

# 'What's Left of politics ?'

*An inquiry into the state of the social critique*

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*“What distinguishes political defeats from military and sporting defeats is that they are potentially interminable. In an armed confrontation the balance of forces turns in favour of one of the belligerents at some point, and the fighting stops. In sport the scale of the defeat is always limited by the exhaustion of the time allocated to the contest. In the political domain, by contrast, defeat can continue indefinitely, which amounts to saying that the gains of the labour movement - democratic and social rights - are infinitely destroyable”*  
(Razmig Keuchayan 2013: 31 - 32).

## SUMMARY

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Critical theory as a whole does not currently contribute satisfactorily to the building of an efficient counter hegemony to the current neoliberal hegemony. More specifically, while abandoning very problematic aspects of earlier Marxist inspired traditions of critical theories, critical theory also lost its ability to formulate normative critiques of the political economy around which effective collective action can be organised. This critique has already been formulated concerning the Frankfurt School tradition (Azmanova 2013) and the second wave of feminism (Fraser 2013). However, more work should be done in this direction with regard to poststructuralist critical theory.

My starting research questions were: What should an effective (social) critique be? How can intellectuals contribute to the (social) critique and, more specifically, to the elaboration of a counter hegemony to the currently dominant neoliberal hegemony? The first and main contribution of this thesis is to demonstrate that it is possible and desirable to develop structural analysis of the economy, which normatively challenges the neoliberal hegemony and enable collective action, while preserving the main takeaways from poststructuralism: *non-essentialism*, *non-determinism* and *non-totalitarianism*. I also point to institutionalist theory which already exists and enables us to develop such a structural yet contingent analysis of the economy.

Secondly, I stress that too much attention is currently devoted in the studied literature to 'second order theorisation about politics. If the goal is to challenge the currently dominant neoliberal hegemony, then much more attention should be devoted to politics. The second contribution of this thesis is to propose a way to structure this reflexion about politics by disentangling it along four dimensions: that of collective identification (the 'who' question), of the political objectives (the 'for what' question) and finally that of strategy and coordination (the 'how' question). I also propose my own understanding of politics, and compare it to that of the four poststructuralist authors studied: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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RS Régulation School  
PRT Power Resource Theory

## INTRODUCTION

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The neoliberal hegemony has survived the 2007-2008 financial crisis (Mirowski 2013). This demonstrates that crises or social pathologies, to use the language of the Frankfurt School, do not on their own trigger political change (Dardot and Laval 2016; Pleyers 2010). Rather, following Berman (2013), I posit that this resilience of neoliberalism is to be explained by the absence or weakness of a counter hegemony able to challenge the neoliberal one, and thereby to reactivate an effective social critique. Although stemming from the classical liberal tradition, neoliberals rejected its conception of the state as a nightwatchman (e.g. Dardot and Laval 2009). Friedrich Hayek, Wilhelm Röpke, Eucken Eucken, Milton Friedman and James Buchanan, the founding figures of neoliberalism, had in common the belief that government intervention was necessary, but should also be primarily dedicated to facilitating the smooth and efficient functioning of markets (e.g. Mirowski and Plehwe 2015; Jones 2014). As stressed by Dardot and Laval (2009), *competition* is the key term of this currently dominant discursive formation.

In established western democracies, the social and economic conditions of a growing number of citizens has massively deteriorated. Among other things, the comeback of 'Balzacian' income and wealth inequalities, and their continuous rise, has been put under the spotlight (eg. Atkinson 2015; Credit Suisse 2016; IMF 2008; 2011; Piketty 2014; Saez 2014). The above mentioned degradation of the socio-economic condition has, up to now, not been translated into an efficient collective action able to challenge it. Concretely, the social critique, *i.e.* the critique denouncing the misery and inequalities generated by the capitalist system, has been historically weak. As Boltanski and Chiapello mentioned almost a decade ago (1999 [2007]: xxxv), "social critique has never seemed as helpless as it did during the last fifteen years, whether in eliciting indignation, but without backing it up with alternative proposals; or (most frequently) in simply giving up denouncing a situation whose problematic character (to say the very least) is inescapable, as if its inevitability was tacitly admitted".

Critical theorists have also struggled to tackle these problems convincingly. In an article titled "*Crisis? Capitalism Is Doing Very Well. What About Critical Theory?*", Albenaz Azmanova stressed the urgency for Critical Theory<sup>1</sup> to focus again on "the structural features of the socio-economic model" (2013: 360) in order to link social injustices with broader structural dynamics. In the same vein, Nancy Fraser (2013) criticised the second-wave of feminism for having put aside "bread and butter issues", while rightfully bringing in non-economically related concerns such as domestic violence, sexual assault or reproductive oppression (instead of simply extending the agenda of the critique). Azmanova and Fraser have in common the attempt to question the economy while preserving the benefits of critical theories which went beyond the economicism of Marxism. A similar theme is tackled in this thesis, but concerning another body of critical literature: poststructuralism. Opening new research avenues by showing that *an efficient counter hegemony to the prevalent neoliberal hegemony can be articulated while maintaining the main insights coming from*

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<sup>1</sup> Critical Theory (in capital letters) being understood as the social criticism following the steps of the so-called Frankfurt School, initiated at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in the 1930s.

*poststructuralism (non-essentialism, non-determinism and non-totalitarianism)* constitutes the **main goal** of this thesis. This is also my first and main contribution to the literature. Poststructuralism will be addressed through the work of four authors: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.

My starting **research questions** were: What should an effective (social) critique be? How can intellectuals contribute to the (social) critique and, more specifically, to the elaboration of a counter hegemony to the currently dominant neoliberal hegemony? To pursue this aim, different types of **literature** are brought together. As mentioned above, the main body of literature addressed is poststructuralist critical continental philosophy, which I addressed exclusively through the work of Foucault, Derrida, Mouffe and Laclau. However, to build my arguments I will also use various empirical literature ranging from more classical political science (e.g. Mair 2008) to ethnographic enquiries of social movements (Pleyers 2010) or history (e.g. Gross 2001). Finally, a special attention is devoted what I call 'broad institutionalism' to designate institutional theory coming crossing various disciplines, ranging from economics (eg. Aglietta 1976; Boyer 1986; Lippit 2010), political science (eg. Hacker 2004; Thelen and Mahoney 2010), to economic sociology (eg. Boltanski and Thevenot 1991; Streeck 2014). This incursion into institutional theory is not simply destined to nourish the empirical 'data'. Indeed, I will also support the claim that this type of institutional and evolutionary theory could serve as an adequate framework for structural analysis of the economy that are not present in poststructuralism, without contradicting its main insights. In the rest of the introduction, the **step-by-step unfolding of my argument**, as well as the structure of the thesis is presented.

My starting point was that to be effective, a counter hegemony, should include 1) a structural analysis of the political-economy, and 2) a form of normativity challenging the current neoliberal hegemony 3) around which collective mobilization can be organised. By *structural analysis* I mean that such an analysis should be able to account for the institutional structure of society, meaning the regularities and rules that lie beyond individual action (but which they concur to co-construct) and nevertheless condition their life and possibilities. By *normative*, I have in mind the articulation of motives of indignation and complaint formulated in sufficiently general terms to form a basis on which to organise collective action directed towards change. Finally, by collective action I mean actions that are coordinated in some way, involving more than one person and seeking to achieve a common objective. The relevance of these conditions are defended in the **first chapter**, mainly on empirical grounds, providing at the same time a short summary of the current disarmament of the social critique, and the left more broadly. The crucial relevance of collective action, not only for the social critique, but also for the left in general, will also be defended theoretically (section 1.1.4).

Such a counter hegemony should also be '*non-essentialist*', '*non-deterministic*' and '*non-totalitarian*', which I take as the main takeaway from poststructuralism. By non-essentialist I mean the rejection of claims that presupposes an inner essence (also called a 'center') to objects, people or phenomena. The exigency of non-determinism is developed at two levels. Both historical determinism (pretending to know the 'necessary' laws of history) and determinism concerning the role of specific subjects in history is rejected (and in particular class determinism). Finally, totalitarianism also is rejected, both as a political regime and as an epistemic stance. Rejecting totalitarianism in an epistemic sense means rejecting grand-theories which pretend to be able to explain all the problems of the social world at once, and are both abstract and limiting. To be clear, these 'three warnings' were developed in reaction

to Marxism (and, in particular, orthodox Marxism) as well as more generally to the tradition inherited from the Enlightenment to which Marx belonged. As will be explained in the **second chapter**, Marxism had its own 'internal history' which culminated with the *new left*, to which Mouffe and Laclau can be associated (but not Derrida and Foucault). It is crucial in order to understand this history, to grasp the structure of critical theory as an academic field, and the work of the authors studied. Besides, it should also be noted from the outset that these arguments - related to the status of knowledge and to the role of language - are double-edged sword through which poststructuralists came to the conclusion that essentialism, determinism and totalitarianism should be rejected. Very powerful in their critique of Marxism, these arguments also make the critique extremely more difficult and complex.

All the authors studied avoid the pitfall of essentialism, determinism and totalitarianism. However, one first contribution of this work is to point out that the three starting conditions for an efficient counter hegemony highlighted in the first chapter *are not simultaneously fulfilled in the work of any of the four poststructuralist authors studied* (cf. table 1 for a very schematic overview). This will be detailed in the **third** and fourth **chapters** devoted to the work of Foucault and Derrida, and Mouffe and Laclau, respectively. Among the four authors, Foucault is the closest to providing a structural analysis of the political-economy. However, the type of normativity Foucault enables is very limited, as is the possibility of effective collective organisation. The same remark applies to Derrida. Indeed, both authors have in common to reduce politics - practices aimed at changing the social - to 'spontaneous', individually driven and subjective ventures. Furthermore, Derrida proceeds through the deconstruction of literary text and semiotic analysis, the analysis of signs. There is thus no question in his work regarding the structural analysis of the political economy.

In the critical comments section of the third chapter, the restriction Foucault and Derrida put on collective action will be criticised. More precisely, I will argue that taken alone this approach to social change did not enable the attainment of the global objectives it expected (section 3.2.2.). Besides, doubts can be cast on whether this restriction of collective action is really the best way to avoid the sins it was supposed to avoid: mainly, but not only, totalitarianism (section 3.2.3.). Finally, the contradictory attitude of Foucault and Derrida with regard to institutions (from governments to the political economy) will be stressed (section 3.2.4.).

**Table 1:** Overview Foucault, Derrida, Mouffe and Laclau (own table)

| Condition            | Foucault | Derrida | Mouffe and Laclau |
|----------------------|----------|---------|-------------------|
| 1. Economy           | Enabled  | Limited | Limited           |
| 2. Normativity       | Limited  | Limited | Enabled           |
| 3. Collective action | Limited  | Limited | Fostered          |

What about Mouffe and Laclau? As will be explained in the **fourth chapter**, a substantial part of their reflexion is destined to foster collective action - prominently by providing a common collective identity. In the Marxist tradition, class belonging is, to put it succinctly, considered as an important factor of mobilisation for collective action. This role played by class (and in particular the working class) in Marxism has been denounced both as

essentialist and determinist. In order to avoid these two pitfalls, Mouffe and Laclau use poststructuralism to propose another, non-essentialist and non-determinist collective identity: the people. More than this, they propose a post-foundationalist definition of democracy: radical democracy, and reformulated the class struggle into an hegemonic struggle. Saying that these concepts are post-foundationalist simply means that they are not grounded in epistemic or moral principles that can be considered as undeniable, given once and for all, and existing outside a particular discourse. Thereby, they avoid the three pitfalls identified above (essentialism, determinism, totalitarianism). The position of Mouffe and Laclau towards normativity is also much more enabling than that of Foucault and Derrida. The philosophical intervention of Mouffe and Laclau are thus, from my standpoint, to be welcomed.

However, and despite being labelled as post-Marxists, Mouffe and Laclau do not engage in structural analysis of the economy. This, I will argue, is only the tip of a larger iceberg: Mouffe and Laclau mainly (though not only) provide an *ontology*. Since this is a more general trend in the literature, it deserves more attention and will constitute the main object of my criticism to Mouffe and Laclau. First, it will be stressed that demonstrating the ontological possibility of the world being different is not in itself emancipatory (section 3.2.1.). Therefore, and because the work of Mouffe and Laclau, and post-foundationalism more generally, is presented as a political philosophy, this overfocus on ontology will be criticised. Rather, I will insist on much more attention being devoted to *politics*, practices aimed at *changing* the social (section 3.2.2). Besides, it is argued that contingent foundations can perfectly be used to ground normative critiques on.

Having made my case for collective action, and showed using the work of Mouffe and Laclau that even though there are no 'final grounds' on which to base normative appraisals, contingent grounds can perfectly fulfil this function, in the **fifth chapter**, I move on to the third main component that a counter hegemony should include: a *structural yet contingent analysis of the economy* (subchapter 4.1.). To make this case, I simply point to the already existing (and well alive) institutional theory. Concretely, my proposition, is to use the Régulation School (RS) as a backbone for institutional and evolutionary analysis, because it provides a heuristic schema of the economy, which does not fall into the pitfalls identified by poststructuralists: essentialism, determinism and epistemic totalitarianism. Already existing macro-institutional analysis, ranging from economic sociology, political science or more classical economics sensible to the role of institutions (eg. Obstfeld and Taylor 2003) could usefully complement the empirical knowledge already provided typically by RS scholars. In the next subchapter (4.2), it is stressed that this broadly conceived institutional theory not only is perfectly compatible with, but in fact instantiate the main insight coming from poststructuralist theory. To be clear, many critical theorists are already aware of the existence of this body of knowledge (including Mouffe and Laclau that are here studied). But to my opinion, they generally relegate them to the role of provider of 'background information'. In other words, they underestimate the critical potential of these analysis and fruitful 'cross-fertilisation' that could emerge from using them as a starting point to develop normative analysis.

This leads me in the **sixth chapter**, where my own reflection towards politics will be presented, which constitutes the second main achievement of this thesis. I proceed in three steps. First, because of the importance of ontological debates in the literature, I stress the contribution - but also the limits - of ontological discussion for politics (subchapter 6.1.). Secondly, I lay out my own approach to politics and put it in vis-à-vis with the authors studied. This discussion concerning politics is structured around four dimensions formulated in three

questions: that of collective identification (the 'who' question), of the political objectives (the 'for what' question) and finally that of strategy and coordination (the 'how' question) (subchapter 6.2.). To link this with my starting conditions, structural yet contingent analysis of the economy, in my framework, can serve both as a basis for collective identification (together with other elements, such as subject positions and values) and as input for the design of political objectives. I shall also make clear from the outset that my main message with regard to this approach to politics is that the scope of the relevant questions and subject to address for critical thinker is much broader than conceived by the authors studied. Therefore, I also made clear that to my opinion, in addition to ontological questions, critical intellectuals can legitimately and usefully contribute to each of these dimensions (subchapter 6.3.).

# CHAPTER ONE: THE WEAKNESS OF THE SOCIAL CRITIQUE

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*“Some people say ‘Neoliberalism has come to an end.’ But we don’t know what that really means - if it has really come to an end, then what is after that?” (Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009), in Pleyers 2010)*

This first chapter explains why a collective effort is necessary to re-think a leftist counter hegemony to neoliberalism after Fordism, and discusses efforts already undertaken in this direction. The main aim is to plead for the relevance of articulating a structural analysis of the economy which normatively challenges the neoliberal hegemony and around which collective mobilization can be organized, the three conditions for an effective counter-hegemony with which I started.

First, this question is approached under the prism of the economy, partisan politics and social movements. Then, a more theoretical argument is presented, stressing the crucial relevance of collective action, not only for the left, but also for the social critique.

## **1.1. The weakness of the social critique**

### **1.1.1. From Fordism to the Neoliberal regime of accumulation**

The 1970s are often pointed to as a pivotal decade in terms of the reconfiguration of the economic system and weakening of social critique. Following the *régulation* school, I problematize this reconfiguration as sealing the end of the Fordist accumulation regime (e.g. Aglietta 1976; Boyer 1986; 2002; 2016). Based on the assumption that the capitalistic mode of production is regularly afflicted with structural crises, the notion of *regime of accumulation* designates the regular socioeconomic patterns enabling the long-term accumulation between two structural crises (Boyer 2013). Under the Fordist regime of accumulation, part of the - then important - gains of productivity were shared with workers through wage increases and social security, in exchange for their acceptance of the capitalistic system and of the alienating working conditions under the Fordist regime (Streeck 2014). The economy was already globalised, but control of capitals were ensured by the Bretton Woods agreements (Obstfeld and Taylor 2003). *Régulation* school theorists have left undefined the nature of the regime of accumulation following Fordism, which they generally call Post-Fordism (Boyer 2016). However, following Lippit (2010) and Streeck (2014), among others, I will refer to the regime of accumulation which supplanted the Fordist regime in Western Europe as the *Neoliberal regime of accumulation*. Designating the neoliberal regime as a *sui generis* regime of accumulation has proven to be more of a subtle enterprise, mainly because, a few fault lines aside, the transformation has been gradual (Hacker 2004; 2005; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Thelen and Mahoney 2010; Major 2014).

The main features of the neoliberal regime of accumulation are the financialisation and tertiarisation of the economy, and increased competition, including international competition,

which today operates not only between businesses, but also between public policy makers who compete with each others in creating the most favorable regulatory and fiscal environments for business to invest in (OECD 2003). Two other salient features of the neoliberal regime of accumulation are rising debt levels for households, firms and governments (McKinsey Global Institute 2015), and its counterpart: *permanent austerity*. The term permanent austerity was coined by Pierson (1994; 1996; 1998; 2001) to highlight the results from two contradictory patterns: increasing pressure on (welfare) state funding, and the maturity and popularity of welfare programs (which makes their direct and rapid retrenchment unlikely) (Pierson 1994; 1996; 1998; 2001). By permanent austerity I mean the never-ending undertaking of large fiscal consolidation plans that rely partially, but primarily, on public spending cuts (Atkinson 2014; Wren-Lewis 2016), and include so-called '*structural reforms*' aiming at 'gaining competitiveness' with regards to global markets, generally by decreasing domestic wages and prices (Stiglitz 2016). In other words, permanent austerity is a *disciplinary machine*, which under the pretext of balancing public budgets and reducing debt, organises the gradual transformation of the basic political and economic structures (Fazi 2014). Besides, the authoritarian character of this transformations has also been stressed (Bruff 2014). I concur here with Colin Crouch (2014: 3) that neoliberalism is not popular, and neither is permanent austerity. In fact, permanent austerity is precisely the result of the impossibility to directly dismantle public services and the welfare state, because of their popularity.

### 1.1.2. The 'Fordist' political left, its decline and conversion

It is easy to see the attractiveness of such a disciplinary institutional setting for 'policy entrepreneurs' from historically right-wing political parties, as well as for the dense network of neoliberal think tanks burgeoning since the 1970s (Plehwe 2010). However, it is now clear that political parties across the spectrum, including social democratic parties, have actively contributed to build the international institutional architecture which paved the way for permanent austerity in the present regime of accumulation. The common narrative thereon starts in the 1990s with Giddens and Tony Blair's third way. Tony Blair, but also Wim Kok in the Netherlands, Bill Clinton in the United States, Gerhard Schröder in Germany and Tony Blair in Great Britain, pulled social democracy to the center of the political landscape, engaging in what is commonly called the "third-way" (Giddens 1994; 1998). Although it is true that the third way was strong in the 1990s, both in continental Europe and in the United States with Bill Clinton, it would be a mistake to believe that the third way-type of political positioning started with them. Notably, the "austerity turn" ("le tournant de la rigueur") happened in France in 1983 under Mitterrand. Jacques Delors, who was the minister of economy, budget and finance under Mitterrand, from 1981 to 1984, and then president of the European Commission for almost 10 years (1985 - 1992), is known to be with Pascal Lamy - another French socialist - one of the main artisans of the deregulation of financial capital (Abdelal 2007)<sup>2</sup>.

One can only wonder what left-wing political parties, and notoriously social democratic parties, had to gain from such a turn, and if this was not rather a failure of the left. Indeed, according to Razmig Keucheyan (2013: 7) in his map of the current left hemisphere: "In the

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Delors prefaced, and at the same time emphatically praised, the French edition of Giddens *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998).

beginning was defeat. Anyone who wishes to understand the nature of contemporary critical thinking must start from this fact". Besides, there was not one, but several defeats, which all marked the evolution of the critique of capitalism. Social democratic parties, which at this point in time were structured around representations associated with the post-war economic compromise, failed to satisfactorily adjust social critique to the neoliberal regime of accumulation all across Europe and subsequently abandoned the critique of capitalism for a more narrow objective: humanising it (Mouffe 2005a). A further blow came from the way Marxist thought was discredited by the Soviet and Chinese experiences. Communist parties, which, *inter alia*, incarnated the left of social democratic-parties under the Fordist regime of accumulation, were substantially weakened. When, close to the end of the century, Boltanski and Chiapello stated that social critique is disarmed, they rightfully pointed to an ideological neutralization, i.e. "critique no longer knows what to say" as the result of a reconfiguration of the capitalistic system (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999: 93).

This in turn had consequences for the political system. Colin Crouch (2004) coined the term *post-democracy* to refer to the increasing lack of grip of "ordinary people" on the political game, which is more and more turned into a public relations process. Chantal Mouffe (2000; 2005) pointed to the post-political nature of the current political system, in the sense of an absence of 'genuine' alternative projects in the political offer. More precisely, the concept of post-political for Mouffe refers to the disappearance of agonism, i.e. political struggle between clearly differentiated alternatives. As a consequence, constituents have left the voting booths, political parties and the unions. Voter turnout has been falling constantly in western liberal democracies since the 1970s. With few exceptions (Luxembourg and Spain), almost all Western countries experienced a drop ranging from 10 to 20 % of voting turnout in general elections from the 1960s onwards, with no sign of reversal (Mair; 2005; 2008; 2013; Streeck and Schäfer 2013). Besides, this drop of voter turnout has been unevenly distributed within countries. In a nutshell, better endowed voters, be it in education, income or social capital, participate more (especially in countries where voting is not compulsory) (Kasara and Suryanarayan 2015; Streeck and Schäfer 2013). Another consequence of the "defeat of the left", and certainly not the least one, is the rise of extreme right parties in many European countries, as attested by recent notable electoral performances in France, Belgium, Hungary, Austria and Sweden, to name a few (Fagerholm 2016). The success of these parties seems to be not only based on cultural issues in which immigration is presented as a central threat in xenophobic discourses, but also on a discourse that addresses economic issues in populist terms to denounce globalisation and neoliberalism (de Lange 2007). As mentioned above, this rhetoric seems to find a broad appeal among large segments of the population who have lost confidence in the ability of the traditional left to appropriately represent their interests, and have turned towards parties who seem more willing to address their grievances.

### **1.1.3. Alter-globalism and a possible renewal of the political left**

Let's recall that even under the neoliberal hegemony, effective counter discourses continued to exist concerning certain aspects of social life, such as sexual norms and the organisation of family. In particular, so-called 'new social movements' to designated social movements different from the labor movement, emerged in the post-Fordist era. Indeed, the mid-1960s were marked by intense wide-scale protests, student movements (opposing war and the authoritarianism of the industrial society), ecologists, feminists, the LGBT community,

and the civil rights movement (Pichardo 1997, Touraine 1971). Many social improvements were achieved, such as the end of racial segregation in the USA, or the recognition - at least formally - of women's equality to men. It is in fact primarily concerning economic and social matters that the situation has deteriorated over the last four decades. For this reason (and certainly not because economic structure is all that critique should care about), having an adequate understanding of the current economic structure, and being able to criticize it in a constructive way in order to challenge the currently prevalent neoliberal hegemony is, I believe, the most important challenge the critique is currently facing, be it at the ontologic or the ontic level. However, let me mention some steps already undertaken in this direction, and whose strengths and limits will be discussed later in this work. Let me present two very different strategies that have been adopted: the alter-globalist movement, and the (more recent) left-wing populist parties.

### **A) *The alter-globalist movement***

In the 1990s, the glorious era of Alain Minc's 'happy globalisation' (1997) and Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History' (1992), the *altermondialiste* (in French) globalist movement emerged in explicit and direct opposition not so much to globalisation, but rather to the then predominant neoliberal hegemony and the market supremacy it put forward. As a direct reply to the Thatcherite motto, their slogan is: "Another World Is Possible". Symbolically, the mobilisations that took place in Seattle during December 2000 against the WTO ministerial summit were a turning point, soon elevated to the rank of *founding myth*. It was indeed marked by an important mobilisation, around 50,000 protesters, to whom the failure of the trade agreements (and since then the multilateral trade agreements) was (probably abusively) attributed (Pleyers 2010). However, first the alter-globalist movement also started to peter out since its apogee, the Genoa G8 meeting in 2001, which gathered around 250,000 people. Since Genoa, to only take one indicator, the number of participants to the G8 protests has declined, amounting to only 10,000 at the Miami protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) (Gibson 2008). The latter is even more striking while having in mind the politicization of international trade (e.g. Donald Trump vowing to roll back the FATCA), and in my opinion only stresses the weakness, noted by Gibson, of the alter-globalist movement among "marginalised populations, particularly within urban spaces in the North". On the other hand, the absence of substantial change after the financial crisis also showed first, that neither crisis, nor the alter-globalist movement alone, will suffice to induce social change, and second, that there was an urgent need not only to argue that they are possible, but also to propose concrete alternatives (Pleyers 2010).

Geoffrey Pleyers (2007) distinguished two strands within the alter-globalist movement, which he called the *way of reason* and the *way of subjectivity* (cf. table 2). The difference between the two 'ways' lies primarily in their conception of social change and movement coordination, as well as their conceptualisation of power and of institutions. Generally speaking, both strands of the alter-globalist movement emphasises autonomy, and refuses to engage in traditional mass and party driven politics (Carroll 2010). Instead, they favor a logic either of grass-root resistance to power (the way of subjectivity) or of counter power (the way of reason). ATTAC-France constitutes a typical example of the way of reason, which conceptualise social change primarily as a top-down process, aiming at changing -among

others- global institutions. Proponents of the way of reason put the emphasis on the efficiency of their advocacy which is directed both to the civil society, the public at large and to political parties. However, they themselves do not seek to build political parties, favoring a logic of ‘counter power’ à la Montesquieu. They are generally organised in hierarchical (or ‘vertical’) structures accepting some principles of representation and delegation of responsibilities. Its elite is highly cosmopolitan and in many regards resembles that of the global elite, and tends to power concentration, including in undeclared ways.

**Table 2:** The way of subjectivity and the way of reason

|                              | <b>The way of subjectivity</b>                                | <b>The way of reason</b>                                      |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Social change</b>         | Bottom-up (starts local)                                      | Top-down (starts international)                               |
|                              | Participation and democracy (outside and within the movement) | Efficient advocacy to change political economic institutions  |
| <b>Movement coordination</b> | Coherence of means and ends                                   | Expertise, efficiency   |
|                              | Very fluids, informal an sporadic networks                    | Institutionalisation  |
| <b>Relation to politics</b>  | Rejection of ‘classical’ politics                             | Integration (without participation) into ‘classical’ politics |
| <b>Relation to power</b>     | Autonomous spaces   | Counter power   |

Own table, based on Pleyers (2010)

On the other hand, *Via Campesina* or the *Zapatista movement* are instantiations of the *way of subjectivity*. From this stance, social change is conceived as a *bottom-up process*, triggered by local actions. The local is conceived as a terrain of experimentation, eventually acquiring a global relevance, by becoming a source of inspiration (not models) for other local movements through the mechanism of *swarming*. ‘think global, act local’, was their original slogan. Both strands insists on participation as a central feature of democracy, but for the way of subjectivity this is translated in the refusal of any delegation of power. Generally speaking, they are distrustful of any (political economic) institution, as well as to the institutionalisation of their movements. Instead, they favor *horizontal, informal* and convivial modes of coordination (and often also temporary). As Alain Touraine (2000[1997]: 96 in Pleyers: 91) stressed, ‘they want to change life a lot more than transform society’. They also therefore have a high exigency of *coherence between action, values and objectives*. Echoing Foucault’s care of the self, and understanding of power as micro-powers, expressing oneself and developing subjectivities also ranks among the central motto of the way of subjectivity<sup>3</sup>. To achieve this,

<sup>3</sup> “The enemy is not only external, it is also our own way of thinking’ (a piquetero). It hence becomes a

they aim at creating autonomous spaces free of the 'power-domination' both of the state and of the markets. Note that generally speaking, the way of subjectivity is the one that is the closest to the critical ethos advocated both by Foucault and Derrida.

## ***B) The left-wing populist party***

Since then, and (for some) inspired by the later work of Laclau and Mouffe, new leftist alternative political parties have emerged on the political scene: *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* in Spain, and more recently *La France Insoumise* in France. These political parties are often qualified as left populist parties. Besides, new figures emerged, with more or less success, from internal struggles within the 'social democratic family (if this terminology makes sense in the context of the US and the UK), and generally against the establishment of their own parties: Bernie Sanders in the USA, and Jeremy Corbyn, who surprised everybody by taking the reins of the *Labour Party*, and increased its presence in the British parliament with a clearly more leftist discourse and proposals. However, up to now, except for *Syriza* (although it is currently implementing the neoliberal policies imposed by the Troika) (Zahariadis 2016), none of these leftist political movements was able to form and lead a government, or to 'take power' in any form. In a nutshell, we are currently going through a period of deep uncertainty, out of which the best or the worst could emerge. Although this opens a new avenue, the road to rethinking and refounding the political left will certainly be long and arduous, and these observed positive tendencies are only initial sparks.

The two examples mentioned above represent two distinctive ways to do politics. In what follows, I will regularly come back to these examples, to illustrate my discussion about how to conceive politics. However, for now, I want to make clear and explain why, I defend collective action as a necessary component of left-wing politics.

## **1.2. When freedom cannot stand alone, collective action is needed**

Why should we worry about collective action in the 'postmodern age'? My succinct answer: because the age of postmodernity is still an age of profound asymmetries (of resources among others). Yet, in situations precisely, collective action is the cement uniting the weaker resources of those who are not favored by these asymmetries. By collective action, I refer to actions that are collective, in the sense that they are coordinated in some way, involving more than one person and seeking to achieve a common objective (inspired by Poteete and Ostrom 2004).

### **1.2.1. Collective action as the cement binding individual resources**

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matter of 'changing oneself'" (p. 98

To make my case, I am borrowing this approach regarding resources and their asymmetrical distribution from the Power Resource Theory (PRT), which defines power relationally. PRT indeed talks about 'power resources' when referring to "the attributes (capacities or means) of actors (individuals or collectivities), which enable them to reward or to punish other actors" (Korpi 1987: 33). In other words, power is power over others. Domination is never total, and can vary depending on the power resources that can be mobilised by actors (which are also not stable over time) (Korpi, O'Connor and Olsen 1998). So all actors have resources, but not in equivalent proportions, and not of the same kind. Resources can be characterised in terms of their scarcity (their availability), their centrality in other actors' daily lives, and the potential they have to be concentrated in the hand of few actors and preserved over time. Finally, resources vary according to their liquidity, i.e. "the degree to which a resource is ready to be used" (Korpi 1987: 34). To take a typical example, money is a very liquid resource, labour is not.

Among these resources, the PRT highlights crucial and asymmetric resources: capital and control over the means of production, on the one hand, and 'human capital', on the other. There is an asymmetry with regard to how easily these two resources can be mobilised. While capital is easily mobilisable, this is not the case for human capital, which requires coordination and collective mobilisation to become a resource (Merrien and al. 2005)<sup>4</sup>. Capital is also easily convertible in other resources without requiring collective mobilisation as such, and therefore also very liquid. On the other hand, "human capital", from labour power to occupational skills and education, also constitutes an inescapable power resource. However, labor as a resource is generally specialised to a certain domain, "cannot be concentrated to a very high degree, is often difficult to preserve over time and is generally not a scarce resource. Furthermore, it has a relatively low convertibility and its mobilization involves relatively high costs" (Korpi 1985: 34).

Labour is a resource when used (for production), but also when not used (bargaining resource). One's individual labour can generally become a resource for large scale change only in the context of collective action. The argument is that while corporations have many available resources that can be used for a specific objectives, through punish/reward tactics for instance, most individuals do not. Given this scarcity of resources, if a person does not show up for work in the hope of pressuring her boss, she can easily be replaced by another more docile worker. And for a significant part of the population, precisely those in the most vulnerable positions and therefore in the most urgent need for change, this can mean dire consequences. Only when many workers coordinate and act together, going on strike for instance, or pressing their demands collectively in any form, does individual labour eventually become a usable resource in the context of asymmetry of resources. Collective action is the cement which transforms their individual ability to work (or not) into a genuine resource.

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<sup>4</sup> The power resource theory was, in the field of social policy in the early 1980s, the dominant school in the literature concerned with explaining variety between existing welfare regimes in Europe. The power resource theory explains this variety in terms of depth and form by the strengths and organization of the labour movements (Merrien & al 2005). Clearly, although breaking with the Marxist tradition with many regards, the power resource theory has a narrow view on what this collective mobilisation was about: trade unions and social democratic parties. Focusing exclusively on the labour movement as explanan of the diversity of welfare states might be criticised (eg. Baldwin 1990). However, what interests me here is the relation they draw between asymmetry of resources, collective mobilisation and institutionalisation.

## 1.2.2. Generalising the relevance of collective action for the left

Two very reasonable premises lie in the background of my argument about collective action. First, societies are constructed around structures in which certain individuals have power over others because they possess more resources than others. These resources can be of various kinds (money, capital, brute force, law, symbolic resources, etc.). This premise does not clearly stem from poststructuralist thinking, but does not contradict it either. Rather, the question of structural asymmetries seems to be 'suspended' in poststructuralist writings. Second, my argument also presupposes that the least privileged actors are never totally alienated and without resources. As mentioned in the first chapter, this premise ensues from the poststructuralist epistemic rejection of totalitarianism: because narratives are never total, actors are never totally alienated, rendered blind to their domination. This capacity of ordinary actors to themselves carry out critical and moral judgements has been particularly documented by Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski (1991). Besides cognitive resources, less favored actors also dispose of resources ensuing from their interdependence with more privileged actors (the typical example being labour), as will be developed in this section.

The argument does not on *its own* imply any determinism. Indeed, it is not said that collective action will necessarily arrive, but rather that collective action constitutes an instrument of conversion of resources possessed by individuals, which proves to be crucial in situations where one is facing a more powerful opponent on all fronts. For this reason, I subscribe to the statement of Oliver Marchart (2002) according to which, "toute politique aspirant à l'efficacité et à un certain objectif doit remplir deux conditions: elle doit être a) collective (et non individualiste) et b) organisée". Exactly for the same reason, collective action proves to be crucial for the left (even when not reduced to the labour movement). What the left is exactly maybe more than uncertain than ever, undefined as much as in constant re-definition. However, its historical legacy is pregnant enough to identify at least two central tenets. First, being from the left entails taking seriously the impact of social structures on people, as well as the fact that we are all born with unequal chances, and with this in mind deliberately *being on the side which is not that of the most fortunate* (Brisac 2017). Secondly, to be from the left entails a *voluntary attitude* with regard to this. Is to fight against the established order, the strength of things, the inertia of the world' (Amar 2016).

On the other hand, collective action also entails costs. In terms of *opportunity costs*, it entails time and resources invested in collective action could have been invested elsewhere. There are also direct risks involved in collective actions questioning established powers, starting with costs associated to retaliation (Korpi 1985). Besides, as Mancur Olson (1965) stressed, free-riding always remains an option, so individual actors need specific incentives in order to engage in collective action. Therefore, it is also clear that individuals need *reasons* to engage in collective action. They do not engage in a collective act because there is a purported collective interest to do so. This theme will be developed repeatedly throughout this thesis. In the next chapter, we will see how Mouffe and Laclau attempt to enable collective action by forging a common collective identity: the people. However, in the coming sections of this chapter, I will criticize Foucault and Derrida for making efficient collective action almost impossible. However, before turning to these authors, it is necessary to understand the theoretical background and historical context in which their thought was developed, which is the objective of the next chapter.

### 1.3. Chapter conclusion

Neoliberalism, as a political ideology, is currently hegemonic. Because the disarmament of the social critique (which has traditionally been carried out by the left) is related to an economic reconfiguration, namely the passage from the Fordist regime to the neoliberal regime of accumulation, building a counter hegemony will necessarily entail understanding the nature of the current political-economic structure. Not only did the left fail to have a specific discourse on economic issues, thus inaugurating the reign of post-politics, but social democrats also actively contributed to building institutions reinforcing the neoliberal character of the current regime of accumulation. While during this period the organisations historically related to the labour movement were either weakened (trade unions), repositioned toward the center on economic questions (social democratic parties) or almost disappeared (communist parties), new social movements emerged.

Among these new social movements, the alter-globalist movement specifically sought to oppose the neoliberal hegemony, but failed to build a solid base in the western working class. Besides, with hindsight after three decades, one can question the achievements of the main political goals of the alter-globalist movement, especially after the 'window of opportunity' for change opened by the 2007-2008 crisis. One of the specificities of the alter-globalists, mirroring a more general trend in social movements, was their refusal to engage in partisan politics, leaving the only alternative discourse concerning the economy in partisan politics to the extreme right (or right-wing populists) parties. This changed recently with the emergence of left-wing populist parties and of new voices emerging in social democratic parties. However, until now, none of these attempts were successful, stressing the current and continuous relevance not only of intellectual refoundation, but also of strategy. This theme will be developed in the fifth chapter.

This historical overview also highlighted a debate prominent among actors of the social critique: that of the organisation or coordination of critique. On the one hand, the alter-globalist movement instantiate the position of the tenants of a weakly coordinated, primarily subjective and individual mode of politics. On the other hand, newly emerging left-wing populist parties, and new voices emerging in more classical social democratic parties, opted for a more 'classical' mode of politics: partisan politics. This discussion will be prolonged in the fourth and fifth chapters, addressing the thought of Derrida and Foucault, and Mouffe and Laclau, respectively. However, for now, it is suffice to stress that we will see, *contra* Derrida and Foucault, that collective actions have been defended as being essential to the social critique. In a nutshell, using the Power Resource Theory (PRT), I argued first, that in a situation of structural asymmetries, collective action is the cement uniting the weaker resources of those who are not favored by these asymmetries. Second, in such structural asymmetries the left is committed to the side of the weaker and determined to improve its condition.

However, to fully understand this position with regard to the politics of the four authors studied, some background knowledge should be provided. This task is undertaken in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO: POST-STRUCTURALISM AND ORTHODOX MARXISM, ITS CONSTITUTIVE OUTSIDE

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To discuss poststructuralism, I decided to focus on Foucault, Derrida, Mouffe and Laclau. Indeed, poststructuralism is broader than that, and Foucault did not explicitly recognise himself as a poststructuralist (Gary 2015), while Mouffe and Laclau are *building* on poststructuralism to develop their post-Marxism in order to solve some of the issues raised not only in poststructuralism, but also in post-Marxism. However, these three authors can reasonably be taken as ‘case studies’ of how politics is apprehended by poststructuralist inspired authors. They are also sufficient to achieve the goal of this thesis: pointing out the compatibility between the main insights of poststructuralism and a normative and structural (yet contingent) analysis of the economy enabling collective action.

However, before addressing this, a small detour by way of the intellectual background of these authors is necessary. The continuity between the first and second part of this chapter should be stressed here: both poststructuralism and post-Marxism are situated to the left of the political spectrum in the post-Fordist era, precisely during which time the left has been weakened. Foucault and Derrida on the one hand, and Mouffe and Laclau on the other, can in fact be placed in two different camps. Indeed, Foucault and Derrida go much further in their rejection of Marxism than Mouffe and Laclau, who belong to the New Left and explicitly present themselves as post-Marxists.

First the Enlightenment, the more or less moderate rupture in which poststructuralism can be placed, will be presented. Then, Marxism is addressed and finally, poststructuralism.

### **2.1. Grand narratives, faith in progress, reason and knowledge**

Modernism can be described as an overarching paradigm lasting from the 15th century to the 19th, which included (but was not limited to) the Enlightenment (Best and Kellner 1997). The Enlightenment generally refers to a specific period starting in the mid-17th century and lasting until the 18th century, during which the old world was ‘swept away’ in favour of the ‘modern world’ (Bristow 2011). While traditional philosophers were primarily concerned with metaphysics<sup>5</sup>, after Descartes the conditions of human knowledge took centre stage. This major turn is known as the *epistemological turn* and reverted the order of priority between the study of the object (the known) and that of the subject (the knower) as the main topic in philosophy (Wolff 1963). Although the title of his *Meditation on First Philosophy* (2013 [1641])

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<sup>5</sup> The term metaphysics initially referring to Aristotle’s work on ‘first physics’, which was called metaphysics, since it was physically located after his section on physics in the first collected editions of Aristotle’s work (Wolff 1963). To be more precise, Aristotle’s, ‘first physics’ was centered on the *objects* of knowledge, the “things known better in themselves than to us”.

was an explicit reference to Aristotle, by placing such an emphasis on the subject in his *Discourse on the Method* (1998 [1637]) Descartes fostered a shift of attention from the *object* to the *subject*, and triggered a series of works, culminating with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (2013 [1781]). In this masterpiece, Kant proposed a new discipline aimed at studying the grounds and use of human knowledge, to which he gave the name of 'Transcendental Philosophy', and which corresponds to what we would nowadays call *epistemology* (Wolff 1963).

The engagement with, and fascination for, science was a key feature of the Enlightenment. New discoveries and fast progress in science - particularly Newton's physics (1687) -, but also in philosophy, society and politics, fascinated its contemporaries and triggered a great and *optimistic confidence* in the *human ability to control the world* and the environment through the use of *reason*, and to bring about *progress*, which was seen as being inevitable and infinite. Politically, this led to the *questioning of traditional authorities*, including political and religious ones, triggered by the question: "why should we need political or religious authorities to tell us how to live or what to believe, if each of us has the capacity to figure out these things for themselves?" (Rohlf 2016). The French Revolution was a culminating point embodying the destruction of the traditional social order in favor of a new "political and social order informed by the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality for all, founded, ostensibly, upon principles of human reason" (Bristow 2011). The Enlightenment planted the seeds of revolution by establishing the (formal) equality of all human beings as a new central political norm in the face of existing and naturalised "privileges and hierarchies of feudal society", which accepted inequality as the formal norm (Offe & Wiesenthal 1980). More generally, there was great faith at this time that social progress, or progress in terms of individual liberties, will go together with technological or scientific progress (Foucault 1984).

## **2.2. Marxism and post-Marxism**

Marx will remain in background of this whole thesis, be it to break with his thought, or to revive it. As for the authors studied, the purpose here is nevertheless not to present an exhaustive overview of the work of Marx. In the first section (2.2.1.), Marx will be placed in the continuity of Hegel, to whom Marx borrowed a teleological view of history. Marx's commitment to 'changing the world' (and not only understanding it), will also be stressed, as well as the class determinism pervading his thought. These elements are important to stress because they are the most problematic elements of Marx's thought and figure among most contemporary debates concerning Marxism. In the second section (2.2.2.), the development of Marx's thought after his death is sketched, from Classical Marxists (e.g. Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin), to Stalinism and, as a reaction, Western Marxism (e.g. Adorno and Althusser). This passage from Classical to Western Marxism is important because it also signals a crucial period where most intellectuals lost their direct connection to social movements. Finally, the New Left is presented in the third section (2.2.3.). The New Left emerged in the 1960s and re-thought Marxism outside the three problematic elements mentioned above.

### **2.2.1. Hegel and Marx**

Broadly speaking, three main influences can be stressed in Marx's thought: Hegel, Ricardo and French revolutionaries. Hegel historicised and radicalised Kant's epistemology (Veeke 2013). For Hegel, history entailed a process of development (Woodfin and Zarate 2013). Hegel was not the first philosopher attempting to distinguish the patterns, directions and/or stages through which human history unfolded in an attempt to point to deeper underlying purposes or orders behind the contingency of historical events, in an hermeneutical attempt to interpret history as an ancient text. For a long time, the interpretation of history was a religious problem, as is noticeable for instance in Leibniz's attempt to make the tragedies of history logically compatible with the existence of a benevolent god's will. With the Enlightenment, progress replaced god and religion-based teleologies were rejected. For Hegel, history is a process in which human freedom is realised. He constructed a sequential model of the unfolding of human history as 'progress', each stage being associated with a certain level of human freedom. Examples of stages are the Greek polis, associated with public freedom, the Protestant Reformation which delivered individual freedom, and the modern state, providing civic freedom. Hegel also envisaged this final, full stage of history and human freedom as a genuine possibility (Little 2017).

While Hegel was an academic philosopher sympathetic to the French revolution, Marx was an activist, a revolutionary. As Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach stated: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it". (1969). Marx kept Hegel's dialectic<sup>6</sup> and teleological apprehension of history, but rejected - or to be more precise reverted - his idealism: human beings, not ideas, through their activities, and the way they create and transform their world, are the motor of progress, and of the march of history (Bohman 2016). This doctrine is known as *historical materialism*, and went along with the claim that the level of development of the productive forces is the determinant of economic structures ('infrastructure'), which themselves determine the nature of the political and legal institutions (or 'superstructure'). As Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology* (1965[1845])<sup>7</sup>: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life". Simply said: life determines consciousness. As Hegel did, Marx distinguished different successive historical stages, modes of production: tribal society, antiquity ('ancient communal and State ownership'), feudalism and capitalism (ibid), and famously predicted the advent of the socialist and then communist mode of production. Note here that Marx definitively shares the Enlightenment's confidence both in reason and in progress (though under his pen, progress was the development of the productive forces, which through a historical progression should ultimately lead to socialism).

In addition to this historical determinism, classical Marxist thought is also pervaded

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<sup>6</sup> Generally speaking, a dialectic argument refers to an argument involving "some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides" (Maybee 2016). Plato used this technique when he presented his arguments as a back-and-forth dialogue between Socrates and his students, during which the philosophical definition of the concept at stake was refined by the students, in answer to Socrates critical comments. For Hegel, dialectics also implies "a contradictory process between opposing sides", and allows a systematic movement from less sophisticated views and propositions to more elaborated and complex ones. Yet, in this case, the opposing sides are not always people defending arguments. Depending on what matter Hegel is working on, it could range from logical concepts to different definitions of consciousness (ibid).

<sup>7</sup> Note that *The German Ideology* was not published in Marx's lifetime.

with *class determinism* because it conceives of a particular class, the proletariat, as the 'motor' of this progress (in the capitalist mode of production). As mentioned in the opening of the first chapter of the *Communist Manifesto* (2004[1848]), for Marx "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". To him, antagonistic relationships among classes emerged from relations of production, i.e. the human relationship around which work is organised (Woodfin 2013). Under the capitalistic mode of production, the two antagonistic classes were the capitalists, characterised by the fact that they owned the means of production, and the proletariat who did not, and therefore had to rent themselves to the capitalists in order to survive. With the deepening of the industrial revolution and the intensification of competition among capitalists, Marx in fact expected the proletariat to be "recruited from all classes of the population", including for instance the lower middle class (Marx 2004[1848]). However, Marx also contended that "Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product" (ibid). Ultimately, all the other classes have to disappear, to be dissolved in the proletariat.

### 2.2.2. Classical Marxism, Stalinism and Western Marxism

Marx expected the socialist revolution, as a prelude to the establishment of the communist society, to take place in an advanced industrial nation like Germany or the UK. It never happened. Marx died in 1883 at the dawn of the second industrial revolution, and his ideas followed their own course, initially with what Perry Anderson (1983) called '*Classical Marxism*' (as opposed to Western Marxism), which included among others Karl Kautsky, Vladimir Lenin, Léon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg.

In 1917, The October Revolution installed the first government directly inspired by the ideals of Marx (aside from the ephemeral Paris Commune). After the death of Lenin, Stalin seized power and established a cult of personality around the character of Lenin (Sim 2004). The purpose was to reinforce his own legitimacy as the supreme ruler under what became known as Stalinism. Stalinism was clearly a totalitarian political regime, celebrating the centrality of the 'state' (Tucker 1977). Stalinism also grants a central role to political leaders, to the detriment of ordinary people (Bottomore 1991). This enlightened elite are the leaders of the communist party of the Soviet Union, which should not only control power in Russia, but also in the soviet republics, whose respective communist parties should all be subordinated to the communist party of the Soviet Union. It is evident why Stalinism is today largely regarded as a system of oppression which caused tremendous suffering for millions of people not only in Russia, but in all of the Soviet Union.

The authoritarian and totalitarian regime established by Stalin after Lenin's death led to a counter reaction from the side of western Marxist intellectuals, which Anderson called the '*Western Marxists*'<sup>8</sup>, represented by figures as diverse as Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser. Of the two prominent strands to which

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<sup>8</sup> As often, the term *Western Marxism* was first used as an insult, coined by the Soviet communist party to denigrate western Marxists such as Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch. Yet, it came to be used as a self-identification term by these scholars, who departed from the 2nd and 3rd international (Kellner 2005).

western Marxism gave rise, the Frankfurt School and Louis Althusser's structuralist interpretation of Marx, the latter is of particular interest here because it gave rise, through the counter reaction it generated, to the poststructuralist stance on which I will focus in the second chapter. Besides politics and economics, which played a predominant role in most of 20th century Marxist theory, western Marxists developed an interest in cultural and social forms of domination (Kellner 2005).

Since the Stalinist orthodoxy at this time also pervaded most communist parties, including in the west, this break was also one between a second generation of Marxist intellectuals and communist social movements and political parties (Keucheyan 2013), to the point where critical intellectuals became the 'vanguard without rearguard' that they currently are, to quote Luc Boltanski (Boltanski and al. 2014). Indeed, although it is not the sole factor, no longer being directly tied to social movements had an impact on the nature of the research produced. As Razmig Keucheyan (2013: 11-12) puts it: "Just as the practice of empirical science was bound up with the fact that the Marxists of the classical period played leadership roles within workers' organizations, so remoteness from such roles prompted a 'flight into abstraction'. Marxists now produced hermetic knowledge, inaccessible to ordinary workers, about fields without any direct relationship to political strategy". Most critical thinkers remained academics, while seldom being "full fledged members of political or social organizations" (ibid). Note that in the fifth chapter, the current absence of attention for strategy and the 'flight into abstraction' will be problematized as a weakness of current critical thinking.

### **2.2.3. The New Left : Breaking with labour metaphysics**

The New Left roughly dates back to the mid 1950s. Not unrelated, 1956 was a symbolic year marked by the Budapest insurrection, a revolt against the domination of the USSR over Hungary, which was severely repressed by Moscow, and by Khrushchev's secret speech on Stalin's crimes. The New Left is a label designating theorists and movements which refused to choose between the orthodox and dictatorial Marxism of Stalin, and the 'free capitalistic world', while not renouncing the radical critique of the capitalist system. The New Left includes, but is not limited to, Western Marxists, and is currently still alive, notoriously through their main publication, the *New Left Review*. As Classical Marxists did, New Left scholars clearly placed themselves in a continuity with Marx. However, at the same time, the New Left is equally profoundly impregnated by an urgency, a necessity to break with certain central elements of Marxist thought (Tormey and Townshend 2006). As did poststructuralism, the New Left rejects Marx's *teleological theory of history*, i.e. the previously mentioned doxa according to which the dialectic of history will necessarily converge towards an ultimate synthesis, the communist mode of production, in which all the contradictions present in the anterior historical periods will be resolved.

Similarly, the New Left rejected the Marxist account of the *revolutionary subject*, which, in this reading, attributed to the proletariat the role of overthrowing the capitalist mode of production. Instead, Charles Wright Mills (1960) urged the New Left to break with the "labour metaphysic", which he described as a "legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic", or even a "historically specific idea that has been turned into an a-historical and unspecific hope", and instead to design a *strategy* adequate to the specific historically and

geographically contingent situations. By doing so, Mills set up a research agenda that has been taken up by, among others, Edward Palmer Thompson in his book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), who stressed the socially constructed character of social classes, and by Mouffe and Laclau in *Hegemony And Socialist Strategy, Towards A Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). Although remaining sensitive to the fate of workers, Mouffe and Laclau aimed at enabling a solidarity between the labour movement and so-called 'new social movements', such as those inspired by the feminist and postcolonial critique (Keucheyan 2013). Indeed, the various social movements emerging in the 1960s and 1970s (from the civil rights movement to May 68) showed that not all social antagonisms could adequately be framed in Marxist terms (Laclau and Mouffe 1985 [2001]).

## **2.3. Poststructuralism, and its main takeaway**

In this subchapter, poststructuralism is presented, in relation with the Enlightenment and the modern era.

### **2.3.1. Poststructuralism, anti- and post-foundationalist**

Postmodernism emerged in the turbulent end of the 1960s, and it proliferated throughout the world in the 1980s. Postmodernism stands both in opposition to, and in continuation of, the modern era, including the Enlightenment. On the one hand, postmodernists still situate themselves in the modernist wake by their endorsement of individualism (Best and Kellner 1997). On the other hand, poststructuralist authors can be characterised as expressing doubt towards *Reason* as a unifying project. Epistemically, poststructuralists (as well as other authors such as Jurgen Habermas, and Richard Rorty) embraced intersubjectivity and the linguistic turn. While the Kantian epistemology was centered on the subject, now language and practice is put into the center of the stage (Veeke 2013). There is an important overlap and unclear distinction, between postmodernism and poststructuralism. The latter term being generally associated with authors criticising typically structuralist authors such as Saussure and Levi-Strauss. Because the aim of this thesis is to discuss the possibility of structural analysis of the economy, I will stick to the term poststructuralist and focus on the work of four authors that have been associated with it: Derrida, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe.

Poststructuralist authors, opposing *Foundationalism*, take issue with the possibility of *grounding* knowledge (as well as truth and science). Foundationalism emerged as a debate in the philosophy of science related to the justification of knowledge. Foundationalism is as old as Aristotle or Descartes, but was revived in the early 20th century by the debate regarding scientific method, and more prominently the Neurath-Schlick debate (later famously prolonged by Willard van Orman Quine). Otto Neurath, criticising the foundationalists, put forward the metaphor of *raft*, claiming that no set of statements has the privileged status of "ultimate foundation of knowledge". To defend foundationalism, Moritz Schlick proposed the metaphor of the pyramid "in which knowledge rests on a special class of statements whose verification do not depend on other beliefs" (Poston 27/07/2017). Post-structuralists reject the certainty associated on such grounds, as well as their extra-discursive character.<sup>9</sup> First, they do not think that knowledge can be 'definitively' grounded on principle "undeniable and immune to

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<sup>9</sup> Note that poststructuralists do not usually explicit say what 'grounds' means for them, neither do they refer to Neurath, Schlick and Quine. Rather they would refer to Heidegger and his notion of *abgrund*.

revision" (Marchart 2007: 12). Besides, they also stress that any truth is always "conditioned by a discursive 'truth regime' that specifies the criteria for judging an analytical narrative to be convincing" (Torfing 2005: 155).

In terms of political philosophy, poststructuralists also stress the impossibility of such grounding. They argue that *society* cannot be grounded in certain 'foundations', basic metaphysical cause, that would be on the one hand, undeniable, known once for all, and on the other "located outside society and politics" (Marchart 2007: 11-12). Rejecting the very possibility of final grounding for politics, and normativity in general, they thus criticise any attempt to defend such final 'grounds' for justice, universal values or normative principles. No principles can be presented as 'the essence' of politics, they claim, and neither can it be reduced as 'determined' by the economy. In other words, no ontological foundation pre-exists politics. Nevertheless, this also signals that their position is not that of a total relativism, as they do not argue that no grounds exist at all. Rather, they stress that politics is always *contingent* to particular contexts inscribed in a specific time, location and culture (Swyngedouw 2011). Recognising that some grounds, but that they are *contingent* distinguishes post-foundationalist form anti-foundationalism (the simple reversion, negation of the foundationalism) (Marchart 2007).

### 2.3.2. Anti-essentialism, anti-totalitarianism and anti-determinism

Marx, as an Enlightenment thinker, was optimistic about progress. He grounded the scientific value of his work (and especially in his later work *Capital*) on having unveiled the laws of history, and proving the necessity of the self-incurred collapse of capitalism. A *contrario*, poststructuralists criticized the 'doctrinal elements' historically associated with 'grand-narrative' theories, starting with Marxism (and in particular certain interpretations of Marxism), such as: the faith in future progress and the determinism associated with it, as well as its scientism (the overconfidence in the possible objectivity of science) or economism (the tendency to reduce all dimensions of life to their material, economic aspect). À contrario, poststructuralist loss of the Enlightenment *faith* in progress. For instance, Foucault stressed that contrary to the 18th century confidence that social progress (or progress in terms of individual liberties) will go along with technological progress, the history of the last two centuries showed that this link was more intricate: technology channeled can become the instrument of various power relations. Accordingly, the (political) stake of social change, according to Foucault, is to prevent technological progress from being coupled with the intensification of power relations.

Post-structuralists rightfully developed a two-level critique of *totalitarianism*. They rejected totalitarianism at the political (or ontic) level, criticising totalitarian regimes, including regimes claiming a Marxist tradition such as that of the USSR. Epistemologically, poststructuralists reject a 'totalising system of thought', as Levinas puts it, or 'grand-metanarratives' in the words of Jean-François Lyotard, to refer to systems of thought that pretend to understand all domains of life (Udofia 2017). Another good example is provided by Foucault when he describes his work as departing from the usual 'totalizations' deployed in politics by its 'concreteness' (it starts from concrete problems), 'generality' and diagonality: "I believe precisely that the forms of totalization offered by politics are always, in fact, very limited. I am attempting, to the contrary, apart from any totalization - which would be at once

abstract and limiting - to open up problems that are as concrete and general as possible, problems that approach politics from behind and cut across society diagonally” (1984 [1983]: 376). At the philosophical (or ontological) level, poststructuralists rejected a certain way of engaging in critical theory in which the critical theorist, standing on top of his superior knowledge and lucidity, looks down on others and pretends to *emancipate them*, by revealing the ideological veil which renders them blind to their real, oppressed, condition (Sim 2004). The latter critique, was rather clearly directed to the Frankfurt tradition, as well as to the structuralist one and the Marxist notion of ideology. This can be related to the poststructuralist epistemic critique of totalitarianism. Stating that discourses, narratives, and so forth are never total, in my opinion, also implies that individuals are never completely alienated or dominated.

To my opinion, this rejection of totalitarianism, determinism and essentialism constitutes the main takeaway from the poststructuralist thought. However, in the next chapters, we will see that these main takeaway came to substantially complicate the task of the critique.

## **2.4. Chapter conclusion**

Concomitantly with the weakness of the social critique, in philosophy and critical theory, the debates concerning Marxism, as well as the ideals of reason, faith in progress and the Kantian epistemology, centered on the subject of knowledge. Prominent grievances addressed to Classical Marxism were the historical determinism of its historical materialism, as well as its class determinism, which erected the labour class as the central and leading revolutionary subject.

Besides, after the death of Lenin, the orthodoxy and totalitarianism installed by Stalin also legitimately led to profound intellectual critiques. While the New Left sought to ‘break with the labour metaphysic’ but explicitly remain in the footsteps of Marx, poststructuralists developed a more radical critique, which was also a critique of the Enlightenment. They stressed the intersubjective character of knowledge, and its entanglement in language. More generally, they also vigorously rejected the totalitarianism, essentialism and any form of determinism, which constitutes, in my opinion, the main takeaway from poststructuralism. However, as will be argued in the two following chapters, while having been very good at challenging Marxism, neither post-Marxists nor poststructuralists have until now been up to the task of replacing its normative appeal and its collective mobilisation ability. Furthermore, I will cast serious doubts on the effectivity, at the ontic level, of their critique and in particular, on their apprehension of politics.

## CHAPTER THREE: FOUCAULT, DERRIDA, AND THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST PROBLEMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS

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In this second chapter, the way politics is conceived by Foucault and Derrida is developed, with the main goal of stressing the fact that Foucault and Derrida unduly restrict the possibility to build counter hegemonies, clear political objectives, the role that can legitimately be played by critical intellectuals on the one hand, and the legitimate forms of collective action on the other. The first subchapter lays out Foucault and Derrida's respective conception of the method intellectual critique, its purpose (not building counter hegemonies), how public advocacy should be organised, as well as their conception of political-economic institutions. In a second subchapter, this conception is criticised mainly with regard to the detrimental effect it has on collective action, and therefore on the efficiency of political struggles. Besides, the legitimacy of the motivations behind this restrictive perspective on politics are also questioned.

### **3.1. How to question the social order after poststructuralism**

First, the approach of Foucault and Derrida to the critique will be described. It will be stressed that for both authors, building counter hegemonies, and even alternatives, is not part of the critical agenda of intellectuals (section 3.1.1 and 3.1.2). Furthermore, they conceive politics as primarily individual, subjective and spontaneous - which will be criticised in the next subchapter (section 3.1.3). Finally, the critical approach of Foucault towards the power exerted by the institutions of the state and the economy on individuals will be discussed, highlighting *resistance* as the main political strategy developed by Foucault with regard to this power (section 3.1.4).

#### **3.1.1. Foucault: the critique as limit experience**

The essay, *What is Enlightenment* (1984), written by Foucault close to the end of his life, can be seen as summing up his mature position towards critique (Dekens 2004). Foucault, building on Kant's essay *Answering the Question: what is the enlightenment?* (1784) and on Baudelaire, redefined the Enlightenment as an *ethos*, a specific critical attitude towards ourselves, and modernity as a relationship towards one's present: the "permanent critique of our historical era" (*'notre être historique'*) (Foucault 1984: 42). The precise content of this ethos is prone to change, but overall, it can be described as a *limit-attitude* because it amounts to analyzing and reflecting on limits which will eventually be transgressed.

Critique amounts to putting our cognitive capacities into use to analyse for the higher purpose of liberating ourselves (in fact 'our selves', 'nos soi') from power relations which, while

often presented as natural or rational, express historical contingencies. Practically, the critical attitude takes the form of historical inquiries aimed at answering the question: *Why do we think what we think, and why would we not think and act differently?* Generally speaking, Foucault primarily proceeded by showing the contingency of objects, of the self, of institutions, and discourses and generally speaking, focuses on and challenges common understandings of power generally speaking (Howarth 2000). Each of these historical enquiries should, Foucault argues, be “genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method” (ibid: 46). It would proceed by understanding the contingent and historically built constraints on what we are and have been (the archeological method<sup>10</sup>), to push further the boundaries of what we can be, “to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (ibid: 46).

More explicitly than Derrida, Foucault thus recognises *one* value, *liberty*, through which different states of affairs could be gauged against each other, and their relative desirability argued for. Yet, content-wise, this value of *freedom*, the horizon, the purpose, should remain “undefined”, “empty”. Liberty means something, but its meaning should be continuously discussed: “we are always in the position of beginning again” (Foucault 1983: 47), Foucault argues. It is a task to be reaccomplished a thousand times. Indeed, any emancipatory act eliminating power relations immediately becomes itself an act of power, if only by defining what power is. As soon as liberty is defined and realised, it becomes a power on its own and is to be questioned again. More generally, it is quite clear that Foucault purposefully does not propose explicit normative criteria because as Christian Veeke (2013: 80) stressed he aims to “argue against the attempts to ground a normative theory on a universal feature of Man or History”. Foucault also made it clear that his historical approach was to be understood as “a genealogy of problems, not solutions” (Foucault in Vallois 2015), and that he do not believe that it is the role of intellectuals to play the ‘advisor’ of social movements (Veeke 2013).

However, Foucault nevertheless maintains a minimal constructive leap and clearly wants freedom to be more than an “empty dream”. This is also consistent with Foucault’s own practical political involvement on the side of prison inmates or immigrant workers, for instance (Boubeker 2004). To make these two ends meet, Foucault proposes that, in addition to analysing limits, the critical ethos should also be *experimental* and striving for coherence between theory and practice. Experimentation and coherency is for Foucault the only possible way to positively define freedom, while avoiding the totalitarian road. The recourse to experimentation enables the critique, according to Foucault, to “put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is *possible* and *desirable*, and to *determine the precise form this change should take*” (ibid: page). Discussing the problematic relation of intellectuals from various strands to the nazi regime (including of course Heidegger), Foucault also stressed the importance of coherence: “at every moment, step by step, one

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault first used the term ‘archeology’ in one of his doctoral dissertation. However, it is in *Words and Things* (1966) that Foucault articulated his archéological method, aimed at the uncovering historical epistèmes, the underlying rules conditioning what could be known and considered as ‘truth’ at a specific epoch. In *On The Enlightenment*, Foucault integrated his archeological method with the later on developed genealogical method. The genealogical method aimed at separating “out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” (Foucault 1984: 46), while the archeology is given the more modest role of “treat[ing] the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events” (Foucault 1984: 46).

must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is” (Foucault 1984[1983]: 374).

### 3.1.2. Derrida: decentering chains of equivalence

Let us turn now to Derrida, whose entry point is a literary, linguistic and aesthetic approach, which builds on - and at the same time criticises - Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic and Levi-Strauss’s structuralism (Fry 2012). In Derrida’s poststructuralist understanding, the meaning of signifiers, i.e. sounds and images associated with concepts (for instance words) is provided by nothing else than other signifiers (for instance other words). Meaning is thus formed through *chains of signifiers* (where signifiers are associated with each other through relations of equivalence and difference) and can therefore never be grounded. The critical philosophy of Derrida, which explicitly aims not only at describing but also at transforming the society in which he lives, functions through the *deconstruction*<sup>11</sup> of the above mentioned ‘chains of equivalences’. Derrida particularly insists on mutually constitutive binaries, showing that what we take for granted, for instance, the concept of woman, only exists through the relation(s) to what it cannot possibly be, its opposite: man<sup>12</sup>. In technical words, its ‘center’ is said to be empty (it has no *sui generis* meaning of its own outside the binary relationship) and defined by the other term of the binary relationship, its ‘constitutive outside’ (here the concept of Man).

For Derrida, Deconstruction is “to-come” (‘ce qui arrive’) (in Royle 2003). Like an earthquake does, tremor after tremor, deconstruction would propagate itself, one destabilisation would trigger another, identities would be split, broken, making it visible that they are constituted through their impossibility, their constitutive outside, provoking (but not designing) new, different or *différent* chains of signifiers. It is a “strange strategy without finality” (Derrida in Royle 2003) which opens up spaces for ‘*l’à-venir*’ (‘to come’). *L’à-venir* differs from the future (‘*le futur*’) by its novelty. While the future is nothing more than a displaced present (‘*un présent décalé*’) because it maintains a continuity with the present, *l’à-venir* is unforeseeable, which makes it an expression of freedom.

Indeed, for Derrida, it is not possible to escape this thinking in binary relationships, since negating one term only leads to endorsing the other term as the new center (for instance: unconscious instead of conscious, or irrational against rational). Instead, the only horizon is to refuse that one of the terms, the poles, of the binary relationship becomes the center (Selden & al. 2016). In other words, for Derrida, *decentering* these binary relations - from the logos to the subject, and including political institutions - is the proper critical move (Royle 2003). Through deconstruction, a text is tied apart, disclosing behind a concept “X, *an impossibility* that becomes its proper and sole possibility, with the result that between the X as possible and

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<sup>11</sup> Derrida is well known as the founding figure of the deconstructive approach (Selden & al. 2016). However, *-ist* (Royle 2000). Besides, Derrida drew on an already well established tradition of deconstruction, including Heidegger’s concept of Destruktion (Holland 21/06/2017), whose influence he shared with Foucault (Gary 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Another example is that of the term ‘nature’. The term nature, according to Derrida, does not exist without ‘culture’, (and in fact presupposes it). Indeed, without culture, there is no point to define, distinguish nature. In fact, the meaning of ‘nature’, one center, is provided through its opposition to ‘culture’, another center, hence ‘nature’ exists as a center, but is empty for it is defined through its opposition to culture, which is outside this structure (Fry 2012).

the 'same' X as impossible, there is nothing but a relation of homonymy, a relation for which we have to provide an account" (Derrida, in Royle 2000: 300). To relate this to the previous discussion, X is a center, a blanket concept. Deconstructing X, comes to showing the binary relationship linking X to another signifier, 'the impossible', or the negation of X, through which X acquires its meaning, revealing the contradiction making the text possible (Holland 21/06/2017).

Until the early 1990s, deconstruction was characterised by an apparent lack of normative impetus. As Veeke (2013: 112) stressed, "it wasn't clear from the outset what the political, ethical or critical contribution of deconstruction could be". In his later writings, Derrida sought to resist the claim that deconstruction is "neutral and indifferent towards ethical questions, the law, justice" (Derrida, in Boissinot 1994: 624). In *Force of Law* (1992), Derrida contrasted justice and law ('*le droit*'). Note that for him, the law not only means the legal apparatus, but also acting according to some moral principles or let us say, Kantian categorical imperative (Veeke 2013). Derrida claimed that only law is deconstructible, not justice, which belongs to the realm of the singular. While justice always escapes us, "there is a perfectibility, a deconstructibility of the law" (Derrida, in Boissinot 1994: 624).

On the other hand, Derrida also asserted that "Justice is that on behalf of which one deconstructs" (in Boissinot 1994: 625, own translation)<sup>13</sup>. While not constituting a right ('*un droit*'), justice is the motive of the law ('*le droit*') and of deconstruction. "'We deconstruct' also means that we improve law" (ibid), he stated. What Derrida meant is that justice cannot be grounded. Instead, justice can only be approached "in oblique fashion" (Derrida 2002: 237), by questioning it. This is what deconstruction, according to Derrida does.

### **3.1.3. From the Dismissal of organised collective action to mystical collectives**

As previously discussed, under the ferule of Derrida and Foucault, critique is a dismantlement, which is meant to be creative, just like Schumpeter's creative destruction, and can have two motives - justice and freedom - but these are empty, never transcendently defined. Politics should, for them, also clearly be an *individual, subjective and spontaneous enterprise*. Contrary to the totalitarian specter of Marx always in background, they reject the idea of party, of organisation, and assimilate any institution with forms of oppression and power. While they do not in principle reject collective action, they overemphasize the necessity for a social movement to be spontaneous in order to be authentic (as opposed to the artificial feature of an organised movement). As Isabelle Garo (2001) reminds us, this emphasis on - and fascination for - the spontaneous spread of ideas or of political movements can be found in most philosophers of that time, and targeted not only the state, but also political parties, trade unions and the classical way to engage in politics (Garo 2011). Neither in Derrida, nor in Foucault, are there collective identities, aspiration or struggles. Both authors were at some point active and activists, but always as private persons, not in name of their philosophical theories. In 2004, in one of his rare appearances on French public television, Derrida

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<sup>13</sup> Note that the signifier '*droit*' in French can mean both the law, the right, and right, and that Derrida is clearly playing with these homographies.

(surprisingly) took many positions on current affairs, such as the Iraq war or the future of the EU, but remained quite vague about any underlying political conviction or guiding principle, only stating at some point : "My hope, and it might be excessive, is that there will be popular movements that will challenge certain sovereign policies." As Best and Kellner (1997) stresses, Mai 68 was their model.

In the *Specters of Marx* (1993), Derrida finally took an explicit position on Marx, described him as having three 'spirits': the communist and totalitarian one, the emancipatory one, and the critique inherited from the Enlightenment (Derrida in Boissinot 1994). Derrida lays claim to these last two spirits, and invokes them like mystical spirits to revive a new *internationale*. Like a hostage of his binary relationship with Marx, from which he only takes the cultural critique over, Derrida invokes an atomised populace of individuals, subjects without names, characters without faces, asking them to work for the creation of "the alliance of a rejoining without conjoined mate, without organization, without party, without nation, without State, without property (the "communism" that we will later nickname the new International)" (Derrida 1993: 35). In other words, Derrida's new *internationale* is just like his concept of nature: empty. It is exclusively defined as an exclusion of a certain type of Marxism. It is the rejection of the organisation, of the party, or the nation of the state. To contrast it with the work of Mouffe and Laclau, which will be discussed later, and which is generally qualified as post-Marxist, the Derridean critique can be described as a return to the romanticism of Marx, tinted with the revolutionary spirit and enthusiasm of the French Revolution, but without his Ricardian side: the analysis of political economy.

### **3.1.4. Political and Economic Institutions, a 'less the better' approach?**

Derrida takes literary texts as expressions of human subjectivity, contrary to Foucault who paid attention to past and present institutions (besides language), including economic institutions.<sup>14</sup> However, resistance, the main political strategy proposed by Foucault, is essentially a reactive strategy, and does not enable the building of alternative institutional settings.

A distinction should be made here between the early and late Foucault. In works such as the *History of Madness in the Classical Age* (1961), and *The Order of Things* (1966) ('*Les mots et les choses*'), Foucault focuses on 'broad structures', although contrarily to structuralists à la Levy-Strauss, the historicity and contingency of these structures are stressed. Among these technologies are discourses: the conceptualisation of madness as an illness from the 17th century onwards for the former, and how knowledge is produced over the ages for the latter. The contingency of these discourses was excavated by pointing to ruptures in these discursive formations, across time. With *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault initiated his genealogic turn. Power, instead of being apprehended as located in structures, is

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<sup>14</sup> In one of the intellectual fist-fights between the two philosophers, Foucault has therefore reproached Derrida for the 'naivety' of his approach, abstracting the text from the context, the discourse from its *épistème*, in three pages of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (2006[1961]) from a book of 299 pages (Foucault 1994).

now conceived as being *diffuse*. It is located neither in specific institutions, nor in the state apparatus as such. Knowledge, the knowledge of the body, is described as a *technology*, the political technology of the body (*'la technologie politique du corps'*) through which a control is exerted not only on the body, but also *through* it, in what Foucault calls "microphysics of power" (*'une microphysique du pouvoir'*). In modern times, powers are micro-powers and they potentially come from everywhere. Above all, power, and discipline, became increasingly exerted through normalisation (rather than, for instance, through direct hierarchical observation), "to punish less, perhaps; but certainly to punish better", Foucault highlights.

Additionally, Foucault became interested in the way economic mechanisms of domination are being enabled and facilitated by the institution of the state. New principles of government, based on specific types of rationality, the *governmentality* of the state, emerged along with the state, through which populations were managed, and not simply territories as in the Middle age (Revel 2002). Biopolitics, the political and global management of the life of individuals (for instance, including the organisation of the family, hygiene), is the object of the state governmentality, which achieves this aim not only by exerting a domination on individuals (*"les technique de domination exercées sur les autres"*), but also by educating and transforming individuals themselves (*"les techniques de soi"*). In the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1984), the theme of the care of the self (*'le souci de soi'*) is explored in more details and even become a critical practice, almost a praxis. More generally, since *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault developed a 'political' strategy which would be very influential in social movement and in 'critical' academia: resistance. The resistance in question is a resistance against the limits. It does not seek to establish (or even conceptualise) other rules, other norms, for these would be equally oppressive. However, Foucault is unable, from his framework, to account for why we should resist, or where resistance should stop (Pickett 1996). Finally, let me stress that Foucault did devote attention to political economy in his 1978 and 1979 lectures at the Collège de France, titled 'The Birth of Biopolitics' (2004). However, for Foucault, the study of political economy was generally subsidiary to his main goal: understanding and analysing power (Vallois 2015).

## **3.2. Critical comments**

As discussed, for Foucault and Derrida, social change should be primarily driven by individuals, in their particularity, and as much as possible their own subjectivity. It should have no defined aim. For Derrida it is *l'à-venir*, for Foucault an empty notion of freedom, and both make it clear that it is the role for neither critical scholars, nor for activists, to construct alternative projects. As a consequence, while lauding *spontaneous* collective gatherings, they also seem to oppose any sort of explicit coordination between these individuals' political actions and defined strategies. Neither Foucault, nor Derrida provide an explanation of how their critical ethos could possibly lead to *effective* social change, but they still present it as a genuine form of critique. As Hodgson (2006) stressed, all the definitions of *spontaneous* institutions and according social change, remain problematic. Let us settle, nevertheless, on the following definition: a mobilisation is spontaneous when it has no explicit or formal coordinating and centralising body, and takes place locally.

This subchapter starts by stressing that the perspective of Foucault and Derrida on politics has been forged in a context which was very different from the current one. More precisely, Foucault and Derrida's conception has been, I argue, overdetermined by a counter reaction to currents of Marxist orthodoxy in France in the post-war period (section 3.2.1.). Then, I will argue that the conception of politics put forward by Foucault and Derrida raises genuine difficulties for organising collective action, and thereby significantly restricts the efficiency of politics, especially from the side of the weakest. More generally, the fact that the impact of 'spontaneous' collective mobilisation is too limited when compared with its ambition will then be stressed, and illustrated with the case of the alter-globalist movement (section 3.2.2). In the third subsection, the theoretical motivations for advocating for such an approach to politics will be challenged. More precisely, it will be argued that spontaneous, individual political action does not on its own avoid the sins it is supposed to prevent (section 3.2.3). Finally, this subchapter ends up on a more general note: institutions, rules structuring social interactions, will always be there. Rather than simply conceptualising them as technologies of power, a more fruitful approach is to think of them as having a Janus face (section 3.2.4).

### 3.2.1. Chasing dead enemies

My explanation for this aversion to institutions which regulate social life is that poststructuralist thought has been entangled in a detrimental binary relationship with two dead enemies: Stalinist communism and Maoism (and the fascination of many left intellectuals with these ideologies up to *May 68*, and even later). Foucault and Derrida were students during the Stalinist / Maoist phase described above, and they had both quickly become skeptical towards it. It should also be mentioned that in France, this Stalinist / Maoist phase was longer than in most other western countries, partly because the French communists had led the resistance against Nazi Germany, and had thus a strong claim to legitimacy after WWII, which allowed them to remain on the central political scene up until the eighties. In France, the translation in French of Soljenitsyne's *Gulag Archipelagos* in 1974, and its subsequent popular success, represented the last nail in the coffin of Stalinists and Maoists, including intellectuals (Keuchayan 2013). Besides, during Mai-68, both the communist party and trade unions leaders decided to negotiate with the state, some material counterparts to against the return to law and order (Best and Kellner 1997).

To phrase it in Derridean terms, just as the concept of *Nature* would not exist without that of *Culture* (which can thus be said to 'precede' it), certain aspects of the poststructuralist restrictive view on politics seem to be a direct response to the Marxist orthodoxy which preceded it. This is quite transparent in an interview given by Derrida just after the publication of the *Specters of Marx* (Derrida in Boissinot 1994). Derrida was unsatisfied as much by the communist party's orthodoxy, as by Althusser's critique of it (then dominant in the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*). Worried about reinforcing the former by criticising the latter, Derrida talked in ellipses. As he stated : "To those who take the time of reading me, I believe I had already multiplied discrete signals about my positions, my reticences, and at least in hints, with regards to discourse, Marxist practices and practices on the part of communist parties" (ibid: 620, own translation). A similar case can be made about Foucault, although he started his career as a Marxist, and even briefly adhered to the French Communist Party. Isabelle Garo (2011) stressed that the ambition of Foucault, after his break with the communist party in the 1950s, was to develop a *theoretical alternative to Marx*. In other words, the entire work

of Foucault is marked by an unproblematized and ambiguous proximity to not only Marx, but also to the Marxist movement.

To relate this to the ontic level, Merijn Oudenampsen (2016), focusing on the Netherlands, distinguished two quite different generations of leftists. The baby boom generation, that of my grandparents, “took the country by storm in the sixties and seventies”, Oudenampsen says. Overly enthusiastic and careless, they “fell back on a superficial and orthodox Marxism, clung to a sharp dichotomy between reformism and revolutionary politics, and pursued a romantic notion of revolution, without a clear idea of its point of departure or its destination. According to the ruling political fashions of the time, leftist students flirted with Stalinism and Maoism” (ibid). In contrast (and a Marxist could not refrain from adding the world ‘dialectic’ here) the next generation - that of current ‘policy makers’ - was constituted by “sober technocrats” whose identity was in large part defined “in opposition to the radicals on the left” (ibid: 147). Oudenampsen has in mind party leaders of the social democrats of the third way. This technocratic and depoliticized generation - and not the Maoist furor of the 1960s or Althusser’s overdetermined academic opposition to the aforementioned Maoist activists - is the *current* challenge for those attempting to re-think the political left. *This* is the challenge for the left.

While it goes without saying that important lessons should be learned from the Stalinist and Maoist experiences, the poststructuralist answer is too extreme and tends to let critique wither away, which is particularly problematic in situations in which individuals are structurally weaker than those whose domination they aim to free themselves from, a point I will stress. Therefore, rethinking the left after and beyond the third way, the collapse of the Bretton Woods institutions, the financial de-regulation and the financial crisis which followed, requires taking a step back in order to question the starting assumptions underlying what constitutes legitimate politics promoted by poststructuralism. To be more precise, I believe that the conception of the critique just illustrated with the thought of Foucault and Derrida, which has been quite influential among social movements, almost annihilates the possibility of effective collective action. A reminder that in the first chapter, I defended collective action as being crucial in situations of asymmetries because it enable to the weaker resources of those who are not favored by these asymmetries.

### **3.2.2. The limited global impact of ‘spontaneous’ collective mobilisation: the alter-globalist movement as example**

As Srnicek and Williams (2015) stress, taken alone, a purely ‘bottom-up’ approach be *insufficient with regard to the current and coming global challenges* (Srnicek and Williams 2015). Besides, it will also mean that possibilities of change that are available, in particular the ones offered by the state, via partisan politics, are not used. To evaluate and point out the limits of this perspective on politics, let us have a look at a concrete example provided by the *alter-globalist movement*. Indeed, Foucault in particular, through *inter alia* the work of Toni Negri and Michael Hardt (2000) was quite influential among the alter-globalist movements, and in particular the strand that Geoffrey Pleyers called the ‘way of subjectivity’. What is interesting with the alter-globalist movement, is that we now have sufficient hindsight to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies. As Pleyers stressed concerning the way of subjectivity, “the spread from social change in a limited group to a larger scale

transformation remains a blind-spot” (ibid: 96-7). One can cast doubts on the actual ability of the *swarming*, put forward by the way of subjectivity, to actually achieve the global transformation expected. While the way of subjectivity has been quite successful at triggering local initiatives, this did not have any significant impact on global pollution levels, or working wages for instance.

In fact, the same can be said with regard to the way of reason, when taking into account their mitigated bilan concerning the three emblematic priorities of their agenda, the annulation of the third world debt, the abolition of tax havens and the tobin tax on financial transactions (Pleyers 2010). While some results have been achieved concerning the former, the latter largely remained, at best, disappointed campaign pledges. In particular, after the financial crisis, which had been largely ‘predicted’ by alter-globalist scholars, they failed to mobilise around the concrete realisation of institutional change. A similar observation can be made concerning the European Constitutional Treaty. Among others, alter-globalists (mainly of the way of reason) could foster an important mobilisation against the treaty. However, after its failure, a more social Europe never emerged, and to the contrary, after a stage of paralysis another, no more progressive treaty was adopted. This only stresses the importance for politics to have concrete political objectives.

### **3.2.3. Spontaneous, individual political action does not on its own avoid the sins identified by poststructuralists.**

Such a restriction would be acceptable if valid reasons were motivating it. A first motivation, Foucault suggests, is to avoid totalitarianism and barbarism.<sup>15</sup> This certainly makes sense if we think of spontaneous change as being the opposite, the negation, of Stalinism. However, thinking outside the binary relationship, one could, and should, stress that *reducing political action to ‘spontaneous’ and individual action offers no guarantee of avoiding totalitarianism*. First, barbarism can emerge spontaneously, locally, as much as being the outgrowth of a centralised and totalitarian organisation. For example, there are instances of ‘spontaneous’ massacres, such as the one documented by Jan Gross (2001) in Jedwabne. In 1941, in this Polish town, as the author put it, half of the village ‘spontaneously’ murdered the other, Jew, half. The murders were not instructed or orchestrated by the German occupant. Rather, the local population undertook it on their own initiative, spontaneously. Secondly, the *exodus* strategy, consisting in deserting the classical political institutions, and in particular, running for elections (as opposed to a strategy of *engagement with* political institutions), to use the words of Chantal Mouffe (2008), also means that political institutions are abandoned ‘to the opponent’, including, and increasingly, not only to the right but also the extreme right, potentially handing the keys of power to future totalitarian regimes.

There is a second part to the totalitarian risk argument, which is related to the Marxist teleological view of history. Believing or asserting that history is a succession of stages, that ultimately, through the resolution of the respective contradictions of each stage, an utopian communist society freed from all these contradictions will emerge, tends to legitimise,

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. “I prefer even these partial transformations that have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century” (Foucault 1984: 47).

intentionally or not, current atrocities, using a diachronic 'utilitarian-kind' of argument: suffering now, is justified by the realisation of the purported utopia. Having explicitly refused historical determinism, my position is clear that this type of legitimation should absolutely be opposed. However, there are other ways to prevent this other than by restricting the only valid social changes to spontaneous, individually-driven, bottom-up change. For now, let us focus on the fact that an absolute rejection of the idea that there is a telos, a direction, a purpose to history entails that such predictions will always be *incomplete* and marked by a certain degree of uncertainty, as a consequence, I will argue in the fifth chapter that: 1) political objectives should always be reevaluated regularly with regard to the changing political context, and 2) the legitimacy and source of identification to a movement should be based on shared values and a common understanding of society, rather than directly on concrete political objectives, in order to enable a certain room for manoeuvre for updating these more concrete political objectives.

The fear of totalitarianism is only one part of the reasons why the 'spontaneous' and 'individually driven' road is privileged by Foucault and Derrida among others. The other reason is, as exposed above, a more experiential one, and is related to these authors' conception of what it means to be free. This is a central element of the alter-globalist way of subjectivity, whose proponents strive to "build *spaces of experience; places sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society which permit actors to live according to their own principles*" (ibid: 39, emphasis in the original). These spaces can take different forms, ambitioning to be permanent or ephemeral (G8 or border camps), striving to insulation (zapatista) or spaces within the city (such as communal gardens). Having endorsed a late-Foucauldian perspective on power potentially coming from everywhere, and despite their emphatic rejection of any utopia, they also expect and strive for their spaces of experience to be free of 'power-domination'<sup>16</sup>. However, the 'end of power', even in these spaces and movements, has remained an illusion and "concretely some activists become far more involved than others and acquire greater influence. In fact, the limited formalization of these spaces in no way protects them from the play of power" (Pleyers 2010: 44). It is also clear that 'charismatic or media leaders', such as José Bové or Subcomandante Marcos, 'spontaneously' emerged. To put it succinctly, the willingness to create spaces of autonomy free from the power of the state and of the market, in which individuals could flourish, did not *effectively* rid these places of power relations.

Another good example was provided by the organisation of the world social forum. The first world social forum, held in 2001 in Porto Alegre in Brasil, resembled an academic colloquium open to the public: "well-known intellectuals and academics monopolizing the large panels and even most of the smaller workshops" (ibid: 214). However, the cosmopolitan activists of the *way of reason* who had organised the forum were quickly overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of participants of the *way of subjectivity*, who sought to reappropriate the event and its organisation. This stands in stark contrast with the 2005 world social forum (again in Porto Alegre), where public lectures and panels were replaced by participatory workshops, enabling exchange of experience among alter-globalists all around the world. Besides, the event was presented as 100 percent horizontal and self organised. However, what really

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<sup>16</sup> In Pleyers terms: "While often effective, 'spaces of experience' are also fraught with illusions such as the existence of groups freed of power relations and the utopia of a space outside society and politics" (ibid: 96).

happened in this regard is more nuanced. Often, 'closed meetings' were held at night, to organise what could not be organised in long and often frustrating horizontally organised plenary sessions where dozens of activists were sequentially speaking, but no decisions taken. In other words, *the absence of formal principles of delegation and internal structure suppressed neither delegation nor and structure, but simply led to the creation of a parallel shadow structure*. As Oliver Marchart (2002) stressed, the inherent problem of such a notion as *transversality* is that it pretends to solve the question of organisation, while in fact it raises the question of what form of organisation is most appropriate, because it is itself a form of organisation.

Having discussed Derrida and Foucault's stance towards collective organisation, let us now pay attention to their relationship to institutions.

### **3.2.4. Institutions, the building blocks of social order, have a Janus face**

Institutions are the building blocks of social life and will therefore always be present, as long as we live and communicate with others. Hodgson (2006: 2, 18) defined them as "systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions", where rules are "socially transmitted and customary normative injunction or immanently normative disposition, that in circumstances X do Y" (ibid: 3), where Y can designate one or more possible behaviors. Language, money, law, systems of weights, traffic rules and table manners, but also firms, trade unions or central banks, are examples of institutions (Streeck and Thelen 2005). More than being isolated rules, various institutions are in some way interrelated and form "social rule-systems" (Hodgson 2006: 13). The standpoint defended here is that individuals are never fully determined by the institutional structure. Or, as Hodgson (2006: 6) puts it, institutions are "simultaneously both objective structures "out there" and subjective outgrowths of human agency "in the human head." Institutions are in this respect like Klein bottles: the subjective "inside" is simultaneously the objective 'outside'". Another important insight of institutional theory is that institutions do not only constrain, but also *enable* behavior. Traffic rules are constraining, but also enable to us to circulate smoothly and with less danger. A more pervasive example of enabling institution is language, which enables individuals to communicate, or critical philosophers to decenter binaries.

Different types of institutions can be distinguished. For critical philosophers, at least three types of institutions are of particular relevance: political economic institutions ('the basic structure of society'), organisations and conventions. The radical stance taken by the way of subjectivity towards political economic institutions, as well as that of organisations, leads them to self-contradicting positions where their ideal is "frequently contradicted by actions and concrete practices" (Pleyers 2010: 223). The previously stressed issues of autonomous spheres, and the internal coordination of their 'spontaneous' movements constitute an obvious example. A second case has to do with their relationship towards the state, as is the case for the *piqueteros* groups holding a radical anti-statist discourse, and at the same time demonstrating for better social benefits<sup>17</sup>. This is not specific to the *piqueteros*. In fact, all the

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<sup>17</sup> The *piqueteros* are informal groups of unemployed people who used *piquets* to block roads in Argentina in the 1990s to make their demands heard by the government.

cases studies conducted by Pleyers were entangled in this type of contradictory relationship with the state, except for the Zapatistas<sup>18</sup>. In fact, Foucault himself even ends up in a contradictory position, as has been stressed by Pickett (1996: 465-466), “Foucault wants to be engaged; he wants to further human equality through attacking hierarchical power relations. At the same time, he wants to maintain a philosophical position which holds that every social norm is normalizing and every set of morals is constructed by power. These two desires are at odds, and Foucault's deeper philosophical commitments make his political stance troubling”.

To go back to the alter-globalist example. Concerning the *way of reason*, let us only stress that their *Montesquiesque* logic of counter power cannot on its own bring across the change in terms of political economic institutional that they advocate for. To achieve this, governments have to follow. Yet, as mentioned above, even the *way of reason* strands of this generation of activists cautiously avoided being involved in ‘traditional’ political parties, or creating new ones. Their interlocutors, even from the left, were reluctant to translate their constructive proposals into law, relegating their role to a primarily reactive and oppositional one. In simple terms: they had to cope with Lionel Jospin who, to take only one example, privatised even more public companies than the previous government from the right. This, as well as the aforementioned disappointment concerning their political achievements, led several alter-globalist ‘leaders’, despite previously refusing to, to eventually affiliate themselves to political parties (e.g. José Bové).

### **3.3. Chapter conclusion**

First, the way Foucault and Derrida conceive their critical contribution (as well as their boundaries), as an experience the limits and the decentering of chains of equivalences respectively, has been explained. It has been stressed that both authors would be reluctant to the proposal of building a counter hegemony to neoliberalism. For them, being a critical intellectual does not entail building alternatives, but opening possibilities, showing the non ‘naturalness’ of our present condition, be it with regard to our subjectivity, or to the various institutions of the state and the economy (Foucault), or how the social structure is reflected in language (Derrida). For Foucault, the critique is an intellectual attitude, an ethos, aimed at questioning our limits by disclosing the contingent present forms of subjectivity and institutions through historical – archeologic and genealogic - enquiries.

Concerning broader values, Derrida stresses that only the law, not justice, can be deconstructed. The purpose of deconstruction is to open up spaces for an *à-venir* whose unpredictability precisely makes it an expression of freedom. Foucault recognized one value, that of liberty, but refused to attach a specific content to it. More generally, Foucault denounced power relations, without really proposing a prospect enabling one to definitively escape from them. Generally speaking, Foucault saw his critical contribution as pointing to the contingency of forms of the self and of institutions. The main political strategy that he proposed was *resistance*. Besides, Foucault stressed the importance when some positive content is given to the notion of freedom, to base it on experience. He also stressed the importance of coherence

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<sup>18</sup> However, the Zapatistas were also those whose material conditions of existence only slightly improved.

between theory and practice. Finally, the fact that both authors conceived politics as primarily an individually driven, subjective and spontaneous practice, has been stressed.

Obviously, the immense legacy provided by the work of Derrida and Foucault cannot be reduced to the five pages account presented here. Yet, it goes without saying that certain number elements in Derrida and Foucault's thought, starting with deconstruction, remain important tools of critique. It has been argued, however, that Derrida and Foucault, reflecting a wider trend in the literature (in particular at this time) excessively (when compared to the benefits) restrict the role of the critique to an individually driven and spontaneous one. Taken alone, the way Derrida and Foucault conceived the critique is unsatisfactory because it weakens the practical potential of critique, and does not enable it to challenge existing asymmetries and hierarchies because it considerably weakens the possibility of effective collective action and tends to unjustifiably disregard its benefits. In addition to the theoretical critiques that can be addressed to these argument, the experience of social movements inspired by them, in particular by Foucault, showed the limits of this model.

Note that only when it is proposed as the sole legitimate road towards social change is individually driven political action so problematic. Once these constraining conditions are put aside, individually driven political action and organised collective action prove to be more complementary to each other than adversarial.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE PEOPLE, MOUFFE AND LACLAU'S RE-ARTICULATION OF A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

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One of the most advanced steps towards a fruitful synthesis between classical Marxism and poststructuralism can be found in the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, who embraced both paradigms for their innovative ventures. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985 [2001]), one encounters certain classical Marxist heroes, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, but they become the actors of Mouffe and Laclau's genealogy regarding the notion of hegemony. The texts of Marx himself are seldom mentioned. Typically Marxist terms and themes, such as the *Proletariat*, the *Working Class*, or *Revolution* are present to be *decentered*. Remaining true to the spirit, but open to new readings. The spirit of the Marxist project is not disavowed, but the struggle of the working class is now considered as one of many possible constructions of social opposition. The teleological perspective is replaced by the perspective of a more contingent and plural struggle for hegemony.

Mouffe and Laclau adopted not only the vocabulary, but also the theoretical apparatus, of poststructuralism to rethink Marxism, and in particular, to move away from class and historical determinism, and hence to 'break with the spell of the labour metaphysic'. This has allowed Mouffe and Laclau to grant the so called 'new social movements' of the 1970s (and potentially others to come), such as the feminist, ethnic, nationalist, sexual minorities and environmental movements, an equal position as agents of social change and possibly progress, which they did not always have. In contrast to the Foucauldian indecision, Mouffe and Laclau made clear that resistance can be a tool, but that it is quite a poor horizon, for "those movements will remain of a defensive nature" (ibid: xix), inadequate to accomplish the task assigned, and the eventual achievements of resistance will remain ephemeral. The more substantial issue is, for Mouffe and Laclau, to build a new hegemony, able to challenge the neoliberal one. Constructing, not only deconstructing, is thus clearly their project. Furthermore, Mouffe and Laclau do not fall into the pitfall of reducing the critical ethos to a purely individually driven and personal one.

Let me relate these critical comments to my initial research questions: *What should an effective (social) critique be? How can intellectuals contribute to the (social) critique and, more specifically, to the elaboration of a counter hegemony to the currently dominant neoliberal hegemony?* The work of Mouffe and Laclau is certainly to be welcomed with regard to the possibilities of effective change offered by the critique, as their approach enables a form of collective identification (around the figure of the people). They also provide a normative criterion: radical democracy. In a more residual form, this approach also opens up a strategy, a short term objective: satisfying the demands of the 'forgotten sectors'. Nevertheless, after the exposition of the main elements of Mouffe and Laclau's thought, two critical comments will be made. Following Oliver Marchart (2007), it will be stressed that Mouffe and Laclau mainly provided an ontology which does not on its own constitute an emancipatory political philosophy. Since Mouffe and Laclau wants to be normative and to go beyond the simple provision of an ontology, they partially ground political philosophic concepts such as the people or radical democracy. However, it will be argued that more work is needed in order to relate these post-foundational concepts to actually existing institutions (4.2.1.). Besides it is

stressed that more attention should also be devoted to the ontic level, to politics, which is currently, and strangely, neglected in the literature (4.2.1.).

## **4.1. Back to the hegemonic struggle**

The work of Mouffe and Laclau came as a *summa magna* of the previously cited New Left critics of orthodox Marxism. Indeed, Mouffe and Laclau still considered themselves in the filiation of Marx, while drawing heavily on poststructuralist and Lacanian theory. They saw it as the pressing challenge for the left to cease the factional struggles between the labour movement and so called new social movements by uniting these multiple fronts together in a common struggle, or “to create a chain of equivalence among the various democratic struggles against different forms of subordination” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: xviii). “Struggles against sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, and in the defence of the environment, needed to be articulated with those of the workers in a new left-wing hegemonic project”, Laclau and Mouffe claimed (ibid: xviii).

First, Mouffe and Laclau’s conception of discourse, as well as the social, a notion that will play an important role is the subsequent part of this work, is presented (section 4.1.1). Then, Mouffe and Laclau’s redefinition of the class struggle into a hegemonic struggle is discussed (section 4.1.2). The third section deals with what I believe to be the main achievement of Mouffe and Laclau: redefining a subject position that can be used as a mobilising collective identity for collective action (section 4.1.3). Finally, radical democracy, the normative ideal proposed by Mouffe and Laclau, will be briefly presented (section 4.1.3).

### **4.1.1. Identities, articulative practices and discourses**

In the work of Laclau and Mouffe, the whole social structure, including institutions, social relations and the qualification of people as subjects are conceptualised as discourses. They have thus a very broad notion of discourse. However, they insist that this notion of discourse is also *not idealist* because discourses are conceived as the result of *practices*. In their terms: “a discursive structure is not a merely 'cognitive' or 'contemplative' entity; it is an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations” (ibid: 96).<sup>19</sup> Mouffe and Laclau are not essentialist.<sup>20</sup> Their use of the notion of *articulation* stresses that relations forming the social are not made out of logical necessities, but are constituted contingently through practices. In this regard, they follow Derrida for whom the meaning of signifiers, or signifieds, is provided by other signifiers. All these signifiers are articulated with each other, forming a chain of signifiers. Besides meaning, this also endows signifiers with a sense of naturalness, or being the self-evident identity of people, objects or institutions (Marttila 2015).

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<sup>19</sup> Note that for Mouffe and Laclau, linguistic and non-linguistic elements cannot simply distinguished as two different domains juxtaposed to each other. Rather they are conceptualised as nested together in discourses in a dynamic and non-teleological process. However, the quote is ambiguous because it suggests that discourses themselves are practices, which conceptually makes little sense. Discourse should be thought about as continuously created, maintained and changed and thereby embedded in practices of articulation. But once signifiers are articulated with each other, the link between them will here be called an articulation, not and articulative practice.

<sup>20</sup> Note that the term *essence* can be used interchangeably with that of *meaning* or *identity*.

For Mouffe and Laclau, these 'sedimented' articulations which are not questioned because they seem natural are called 'the social'. Mouffe and Laclau reserve a very privileged position to moment where the social is articulated. They refer to this as 'the institution of the social' or 'the political'. For them, *the political* corresponds to a moment of 'radical contingency', since at this moment, the element ceases to 'seem' natural and can possibly take different meanings.

Although Laclau and Mouffe agree with Derrida that identities are never totally fixed because of the absence of a transcendental signifier, they also stress that *identities are always partially fixed*. In their words: identities "have to be partial fixations - otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible" (1985: 112).<sup>21</sup> More than an indefinite chain of signifiers, discourses also effect a partial fixation of meaning which is rendered possible by a form of closure of each particular discourse, a boundary between what it is, and what it is not. This partial fixation of meaning happens through *nodal points*, or points of references (Marttila 2015), which provide this boundary. On the one hand, nodal points constitute privileged loci of articulation with other elements within the discourse. On the other hand, as do Derridean empty signifiers, nodal points (let us say 'A', or 'the people') are themselves ontologically meaningless. In fact, it is because they are ontologically meaningless that they draw their meaning out of their opposition to their negation ('non-A', or 'the elite'), the antagonistic other.<sup>22</sup> This also establish a *boundary* between one discourse and another.

Although the antagonistic other signals a closure of particular discourses, Mouffe and Laclau insist that discourses are *never totally closed*, complete, sutured, and therefore *always open to new articulations*. This seemingly enigmatic formulation expresses the simple idea that discourses are never determined once and for all, they can always change in a multiplicity of unpredictable ways. As system of equations with more unknowns than equations always enables multiple possible solutions. This 'field of overdetermination' constitutes the condition of articulatory practices because if all elements were articulated, then the system would be completely determined. More than possibly being destabilised by such rearticulation, Mouffe and Laclau insist that discursive formations will *always* be destabilised because a central element of it, the above mentioned *nodal point*, is defined through an antagonistic relationship with his incommensurable other, which introduces within the discourse an element which is exterior to it. This is how the notion of *antagonism*, in Mouffe and Laclau's post-foundational ontology, comes to play the dynamic role previously reserved for class antagonism in Marxist thought (Keucheyan 2013). Note that in this scheme, there is no ultimate locus of reconciliation of the antagonism triggering the hegemonic struggle.

Let us now see how Mouffe and Laclau use these very abstract concepts to conceptualise the notion of hegemony and their post-foundational understanding of collective identity (the people) and of democracy (radical democracy).

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<sup>21</sup> Laclau and Mouffe continue: "Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning" (ibid 112).

<sup>22</sup> This notion is similar to that of 'constitutive outside' in Derrida's textual analysis.

### 4.1.2. Hegemony vs. Class struggle

'Zooming out', Laclau and Mouffe concluded that class struggle was only one expression of what, at a higher-order level of theorisation, should be conceptualised as a *hegemonic struggle*. The notion of hegemony was already present in the Marxist tradition, before Gramsci, although it occupied a rather minor role. Gramsci, a contemporary of the rise of fascism, understood that for the class struggle to succeed, not only the state had to be defeated, but society itself had to be 'conquered'. Indeed, Gramsci insisted winning over the state and exerted ruling through coercion was not enough. The 'spontaneous consent' of the people also had to be obtained. Attaining hegemony is therefore for Gramsci also a cultural process (Veeke 2013).

In the work of Laclau and Mouffe, the concept of hegemony is much more central and encompassing. As described by Thomassen, "Laclau and Mouffe argue that every level of society and of social change can be understood through the logic of hegemony" (ibid: 166). *A discourse dominating the social world is called a hegemony. Following on from this, the articulative practices that give birth to and sustain discourses can be called hegemonic practices*<sup>23</sup>. As Torfin mentioned, for Laclau and Mouffe, discourses are "constructed *in and through* hegemonic struggles that aim to establish a political and moral-intellectual leadership through the articulation of meaning and identity" (Torfin 2005: 15). So hegemonic discourses are not determined by the infrastructure (like Marxist ideologies), and are not the product of the unfolding of reason (in a Hegelian fashion), but they are determined in political struggles through articulative practices which "manage to provide a credible principle upon which to read past, present, and future, events, and capture people's hearts and minds" (ibid). In their conceptualisation, the object of the hegemonic struggle is radically open, and is not tied to any underlying determinism, as was the class struggle, which constituted the canonised mantra of the communist movement since its inception (and including Gramsci).

### 4.1.3. Oppressed of all conditions, unite!

As Thompson (1963) before them had done, Mouffe and Laclau stressed the socially constructed character of classes. As Mouffe and Laclau (1985: 115) mention: "Whenever we use the category of 'subject' ... we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure". By using the notion *subject position* Mouffe and Laclau signal that collective identities (e.g. 'the labour class') only exist through discourses, and do not directly ensue from 'purely material' positions. Social subjects are ontologically indeterminate. The ontic content that it will take cannot be defined a priori but rather, "the logic of hegemony, as a logic of articulation and contingency, has come to determine the very identity of the hegemonic subjects" (ibid: 185). Hegemonies, discourses and collective identities are

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<sup>23</sup> In the words of Chantal Mouffe (2008): "On one side it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of the political as the ever present possibility of antagonism and this requires, on the other side, coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order. This means recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and envisaging society as the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency. The practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed, are what we call 'hegemonic practices'".

articulated ex-post, under the impetus of practices happening in the realm of politics. One important consequence follows from this: new social movements are equally legitimate as “subjects of socialist change”.<sup>24</sup>

Besides, Mouffe and Laclau aimed at opening the possibility of a *rearticulation* of collective identities enabling collective mobilisation. In *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau proposed the *people*, as a desirable rearticulation of the collective identity around which left social movements could be structured.<sup>25</sup> Rather than demands emerging from pre-established social groups, for Laclau the collective identity of social groups emerges from their demands, or to be more precise, from demands unsatisfied by a system. This rejection of their demands by the system will play the role of cohesive cement between individuals henceforth united by their common rejection. The people then emerge as a political category inscribed in the hegemonic war of positions, at minimum united by common demands. The elites, the oligarchy, is the common adversary, not only uniting the people, but also *constituting* it by creating an ‘internal boundary’, distinguishing an *us* from a *them*, the people from the elite.

Let me illustrate this point with a very simple example given by Laclau in an interview: “Suppose you have a group of neighbours asking the municipality to create a bus line that connects the place where they live to the place where most of them work. If the municipality accepts this claim, this is the end of the matter. The claim is discursively inscribed and administered. But let’s suppose the municipality does not accept the claim. There is then the frustration of a demand, and an inability of the institutional system to channel the demand. Now let’s further suppose that among or connected to these people whose demand has been frustrated, there exist other demands that are also being frustrated, for instance regarding housing, health, security, schooling, and so on. People start to have the idea that they have something in common, in the sense that their demands are being opposed by a system that has power but does not recognize them” (2011: 6). At this stage, a ‘pre-political’ and ‘pre-populist’ situation is created in which a “chain of equivalent demands not recognized by the system” is created. According to Laclau: “In this situation people will start feeling that there exists a division of society between those at the top and those at the bottom. At some point somebody starts interpellating people at the bottom against the whole system. That is the moment in which the populist identity arises. So you have all these demands floating there and some sense of equivalence, or what I call an equivalential chain. And then there is the crystallizing of the plurality of demands around one symbol that unifies the chain. In most of the cases – in fact I have not found a single example in which this is not the case – that symbol is the name of a leader” (2011: 6-7).

#### 4.1.4. Radical democracy

Having established that any social group, and not only the proletariat, could be the subject of social struggle aimed at socialist change, Laclau and Mouffe proposed radical democracy as a normative ideal. Radicalising democracy, for them, means expanding the

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<sup>24</sup> “The political meaning of a local community movement, of an ecological struggle, of a sexual minority movement, is not given from the beginning: it crucially depends upon its hegemonic articulation with other struggles and demands” (ibid: 87).

<sup>25</sup> Also called the articulating subject, social subject or hegemonic subject in their terminology.

liberal definition of democracy formed around the values of freedom and equality to also include *difference*. As they mention it: “The task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy” (ibid: 176). The old bourgeois ideal can be turned into a genuinely radical project, they claim, democracy being radicalised each time that a ‘sector’ of the society, in Gramscian terms, whose demands has been neglected, is taken into account. At the same time, they preserve a post-foundational ontology because they do not define democracy once for all, or with regard to an inner essence. Besides being radical, they also insist that their conception of democracy is plural.

However, their conception radical democracy should not be confused with a specific set of institutions. As explained by Laclau, in his conception, it might be according to him that democratisation happens through nationalistic military dictatorship: “After they became independent, Latin American states were organized as liberal parliamentary regimes, yet they were not the least democratic because the democratic demands of the masses were ignored. The mass movements that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century therefore expressed themselves predominantly not via liberal channels but mainly through a form of nationalistic military dictatorship. There existed a bifurcation in the democratic experience of the masses: there was liberalism and there was democracy expressed through these non-orthodox channels.” (Laclau 2011:5)

## **4.2. Critical comments**

Predictably, at the time of its publication, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was not received well by Marxist authors. As summarised by Peter Ives (2005: 356), they accused Mouffe and Laclau of being little more than “liberal pluralism dressed in fancy words and postmodern jargon”, for being relativist, idealist, anti-Marxist, or just confused ... presenting a ‘descent into discourse’ - a decay from well grounded, material reality into the idealistic and problematic realm of language and discourse”. At the same time, they marked a turn, a theoretical point of reference in the field, not only of post-Marxism, but also of new social movements and identity politics (ibid).

Concerning other possible forms of criticism, I do not think it would be correct to address to Mouffe and Laclau the label of relativism (which they themselves also explicitly rejected) (Laclau and Mouffe 1987). In the first section of these commentaries, accepting that Mouffe and Laclau are not relativists in the strong and caricatural sense, I will question whether their theoretical framework allows to sort out different moral, ethical or political standpoints. To be more precise, relying on the work of Marchart (2007) I will argue that more work is needed in order to relate these post-foundational concepts to actually existing institutions (4.2.1.). Besides it is stressed that more attention should also be devoted to the ontic level, to politics, which is currently, and strangely, neglected in the literature (4.2.1.).

### 4.2.1. Post-foundationalism, as an ontology, is not in itself emancipatory

As Marchart (2007) has argued, post-foundationalism should first be characterised as an ontology, or to be more precise, and following Derrida, as a *hauntology*, meaning an ontology haunted by the absence of final grounds. As Marchart stresses, resting upon Laclau's understanding of post-foundationalism is not only an ontology of politics, but an ontology of all meaning. However, for many left-Heideggerians, not just Laclau and Mouffe, a certain politics emanates from the fact that there are 'no grounds': realising that there are no grounds, people will be less inclined to see their destiny as ineluctable.<sup>26</sup> Human beings "will start seeing themselves more and more as the exclusive authors of their world". People will tend to consider their fate as inevitable where they assume that God or nature have made the world as it is. But if the world is considered the result of the "contingent discourses and vocabularies that constitute it" (Laclau 1996a: 122, in Marchart: 157, own emphasis), people will presumably develop a more political attitude, and this opens further emancipatory possibilities.

However, as Marchart points out, there are no *a priori* reasons for which realising that there are not final grounds will necessarily lead to emancipatory practices. Why would human beings, once they consider themselves the actors of their world, especially engage in emancipatory practices? Accepting that they would engage in emancipatory practices, why would they adopt Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of it? Other outcomes are equally possible, including a "conservative post-foundational skepticism which is not necessarily democratic or emancipatory" (Marchart 2007: 157). Taken alone, Marchart insists, Laclau's argument is a *non sequitur*, because post-foundationalism as a normative criterion for democracy is not in itself ontologically a post-foundational criterion. Rather, Marchart argues, "to elaborate an explicitly leftist version of post-foundational thought is in itself a political decision". To turn the post-foundational ontology into a political philosophy, Mouffe and Laclau had to ground their own notions, such as the notion of radical democracy. Paradoxically, some grounding was necessary for the post-foundational ontology to become a political philosophy. Doing this enable Mouffe and Laclau to avoid falling into the contradictory position of Foucault pointed in the third chapter.

However, even while doing this, Laclau and Mouffe generally remains very abstract. For instance, they do not provide criterion enabling to distinguish their notion of democracy from a classical liberal definition of democracy. As Veeck (2013: 246) stresses, their work "does not seem to be well-equipped for dealing with the analysis of institutions". Similarly, concerning the economy, when Mouffe and Laclau (1985) mention the deep mutation having occurred in the capitalistic system this is only aimed to provide background information motivating the relevance of their project by explaining the emergence of the new social movements. With the exception of the notion of people, their main contribution is ontological. They also claim that democratic rights should be extended to the economy, contrarily to what is asserted in the classical liberal as well as in the neoliberal understanding of democracy (ibid: 185). However, one can wonder what this precisely mean, at the ontic level? For sure,

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<sup>26</sup> Note the fallacy behind "considered the result of". Laclau seems to imply that discourse *and vocabularies constitute* the world. This would be a good weapon for those who claim that despite what they say, Mouffe and Laclau became idealists. However, although sharing this worry, I intend here to argue with Mouffe and Laclau's claim taken at its face value, and thus simply ignore this issue.

specifying this is also not their project. They are also right when they stress that: “although several left politics may be conceived and specified in certain contexts, there is not one politics of the left whose contents can be determined in isolation from all contextual reference. It is for this reason that all attempts to proceed to such determination a priori have necessarily been unilateral and arbitrary, with no validity in a great number of circumstances” (ibid: 179). However, this work, linking Mouffe and Laclau’s ontological reformulation to existing institutions is crucial, and has to be carry out because it is precisely what provides its very meaning to concepts such as liberty or equality. Without a link to existing institutions in specific contexts, these concepts remain only ontological concepts, which mean that they are empty, just defined by their opposition to an antagonistic other.

#### **4.2.2. The critique as directed to the realm of contingent foundations: politics**

To be effective, while not neglecting ontology, the critique should be directed first and foremost to *politics*, I claim. Indeed, while reading post-foundationalist authors, one gets the impression that the social is potentially much more *volatile*, subject to radical and fundamental change, than it actually is. What I stress here is that the social is much more resilient than is often presented by post-foundationalist political philosophers. It is fortified in the law, in political institutions, in conventions and norms. In other words, active work has to be done for the social to change. As I will show below, developing an emancipatory political philosophy requires attention not only to the political, but also to the conditions of politics. Yet, as Marchart (2007: 173) notes, the “side of politics (what, in the case of the ontological difference, would be the ontic aspect of the difference) has not yet received sufficient attention”. So politics is about how to effectively re-articulate elements, and in which direction. Politics requires taking into account both the constraints and possibilities opened up by the social.

Although ideologically overdetermined, the social is *constraining*. First, because the social is composed of articulations that seem ‘natural’ (even though they are not). This means that, concretely, showing the contingency of the social entails advocacy, arguments, and convincing others. Secondly, rearticulating elements in new moments which will be sedimented entails, for the left, overcoming the unfavorable balance of power because of their position on the side of the vulnerable. The age old argument, according to which progressives will always have a more difficult task than conservatives because the former advocate for radical change while the latter for the status quo, is here of course also relevant. So both to trigger and to win over these moments of indeterminacy and radical contingency, the political acclaimed by post-foundational political philosophers, there is a *struggle* between conflicting discourses about the type of articulations that will be instituted, and therefore about the new meaning of signifiers. This requires a definition of concrete political objectives, and to devise and deploy a clear strategy to reach them.

On the other side, the social also opens up possibilities for the critique to be grounded on the shared norms, values and conventions it contains. My target here is the latent claim that because there is no final ground, no moral and normative arguments can be made any more. This is not at all incompatible with a full recognition of the contingent character of the social, nor does it in principle ‘freeze’ these norms forever. To insist on this, I am not saying

that there are definitive grounds, or natural essences. Instead I am arguing that the contingent social constructions such as norms, conventions, laws, representations of the social, or notions of justice can be used by the critique in the war of position. Indeed, the post foundational ontology not only means the absence of final grounds, it also entails the presence of what Judith Butler (1992) called '*contingent foundations*' to refer to "a plurality of hegemonic moves that seek to ground society without ever being entirely able to do so" (Marchart 2007: 7). As Marchart stresses : "As soon as we accept that society cannot be grounded, and never will be, in a solid foundation, essence, or centre, precisely that impossibility of foundation acquires a role which must be called (quasi-)transcendental with respect to particular attempts at founding society. Thus, the notion of foundation is split into a purely negative foundation on the one hand (the impossibility of a final ground), and the possibility of 'contingent foundations' ... – that is, a plurality of hegemonic moves that seek to ground society without ever being entirely able to do so."

### **4.3. Chapter Summary**

The work of Mouffe and Laclau provides critique with a subject of struggle, or collective identity (that of alliance between different 'sectors' whose requests to the state are ignored) and a short term political objective, the fulfillment of these demands, a strategy of alliance among various sectors of the society in order to expand the populist discursive formation and possibly (but always temporarily) becoming hegemonic by winning the war of position (Gramsci) and getting into power. Finally, they also propose a mode of coordination: the populist party. Drawing on Marchart's (2007) development of post-foundational thought, it will be stressed that what Mouffe and Laclau developed is first and foremost and an ontology is not in itself emancipatory (note that this equally plays against Foucault and Derrida's approach to politics). Secondly, and taking post-foundationalists as political philosophers this time, their overfocus on ontology will be criticised. Instead, because of the resilience of the social, and the war of position in which attempts to change the social happens, good arguments, strategies and modes of coordinations will have to be elaborated, and there is no objective reason why scholars should be barred from contributing to this task. Note finally that 'the social' also provides contingent grounds on which to base normative appraisals about the economy. Providing a structural yet contingent analysis of the economy, with which to anchor these normative appraisals, constitutes the object of the next chapter of this work.

## CHAPTER FIVE: STRUCTURAL YET CONTINGENT APPRAISALS OF THE ECONOMY

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This thesis aims at showing that one has not to choose between building an efficient counter hegemony to the prevalent neoliberal hegemony, and maintaining the main insights coming from poststructuralism: non-essentialism, non-determinism and non-totalitarianism. I proposed that in the current political context of western Europe, for such a counter hegemony to be efficient, it should be able to articulate a structural analysis of the economy which normatively challenges the neoliberal hegemony and around which collective mobilization can be organized. *Collective mobilisation* has already been discussed at length. In the first chapter, I drew on the PRT to propose a theoretical argument justifying the relevance of collective action for the left. In the third chapter, using mainly concrete examples this time the Foucault and Derrida's restrictive view on social change has been criticized. One chapter later, the work of Mouffe and Laclau has been welcomed for adopting a broader view on social change, and providing a form of collective identification. *Normativity* also has been discussed. It has been argued that although there are no final grounds, the critique can still be grounded in contingently.

This chapter addresses the third stone of my argumentation by demonstrating not only that it is possible to conduct *structural yet contingent analysis of the economy*, but also that such analysis already exist. To be clear, I do not seek to conduct myself such an analysis here. Rather, two precise aims are pursued. First, presenting a well alive research program - broad institutionalism - which enable to carry out structural analysis of the economy (subchapter 5.1). Second, showing that such an analysis would not be incompatible with the main insight of poststructuralism. In fact, more than compatibility, it can even be said that the regulation school actively exemplifies the main insights from poststructuralist ontology (5.2.).

### **5.1. Studying the economy in a structural, yet contingent, way: drawing on broad institutionalism**

I start here by presenting the RS (5.1.1.). Then, how the RS sees change is explained because this enable me to show although it has some Marxian roots, there is no determinism in the RS (neither historical nor of class) (5.1.2.).

#### **5.1.1. Presenting the *régulation* school**

The *régulation school* (RS) is an institutional and historically informed approach born out of the critique of neoclassical economics and the structuralists such as Louis Althusser (Boyer 2002a).<sup>27</sup> Starting primarily from a macro-institutional perspective, the RS also uses several

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<sup>27</sup> The name of de *régulation* school can be misleading for an Anglo-Saxon audience because of the meaning of the quasi homonym in English of the French term '*régulation*': 'regulation'. In French

tools coming from macroeconomics, Marxist perspectives (while rejecting, among others, its determinism) and the French “Ecole des Annales” (Coriat and Dosi 2002). The RS proceeds mainly through *comparisons*, whether diachronic, i.e. the comparison of one similar case over time, or synchronic, i.e. the always historically informed comparison of different cases (e.g. countries) during the same period (e.g. Boyer 2013), or by analyzing the tensions or *contradiction* within particular sets of institutions.

Michel Aglietta (in Boyer 2002: 1) defined the RS as being “the analysis of the way in which transformations of social relations create new economic and non-economic forms, organised in structures that reproduce a determining structure: the mode of production”. The notion of *mode of production* comes from Marx, and designates the “social relations governing the production and reproduction of the material conditions required for life in society” (ibid: 341). Capitalism is a mode of production. The capitalistic mode of production is in fact the main focus of the RS (because of its predominance, not by hypothesis). At a lower degree of abstraction, the RS also identifies particular ‘*accumulation regimes*’, or regular socioeconomic patterns enabling the long-term accumulation (characterising the capitalistic mode of production) between two structural crises. Fordism is an example of an accumulation regime. These regimes of accumulation contain the mechanisms, procedures and social behaviors which enable the institutional forms (considered independent *à priori*) to form a system.

**Table 3:** Main concepts of the *régulation* school (RS) (own table)

| Concept                | Definition  | Example  |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Mode of production     | Social relations on the basis of which the material conditions of the reproduction of life are produced                             | Capitalism, Communism  |
| Regime of accumulation | Socio-economic regularities enabling the long-term accumulation specific to the mode of production (description of specific cycles) | Fordism, post-Fordism  |
| Institutional forms    | Set of interrelated institutions coevolving with each other   | Monetary regime, wage–labour nexus, nature of competition, integration into the world economy, state/economy links |

According to RS scholars, “the viability of any socioeconomic regime relates to the short- and long-term compatibility—or, even better, complementarity—of five institutional forms” (Boyer 2013): *the monetary regime, the wage–labour nexus, the nature of competition, integration into the world economy and, finally, the links between the state and the economy*, each of them forming one institutional form. The wage-labor nexus corresponds to the “mutual

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*‘régulation’* has more meanings than in English. In the context of the RS, *‘régulation’* means complex process through which a social and economic system is reproduced over time by preserving its essential characteristics. To designate “a rule or order issued by an executive authority or regulatory agency of a government and having the force of law” (Merriam-Webster online 29/04/2017), the term *‘règlementation’* is more generally used in French. To stress this point, and avoid further confusion, Robert Boyer generally uses the French term *‘régulation’*, using ‘é’ with an acute accent, even in English communications.

relations among different work organization, lifestyle and ways in which the labor force is reproduced" (Boyer 2002: 345). By the forms of integration into the world economy ('forme d'adhésion au régime international'), Boyer (2016: 46) refers to "the conjunction of rules that organise relations between nation states and the rest of the world, in terms of migration, commercial trade, production sites, via direct investments or through other financial means". The *monetary form*, or monetary regime, constitutes, according to Boyer (2016: 22), the "basic institution of market economy". The monetary regime refers to the set of rules that govern payment and credit systems. The *forms of the state* ('*formes de l'Etat*') refers to the set of institutional compromises which, once agreed upon, create rules and regularities in the evolution of public spending and revenues" (Boyer 2016: 46). Finally, the *forms of competition* ('formes de la concurrence') refers to the institutions through which markets are organized.

### 5.1.2. Stability, crisis and change

The aim of the RS is not to provide a static taxonomy of existing institutional settings, but rather to point to their internal contradictions, conditions of viability and crisis, of these specific institutional settings. It RS starts from the *a priori* that there is no principled reason for which the capitalist system, as well as its contingent "set of institutionalised compromises", should/would be stable. From there, RS theorists try to analyse the viability of these contingent regimes of regulation. Boyer stresses that the observation of coherent regimes of accumulation is rather a post-factum outcome than the product of an *ex-ante* grand design. Indeed, coherent regimes of accumulation are not *ex ante* 'designed' in order to fit well with each other. There is no 'automatic mechanism' ensuring the compatibility. Rather, the endogenous co-evolution of institutional forms has been stressed, drawing on the evolutionary metaphor. Indeed, institutional forms are continuously adjusting to each other, and *co-evolving* with each other, in a "process of trial and error through which a series of institutional forms that are initially disconnected and formally independent (since they result from institutionalized compromises among diverse agents in different fields) adjust to one another until a viable institutional configuration emerges" (Boyer in Crouch and al. 2005: 367). The mechanisms of *path dependency*, *institutional complementarity* and *institutional hierarchy* have been proposed to understand this.

Paul David (1985: 332) defined a "path-dependent sequence of economic changes" as "one of which important influences upon the eventual outcome can be exerted by temporally remote events, including happenings dominated by chance elements rather than systematic forces (...). In such circumstances 'historical accidents' can neither be ignored, nor neatly quarantined for the purpose of economic analysis; the dynamic process itself takes on an essentially historical character".<sup>28</sup> Douglass North (1994) and Paul Pierson (1994) expanded the relevance of the concept of path-dependency to the study of institution, proposing that the

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<sup>28</sup> Paul David gave the following now well-known example: QWERTY keyboards were developed and adopted at the age of the type-writers. QWERTY keyboards were designed in order to make it difficult for people to type really fast, because this made the first typewriters jam. In the early 1970s, a much more efficient technology was available, the DSK keyboard (Dvorak Simplified Keyboard) and the jamming problem was solved. David's puzzle was why, if it was well known that DSK keyboards made it possible to type faster, was this technology not used? And then, when it was finally was adopted by Apple's computers, why did it not impose itself as the new standard? David's answer was that the use of the then dominant technology, QWERTY keyboards, produced *locked in* effects: "Touch typing gave rise to three features of the evolving production system, which were crucially important in causing QWERTY to become "locked in" as the dominant keyboard arrangement.

longer an institution is established, the more difficult ('costly') it is to deviate from the path constituted by all the past rules. The typical example brought to the fore by Pierson is that of the Welfare State, which proved to have an extraordinary resilience, even under Reagan and Thatcher.

*Institutional complementarity* "describes a configuration in which the viability of an institutional form is strongly or entirely conditioned by the existence of several other institutional forms, such that their conjunction offers greater resilience and better performance compared with alternative configurations" (ibid). For instance, in the Fordist regime: complementarity between the wage-labor nexus and the gold standard regime, as well as between the wage-labor nexus and a credit based monetary regime (Boyer 2016). Institutional complementarity is, however, never perfect and there always remains. In the words of Boyer, "fit among institutions is always partial and transitory" (in Crouch & al. 2005: 368).

On the other hand, the term *institutional hierarchy* is used when "for a given era and society, particular institutional forms impose their logic on the institutional architecture as a whole, lending a dominant tone to the mode of regulation" (ibid: 367). The asymmetry between the two institutional forms can be intentional, deriving from the deliberate willingness to set such a hierarchy at the design of the institution, as is the case, for example, of "the monetary regime put forward by a conservative central bank, which then implies flexible labour market adjustments and the absence of structural deficit spending by governments" (ibid). But the hierarchy can also result from developments in one institutional form, which affects the other institutions. Finally, as Streeck (in Crouch & al. 2005) stresses, the fact that complementarity and coevolution might be observed among institutions, forming regimes of accumulation, does not prevent change from happening.

## **5.2. Compatibility with the poststructuralist ontology**

In fact, recognising the role of contingency, as well as the open-ended and uncertain character of the development of economic institutions is also one part of the premises of this type of institutional analysis (Boyer 2016). Besides, as just shown with regard to institutional change, there is neither historical determinism, nor class determinism. Rather, according to the RS, institutional change happens either through direct policy change, or through evolutionary mechanisms of coevolution. Institutional theory shares with poststructuralists, although through different channels, the insight that systems are never total, never fully realised. Institutionalists explain this by the fact that institutions seldom disappear, but in general simply slowly transform. Consequently, there always remain institutions sitting at odds with the dominant hegemony or paradigm of the time (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). The RS thus does not suffer from epistemic totalitarianism. As a consequence, a geographically and temporally situated (or contingent), analysis of political-economic structures based on the RS, or a similar body of literature not only is perfectly compatible but in fact even instantiates the previously mentioned poststructuralism's main insights.

The most fruitful use that can be made from the *régulation* school, in my opinion, is that of a backbone, which enable the structuring various institutional and evolutionary approaches to the economy, ranging from economics (eg. Aglietta 1976; Boyer 1986; Lippit

2010), political science (eg. Hacker 2004; Thelen and Mahoney 2010), to economic sociology (eg. Boltanski and Thevenot 1991; Streeck 2014) or even more classical economics sensible to the role of institutions (eg. Obstfeld and Taylor 2003). Extrapolating from these perspectives, a structural, but yet contingents analysis of the economy would mean analysing the interplay of institutions around which the economic system is organised. In other words, I am suggesting a meso-level theory. To be clear, many critical theorists are already aware of the existence of this body of knowledge (including Mouffe and Laclau that are here studied). But to my opinion, they generally relegate them to the role of provider of 'background information'. In other words, they underestimate the critical potential of these analysis and fruitful 'cross-fertilisation' that could emerge from using them as a starting point to develop normative analysis. My standpoint is not that poststructuralist philosophers should stop doing philosophy and starting doing institutional analysis but rather that genuine synergies should be between this institutional theory, which is mainly descriptive, and political philosophy.

Besides, this perspective on the social also enables us to stress the resilience of 'the social' (in Mouffe and Laclau's language), despite its contingency. This resilience, I believe, only emphasising the argument that the conditions of possibility opened by the post-foundational ontology are in no way on by their own constituting forces of change. Rather, taking the standpoint of a certain discursive formation, a serious attention should be devoted to politics. Based on a structural but yet contingent analysis of the economy (because of its current negligence) defining political objectives, strategies and means of coordinations enabling to achieve them. To discuss this, let us now turn to the sixth and final chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE POST-FOUNDATIONAL ONTOLOGY AND POLITICS

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At this point, the reader might ask herself two questions. First: what *remains of the ontology*? Upset (or relieved), the reader might wonder whether I am proposing to simply throw it all away and forget about it! Let me stress that I will not. Rather, summarising the various main points discussed in the previous chapters, I will point to what I see as the main implication of the poststructuralist ontology for politics (section 4.1.). Secondly, the reader might ask: What is politics about? And how can intellectuals contribute to it? These two questions will be addressed in the last two sections of this chapter (section 4.2. And 4.3. respectively).

### **6.1. What poststructuralist ontology teaches us**

Despite criticising the predominance of ontological discussions in the literature, I want to insist that ontology matters. To be more precise, ontology informs the critique about its epistemic limits - the limits to what we can know - and therefore enables us to draw important conclusions concerning the critique. However, neither ontologies or epistemologies are themselves able to *directly* inform critical praxes. They should rather be conceived as *meta-critical*. By designating epistemologies and ontologies as *meta-critical* I mean that they point to the conditions of possibility regarding the critique and its limits (which is a contribution), but do not in themselves constitute a critique. Only when actors act on this basis, does the social reality effectively change.

With this regard, let me sum up in two very short sections, what has been argued for in this thesis concerning the limited critical character of an ontology (section 6.1.1.) on the one hand. On the other hand, a few examples of how ontology informs us about the limit of the critique with regard to politics will be recalled (section 6.1.2.).

#### **6.1.1. How ontology informs the critique**

Let me summarise here two concrete consequences of the post-foundational ontology for the critique that have been stressed in this work. First, since systems of knowledge are never all encompassing, actors cannot be considered completely alienated and dominated. Second, since the social world and the result of political action or institutional change is uncertain, norms should be developed in order to evaluate the impact of institutional change deliberately triggered. A first norm proposed here is that political objectives should be re-evaluated regularly.

#### **6.1.2. The limited critical character of an ontology**

Just to illustrate this point, let me bring back the critical comment made with this regard

in chapter 4. As an ontology, post-foundationalism does not have the direct effect of triggering effective and emancipatory change. As stressed by Marchart (2007) Mouffe and Laclau's post-foundational ontology only: 1) opens up *conditions of possibility* of re-articulation of meaning, of the political, and 2) maintains that such re-articulation constantly happens, without being *ex nihilo* able to indicate which form or even direction these re-articulations will take. The same could be said about the work of Derrida and Foucault, who are not providing ontologies in the way Mouffe and Laclau do. However, the outcome of their work, with regard to the critique is mainly to increase awareness that things could be different, without spelling out which other state of affair would be desirable.

The main difference with this regard concerning Mouffe and Laclau, and Foucault and Derrida, is that Mouffe and Laclau (even though they might not be spelling it explicitly) accept the partial grounding necessary to turn their post-foundational ontology into a political philosophy. Both Derrida and Foucault refuse this. Because, at the same time, Derrida and Foucault also want to be critical, they end up with self-contradicting affirmations, as showed in the third chapter. Although Mouffe and Laclau do not end up in such aporias, I nevertheless stressed that generally speaking, much more attention should be devoted to politics in the literature, if the aim is to challenge the neoliberal hegemony (as explicitly mentioned in the preface of the 2001 edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. This is the object of the next subchapter.

## **6.2. The four dimensions of politics**

The aim of this subchapter is to provide a heuristic and schematic description of what politics encompasses, to confront it with the work of the four authors studied and to present my own approach to politics (cf. table 4). Note from the outset that in my conception of *politics*, the 'war of positions' between different discursive formations is *necessarily collective and coordinated*. As argued in the second chapter, collective action is the *sine qua non* condition for any effective leftist politics, given the commitment of the left to the defense of the weakest, whoever they may be. Re-stating the questions concerning critique and collective action in non-dogmatic terms leads us to interrogate the way poststructuralists approach politics. To structure this reflection on politics, let us disentangle four prominent dimension of politics, which I structured around three questions: *for what* (Political objectives) ? *Who* (collective identification)? *How* (strategy and coordination)?

**Table 4:** Derrida, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe on Politics (own table)

| Schematic question                    | Derrida                                    | Foucault  | Laclau and Mouffe   | Alternative proposal  |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Who? Collective identity</b>       | Only individuals, (no collective identity) | Only individuals, (no collective identity)            | The people (Empty: based on a common rejection by elites) Including the excluded (norm) | Subject identity: the people, ...<br>Values: Solidarity, equality, ..<br>Common understanding of the social                 |
| <b>For what? Political objectives</b> | <i>À venir</i>                             | Empty freedom   | Fulfilling the rejected demands of the 'people' (SR)                                    | Concrete political objectives (e.g. alternative monetary system)  |
| <b>How? Strategy</b>                  | Linguistic decentering of meaning          | Resistance (care of the self, ...) Local and specific | War of position, populism<br>Getting in office (SR)                                     | Whatever is <i>adapted to</i> , but <i>consistent with</i> , the aim pursued:<br>- Party<br>- Grassroots movements<br>- ... |
| <b>How? Coordination</b>              | Individually driven spontaneous change     | Individually driven spontaneous change                | Left populist movement  | Left populist movement with a distinctive project, counterbalanced by grassroots movements                                  |

SR: short run

### 6.2.1. Collective identification: the 'who' question

The first question raised by collective action is that of collective identification. By collective identity I refer to the "process by which social actors recognize themselves – and are recognized by other actors – as part of broader groupings, and develop emotional attachments to them" (Della Porta and Diani 2009: 92). The question of collective identification is totally rejected by Derrida and Foucault, who instead put the emphasis on individuals and their subjectivity. Laclau and Mouffe rather than rejecting collective identification, as Foucault and Derrida do, propose a post-foundational mechanism of identification. First, they claim that the 'subject position' (the workers in Marxism) can be anybody. Then, Laclau argues that having one's demands rejected by the state can constitute a mechanism of articulation of a common identity by which all those who are treated like 'underdogs' commonly identify as the people, thus defined by its opposition to 'the elites' (and is therefore ontologically empty). Note that the identity hence created is not a very positive one, it is the identity of rejected requesters, who are tied together by this rejection, and because their respective requests do not overlap, by leaders.

For the reasons explained in chapters two and three, while I see virtues in all of them, taken alone, these stances are problematic. To put it succinctly, the Foucault / Derrida position risks annihilating collective action, while the latter risks subordinating it to the ferrule of a charismatic leader.

Besides, concerning Mouffe and Laclau, I fail to see why common rejection is more laudable as 'contingent grounds' for collective identity than are common values or a common project of society. As Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (2009: 91) stressed, although this is quite frequent, collective identity does not as such have to be defined with reference to "specific social traits such as class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or the like, nor in reference to in reference to specific organizations". Collective identification might well be based on values or on a common worldview, *inter alia*. One might well argue that what I am pleading for is not that different from what is advocated by Mouffe and Laclau. After all, it might well be argued that Mouffe and Laclau would agree with this, and simply call it hegemonic articulation. And theoretically, this would be right. However, it is also clear that from the side of the ontic level, their re-conceptualisation of the subject (and of democracy, ... as inclusion of 'subjects that were previously excluded') is the main dish on their plate. Yet, the strength and appeal that Marxism may have had cannot possibly be reduced to class belonging. It follows that the post-Marxist refoundation cannot be exhausted by redrawing the subject of social movements. What about the normative appeal of the exploitation of labour? What about the analytical framework to approach the political economy conferred by Marx's *Capital*? As is apparent in her dialogue with Pablo Iglesias, the Secretary General of Podemos, Mouffe is committed to distinguishing left wing from right wing populism (Thomassen 2016). Another way to restate my point would be: what, except for immigration and xenophobia, distinguishes left- and right-wing populism?

My answer is that if left-wing populism is to be an instrument to revive the left, its identity should be based on more than circumstantial empty signifiers. Additionally, it should stand for specific values and a genuine project of society. In other words, *identifying with a collective is first and foremost taking a position among different and competing discourses about the social*. These discourses articulate collective identities (possibly but not only *the people*), but also *values* (such as liberty and equality, but also decommodification or solidarity) that are cherished and shared by the individuals identifying with this understanding of society. Notions about how value is created and progress attained, as well as how it qualifies the dominant economic system, are other important dimensions of a discursive formation. Finally, and crucially, instead of basing articulation between the different 'local identities' (or character) forming the people together only on their common rejection (which enables to avoid grounding this identity ontologically, according to post-foundationalist), at the ontic level, it also makes sense to stress the mutually beneficial interdependencies among these different characters as a firm ground (however contingent, varying in time and space) on which to develop more robust notions of solidarity. In light of this, I want to emphasise that this discursive formation, this understanding of the social developed at a very concrete, ontic level, can play the role attributed to 'common rejection' and the 'leader' in Laclau's thought. Let me also emphasise that I am not even talking here about utopias, understood as a blueprint, as defined by Popper, since I am conceptually distinguishing concrete political objectives (the object of the next section) from a higher level of abstraction: common values and understanding of society. Only the latter should constitute locus of identification, which enables a certain fluidity with the

concrete political objectives that can be adapted as much as needed with regard to the societal change taking place.

### **6.2.2. Political objectives: the ‘for what’ question**

The second question, which is totally neglected, almost ignored, in the poststructuralist literature, is the *for what* question, that of *political objectives*. By political objectives, I refer to the substantive advancement of these values and principles in concrete and local collective struggles. More concisely, politics entails defining concrete objectives, based on an analysis of the existing institutions (in a broad sense, including: the state, political economic institutions and various accepted norms) which would translate the more abstract norms and values emblematic of the discursive formation to which individuals identify, at a specific position in history, and geographic location. To take the example of the norm of radical democracy proposed by Mouffe and Laclau, political objectives would effectively enable the inclusion of excluded categories of people. Political objectives can be defined in more or less abstract terms (e.g. rediscovering ‘the commons’ or the adoption of a specific law). Note that collective identification is not at first related to the specific political objectives, but rather to the broader understanding of society. Which institutions enable to give shape, to realise it best, should be based on empirical studies of contingent and historically and geographically situated sets of institutions. Besides, precisely because of the uncertainty related to (even empirically informed) knowledge, because of the constantly evolving nature of societies, as well as the feedback effect of politics, these political objectives should be regularly ‘updated’.

As already stressed, philosophically, Foucault and Derrida are as reluctant to state explicit political objectives, as they are to support collective identification. For Derrida, the objective of deconstruction should remain ‘à-venir’, and for Foucault the critique should stand behind *freedom*, but this word has to remain undefined, empty. Mouffe and Laclau go one step further, proposing a norm and a short term answer. The norm they propose through their re-conceptualisation of democracy, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, is that each time excluded groups are included in the scope of democracy, democracy is radicalised. In *On Populist Reason*, as just stressed, Laclau furthered this point by providing a short term, still empty, answer: the political objective defended by the people is constituted by the demands addressed by all the ‘underdogs’ of the state, and whose common rejection constitute the basis of their collective identification. However, this leaves us again, and at best, with an ontologic norm concerning the former (radical democracy), and a second order depiction concerning the latter (the short term political demands of ‘the people’). However, at the ontic and critical level (as opposed to the meta-critical level of ontology) political objectives should not be empty at all. Because of the presence of the social, of existing political economic institutions, and their contingent nature (stressed at length by poststructuralist authors), defining political objectives should start with cautious analysis of these institutions. As stressed above, nothing in the post-foundational ontology implies that this type of empirical analysis cannot legitimately be conducted.

### **6.2.3. Strategy and coordination: the ‘how’ question**

A third question raised by the critique is that of the strategy to adopt, the *how* question.

As explained in the introductory historical chapter, since the early twentieth century, because of the orthodox doctrine of the USSR, along with “professionalisation and academicization of intellectual activity”, critical theorists took their distance from the working-class movements (ibid). Generally speaking, intellectuals (academics) were not at the same time political leaders. This had an influence on the type of research they did. Western Marxism became ‘non-Clausewitzian’, refuged in aesthetic epistemology or ideal theorisation, totally neglecting political strategy in a concrete sense.

According to Daniel Bensaid, the history of the Labour movement since its inception until November 9 1989 has been marked by ‘two major ‘strategic hypotheses’. First, the ‘insurrectionary general strike’ were (principally) the working class seizes control of power centers as well as the capital (the ‘models’ being the Paris Commune and the October Revolution). Second, and very influential in Third World countries, the ‘protracted people’s war’, exemplified by the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions, proceeding gradually through the ‘liberation’ of zones (Keucheyan 2013). It is quite clear that contemporary societies are much more averse to violence than that of the ‘short 20th century’ (which is without any doubt positive), and that these strategies are unadapted to the current context. Any strategy should take this [the cultural norms prevalent in a given society] into account. Besides, strategy should also take into account the resources available to actors. As stressed by Laclau and Mouffe, concrete strategies and modes of coordinations should always be developed in relation to a specific context. Decontextualized, or more theoretical knowledge, for instance, about possible strategies, their respective weakness and strengths, might still be relevant and useful for social actors. However, before being used, such knowledge should always be recontextualised first. Second, analysis of peculiar context in order to identify the resources available to actors is equally important than theoretical strategies.

*Grosso modo*, among the four authors studied (and the recent literature) discussions about strategy (which is currently overshadowed in the literature) generally surrounded two questions. The first strategic question is the relation to existing institutions (and in particular partisan political institutions and the state). To borrow the expression of Mouffe (2008), two strategies are defended: the engagement *with* (Mouffe and Laclau) or withdrawal from existing institutions (Hardt and Negri). These strategies generally overlap with the second major strategic debate which is related to the mode of coordination of collective action: implicit or explicit coordination? And in a second step, political party or not?

Foucault restricted legitimate strategies to strategies of resistances, organised locally and horizontally, i.e. without formal hierarchy. His model was (in my opinion a fantasmagorique view of) May 68. This view was quite influential, not only among alter-globalists, but also broadly among various local environmental movements related to food and consumption, and the transition movement (De Bouver 2016). In fact, Foucault was not even opposed to revolutions (as long as it emerged in a decentralised fashion) (Pickett 1999).<sup>29</sup> According to him, this strategy could be transformative not only of institutions but also of the self. As already stressed above, in poststructuralism à la Foucault and Derrida the question of coordination is overdetermined by its opposition to the Stalinist party on the one hand, and to the dominant form of organisation of the Fordist era, on the other. Surprisingly, this literature being so inclined to deconstruct whatever can be deconstructed, it seems to fail to conceive the party

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<sup>29</sup> Foucault was therefore opposed to the judiciary and penitentiary system on the grounds that it prevented such revolutions to happen (Pickett 1999)

other than as a 'bureaucratic', highly hierarchical and structurally based on relations of obedience to some central dogmatism. Yet, there is no reason to believe that a political party cannot be reinvented in new terms, or that any political party is necessarily authoritarian, either in a strong sense, as a totalitarian (implicitly or explicitly Stalinist or even communist) one, or in a weaker sense, as a very hierarchical organisation, archetypical of the Fordist era (see Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). On the other hand, there is also no more reason to argue that the party, or in its corporatist fashion, the trade union, should be the locus of coordination of all leftist collective action, as a simple-minded return to a (non desirable) past that no longer exists would imply.

Mouffe and Laclau propose a clear strategy: populism. As Mouffe (21/11/2016) mentioned: "Populism is not an ideology or a political regime, and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content. It is compatible with different forms of government. It is a way of doing politics which can take various forms, depending on the periods and the places". For Mouffe and Laclau also put to the fore a strategy of engagement with the political institutions. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* they made clear that for them the form of coordination also enabling the "emergence of democratic antagonisms" cannot be determined a priori. Concerning the party, they say: "The party as a political institution can, in certain circumstances, be an instance of bureaucratic crystallization which acts as a brake upon mass movements; but in others it can be the organizer of dispersed and politically virgin masses, and can thus serve as an instrument for the expansion and deepening of democratic struggles" (1985: 180). However, it is quite clear that their populist strategy is addressed to a political system since the basis for the formation of the people is common rejection by a system. Besides, Laclau and Mouffe not only supported politicians from Hugo Chavez to Cristina Kirchner, but are also known for having inspired many activists involved in the creation of left populist political parties, in particular, 'Podemos' in Spain, 'Syriza' in Greece and 'La France Insoumise' in France.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, the issue at stake is not that of much party or not, but again, it is that of the political objectives. If these political objectives are best served by getting into office, a political party constitutes an adequate form of coordination. More generally, neither the type of strategy to adopt, nor the mode of coordination of this collective action, I believe along with Mouffe and Laclau, should be decided ontologically or *à priori*, independently of the context. Rather, the strategy and mode of coordination should be evaluated with regard to the means available and the political objectives pursued. This can be summed up in the proposition that modes of coordination (as well as strategies) should be *adapted to* but *consistent with* the political aim pursued (which logically also entails a coherence with regard to the source of collective identification). This adaptation condition should elicit some scepticism, for instance when Derrida suggests that in order to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, he "*trusts the people (peuples) of Israel and Palestine to impose a shared sovereignty on their respective leaders*" (Derrida 17/06/2004). On the other hand, *consistency* is a very relevant notion for Foucault, enabling limits to be put on the power of political parties. The same hold for stressing the importance of grassroots movements and bottom up social change. Indeed, Mouffe and Laclau did not develop a clear position concerning what a populist movement or radical

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<sup>30</sup> Although Laclau (2005: 226) also stress struggles, such as that led by the Polish trade union Solidarnosc against the communist regime where there was no need for a leader.

democracy should or should not be. After all, their theoretical argument against totalitarianism is primarily epistemic and ontologic. Simply put, Mouffe and Laclau sought to propose an ontology of the social enabling to rethink Marxism in a non-essentialist, non-totalitarian and non-determinist way. However, they did not theorise which institutional structure a populist movements should or even could take to avoid falling into these pitfalls.

In a nutshell, *fruitful convergences* could be drawn between the seemingly conflicting views hold by Foucault and Derrida on the one hand, and Mouffe and Laclau, on the other. Besides, history has shown that leading the government is not sufficient to be in position to implement one's favorite policy making set. It is clear that these parties will have to face a whole 'institutional architecture' which is currently not favorable to a turn to the left. Two prominent examples, concerning Europe, are the monetary union and the current institutionalisation structuring (or destructuring, according to the perspective taken) of the international economy. Questions of strategies are going beyond that of the form of coordination, and should also possibly have an answer to those questions.

### **6.3. Which role for intellectuals in politics ?**

As insisted upon all along, poststructuralists have been noticed neither for articulating clear motives of indignation against the current social order (including the economy), nor for proposing concrete alternatives enabling to improve it. One reason for this is that a substantial strand of the literature did no longer conceive its task as one of developing and articulating critiques of contemporary institutional structures (referred to as 'the social'), and to making concrete alternative proposals to improve it as part of its tasks. Rather, poststructuralists, and in particular Derrida and Foucault developed what can best be described as 'second order theorizations about politics', to refer to theorizations in which the concrete content of politics remains deliberately undefined.

In my opinion, the role of intellectuals, understood in this regard, is quite simply to express: *intellectuals can legitimately and usefully contribute to each of these dimensions*. Additionally, intellectuals might contribute to 'ontological' and 'epistemological' issues. Note that by critical intellectuals I mean: "people who defend political positions based on arguments of social authority, i.e. their competence as thinkers, historians, scientists, professors, writers, or artists" (Charle 2001: 7628, in Pleyers 2010: 136).

## CONCLUSION

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The thesis started by bringing into context the relevance of providing a structural analysis of the economy which normatively challenges the neoliberal hegemony and around which collective mobilization can be organized. In the second chapter, some helpful background on poststructuralist thinking, Marxism and post-marxism was provided. Then, the approach towards politics of Derrida and Foucault has been explained and criticised. In the fourth chapter, the same exercise was repeated with Mouffe and Laclau. The fifth chapter aimed at providing an illustration of how it is possible to carry out a contingent yet structural analysis of the economy. Finally, my criticism both of Foucault and Derrida, and Mouffe and Laclau as well as my own approach towards politics, and the role of intellectuals in it, was summed up in the sixth chapter. How far are we now, with regard to the initial questions: *What should an effective (social) critique be? How can intellectuals contribute to the (social) critique and, more specifically, to the elaboration of a counter hegemony to the currently dominant neoliberal hegemony?* Since the introduction presents a quite exhaustive and linear summary of the development of this thesis, let me focus here on the key achievements reached.

I have not myself built a structural analysis of the economy (1) which normatively challenges the neoliberal hegemony (2) and around which collective mobilisation can be organised (3). However, I showed that none of the three components of this proposition are incompatible with the main takeaways from poststructuralism: anti-essentialism, anti-totalitarianism and anti-determinism. First, I pointed to an already existing structural (yet contingent) analysis of the economy, which bears none of the above mentioned main takeaways from poststructuralism (chapter five). Second, pointing to 'the social' in Mouffe and Laclau's thought, I stressed that even if there are no final grounds used to carry out normative appraisals, contingent grounds can perfectly fulfill this task (chapter four). The third point - that of collective action - requires some additional elaboration. Firstly, the work of Mouffe and Laclau showed that no essentialism is necessary to enable the collective identification which renders collective action possible by articulating a non-determinist and non-essentialist subject position: the people. Secondly, to relate it more directly to Derrida and Foucault, I also stressed that reducing politics to spontaneous, individually driven political action (which in itself almost annihilates collective action) does not at all constitute a barrier to totalitarianism (section 2.2.3). Finally, concerning the issue of historical determinism, let me stress that the logical conclusion of the refusal of historical determinism (although not followed by Marx) is precisely that politics is crucial. For those who side with the weakest, as the left is committed to, political can therefore only be organised and collective. In the first chapter, I formulated this argument using the Power Resource Theory (PRT).

This leads me to the more general conclusion of my work. Taken to its full extent, the fact that knowledge is mediated through language does not on its own have the radical consequences that seem to be implied by poststructuralist and post-foundationalist political philosophers. More generally, concurring with Marchart (2007) I stressed that an ontology cannot in itself constitute a political philosophy. If, as I believe, the point of critical theory is not merely to *interpret* the world, but to *change* it, then much more attention should be devoted to *politics*, i.e. practices aimed at changing the social. Indeed, *Politics* is the main locus of the hegemonic struggle. The post-foundational ontology only points to its condition of possibility, and *The political*, understood as the moment of contingency where the social is instituted its outcome.

My second contribution to the literature is to be found in my discussion of politics (section 4.2).

In a nutshell, I disentangled four dimensions of politics: that of collective identification (the 'who' question), of the political objectives (the 'for what' question) and finally that of strategy and coordination (the 'how' question). For each of these dimensions, I summed up the position of the four poststructuralist authors studied: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, and then proposed my own understanding of it. Let me be very clear here. More than presenting a full fledged conception of politics, I aimed to open debates and point to blind spots. Concerning politics, this enabled me to stress that three tasks in particular would deserve much more attention:

First, engaging in, or at least with, *structural analysis of the economy*. As I have mentioned, political economy does not at all in itself entail determinism, and as I pointed out by presenting the example of the regulation school (combined with some institutional and evolutionary perspective), contingent yet structural analysis of the economy already exists. Besides, its social scientific contribution as structural yet contingent analysis can be used in a critical perspective both for collective identification and to design concrete *political objectives*. As I stressed, in particular, such an analysis of the economy is currently pressingly needed because it has been neglected since the dismissal of Marxism. Indeed, ontological discussion will enable us neither to devise alternative institutional settings, nor to advocate for them.

A second, and related, pressing task (and one that would fit philosophers particularly well) is that of prolonging the work of *rethinking the sources of collective identification* undertaken by Laclau and Mouffe. Mouffe and Laclau's contribution was to refound a subject of identification in a non-determinist and non-essentialist fashion. However, while populism might be a pertinent strategy, it remains doubtful that this strategy is up to the task of an intellectual re-foundation of Marxism (or more generally of the left) in which the New Left has now been engaged in for half a century, and pursued by Mouffe and Laclau. In particular, I stressed two other potentially fruitful sources of collective identification, other than a subject position: common values and a common understanding of society. Developing this would also have the advantage of facilitating a more clear-cut distinction between right- and left-wing populism.

Finally, a third work site is that of strategy and forms of coordination in a non-dogmatic and contextualized way. Fruitful convergences can be developed between the work of the four authors studied. However, similarly to the question of the political objectives, much more attention should be devoted to the concrete form that these strategies and forms of coordinations are to take at the ontic level.

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