemony was ultimately doomed to failure. For such reasons, the “radical democracy” project remained a weak formula, basically affirming the plurality of social movements and promising only temporary hegemonic alliances to political actors. It came off the stage in the new century by leaving its place to the discussions on *Empire*.

However, many of the theses and themes of Post-Marxism survived. Ideas that dominated the left during the dissolution process were actually in circulation before Post-Marxist theory (for example, André Gorz’s *Farewell to the Working Class*). In a sense, Laclau and Mouffe became influential because they brought together within a new theoretical synthesis the ideas that were already gaining wide currency. Although *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was forgotten eventually, the theses remained. In short, Post-Marxism in the narrow sense is long gone, but the Post-Marxist approach in a broad sense is still alive.

The crisis conjuncture that started in 2008 marks the rise of class politics and the end of the Post-Marxism era, but the curtain has not come down yet. It takes time for habits to change and the spirit of the age to form. In this paper, I hope to contribute to the acceleration of this process. I will discuss via Laclau and Mouffe, the most well-known representatives of this movement, some of the main arguments of Post-Marxist approaches that reject all kinds of “essentialism”, categorically oppose class reductionism, and act on the basis of plurality, multitude, discourse analysis, and identity politics. Though I will discuss and criticize Post-Marxism in the narrow sense (the Laclau-Mouffe version), I will try to question the intellectual ground of Post-Marxism in a broad sense.

### ***On Hegemony and Socialist Strategy***

Ellen Wood had given the title *The Retreat From Class* to her book criticizing the theses that were prevalent on the left in the early neoliberal era. Like many influential works of those years, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is also unsympathetic to the concept of class in general and the working class in particular. Marxist theory places class at the center of its analysis of society and its understanding of social transformation, but Post-Marxism opposes this “ontological” privilege. It also objects to the idea that society and history have a rational structure. In other words, it does not propose another concept instead of “class”; it questions the idea of a basic social unit that will always be valid: Classes were the main actors of social transformation during the 19th century Europe in which Marx lived, but as we approach today, different types of actors appear on the scene due to the deepening of social differentiation. It is worth quoting at length from the Introduction to the book:

What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital “r”, as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to

another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will that will render pointless the moment of politics. The plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles has finally dissolved the last foundation for that political imaginary. Peopled with “universal” subjects and conceptually built around History in the singular, it has postulated “society” as an intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered on the basis of certain class positions and reconstituted, as a rational, transparent order, through a founding act of a political character. Today, the Left is witnessing the final act of the dissolution of that Jacobin imaginary.<sup>4</sup>

In short, Marxism has conceived society as a rational structure, predicting the transformation of this structure through class-based action but has faced a crisis because it could not respond to the plural character of contemporary social struggles. According to the epistemological framework Laclau put forward in his previous work, the crisis of a theory will first be met by efforts to expand this theory (with new concepts), but at a certain phase it will be necessary to move on to a new theory by abandoning the old one: “From the theoretical system to the theoretical problems and from them to a new theoretical system: that is the course of the process of knowledge”.<sup>5</sup> According to this template, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has to be seen as the work that presents the new theoretical system to replace Marxism, that is, Post-Marxism.

In preparation for the discussion of the main theses of Post-Marxism, let’s look briefly at the structure of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. The interpretation (“deconstruction”) of the history of Marxism in terms of the necessity-contingency tension takes up about half of the four-chapter book. This is followed by another discussion targeting the theoretical foundations of Marxism (at the end of the second chapter and the whole third chapter). The theses developed here prepare the ground for the political proposal in the fourth and final chapter, namely the radical democracy project.

Perhaps the most fundamental move of Post-Marxism is the attempt to place Marxism in a historically relative position. According to this, at the beginning of the modern period, during the era that opened with the French Revolution and lasted until the middle of the 19th century, the main political polarization was between the people and the ancient regime. With the coming of industrial society, this opposition lost its political effect, and Marx (and other socialists) reformulated the social division around a new principle, in the form of class antagonism.<sup>6</sup> But this new formula could not cover all social contradictions, and the inadequacy of the class principle was also felt by Marxists who needed recourse to the theory and practice of “hegemony” in the first half of the 20th century.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, though Marxism based itself on a strict conception of historical necessity, it was forced to increase the share of contingency since real life did not fit the theory. “In so far as the paradigmatic sequence of its

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4 *HSS*, p. 2.

5 Ernesto Laclau, “The Specificity of the Political”, in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism-Fascism-Populism*, London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 61.

6 *HSS*, p. 149–152.

categories was subjected to the ‘structural pressure’ of increasingly atypical situations, it became ever more difficult to reduce social relations to structural moments internal to those categories”.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, the notion of hegemony has been developed to fill the theoretical gap that arose because history did not develop as expected. However, this concept has made the theoretical problems of Marxism more visible because it became clear that it is not enough to define social actors mainly in the field of relations of production.<sup>8</sup>

Though Marxists have been forced in practice to go beyond class, the central position of class was not questioned in theory. The “people”, the main actor of pre-Marxist era social struggles, was included within Marxist political categories during the Popular Fronts of the 1930s, but it was difficult to attribute a clear class identity to it. It has become increasingly visible that political actors do not necessarily coincide with economic subjects (classes) or that hegemony is established by basic classes. In short, the conditions that forced the introduction of the notion of hegemony and the very logic of hegemony make the *identity between political actors and classes* problematic.<sup>9</sup>

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* criticizes the “dogmatic” classist understanding of Marxism, and has received many solid responses from Marxists. Many writers have emphasized that Laclau and Mouffe have created a simplified version of Marxism to direct their criticism, reached very comprehensive conclusions from superficial and controversial premises, and failed to offer a meaningful political perspective.<sup>10</sup> I think these counter-criticisms are generally correct but also incomplete. Because the theoretical part of the book (roughly the third chapter), which establishes the connection between the interpretation of Marxism and the proposal for radical democracy, is often neglected. The weakness of the radical democracy project may have created the impression that the philosophical propositions that provide a basis for this project are unimportant. However, these propositions appear explicitly or implicitly in political projects other than Post-Marxism. In other words, the intellectual ground on which Post-Marxism rests continues to produce its effects. Thus the discussion needs to be conducted at a more fundamental level.

## From antagonisms to the impossibility of society

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<sup>7</sup> HSS, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> HSS, p. 13; also see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, New York: Verso, 2005, p. 125-6.

<sup>9</sup> HSS, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Gülnur Savran, “‘Öz’lerin Reddinden Sınıf Politikasının Reddine” [“From the Rejection of ‘Essences’ to the Rejection of Class Politics”], *Onbirinci Tez*, no 10, 1990; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New “True” Socialism*, London, New York: Verso, 1998 [1986]; Gülseren Adaklı, “Post-Marksizmin Kuramsal ve Siyasal Açmazları” [“The Theoretical and Political Dilemmas of Post-Marxism”], *Praksis*, no 1, 2001; Sevilay Kaygalak, “Post-Marksist Siyasetin Sefaleti: Radikal Demokrasi” [“The Poverty of Post-Marxist Politics: Radical Democracy”], *Praksis*, no 1, 2001; Norman Geras, “Post-Marxism?”, *New Left Review* 1, no 163, May-June 1987; “Ex-Marxism Without Substance: Being a Real Reply to Laclau and Mouffe”, *New Left Review* 1, no 169, May-June 1988.



Behind the political project of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* lies the view that society is *not* a rational unity: When referring to society, we need to think of structural failures rather than a structure. The reason for this is antagonisms (conflicts, irreconcilable oppositions). There is no “complete” society that has been able to end conflicts within itself, integrated in a closed and transparent manner: “Society never manages fully to be society”.<sup>11</sup> The title of one of Laclau’s articles mentions “the impossibility of society”. This expression does not mean that societies do not exist but that they exist in the form of partial and unstable attempts at structuring, to deal with the antagonisms that make them impossible. Thus, “If society is not totally possible, neither is it totally impossible”.<sup>12</sup>

According to Post-Marxism, the antagonisms that permeate society disrupt its structurality and objectivity. In a sense, antagonisms destruct its “foundation”. From this, the claim about the determinacy of the economic base (foundation) is questioned. In short, at the beginning of the road to the rejection of class politics stands a “metaphysics of antagonism” based on the “ontological” primacy of antagonisms and conflicts.

Taking struggle, conflict, and antagonism as ontologically primary is certainly correct; but if such an understanding is brought forward to the denial of social objectivity, this makes a strategic political orientation impossible and ultimately turns into a self-defeating project. Post-Marxism, which advocates the “primacy of the political”, can be regarded as a basically reformist initiative that seeks to resolve the tensions between the two terms of the dichotomies like determinism-voluntarism or necessity-contingency by emphasizing the second pole, and trying to combine an understanding of politics close to anarchism with liberal goals.<sup>13</sup> The price of such an attempt has been the complete abandonment of the revolutionary potential of class politics, set aside in the name of rejecting all essentialism.

Antagonism is usually translated into Turkish as “irreconcilable contradiction”. In Marxist literature, the irreconcilable nature of the opposition is emphasized by speaking of antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat but of “non-antagonistic contradictions” between, for example, commercial and industrial bourgeoisie. Contradictions of the second kind are reconcilable, unlike the first. However, in the Laclau–Mouffe usage of the term, antagonism is different from contradiction. Contradiction means a logical conflict, while antagonism expresses a situation of actual conflict. Two social actors not contradicting each other may engage in an antagonistic struggle. Or conversely, a contradictory position may not create an antagonism.

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<sup>11</sup> *HSS*, s. p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> *HSS*, p. 129. At a time when Margaret Thatcher was declaring the neoliberal program in England by claiming that “There is no such thing as society, there are only individuals”, Laclau was defending his thesis about “the impossibility of society” – an interesting coincidence.

<sup>13</sup> Post-Marxism is not directly anarchist since it proposes a politics of hegemony and thus rejects the idea of decentralized resistance. However, because it also rejects the strategic perspective in practice, it approaches what Todd May calls “tactical political philosophy”. See *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, p. 11-2, 54.

Three other notions complement this concept of antagonism. For Laclau and Mouffe, any “relation of subordination” does not necessarily involve resistance; the resistance of the oppressed can only take place under the influence of an outside element, a “constitutive outside”; and if resistance begins as a result of such an effect, the relationship in question will now be experienced as a “relationship of oppression”.<sup>14</sup> For example, a woman who has obeyed her husband for years in a conservative family may begin to view the situation as an oppressive relationship when confronted with liberating ideas or practices. An antagonism can arise from this.

The claim that makes the Post-Marxist understanding of antagonism truly unique is that antagonisms do not take place between two positive and “full” identities but between two adversaries who mutually negate each other’s identities. “The presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution”.<sup>15</sup> In other words, those in conflict are not “A and B” but “non-A and non-B”. During the antagonism, identities and differences are suspended and existing identities become invalid. Thus arises a naming problem, and language is disrupted. The division of society by antagonisms makes its “objective” character problematic.

Insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself. But nor is the force that antagonizes me such a presence ... If language is a system of differences, antagonism is the failure of difference: in that sense, it situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it - that is, as metaphor ... every language and every society are constituted as a repression of the consciousness of the impossibility that penetrates them. Antagonism escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language, since language only exists as an attempt to fix that which antagonism subverts.

Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are *shown* ... Strictly speaking, antagonisms are not internal but external to society; or rather, they constitute the limits of society, the latter’s impossibility of fully constituting itself.<sup>16</sup>

Questioning the structurality of a structure is one of the favorite themes of 20th century thought. For example, Derrida shows that the notion of structure always includes the idea of a center, but the center is not subject to the logic of the structure, and hence it actually stands *outside* the structure.<sup>17</sup> The notion of structure prevailing in linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and ethnology both requires a center and tries to confront the fact that it does not exist. The structure is based on, structured around a center, or rather a constitutive void, which is both inside and outside. This idea of a founding void, or lack can be extended to all structures, from

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14 *HSS*, p. 153.

15 *HSS*, p. 125.

16 *HSS*, p. 125. Also see Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on The Revolution of Our Time*, trans. Jon Barnes, London, New York: Verso, 1990, p. 17–8.

17 Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 351–4.

social structures to individual formations.

In the Marxist understanding of antagonism, society is thought to be structured around a central antagonism, a fundamental division: The labor-capital contradiction constitutes the basic matrix that provides the meaning of all other social conflicts. As Laclau once wrote (in his Marxist period), “not every contradiction is a class contradiction, but every contradiction is overdetermined by the class struggle”.<sup>18</sup> For this understanding, the “central” antagonism, though always tried to be suppressed, is at the same time the element that establishes the objectivity, the “structurality” of the society.

Marxists emphasize the “irreconcilable” nature of the antagonism. Post-Marxism, on the other hand, emphasizes unpredictability (the notion of “constitutive outside” is used to show that antagonism cannot be derived from the logic of the “inside”). While Marxist antagonism is the constitutive element of objectivity, Post-Marxist antagonism is something that distorts language and meaning, and shows the limit of objectivity. There is a central antagonism in Marxism, while Post-Marxism suggests the plurality of antagonisms: Many antagonisms arise from the interaction of many logics operating within the social field. The transition of any of these to the “central” position depends on unforeseen contingent conditions.

Thus two different conceptions of antagonism correspond to two different conceptions of “society”. In the Marxist understanding, because of the antagonisms involved (first and foremost the labor-capital contradiction), society never forms a “closed” system in a functionalist sense; yet it exhibits a historically consistent, rationally intelligible structurality, objectivity. In the Post-Marxist understanding, however, antagonisms cancel the rationality and predictability of society. In this universe dominated by contingency, necessity exists only as temporary, partial attempts. In such an approach, which denies fundamental transformations, the possibility of determining a concrete political strategy disappears.<sup>19</sup>

## Problems of the Post-Marxist conception of antagonism

There are several problems with the Post-Marxist conceptualization of antagonism. First, it cannot be said that the identity of both parties is denied in the antagonistic relationship. It is no accident that the antagonism examples given by Laclau and Mouffe always fail in this respect. For example, they write that “it is because a peasant *cannot be* a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from his land”.<sup>20</sup> Here, the “peasant” identity of the peasant is indeed under threat. But the other pole of the relationship (the landowner) does not have such a problem. Extending the example, workers who resist lay-offs do not negate (actu-

<sup>18</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology”, in *Politics and Ideology*, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Mouffe’s writings in the period after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* are examples of this. In general, Mouffe calls for “transforming antagonisms into agonisms”, that is, for hostilities to be replaced by arguments between opponents. But there are no concrete suggestions as to how this will happen. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London, New York: Verso, 2000, p. 14, 74, 102-3; *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, London, New York: Verso, 2013, p. xii, 7.

<sup>20</sup> *HSS*, p. 125.



ally affirm) the capitalist's "capitalist" identity either. The identity of the capitalist can only become problematic if the workers oppose the wage relation and capitalist exploitation. If an identity describes a position of structural difference, for a general "identity crisis" to emerge, this relational structure must be questioned as a whole. If such a revolutionary situation does not occur, then we are dealing with ordinary everyday conflicts that can be expressed quite easily within the given social objectivity.

The second problem is related to the notion of "constitutive outside". The main concern in the Post-Marxist use of this term (which is attributed to Derrida) is to suggest that antagonisms do not arise spontaneously from contradictory positions. Laclau argues, for example, that it is not logically necessary for the working class to resist a wage cut. According to him, in Marxist theory concrete agents embody economic categories; the worker is categorically a "seller of labor power", and the ability to resist wage cuts is not logically included in such a category. If the worker resists it is because her consumer identity *outside* the relations of production is damaged or denied; that is, the intervention of an "outside" is necessary.<sup>21</sup>

In the first example, the peasant could not become a "peasant" because of antagonism. Now it is said that the worker cannot become a "consumer" because of antagonism. In both cases, the identity of the other pole of the relationship (landowner, capitalist) remains unaffected (not negated). Moreover, the premise of Laclau's argument is flawed. Because the category of "seller of labor power" *logically* includes that the worker, like every seller, resists, as much as possible, the reductions in the price of the commodity sold.<sup>22</sup> (Laclau thinks that this is not logical, and requires additional assumptions such as "homo economicus"; but what is at stake here is the *logic of exchange*.) The same applies to the extension of working hours. Whether the protest of the workers will take the form of silent grunts or, for example, factory occupations is another matter that depends on the concrete power relations. The capitalist-worker relationship is antagonistic and irreconcilable whether or not workers openly resist (the actual compromises between the two classes do not affect this "ontological" opposition; in fact, what governs partial compromises is the labor-capital contradiction itself). If Laclau's approach is accepted, then it will also be necessary to determine the exact beginning point of the worker resistance.

There is another dimension to the notion of "constitutive outside". If the "outside" is really constitutive, the other is not only the element that prevents me from being fully myself, but also, in a sense, what makes me who I am. Thus, antagonism involves not only the negation but also the affirmation of identities.<sup>23</sup> It is well known that social actors often become subjects and gain their identities through

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21 Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 9; *On Populist Reason*, p. 150. "There is no logical connection whatsoever between positions in the relations of production and the mentality of the producers. The workers' resistance to certain forms of domination will depend upon the position they occupy within the ensemble of social relations, and not only in those of production" (*HSS*, p. 84-5).

22 In fact, the central role of the consumer identity of the working class *within* the capitalist relations of production is examined in detail in the reproduction schemas of the second volume of *Capital*, or Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital*. But, even if we lay aside this fact, the premise is flawed.

23 Laclau mentions this in his later work, but does not elaborate much (*New Reflections*, p. 21).

conflicts or struggles with other actors. This “identity-forming” property of antagonisms means that they are also a constitutive element of social objectivity. As a result, the processes of contradiction, conflict, and antagonism are precisely what characterize objectivity.

Another problem in the Post-Marxist understanding of antagonism is as follows: We experience the disruption of language not only in the case of antagonism but in all kinds of change processes. When an object is changing from A to B, it is neither A nor B at the time of transformation (it is also both A and B), its identity is yet to be determined. For example, part of the capitalist class regularly loses its “capitalist” identity through bankruptcies, etc. (without antagonism). Social entities go through lots of qualitative changes without conflict – firms are restructured, some artisans turn into workers, institutions change their positions. According to Post-Marxist assumptions, it would be necessary to say that such changes also disrupt language and limit objectivity. In fact, if this kind of reasoning is consistently followed, there will be no objectivity: everything is always in flux, changing. A disciple of Heraclitus did not find it sufficient to say “One cannot bathe in the same river twice”, and “corrected” his master by saying “No one can do this even once!” The point that Post-Marxism will reach will be close to that of the impatient disciple.

In general, the problems in the Post-Marxist notion of antagonism stem from the attempt to reconceptualize antagonisms as actual conflicts by limiting contradictions to the realm of logic (propositions). The thesis that “an antagonism does not necessarily arise from a contradiction, and an antagonistic relationship does not have to be contradictory” is in fact questionable in terms of Laclau and Mouffe’s own understanding of discourse, which advocates the unity of language and action. The claim that there are full identities in dialectical contradictions, and identities are negated in antagonism is also a controversial starting point. As we saw above, if identities are also affirmed (as well as negated) in antagonisms, it is not clear why this should not be considered a “contradiction”. The problem is conceiving conflict or antagonism as something limiting objectivity. From this point, it is concluded that social conflicts are unpredictable (because “there is no logical connection” between the contradictory positions in the relations of production and the mentality of the actors occupying these positions) and that there is no central antagonism. Such a theory, which tries to trivialize the labor-capital contradiction, will never be able to propose a meaningful “socialist strategy”, but will reflect a lack of strategy.

### Critique of economic determinism

If the first step on the way to the rejection of class politics is to question social objectivity starting from a metaphysics of antagonism, the second step is to reject the idea of the “base” of society and determination by the economic structure (base). Now let us look at these moves. At the end of the second chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we encounter the following lines in a subsection titled “The Last Redoubt of Essentialism: the Economy”:

The economic level ... must satisfy three very precise conditions in order to play

this role of constituting the subjects of hegemonic practices. *Firstly*, its laws of motion must be strictly endogenous and exclude all indeterminacy resulting from political or other external interventions ... *Secondly*, the unity and homogeneity of social agents, constituted at the economic level, must result from the very laws of motion of this level ... *Thirdly*, the position of these agents in the relations of production must endow them with “historical interests”, so that the presence of such agents at other social levels -through mechanisms of “representation” or “articulation”- must ultimately be explained on the basis of economic interests.<sup>24</sup>

The exaggerated nature of the language is striking: Expressions demanding “completeness” such as three “very precise” conditions, “strictly endogenous” laws of motion, or the exclusion of “all indeterminacy” seem symptomatic. Since such a pure “economic level” has never existed anywhere in history, either Marxists must have exaggerated the importance of the economy, or Laclau and Mouffe are suggesting some arbitrary criteria.

The first move, which detaches politics from the economy, is followed by the second, which reverses the relationship that Marxism establishes between the economy and politics: “We will attempt to demonstrate that the space of the economy is itself structured as a political space, and that in it, as in any other ‘level’ of society, those practices we characterized as hegemonic are fully operative”.<sup>25</sup> To prove this, an explanation is given based on the claim that the commodity character of labor power is a fiction of Marxism. According to this claim, it cannot be said that labor power is a commodity, since “if it were merely a commodity like the others, its use-value could obviously be made automatically effective from the very moment of its purchase”.<sup>26</sup>

No doubt, every Marxist knows that use value is actualized, realized, not when the commodity changes hands, but with actual use. In the fourth paragraph of the first volume of *Capital* Marx writes that “Use values become a reality only by use or consumption”.<sup>27</sup> It is clear that this also applies to the commodity of labor power. But no worries. Laclau and Mouffe write, as if having made a very original invention, that the capitalist buying labor power will try to extract the largest possible amount of labor from it. “The labor process cannot exist without a series of relations of domination”.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the labor process is “not merely the place where capital exerts its domination, but the ground of a struggle”.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the economy itself is a political terrain, and thus the myth of determination by the economy falls to the ground. And not only that: “The thesis that the productive forces are neutral, and that their development can be conceived as natural and unilinear, is entirely unfounded. This also removes the only ground on which the economy could be understood as an autonomous and self-regulated universe”.<sup>30</sup>

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24 HSS, p. 76.

25 HSS, p. 76-7.

26 HSS, p. 78.

27 Karl Marx, *Capital vol. I, Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 35, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 46.

28 HSS, p. 79.

29 HSS, p. 79.

30 HSS, p. 80.

It is easy to refute these explanations, which should come as a surprise to anyone who knows a little about *Capital*. Marx states, for example, that it is possible to write “quite a history of inventions, made since 1830, for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working class”.<sup>31</sup> The analysis of the labor process in *Capital* is not the story of naturally developing productive forces, but the exposition of a development whose direction and pace are determined by the class struggle. Moreover, contrary to what Laclau and Mouffe think, it is precisely the distinction between labor and labor power that enables us to grasp the struggle between workers and capitalists in the labor process. Because what the worker sells (labor power) is a capacity, an ability, a potential. The capitalist makes pressure to use this potential to the fullest. If it were otherwise, there would be no need for dispute. The seller of any commodity, once disposed of it, no longer cares about how the buyer uses it. But labor power is a different, special commodity. It is embodied in the worker’s body. The “fiction” of labor power as a commodity does not originate from Marx, but from the capitalist process itself.

The insight that the labor process is the basis of an ongoing struggle between the worker and the capitalist permeates perhaps every sentence of Marx, thus it is strange that Laclau and Mouffe embrace the perspective brought by Marx and try to use it as something that *refutes* the thesis of determination by the economic base. Elsewhere, Laclau argues that there is no mention of class struggle in the dialectic of relations of production/productive forces discussed in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and that such a dialectic of relations-forces is absent in the perspective of the *Communist Manifesto*, which declares all history to consist of class struggles. He presents the first text as a logical contradiction without antagonism, and the second text as an example of antagonism without contradiction.<sup>32</sup> But it is not Marx who fails to consider these two dimensions, the class struggle and the productive forces, together, because many chapters in *Capital* display precisely this intertwining. The “either contradiction or antagonism” dilemma is a problem specific to Post-Marxism rather than Marx.

The effort to refute the thesis that the economic base determines the political, legal, ideological, etc. superstructure aims to clear the way for the “primacy of politics” thesis. According to Post-Marxism, the base-superstructure metaphor is misleading, because, the economy, which is supposed to “lie below”, is itself a political terrain full of conflicts. We encounter politics, antagonisms at the root of all social relations. In their preface to the second edition of the book in 2000, Laclau and Mouffe state that “This privileging of the political moment in the structuration of society is an essential aspect of our approach ... we conceive of the political not as a superstructure but as having the status of an *ontology of the social*”.<sup>33</sup> Politics, not the economy, comes first in the structuring of the social sphere, and this makes the idea of a “base” (or “foundation”) of society problematic. There are only antago-

31 Marx, *Capital. I*, p. 439.

32 Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 16; “Structure, History, and the Political” in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London, New York: Verso, 2000, p. 202.

33 *HSS*, p. xii, xiv.

nisms in the “foundation”, and such a foundation cancels itself.

The “primacy of politics” thesis was later extended, and made way for the questioning of the existence of the economic level. One of the characteristic features of capitalism is the existence of an economic level *separate* from other social spheres, but Laclau denies this: “The myth of a separate and definable ‘economic instance’ must be abandoned”.<sup>34</sup> He even sees terms such as class, class struggle, capitalism as “fetishes” that are devoid of precise meanings.<sup>35</sup> In the end, “there is no room for the distinction, as in classical socialism, between economic struggle and political struggle; economic struggles are as political as those taking place at the level of the state conceived in its restrictive sense”.<sup>36</sup>

Ironically, an approach that denies economic determination comes to the view that Lenin criticizes as “economism”. Everyone accepts the political nature of economic struggles, but there is a difference between the political character of struggles limited to the economic sphere and the revolutionary policy towards state power. Lenin emphasizes this difference by saying, “There is politics, and there is politics”. Laclau and Mouffe (and many others), who dissolve all struggles in a general notion of the “political”, seem to be in a bit of a hurry to bury up the economy, and thus the classes.

The explanation of the relationship between the economy and politics in Post-Marxism seems to have moved from the primacy of politics thesis to the claim that the economy as a separate “instance” does not even exist. Of course, Post-Marxism does not deny the existence of economic facts, but it seems to have a clear difficulty in conceptualizing the economic level. It is time, then, to focus on the relations between the economy and politics.

## Economy and politics

Are all social relations political? Laclau discusses this issue in his 1990 book *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, using Husserl’s notions of “sedimentation” and “reactivation”. According to Laclau, social practices derive from political origins, but this is not apparent at first glance. Even the simplest habits in daily life (going to the movies, taking the train, drinking coffee in the morning...) are initially shaped by certain interventions, formed by the exclusion of certain alternatives, and gained permanence over time, thus hiding their original political stamp. Laclau calls this “sedimentation”. The social sphere consists of political practices that have become sedimented and have gained a certain objectivity. But if objectivity itself is based on certain exclusions, traces of these exclusions will somehow be present. Here, “reactivation” is the making visible of the political origin, the revealing of the contingent character of objectivity.<sup>37</sup>

The appropriateness of the concept of “reactivation” to express the political dimension can be questioned. However, we can unequivocally accept the political

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34 Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 25.

35 Laclau, “Structure, History, and the Political”, p. 201.

36 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 154.

37 Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 33–5.



(antagonistic) character of social phenomena: *Social relations are always political*. There is a certain component of power in all social relations.<sup>38</sup> (The goal of socialism is not a utopian thing such as putting an end to all power relations altogether, but to reorganize the distribution of social power.) Therefore, as a rule, economic relations that form part of social relations are also political.

However, there is also a “political” sphere that is the institutionalized form of politics and includes the state, political parties, bureaucracy, etc. The main terrain of social change, of politics, is this macro-political sphere. To say that social relations are political relations does not mean that all social relations are determined by the state. Yet those who want radical changes in social relations must confront state power.

What is said about politics also applies to the “economic” sphere as relations of production. Social relations are always political relations and *at the same time* class relations. For example, parent-child relationships, leisure time, love relationships, neighborhood, culture, sports, nutrition, etc. every social phenomenon we can think of has a class dimension, and is indelibly imprinted with the relations of production.

“Politics” is peculiar to class societies in general; it includes the state as the main institution and has gained autonomy from social relations over time. The novelty added by capitalism is the autonomization of the “economy” (against politics and society), the basic elements of which are firms and markets. *Autonomy* should not be thought of as an absolute break or independence, but means that a relational system becomes a whole capable of reproducing itself, begins to set its own rules, and the boundary that separates the inside and the outside gains a certain permanence. This does not mean that the relational whole has gained complete independence, but it has begun to provide its own conditions of existence to a large extent. We are not dealing with Spinozan-style absolute substances which “cause themselves”, but with systematic structures that, once arising, begin to produce their own inputs (feedback circuits are the simplest example). Indeed, Marx’s theory also asserts that at a certain stage capital begins to set its own presuppositions.

The economy-politics-society triad constitutes the three basic *social* spheres in capitalism. These three domains form a dialectical unity, they *reproduce themselves and the society by mediating each other in mutual interaction*.

It is of course possible to analyze the triad in different ways. For example, Mark Neocleous, working on the Marxist theory of the state, writes (without explaining why) that it is necessary to use both the base-superstructure distinction and the state-civil society distinction. He rightly states that civil society cannot be reduced to the economic base but does not explain the *internal* link between the base-superstructure and state-civil society distinctions.<sup>39</sup> But these two distinctions reflect

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38 While using the concepts of politics and power synonymously, it is necessary not to forget Cemal Bâli Akal’s remark: “Those who take relations of power as an inevitable result of all kinds of socialness, meaning the establishment of any order, have difficulty in determining the difference between power and political power”. İktidarın Üç Yüzü [*The Three Faces of Power*] Ankara: Dost, 1998, p. 347.

39 Mark Neocleous, *Administering Civil Society: Towards a Theory of State Power*, London: Macmillan Press, 1996, p. 16-7, 38-40.

two different divisions of the same totality, which consists of three basic spheres (or levels) of capitalist society. Because of this, using one and not the other will not be enough. In the distinction between the state and civil society, “civil society” covers both economic relations in the narrow sense and other relations in the sphere of society. (The liberal left in Turkey takes the state-civil society distinction as more or less synonymous with the state-society opposition; this nice trick helps to exclude economic exploitation from civil society.) On the other hand, the base-superstructure distinction is the classical Marxist formulation in which the political, legal, ideological, etc. forms, that is, forms peculiar to “politics” and society are conditioned by the economic base.

The relations between the three mutually mediating spheres are not “symmetrical”, but unequal and combined. A dialectical relationship does not mean reciprocal balance. Post-Marxists are correct in emphasizing the political nature of the economy, but they somehow forget the economic character of politics. The problem is how to envision the relationship between the two. Historical materialism argues that transformations in the structure of relations of production (transition from agriculture to industry, commodification, the expansion of wage labor, etc.) condition changes in the “superstructure”. The reverse is not seen in history. A mere change of political power does not lead to radical changes in the relations of production. The only exception is the change of political power *between classes*, which confirms the determination by the economic base thesis.

When Lenin criticized economism, he emphasized that it included an understanding of politics that is limited to the *economic sphere*; and argued that it could not make permanent gains for the working class because it did not orient itself to transform state power and did not face the problem of macro-power. Today’s social movements are similarly positioned only in the *sphere of society* and direct their demands to the state by acting as a pressure group. Certain “gains” can be achieved with this type of identity politics, but there is no guarantee that these will be permanent.

If we want a genuine, lasting, fundamental social transformation, there is no alternative but to wage a total anti-capitalist struggle. For this, it is necessary to conceive capitalism as an objective-structural system. Melting all social struggles into a general notion of the “political” as Laclau does may seem like a very “political” approach at first glance, but in reality it means abandoning the claim of structural social transformation.

## **Anti-capitalist struggle**

According to Post-Marxism, since the economy is not the basic sphere that determines the others, the classes formed in this sphere cannot be the privileged elements of social transformation. The “ontological” privilege that Marxism grants to classes and specifically to the working class is because classes have come to the fore in a certain period of history. But this period was short-lived:

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Initially “democracy”, conceived as a field of popular action, is the great protagonist in the historic confrontations which dominate the life of Europe between 1789 and 1848 ... Later comes the major break constituted by the long reaction of the 1850s; and when this comes to an end and popular protest is renewed, the protagonists have changed ... the unions or nascent social-democratic parties ... which establish themselves with increasing solidity.

(...)

Marx’s ... reflection took place in a moment at which the division of the political space in terms of the dichotomy people/ancien régime seemed to have exhausted its productivity, and was in any case incapable of constructing a vision of the political which would recapture the complexity and the plurality peculiar to the social in industrial societies. Marx seeks, then, to think the primary fact of social division on the basis of a new principle: the confrontation between classes. The new principle, however, is undermined from the start by a radical insufficiency, arising from the fact that class opposition is incapable of dividing the totality of the social body into two antagonistic camps, of reproducing itself automatically as a line of demarcation in the political sphere. It is for this reason that the affirmation of the class struggle as the fundamental principle of political division always had to be accompanied by supplementary hypotheses which relegated its full applicability to the future.<sup>40</sup>

According to the Post-Marxist interpretation of history, the introduction of the notion of hegemony was a response to the inability of the class principle to reflect the complexities of the political sphere. This inadequacy arose from the fact that classes are economic agents defined in the field of relations of production; their presence at the political level can only take the form of a kind of reflection or “representation of interests”. The specific logic of politics has led to permanent failures of this understanding in practice. But if we try to rectify this by taking class formation more broadly to include the political level (as Balibar or Poulantzas did, for example), in this case, there is no guarantee that the emerging agents will necessarily be class subjects. Consequently, social conflicts do not necessarily take the form of “class struggle”.<sup>41</sup>

Another consequence of this reasoning is that a socialist project not based on the working class is possible. According to Post-Marxists, like the idea of “revolution” based on the total transformation of society, the view of the historical proletariat that will realize this transformation is also wrong; because the working class, like all other identities, is a particular group that pursues its own interests. Under certain circumstances, it might go beyond this particular identity and gather other groups around its political project, but this would be an exceptional case. The rule is temporary and unstable alliances, or rather chains of equivalence, established between different identities. Within such a chain, the working class will have no privilege: “A variety of other points of rupture and democratic antagonisms can be articulated to a socialist ‘collective will’ on an *equal* footing with workers’ demands. The era of the ‘privileged subjects’ -in the ontological, not practical sense- of the anti-capitalist

<sup>40</sup> *HSS*, p. 149, 151.

<sup>41</sup> *HSS*, p. 20, 100; Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 37.

struggle has been definitively superseded".<sup>42</sup>

Why can't there be privileged subjects in the anti-capitalist struggle? According to Laclau and Mouffe this is because capitalism threatens many different areas. In their response to Norman Geras' critique they write that "there are many points of antagonism between capitalism and various sections of the population (environmental pollution, property development in certain areas, the arms race, the flow of capital from one region to another, etc.), and this means that we will have a variety of anti-capitalist struggles".<sup>43</sup> The result, of course, is the inadequacy of the class struggle:

many sectors are threatened by the capitalist logic, and ... the resulting antagonisms are not necessarily related to particular locations in the relations of production. As a result, the notion of class struggle is totally insufficient to explain the identity of the agents involved in anti-capitalist struggles. It is simply the remainder of an old-fashioned conception which saw in an assumed general proletarianization of society the emergence of the future burier of capitalism.<sup>44</sup>

We see that Post-Marxism, which declares that the era of class struggle is over, makes a very simple mistake and equates the anti-capitalist (socialist) struggle with social struggles against the logic of capital. But this identification is misleading. Not all struggles against the logic of capital are "anti-capitalist". Many social segments take the blow of capital and start resistance, but most of these are "particularist" struggles; they tend to be confined to a particular problem area. Anti-capitalist struggle, on the other hand, is only possible by targeting capitalist relations of production and confronting the central antagonism of society (the labor-capital contradiction).

The "plural and diverse" character of social struggles should be obvious to everyone in today's world. There are many forms of struggle such as the women's movement, the ecology movement, national movements, the student movement, the struggles of sexual minorities, human rights activism, the anti-nuclear movement, the anti-globalization movement, the anti-war movement, and there is an endless variety within them. However, *in the context of the anti-capitalist struggle*, there is an asymmetry between all these different movements and the workers' struggle. While the contradiction of capital with labor has an antagonistic (irreconcilable) character, this quality is not seen in other forms of struggle. For example, the end of capitalism is a necessary condition for the prevention of ecological destruction or the real emancipation of women, but the working logic of the capitalist system does not create from within the socio-political subjects to fight in this direction. The working class, on the other hand, achieves social and political existence by being formed within the capitalist relations of production itself. Its struggle is necessarily fought not only against the negative consequences of the logic of capital but against capital itself. In this sense, it occupies an "ontologically privileged" position in the

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42 HSS, p. 87.

43 "Post-Marxism Without Apologies", in *New Reflections*, p. 127.

44 Laclau, "Structure, History, and the Political", p. 203.

*anti-capitalist struggle.*

## **From the particular to the universal**

Besides the “ontological” reasons discussed above, Post-Marxism’s objection to class politics is based also on factual reasons. One reason is that the working class is also a segment that has not gone beyond its own “particular” demands. The second is the decline of the working class as a socio-political actor. In short, “class struggle is just one species of identity politics, and one which is becoming less and less important in the world in which we live”.<sup>45</sup>

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the democratic revolution has been deepening in modern societies since the 18th century. The critique of political inequalities that began with the French Revolution has expanded from the political sphere to economic inequalities and other social relations (e.g., gender inequality). In this respect, socialism is just a moment in the development of the democratic revolution. The labor movement in Western countries has displayed a “particularist” character that focuses on the problems within the field of production rather than questioning the capitalist relations of production as a whole. The struggles that Marxists sneer at as “reformist” actually correspond more to the demands of the working class than radical rhetoric.<sup>46</sup>

We saw above that while Marx gave central importance to struggles in the labor process in his theory, Post-Marxism tried to refute Marx on the basis of the very existence of such struggles. Here we encounter a similar situation. Lenin’s thesis that the working class will only reach trade union consciousness by itself means that the struggles of this class will remain in a “particularist” mode unless it meets with the socialist movement. This is precisely a state of immaturity that the workers’ movement must overcome. As long as the working class cannot leave its “particular” character behind and move to the “universal” position (which requires political mediation), it will not be able to find a permanent solution to its problems. The solution is not simply higher wages or shorter working hours; the solution to the antagonism between labor and capital is to put an end to capitalist relations of production and therefore to the worker identity itself.

The central question of politics, as Laclau rightly and repeatedly emphasizes, is the move from the particular to the universal. Pure particularity (identity politics today) is in itself a very weak conception of politics. The important thing is to occupy the position of the universal, and since only a concrete particular element can undertake this, there is a question of hegemony.<sup>47</sup> Thus, our question becomes whether working-class hegemony is possible and meaningful.

Laclau has on several occasions cited the emergence of a general equivalent and the money form in the context of the transition from the particular to the universal. As is known, Marx’s analysis of the value form in *Capital* shows that as commodity

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45 Laclau, “Structure, History, and the Political”, p. 203.

46 *HSS*, p. 157.

47 Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso, 2007, p. 26, 51-3, 61; *On Populist Reason*, p. 115.



exchange becomes generalized, a particular commodity begins to represent all other commodities, eventually becoming money. A particular element fills a universal position, hegemonizes it. Similarly, the basic political issue is how a particular group will begin to represent the demands of the “people” and become the universal class. Gramsci’s analyses of the transition from the corporatist class to the hegemonic class are examples of a similar logic. Laclau has pursued this question perhaps his entire intellectual life: How is a “people” built, how does a social group begin to represent the whole people?<sup>48</sup> It is really remarkable that he has captured the formal similarity with Marx’s analysis of the value form. But Laclau has never asked the question: Why gold? Of all the commodities, why just this particular object has been the most stable form of money?

The answer to the question is of course related to the properties of gold and the structural requirements of the exchange process. Gold is hard to corrode, can be easily split and combined, transported, etc. In short, there are *historical and logical* reasons for gold to play this role, compared to all other commodities. So we are, in effect, concerned with whether the working class is historically and logically fit to take on such a universal role.

Laclau and Mouffe’s view on this is, of course, negative. They argue that the working class is unfit for such a role. However, they do not have any concrete suggestions as to who or which social subject is appropriate, because they think that the subject will also be formed within the hegemonic construction process. “There is no struggle which has inscribed in itself the guarantee of being the privileged locus of universalistic political effects. Workers’ demands - higher wages, shorter working hours, better conditions in the workplace, and so on - can, given the appropriate circumstances, be as easily integrated into the system as those of any other group”.<sup>49</sup> In short, the working class is just a particular group, not much different from the others. In this respect, for example, the term “class struggle” is misleading. Because the struggle does not take place only between classes. A genuine political struggle, though waged by the workers, will have dimensions that transcend the working class. After all, the working class in the developed capitalist world has regressed both quantitatively and qualitatively in the last thirty or forty years.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the notion of class has little relevance in social practices:

The classical Marxist concept of “class” derived its verisimilitude from the fact that it established a correspondence between two levels: a formal structural analysis of the tendencies of capitalist society and of the social agents resulting from them, and an intuitive identification of those agents. Everybody knew *who* the workers, or the peasants, or the bourgeoisie were. And - Marxists, at least - knew what it meant for the working class to become a “universal class”. But the very fact that the “enlarged conception of the working class” discusses who the workers are means that the correspondence between the intuitive level and structural analysis

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48 *Emancipation(s)* and *On Populist Reason* directly focus on this question. For the previous periods, see Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology”, p. 109-110, 141; “Towards a Theory of Populism”, in *Politics and Ideology*, p. 174-5, 195-7.

49 Ernesto Laclau, “Constructing Universality”, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 292.

50 Laclau, “Structure, History, and the Political”, p. 210; “Constructing Universality”, p. 298-99.

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no longer obtains. Most damaging: even if the enlarged conception of the working class were correct - which it is not - it would be impossible to derive from it any conclusion concerning “class politics”, for it speaks only about a *virtual* working class, corresponding to no specifiable group.<sup>51</sup>

If despite all this evidence, one is still not convinced that the time of the working class, and the classes in general, is long gone, there must be emotional reasons for this: “One could ask oneself why all these intellectual contortions to keep the notion of the centrality of the working class at any cost. It does not require a trained psychoanalyst to discover that the reason is mainly emotional, as the notion of the working class as the emancipatory subject is so deeply rooted in the political imaginary of the Left”.<sup>52</sup>

Pointing out that your opponent is behaving emotionally can be an effective rhetorical move, but in reality it is a weak argument. If an anti-capitalist (socialist) strategic political account is on the agenda, that is, if a line of struggle is to be formulated that covers not only struggles against the logic of capital but directly the labor-capital relationship, it will be strange if the working class does not occupy a central position in it. The fact that, while Post-Marxists such as Laclau and Mouffe were struggling to prove the irrationality of class politics on all grounds, the Thatcher government in England attacked the working class with a clear class strategy is, in Wood’s words, “the supreme irony”.<sup>53</sup>

## Results and beyond

We may still be living in a Post-Marxist era, but it is crucial not to forget that this is an era of defeat, and its end has come with the new conditions after 2008. Throughout this period we saw that it was possible to achieve some gains through particular struggles, but these were not permanent. A kind of Sisyphus effort indeed. Particularist identity politics is not only inefficient in the long run, but also serves the legitimacy and reproduction of capitalism itself. If we are going to wage an “anti-capitalist struggle”, which we should, we may have a chance only if we change the political ground. Interestingly, Laclau himself states that while particular struggles proliferate, the universal discourses to articulate them have declined; but he does not link this to the worldwide defeat of the working class and the contributions of Post-Marxism to this process.<sup>54</sup>

No one can deny the plural character of social struggles. Many forms of struggle called “particularist” have in practice enabled a significant part of the population to gain political experience in one way or another. These struggles, which vary widely in themselves, do exist. They do not have to disappear or to unite in a single movement. However, to achieve effective results, anti-capitalist hegemony politics is necessary. The destructive and irrational nature of capitalism, which has become

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51 Laclau, “Constructing Universality”, p. 298.

52 Laclau, “Constructing Universality”, p. 307, n. 5.

53 Wood, *Retreat from Class*, p. 182.

54 Laclau, “Structure, History, and the Political”, p. 209.

increasingly evident in the neoliberal era, forces different movements such as the ecology movement or the women's movement to an anti-capitalist orientation. And to formulate a genuine anti-capitalist strategy, it is necessary to take into account the "ontologically privileged" position of the working class in the capitalist relations of production.

The most basic socio-economic-political phenomenon of today is the dominance of capitalism around the world. As a result, wage labor has become the dominant form all over the world. In the 21st century, wage workers make up around 80-90 percent of the working population in the developed capitalist world. In countries like Turkey, this rate reaches 70 percent. We live in societies where the majority work for wages.

Contrary to Laclau's claim, the enlarged conception of the working class does not correspond to a virtual working class. Even the demands that can be seen as the demands of the working class in the narrow sense (a certain purchasing power, short working hours, humane working conditions, as well as democratic rights such as freedom of expression and the right to organize to express these demands, etc.), in fact, directly concern large sections of the people. However, a constructive strategy and effort are required to create a collective will.

Since the experiences of Marx and Engels in the 1848 revolutions, it is known that the hegemonic alliances to be established between the working class, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry are essential in the democratic revolution.<sup>55</sup> In the process, which gained the character of "permanent revolution" in Russia, a "worker-peasant alliance" was established under the leadership of the working class. At that time, the industrial working class was about five percent of the general population, by the most optimistic estimate.

In the hundred years since then, the peasant population has shrunk in many countries, while the working class has expanded, and the labor aristocracy and urban petty bourgeoisie have grown proportionally. We can say that the approach expressed as "identity politics" mainly reflects the needs and politics of these last two sections (the petty bourgeoisie and the labor aristocracy). This approach needs to be replaced by a working class-centered politics of hegemony. Today's enlarged working class is the most natural, logical *starting point* for an anti-capitalist hegemonic project.

If we take the "universal" literally in the particular-universal relation, no politics other than socialism can be suitable for this role. Nationalism, religious ideologies, conservatism (which can be considered a combination of the former two), and liberalism (positioned almost everywhere as the world view of the elite class), etc., no ideology, no politics has the potential to be as universal as socialism. On the contrary, these are elements that divide humanity within itself and make the parts hostile to each other. On the other hand, the human rights discourse, which is generally included in liberal politics, is not very suitable because it does not exclude anyone. Universality in politics does not mean covering everybody without exception. It

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<sup>55</sup> August H. Nimtz, *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000, p. x, 51, 288, 297.

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seems that the only way for a large mass to unite is to unite against a particular adversary. The slogans of the Occupy protests in the USA such as “We are the 99 percent” were accurate in this respect. The fact that the overwhelming majority of this 99 percent is worker-laborers (the ratio of wage-earners in total employment in the USA exceeds 90 percent) shows that the “worker” identity can be a practical and natural pillar in the construction of a common identity of “us”.

The fact that the vast majority of the population is proletarian does not mean that the working class automatically becomes the “people”. Working-class organizations, content with expressing the interests of the class in the narrow sense, do not *thus* become the representatives of the people. Many social movements were forced into an anti-capitalist orientation due to the negative effects of the logic of capital, but on the other hand, because of their specific problem areas and the fact that socialism was far from being a center of attraction, they continued their traditions of organizing and acting separately. A genuine politics of hegemony requires working-class organizations to be able to go beyond their narrow perspectives.

When we look at the structure of the working class today, we see that the heterogeneity within it has increased as a result of its expansion. On the other hand, as a result of neoliberal policies, an opposite dynamic has started and heterogeneity has begun to decrease both within countries and throughout the world. Claims that a new era, a “precariat” era has begun, in which the majority meets in the lower strata of the working class, reflect an important truth (provided we agree that the precariat is part of the “proletariat”). This indicates that a project of hegemony based on the unprivileged layers of workers has a high chance of success.

We can expect a partial decline in cultural identity demands, and an increase in class-based projects and demands in the upcoming period. If the arguments here are correct, it turns out that Post-Marxism was wrong on another issue: The theory that belongs to a certain period of history and that seems to be valid only for a while was not Marxism. On the contrary, Post-Marxism turns out to be a theory peculiar to the era of defeat. We are in a period where the inefficiency and deadlock of identity politics are becoming increasingly visible. Class politics has a bright future ahead.