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Ideology and post-Marxism

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ABSTRACT   *The article traces the emergence within post-Marxism of the notions of antagonism and heterogeneity out of dissatisfaction with the tension exhibited by Marxism between objectivity and class antagonism. The rhetoric of discourse and the representation of antagonistic relations are discussed, and the consequently crucial role of the 'empty signifier' is offered as a unifying name for radically contingent features rather than as a concept with a common core. The political is thus seen as the world of contingent articulations, and it is popular in the sense that it is a nodal re-aggregation of plural demands. Ideology is the representational, metaphorical and precarious closure that stabilizes meaning within specific contexts.*

The editor has asked me to provide an account of the theoretical approach which I have developed in a variety of publications over the last twenty years. In attempting to do so I intend to present an articulation as systematic as possible of the main categories associated with discourse theory in the way in which it has been conceived by myself and by a series of other scholars. It is in the global architectonics of this articulation, rather than in the particular theses composing it, where the contribution of this essay is to be found.

   The starting point of our reflection was an ambiguity to be found in the Marxist conception of history, which had been very often pointed out but which, in our view, had not received the systematic treatment that it deserved. It was the following: history was for Marx, in the first place, an entirely objective process dominated by the contradiction between the development of productive forces and the successive systems of relations of production constitutive of social organisation. The epitome of this objectivist vision was the 'Preface' to the *Critique of Political Economy*, where social antagonisms play a clearly secondary role, being only the distorted reflection of an underlying necessary logic. On the other hand, however, Marxism also asserted that the history of humanity was the history of class struggle, to quote the famous formulation of the *Manifesto*. How to bring these two visions into unity? My increasing conviction became that

this was an impossible task, and that the so-called 'crisis of Marxism' was, to a large extent, the result of this impossibility. By the 1970s this objectivist vision was entirely discredited. The labour theory of value, on which it was grounded, was shown to be plagued by all kinds of theoretical inconsistencies; the key prediction of an increasing simplification of the social structure under capitalism was entirely disproved; and the complexity of social and political identities in a globalised world challenged any narrow, 'class based' perspective.

What, however, about the second vision, the one that challenged a petrified notion of social relations by asserting the centrality of social antagonisms—'class struggle', in Marx's terms? Although the 'class' limits of that vision could certainly be equally put into question, the centrality of the antagonistic moment had lost none of its relevance. It required, it is true, a new awareness of what is involved in an antagonistic relation and, especially, a thinking of that relation which did not subordinate it to the precise locations assigned to it by the objectivist conception. This is the starting point of our Post-Marxism.

So how to conceive of what an antagonist relation is? For the objectivist conception this was an entirely secondary issue, because the logic of history *passed through* but was not *constituted by* antagonisms. But if the latter are seen as primarily constitutive of the social fabric, the determination of their ontological status becomes a central theoretical issue. We started, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, by referring to the Kantian distinction between real opposition and contradiction, none of which we saw as being able to grasp what is involved in a social antagonism. Contradiction, as Kant pointed out, can only take place between concepts. This is why an idealist philosophy like Hegel's, which reduces the real to the concept, could conceive of antagonisms as contradictions; but, as the Della Volpian school in Italy pointed out, this is incompatible with a materialist philosophy like Marxism, which asserts the extra-mental character of the real. However, although we agreed on this point with the Della Volpians, we could not follow them in their second thesis, according to which social antagonisms should be conceived in terms of the Kantian real opposition (*Realrepugnanz*), for the simple reason that real oppositions are not in the least antagonistic. There is nothing antagonistic in the clash between two stones. In that case, however, if neither contradiction nor real opposition has the right credentials to intellectually grasp what is involved in an antagonism, how could we conceive of the latter?

This was the point in which our approach took a radical turn. While both contradiction and real opposition are objective relations—between conceptual objects in the first case, between real objects in the second—antagonisms, for us, are not objective relations but a kind of relation in which the limits in the constitution of any objectivity are shown. How so? From the viewpoint of each of the two antagonistic forces, its opponent is not an objective presence, completing the fullness of one's own identity, but represents, on the contrary, that which makes impossible reaching such a fullness. This means that, as far as we remain within the perspective of each of the two antagonistic forces, the moment *strictu senso* of the clash, far from being objective, indicates the impossibility of society of reaching a full objectivity. To conceive of antagonisms as objective would

require the viewpoint of an objective observer, who would see in them an expression of a deeper objectivity escaping the consciousness of the two forces in conflict. This is the task performed by the Hegelian 'cunning of Reason'. But it is exactly the temptation that we have to resist if we are going to see antagonisms as *constitutive* and not *derivative*.

The notion of antagonism as a *limit* of objectivity is, however, only a starting point. A set of issues connected with the notion of 'limit' immediately arises. Let us refer to some of them. Firstly, how exactly to conceive of a limit? If what is beyond the limit is in *pari materia* with what is this side of it, the limit would be a sham, it would just be an internal differentiation within a single space of representation. So a *true* limit should interrupt that space, it should be radically *heterogeneous* with it. We have thus introduced the notion of 'heterogeneity' which, however, is far from transparent and whose true implications can only be approached through a series of steps attempting to unveil its true implications. We could start with a transcendental question: How has an entity to be so that its limits are really heterogeneous—i.e. that they imply a radical interruption of a space of representation? There is a precondition for such an interruption, which is that the gap that it involves should not be the one taking place between regional fields of representation—whose differentiation would itself be fully representable—but should be rather an aporia internal to the principle of representation as such. This precondition already excludes a set of candidates as possible paradigms of the basic ontological terrain. All notions of a limit as grounded in *positive* differences are, of course, incompatible with the idea of a radical limit (positive differences presuppose a ground within which they are constituted, so they cannot apprehend what a *radical* limit is). But, for the same reason, dialectical contradictions should be excluded: as in any dialectical contradiction (A—not A) the precondition is that I have in 'A' everything I need to make the transition to 'not A', dialectics has to postulate a single space of representation within which that transition is to take place. Heterogeneity in the radical sense that we are postulating is incompatible with both dialectics (based on contradiction) and with simple opposition (based on contrariety). With this we reach again the conclusion at which we had already arrived: neither contradiction nor real opposition are compatible with the notion of 'limit' that antagonism, as based on radical heterogeneity, requires. So what we need is an ontological terrain in which the failure inherent to representability (the moment of clash present in antagonism which, as we have said, escapes direct representation) becomes itself representable, even if only through the traces of non-representability within the representable (as in Kant's noumenon: an object which shows itself through the impossibility of its adequate representation).

Let us enumerate more precisely the transcendental conditions of a terrain in which the notion of antagonism as limit of objectivity can be inscribed. The first and more important one is that what is inscribable within such a terrain should be wider than the field of objective relations (otherwise we would be confined to the exclusive alternative real opposition/dialectical contradiction). Second, what is actually inscribable within that terrain should not be just what is representable, but also the ultimate inner impossibility of representability as such (otherwise

we would not have transcended the field of objectivity). Third, the 'entities' constructed around the limit of objectivity could not be *conceptually* graspable (if they were there would be, again, positive objects). Fourth, whatever primacy any entity has over the others, it cannot be the one inherent to a hierarchy within a specifiable differential universe (which necessarily presupposes objective relations other than the non-relational relations that we are looking for). The first condition is met by the notion of *discourse*: the second by that of *empty signifier*; the third by the concept of the *name* as the ground of the thing; the fourth by the notions of *unevenness* and *radical investment*, best shown by the Lacanian notion of object *a* and by the logic of hegemony, which are ultimately identical. Let us summarise the argument around these four conditions.

What does a non-relational relation mean? One that is not inscribable within the field of objectivity because its function is, precisely, to subvert that field. Or, what is the same, one that destabilises the givenness of entities. A clash between two social forces, if we remain at the level of their physical materiality, would entirely belong within the field of the ontically given. This means that the negation of the fullness of being resulting from antagonism expresses itself *through* that field but consists of something beyond it. The presence of the antagonistic other prevents me from fully being myself. So what is necessary is an ontological terrain within which that distance from myself resulting from antagonism could be inscribed. This terrain is what we have called *discourse* and, as we have pointed out several times, it is not restricted to speech and writing but embraces all systems of signification. It is, in that sense, coterminous with social life. The notion of 'language games' in Wittgenstein, which covers both the use of words and the actions which are associated with it, is close to what we understand by 'discourse'. Our project differs, however, from Wittgenstein's as far as we try to explore the ontological implications of linguistic categories— such as 'signifier/signified', 'paradigm/syntagm', etc.—which cease in that way to be merely regional categories of a linguistics conceived in a narrow sense. In some respects we could say that, if we are searching for a terrain in which the subversion of identities resulting from antagonistic relations could be represented, rhetoric should be a privileged field for our inquiry, given that it consists, precisely, in the distancing of all literal meaning as a result of the tropological movement. This is undoubtedly true, but we must add the crucial proviso that rhetoricity is not a literary adornment, external to language, but an internal part of linguistic functioning. Roman Jakobson, for instance, in a decisive turn, has associated metaphor and metonymy with the paradigmatic and syntagmatic poles of language respectively, grounded in relations of substitution and combination. This turn is crucial for our attempt at presenting the discursive terrain as the primary ontological one.

This first step in the direction of a discursive/rhetorical ontology is a necessary one but not, however, sufficient. If we remained at this point we would have simply replaced a dialectic or positivist ontology by a semiotic one, but such replacement would have not made much headway in the direction of explaining antagonistic relations. Language is, according to Saussure, a system of differences,

and the latter are, in their interconnections, as objective as the relations of contradiction and real opposition that we have discarded. Something more is needed for our purpose. Let us go back for a moment to rhetorics. According to Cicero, we must appeal to figural language because there are more objects in the world to be named than words at our disposal. This is for him, of course, an empirical deficiency, but if it could be shown that there is in the structure of signification something of the nature of a *constitutive* impossibility, if signification requires the presence of something which cannot be signified as its essential precondition, we would have moved a step further towards the solution of our riddle (the antagonistic clash, which cannot be directly represented as an objective moment, could perhaps be signified in a different way if language has other modes of signification than a direct, objective representation).

The arsenal of rhetoric has a mode of signification which does away with the complementarity literal/figural. It is what is called *catachresis* (a figural term to which no literal one corresponds). Obliqueness is constitutive of catachrestical signification. For reasons I cannot elaborate now there are grounds to think that catachresis is not a specific trope but the mark of rhetoricity as such, present in all tropes. The literal would simply be a term which conceals the traces of its own rhetoricity, so that rhetoricity would be constitutive of language.

Why so? Because for reasons that I have given elsewhere[1] no system of signification can close itself otherwise than through catachrestical displacements. The whole argument is developed in that essay and I will not repeat it here. I will just enumerate its logical steps. They are as follows: (1) language (and by extension all systems of signification) being essentially differential, its closure is the precondition of signification being possible at all. (2) Any closure, however, requires the establishment of limits, and no limit can be drawn without, simultaneously, positing what is beyond it. (3) But as the system is the system of *all* differences, what is beyond the limit can only be of the nature of an exclusion. (4) The exclusion operates, nonetheless, in a contradictory way: it is, on the one hand, that which makes possible the system of differences as a totality; but, on the other, *vis-à-vis* the excluded element, the differences are no longer merely differential but equivalential to each other. This tension being logically unavoidable, the systemic totality is an object which is, at the same time, impossible and necessary. Impossible: the tension between equivalence and difference being insurmountable, there is no literal object corresponding to that totality. Necessary: without that object there would be no signification. (5) Conclusion: the impossible object would have to be represented, but this representation would have to be *essentially* distorted and figural. This is the point in which catachresis enters the scene. The possible means of this distorted communication are only the particular differences. So one of them, without ceasing to be particular, has to incarnate that impossible totality. Seen from a certain angle, this is the production of an *empty signifier*: it signifies a totality which is literally impossible. Seen from another angle, this is a *hegemonic* operation (or the construction of a Master signifier in the Lacanian sense): a certain particularity transforms its own body in the representation of an incommensurable totality.

We have now all the necessary elements to define what is involved in an antagonistic relation. The moment of the antagonistic clash, which cannot be directly represented, can however be signified—positivised, if you want—through the production of an empty signifier (or two, rather; one at each side of the antagonistic frontier). The camp belonging to one's own identity, which cannot close itself around its ontic particularity because of the presence of the antagonistic force, has to signify itself through a chain of equivalences between its internal contents and through the production of an empty signifier with no signified, for it represents the impossible fullness of the community. And what each of the forces in conflict will see at the other side of the antagonistic frontier will not be a purely ontic content either; that content would just be a means of representation of something different from itself: the anti-community. This gap between ontic *means* of representation is pregnant of a multiplicity of political consequences, the most important being the essential instability of any equivalential chain: no empty signifier can fully control which are the links which will be part of that chain. We see now clearly how the limit of objectivity that the antagonistic clash represents can be signified. Such signification will involve a permanent catachrestical movement. Although the clash has no direct, objective representation, it will show itself through its subversion of the field of objectivity. We are not far away from Lacan's notion of the subversion of the Symbolic by the Real.

There are two other transcendental conditions that the antagonistic relation has to fulfil if it is going to be theoretically perspicuous. The first concerns the theoretical status of the empty signifier. The answer to this question would normally be quite simple: we are dealing with a concept. If the question was concerned with the position of the notion of 'empty signifier' within a theoretical structure, there is no doubt that, whatever that position would be, we would be referring to an entity of a conceptual nature. But the question is not that. The question is about the relation of an empty signifier to the objects it groups under its denomination. We know that any conceptual grouping should be conceived as a *subsumption*. There is something that the concept expresses which is reproduced without alteration in each of the instances of its application. The concept cannot be anything but a universal, and the instances realising it must necessarily reproduce something identical in all of them, a hard common positive core beyond their particularistic variations. Now, what happens if that common core is absent, if the ground of an equivalential relationship is not given by any positive feature underlying the various individual social demands but by their common opposition to something that negates all of them? Here we reach the kernel of an antagonistic relation: the components of each pole of the antagonism are not united by any shared positive feature (in that case we would be dealing with a purely *objective* unity), but by the opposition of all of them to the force with which they are confronted. So the empty signifier—the term which unifies the ensemble of those components—cannot be a concept, for the relation it establishes with the instances it regroups is not one of *conceptual* subsumption. As we know, what is essential in a conceptual subsumption (Kant's determinative judgement would be a typical

expression) is that the rule should precede the instances of its application. But the subsumption of a plurality of equivalential links under an empty signifier cannot be a conceptual operation, because of the heterogeneity of those links, whose only common feature is of a negative nature. In that case, if the connection of the empty signifier with the instances it covers is not of a conceptual nature, of what nature is it?

It is a *name*. Let me briefly explain how I see the difference between a nominal and a conceptual order. The central issue is: how do names refer to objects? In my book *On Populist Reason*[2] I have addressed this issue, arguing that the two main approaches—descriptivism and anti-descriptivism—part their ways on the crucial issue of whether or not that reference involves a conceptual mediation. The classical descriptivist position—in its various formulations, from John Stuart Mill to Bertrand Russell—asserts that any objective reference involves a conceptual mediation: every name is associated with a set of descriptive features, so that when I find an object in the world showing those features, I apply that name to it. So we are fully within the realm of the Kantian determinative judgement: without the descriptive features functioning as a rule for assigning a name to an object, that assignation would be entirely arbitrary. The second perspective is the anti-descriptivist approach, linked to the work of Saul Kripke and his followers: here the conceptual mediation is absent; naming is a primal baptism, not grounded on any universal rule. Needless to say, our view, which definitely moves away from the notion of conceptual subsumption, clearly locates itself within the anti-descriptivist camp. With one proviso, however. If primal baptism involves assigning a name to an object without any kind of conceptual mediation, a problem, however, persists: is the unity of the object something *given*, so that the name rubber-stamps something already achieved before the process of naming it, or, instead, does the unity of the object result from the act of naming it? Everything we have said about 'empty signifiers' already announces that only the second is, for us, a valid alternative. To put it in Lacanian terms: the unity of the object is only the retroactive effect of naming it. And we can easily see why. If the various determining components of an object shared some essential features preceding the act of naming it, the act of naming would be ancillary to a conceptual mediation. But if those features are heterogeneous and, as a result, radically contingent, the unity of the object has no other ground than the act of naming it. This explains our thesis that *the name is the ground of the thing*. And shows also why no conceptual subsumption can account for the type of unity achieved by an empty signifier within a discursive terrain.

One more structural moment of our approach requires stressing. We have so far indicated how the Real subverts a symbolic fabric, how the limit of objectivity acts retroactively over the latter, distorting its internal coherence. The key of this distortion is to be found in the production of empty signifiers. They—this is a key feature—have an irradiation effect which goes beyond any determinable structural location. This means that the investment they receive cannot be one more structural determination for in that case it would be fully objective and the disruptive effect that they bring about would be lost. It is because of that that we

speak of *radical investment*. It is 'radical' because it fully comes from outside and it is 'investment'—almost in a financial sense—because you endow one structural element with a value which does not derive from its location within the structure. This is the reason why all attempts at privileging one structural element over the other—the famous 'determination in the last instance' by the economy, for instance—entirely miss the point. That determination could only be an objective effect, and could not explain the limitation of objectivity which results from an antagonistic presence.

In that case, what is the nature of an investment which is truly radical? In our view, it can only be of an *affective* nature. This assertion requires, however, a precautionary warning. It would be wrong to think that signification would be on the side of objectivity while the affective investment would be a force entirely alien to the signifying process. As I have tried to show in my work[3] this would be a fallacious division because, first, signification requires affect, as far as the paradigmatic pole of language—which Saussure, revealingly, called 'associative'—requires substitutions only possible in terms of an individual experience; and, second, affect is not a force fully constituted outside signification, but only exists through the differential cathexis of a signifying chain. This is the point in which I have tried to link the logic of hegemony to that of the object *a* in Lacanian theory, especially in the way in which it has been presented in the work of Joan Copjec.[4] According to Lacan, sublimation is to elevate an object to the dignity of the Thing (of the Freudian Thing, of course). This means that a certain partial object ceases to be a partiality within a totality—which would reduce it to mere moment within a global structure—and becomes a partiality which *is* the totality. But this is nothing else than the role that we have attributed to the 'empty signifier' in the constitution of a hegemonic formation. So the logics of the object *a* and that of hegemony are not simply homologous: they are identical, as both show how structural effects are possible which, however, are not structurally determined. It is important to fully realise the consequences of this last assertion. In order to have a full overlap between structural determination and structural effects, the structure should be *causa sui;* it should be, in other terms, some kind of Spinozean eternity. And, indeed, that is what is presupposed by all theories which made the mode of production the *fundamentum inconcussum* of the social. As soon, however, as we subvert this self-determination through the presence of a heterogeneous other—as is the case in antagonism—structural effects tend to distance themselves from structural determination—which is the same as saying that the latter is a system of power which, like all power, is exercised over something external to itself. In other terms: once self-determination is over, any structural configuration is going to have conditions of existence that are not generated by itself. In the case of the mode of production this means that, as those conditions of existence are not themselves the result of any determination in the last instance, they are going to be internal to the articulated whole that they help to constitute. This is the reason why the notion of 'mode of production' has to be replaced by that of 'hegemonic formation'.

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We can, at this point, return to the question of the transition from Marxism to post-Marxism. The starting point was, as we have indicated, the ultimate incompatibility between the two premises which constituted the terrain of classical Marxism: the vision of history as a story unified by the contradiction between development of productive forces and the various systems of relations of production—a development which was centred in necessary laws; and the notion of a centrality of class struggle—which opened, at least potentially, the possibility of contingent outcomes. If the contradictory nature of these two premises remained concealed for a long time it was because of the way in which they were articulated in Marxist discourse: the objectivist component had the upper hand and established limits to the full expansion of the logic implicit in the notion of social antagonism. One can only think of the role that the category of 'historical necessity' played in the Marxism of the Second International to see the limits that it put on political creativity and imagination. Once, however, the faith in that historical necessity was weakened, the dams represented by Marxist dogmas were breached in every direction. One has, however, to point out that this was not a collapse but, rather, an orderly overflow: it was simply the development of the potential contained in the centrality of class struggle as motor of historical change once it was no longer limited by the premise of an objectively determined limit. The movement from Marxism to post-Marxism is, to a large extent, the story of this transition.

It is, perhaps, paradoxical, that the first casualty in this transition was the very notion which had made it possible: the centrality of 'class struggle'. How so? The reason is to be found in the inner heterogeneity which we have found as inhabiting the notion of social antagonism. If antagonism could have been explained in a dialectical manner (A—not A), there would have been no problem: both the clash and the agents of the clash would have been determined in the same movement. But we have already explained the reasons why a dialectical transition is radically impotent to explain what goes on in an antagonistic confrontation. If we move, however, to the heterogeneity that we have found at the heart of this antagonistic relation, if its two poles do not belong to the same space of representation, in that case there is no way to root the notion of struggle to a particular social category such as 'class'.

Let us see the true dimensions of a heterogeneous relation. As I have pointed out elsewhere, there is no way of finding the moment of radical heterogeneity in a dialectical transition. Let us see, for instance, the notion that capitalist relations of production are inherently antagonistic. For a dialectical conception which reduces antagonism to contradiction, the first task should be to find a homogeneous terrain within which the contradiction could emerge. To do this I have to reduce the capitalist to an economic category—buyer of labour power—and the same in the case of the worker—seller of labour power. The conclusion was that this relation is intrinsically antagonistic because the capitalist extracts surplus value from the worker. But this conclusion is unwarranted. The relation only becomes antagonistic if the worker *resists* the extraction of surplus value, but I can analyse the category of 'seller of labour power' as much as I like and I will still be unable

to logically derive from it the category of 'resistance'. So the very reduction of capitalist and worker to economic categories that the construction of a homogeneous space of dialectical mediation requires makes it impossible to think of the specifically antagonistic moment of the relation. Why could an antagonism, however, exist between workers and capitalists? Because of the way the worker is constituted *outside* the relations of production (the fact that below a certain level of wages he/she cannot live a decent life, etc.). But in that case the conflict is not *inherent* to the relations of production but *between* the relations of production and the way social agents are constituted outside them. The conclusion is clear: the two spaces of representation (the worker's and the capitalist's) are radically heterogeneous, so that the terrain within which a dialectical mediation would have been possible has broken up.

From here the consequences rapidly follow. Once we have concluded that an antagonism presupposes two heterogeneous spaces of representation which are not dialectically mediated there is no reason to assume that locations within the relations of production are going to be privileged points to antagonistic confrontation. Capitalist development creates many others: ecological crises, imbalances between different sectors of the economy, imperialist exploitation, etc. In that case, the subjects of an 'anti-capitalist' struggle are many and cannot be reduced to a category as simple as that of 'class'. We are going to have a plurality of struggles. Struggles in our society tend to proliferate the more we move into a globalized era, but they are less and less 'class' struggles. Could we argue that, however, there is in capitalist societies—as Marx believed in the 19th century—an inner tendency to the simplification of social structure, so that we are advancing towards a situation in which we would have, as the final showdown of history, a simple confrontation between workers and capitalists? To take a brief glance at what goes on in contemporary societies is enough to brush aside this objection without further ado.

One consequence of our analysis is that we have to assert the primacy of politics in the structuration of social spaces. No question any longer of infrastructural logics which, at our backs, would determine the future of our societies. The *political*—the world of contingent articulations—is, it is true, limited by the *social*—the field of sedimented social practices—but the social automatisms of the latter have a decreasing influence in determining the structuration of our communities. The effects, again, of globalisation are clearly visible in this area.

A second consequence is that political actors are *always* going to be, to some extent, *popular* actors. We understand by a 'people' a collective actor resulting from the equivalential reaggregation of a plurality of demands around a nodal point or empty signifier (we have already explained this last category). There are two limits to the constitution of popular actors that we should briefly consider. The first is linked to the sectorialisation of social demands. The heterogeneity linked to social antagonisms can never generate unlimited equivalential chains except at periods of organic crises. In that way the 'populistic' inscription of a demand is always going to find limits which, however, conjuncturally vary. We have thus a tension between the ability of a group to act hegemonically over other sectors and

its objective location in a system of relations which puts limits to this hegemonic opening. A trade union, for instance, can act as a rallying point for a variety of other social demands, but the fact that it has to defend the interest of the workers within a very precise institutional framework can act as a fetter to its hegemonic ambitions. The whole Gramscian dialectic between 'corporative' and 'hegemonic' class is the best representation of this tension. (When we are speaking of the structural limitations imposed by a certain framework we are not going back to the 'objectivist' infrastructure that we have criticised. We are not saying that those structural limitations are a bedrock of history whose contradictions would explain the course of the latter, but that any social situation is the result of a negotiation between a symbolic framework and a heterogeneous other that undermines it.)

We have been referring so far to the possibilities and obstacles in creating an anti-system mobilisation. Our second consequence concerns the opposite movement: the reaction to antagonistic mobilisations from those in power. Their general politics can be summarised in one formula: to de-mobilise the underdog. The anti-political move *par excellence* consists in obtaining, as much as possible, a situation in which all interests become corporative, preventing the formation of a 'people'. The Saint-Simonian formula: 'from the government of men to the administration of things' is a clear expression of this trend. In my book on populism I have mentioned that in Mexico during the rule of the PRI, the government was relatively flexible when confronted with individual demands. What it did not tolerate is what they called '*el paquete*' (the parcel)—that is, a global set of demands equivalentially articulated, which would have implied a major political turn. However, there is also possible a populism from power, whenever a major initiative involving drastic changes in the institutional system requires popular mobilisation.

We can, at this point, turn for the last time to the history of Marxism to see how the 'institutionalist' and the 'populist' moments were combined in producing ambiguous political effects. To start with, Marxism was the epitome of the refusal to endorse any kind of populistic reaggregation. The revolutionary perspective was, however, maintained, because just concentrating on the defence of the interests of the workers and letting the 'necessary laws of history' do the rest, they would end up representing the vast mass of the population once the process of proletarianisation had reached a certain level. The combination between the illusory character of this prognostic and the actual politics which made it possible—the defence of the corporative interests of the workers—had paralysing political effects. The trade union location, far from being some kind of 'free territory', was part of the institutional system of the country, so that when the latter was threatened, as happened in 1914, 'national' solidarity prevailed over 'class' ideology. With the division of the working class movement and the emergence of the Komintern, the poverty of pure 'classism' was shown even more clearly: a zigzag oscillation between ultra leftist adventurism and opportunistic accommodation with the status quo was the trade mark of Communist politics. The 'bolshevisation' of the Communist parties in the 1920s sealed the destiny of this essentially anti-hegemonic orientation. It was only in the few cases in which

Stalinist control was relaxed and some Communist movements managed to transform themselves in nodal points of a wider national and popular collective will that the outcome was other than a disastrous defeat. Mao's Long March and Tito's partisan war were perhaps the two main victorious experiences which constructed wider popular identities and showed the limitations of a pure 'class struggle' strategy. Gramsci's theorisation, centred on the notions of 'hegemony' and 'collective will', was the main expression of an alternative strategy which found, however, few followers.

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There is a last point to which we have to refer. What about 'ideology', which appears in the title of this essay? Within the Marxist terrain, there have been two main notions of ideology and both, in my view should be rejected. The first is the notion of 'false consciousness'; the second, that of ideology as a necessary level of any social formation. The first is linked with the possibility of a 'true' consciousness by a humanity reconciled with itself—and in some of its versions, ideology is opposed to science. The essentialism of this vision has entirely discredited it. As for the second, it is too much linked to the notion of a naturalistic infrastructure being reflected in distorted ideas in the mind of people, to have any purchase for contemporary theorisation. We are however reluctant to entirely abandon the notion of ideology. I think it can be maintained if its meaning is given, however, a particular twist. As we have seen, there is something essentially catachrestical in any precarious stabilisation of meaning. Any 'closure' is necessarily tropological. This means that those discursive forms that construct a horizon of all possible representation within a certain context, which establish the limits of what is 'sayable' are going to be necessarily figurative. They are, as Hans Blumenberg called them, 'absolute metaphors', a gigantic *as if*. This closing operation is what I would still call *ideological* which, in my vocabulary, as should be clear, has not the slightest pejorative connotation.

Notes and References

1. See my essay 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics', *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996).
2. E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), chapter 4.
3. E. Laclau, 'Glimpsing the future', in S. Critchley and O. Marchart (Eds), *Laclau. A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004).
4. J. Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).