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„The Problematic of Ideology, the Problem of Discourse: a
Meta-Theoretical Critique of Laclau and Mouffe’s Hege-
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Clara Teresa Picker

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1 Introduction

Throughout the last few decades, Marxist social and political theory has undergone processes of radical transformation. Events like the rise of the so-called New Social Movements (*NSM* henceforth), the decline of the Soviet Union or the changing modes of social organization in Western post-Fordist societies have challenged traditional Marxist approaches to capitalism and the nature of revolutionary movements, as well as visions of post-capitalist societies.

On the other hand, the transformations within Marxist theory have been brought about by the theoretical shift of paradigms within academic discourse, triggered by a number of intellectual strands often subsumed under the term 'Postmodernism'. The term 'postmodernism' itself is both ambiguous and overused – it signifies not only a change of paradigms in the fields of art, literature, and philosophy but also the general process of the transformation of the organization of social life in the second half of the 20th century (Sim 1999, p. vii-x). Put simply, philosophical Postmodernism can be characterized

“as a form of scepticism – scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms, etc. [...] Scepticism is an essentially negative form of philosophy, which sets out to undermine other philosophical theories claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth, or of criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth.” (p. 3)

In the field of philosophy, postmodern thought has been mainly influenced by the intellectual strand of post-Structuralism (and here especially Derridian 'deconstruction'), which can be characterized a reaction to, and a radicalization of, Structuralist paradigms that dominated French thought during the middle decades of the 20th century (p. ix). What Structuralism and post-Structuralism share is their grounding in the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who conceived of language as a system “with rules and regulations (or internal grammar) that governed how the various elements of language operated” (p. 4). Structuralism incorporated this systemic approach into various disciplines, “making the basic assumption that every system had an internal grammar that governed its operations. The point of Structuralist analysis was to uncover that grammar, whether the system in question be tribal myth, the advertising industry, or the world of literature or fashion” (p. 4). The critique of this paradigm from the perspective of post-Structuralism and Derridian deconstruction has mainly consisted in the objection to the idea that these systems are closed, and it has been based on the assertion of a fundamental instability of language (p. 5).

In doing so, post-Structuralism and deconstruction have shifted back the emphasis on the central role of language and the construction of meaning – that is, on the dimension of 'discourse'. Its potential fields of application are, therefore, without boundaries: every academic discipline and virtually every dimension of social life rely on the sphere of language, and can thus be approached from the vantage point of discourse theory.

Hence, while the events mentioned above put in question the empirical adequacy of Marxist theory, post-Structuralism problematized the ontological and epistemological status of its theoretical categories.

One of the most influential and controversial theoretical responses in this respect has been Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (first published in 1985, Laclau/Mouffe 2001a). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS henceforth) can be described as both a paradigmatic and outstanding theoretical intervention. It is paradigmatic in the sense that it is explicitly presented as a reaction to the aforementioned situation, understood by its authors as an extension of the "crisis of Marxism" - i.e., the "increasing gap between the realities of contemporary capitalism and what Marxism could legitimately subsume under its own categories" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001b, p. vii). This crisis, Laclau and Mouffe argue, affects Marxist theoretical categories as well as Socialist politics:

"What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of revolution, with a capital 'r', as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogenous collective will that will render pointless the moment of politics. The plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles has finally dissolved the last foundation for that political imaginary. Peopled with 'universal' subjects and conceptually built around History in the singular, it has postulated 'society' as an intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered on the basis of certain class positions and reconstituted, as a rational, transparent order, through a founding act of a political character. Today, the Left is witnessing the final act of the dissolution of that Jacobin imaginary." (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 2)

But I think that Laclau and Mouffe's work can also be regarded as outstanding, not only in terms of its influence in the field of political theory, but also in terms of the nature of their engagement.

First, Laclau and Mouffe not only critique the Marxist intellectual tradition, but also develop a new theoretical framework 'attuned' to contemporary capitalism and post-Structuralist

insights. Furthermore, they also venture to sketch out the political implications of their theoretical intervention - that is, they affirm their political commitment to socialism and outline their vision of a “radical and plural democracy” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001b, p. xviii). Finally, *HSS* is characterized by an extensive interrogation of the Marxist intellectual tradition, covering authors like Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, or Georg Lukacs.

HSS combines two lines of argument that figure prominently in the contemporary academic criticism of Marxist thought. One stresses the increased complexity of post-Fordist societies, the changing nature of capitalist production and social organization, implying that Marx’s approach may have been adequate for the analysis of societies in the 19th and first half of the 20th century, but has, by the 1970’s at the latest, just become “out of date”. The second line of argument, often employed from a post-Structuralist perspective, mainly targets the ontological and epistemological foundations of Marxist theory.

In their analysis of the conditions that triggered the 'crisis of Marxism', Laclau and Mouffe seem to suggest that it was particularly the conceptual fixation on 'class' that made Marxist theory fall short of contemporary capitalist reality. Consequently, 'class essentialism' is one of their main points of critique. Their argument is not so much that the working class does not exist (anymore), but rather that the class positions of social agents do not automatically translate themselves into political positions, and that this prominent assumption in Marxist thought cannot be simply corrected since it points to the fundamental ontological and epistemological fallacies of this intellectual tradition. In their reading, the inadequacy of the concept of 'class' is a symptom that refers to a more profound flaw of Marxist theory, namely its ontological basis. Moreover, 'class reductionism' seems to entail a wider set of propositions to which they strongly oppose.

In the development of their own theory, Laclau and Mouffe draw on Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, which – in its reworked version – comes to be their central category of political analysis. Hegemony, understood as the logic of the political, leads Laclau and Mouffe to conceptualize the social as discursive space, for its condition of possibility is “that a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001b, p. x). 'Hegemony', furthermore, invokes a conception of the social as a contested field, in which different social groups struggle for power. However, this conflictuality is not theorized in terms of 'class antagonism/class struggle', but through the concept of 'social antagonism'.

'Social antagonism' allows Laclau and Mouffe to affirm the conflictual nature of societies and at the same time to strongly reject the notion of 'objective' interests - that is, the assumption that social agents hold specific interests of which they are not conscious. They argue that interests are social products, constructed in a slow historical process through ideological, discursive and institutional practices. Antagonisms, then, are not objective relations, but reveal the limits of all objectivity. Moreover, for them, society is constituted around these antagonistic limits.

In Laclau and Mouffe's reading, Marxist thought has at a certain point in history just reached the limits of its explanatory potential. An adequate response to this situation implies for Laclau and Mouffe more than just revising the basic categories of the Marxist intellectual tradition - it must at the same time go beyond it, since

“[m]any social antagonisms, many issues which are crucial to the understanding of contemporary societies, belong to fields of discursivity which are *external* to Marxism, and cannot be reconceptualized in terms of Marxist categories – given, especially, that their very presence is what puts Marxism as a closed theoretical system into question, and leads to the postulation of new starting points for social analysis.” (p. ix-x, emphasis in original)

They perceive the changes in contemporary reality – like the emergence of ecological or feminist movements – in terms of the appearance of new objects of theoretical inquiry, which not only put into question the validity of categories that are not able to accommodate them, but the *ontological* conditions of these categories. Hence, their commitment to post-Structuralism as a new ontological paradigm expresses their view that “[t]he problems of a globalized and information-ruled society are unthinkable within the two ontological paradigms governing the field of Marxist discursivity: first the Hegelian, and later the naturalistic” (p. x).

Laclau and Mouffe label their own position 'post-Marxist' (p. 4), indicating both its indebtedness to Marxism, as well as its separation.

The reactions to *HSS* were, as I indicated, rather controversial. One of the most critical responses can be found in a review by Norman Geras (Geras 1987), who begins his review with describing *HSS* as

“a product of the very advanced state of an intellectually malady, in a sense I shall presently explain; and it is theoretically profligate, dissolute, in ways I shall also seek to demonstrate, more or less any ideational combination or disjunction being permitted here, without regard for normal considerations of logic, of evidence or of due proportion.” (p. 42-3)

Geras mainly criticizes Laclau and Mouffe from a Marxist point of view, and ultimately characterizes their position as 'anti-Marxist' (p. 81). Equally critical were the responses by Ellen Meiksins Wood (Wood 1986), and John Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1988). All of these authors profoundly object to Laclau and Mouffe's assessment of the Marxist tradition, and their specific reading of Marx, Gramsci, and Luxemburg. Stanley Aronowitz's assessment of *HSS* (Aronowitz 1986-87) presents itself as more sympathetic, and mainly problematizes Laclau and Mouffe's proposed alternative to class politics and Marxist economic reductionism.

Jacob Torfing (Torfing 1999) and Anna Marie Smith (Smith 1998) praise Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical intervention, and seek to further develop their discourse theory for social analysis. Smith is especially concerned with exploring the implications of their 'radical democratic pluralism' (Smith 1998, p. 1-5). One of the most theoretically elaborated examinations of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism can be found in Geoff Boucher's study of the theoretical discourses of Laclau and Mouffe, Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek (Boucher 2008).

Before I continue, I would like to make a few comments about the development of this thesis. My engagement with *HSS* was originally triggered by the interest I developed in the controversy it produced. This is to say, the more I engaged with the criticism of *HSS*, the more interested I became in the theoretical debates between Marxist and post-Structuralist theorists. Although I personally favored Marxist approaches, and was thus rather critical of post-Structuralist claims regarding the philosophical inadequacy of the former, I was fundamentally frustrated by the nature of the criticism to which both intellectual strands subjected each other.

On the one hand, I felt that the 'modes of critique' (Savage 1981) consisted mainly of either reading one theoretical discourse in terms of another or of comparing the respective theoretical discourses to 'reality,' i.e. allegedly a domain of untheorized facts. The problem with these modes of critique, as I saw it, was that they mainly registered substantive differences between Marxist and post-Structuralist theory, but could not illuminate the specificity or the inner mechanisms of the critiqued theoretical discourses themselves.

Similarly, I had the feeling that Marxist and post-Structuralist theorists were concerned with fundamentally different dimensions of social phenomena, but, rather curiously, did not seem to be aware of this fact. Finally, even though I often agreed with the asserted shortcomings of both post-Structuralist and Marxist theory, I nonetheless felt that these were often described rather than explained. Hence, for me, two crucial questions emerged. First, how can one critique and analyze a theoretical discourse without merely comparing it to 'something else', which it is not? Said differently, how can one engage with a theoretical discourse 'on its own terms', i.e., investigate its specific inner relations, objects of knowledge, interplay of concepts etc.? Related to this, does the critique of a given theoretical discourse necessarily have to be carried out from the standpoint of another theoretical discourse? And if not, on what other grounds can one criticize or even reject a theory? Second, what are the different modes of critique with which we can approach a theoretical system? What are their respective objects of knowledge (i.e., which dimensions can we explore by deploying them)? What understanding of theory, reality and knowledge do these various modes of critique presuppose?

In this work, I seek to engage with these questions by developing an immanent critique of *HSS*. Hence, the aim of this project is twofold: I investigate the meta-theoretical questions mentioned above, and develop a methodology that will allow me to both access and engage with Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse on its own terms as well as to identify potential problems. Next, I deploy said mode of immanent critique to explore those dimensions of *HSS* that present themselves as potentially problematic for the practice of theorizing, especially the implicit equation of discourse theory with social theory, and the fact that Laclau and Mouffe assign their concepts an ontological status.

My overall aim, however, is to develop an approach that will allow me to investigate and explain these problems from the standpoint of Laclau and Mouffe's concepts and theoretical assumptions, without reference to empirical reality or another 'superior' theoretical discourse. In other words, I conceive of the aforementioned aspects as theoretical effects, and I seek to identify and understand which combination of elements in their theoretical discourse engenders them.

At this point, I would like to make an important remark: while the methodological part is rather brief on paper, it was these meta-theoretical investigations that transformed my general approach to theory by fundamentally restructuring my understanding of the nature of the

latter. This led not only to radically new questions and problems; it also provided me with numerous new possibilities for interrogating and working with theoretical systems. Hence, these meta-theoretical investigations altered both the nature of my engagement with systems of thought and the range of the fields with which I engaged. For all of these meta-theoretical questions not only concern the field of social and political theory, but point to a more general level of reasoning and theorizing. In this sense, my engagement with the issues of methodology and meta-theory opened up a whole new area of inquiry – it, thus, presents the condition of possibility of the present work.

Finally, I would like to sketch out the trajectory I will follow. Above I indicated that *HSS* presents different yet logically related projects: First, Laclau and Mouffe critique Marxism from a post-Structuralist perspective. This critique is, moreover, partially supported by empirical arguments (in their emphasis on the non-class based nature of *NSM*, etc.).

In this sense, the theoretical discourse of Marxism comes to figure as the backdrop against which Laclau and Mouffe develop their own discourse, and the theoretical 'essentialism' they identify and reject attains the status of what could be called a 'negative yardstick', against which they measure their own concepts. It is out of this critique that Laclau and Mouffe, secondly, construct their own theoretical discourse – that is, that they construct problems for analysis, and concepts as a means to resolve these problems. Finally, Mouffe and Laclau draw on their theoretical conclusions and their political commitment to develop the project of 'radical democracy', and, furthermore, elaborate on the *strategic* implications of their work.

In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse can be divided into an analytical and a normative/strategic part. The analytical part is characterized by the intertwined enterprises of providing a critique of Marxism and 'essentialism', and the development their own concepts. In my analysis, I will largely focus on the analytical part of their work, since my aim is to explore the potential of their theoretical concepts. For the same reason, I will – for the most part of my discussion - only deal with their critique of Marxist concepts if (analytically) necessary, hence, if the critique is essential to grasp the logical relations of their theoretical framework. That is to say, I will, whenever possible and analytically accurate, *avoid* engaging with their critique of Marxism at this point, since such an engagement would fundamentally alter my own object of knowledge (i.e., modify the question of the properties and logical relations of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse into the question of the nature and accuracy of their critique of Marxism).

Thus, the ultimate aim of this enterprise is to explore the theoretical discourse developed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau - that is to say, to explore the specific problems they construct for analysis, the concepts they develop to solve these problems as well as the specific relations between these concepts. In the next chapter, I will argue that the problems of (or constructed within) a given theoretical discourse are not external to it, but generated by the respective discourse. That is to say that - according to the definition of theoretical discourse and the conception of knowledge I deploy in this work - the particular objects of knowledge or problems I seek to identify, are themselves produced by the theoretical discourse in question. But how are we, then, to make sense of the specific relationship between a theoretical discourse and its problems or objects of knowledge? I will suggest that they are related through what Althusser called a 'theoretical problematic', which constitutes the condition of possibility of both a theoretical discourse and its objects of knowledge (Althusser 2009). Althusser's notion of the theoretical problematic indicates a specific terrain, or structure, that underlies a given theoretical discourse (or a set of theoretical discourses), and engenders the latter's *original* problems or objects of knowledge. In this sense, it can be described as a theoretical discourse's 'theoretical unconscious'.

While the concept of hegemony certainly figures prominently in Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse, I suggest that the latter is actually *structured* around the problem of 'ideology' - or, more precisely, around the problem of 'ideology' in the context of the Marxist base-superstructure problematic. In chapter 3, I argue that this derives from the conceptual entanglement of the problems of 'ideology' and 'economism' as it is represented in Western Marxism. I investigate the different Marxist approaches to 'ideology', and discuss their theoretical implications. I draw on Jorge Larrain's distinction between expansive and restrictive concepts of ideology (Larrain 1991, 1992) and problematize the effects of those approaches, which cast 'ideology' as 'worldview'. I then proceed to conceptualize 'ideology' as *HSS's* theoretical problematic.

In chapter 4, I explore Althusser's concept of ideology as well as Laclau and Mouffe's earlier works (Laclau 1979; Mouffe 1979a, Mouffe 1979b). I argue that Laclau and Mouffe's works prior to *HSS* were characterized by the attempt to resolve the tensions inherent in Althusser's approach to 'ideology'. I suggest that these tensions derive from the theoretical proximity of Althusser's concept of ideology to the notion of identity formation.

In chapter 5, I engage with Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and argue that it is, despite the authors' claim to the contrary, based on an irrealist ontology. I draw on Roy Bhaskar's critical realism (Bhaskar 2008) to challenge Laclau and Mouffe's ontological claims, and demonstrate the impoverishing effects their equation of 'the social' with 'the discursive' has on the practice of theorizing.

In chapter 6, I approach the concepts of *HSS* as products of the combination of the theoretical problematic of ideology, which is only thinkable on the basis of a realist ontology, and Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse that, as I demonstrate, relies on an irrealist ontology.

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

“But as there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of. We were all philosophers. We did not read *Capital* as economists, as historians or as philologists. We did not pose *Capital* the question of its economic or historical content, nor of its mere ‘internal’ logic. We read *Capital* as philosophers and therefore posed a quite different question.”
(Althusser 2009, p. 14)

In the first part of the quote, Louis Althusser justifies the need for methodological qualifications and elaborates them. If there is no such thing as an 'innocent reading', the author must avow the reading of which s/he is guilty. However, this statement does not explain *why* there are no innocent readings. Now, an immediate answer to this question would emphasize that human beings are not 'blank pages' or objective rational individuals: they are always already shaped by a particular social, theoretical and cultural environment. Hence, there is no such thing as an innocent reading since there is no such thing as an innocent *reader*, and revealing the nature of one's 'guilty' reading would involve making explicit one's social and theoretical background. Althusser, however, proceeds to do something quite different. While he does indeed establish that different academic backgrounds affect how we engage with a theoretical text, the problem, which concerns him, is not that of showing that certain presuppositions may inhibit *objectivity* on the part of the reader, leading to different *interpretations* of a text. Problematizing the possibility of an 'objective' reading merely points to the fact that different answers may follow from the same question, which is frequently explained by reference to the reader as subject. The 'problem' of different readings would, then, consist in evaluating them in terms of their accuracy. But Althusser's statement indicates quite a different observation; namely, that academic training affects how we approach a theory by determining the *questions* we pose.

The readings generated by specific disciplinary backgrounds diverge not only in that they may lead to differing results (different answers to the same question), but in that they are governed by different *questions*. Now, the fact that we can approach a theoretical text with different questions, which produce different answers, goes beyond the issue of the reader's subjectivity and objectivity, and draws attention to the broader process of theoretical critique. This is to say, it broaches questions concerning the nature of knowledge as well as the nature of theory.

In this chapter I explore modalities of theoretical engagement and the philosophical presuppositions upon which they rely. I first discuss Peter Ekegren's categorization of different modes of reading in order to outline the variety of analytical levels through which theoretical texts can be approached (Ekegren 1999, p. 8). I then proceed to introduce Stephen Savage's analysis of different types of theoretical critique and their corresponding conceptions of knowledge (Savage 1981, p. 1-61). After which, I engage with Louis Althusser's critique of empiricism and introduce his conception of theoretical work as a production process (Althusser 2009). Finally, I spell out the methodological implications for my thesis. In the course of doing so, I use a number of terms that require preliminary clarification.

Following Hindess and Hirst, I use the terms 'theory' and 'theoretical discourse' to refer to "the construction of problems for analysis and solutions to them by the means of concepts. Concepts are deployed in ordered successions to produce these effects" (Hindess/Hirst 1977, p. 7). I, however, give preference to the term 'theoretical discourse.' First, because it emphasizes the process-related dimension of theorizing. Second, because it establishes a conceptual rupture between 'theory' and 'theorists' and thus indicates a realm of autonomy for the former. And finally, it recognizes the fact that "[t]heories only exist as *discourses*—as the concepts in definite orders of succession producing definite effects (posing, criticising, solving problems)—as a result of that order" (p. 7; emphasis in original). The term 'discourse,' in this context, signifies a system of distinctively related concepts that enables a text or author's position, and can thus be understood as the latter's condition of existence (Savage 1981, p. 31 ff.).

I use the term 'theoretical text' to indicate that it is a specific medium of theoretical discourse; thus the activity of reading represents an identifiable way of engaging with the latter. I, therefore, mainly deploy the term 'theoretical text' to foreground the *process* of interacting with theoretical discourses. My emphasis on the *text* as a medium of theoretical discourse derives from the simple observation that in the social sciences theoretical work almost always implies engaging with texts. However, I will not discuss texts 'as texts' (i.e., explore their intrinsic mechanisms and structures in the fashion of literary science).

I tentatively use the term 'critique' or 'theoretical critique' as an overall signifier for the process of engagement with theoretical discourses. '(Theoretical) critique' is, in this sense, broadly defined as 'analysis of discourse' (Savage 1981, p. 2). Understood thus, 'critique' can

refer to a variety of processes that may differ in their particular character (e.g., reviews, application of theoretical concepts in research, etc.), but nonetheless involve some kind of interaction with theoretical discourses.

2.2 Approaches to theoretical texts

So far I have emphasized the fact that any theoretical work can be approached from a number of different perspectives and can “be read with different interests in mind, all presumably equally legitimate” (Ekegren 1999, p. 8). It is important to note that although all these perspectives may be equally valid, they nevertheless represent profoundly different modes of analysis. Most importantly, these different interests determine the specific questions that are posed to a theoretical text, and thus define the parameters according to which the latter will be evaluated (p. 8).

Thus, a theoretical text may be understood variously: in a *social context as a social phenomenon*, a theoretical text is approached either as products of a particular society and historical period, or as a factor influencing society. Recent examples of an approach of this fashion can be found in attempts to make sense of Postmodernism, understood as a distinct phenomenon of a particular period of capitalist social organization (see e.g., Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991; Marsden 1999), or works that conceptualize Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism as a product of late capitalist ideology (see Wood 1986). As a *biographical testimony*, a theoretical text is explored in relation to its author, thus establishing a connection with its author’s life (Ekegren 1999, p. 8). As a *medium for theoretical discourse*, a text is rendered as an instantiation of a particular mode of thought. And finally, in the fashion of literary theory as a *text in its primary sense*, a theoretical text is conceived as “a carrier of meaning” (p. 8).

Now, at first sight, the main difference between these approaches seems to derive from the distinct kinds of knowledge that they yield, which draws our attention to the fact that different questions generate different answers. However, they also differ in a more profound and for the present project far more significant sense; namely, in that they enable fundamentally different forms of engagement, and, consequently, broach the technical problem of the mode of analysis of theoretical discourse (Savage 1981, p. xii). The issue at stake, then, is not so much the existence of different *perspectives* on a theoretical text—a notion that, again, highlights the condition of the reader and his or her specific background or

interest—but that these different perspectives entail different 'modes of critique' (p. xii). It is this dimension that makes possible a shift of emphasis from the reader as 'consumer' of a given theoretical text to the *process* of engaging with theories as such.

Now, what does it mean to conceptualize the activity of critical analysis as a *mode of critique*? First, it presupposes a specific understanding of theoretical *critique*; namely, one that recognizes that a "critique is not simply a number of discrete observations about an author's 'point of view,' but a relation between a mode of analysis and the text, or texts, in question" (p. xii). Thus, a mode of critique can be described as "the position it [the critique, C.P.] establishes in relation to its object" (p. 2). Secondly, conceiving of theoretical analysis as a mode also implies a specific understanding of theory: the latter is more than an author's 'point of view'. I elaborate on this last statement in the next section. By drawing on a model of different modes of critique introduced by Savage (Savage 1981, p. 1-61), I try to connect the first two, of the four approaches to theoretical texts I introduced above, to specific modes of critique, i.e., the relativist and realist¹ modes of critique, and discuss their methodological implications. In doing so, I seek to emphasize that different modes of critique not only represent a variation in scientific interest, but are furthermore informed by different conceptions of knowledge and, consequently, of theory itself.

2.3. Different modes of critique

2.3.1 The relativist mode of critique

The relativist mode of critique approaches a theoretical discourse principally as a product of a particular society and period. It corresponds to the understanding of a theoretical text as social phenomenon, "its major effect is to read knowledge in terms of the social context of its production and to assess the relation between that context and the form which knowledge takes" (Savage 1981, p. 5). This mode of critique frequently takes the author (or theorist) as the primary object of analysis and consequently also as the primary object of theoretical critique. The theoretical discourse itself is approached in *relation* to the political, social, or personal context of the author, who is essentially rendered as a socially embedded subject (Savage 1981, p. 5).

This mode of critique, often informed by the sociology of knowledge and the tradition of ideology critique, entails a number of theoretical problems and implications with regard to the status of theoretical discourses. The emphasis on the author as subject tends to effectively

¹ I would like to emphasize that here the term 'realist' does not refer to philosophical realism.

deny the theoretical system as object of analysis any autonomy: if a theoretical discourse is primarily understood as an expression of an author's experience, social context, political agenda etc., then a proper understanding of a theoretical discourse requires a proper understanding of its author, or, at least, of the author's biographical context. Thus, it is the author as the subject of discourse that is rendered as the primary object of critique, and the theoretical discourse itself is effectively reduced to an author's 'point of view' (p. 5).

Furthermore, the strong emphasis on the relation between knowledge and social context gives rise to an understanding of theoretical discourse as mere reflex of the social (p. 7), and of knowledge as being essentially relative to social context. Now, what kind of reading does this mode of critique imply? First, the relativist mode of critique primarily approaches theoretical discourse in relation to 'something else' (i.e., a certain set of social relations, the author's political context, etc.), and, accordingly, compares the latter "with an object already defined outside of it" (Althusser 2009, p. 14). Moreover, by exclusively emphasizing the social character of theoretical discourse, this 'sociological reading' (Ekegren 1991, p. 8) tends to undermine its own analytical stance. It cannot account for its own position in relation to the discourse with which it engages:

"Given the proposed intimate relation between concepts and their social context of production it negates the possibility either of demonstrating that another theory is any better than the one under criticism—its effect is to require that all forms of knowledge be relative to sets of social conditions. If it argues otherwise the sociology of sociology must land itself in contradiction." (Savage 1981, p. 9)

Another variant of this mode is represented by critiques that seek to make sense of the internal structure of a theoretical discourse by exploring the relation *between* different texts by the same author. This can, for instance, take the form of identifying recurring 'basic assumptions', e.g., traces of certain philosophical presuppositions, theoretical doctrines, worldviews, etc., whose effects are then explored throughout the discourse. One of the problematic aspects of such a reading is that it tends to implicitly cast the respective 'basic assumption' as the basic structuring *principle* of the discourse in question. This mode of critique in a way resembles what Althusser described as "the religious myth of reading" (Althusser 2009, p. 17), where reading is ultimately governed by the aim of locating "the presence of the 'abstract' essence in the transparency of its 'concrete' existence" (p. 16).

Reading, then, has as its primary objective the identification and uncovering of this abstract

essence in its various concrete manifestations. Theoretical discourse itself is, consequentially, primarily conceived as an expression of an abstract governing principle that realizes itself in a discourse's concepts. Consequently, a theoretical discourse's concepts are grasped as expressions of an essential meaning (Savage 1981, p. 33); it is, thus, effectively cast as an 'expressive totality' "in which each part is *pars totalis*, immediately expressing the whole that it inhabits in person" (Althusser 2009, p. 17, emphasis in original).

Now, how does this affect the 'internal' character of this mode of critique? If the concepts of a theory are understood as mere embodiments of an abstract essence, this abstract essence or 'governing principle' implicitly attains the status of an *organizing principle* — i.e., of an internal logic — of the respective theoretical discourse, and the logical relations between concepts are, then, constructed in accordance with the identified internal logic. Consequently, "[c]oncepts that have no determinate logical relation may be united because they are merely expressions of the same essence, a constitutive meaning" (Savage 1981, p. 33), and "[t]he totality is not governed by the unity of its concepts," but "by the relation between essence and expression" (p. 34). What follows is that "[t]he internality of the critique is in terms of the relation *between discourse and its presuppositions*," (p. 32; emphasis in original) and the theoretical discourse in question is effectively explored *in relation* to these presuppositions.

2.3.2 The realist mode of critique

Although the realist mode of critique overlaps in a number of respects with the relativist mode, it nevertheless contains a set of distinct characteristics. Broadly put, it "approaches the discourse in question with a pre-given conception of the essential and true nature of reality— discourse is either praised or opposed on the basis of its apparent degree of correspondence or non-correspondence with this real state of affairs" (Savage 1981, p. 10). Thus, if the relativist mode of critique is mainly concerned with the question as to *why* an author took a particular 'point of view' in terms of the her/his social context, political agenda, core beliefs etc., the realist mode can be described as investigating *what* an author does or does not see — that is to say, it investigates a theoretical discourse's correspondence to 'reality'.

The most serious theoretical problem associated with this mode of critique concerns the issue of operability; that is to say, how a critique will demonstrate that the theoretical discourse in question does indeed fail to reproduce reality (p. 12). Such an undertaking would require demonstrating that there *is* "one reality, a sphere of irreducible phenomena that remains

independent of any theoretical language and that is, therefore, beyond dispute—it could then provide a consistent yardstick against which to judge discourse” (p. 13; emphasis in original). My intention here is not so much to problematize this issue from an ontological or epistemological perspective,² but to bring out its implications for this particular mode of critique.

In this sense, the critical point is to - practically - confront the theoretical discourse in question with reality in its 'pure state', that is, before any theorization. Until this is accomplished, what is effectively opposed to the theoretical discourse in question is *another* theoretical discourse, thus “far from constituting a theoretical critique of the concepts and arguments of the discourse in question, this mode of analysis merely measures the substantive distance between the objects specified in one discourse and those specified in another” (Hindess/Hirst 1977, p. 14). To be sure, this is not to say that such an undertaking is not per se legitimate, nor to state that there are no possible criteria according to which one of the discourses in question can be preferred or rejected. The problem, rather, lies in the process that such a reading engenders: again investigating one theoretical discourse in terms of another.

A related problem follows from the particular conception of knowledge implied by the realist mode of critique, namely, the conception of theoretical discourse as a representation of reality. If a theoretical discourse is judged on the basis of its correspondence to ‘reality’, the relation of the former to the latter is conceptualized in terms of *vision*: reality attains the status of a given, i.e., a set of pre-existing objects, which can be recognized through theoretical discourse. Theorizing is, then, the task of recognizing, of ‘seeing’ what is already there, and the effect of knowledge is to mirror reality (Althusser 2009, p. 19). Theoretical discourse is, consequently, judged on the basis of what it does and does not see, and the analysis of a theoretical discourse mainly concerned with exploring ‘presences’ and ‘absences’ (p. 18). The problem is that this mode of reading cannot sufficiently *explain* these presences and absences: if knowledge is a matter of recognition— i.e., of ‘seeing’ what is already there— then theory is cast as set of observations made by an author. This conception, therefore,

“reduces every weakness in the system of concepts that makes up knowledge to a psychological weakness of ‘vision’. And if it is absences of *vision* that explain these *oversights*, in the same way and by the same necessity, it is the

²For a critique of epistemology against the backdrop of discourse theory see Hindess/Hirst (1977).

presence and acuteness of ‘vision’ that will explain these ‘*sightings*’ (*vues*): all the knowledges recognized.” (p. 19; emphases in original)

Thus, the presences and absences in a theoretical discourse are, again, explained by reference to its author as subject. By implicitly casting a theoretical discourse as a set of observations, this approach also restricts the *analysis* of this theoretical discourse to a set of observations. What this mode of critique, consequently, does not provide is the means with which to make sense of these presences and absences in relation to the theoretical framework itself. That is to say, the realist mode of critique fails to recognize that “the combined existence of sightings and oversights in an author poses a problem, the problem of their *combination*” (Althusser 2009, p. 20; emphasis in original).

Thus far I have tried to show that different modes of critique rely on identifiable presuppositions about the nature of theory and knowledge. That is to say, “[i]f there are no innocent readings, that is because every reading merely reflects in its lessons and rules the real culprit: the conception of knowledge underlying the object of knowledge which makes knowledge what it is” (p. 36-7). In what follows, I outline the particular mode of critique deployed in the present work by elaborating on the understanding of theoretical discourse and knowledge on which I rely, namely, Althusser’s model of theoretical work as mode of production of knowledge. I, however, confine myself to a discussion of those concepts of Althusser that are relevant to my present project.³

2.4 Theoretical practice and the production of knowledge

2.4.1 The concept of the theoretical problematic

Althusser’s conception of knowledge and theoretical practice arises from the idea that science is always embedded in a definite theoretical structure, i.e., a ‘theoretical problematic.’ Althusser frequently invokes a spatial metaphor to specify this construct, suggesting that it can be understood as constituting a definite field (‘terrain’) and a corresponding horizon (Althusser 2009, p. 25). A theoretical problematic is, then, constitutive of science itself, since science

“can only pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its absolute and definite

³ For a critical account on Althusser’s conception of science vs. ideology see Hindess/Hirst (1977) and Savage (1981).

condition of possibility, and hence the absolute determination of *the forms in which all problems must be posed*, at any given moment in the science.” (p. 26; emphasis in original)

I would like to highlight one particular dimension of this statement, specifically, the emphasized relationship between the theoretical structure and the production of problems. In this conceptualization, a theoretical structure is not merely deployed as a means for resolving problems, i.e., to explore objects of knowledge, but is already constitutive of the production of said objects. Thus, the objects of knowledge of a theoretical discourse are not external to (and dealt with through) the latter, but produced by —and hence tied to —theoretical discourse itself. Consequently,

“[a]ny object or problem situated on the terrain and within the horizon, i.e., in the definite structured field of the theoretical problematic of a given theoretical discipline, is visible. [...] The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject, endowed with the faculty of ‘vision’ which he [sic!] exercises either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems.” (p. 26; emphases in original)

And if it is a theoretical problematic that determines what is ‘visible’ in a theoretical discourse, the same mechanism defines the invisible *as* invisible. Thus, ‘vision’ and ‘non-vision’ are inherently related since they share the same conditions of existence:

“The invisible is defined by the visible as *its* invisible, *its* forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible (to return to the spatial metaphor), the outer darkness of exclusion – but the *inner darkness of exclusion*, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure.” (p. 27; emphases in original)

2.4.2 Althusser's critique of empiricism

Now, these propositions entail some assumptions that need to be discussed in more detail. In particular, they establish a rupture between, what Althusser termed (with reference to Marx), as the ‘real object’ and the ‘object of knowledge’, thereby designating one of Althusser's most important objections to empiricism⁴ (Althusser 2009, p. 37-43). Althusser strongly criticized empiricist conceptions of knowledge and rejected their core assumption: knowledge as recognition of a given. In his account, the main flaw of empiricist conceptions of knowledge

⁴ Savage's criticism of the realist mode of critique is complementary to Althusser's critique of empiricism.

follows from the failure to distinguish between the 'real object' and the 'object of knowledge' (p. 37-43).

Thus, empiricism conceptualizes the process of knowledge as taking place between pre-existing subjects and objects. The process of knowledge itself is, then, mainly carried out by the subject and consists in abstracting from the real object. It is through this process of abstraction that the subject comes to appropriate the essence of the real object and produces knowledge. Knowledge is, consequently, "an abstraction, in the strict sense, i.e., an extraction of the essence from the real, which contains it and keeps it in hiding" (p. 38). It is this conceptualization of the knowledge process that ultimately renders it as an act through which what is already there is recognized, implicitly equating knowledge with vision.

Althusser identifies a logical inconsistency in this conception. If empiricism takes the essence of the real object to be the initial target of the knowledge process, it implicitly affirms the existence of two different objects: in this case, it is indeed this essence that constitutes the actual object of knowledge, thus it is not identical with the real object. However, empiricism simultaneously "denegates what it has admitted, precisely by reducing this difference between two objects, to a mere distinction between the parts of a single object: the real object" (p. 42-3).

2.4.3 Mode of production of knowledges

Based on his distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge, Althusser re-conceptualizes the process of knowledge as a process of production: thus, whereas the real object exists independently of thought, the 'object of knowledge' is *produced* by thought as a thought-totality, i.e., as a thought object (p. 44). This process, i.e., the production of the thought-object, takes place entirely in the domain of knowledge production and is by no means identical to the processes that generate the 'real object.' The latter takes place in the order of the real, i.e., "the order of succession of the moments of *historical* genesis" (p. 44; emphasis in original).

Now, how are we to understand this process? Althusser here draws on a Marxist notion and conceptualizes 'thought' as mode of production of knowledges, i.e. as a historically constituted system. 'Thought' is, therefore, not conceptualized as an ahistorical absolute consciousness of individual subjects, but as being shaped by real conditions, the product of

natural and social reality (p. 44). Hence, ‘thought’ is constituted by a structure that combines three elements: i) the type of object on which it labors (i.e., its ‘raw materials’), ii) the available theoretical means of production (i.e., theory, method and technique), and iii) its historical (social and theoretical) relations of production (p. 44).

Consequently, the specific mode of production of knowledge constitutes the conditions of theoretical practice. Two further remarks are necessary at this point. First, Althusser emphasizes that the adjective ‘raw’ in ‘raw material’ does not designate a state of ‘purity’—i.e., he insists that we never confront a ‘pure object’. Rather, ‘raw material’ must be understood as being always already determined by the specific historical (i.e., social and theoretical) relations of production (p. 45-6). Second, given Althusser’s conception of the relationship between a theoretical structure and *its* objects of knowledge, ‘raw material’ has to be understood as being already determined by the specific theoretical means of production. It is against this backdrop that Althusser, following Marx, defines “theoretical practice, i.e., thought’s labour on its raw material) as the ‘*labour of transformation (Verarbeitung) of intuition (Anschauung) and representation (Vorstellung) into concepts (in Begriffe)*’” (Marx in Althusser 2009, p. 45; emphases in original).

Now how does Althusser conceptualize theoretical discourse itself? At this point, it is important to invoke Althusser’s emphasizing of Marx’s comment regarding the different processes that generate the real object and the object of knowledge, which foregrounds

“a difference in *order* in the genesis of these two processes [...] Marx declares that the order which governs the categories of *thought* in the process of knowledge does not coincide with the order which governs the *real* categories in the process of real historical genesis.” (p. 49; emphasis in original)

Consequently, the order that governs the production of knowledge does not derive from the real order of historical genesis, and the specific place occupied by thought-categories is defined by their function in the production process itself. This means that theoretical discourse, in Althusser’s understanding, is governed by a logic that is strictly internal. He conceptualizes theoretical discourse as a thought-totality, in which concepts are structurally organized as a synchrony: “the system of the hierarchy of concepts in their combination determines the definition of each concept, as a function of its place and function in the system” (p. 73). It follows that a theoretical discourse and the validity of its concepts can only

be evaluated on internal grounds. Theoretical practice, then, cannot be defined as the application of abstract theoretical concepts to an external reality (their validity being judged in terms of the degree of correspondence), since “*theoretical practice* is indeed its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to *validate* the quality of its product, i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice” (p. 63).

While a critique of this last point is not possible in the context of the present work, I would like to make one brief remark: Althusser's approach establishes the possibility of a strictly internal critique, which seeks to elucidate the *inner mechanisms* of a theoretical discourse. Hence, what this mode of critique provides is a form theoretical investigation that explains the problems and merits of a given theoretical discourse *from the standpoint of its own structure and concepts*, i.e. without reference to external reality or another 'superior' theoretical discourse. In this sense, it is a mode of critique designed to avoid a 'grid reading', i.e., the reading of one discourse through another one (Althusser 2009, p. 19). Such a 'reading through a grid' does, as Althusser argued in his analysis of Marx's reading of Adam Smith, merely provide us with a

“summary of concordances and discordances, the balance of what Smith discovered and what he missed, of his merits and failings, of his presences and absences. In fact, this reading is a retrospective theoretical reading, in which what Smith could not see or understand appears only as a radical omission. Certain of these omissions do refer to others, and the latter to a primary omission – but even this reduction restricts us to the observation of presences and absences.” (p. 19)

Hence, while I deploy this mode of critique to develop an *immanent* critique of *HSS*, I would like to emphasize that I do not regard it as the only legitimate way to engage with a theoretical discourse. Indeed, I would not only like suggest that all modes of critique, discussed throughout this chapter, work to elucidate different aspects of a theoretical discourse, but furthermore want to stress that the question of empirical adequacy should not be ignored. In this sense, Althusser's critique of empiricism is crucial in problematizing a meta-theoretical stance that fails to recognize the specificity of theoretical practice and the difference between 'real objects' and 'objects of knowledge'. In doing so, it cautions against a view of theory that assigns it the status of a journalistic report, or a 'description' of reality. However, the fact that we *can* learn something about the 'real object' by investigating 'objects of knowledge' renders critical the question of the relationship between the two.

One additional remark is necessary at this point: Althusser's emphasis on the dimension of theoretical practice specifies the relationship between a theoretical discourse and 'its' theoretical problematic. That is to say: it highlights that the structure and content of a theoretical discourse are determined not only by its theoretical problematic, but also by the specific raw material, theoretical means of production, and historical relations of production which constitute a 'mode of production of knowledge'. The *specific* effects (i.e., theoretical discourses) a given theoretical problematic produces must thus be understood as result of the interplay of *all* of these instances. This point is, I believe, decisive: it indicates the fact that one and the same theoretical problematic can engender a variety of different theoretical discourses (which furthermore progress to produce their own problems and objects of knowledge), and emphasizes that a theoretical discourse cannot be *reduced* to its theoretical problematic.

2.5 Ontology and epistemology

I already indicated that Althusser's notion of 'theoretical practice' works to situate theoretical work in its social context. This, however, requires us to think about theorizing as a *social practice*. This is to say, how can we acknowledge the socio-historical determinants of scientific thought (López/Potter 2005, p. 7), without *reducing its status* to that of a mere social product? I would like to suggest that this requires an ontological and epistemological stance as exemplified by critical realism⁵ (Bhaskar 2008). Put briefly, critical realism holds that while the objects of knowledge of scientific inquiry exist independently of us ('intransitive objects of knowledge'), they can only be studied through 'transitive objects of knowledge', which are "the raw materials of science – the artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day" (Bhaskar 2008, p. 21). The crucial point, however, is that knowledge about these intransitive objects is, despite these constraints, possible:

"Thus, critical realism puts forward epistemological caution with respect to scientific knowledge, as opposed to a self-defeating relativist scepticism. [...] There are sociological determinants in the process of knowledge production whether in the natural or social sciences. [...] Knowledge is culturally and historically situated. Progress in terms of accumulation of knowledge is not a historically linear phenomenon. Regression in either philosophy or science is always possible and indeed sometimes is in fact what actually occurs. But so too is progress, and human knowledge has indeed been expanded." (López/Potter 2005, p. 9)

⁵ I will confine myself to a general outline of critical realism's central postulates, for a more detailed introduction see López/Potter 2005; Bhaskar 2008.

Acknowledging the fact that it is, in principle, possible to acquire knowledge of intransitive objects, renders critical the question of what the world must be like for knowledge of it to be possible. Critical realism, as a philosophy, establishes “the basis of the possibility” of knowledge about the world (p. 9). It is, thus, akin to transcendental realism, which

“regards the objects of knowledge as the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena; and the knowledge as produced in the social activity of science. These objects are neither phenomena (empiricism) nor human constructs imposed upon the phenomena (idealism), but real structures which endure and operate independently of our knowledge, our experience and the conditions which allow us access to them.” (Bhaskar 2008, p. 25)

However, critical realism's 'critical' stance not only derives from its fallibilism with regard to scientific imperfection or the social situatedness of knowledge, “but also presents the possibility of examining as an object of knowledge the social distortion of knowledge” (López/Potter 2005, p. 14). This is to say, critical realism takes into account “the effect of social inequality upon explanations (including explanations of social inequality)” (p. 14). These effects, however, cannot just be corrected, but have to be explained: “To do so, however, it is necessary to trace the complex ways in which these beliefs are located in the structure of reality. Such is, of course, precisely the purpose of science (which is of course a purposeful human activity)” (p. 14-5).

2.6 Methodological implications

What are the methodological consequences of this conception of knowledge and theoretical discourse for this present work? First, I will approach Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical concepts in the third sense of the categorization I introduced above, that is, as concepts belonging to a particular theoretical discourse. One immediate consequence of this approach—in contrast to the other approaches—is that I will not compare their theoretical discourse with an object 'already defined outside it' (Althusser 2009, p. 14). I will not try to link it to a particular social constellation, or explore its traces in the academic field, nor will I discuss immediate implications of Laclau and Mouffe's work for political strategy. Instead, I will approach Laclau and Mouffe's concepts as abstract theoretical constructs belonging to a particular theoretical problematic in the Althusserian sense, that is to say, as being “defined by the place which they occupy and the function which they perform within a determinate field of concepts” (Hindess/Hirst 1975, p. 1). Hence I will evaluate their internal theoretical status and approach them in relation to their own respective theoretical problematic. I will not

explore their correspondence to an external reality, nor probe their explanatory potential with regard to empirical events. In short, although I ultimately seek to explore the problems and merits of Laclau and Mouffe's concepts for theoretical practice, I will first engage with them 'in their own right'.

To do so I proceed as follows: in the next chapter, I investigate the Marxist concept of ideology, and conceptualize the latter as Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical problematic. I start out by exploring Marx's account of 'ideology' and discuss the various ways in which the latter has been deployed in Marxist theory. I then proceed to discuss 'ideology' in the context of the Marxist 'base-superstructure' problematic. Finally, I suggest that it is the problems produced by this particular combination of elements, that make up Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical problematic.

3 The theoretical problematic of ideology

3.1. Introduction

While the concept of 'hegemony' certainly figures prominently in Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse, I suggest that the latter is actually *structured* around the problem of 'ideology' - or, more precisely, around the problem of 'ideology' in the context of the Marxist base-superstructure problematic. This, as I will argue throughout this chapter, derives from the conceptual entanglement of the problems of 'ideology' and 'economism' as it is represented in Western Marxism.

'Economism' can be defined as a variant of 'essentialism' (i.e., the assumption of the existence of a dominant underlying structuring principle) that “confers explanatory primacy to the basic contradictions and the endogenous laws of the capitalist economy” (Torfing 1999, p. 19-20).

The problem of 'economism' in Marxist theory typically arises in the context of those conceptions that analytically divide society into a 'base' (or 'infrastructure'), defined as the relations of production and the productive forces, and 'superstructures' (i.e., politics, culture, ideology) (Benton 1984, p. 99). Now, while such a distinction between different dimensions of a social formation can be useful for analytical purposes, the questionable aspects of Marxist base-superstructure models have often been revealed by attempts to determine the specific relationship between these instances. In this context, 'economism' refers to the proposition that superstructures are determined by the economic base, and only have constrained efficacy in the historical process. Consequently economism is related to questions dealing with the role, nature, and efficacy of superstructures.

I would like to put forward two propositions: First, that there has been a tendency in Marxist theory (especially Western Marxism) to confront these questions on the terrain of ideology theory. This, I will argue, can be regarded as a consequence of a specific conceptualization of ideology in which superstructures are conceptualized *as* materialized ideology. Secondly, I would like to suggest that this tendency is also manifest in Laclau and Mouffe's intellectual trajectory – i.e. the work that preceded *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* already displayed their engagement with the problem of 'economism', and their attempt to work out a non-reductionist theory of ideology (see Laclau 1979, Mouffe 1979b).

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the first of these two propositions and interrogate the

concept of ideology in a way that allows me to frame it as *HSS's* theoretical problematic. My intention is not to give a full account of the different ways in which 'ideology' has been employed within Marxist theory,⁶ but to discuss it in those specific contexts that eventually rendered it critical to Laclau and Mouffe's field of research – that is, the problem of ideology in the context of the 'base-superstructure' problematic. My emphasis on this specific aspect of the concept of ideology is not only a practical one, but also a methodological necessity that follows from the concept of 'theoretical discourse' deployed in this work. As I have argued in the previous chapter, a theoretical discourse can be understood as a system of concepts that are defined by their specific place and function *within* a determinate field of concepts. The *specific* meaning and function of the concept of ideology is therefore modified by the system of concepts in which it is deployed, and has to be evaluated in relation to the latter.

I will start out by investigating how 'ideology' is conceptualized in Marx's writing in order to illuminate the ways the concept has been transformed in Marxist theory. It is important to stress that I neither intend to evaluate the legitimacy of the various conceptions of ideology, nor to discuss their respective theoretical value in relation to Marx's original concept. Instead, what I seek to show is that the concept of ideology, over time, became part of a new theoretical problematic that fundamentally altered its conceptual identity. I will then proceed to discuss 'ideology' in the context of the 'base-superstructure' problematic, which, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, represents the background to Laclau and Mouffe's engagement with the former. Finally, I will suggest that it is the problems produced by this particular combination of elements that make up Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical problematic.

3.2. Ideology in Marxist theory

3.2.1 Ideology in Marx

The concept of ideology, although originally born in the context of the early bourgeois struggle against feudalism and traditional aristocratic society (Larrain 1994, p. 9), attained much of its popularity within the Marxist tradition (and here, for reasons that I will discuss in the course of this chapter, especially in Western Marxism).

The fact that Marx never produced a coherent account of 'ideology' (and was not especially concerned with this intellectual project either), but rather a series of outlines (which, furthermore, entail conflicting notions of ideology, see McLellan 1986, p. 9-30; Larrain 1991, p. 8; Woodiwiss 1990, p. 43) makes it seem rather surprising that 'ideology' is conceived as

⁶ For a detailed study of this question see Larrain 1991;1992 and McLellan 1986

one of Marx's "central concepts" (McLellan 1986, p. 9). What, as Jorge Larrain noted in his investigation of the Marxian concept of ideology, furthermore complicates the project of working out Marx's original concept of ideology is the fact that Marx's rather unsystematic treatment of the latter took place not only in different contexts, but over a number of decades, which were marked by the evolution of Marx's intellectual development (Larrain 1992, p. 36).

However, there are some continuities between these different conceptions, which allow for a general outline of his basic ideas. The most systematic treatment of the issue of 'ideology' can be found in Marx's early works and can be characterized as follows: First, Marx approach to 'ideology' comprised - as David McLellan argues – two main elements:

“[I]deology was connected with idealism which, as a philosophical outlook, was unfavourably contrasted with materialism: any correct view of the world had to be, in some sense, a materialist view. Second, ideology was connected with the uneven distribution of resources and power in society: if the social and economic arrangements were suspect then so was the ideology that was part of them” (McLellan 1986, p. 9)

The notion of 'ideology' thus refers to a false system of ideas, which were taken to be related to the social base. What made idealism ideological was its movement from ideas to reality (that is, the reduction of reality to the status of an empirical manifestation of an idea or concept), which ultimately mystified the real nature of things. However, these “conceptions had their basis in a real social world that was so misconstrued as to generate these compensatory illusions” (p. 10).

For Marx, the real basis of ideological misconceptions was the conflictual and contradictory nature of class societies. 'Ideology' is, thus, not merely a 'false' system of thought, but is rooted in, and is the product of, a deficient *reality* that it helps to conceal. This is why 'ideology' has to be explained from material *practice* (p. 10). In other words, the concept of ideology is associated with the idea that society is not a harmonious whole but is deeply conflictual and riven by class conflict. Hence, “in order for it not to fall apart these oppositions were covered up by ideas which represented attempts to portray society as cohesive rather than conflictual by justifying the asymmetrical distribution of social and economic power” (p. 12).

For an idea to be ideological, it not only has to be *false*, but it also has to affirm and legitimize

the dominant relations of power in some way, thereby perpetuating the *status quo*. From this it follows that “[t]he character of ideology is given by its relation to the interest of the ruling class and not by a genetic relation to the class from which it originates. That is to say, ideology necessarily serves the interests of the ruling class even if it has not been produced by that class” (Larrain 1991, p. 25).

Naturally, there are different routes for the interpretation of these basic propositions whose respective legitimacy shall not be the subject of this discussion. However, these different readings entail specific problems, which produce theoretical effects in their respective contexts of deployment. One of the most powerful, and equally problematic, features of the concept of ideology already becomes apparent from the rather simplified outline I have provided so far: 'ideology' entails the question of the relationship between reality and consciousness, or, respectively, between reality and appearance. That is to say, the concept of ideology, in virtually every interpretation, engenders an epistemological problem, since it requires a discrimination between accurate and inaccurate representations of reality in terms of their correspondence to reality.

Moreover, while 'ideology' in Marx seems to refer to a specific kind of *philosophical* criticism and has a rather peripheral status in his overall work, it became “a privileged terrain of struggle between different interpretations of Marx” (Larrain 1991, p. 1).

In what follows, I will try to trace back and illuminate these developments by drawing on Jorge Larrain's investigation of Marx's approach to 'ideology' (Larrain 1991; 1992).

In his extensive and elaborated study of Marx, Larrain identifies a scattered and at times contradictory, yet rather sophisticated approach to 'ideology' that by far surpasses the idea that certain forms of knowledge may perpetuate relations of dominance, or the claim that all forms of thought are socially determined. However, Larrain is not so much interested in discovering what Marx 'really meant', or in discrediting some interpretations of Marx to favor others (Larrain 1991, p. 1-5). Instead, he is committed to the project of working out the “various elements which constitute the essential features of the concept [of ideology, C.P.] and the different stages [of Marx's intellectual development, C.P.] at which Marx elaborates them” (p.

9). In so doing, Larrain fruitfully connects the problems he identifies in some interpretations to the ambiguous and often even contradictory propositions inherent in Marx's own arguments.

Larrain's project does, therefore, not so much consist in recovering Marx's 'true' concept of ideology, but in *reconstructing* the different notions of ideology in relation to Marx's intellectual development in a way that ultimately allows for an identification of the concept's basic features.

I will base my discussion of the difficulties in Marx's conception of ideology on the analysis elaborated by Larrain, and incorporate his distinction between a 'positive' (or 'expansive') and a 'negative' (or 'restrictive') conception of ideology. I will also argue that this distinction is decisive for understanding the formation of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical problematic.

3.2.1.1 Two concepts of ideology

In his discussion of the Marxian problematic of 'ideology', Larrain emphasizes the need to distinguish between Marx's project of developing a general materialist account of the relationship between consciousness and reality (and hence the formation of ideas), and the development of the theory of 'ideology' as a *specific* type of consciousness or set of ideas (Larrain 1992, p. 45-52; 1991, p. 19-45). He argues these two specific – related yet distinct - research projects have been collapsed into one, which has led to two different notions of 'ideology' in Marxist theory. One, negative, that is restricted and historical refers to some kind of distorted thought; the other positive, “refers to the totality of forms of social consciousness or to the political ideas of social classes” (Larrain 1991, p. 4)⁷.

3.2.1.2 Materialism, consciousness and reality

The concept of 'ideology' first emerges against the background of Marx's project to develop a materialist theory of consciousness. Larrain argues that this attempt was characterized by Marx's rejection of both mechanical materialism, which assigns consciousness the status of a mere reflection of reality, and idealism which reduces reality to the product of consciousness (p. 38). Marx was, thus, seeking to transcend the subject-object dualism, and facing the problem

⁷ Some authors have adopted this distinction but replaced 'negative' and 'positive' with the terms 'critical' and 'sociological' conception; the term 'critical' indicating some kind of mystification interest and power, and 'sociological' indicating a type of neutrality (see e.g. Purvis/Hunt 1993, p. 478; Boucher 2008, p.7). I will, however, maintain Larrain's original description, for I feel that both his concepts of 'ideology,' i.e., positive and negative, are characterized by the notion of 'mystification'.

“how to reconcile materialism with the fact that reality should not be conceived as a given object which does not include the subject's activity; and how to reconcile idealism with the fact that being cannot be reduced to thought [...] Materialism splits up in two separate worlds what Marx thinks to be a unity whereas idealism dissolves one world into the other. Marx propounds a basic unity between consciousness and reality which nevertheless retain a distinction.” (p. 38)

According to Larrain, Marx's most important objection to mechanical materialism is that it cannot conceive of reality as practice, i.e., as a historically specific product of human action, which is constantly in the process of being produced, reproduced, and transformed by human practice (Larrain 1991, p. 19-20).

It is through the category of 'practice', defined as people's “conscious and sensuous activity whereby they produce their material existence and the social relations within which they live, thus transforming nature, society and themselves [...]”, that Marx seeks to overcome this dualism and unite reality and consciousness (p. 20).

However, since practice is necessarily social it requires the cooperation of human beings. Consequently, different types of social relations in which individuals are forced to participate emerge, most importantly in Marx the division of labor. As a result, the social relations and institutions that are produced by human activity acquire an independence over individuals and thereby come to constitute an 'objective power' to which individuals are subjected. The paradox of human activity is “that it crystallises into objective relations which, despite being produced by men and women themselves, escape their control” (p. 20). 'Revolutionary practice' is, then, practice that transforms social relations and places them under the *conscious* control of individuals. Practice in Marx thus contributes both, to the reproduction and transformation of social relations (p. 21).

3.2.1.3 Consciousness and practice

The category of 'practice' is, as indicated above, deployed to transcend the subject-object dualism by conceptualizing reality *as* practice. That is to say, if reality is not conceived in the form of an object (i.e., as a given and external world) but as a product of human practice, “then men and women can only form ideas and acquire knowledge about the world inasmuch as this reality is practically constituted [...] They do not contemplate it as already formed; they represent it as they construct it” (Larrain 1991, p. 22).

It is here that we encounter the kernel of Marx's materialist conception of the relationship

between reality and consciousness. Consciousness, and consequently the formation of ideas are generally determined by practice: it is in this sense that Marx affirms the primacy of being (or material existence) over consciousness. This, however, still leaves the question as to what constitutes the specificity of 'ideology'.

3.2.1.4 Ideology

The term 'ideology' in Marx is closely connected to the notions of 'practice' and 'contradiction'. As I have already indicated, Marx assumed that humans produce definite social relations through practice which then come to acquire independence and constitute an 'objective power'. Marx thought these social relations in terms of the division of labor, which led to the division of society into different classes. It is “[t]his 'objective power' produced by human practice [which, C.P.] expresses itself in a specific division of labour; it renders a great mass of humanity 'propertyless' in a world of wealth and culture; and it opposes the ruling class to the direct producers” (Larrain 1991, p. 21).

Now, what constitutes the *contradictory* character of this reality? The notion of *contradiction* seems to refer in this context to two levels: First, to the constitution of class society, which is characterized by “a particular division of labour which separates men and women into classes, and which creates an opposition between the interest of the individual and the interest of the community” (p. 26). In this context, the notion of 'contradiction' refers to the generation of opposed, and thus contradicting, *interests*, and the term 'contradictory reality' could actually be replaced with 'conflictual reality'.

Second, *contradictory* could be understood as a characterization of a reality in which we produce and reproduce social relations through our daily practice, but encounter them as an external 'objective power' to which we are subjected. The contradictory character is, then, given by the fact that human beings are controlled by these structures, instead of being their conscious masters (Larrain 1992, p. 45). While the term 'contradiction' in the first sense relates to a concrete, empirical level (i.e., to the existence of conflicting interests, which oppose the individual to the community); the second notion seems to designate the existence of an abstract, depersonalized, i.e., 'objective' mode of dominance which subjects and dominates society as a whole, regardless of class position.⁸

⁸ A more detailed elaboration of this is not possible in the context of my present project, but Moishe Postone seems to make a similar argument and re-interprets Marx's theory of Capital in this fashion, see Postone 1996

The concept of ideology in Marx is closely tied to the idea of the 'contradictory' nature of this reality, since 'ideology' designates those representations of reality which a) misrepresent (i.e., displace) or conceal (i.e., naturalize or negate) these contradictions; and b) originate in these contradictions (Larrain 1991, p. 27).

It is important to note that 'ideology' is, in this definition, not the product of a distorted cognitive process, but of the limitation of practice itself: Marx understands this misrepresentation and concealment of contradictions as an attempt to cope with - or resolve in - consciousness what cannot be resolved in practice (p. 28).

3.2.2 The negative, restrictive concept of ideology

The central features of this 'negative' concept of ideology can thus be summarized as follows: First, 'ideology' cannot be understood as a deliberate attempt by a ruling class to deceive the dominated classes, but has to be conceived as a product of class societies *as such*. That is to say, 'ideology' has the effect of stabilizing dominant relations of power because it conceals or misrepresents their origins, but this effect is, strictly speaking, not the reason for its existence. 'Ideology', then, refers exclusively to those ideas that work to favor the dominant class since it misrepresents or negates those contradictions that constitute the latter's condition of possibility. Its production, however, is not genetically bound to the ruling class. Moreover, not all ideas that serve the dominant class are necessarily ideological, which is reserved for those that refer to, or deal with, society's basic contradictions (Larrain 1991, p. 26). The strong connection between 'ideology' and the notion of 'contradiction' is, then, a crucial feature of this particular conception as it prohibits the conclusion that *all* ideas produced by a dominating class are ideological, or that all 'false' ideas are ideological.

Second, the notions of 'ideology' and 'reality' are actually not opposed in Marx, but rather connected in a peculiar way: 'Ideology' cannot be opposed to 'reality' for it does not simply distort reality, but is itself conditioned by a distorted and contradictory reality, which is the result of contradictory practice itself. That is to say, 'ideology' is a product of, and to a certain extent expresses, these exact contradictions, but it does so in a distorted way that mystifies their real origin.

Furthermore, opposing 'ideology' to 'reality' would be misleading since it does not make explicit the fact that not all misrepresentations of reality are ideological, but only those which originate in reality's contradictory nature and misrepresents the latter. Hence, 'ideology' does

“not arise as a pure invention of consciousness which distorts reality, nor as the result of an objectively opaque reality which deceives passive consciousness. Ideology arises from a 'limited material mode of activity' which produces both contradictory relations and, as a consequence, distorted representations about them; thus it unites in one phenomenon consciousness and reality.” (Larrain 1992, p. 46)

It is this specific connection between, rather than the opposition of, 'ideology' and reality that gives the 'negative' concept of ideology its distinct character, which, as Larrain argues, is *historical* and *restricted* (Larrain 1991, p. 29-30). It is restricted in the sense that it does not include all errors or distortions:

“The relationship between ideological and non ideological ideas cannot be interpreted as the general relationship between falsity and truth [...] Ideology is not a pre-scientific error which disappears when science steps in; ideology is a specific kind of distortion which conceals contradictions and stems from their existence.” (p. 30)

One might add that it is also restricted, because it does not include all ideas produced by a ruling class (see above). This concept of ideology is, furthermore, historical in that the character of 'ideology' changes with the historical development of the contradictions from which it stems (p. 29). I will, in the context of this discussion, refer to this particular conception of 'ideology' as the *restricted* concept of 'ideology', since this expression designates those characteristics that are central to the argument I intend to make:

- a) 'ideology' does not include all errors and distortions and does not correspond to a mere opposition between falsity and truth
- b) 'ideology' exclusively refers to those ideas that work to favor existing relations of power and dominance (hence there cannot be a 'socialist' or 'alternative' ideology), and thus generates social cohesion
- c) not all ideas produced by a ruling class are ideological

3.2.3 The positive/expansive concept of ideology

The fact Marx's concept of ideology is embedded in his project to develop a general theory about the determination of consciousness by reality has strongly affected the changes in meaning that the original concept has undergone in Marxist theory. The evolution of the concept of 'ideology' after Marx's death was strongly influenced by the general development

of Marxist theory. David McLellan (McLellan 1986, p. 21) draws attention to this context especially emphasizing the Marxism of the Second International, which re-modeled Marx's theories into a general doctrine of economic determinism, and to the failure of the revolutionary movement to develop adequately in the West, which led to an increased attention towards the issue of 'consciousness'.

This last point seems especially important to me, since it indicates the modified context in which 'ideology' was explored, namely, the question of strategy, the logic of revolutionary movements, and the constitution of social agents. That is to say, the expansive conception of ideology grants a certain historical efficacy to the actions of social agents, and 'ideology' thus attains centrality as theoretical means through which to explore the mechanisms at work in the process of their constitution.

One of the most significant features of the 'positive', or 'expansive' concept of ideology, which as Larrain argues is characteristic feature of Western Marxism (Larrain 1991, p. 46), is that the specific connection between 'ideology', and the notion of contradictions is loosened or even dissolved. The positive or expansive concept of ideology primarily derives from Marx's claim that consciousness is determined by being (i.e. socially determined), and, broadly speaking, focuses on the way that structures shape consciousness.

3.2.4 Lenin: From 'contradiction' to 'interest'

One of the most important forerunners of such a conception of ideology was certainly Lenin, who conceived it as an instrument in the struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie. Larrain argues that the meaning of 'ideology' was extended in Lenin, so as to theorize the confrontation of political ideas in the context of class struggle:

“The accentuation of the struggle necessarily leads to intense confrontation of all fronts, especially in the field of ideas. The dominant ideas appear openly connected with the political interests of the ruling class and can thus be subjected to strong criticism. Now, in this confrontation the critique of the ruling ideas appears as an expression of the political interests of the dominated classes.” (Larrain 1991, p. 64)

In short, if the political ideas of a ruling class are theorized as 'ideology', it is tempting to assert that the critique of these ideas is realized from a different 'ideological' class-standpoint. The effect of this theoretical move is that “ideology now refers to class political ideas instead of referring to the masking of contradictions” (p. 64).

It is interesting to note that although Lenin believed 'ideology' to be determined by class-position (since it is taken to express its 'fundamental interests'), the development and proliferation of a 'socialist ideology' does not emerge naturally but requires active work. He thus distinguished between the 'spontaneous' consciousness of the working class, which arises from the spontaneous practice, and real 'social-democratic' class consciousness (p. 65). Now, the point is that, for Lenin, the spontaneous consciousness of the working class "did not fully express a true cognition of its objective situation[.]" (Larrain 1992, p. 75), since bourgeois 'ideology' is older and thus more developed and powerful. 'Socialist ideology' thus needs to be studied and developed by intellectuals and brought to the working class from the outside. 'Ideology' is thus not only partially stripped of its negative connotations (i.e. of the notion of 'distortion'), but taken to primarily represent (class)-*interests*.

"The concept may now encompass distorted as much as true forms of consciousness and, therefore, does not by itself entail a negative meaning. The falsity of bourgeois ideology is due not its ideological character but rather to its bourgeois *origin*." (p. 76; my emphasis)

The notion of 'contradiction', which was central in the negative concept of Marx, is thus replaced with the notion of 'interest', and 'ideology' is primarily theorized in the context of questions of *strategy*.

This move opens up the possibility of a conception of 'ideology' as a socially determined worldview. This can be characterized as a sociological conception of ideology. As Alan Hunt and Trevor Purvis note: "The sociological conception of ideology focuses on a plural conception of ideology as the outcome or result of the specific social position of classes, groups or agents" (Purvis/Hunt 1993, p. 478).

Now, this conceptualization of ideology entails some significant shifts in emphasis from the restrictive conception: First, the idea that 'ideology' is an outcome of a particular social position allows one to assume the existence of a multiplicity of different, competing (class)-ideologies. Second, the term 'ideology' does, then, apply to the entirety of the ideas produced by a particular class, in so far as those correspond to a class's 'objective interests' determined by class-position.

The question of 'ideology' thus becomes closely connected to the question of 'strategy' (that is, in the context of Marxism, the question as to how to form a socialist revolutionary movement), and the terrain of 'ideology' is conceptualized as a contested field on which

different ideologies struggle for dominance. This, again, corresponds to a conception of ideology as a general worldview, which includes daily life practices as well as political ideas.

I believe this is a critical point since it gives way to what is commonly characterized as a 'material' conception of ideology (which figures most prominently in Gramsci and the later writings of Althusser, see McLellan 1986, p. 29-34). This means that practices and institutions (such as the state, the educational system, the church, culture etc.) are understood as embodiments or expressions of 'ideology':

“In this sociological sense ideology is 'real', or material, rather than fictional or delusory, and is thus unavoidable in that it simply describes the framework of meanings and values within which people exist and conduct their social lives” (Purvis/Hunt 1993, p. 479). One consequence of this 'material' conception of ideology, which I will discuss in more detail below, is that it allows one to equate what has been traditionally called the sphere of 'superstructures' with 'ideology'.

This conception, finally, entails a significant change in emphasis from 'contradiction' to 'interest'. I have argued above that the specific connection between 'ideology' and the notion of contradiction produces a *restricted* concept of 'ideology', since it precludes the conclusion that a) all ideas produced by, or popular within, the ruling class are ideological, and b) that 'ideology' is a direct expression or representation of a ruling class's *interests*.

'Ideology', in the restricted sense, necessarily serves the interest of the ruling class because it conceals or misrepresents those contradictions that are the ruling class's condition of possibility, but it does not necessarily express or serve these interests in a *direct* way. The connection between 'ideology' and 'interests' is, consequently, rather weak within the restricted conception, and could in fact be expelled without seriously destabilizing the conception as such.

However, within the expansive conception, the notion of 'interest' is, as I have argued above, central: If 'ideology' is conceptualized as a means in the confrontation of ideas in the context of class-struggle, its role is first and foremost to represent the interests of the classes involved.

There is, however, one important aspect that precludes a strict equation between 'ideology' and 'worldview' in the expansive conceptions of ideology: the notion of 'mystification', i.e.,

the idea that relations of domination are misrepresented, or mystified, in 'ideology' so as to secure or facilitate their reproduction.

The fact that capitalism was still conceived in Marxist theory as a system of *domination and exploitation*, which was nevertheless compatible with liberal democracy (and thus, ultimately, relied on the consent of the masses) rendered critical the question as to why people 'voluntarily' participated in their own subordination. As Ted Benton notes:

“[M]odern capitalist societies, characterised as many of them are, by parliamentary political systems of one sort or another, rest principally on securing the active consent of the subordinate classes to the existing form of society and their assigned place in it. If bayonets and prisons ever were the principal means whereby the subordinate classes were kept in their place, this no longer true for many of the more 'advanced' of the world's capitalist countries. At least for most of the time, and with respect to the majority of their indigenous populations, the place of physical repression has been taken by vastly superior means of ideological and cultural subordination.” (Benton 1984, p. 100)

'Ideology' is, in this context, connected to the idea that people are not aware of their domination and exploitation since the relations that do so are mystified or concealed in and through 'ideology'. Hence there is, to a certain extent, an inherent tension in the expansive concept of 'ideology' between a critical notion of 'ideology' understood as the mystification of relations of domination, and a neutral notion of 'ideology' as a general worldview (the *epistemological* problems that all of these conceptions of 'ideology' entail will be discussed below). However, it is important to note that 'ideology' becomes, in this context, tied to the question of the generation of consent and conformity amongst the masses. Furthermore, since Marxism was never only a theoretical tradition, but also a political movement, this question had important political and strategic implications. Hence, the expansive concept generated fundamentally new objects of knowledge: the question of strategy, the question of how social agents are constituted. This can be understood as a transformation of the theoretical problematic of 'ideology'.

3.2.5 Ideology in Gramsci and Althusser

Two of the most influential proponents of the expansive concept of ideology are, despite all their differences, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser.⁹

Gramsci particularly stresses that 'ideology' should not be conceived as a mere system of

⁹ I will, at this point, only briefly introduce the basic features of their respective concepts of 'ideology', and further discuss Althusser's approach in the next chapter.

ideas, but as a force that structures and therefore regulates collective modes of living (Simon 1982: p. 59). In this sense, 'ideology' is *embodied* in daily practices and social institutions. Thus, 'ideology' is not a matter of a person's conscious beliefs: it is realized in the sphere of 'common sense' and structures the framework through which s/he experiences the world.

Consequently, Gramsci distinguishes between 'organic ideologies', i.e. those that are necessary for the existence of a given social order, and 'arbitrary ideologies,' which are individual speculations (Larrain 1991, p. 79). The necessity of 'organic ideologies' derives from their functioning as a kind of 'cement', i.e., their “efficacy in binding together a bloc of diverse social elements” (Simon 1982, p. 61). 'Ideology' is thus conceptualized as a worldview that generates concrete attitudes and practices. In this sense, 'ideology' becomes manifest in all spheres of society (i.e., in art, politics, law, etc.), which can then be approached as forms of materialized ideology (Larrain 1991, p. 79).

For Althusser, 'ideology' refers to the relation between our real conditions of existence and the way in which we experience them (Althusser 1994, p. 123). His main concern is to explain why individuals participate in the reproduction of relations that are based on their exploitation, and furthermore, experience themselves as free and autonomous *subjects* in the process of doing so (p. 128-132). Drawing on Gramsci, Althusser distinguished between a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to theorize a mode of domination that relies on an interplay between consent and coercion (p. 110-13). Althusser also stressed the material dimension of 'ideology', and argued that the latter is *realized* in ISA's (p. 125-6). Therefore, 'ideology' is understood “as having itself a quasi-material existence which defines what people think and is embodied in our society in what he calls 'ideological state apparatuses' such as churches, trade unions, and schools” (McLellan 1986, p. 32).

But while, for Althusser, 'ideology' clearly operates to mystify inequalities and relations of exploitation, it also plays an important part in the process of identity formation. He argues that 'ideology' works to constitute individuals as subjects through 'interpellation'. 'Interpellation' signifies a process in which individuals are interpellated (or hailed), and thus recognize themselves, *as* subjects (Althusser 1994, p. 128-132). In this sense, 'ideology' functions as a medium that informs the individual's interpretation of its existence in relation to society and, thus, “is the very medium in which I ,live out' my relation to society, the realm of signs and social practices which binds me to the social structure and lends me a sense of coherent

purpose and identity“ (Eagleton 1982, p. 172).

One of the problems with this conception is that Althusser in effect combined a partially negative concept of 'ideology' ('ideology' as mystification of exploitative social relations), with a general theory of identity formation. This renders critical the question of the existence of a point external to 'ideology' (Boucher 2008, p. 7). I will further discuss this problem in the next chapter. For the moment I would like to emphasize that in both Gramsci's and Althusser's conception, 'ideology' work of generating consent is materialized in social institutions and practices.

I will discuss the most general features that distinguish restricted and expansive concepts of 'ideology' in a moment, but I would first like to highlight one particular feature they *share*: that is, the fact that the restricted as well as the expansive concept of 'ideology' theoretically rely on a complementary analysis that casts society as a conflictual ensemble, characterized by relations of domination and power. Both approaches thus necessarily *require*, and are at the same time *different from*, an analysis that explains and demonstrates *why* society is deeply conflictual.

This is a crucial point as it establishes an analytical distinction between theories of ideology and other kinds of social analysis (or theory) by highlighting the specific field of research with which the former are concerned. 'Ideology' is, in the restricted as well as in the expansive sense, conceptualized as an effect of, or a necessary requirement for, *something else* (i.e., certain relations of domination and exploitation, class conflict, contradictions, etc.), which cannot be theorized directly with the concept of ideology itself.

In Marx's analysis, 'ideology' is the product of the division of labor (i.e., class society), and has the effect of stabilizing class society (in this sense it already relies on a specific analysis). However, 'ideology' does not illuminate the concept of class society or of the division of labor as such (in this sense, it is different from the kind of analysis it relies on). That is to say, the concept of ideology cannot be used to analyze how class society is structured, what mechanisms it is characterized by, and the kind of relations of domination and exploitation on which it depends (and *why* it does so).

Similarly, the expansive concept of 'ideology' relies on, and thus indicates, the existence of relations of domination and exploitation, but it does not help us understand their nature and workings.

Both concepts of ideology, thus, depend on a different kind of analysis – that is, on a

structural analysis - that they cannot replace.

This dependency is, furthermore, not mutual. Structural analyses do not *necessarily* require a theory of consciousness or of the constitution of social agents - these matters are simply not necessarily part of their object of knowledge or research project. Theories of ideology that conceptualize 'ideology' as an effect of social conflict need to give at least some kind of clue as to *why there is* social conflict in the first place.

One last remark: the connection between 'ideology' and a specific type of structural analysis is stronger within the restricted concept of 'ideology', due to the conceptual centrality of the notion of 'contradiction'. In this conceptualization, 'ideology' cannot be explained or even thought without referring to the contradictory nature of reality as its origin. The notion of contradiction, as I have argued, is closely tied to the concept of 'class society' and 'practice'.

The expansive concept of 'ideology' is only tied to a structural analysis in so far as it has to account for the relations of domination 'ideology' supposedly works to conceal. And, more interestingly, it is only tied to a *Marxist* analysis of society as long as it conceptualizes the conflictual nature of society in terms of *class* conflict.

However, it is clear that both concepts rely on a conception of consciousness as being socially determined, and emphasize the dimension of (socio-)economic determination. One of the major problems for Marxism, thus, was (and in many ways still is) “[h]ow to privilege the socio-economic – and it must be privileged for the conception of history to be materialist – without lapsing into a crude reductionism” (McLellan 1986, p. 19).

3.3 The base-superstructure problematic

The dependence of a theory of ideology on a structural analysis of society, and the consequent existence of two connected yet distinct modes of analysis is, I believe, both indicated and concealed in the Marxist 'base-superstructure' problematic. The 'base-superstructure' approach refers to a 'topographical' conception of society through which Marxism has traditionally sought to conceptualize the relationship between economics and non-economic social practices (Benton 1984, p. 99).

Within this conception, society is analytically divided into a 'base' (or 'infrastructure'), which is typically taken to consist of the relations of production and the productive forces, and 'superstructures' (i.e., politics, culture, forms of consciousness). This analytical division of society into two planes at once designates the existence of two different objects of knowledge

(and hence two different modes of analysis), and yet conceals it through the attempt to establish a relationship between those spheres, and to thereby construct a general theory of history.

The 'base-superstructure' problematic has led to a number of problems within Marxist theory (McLellan 1986, p. 19), and, maybe most importantly, to the problem of 'economism,' which I will discuss in more detail below.

For the moment I would like to focus on the different effects the restrictive and expansive concept of ideology produce within this conception. While 'ideology' in the restricted sense certainly relates to the realm of superstructures, it cannot be simply equated with it. As I have argued above, 'ideology' thus understood designates *specific* forms of consciousness that work to engender practices that conform to the dominant relations, or to impede those practices which do not. However, in order to be 'ideological' an idea not only has to perpetuate the status quo; it has to do so by misrepresenting or concealing the basic contradictions which underlie the latter.

It is, then, rather difficult to *generally* approach institutions (i.e., the state, the legal system, educational system etc.) *as* 'ideology'. Moreover, and maybe even more importantly, the *root cause* of 'ideology' cannot be traced back to a particular institution or agent (such as the state or the ruling class), but is, strictly speaking, situated in the entirety of a specific mode of production. This is why Jorge Larrain rejects the expression 'ideological superstructures', and prefers the term 'ideational superstructure', which includes ideological as well as non-ideological forms of consciousness, and exists along with political, legal, and cultural superstructures (Larrain 1992, p. 50-1).

The effect which the expansive conception of 'ideology' produces in the 'base-superstructure' problematic has already been indicated: the emphasis on the *material* character of 'ideology' and the focus on institutions as distributors of 'ideology' allows one to approach (political, legal, cultural, educational) institutions and practices *as* 'embodied ideology'. The theoretical proximity I indicated earlier between the problem of ideology and the problem of economism does, I believe, originate from this particular rationale.

This, I believe, can at least partially explain why the relationship between 'base' and 'superstructures' has often been theorized and discussed on the terrain of ideology theory¹⁰.

¹⁰ See e.g. Laclau 1977; Althusser 1994, Mouffe 1979b

These debates have centered around the questions of the a) autonomy of superstructures (or 'ideology'), and b) their (its) efficacy in the historical process.

Now, I would like to suggest that

- 1.) these two questions are specific to the expansive concept of 'ideology' (i.e. belong to its theoretical problematic); and
- 2.) that it is these two questions which produce the problem of 'ideology' that underlies the Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse.

3.4 Economism, ideology, and the base-superstructure problematic

In 1979, Chantal Mouffe engaged with these questions in the context of her discussion of 'economism' (Mouffe 1979a, 1979b). She particularly emphasized the problem of 'economism' in relation to the question of 'ideology'. Mouffe argued that while all forms of economism “imply a misrecognition of the distinct autonomy of politics and ideology” (Mouffe 1979b, p. 168-9), the problem of 'economism' and 'ideology' is more complex and has to be elaborated more precisely.

In the course of her discussion, Mouffe distinguishes between two different forms of 'economism' – that is, 'epiphenomenalism' and 'reductionism' - that have been combined in different forms within Marxist theory:

'Epiphenomenalism' designates those conceptions that treat superstructures as mere mechanical reflections of the economic structure, and therefore lead “to a vision of ideological superstructures as epiphenomena which play no part in the historical process” (p. 169). Such conceptions, which grant no efficacy to superstructures, are usually characterized by a relatively crude technological determinism that draws history as a teleological process driven by technological progress and the resulting development of the productive forces, which will eventually result in the revolution of the proletariat. The overcoming of capitalism and the establishment of socialism is thus understood as a historical necessity, and the process of this historical development is rendered as a “necessary succession of stages” (Laclau 1988, p. 251).

The second form of 'economism', which Mouffe labeled 'reductionism', is not so much concerned with the role but with the *nature* of superstructures, that is, with the problem of class-consciousness and 'ideology'. This variant of 'economism' is characterized by three

underlying principles: First, that all subjects are necessarily class subjects; secondly, that classes have their own, distinct ideologies and, finally, that all ideological elements belong to definite classes, i.e., obtain a distinct class character (Mouffe 1979b, p. 189). Here 'ideology' is mainly conceived as a product or reflex of certain class positions and social agents are primarily class agents.

Hence, whereas epiphenomenalism draws the proletariat as a historical subject, and history as a linear, quasi-automatic and pre-determined process, (class) reductionism can be indeed compatible with the notion of contingency, that is, with the idea that politics do have a certain efficacy in the historical process.

Consequentially, although both epiphenomenalist and reductionist conceptions are concerned with the question of the social dynamics of capitalist societies and the conditions of historical change, they still represent quite different research projects. One is concerned with the large-scale patterns of capitalist development, and the other focuses on the issue of 'ideology' - that is, in this context, on the question of the mechanisms at work in the constitution of social agents. The problem of economism can therefore be characterized as revolving around two related yet distinct questions – one regarding the *autonomy* of superstructures, and one regarding their *efficacy* in the historical process. It is important to highlight that both of these problems relate to the question of historical change.

I would now like to suggest both that these questions are tied to the expansive conception of ideology, and that they make up the theoretical problematic of ideology. I will conceptualize the latter as revolving around five questions or problems:

- I. As I have argued above, the expansive conception of 'ideology' relies on the idea that all forms of consciousness are socially determined, and focuses on institutions as distributors of 'ideology'. Hence the first problem of the expansive conception of 'ideology' is concerned with the question of how structures shape consciousness. Furthermore, the evolution of the expansive concept of 'ideology' was strongly influenced by the failure of left revolutionary movements at the beginning of the 20th century, and the rise of fascism in Europe. The question of how structures shape consciousness became thus associated to the question of how social agents were constituted, and how consent was generated.

- II. With the growing focus on the role of superstructures, and the advent of capitalist liberal democracies, 'ideology' was used to investigate the reproduction of (capitalist) social relations.
- III. The question above is, furthermore, inseparable from the reverse problem, namely, the question of how political opposition and change are possible.
- IV. Moreover, the fact that the questions above emerged as legitimate objects of knowledge presupposes that social agents do have a certain efficacy in the historical process. The fourth problem of 'ideology' is, in this context, to theorize the degree and mechanisms of their efficacy. This implies the question of the relationship between structure and agency, i.e., the problem of how to theorize and explain historical change.
- V. The last question is not exclusive to the expansive conception, but is inherent in the concept of ideology as such – that is, the problem of how to account for the theorist's (or Marxism's) own position (Larrain 1991, p. 44; McLellan 1986, p. 19-20).

3.5 The problem of ideology

The last point is, I believe, decisive since it designates a number of problems connected with any conception of 'ideology': That is to say, the concept of 'ideology' contains an epistemological problem, namely, the question of the *correspondence* between certain representations of reality and the way reality 'really is'. The concept of ideology is not only deployed to illuminate the relationship between a certain aspect of people's life and their belief-systems; it also presupposes a gap between our perception of reality and reality itself. Moreover, the concept of ideology holds the promise of accounting for this gap (i.e. to explain ideology's existence *in terms of reality*).

I would indeed argue that any concept of ideology, in its final moment, contains a notion of distortion understood as an inability to transcend the relation between reality and appearance. It is, furthermore, based on the assumption that there might be a difference between these two levels.

In that respect, I agree with Michel Foucault's remark that the notion of 'ideology' always stands "in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth" (Foucault 1980, p. 118).

The introduction of the term 'discourse' in this context means that the concept of 'ideology' implies that certain discourses correspond to what they seek to represent, while others do not

(and hence *misrepresent* reality).

'Ideology', furthermore, assumes the capability of distinguishing between accurate representations and inaccurate representations of reality, and of accounting for the existence of these misrepresentations (in so far as they are ideological). Now, such an assertion is highly problematical in epistemological terms, for the concept does not entail criteria that help us distinguish between accurate and 'ideological' representations. I would, furthermore, like to suggest that 'ideology' also relies on a specific kind of ontology – that is, on a *realist* ontology. I define 'realism' in this context as the proposition that reality exists independently of the human mind (i.e., whether or not we conceive of it), and that it is, in principle, possible to acquire knowledge of this reality (Bhaskar 2008, p. 25-26).

This assertion entails the associated propositions

- a) that it is possible to develop criteria according to which we can judge or test our knowledge of reality in terms of its relative correspondence; and
- b) that reality produces specific effects independently of our conceptions.

In the next chapter, I argue that all of these propositions can be regarded as conditions of possibility (and intelligibility) of any concept of ideology. I investigate the expansive concept of ideology in the works of Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe, and explore its historical and political context of emergence. I conceptualize the latter as providing *HSS's* historical and social relations of production, and discuss the difficulties that Laclau and Mouffe experience when they work with Althusser's conceptions as their theoretical means of production.

4 HSS's pre-history

4.1 Historical relations of production

I would like to recall some of the points I have made concerning the historical and intellectual context of *HSS*. They can be roughly summarized as follows: First, the reality of the USSR and Stalinism led a number of left intellectuals to strongly question the desirability of common conceptions of Socialism as such. Second, the appearance of new sites and forms of social struggle (i.e., student revolts, and anti-racist, feminist, peace, and green movements) in Western Europe and North America in the late 1960's suggested both that the working class was not the primary revolutionary agent, and that class struggle was not automatically the main site of antagonism within capitalist societies (Torfing 1999, p. 1; Benton 1984, p. 96).

Moreover (and, one might say, even worse), by the late 1960's, Marxist theory did not even seem to have the conceptual means to adequately address and theorize these struggles in their own right - that is, without subsuming them under, or declaring them secondary to, class struggle (Smith 1998, p. 39).

These phenomena, as Chantal Mouffe already noted in 1979, gave rise to

“a renewal of interest amongst intellectuals in the possibilities of revolutionary transformations in the countries of advanced capitalism. Following a period of pessimism, which had caused intellectuals to turn to the countries of the Third World, seeing these as the weakest link in the imperialist chain and the *natural starting point for the revolutionary process*, there is now emerging some sort of consideration of the specific conditions in the West.” (Mouffe 1979a, p. 1; my emphasis)

Thus, the appearance of the New Social Movements challenged assumptions regarding the existence of a 'natural' starting point for a revolutionary process and, consequently, those interpretations of Marx's thought that gave rise to such assumptions, especially the Marxism of the Second International, and Leninism. Moreover, the intensity and broadness of social struggles, in particular the events of May 1968 in France, also “served to give a new seriousness to revolutionary socialist politics in the advanced Capitalist countries” (Benton 1984, p. 96).

4.2 Theoretical Means of Production

Within Marxist theory, these developments intensified discussions about the adequacy of the base-superstructure model, and about the nature and efficacy of 'superstructures'. As I argued in the previous chapter, my conclusion is that these questions have often been confronted on the terrain of ideology theory because the expansive concept of ideology gravitates towards equating superstructures with, and hence approaching them as, 'ideology'. Laclau seems to hint at something similar when he states:

“If the increasing interest in ideology runs parallel to a widening of the historical effectivity attributed to what was traditionally considered as the domain of the 'superstructures' – and this widening is a response to the crisis of an economic and reductionistic conception of Marxism – then that very crisis puts into question the social totality constituted around the base-superstructure distinction.” (Laclau 1990, p. 89)

I suggest that the problems created by this situation for Marxist theory correspond to the theoretical problematic of 'ideology', which is structured around the questions:

Regarding the nature/autonomy of 'ideology':

- 1) How do structures shape consciousness (i.e., through which mechanisms are social agents constituted)?
- 2.) How are the dominant relations reproduced (i.e., how is a conflictual social formation stabilized)? How is political opposition possible?

Regarding its efficacy:

- 3.) What is the relationship between base and superstructure? How can historical change be theorized and explained?

Regarding its epistemological status:

- 4.) How to account for the theorist's own position?

4.2.1 Althusser: Ideology and the problem of reproduction

One of the most influential attempts to work out these questions in terms of 'ideology' is Louis Althusser's 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (Althusser 1994), written in 1969 and first published in 1970 (Benton 1984, p. 97, Torfing 1999, p. 2). The conception of ideology developed in this essay does not only fundamentally differ from that in Althusser's earlier approaches, which opposed 'ideology' to science¹¹, but can also be understood as a theoretical

¹¹ For an elaboration of the concept of 'ideology' vis-à-vis science see Althusser 2009; and Benton 1984, p. 35-49

response to the political situation described above¹² (Benton 1984, p. 96-98).

Hence, Althusser particularly emphasized “[t]hat the superstructures are not a mere 'epiphenomenon' of the economic structure, but have their own specific 'relative autonomy', and that ideology, in particular, is a reality in its own right, not reducible to the 'ideas and beliefs' of individual subjects” (p. 96). I would like to draw attention to two aspects of Althusser's approach to 'ideology' in this context: First, Althusser discussed 'ideology' mainly in the context of class struggle (in the context of the base-superstructure problematic, see Benton 1984, p. 99), and, second, 'ideology' is conceptualized as a practice that produces subjects (Mouffe 1979b, p. 171).

Regarding the first point, I would like to highlight that Althusser explicitly problematized the 'base-superstructure' metaphor, and argued that the latter remained - despite its theoretical potential – fundamentally under-theorized. Althusser sought to reformulate the relationship between 'base' and 'superstructures' in terms of the notion of 'reproduction', and to thereby elucidate the specificity of 'superstructures' (Althusser 1994, p. 106).

Although Althusser deploys the term 'superstructures' to refer to the state, law, and ideology (p. 106), these instances are in fact theorized through *one single* concept, namely, ideology. That is to say, the issue of 'ideology' in Althusser's later writings is closely tied to the question of the mechanisms at work in the reproduction of the conditions of production on which the persistence of a social formation depends - i.e., to the reproduction of the instruments of production, the replacement of labor power, and of the social relations in which production takes place (Althusser 1997, p. 101, Benton 1984, p. 99).

Althusser emphasizes the question of how the reproduction of labor power is ensured, and argues that the latter does not depend exclusively on the reproduction of its material conditions of existence (i.e. wages), since “the available labour-power must be 'competent', i.e., suitable to be set to work in the complex system of the process of production” (Althusser 1994, p. 103).

He argues that labor-power in modern capitalist societies has to be *diversely* skilled and suggests that the reproduction of diversely skilled workers requires *specific* regulatory mechanisms, which can only be provided by specific institutions:

¹² Benton also highlights the impact of Chinese Communism and Mao's writings on Althusser, see Benton 1984, p. 96-98

“How is the reproduction of the (diversified) skills of labour-power provided for in a capitalist regime? Here, unlike social formations characterized by slavery or serfdom, this reproduction of the skills of labour-power tends (this is a tendential law) decreasingly to be provided for 'on the spot' (apprenticeship within production itself), but is achieved more and more outside production: by the capitalist education system, and by other instances and institutions.” (p. 103)

Here again we encounter the idea that in Western democracies, the process of reproduction is secured not so much by state coercion or force, but through what could be called 'ideological persuasion', i.e., through definite institutional forms and practices that generate social cohesion and conformity (Benton 1984, p. 100). Following Gramsci's conception of the relationship between state and civil society, Althusser distinguishes between 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISAs) and 'Repressive State Apparatuses' (RSAs) - the former category accommodating schools, churches, family, media, cultural organizations etc., the latter referring to the police, army, government, administration, and courts, etc. (Althusser 1994, p. 108-113).

Althusser argued that, while the RSAs still have an important part in securing the reproduction of the relations of production (not least through securing the existence of the ISAs), it is the ISAs that play the *dominant* part in this process, since it is through the ISAs that the 'ideology' of the dominant class is distributed. Hence, in Althusser (as with Gramsci) “[t]he exercise of state power is no longer restricted to physical violence, but also includes symbolic violence, carried out by the ideological state apparatuses” (Torfing 1999, p. 18).

The second feature I would like to discuss is Althusser's approach to the specific mechanisms associated with 'ideology': As I already mentioned in the previous chapter, Althusser strongly emphasizes the 'material' character of 'ideology'. As Benton notes:

“[T]he material ideological state apparatuses govern 'material practices' and rituals into which are inserted the 'material' actions which *are* the ideas and beliefs of the subject. It is in our daily participation in the practices and rituals of the family, school, party, union, and so on, that we come to 'live' our relation to our conditions of existence under the symbolic and conceptual forms provided by ideology, as it is 'materialised' in these practices.” (Benton 1984, p. 105; emphasis in original)

Althusser refers to the mechanism through which this incorporation of the individual into 'ideology' takes place as 'interpellation', and stresses that “*all ideology hails or interpellates*

concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (Althusser 1994, p. 130, emphasis in original).

'Interpellation' is thus conceptualized as the very mechanism by which 'we' are constituted - and through which we recognize ourselves - as 'subjects'. Ideology' can thus be understood as a “subject-centred body of representations that inserts individuals into social practices by aligning their social subjectivity with the requirements of their existence of mere support of the structure” (Boucher 2008, p. 8). That is to say, 'ideology' ensures reproduction (and social cohesion) by inscribing the tasks required for the functioning of social structures into our very identity, thereby making the former a natural aspect of the latter.

Two components of this conception will become central in Laclau and Mouffe's later work. First, the idea that the identity of individuals (i.e., their status as subjects) does not simply follow from their existence, but is a *product* of definite practices (note that the term 'discourse' is still absent here). The subject is, thus, “not the originating source of consciousness, the expression of the irruption of a subjective principle into objective historical processes, but the *product* of a specific practice operating through the mechanism of interpellation” (Mouffe 1979b, p. 171; emphasis in original). Second, social agents are not “the constitutive principle of their acts, but supports of the structures, their subjective principles of identity constitute an additional structural element resulting from specific historical practices” (p. 171).

4.2.2 Ideology and identity formation

Now, Althusser's conception entails several problems: First, as Benton and Torfing note, the relationship between 'base' and 'superstructure' is explained respectively in a fairly functionalist or, instrumentalist fashion (Benton 1984, p. 99; Torfing 1999, p. 18). The status of superstructures is ultimately reduced to that of a functional requirement for the reproduction of the relations of production, and the state (RSAs as well as ISAs) is depicted as an instrument through which the ruling class exercises class power. The second problem stems from what Geoff Boucher calls an “incomplete synthesis between the critical concept of ideology (ideology as a mystification of exploitative social relations) and the neutral conception of ideology (ideology as a neutral terrain on which social agents contend for hegemony)” (Boucher 2008, p. 7).

I would suggest an additional distinction in this context, and argue that the main problem in

Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses consists in the fact that Althusser proposes at once a theory of ideology and a general theory of identity formation in the absence of the theoretical means through which to discriminate between them. This leads to two possible readings, which entail two different problems.

If, on the one hand, the notion of mystification, i.e., the idea that ISAs work to conceal or misrepresent the individual's *real* condition of existence, is retained, it is almost impossible to account for political opposition or social change, since this implicitly equates 'ideology' with the notion of *dominant* 'ideology':

“To stay in power the ruling class must not only exercise economic and political power, but also ideological power in and through ideological state apparatuses. By exercising its hegemony over and in the ideological state apparatuses the dominance of the ruling class becomes almost total, and the possibility of historical change, therefore, becomes entirely dependent upon class struggle at the level of ideology.” (Torfing 1999, p. 18)

However, if it is through ideological interpellation that the identity of subjects is constituted, it seems impossible to imagine the circumstances under which struggle could take place. That is to say, this conception leaves virtually no room outside 'ideology' and, consequently, renders the latter as a totalizing force.

On the other hand, if we assume the existence of counter-hegemonic *ideologies* with the potential to challenge the dominant 'ideology' spread by the ISAs, and thus understand social reproduction as a contested and not as an automatic process, Althusser's conception not only falls short of explaining “why nonetheless, on balance, it was most probable that the social formation would continue to exist[.]” (Boucher 2008, p. 9), but also deprives the notion of 'ideology' of all conceptual content.

'Ideology' is, in this reading, synonymous with the notion of worldview, or 'ideas' expressing particular social interests. In the first case, it is not clear how Althusser can theoretically account for his own position, and in the second case, how he can defend it.

Finally, I would like to highlight that Althusser's conception of ideology as material practice is structured around the same questions as the problematic of the expansive concept of ideology outlined above - i.e., how do structures shape consciousness, how are social agents constituted, how are the dominant social relations reproduced, what is the relationship between base and superstructure, etc.. As a consequence, it also entails the same problems:

theorizing stability/change, explaining historical change, setting boundaries to 'ideology', accounting for the author's own position.

4.3 Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe

Both Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe engaged with the problems in Althusser's conception prior to their work on *HSS*, and – as I will show in the next chapter – integrated a good deal of Althusser's approach into their reformulation of 'hegemony' (which makes it seem rather curious that they *explicitly* engage with only one of Althusser's concept in *HSS*, namely with the concept of 'overdetermination', see Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 93 – 105).

The central themes Laclau and Mouffe's earlier engagement with 'ideology' are mostly concerned with the problem of 'reductionism', which I mentioned in the last chapter. Let me repeat Mouffe's characterization of 'reductionism' in the context of ideology theory (Mouffe 1979b, p.189):

A reductionist problematic of 'ideology' is characterized by the following:

- 1.) all subjects are class subjects
- 2.) social classes have their own paradigmatic ideologies
- 3.) all ideological elements have a necessary class belonging

In what follows, I explore Laclau and Mouffe's engagement with the Althusserian concept of ideology. I argue that Laclau and Mouffe sought to solve the problems of reductionism by combining Althusser's and Antonio Gramsci's approaches to 'ideology'. I investigate the theoretical effects this strategy produced, and suggest that both Laclau and Mouffe were confronted with the difficulty of providing a non-reductionist concept of ideology capable of accounting for the reproduction of class-relations.

4.3.1. Laclau: Ideology and class

In Ernesto Laclau's famous essay *Fascism and Ideology* (Laclau 1979, p. 81-142), we find a series of important remarks that illuminate Laclau's position vis-à-vis the Althusserian conception of ideology. Laclau starts out by criticizing Nicos Poulantzas' conception of ideology presented in *Fascism and Dictatorship* (Poulantzas 1974); the latter, he argues, ascribes to ideological elements a necessary class belonging.

Laclau puts forward a thesis that he and Chantal Mouffe will subsequently develop into one of their most important concepts in *HSS*; namely, the assertion “that ideological 'elements' taken in isolation have no necessary class connotation, and that this connotation is only the result of the articulation of those elements in a concrete ideological discourse” (Laclau 1979, p. 99). This, he continues, is clearly recognized in “Althusser's most important and specific contribution to the study of ideologies: the conception that the basic function of all ideology is to interpellate/constitute individuals as subjects” (p. 100).

If, Laclau argues, it is through ideological interpellation that individuals come to be constituted as subjects, then

“it is clear that the unity of the distinct aspects of an ideological system is given by the specific interpellation which forms the axis and organizing principle of all ideology [...] *what constitutes the unifying principle of an ideological discourse is the 'subject' interpellated and thus constituted through this discourse.* The isolated elements of a discourse have no meaning in themselves.” (p. 101-2; emphasis in original)

Laclau conceptualizes 'ideological discourse' as an ensemble of different types of interpellations (political, religious, etc.) that “coexist whilst being articulated within an ideological discourse in a relative unity” (p. 102). The 'relative unity' of the discourse in question does not, however, arise from its logical consistency, but is provided by a specific mode of articulation in which each of the isolated interpellations come to operate as a symbol for the others (p. 102)¹³.

The proposition that ideological elements lack any specific class belonging, that they only attain the latter through a specific articulation, again, leaves us with the question of the relationship between social subjectivity (ideological interpellation) and the reproduction of social classes – or, in Laclau's words from back then, between ideologies and class struggle (p. 104).

Laclau proposes to solve this problem by separating 'class struggle' at the level of the mode of production from 'class struggle' at the political and ideological level, and argues that the latter should actually not be conceptualized as 'class struggle' but rather as 'struggling classes' (p. 104-5).

4.3.1.1 Class struggle and popular-democratic struggles

Now, the idea of establishing an analytical rupture between 'class struggle' as an abstract

¹³ We will encounter this idea again in Laclau and Mouffe's reading of 'overdetermination', see Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 97-105.

concept and 'struggling classes' as an empirical referent requires some elaboration. Laclau argues that, at the level of the mode of production, classes only exist in a relation of struggle: "The production relation which constitutes its two poles as classes is an antagonistic relation. Surplus-value, for example, constitutes *simultaneously* the relation between capitalists and workers and the antagonism between them; or rather, it constitutes that relation as an antagonistic one." (Laclau 1979, p. 104; emphasis in original)

The distinctiveness of *this* concept of 'class' is, according to Laclau, that classes are only *constituted* in an antagonistic relation; that is to say, they have, strictly speaking, no existence outside of it. 'Class' is, in this sense, a completely abstract and strictly conceptual term, which already *implies* the dimension of struggle (i.e., determines its object through the category of struggle). Laclau concludes from this that "there are no classes except in a relation of struggle", and "that the level of analysis which makes this antagonism intelligible is that of the mode of production" (p. 104).

Laclau problematizes the application of the concept of 'class struggle' at another level of analysis in Marxist theory - namely to the empirical level to account for antagonisms in a concrete social formation. To demonstrate his point, he gives an example of a social formation in which a feudal landowning class is the hegemonic class and highlights that the latter is, as such, not only opposed to the peasants but also to the petty-bourgeoisie, urban workers, etc. (p.105).

He suggests that antagonisms at the empirical level of a social formation are distinct and not reducible to 'class antagonism', since they lack one important feature. In the case of the example cited above, classes may be struggling, but this struggle has no part in their *constitution*. Hence, they already confront each other *as* classes, and the confrontation as such is relatively external to their identity. This, in consequence, means that "if this antagonism is not a class antagonism, the ideologies which express it cannot be class ideologies" (p. 107). Hence, in the context of an antagonism of this kind, agents are not interpellated as a class, but as *the people* in opposition to a power-bloc. Therefore, Laclau argues, "[t]he first contradiction [at the level of the mode of production, C.P.] is the sphere of *class struggle*; the second [at the level of a concrete social formation, C.P.], that of *popular-democratic struggle*" (p. 107; emphases in original).

4.3.1.2 Ideological interpellation

Ideological interpellation can then be described as symbolically uniting different social groups by interpellating - and thereby constituting them - as *the people*. Laclau is quick to stress that the notion of 'the people' should not be understood as a rhetorical abstraction. It constitutes two poles on the level of political and ideological relations, which are analogous to the two poles constituted on the level of the mode of production through class antagonism, and thus form an *objective* determination of the system which is different from the class determination (p. 108). Hence, “[i]f class contradiction is the dominant contradiction at the abstract level of the mode of production, the people/power bloc contradiction is dominant at the level of the social formation” (p. 108).

While this means that not every contradiction can be reduced to a class contradiction, Laclau does not want to entirely dispense with the idea that ideological interpellation in fact does work to reproduce class relations. He asserts that despite the fact that not every contradiction is reducible to a class contradiction, every contradiction is still *overdetermined* by class struggle, since the relations of production always maintains the role of determination in the last instance (Laclau 1979, p. 108):

“Class struggle at the ideological level consists, to a great extent, in the attempt to articulate popular-democratic interpellations in the ideological discourse of antagonistic classes [...] Every class struggles at the ideological level *simultaneously* as class and as the people, or rather tries to give coherence to its ideological discourse by presenting its class objectives as the consummation of popular objectives. The overdetermination of non-class interpellations by the class struggle consists, then, in the integration of those interpellations into a class ideological discourse.” (p. 108-9; emphasis in original)

The problem with this conception is that while it provides a sophisticated approach to understanding ideological interpellation, the connection between 'ideology' and the reproduction of class relations seems rather arbitrary and under-theorized. In fact, the only concept that links 'ideological interpellation' back to the reproduction of class relations is 'determination in the last instance', which, in Laclau's text, is treated more like some kind of axiom than like a concept. It almost seems external to his theoretical discourse, i.e., not organically linked to any other concept that is part of it. Thus, he asserts 'determination in the last instance', but he does not theorize it:

“According to basic Marxist theory, the level of production relations always

maintains the role of determination in the last instance in any social formation. This in itself establishes the priority of the class struggle over the popular-democratic struggle, since the latter takes place only at the ideological and political level (the 'people' do not, obviously, exist at the level of production relations)." (p. 108)

Laclau's position presented in *Fascism and Ideology* can thus be summarized by the proposition that while classes are constituted through class struggle at the level of the mode of production, they "float in a non-capitalist political and cultural environment, which they try to hegemonise as political and cultural supplements to their economic dominance" (Boucher 2008, p. 9). The problematic aspect of this proposition resides in the fact is that it effectively combines the idea that ideology is class-neutral, with the assertion that every phenomenon is overdetermined by class (p. 10).

4.3.1.3 Laclau's critique of Althusser

At this point, I would like to deal with the problems Laclau identified in Althusser's concept of 'ideology': On the one hand, Laclau problematizes what I described above as an effect of the combination of a theory of ideology and a general theory of identity formation. In other words, Althusser's concept of ideology leaves no room 'outside' the dominant ideology. This, as I already mentioned, leads to a situation where although Althusser's conception can be used to theorize stability, it is unable to account for political opposition and historical change. In Laclau's words:

"In the first place, the mechanism of interpellation not only has for Althusser the function of transforming in an imaginary way the individual into a subject, but also of carrying out his self-subjection to the dominant system, and thus ensuring social reproduction as a whole. In this sense, it has been pointed out, any ideology must be a dominant ideology and there is no possibility of the existence of an ideology of dominated sectors." (Laclau 1979, p. 101)

This remark is, I believe, revealing of Laclau's reading of Althusser with regard to the two possible interpretations I indicated above, and, consequently, points to an important aspect in Laclau's own conception. While Laclau defines the dominant ideology as that through which the individual is transformed in an *imaginary* way (i.e., he retains the notion of 'mystification'), he also indicates the possibility of an 'ideology of the dominated sectors' (p. 101). This position leaves unanswered the question as to the specificity 'the ideological' vis-à-vis 'ideas', 'worldviews', or, for that matter, 'the political'.

I, thus, suggest that while Laclau manages to put forward a concept of class-neutral interpellations, he incorporates the tension between a general theory of subject formation and a theory of ideological interpellation already inherent in Althusser's concept of 'ideology' and conceptualizes counter-hegemonic beliefs as alternative *ideologies*. That is to say, Laclau's theory does not provide the conceptual means to specify what it is that accounts for the *ideological* character of an interpellation. His proposition that “[e]very class struggles at the ideological level *simultaneously* as class and as the people, or rather tries to give coherence to its ideological discourse by presenting its class objectives as the consummation of popular objectives[.]” (p.109) in a way resembles Gramsci's notion of 'hegemonic class', defined as “a class which has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own by means of ideological struggle” (Mouffe 1979b, p. 181). 'Overdetermination' of non-class interpellations by the class struggle does, then, mean the integration of those interpellations into a class ideological discourse.

Now, I would like to suggest that there are two related yet distinct ways to understand 'ideological' in this context: The first is to relate 'ideology' to 'class interest'. Hence, the struggle of classes at the 'ideological level' would precisely consist in the attempt to present their specific class-interests as universal (or 'common') interests, thereby presenting themselves not as 'class' (i.e., as the particular) but as 'the people' (i.e. as the universal). In order for this to be characterized as 'ideological', however, we must assume that these efforts involve a misrepresentation (otherwise we could just regard them as attempts to build political alliances with other social groups based on overlapping interests). It, thus, effectively involves a distinction between reality and appearance and implies the proposition that some discourses correspond to reality, while others do not.

There is, however, another way to interpret 'ideological struggle' in this context that emphasizes the notion of 'worldview' rather than that of 'mystification'. This reading of 'ideology' relies on Gramsci's notion of 'ideology' as a worldview with its corresponding norms of action, and as 'terrain' on which we acquire consciousness of ourselves in relation to the world in which we live (Mouffe 1979b, p. 186). In this case, the expression 'ideological struggle' would refer to the idea that a social group's attempt to incorporate other social groups into their struggle does not so much rely on the existence of overlapping interests, real or asserted, but on shared values and a common worldview. 'Ideology' in this reading comes to signify a particular belief-system that informs the way we perceive the world, and

structures our daily practices. In *HSS*, Laclau and Mouffe subsequently abandon the term 'ideological struggle' (for reasons that I will discuss later), but retain this basic idea under the term 'hegemonic struggle'. Of course, both of the readings, indicated above, ultimately rely on the idea that there indeed are class-specific interests.

4.3.2 Mouffe: Althusser and Gramsci

In Chantal Mouffe's engagement with Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation, we can see both, how this second reading of 'ideology' is further developed, and the effects triggered by the integration of Gramscian concepts into Althusser's original problematic.

In the essay *Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci* (Mouffe 1979b), Mouffe struggles as well with the relationship between 'ideology' and the reproduction of class relations, and suggests the inclusion of Gramsci's concept of 'ideology' into the Althusserian problematic. The guiding question of her project can be roughly summarized as follows: How can we think 'ideology' in a non-reductionist way (i.e., reject the assumptions that a) all subjects are class subjects, b) all ideological elements have a necessary class belonging, and c) all classes have their own, paradigmatic ideologies), but still link it to the reproduction of class relations (p. 170-1, 189)?

Mouffe starts from an Althusserian understanding of 'ideology' as a practice producing subjects, and stresses that

“[t]he social agent possesses several principles of ideological determination, not just one: he [sic!] is hailed (interpellated) as the member of either sex, of a family, of a social class, of a nation, of a race or as an aesthetic onlooker etc., and he [sic!] lives these different subjectivities in which he [sic!] is constituted in a relation of mutual implication.” (Mouffe 1979b, p. 171)

The problem here, again, consists in explaining how these different interpellations eventually work to reproduce class subjects - that is to say, the problem consists in determining the 'objective' relation between these ideological elements, without assuming that these ideological elements possess an a priori class-character (p. 171). Mouffe, similarly to Laclau, refers to the concept of 'determination in the last instance', but conceptualizes the latter as “the result of the establishing of an articulating principle of these ideological elements, one which must result in actually *conferring upon them* a class character” (p. 172; emphasis on original).

4.3.2.1 Ideological struggle and identity formation

In the course of her essay, Mouffe suggests that Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' can be

useful for developing a refined understanding of the process described above, and argues that 'hegemony' in Gramsci relies on an anti-reductionist conception of 'ideology' (p. 172). After outlining the various ways 'hegemony' has been deployed in Marxist theory, Mouffe argues that the specificity of Gramsci's conception derives from the fact that he did not conceive of 'hegemony' as a mere political alliance (based on overlapping interests), but as being “characterised by ideological struggle which attempts to forge unity between economic, political and intellectual objectives” (p. 180).

Mouffe stresses that the notion of 'ideological struggle', understood as a means by which a hegemonic class articulates the interests of other social classes with its own, should not be interpreted as a process of manipulation: A class can only become 'hegemonic' if “this class renounces a strictly corporatist conception, since in order to exercise leadership it must genuinely concern itself with the interests of those social groups over which it wishes to exercise hegemony” (p. 181).

For Mouffe, the most important contribution of Gramsci lies in the fact that he did not conceptualize 'hegemony' merely as political leadership, but as moral and intellectual leadership, which is achieved through ideological struggle' (p. 183). Mouffe argues that in Gramsci, the ideological unity between different social groups actually works to transcend their identities *as* groups, and forms them into a single political subject, or 'collective will':

“According to him [Gramsci, C.P.] hegemony involves the creation of a *higher synthesis*, so that all its elements fuse in a 'collective will' which becomes the new protagonist of political action during that hegemony's entire duration. It is through ideology that this collective will is formed since its very existence depends on the creation of ideological unity which will serve as 'cement'.” (Mouffe 1979b, p. 184; emphasis in original)

Now, Mouffe suggests that this proposition relies on an understanding of 'ideology' that is specific to Gramsci. It is here that we see the effects of the expansive conception of 'ideology' (discussed in the previous chapter) unfold. Mouffe identifies a similarity of Gramsci's and Althusser's understanding of 'ideology', because both approaches emphasize “the idea that subjects are not originally given but are always produced by ideology through a socially determined ideological field, so that subjectivity is always the product of social practice” (p. 186).

4.3.2.2 Ideology as worldview

What we see here is, I believe, a conception of 'ideology' that stretches the latter in such a way that the concept itself becomes absolutely meaningless: If subjects are *always* produced by ideology, what, then, constitutes the latter's specificity? In fact, the second part of this quotation (that subjectivity is always the product of social practice) could easily replace the first, or, respectively, the terms 'ideology' and 'ideological' could just be erased from the first part without modifying the statement itself. Consequently, Mouffe continues to define 'ideology' as 'worldview' with its corresponding norms of action (p. 186), and stresses that

“Gramsci considers that a world-view is manifest in all action and that this expresses itself in a very elaborate form and at a high level of abstraction – as the case with philosophy – or else it is expressed in much simpler forms as the 'expression of common sense' which presents itself as the spontaneous philosophy of the man on the street, but which is the popular expression of 'higher philosophies'.” (p. 186)

Mouffe emphasizes that these 'worldviews' are never individual, but always expressions of a social and collective process (in this sense they are 'organic ideologies', and indispensable for the stability of a given social formation), and that it is through these 'organic ideologies' that people acquire their forms of consciousness. Consequently, since all forms of consciousness are the product of organic ideologies, and these in turn can be understood as 'worldviews' of determinate social blocs, then, according to Mouffe, all forms of consciousness are 'political, in so far as they originate in particular configurations of power (p. 186).

I would like to suggest that this is a rather curious claim, given that Mouffe strongly rejected the idea that there are specific class-ideologies. The difference between these two propositions for Mouffe seems to be that to define 'organic ideologies' as 'worldviews' of determinate 'social blocs' is to conceptualize the former as the *outcome* of a hegemonic process (i.e., ideology per se can still be thought of as class-neutral before it has been articulated), and that a 'social bloc' is defined as a political subject, not as class subject.

This definition of 'ideology' as worldview, furthermore, exacerbates all the problems inherent in the expansive conception. Not only is there virtually no outside 'ideology', but the term itself is not even confined to a *particular* 'worldview'. Instead it is used to accommodate all manifestations of the latter. Moreover, since these 'worldviews' are expressed in all forms of practices and actions within a given social formation, worldviews become but mere

expressions of the dominant relations of power.

This is to say, in this definition of 'ideology', the notion of 'mystification' is at the same time neutralized and retained in a *transformed* manner. It is neutralized since the term 'ideology' is not confined to signifying one dominant 'ideology'; it indicates the existence of a plurality of them. However it is also retained since 'ideology' is connected to the construction and maintenance of power relations.

The only characteristic feature of 'ideology' left in this conceptualization is, thus, the assumption that it works to stabilize (and hence reproduce), or, respectively, challenge the dominant social relations. Hence if 'ideology' expresses itself in all forms of practice from 'art to philosophy' (Mouffe 1979b, p. 186), then all social practices (art, politics, science, culture, education, etc.) can be understood as mere expressions of definite (political) 'worldviews', and, consequently, as tools to stabilize/challenge power relations. The specific practices that characterize a given society are, thus, subsumed under 'ideology,' which is itself mainly understood as a tool in the struggle for power.

Correspondingly, Mouffe especially highlights the 'material' and 'institutional' nature of ideological practice, which, according to Gramsci, is conducted primarily by intellectuals. This 'material' and institutional nature follows from the fact that the distribution and development of 'ideology' depends on a material and institutional structure provided by 'hegemonic apparatuses,' e.g., schools, churches, the entire media (p. 187). This theoretical move produces an effect that is characteristic of the expansive concept of 'ideology': it makes possible the conceptualization of the entirety of social institutions and practices through the concept of 'ideology' (see above p. 45).

However, such a conception of 'ideology' has the definite advantage that it allows for a theorization of the conditions necessary for social change. Thus, Mouffe argues that in order for a dominated social class to become hegemonic it has to create an 'ideological unity' with other social groups. This, however, should not be understood as the imposition of a class-specific ideology of one group over the others, but as the “transformation of the previous ideological terrain and the creation of a new world-view which will serve as unifying principle for a new collective will” (Mouffe 1979b, p. 191). This process of “moral and intellectual reform” (p. 191) consists in a rearticulation of already existing ideological elements into another system.

The class-character of an ideological system (whose existence Mouffe back then still affirmed) stems from the fact that the unity of the latter is established by a definite articulating principle provided by the hegemonic class (i.e., one of the two 'fundamental classes' defined at the level of the relations of production) (p. 200). It is through this double movement of a) rejecting the idea of an a priori class character of ideology or ideological elements, while b) assuming that classes are still the main agents within the hegemonic struggle, that Mouffe proposes to solve the problem of formulating an anti-reductionist concept of 'ideology' that is still capable of explaining the reproduction of class-relations.

She argues that

“[i]n fact the conception of ideology brought about by Gramsci's conception of hegemony attributes real autonomy to it, since the ideological elements which ideological practice aims at transforming do not possess a necessary class-belonging and hence do not constitute the ideological representation of interests existing at the economic level. On the other hand, however, this autonomy is not incompatible with the determination in the last instance by the economy, since the hegemonic principles serving to articulate these elements are always provided by the fundamental classes.” (p. 200)

4.3.2.3 Mouffe and Althusser

Now, the concepts discussed by Mouffe at first do not seem to significantly differ from Althusser's concept of ISAs. In the course of *Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci*, however, it becomes clear why Mouffe prefers Gramsci over Althusser. As we have seen, one of the problems with Althusser's approach consisted in the fact that 'ideology' seemed to be equivalent to the 'dominant ideology'. In combination with the proximity between the concept of ideology and a general theory of identity formation, this led to the problem that Althusser's approach could not account for historical change, political opposition, and so on.

Now, this problem is absent from Gramsci's concept of 'ideology', where the latter is entirely equated with the notion of practice structuring 'worldviews.' From this it follows that we can assume the existence of multiple ideologies in the struggle for hegemony, and, consequently, think about the conditions necessary for social change. However, this is accomplished at the expense of being able to privilege the author's (or, for that matter, a classes) own belief system. However, since the assignment of such a privileged position was a problematic point in all theories of 'ideology', this apparently seemed like a worthy sacrifice. Thus, Mouffe emphasizes that, for Gramsci, “ideology is not the mystified-mystifying justification of an already constituted class power, it is the 'terrain on which men [sic!] acquire consciousness of

themselves', and hegemony cannot be reduced to a process of ideological domination.” (Mouffe 1979b, p. 196)

The 'critical', or 'political' aspect of such a concept of 'ideology' might consist in the fact that it suggests that social practices and worldviews are not innocent but always somehow connected to specific interests (i.e., to power). This is what Mouffe seems to refer to when she states that “this means that all forms of consciousness are necessarily political” (p. 186).

4.4 Ideology and the notion of mystification

There are two aspects of Mouffe's essay that I consider particularly important in the context of my overall discussion. First, as I have already argued in Laclau's case the connection between ideological struggle and the reproduction of class-relations is actually secondary to Mouffe's overall argument: 'Ideology' is conceptualized as class-neutral, and only linked back to 'class' in combination with 'hegemony' (since it is still *classes* who struggle for hegemony). This link is, however, again based on the *assertion* of the principle 'determination in the last instance', so as to conclude with Gramsci that it is 'fundamental classes' who provide the necessary 'articulating principle' that unifies an ideological system by conferring upon it a distinct class character (p. 193).

On the other hand, Mouffe repeatedly stresses the fact that 'ideology' does not actually work to mystify the 'real' nature of things, but has a quasi-real existence. 'Ideology' is inevitable since it is the very terrain on which we acquire consciousness (or, subjectivity): subjects are “not given but always produced by ideology through a socially determined ideological field” (p. 186). Moreover, 'hegemony' is neither understood as simple class-alliance, nor as the product of ideological manipulation, but involves the actual *creation* of a new subject – a collective will, i.e., a political subject – that is different from the social classes of which it is strictly speaking made. (p. 184, 189).

Hence, Mouffe stresses that, for Gramsci,

“the subjects of political action cannot be identified with social classes. As has already been seen, they are 'collective wills' which obey specifically formed laws in view of the fact that they constitute the political expression of hegemonic systems created through ideology. Therefore, the subjects (the social classes) which exist at the economic level, are not duplicated at the political level; instead, different 'inter class' subjects are created.” (p. 189)

Similarly, Mouffe highlights that, in the course of ideological struggle, a class actually not only *presents* its particular (class-) interest as universal, i.e., it represents itself not as class but as 'the people', a class can only become 'hegemonic' in so far as it “renounces a strictly corporatist conception, since in order to exercise leadership it must genuinely concern itself with the interests of those social groups over which it wishes to exercise hegemony” (p. 181).

Mouffe's remarks reveal a common tendency, namely, that of establishing a frontier between Gramsci's 'material' concept of ideology (and 'hegemony') and notions of 'ideology' as 'false consciousness'. However, there is a difference between asserting that 'ideology' is *merely* false consciousness (i.e. only consists of ideas, or has no real efficacy) and asserting that 'ideology', as a concept, necessarily *involves* the dimension of false consciousness. For if the term 'ideology' does not indicate a gap between reality and appearance (or, for that matter, perception), what accounts for its conceptual identity? Such a definition would merely leave us with the notion of 'ideology' as a 'system of ideas', or a 'worldview' while asserting that the latter is neither arbitrary nor a matter of individual preference but *socially* determined.

Now, strictly speaking, an analysis of this kind would consequently be confined to a description of these different 'worldviews', or, 'ideologies', and of the social circumstances by which they are determined. If 'ideology' is simply treated as socially determined thought, i.e., if it is detached from the question of representation/misrepresentation, then any analysis of 'ideology' would have to exclude the question as to the actual correspondence to reality of a given 'ideology'. In some way, then, this approach to 'ideology' does - as Terry Eagleton remarks in a similar context - “return to a pre-Marxist view of it, as simply 'socially determined thought'. And since this applies to any thought whatsoever, there is a danger of the concept of ideology canceling all the way through” (Eagleton 1994, p. 194).

In order to go beyond such an analysis, we would need an additional assumption that works to specify the connection between 'ideology', or 'worldviews', and their socially determined character. In Gramsci's case this was accomplished through the notion of 'objective interests', i.e., through the underlying idea that the interest of social agents are determined by their position in the relations of production, and that 'ideology' is in some way or another connected to these interests. In other words, that they work to favor some and to disadvantage others.

However, in order to dispense with the notion of 'mystification' or 'misrecognition', we would

have to assume that social agents only hold worldviews appropriate to their 'objective' interests, that consciousness corresponds to social position. Since this assumption (i.e., the idea that the consciousness of the proletariat, for example, is a reflex of their social position and therefore necessarily socialist and revolutionary) has not proven itself to be theoretically (or, historically) particularly successful for Marxism, we are back at the original problem that figured so prominently in Western Marxism – namely, the question as to why people voluntarily participate in the reproduction of those very relations by which they are subordinated..

This question is, furthermore, strictly unthinkable if we reject any notion of 'mystification' and the distinction between 'reality' and 'appearance', since it is itself based on the idea that people are being subordinated, but do not recognize this fact (hence their 'voluntary' participation in the process becomes an analytical problem).

The same applies, I believe, to the issue of 'hegemony': The very conceptualization of 'hegemony' as a form of *domination* based on the generation of consent rather than on coercion (Eagleton 1994, p. 194; Barrett 1994, p. 238) presupposes that a given social formation is characterized by relations of domination, but can be perpetuated with only minimal resort to force because domination is not recognized as such. I would first like to suggest that the concept of ideology cannot be sustained if we dispense with the idea that 'ideology' involves some form of 'false consciousness', or 'misrepresentation'.

Secondly, I would like to emphasize that the type of analysis described above ultimately relies on a different mode of analysis as its condition of existence. That is to say, in order for the voluntary participation of the masses in a certain system to become an analytical problem, the latter must already be characterized as a system of domination. The question as to why people participate in the reproduction of social relations, in which they are exploited, relies on an analysis concluding that these social relations in fact are relations of domination/exploitation. It is precisely the characterization of social relations as relations of domination/exploitation that engenders the problem of 'ideology' in the first place.

In *Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci*, this link to a different type of analysis (engendering the problem of 'hegemony' and 'ideology') is, I believe, designated by Mouffe's indication that only a fundamental class (i.e., a class occupying one of the two poles in the relations of production) can become hegemonic (Mouffe 1979b, p. 183). It is this premise on which she

bases the principle of 'determination in the last instance'. It is here that we most clearly see the association between her (and in fact Gramsci's) theoretical discourse and a concept that is external to the latter, i.e., that belongs to a different mode of analysis.

4.5 From Gramsci to *HSS*

The problem that both, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe were concerned with prior to *HSS*, can thus be summarized as how to theorize 'ideology' in a non-reductionist way (i.e., as class-neutral phenomenon), while still connecting it to class-struggle (i.e., explain the reproduction of classes). That is to say, they sought to theorize stability (the reproduction of social relations) as well as historical change through the concept of 'ideology'.

The problem which remained unresolved in both approaches follows from a combination of the assertion that social classes do exist at the economic level, but cannot be identified with the subjects of political action, and the proposition that the hegemonic principle is always provided by a fundamental class and indeed works to confer upon an ideological system a distinct class-character. Moreover, in both essays we find an indication of the existence of an additional mode of analysis that is involved in posing ideology's original problem. In Laclau's essay this is actually made explicit by his suggestion of the need to separate the concept of 'class struggle,' which belongs at the level of analysis of the mode of production, from 'struggling classes,' which refers to the concrete empirical level of a social formation, Laclau 1979, p. 104-5).

Finally, in Mouffe's *Hegemony an ideology in Gramsci*, 'ideology' loses its connection to the notion of 'mystification' (or 'misrepresentation') and thus no longer indicates a gap between 'reality' and 'appearance' (or 'perception'). Furthermore it is conceptualized as a means in the struggle for hegemony. Thus, 'ideology' becomes that through which the struggle for 'hegemony' is undertaken, and the basis on which 'hegemony' is established.

These two points are, I believe, decisive for the subsequent development of the theoretical discourse of *HSS*, for they are both connected to the introduction of the category of 'discourse' in Laclau and Mouffe's later work. In the next chapter, I will show that Laclau and Mouffe in *HSS* effectively replace 'ideology' with the category of 'discourse', and that this move can be understood as a consequence of both the specific conceptualization of 'ideology' deployed in their previous work, discussed above, and the problems inherent in the concept itself.

5 Ideology and discourse theory

5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter I showed that both Laclau and Mouffe engaged with the Althusserian conception of ideology as interpellation before *HSS*. I argued that in their work they attempted to overcome the theoretical impasses of Althusser's approach (explaining historical change, ideology as a means in the reproduction of class relations) by drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

The attractiveness Gramsci's work had in the political and theoretical situation described in the last chapter surely derived from the fact that he had developed the conceptual means to theorize stability and change from a historical perspective. Concepts like 'historical bloc', 'organic intellectuals', or 'war of position' enabled a theorization of *how* 'ideology' generates consent, and under what conditions the dominant (i.e., hegemonic) ideology can be challenged. The category of 'hegemony' provided a theorization of rule that exceeded notions like 'state' and 'state power', and emphasized the dimension of moral and intellectual leadership, which is realized in state as well as non-state institutions.

Ironically, then, the concept of hegemony became central in what I defined as the theoretical problematic of ideology. In this context, 'ideology' was primarily understood as a 'worldview' that engendered social practices and worked as some kind of social cement. I already argued in the last chapter that such an approach to 'ideology' deprives the latter of its conceptual identity.

In *HSS*, Laclau and Mouffe do not explicitly interrogate (or situate themselves in) the Marxist tradition of ideology theory, but construct a genealogy of the concept of 'hegemony,' which, they claim, introduced the 'logic of contingency' into an orthodox Marxist theoretical discourse dominated by the 'logic of necessity' (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 3). The assumption behind this postulate is that the diagnosed 'crisis of Marxism' was primarily caused by economic essentialism (i.e., 'economism'), which either denies political struggle any efficacy in the historical process ('epiphenomenalism'), or reduces political struggle to *class* struggle ('reductionism').

Laclau and Mouffe argue that this 'crisis of Marxism' had already become manifest at the

beginning of the 20th century, when epiphenominalist conceptions (i.e., concepts that draw history as the outcome of the development of the contradictions between the productive forces and the relations of production) could not account for actual historical developments:

“Faced with the rationalism of classical Marxism, which presented history and society as intelligible totalities constituted around conceptually explicable laws, the logic of hegemony presented itself from the outset as a *complementary* and *contingent* operation, required for conjunctural imbalances within an evolutionary paradigm whose essential or ‘morphological’ validity was not for a moment placed in question [...] As the areas of the concept's application grew broader, from Lenin to Gramsci, the field of contingent articulations also expanded, and the category of 'historical necessity' – which had been the cornerstone of classical Marxism – withdrew from the horizon of theory.” (p. 3; emphases in original)

Epiphenominalist conceptions were subsequently replaced with *reductionist* conceptions; that is to say, social and political struggles were still approached in terms of 'class struggle', and the problem of 'economism' remained unresolved in Marxist theory. I would now like to suggest that *HSS* can be regarded as an attempt to rethink 'hegemony' in non-economistic terms.

For the purpose of this analysis, I reconstruct this process as follows: As a first step, Laclau and Mouffe reject what Mouffe described as 'epiphenomenalism', i.e., conceptions that understand history as a linear, pre-determined process, essentially governed by the development of the productive forces, and ultimately thriving towards the overcoming of capitalism and the realization of socialism. Within this scenario, the working class, as the part of the productive forces, comes to inhabit a central position as carriers of the revolutionary process, while politics and ideology merely occupy a peripheral position.

As a next step Laclau and Mouffe turn to those conceptions, which grant more efficacy to 'superstructures', but still adhere to the analytical centrality of the working class – what Mouffe had previously described as 'reductionism' (Mouffe 1979b, p.189). Laclau and Mouffe argue that the concept of hegemony, around which most of these reductionist conceptions revolve, emerged within Marxist theory as a reaction to the empirical inadequacy of epiphenominalist approaches, which became manifest at the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, it was empirical (historical) developments that

“introduce[d] some gaps into the argument concerning the necessary laws of

capitalist development as presented by the Second International. The concept of hegemony emerged in the marxist tradition precisely as a concept destined to fill this gap. It emerged in the discussions of social democracy in Russia, discussions about the relationship social classes and democratic tasks.” (Laclau 1988, p. 250)

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe analyze the various conceptual responses to this impasse, which, they argue, was further enforced through the plural and multifarious character of the *NSM*. In addition, they engage in the project of filling the resulting theoretical gap; albeit, they do so with entirely different presuppositions. They explicitly criticize not only particular theorizations of 'hegemony', but, also, the manner in which the concept was deployed - that is, as a means to account for historical developments that could not be explained by epiphenominalist approaches. They argue that “the logic of hegemony presented itself from the outset as a *complementary* and *contingent* operation, required for conjunctural imbalances within an evolutionary paradigm whose essential or ‘morphological’ validity was not for a moment placed in question” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 3; emphases in original).

For Laclau and Mouffe, by contrast, 'hegemony' not only points to the deeper flaws within Marxist theory, but, furthermore, introduces a specific 'logic of the social,' which is, according to them, ultimately incompatible with Marxist categories (p. 3).

My investigation of the central concepts developed in *HSS* starts at this point, and focuses on the idea that the category of hegemony introduces a specific 'logic of the social', i.e., has the status of an ontological category. I will suggest that this can be regarded as a consequence of the replacement of the category of ideology with the concept of discourse.

5.2 Gramsci, ideology and reductionism

Before I begin, I would like to recapitulate the central claims of Laclau and Mouffe's respective engagement with 'ideology' prior to *HSS*. As I have shown, both engaged in the project of working out a non-reductionist conception of 'ideology'; this is to say, of developing a conception in which 'ideology' was theorized as autonomous from class, but which could still account for the eventual reproduction of class relations. I would like to suggest that the position developed by Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci* (Mouffe 1979b) already anticipated a good deal of the central argument developed in *HSS*. Thus, in *HSS* Laclau and Mouffe reinforce their endorsement of Gramsci's conception of ideology and 'hegemony', for the latter is conceptualized not merely as political, but as intellectual and

moral leadership, which opens up the path concept of hegemony beyond class alliances:

“For, whereas political leadership can be grounded upon a conjunctural coincidence of interests in which participating sectors retain their separate identity, moral and intellectual leadership requires that an ensemble of 'ideas' and 'values' be shared by a number of sectors – or, to use our own terminology, that certain subject positions traverse a number of class sectors.” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 67)

The idea that 'hegemony' in Gramsci points to the process of the creation of a new subject, whose identity is not reducible to the identities of the social groups of which it is made up, already figured prominently in Mouffe's earlier discussion of Gramsci. This point is also foregrounded by Laclau and Mouffe in their praise of Gramsci's non-reductionist conceptualization of 'ideology'. They argue that there are two fundamental displacements in Gramsci's concept of 'ideology', which account for the latter's alleged break with the reductionist problematic (p. 67). The first displacement consists in Gramsci's emphasis on the materiality of 'ideology'. Laclau and Mouffe argue that the fact that 'ideology' is conceptualized as being embodied in an ensemble of institutions and apparatuses, “which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles” (p. 67), precludes any understanding of the former as mere 'system of ideas', or a superstructural reading of 'ideology'.

The second displacement they identify in Gramsci is, I believe, even more important with regard to Laclau and Mouffe's own concepts, for it concerns the reality/appearance distinction associated with 'ideology'. They emphasize that the notion of 'moral and intellectual' leadership itself is not sufficient for a truly 'non-reductionist' conception of ideology, since the former could still be understood as 'ideological inculcation' by a hegemonic class, and thus involve the notion of mystification (p. 67): “In that case, there would be no subject positions traversing classes, for any that seemed to do so would in fact be appurtenances of the dominant class, and their presence in other sectors could be understood only as a phenomenon of false consciousness” (p. 67).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, it is here that we find Gramsci's most important contribution to a non-reductionist concept of ideology, since “[f]or Gramsci, political subjects are not – strictly speaking – classes, but complex ‘collective wills’; similarly, the ideological elements articulated by a hegemonic class do not have a necessary class belonging” (p. 67). For the

authors of *HSS*, this rejection of a necessary class belonging of all ideological elements constitutes Gramsci's break with reductionism, for it enabled him to conceive of politics as 'articulation' – “that is to say, as a *political construction* from dissimilar elements” (p. 85; emphasis in original).

However, while this movement from the 'political' to the 'intellectual' and 'moral' plane generates the possibility of a concept of hegemony beyond 'class alliances', since intellectual and moral leadership requires that “certain subject positions traverse a number of class sectors[.]” (p. 66-7), Gramsci still assumed that classes were the central agents within the hegemonic struggle. While Mouffe and Laclau had both affirmed this idea in their earlier works (and theorized it as 'determination in the last instance'), this is the point in *HSS* where they fundamentally break with their old concepts and depart from Gramsci's. They argue that “[f]or Gramsci, even though the diverse social elements have a merely relational identity – achieved through articulatory practices – there must always be a *single* unifying principle in every hegemonic formation, and this can only be a fundamental class” (p.69). This is to say, for Gramsci, class hegemony is here not a result of the hegemonic struggle, but its ultimate ontological foundation. This, for Laclau and Mouffe, is the 'inner essentialist core' of Gramsci's thought (p. 69).

What becomes manifest at this point is that 'ideology' and 'hegemony' in Gramsci are so closely related that their respective conceptual identities easily become contaminated by each other. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that Laclau and Mouffe in their discussion of 'hegemony', subsequently abandon 'ideology', and integrate it into the term 'hegemony'. However, I would like to suggest that the argument cited above is actually an argument about 'ideology' rather than about 'hegemony'. Hence, what Laclau and Mouffe criticize in Gramsci's approach, as they themselves clearly state, is not just the fact that the 'fundamental classes' are assumed to be the only hegemonic agents, but also that their identities as classes precede the hegemonic (i.e., 'ideological') struggle:

“Whether the working class is considered as the political leader in a class alliance (Lenin) or as the articulatory core of a historical bloc (Gramsci), its fundamental identity is constituted in a terrain different from that in which the hegemonic practices operate” (p. 76).

I would like to suggest that the last part of this quote expresses not only one of Laclau and Mouffe's most important theoretical innovations in *HSS*, but that it, furthermore, resolves a

tension inherent in Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation. Said tension was already apparent in Mouffe's earlier engagement with Gramsci, namely, the question of the relationship between 'ideology' and identity formation. As I have argued above, in *Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci*, Mouffe particularly emphasized the fact that for Gramsci, 'ideology' was not a mere system of ideas, or 'false consciousness', but the very terrain on which the identity of subjects was constituted (see above p. 63).

There is, thus, literally no 'outside' of 'ideology', and, as I have suggested, the latter completely loses its conceptual specificity. This might be one of the reasons why Laclau and Mouffe abandon the term 'ideology' (I will draw on other reasons for this move in a moment), but retain the basic idea of 'subject producing practices' as a central part of the hegemonic effort. Hence, their objection to the idea that the identity of the working class is "constituted in a terrain different from that in which the hegemonic practices operate" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p.76) contains one of their most important theoretical propositions: if it is through ideological/hegemonic struggle that subjects are produced, the identity of the working class (or any social agent) cannot precede this process, but is constituted as well in and through the ideological/hegemonic struggle.

I would like to suggest that this claim can be regarded as consequence of the expansive conception of 'ideology' as a 'worldview' and a process of identity formation, and the abandonment of the notions of 'mystification' and 'misrepresentation'.

Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on the fact that "hegemony supposes the construction of the very identity of social agents, and not just a rationalist coincidence of 'interests' among preconstituted agents [.]" (p.58) can be regarded as working analogously to their claim that "the field of politics can no longer be considered a 'representation of interests', given that the so-called 'representation' modifies the nature of what is represented" (p. 58). To be sure, these claims not only relate to a view that privileges 'fundamental classes' as hegemonic agents, but, again, express the idea that the identities of social agents *as such* are constituted within, and not prior to, the hegemonic process.

In this chapter, I would like to suggest that these claims can be regarded as a theoretical effect of the integration of the category of 'discourse' into the theoretical problematic of 'ideology' as defined above.

In the next section, I will discuss Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of discourse and their

related definition of 'essentialism' and 'anti-essentialism', and argue that, despite Laclau and Mouffe's claim to the contrary, it clearly belongs to an irrealist ontology.

5.3 Discourse, anti-Essentialism, and meaning

Before I start to investigate the theory of discourse proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, I would like to make some general comments about regarding how the concept of *discourse* is deployed in the social sciences and the humanities. As Hunt and Purvis note, the concept of discourse "focuses attention on the terms of engagement within social relations by insisting that all social relations are lived and comprehended by their participants in terms of specific linguistic or semiotic vehicles that organize their thinking, understanding and experiencing" (Purvis/Hunt 1993, p. 476).

The prominence the category of 'discourse' has attained in a variety of disciplines since the 1980's rests on the insight that we only access the world and its objects through 'language'; that is, that our access to the world is always mediated by discourse.

Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe argue in the preface to the second edition of *HSS* (Laclau/Mouffe 2001b, vii-xix), that

"the category of 'discourse' has a pedigree in contemporary thought going back to the three main intellectual currents of the twentieth century: analytical philosophy, phenomenology, and structuralism. In these three the century started with an illusion of immediacy, of a non-discursively mediated access to the things themselves [...] In all three, however, this illusion of immediacy dissolved at some point, and had to be replaced by one form or another of discursive mediation." (p. xi)

5.3.1 Structuralism, essentialism, post-Structuralism

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory emphasizes the construction of every identity, i.e., social identity in and through practices of articulation (Torfing 1999, p. 41). Their theory of discourse, and consequently their theory of identity construction, are widely based on Saussurean linguistic theory, which assumes the relation between signified and signifier to be arbitrary, and, consequently holds that the meaning of a term is purely relational and only determined by its opposition to all the others, i.e., in the context of a specific articulation (Smith 1998, p. 84-85, Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 112-13). However, while Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that this (structuralist) conceptualization presented an important move away from essentialism, i.e., from "a conception of unities whose demarcation was given, like a

nomenclature, by its reference to an object” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 113), they suggest that structuralism is still characterized by 'essentialist' remnants since the relational system in which identities acquired their meaning was conceptualized as a closed system. Laclau already argued in 1983:

“The great advance carried out by structuralism was the recognition of the relational character of any social identity; its limit was its transformation of those relations into a system, into an identifiable and intelligible object (i.e. into an essence). But if we maintain the relational character of any identity and if, at the same time, we renounce the *fixation* of those identities in a system, then the social must be identified with the infinite play of differences, that is, with what in the strictest sense of the term we can call *discourse* – on the condition, of course, that we liberate the concept of discourse from its restrictive meaning as speech and writing.” (Laclau 1990a, p. 90, emphases in original)

The essentialism of structuralism thus consists in its “search for the possible underlying structures constituting the inherent law of any possible variation” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 113). 'Post-Structuralism' can then be understood in terms of the following propositions: every identity is purely relational; its meaning can never be entirely fixed because it is always subverted by the infinite play of differences that surrounds it.

5.3.2 Articulation and discourse

A central concept in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse is that of 'articulation'. It can be defined as a practice that establishes relations among dissimilar elements “such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (p. 105). In this context, the term 'discourse' signifies the structured totality resulting from this articulatory practice. The modified identity of those elements that are articulated together is designated by Laclau and Mouffe's statement that, in the process of articulation, 'elements' are reduced to 'moments' of the discursive totality (p. 106). If different elements only attain their specific meaning in combination with other elements, their identity is, consequently, purely relational and determined by its respective differential position within a given totality: “[I]n an articulated discursive totality, where every element occupies a differential position – in our terminology, where every *element* has been reduced to a *moment* of that totality – all identity is relational and all relations have a necessary character” (p. 106, emphases in original).

The insistence on the purely relational character of every identity also informs Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of 'anti-essentialism'. If all identity is relational, and it cannot be

ultimately fixed, there can be no such thing as an 'essence' of an object/identity. Consequentially, a discursive totality can only be understood as a *relational* totality.

5.3.3 Discursive formation

Drawing on Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe take up the notion of 'discursive formation', which they understand as a formation which is characterized not by unity - i.e., an underlying principle, or logical coherence of its elements, but by regularity in dispersion. They emphasize the impossibility of a final fixing of meaning, as well as the contested and ultimately open character of every 'discursive formation' (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 105). That is to say, although Laclau and Mouffe argue that identities which are part of a articulated discursive totality obtain a *necessary* character (in the sense that, if they would have a different identity then we would be dealing with a different discursive totality), the position of elements within a discursive totality can never be ultimately fixed. Therefore, the relational logic of a specific discourse will always be incomplete and pierced by contingency.

'Discourse' thus designates a system of differential entities, which includes within itself linguistic as well as non-linguistic elements, and is always the result of a partial limitation of "a 'surplus of meaning' which subverts it. Being inherent in every discursive situation, this 'surplus' is the necessary terrain for the constitution of every social practice. We will call it the *field of discursivity*" (p. 105, emphasis in original).

5.3.4 The social

Following Derrida, the authors of *HSS* conceptualize 'the social' as a space dominated by the flow of differences that subvert any possibility of the final fixing of meaning, but, nevertheless, require the act of a partial fixation: "A discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a center. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*" (p. 112, emphasis in original).

The practice of articulation, thus, consists in the construction of such nodal points in order to establish and partially fix meaning. And since social identities are also only constructed within discourse, "there is no social identity fully protected from a discursive exterior that deforms it and prevents it becoming fully sutured" (p. 111). This also means that the transition from 'elements' to 'moments' can never be complete: "The status of the 'elements' is that of floating signifiers, incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain. And this floating character finally penetrates every discursive (i.e. social) identity" (p. 113).

What Laclau and Mouffe effectively propose is the construction of an ontology of the social out of discourse theory. To be sure, Laclau and Mouffe start out by investigating how discourses are structured and constituted, i.e., how meaning is created, but they end up arriving at propositions concerning the ontology of the social. In the following section, I will further explore their concept of discourse and suggest that this stance follows from an ontological position that can, contrary to Laclau and Mouffe's own claim, be described as irrealism. I will then proceed to discuss the problems of irrealism for the practice of theorizing. I will, furthermore, suggest that this paradoxically leads to a theoretical proximity of Laclau and Mouffe's position to classical empiricism.

5.4 Discourse, epistemology and ontology

First, I would like to emphasize that Laclau and Mouffe's theory of 'discourse' revolves around questions of epistemology and ontology. The idea that we have no direct access to things themselves, that is, to 'reality', but that the latter is always mediated through discourse is an epistemological problem (i.e., relates to the question of what we can know about the world). Laclau and Mouffe's proposition that we only have access to the world through discourse can thus be regarded as an epistemological statement. However, the renouncement of the possibility of an immediate access to reality poses more questions than it resolves, and requires specification. That is to say, the idea that discourse mediates our access to the world (and, consequently becomes the condition of our knowledge about the latter) does not, per se, problematize the status of our knowledge of the world. For instance, if we assume that discourse mainly represents reality in an accurate way, the discursively mediated nature of the latter would not be a problem.

If we, on the other hand, assume that discourse may or may not represent reality accurately, we would need some criteria that would allow us to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate representations, or to at least assess their respective verisimilitude. This is only to emphasize that the claim that discourse mediates access to reality implies the problem of correspondence, and therefore requires a theory of reference.

The critical question following from the statement that we can only access the world through discourse, is, thus, the question of the relationship between discourse and reality (i.e. the 'extra-discursive'), which, I suggest, is an *epistemological* as well as an *ontological* problem.

5.4.1 Discourse and the extra-discursive

The most important and, as I will argue, defining feature of Laclau and Mouffe's conception of 'discourse' is their rejection of any distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive, and the theoretical premise on which this rejection is based (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 107-8, Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 101-12). Simply put, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices is useless since the *meaning* of every practice or object is only established within discourse. They argue that objects, events, and practices only attain their specific meaning within a discursive totality, regardless of whether they *exist* outside discourse:

“If I kick a spherical object in the street or if I kick a ball in a football match, the physical fact is the same, but its meaning is different. The object is a football only to the extent that it establishes a system of relations with other objects, and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the objects, but are, rather, socially constructed.” (Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 100)

What is interesting is Laclau and Mouffe's insistence that this conceptualization is still compatible with a realist ontology, for their theory of discourse, they argue, does not put in question the *existence* of objects external to thought, but only emphasizes that the latter's meaning (i.e., *being*) is only constructed in discourse (p. 100-5). Thus, in *HSS*, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that

“[t]he fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence.” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p.108, emphasis on original)

Now, I would like to strongly object to this proposition. What Laclau and Mouffe seem to suggest is that objects exist outside discourse but that, simply put, *nothing follows from this fact* since their meaning, i.e., how we perceive them, depends upon discourse. What this conception is clearly lacking is a theory of reference, which allows on to judge the two possible interpretations suggested in the example above in terms of their respective adequacy. True, if an earthquake is understood as a natural phenomenon or as an expression of the 'wrath

of god' does depend upon the meaning it is given in discourse, but the crucial point here is that we have good reasons to think one of these interpretations is clearly closer to reality than the other, and that Laclau and Mouffe's conception cannot account for these reasons.

That is to say, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse does not give us any means of judging between these interpretations (or, hence, *any* statements or discourses) in terms of their correspondence to reality. That this omission constitutes an epistemological as well as an ontological problem becomes even more apparent when we consider the fact that Laclau and Mouffe extend this conception to the 'natural world' and ask "what can we say about the natural world, about the facts of physics, biology or astronomy that are not apparently integrated in meaningful totalities constructed by men [sic!]" (Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 102). The answer, according to Laclau and Mouffe, would be that natural facts are also discursive facts, that

"the idea of nature is not something that is already there [...] but is itself the result of a slow and complex historical and social construction [...] If there were no human beings on earth, those objects we call stones would be there nonetheless; but they would not be 'stones', because there would be neither mineralogy nor a language capable of classifying them and distinguishing them from other objects." (p. 102)

This is, without a doubt, true but it does not solve the crucial problem; namely that, once again, Laclau and Mouffe's conception does not give us any clue as to how to choose between a discourse in which these objects we call 'stones' are constituted as natural entities with certain chemical, mineral properties etc., and one in which they are constructed as, say, the tears of god that we should worship. Even worse, their position suggests that it is not possible to make such a judgement.

5.4.2 Realism and irrealism

I would, thus, like to suggest that the propositions quoted above at best evade the questions necessary to properly place oneself on the realism/irrealism divide, and effectively make their position irrealist. Let me elaborate:

As Roger Trigg (Trigg 1980, p. vii-xx) and Anthony Woodiwiss (Woodiwiss 1990, p. 68-71) point out, in the realm of ontology there only exists two positions, namely, "those who wish to 'construct' reality out of men's [sic!] experiences, concepts, language or whatever, and those start with the idea that what exists does so whether men [sic!] conceive of it or not" (Trigg

1980, p.vii).

Against this background, Laclau and Mouffe's position seems to seek a middle-way between these two alternatives. In other words, they seem to argue that although reality *exists* independently of our conception of it, the reality *we perceive* (i.e., our 'version' of reality) is inevitably constructed through discourse. Now, this position could still be compatible with a realist ontology, were it supported by a theory of reference establishing and specifying the relationship between 'reality' and our perception of it such that knowledge of the former would in principle be possible.

The lack of such a theory of reference in Laclau and Mouffe's work, however, renders their affirmation of the independent existence of object completely useless. If nothing follows from the independent existence of reality for our perception or knowledge of it, we could just as well assume that reality does *not* exist independently of us. The epistemological consequences of these two positions are, I believe, the same. As Trigg notes in a remark about Wittgenstein: "A reality we can know nothing of is not so very different from no reality at all" (Trigg 1980, p. 10).

5.4.3 Theoretical effects of irrealism

Hence there is a need for additional criteria to distinguish realism from irrealism (idealism). What is required for the realism/irrealism distinction to become meaningful is the establishment of a connection between the independent existence of reality and the possibility of knowledge about it. This is, I believe, expressed in Roy Bhaskar's claim that ontology "does not have as its subject matter a world apart from that it investigates by science. Rather, its subject matter just is that world, considered from the point of view of what can be established about it by philosophical argument" (Bhaskar 2008, p. 36). Hence, philosophical ontology does not only ask how/what the world 'is', but what it must be like for knowledge about it (i.e., science) to be possible (p. 36).

A position such as Laclau and Mouffe's that divides reality into 'reality' and 'reality-for-us', and consequently restricts our knowledge claims to the sphere of the latter can be described as 'conceptual idealism' (Trigg 1980, p. 5-13), or 'transcendental idealism' (Bhaskar 2008, p. 25), which implicitly render ontology irrelevant since, as I have argued above, it holds that nothing

follows from reality's independent existence. The consequence of this claim is what Bhaskar termed the 'epistemic fallacy' which

“consists in the view that statements about being can be reduced to or analysed in terms of statements about knowledge; i.e. that ontological questions can always be transposed into epistemological terms. The idea that being can always be analysed in terms of our knowledge of being, that it is sufficient for philosophy to 'treat only of the network, and not what the network describes'¹⁴, results in the systematic dissolution of the idea of a world (which I shall here metaphorically characterize as an ontological realm) independent of but investigated by science.” (Bhaskar 2008, p. 36)

One rather curious effect of such a position is that it constrains, not only our investigations, but also our explanations to what we, according to it, have access to, i.e., our experiences. In this sense, irrealism is compatible with forms of empiricism (p. 36-45).

The effect of such a position on theoretical practice is that it replaces propositions and inquires about 'the world' with propositions and inquiries about our understanding or perception of the latter. In Laclau and Mouffe's case, the centrality of the category of 'experience' is represented by their emphasis on the category of 'meaning' (constituted within discourse), which they effectively render co-extensive with reality (Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 100-6). The effect of this theoretical position resembles the effects of what Bhaskar called 'transcendental idealism', namely, that it restricts theoretical practice to theorizing experience (in Laclau and Mouffe's case the realm of *being*, i.e., of meaning constituted in discourse) thereby shifting the object of knowledge from 'the world' to our understanding of it:

“If the bounds of the real and the empirical world are co-extensive then of course any 'surplus-element' which the transcendental idealist finds in the analysis of law-like statements cannot reflect a real difference between necessary and accidental sequences of events. It merely reflects a difference in men's [sic!] attitude to them. Saying that light travels in straight lines ceases then to express a proposition about the world; it expresses instead a proposition about the way men [sic!] understand it.” (Bhaskar 2008, p. 28)

A problem associated with such a position, is that it, strictly speaking, forecloses the possibility of conceiving, and consequently of theorizing 'empirical events', phenomena, and experiences as *effects* of processes that take place beyond the level of 'appearance' or 'experience' because it holds that nothing can be said or known about this level. In classical

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, L.: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1961, 6.35.

empiricism, this leads to a situation which can be characterized as follows: explanation is reduced to an affirmation of the regular conjunction of different empirical events, which are, if they fulfill certain criteria, assumed to be causally related. Their connection (i.e., the mechanism generating events), however, is asserted exclusively on the basis of the observed regularity of the pattern of their appearance, which is taken to necessarily lead to the *impression* of causality (this impression is explained by reference to the human psychological conditions). Hence, “the locus of necessity is shifted from the objective necessity of the natural world to the subjective necessity of causally-determined or the inter-subjective necessity of rule-governed mind” (p. 41). This necessity is taken to be “imposed by men [sic!] on the pattern of events; [and, C.P.] the generative mechanism is [taken to be, C.P.] an irreducible figment of the imagination” (p. 45).

One of the problems that follows is that this deprives us of the possibility of thinking of 'events' in terms of 'effects' generated by structures that are not as such observable (and can thus not be experienced), but are nevertheless real. That is to say, it deprives us of the possibility of thinking about the world as multi-dimensional structure independent from us; the latter is effectively “squashed into a flat surface” (p. 44), and, consequently, the notion of 'structure' can only be allowed if it is located in the human mind or in the scientific community (p. 45).

The second consequence, as Bhaskar notes, is that the denial of the possibility of an ontology of reality beyond and independent from experience often merely results in the generation of an *implicit* ontology and realism (p. 40). I accept Bhaskar's proposition that in the case of David Hume, the vacuum generated by the latter's critique of the possibility of any philosophical ontology, has been filled with his concept of experience (p. 40). This is to say, Hume not really succeeded in banishing ontology from his account of science, but, rather, implicitly developed an ontology of impressions, i.e., of experience. Hence, Bhaskar argues that “[i]n the empirical realist tradition the epistemic fallacy thus covers or disguises an ontology based on the category of experience, and a realism based on the presumed character of the object of experiences, viz. atomistic events, and their relations, viz. constant conjunctions” (p. 40).

5.4.4 Irrealism and discourse theory

Now, how do these effects become manifest in Laclau and Mouffe's version of irrealism?

Laclau and Mouffe's insistence on the primacy of meaning, i.e., on the impenetrability of the discursive space, consequently leads them to conceptualize 'discourse' as embracing material as well as non-material objects. I would like to point out that this is a logical necessity, for if we assume that we only have access to the world through discourse, and assert that it is through 'meaning' that the world becomes intelligible (and this meaning is only constructed in discourse), then we have to conclude that the meaning of material objects and practices is also only constructed through discourse. Hence, they state that "as long as every non-linguistic action is meaningful, it is also discursive" (Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 104).

I would like to suggest that Laclau and Mouffe's position that renders the discursive and the real as co-extensive effectively leads to a situation in which they cannot theorize *anything but* discourse. Again, if our access to the world is confined to the meaning it is given within discourse, and if this meaning is exclusively constructed through intra-discursive operations, then our knowledge claims are constrained to this sphere of meaning. This is to say, an ontological and epistemological position of this kind leads to a situation in which we cannot make claims about how the world 'is', but only about what meaning is given to it.

Adopting Bhaskar's example, this would mean that an inquiry about, say, discrimination against African Americans in the US in the 20th century would be transformed into an inquiry about when and how the relation between white Americans and African Americans was constructed as a relation of discrimination in discourse. Now, the point I am trying to make is not so much that this would entail the danger of moral relativism (although this might be a potential problem as well), but that this is a completely different research project (i.e., that the latter question refers to a different object of knowledge than the first). To be sure, my intention is not to suggest that an investigation of the way the situation of African Americans has been constructed in discourse would not be interesting or let alone legitimate. Rather, I seek to problematize the fact that this is triggered by an ontological and epistemological position that claims that these two questions are identical, or worse, that the latter question is the only one we can legitimately pose.

What I am, thus, proposing is that the version of discourse theory put forward by Laclau and Mouffe tends to equate discourse theory with social theory, thereby discretely transforming their respective objects of knowledge. This effect is, I believe, triggered by their ontological and epistemological position that assimilates reality to meaning.

A related problem with this conception of discourse is that the latter, strictly speaking, does not allow for an analytical distinction between discourse and other instances. It does not leave room for any category besides discourse, because discourse is what makes the world meaningful, i.e., intelligible for us, and thus comes to figure as the boundary of 'our' universe. In Laclau and Mouffe words: “If the *being* – as distinct from existence – of any object is constituted within a discourse, it is not possible to differentiate the discursive, in terms of being, from any other area of reality” (p. 105, emphasis in original). This proposition is, as I will show in the next chapter, highly problematic for the practice of theorizing, since it effectively requires us to subsume all phenomena under one single category, and, consequentially, to explain them only by reference to that very category, i.e., discourse.

All of these effects can, as I have suggested, be explained by Laclau and Mouffe's position, which splits reality up into 'reality' (about which we can know nothing), and 'reality-for-us' and does not provide any clue as to how the latter might be informed by the former. Throughout the next chapter I will show how the implications of this become manifest in *HSS*.

For now, I would like suggest that the fact that Laclau and Mouffe assign their concepts an ontological status can be understood as an additional effect of this rupture. As we have seen, their concept of discourse requires a certain ontology (i.e., anti-essentialism, the idea that all identity is purely relational, etc.). Now, as I have indicated above, these principles originally belonged to the domain of linguistics, that is to say, they had been originally developed in the context of the analysis of linguistic signs (i.e., language), and were subsequently integrated into other strands of theory and philosophy (Torfing 1999, p. 87-90). In this sense, the ontological positions put forward by Laclau and Mouffe can be understood as corresponding to their theory of discourse.

However, since Laclau and Mouffe assume the identity of the discursive and the real, i.e., that they are co-extensive, they seem to transpose this ontological presupposition upon the social. That is to say, the trajectory of this theoretical move seems to be that since “it is not possible to differentiate the discursive, in terms of being, from any other area of reality” (Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 105), and our access is restricted to this area of 'being' (i.e., meaning), then the ontological basis of the discursive can be substituted for the ontological basis of the real. Now, I would like to suggest that this trajectory can be regarded as being

analogous to the movement from the renouncement of the possibility of a philosophical ontology of reality to the implicit construction of an ontology of experience noted by Bhaskar in the case of classical empiricism/transcendental idealism (see above p. 85).

In both cases, the claim that we can know nothing about reality beyond the level of our experience (that is, in Laclau and Mouffe's case, the level of meaning constructed in discourse) leads to the subsequent construction of an 'alternative' ontology, based on the category of 'experience' (or 'discourse'), and to a 'disguised realism' based on the presumed character of the object of experiences and their relations (in the case of discourse, namely, subject positions, articulations, floating signifiers, etc.) (Bhaskar 2008, p. 40). This version of realism is 'disguised' insofar as it leads to the paradoxical situation where it is possible to make statements (i.e., knowledge claims) about the nature of a world beyond discourse, and to theorize concrete discourses as effects of underlying structures, only this time the 'world beyond discourse' is taken to be the ontology upon which the category of discourse is based.

In the next chapter, I will argue that this ontological position is strictly incompatible with the notion of 'ideology'. I will elaborate on the problems the incorporation of the concept of discourse produces in the theoretical problematic of ideology, and conceptualize the concepts developed in *HSS* as a means to resolve these problems.

Finally, I will explore the effects of these concepts for theoretical practice.

6 Theoretical effects: the concepts of HSS

6.1 Discourse and ideology

It would like to suggest that the conception of 'discourse' discussed above, and the ontological and epistemological positions it is predicated on are strictly incompatible with both of the conceptions of ideology I have discussed throughout the last chapters. As I have argued, 'ideology' conceptually depends on a distinction between 'reality' and 'appearance'. Therefore, it requires an ontology (and an epistemology) that holds that reality exists independently of our perception, and that we, in principle, have access to this reality. In the context of discourse theory, this means that there must be a means by which we can distinguish adequate from inadequate propositions about representations of reality. A distinction of this kind is strictly impossible in the context of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework.

Laclau himself has repeatedly affirmed his rejection of the category of 'ideology'. In 1983, he discussed what he identified as the two classical approaches to the problem of ideology in the Marxist tradition (Laclau 1990a, p. 89) and emphasized the fact that neither of them was theoretically compatible with an anti-essentialist ontology. The first version, Laclau argues, approaches ideology as a level of the social totality, and it rests upon an essentialist conception, in which “this totality operated as an underlying principle of intelligibility of the social order. The status of the totality was that of an essence of the social order which has to be *recognized* behind the empirical variations expressed at the surface of social life” (p. 90, emphasis in original). Laclau's criticism of such conceptions addresses their incompatibility with positions that

“accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial process is an impossibility.” (p. 90, emphasis in original)

I would like to add that there exists another obstacle, namely the fact that a position like Laclau and Mouffe's does not allow for a distinction between 'essence' and 'empirical variations', since such a statement requires a proposition about the nature of 'reality' apart from the way we experience it.

The second approach to 'ideology', Laclau argues, renders 'ideology' as 'false consciousness',

and is thus grounded in the presupposition that “the identity of the social agent can be fixed. It is only on the basis of recognizing its true identity that we can assert that the consciousness of the subject is ‘false’” (p. 91).

However, the most important obstacle for an integration of any theory of ideology into Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse follows, I believe, from the fact that their theorization of 'discourse', strictly speaking, does not allow one to privilege any particular discourse over another in terms of its correspondence to reality. Thus, in *The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology* (Laclau 1997), Laclau argues that the 'death' of theories of ideology is connected to the abandonment of notions of 'truth', since “[c]ategories such as 'distortion' and 'false representation' made sense as long as something 'true' or 'undistorted' was considered to be within human reach” (Laclau 1997, p. 298-9). The problematic status of the project of 'ideology critique' thus follows from the fact that

“[t]he bedrock of such a critique is to postulate access to a point from which - at least tendentially - reality would speak without discursive mediations. The full positivity and graspability of such a point gives a rationale to the whole critical operation. Now, the critique of this approach starts from the negation of such a metalinguistic level, from showing that the rhetorico-discursive devices of a text are irreducible and that, as a result, there is no extra-discursive ground from which a critique of ideology could proceed.” (p. 299)

What is particularly interesting about this statement is that it makes explicit Laclau's stance on the relationship between discourse and 'reality' – that is to say, what makes the project of ideology critique *impossible* (not only *problematical*) is the fact that reality never 'speaks' to us without discursive mediation, and that the latter does not allow for a distinction between 'distorted' and 'undistorted' representations of reality.

However, all of this is just to point out that any concept of 'ideology' requires a distinction that is impossible to make in the context of Laclau and Mouffe's ontological position, namely, the distinction between reality and appearance. The theoretical justification of this distinction was, as I argued above, a problematic one in the tradition of ideology theory. Consequently it is in this light that we should understand Laclau and Mouffe's attempts, in their earlier work, to free the concept of ideology from the notion of 'distortion' and assign it a constitutive role in the formation of identities (i.e., a positive, universal character), and a material dimension.

From their own accounts, their turn to discourse theory can be understood as a consequence of

the abandonment of the reality/appearance distinction. They define 'hegemonic relation' as the relation "by which a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001b, p. xiii), and indicate that their decision to conceptualize the social as a *discursive* space followed from the fact that it is this notion that makes such a relation conceptually possible (p. x). That, of course, is to say that the only other way to think about a relation in which a particularity assumes the representation of a universality strictly incommensurable with it would be to invoke the notion of *misrepresentation*. Now, this is not to suggest a particular order of cause and effect. It is perfectly possible to understand their decision to abandon the reality/appearance distinction as following from their turn to discourse theory and not the other way around (and it is most probable that there was no definite order of succession between these two theoretical moves). What I would like to emphasize is rather that these two positions, which respectively correspond to ideology and discourse theory, mark both the theoretical proximity of these concepts and their fundamental incompatibility.

Now I would like to suggest that, despite Laclau and Mouffe's rejection of the category of 'ideology', the theoretical problematic underlying HSS can still be characterized as the problematic of ideology, i.e., as revolving around the questions:

- I. How do structures shape consciousness (i.e., through which mechanisms are social agents constituted)?
- II. How are the dominant relations reproduced (i.e., how is a conflictual social formation stabilized)? How is political opposition possible?
- III. What is the relationship between base and superstructures? How can historical change be theorized and explained?
- IV. How can one account for the theorist's own position?

Let me briefly reconsider the way these questions have been addressed via the category of ideology. In both the restrictive and expansive conceptions, 'ideology' has been deployed to theorize how social structures shape the way we conceive of the world and ourselves. With regard to restrictive conceptions of ideology, this project has been limited to those belief-systems in which social structures have generated representations that either concealed or

displaced contradictions.

The link between this process and the reproduction of dominant relations is certainly implied in conceptions of this kind (since the concealment of contradictions necessarily facilitates their reproduction), but is – strictly speaking – theorized as an effect of secondary importance. The fact that the question of reproduction has a rather peripheral status in restricted conceptions of 'ideology', and the latter's limitation to accounting for certain belief-systems rather than 'consciousness' in general, also renders secondary the question of the relationship between 'base' and 'superstructures', as well as the question of explaining historical change (since 'ideology' is not deployed to explain the process of the constitution of social agents).

In expansive or 'positive' conceptions of 'ideology', however, 'ideology' is used to account for the entirety of forms of consciousness and is, consequently, theorized as a key mechanism for identity formation. Furthermore, as I noted above, these questions arise in the context of discussions about the logic of revolutionary movements and socialist strategy. They thus express a paradigm shift in Marxist theory, and designate a transformation in the understanding of the role of superstructures in the historical process.

'Ideology' is deployed to explain the process by which social agents are constituted and, consequently, to account for the reproduction of the social relations that are dominant in a given social formation. The problem of explaining historical change is, as I have shown, implied in this approach, since the latter has to be able to account for both, stability (i.e., reproduction) and change (i.e., political opposition). The difficulty of accounting for a theorist's own position is an effect of the general problematic inherent in expansive conceptions of 'ideology', namely, to reconcile the idea that 'ideology' is constitutive of all forms of consciousness with the possibility of 'un-ideological' knowledge and consciousness.

To state that the theoretical problematic of 'ideology' underlies *HSS* despite Laclau and Mouffe's is to propose that their theoretical discourse revolves around the questions cited above. I would like to suggest that while these questions have traditionally been addressed through notions of 'ideology' or 'ideological struggle', in *HSS* Laclau and Mouffe replace 'ideology' with the concept of 'discourse', and that this replacement generates new theoretical problems and, consequently, new concepts to resolve them. Laclau and Mouffe's "constructivist theory of identity formation" (Smith 1998, p. 55-6) can thus be understood as an attempt to resolve the problem of the constitution of social agents on the terrain of

discourse theory.

6.2 The Construction of the Subject

I have shown that, in Althusser as well as in Laclau and Mouffe's earlier works, 'ideology' was conceptualized as a 'subject producing practice' – that is to say, 'ideology' was thought to be the very terrain on which political identities were constituted. The theory of discourse presented in *HSS* in many respects extends this approach, since it postulates that all identity (i.e., of agents as well as of objects) is constructed in and through discourse. In a way, this idea resembles the claim of the 'materiality of ideology' with regard to its theoretical effect. This is to say, while conceptions that emphasize the 'material' dimension of 'ideology' allow one to approach the entirety of institutions and practices with the concept of 'ideology', the claim that every identity is discursively constructed similarly establishes discourse as the primary analytical unit. Now, in Laclau and Mouffe's case, this stance slightly transforms the original project of 'ideology' of exploring consciousness or subjectivity in relation to social structures. Their conceptualization of discourse, which holds that “it is not possible to differentiate the discursive, in terms of being, from any other area of reality” (Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 105), necessitates that they subsume the notion of 'structure' under the category of 'discourse'. This is to say, the question of how structures shape consciousness is thus transformed into the question of how discourse produces subjects, i.e., discursively constructed subject positions.

Laclau and Mouffe reject the view of the subject as a rational and self-transparent agent, claiming that subject positions are – self-evidently – also only constructed through discourse and within a discursive structure. Hence, Laclau and Mouffe state:

“Whenever we use the category of 'subject' in this text, we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations – not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible – as all 'experience' depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility.” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 115)

Consequentially, the impossibility of a final fixation of meaning also applies to the discursively constructed subject positions (p. 115). The specific meaning and status of identities is only established in the context of an articulation, in which the specific relations between different subject positions are constructed. Identities are, thus, purely relational and

lack as such any kind of positivity. Hence,

“[e]ach of the subject positions are like 'floating signifiers': their meaning is never entirely fixed but always remains open to change. The meaning of a subject position is constructed through its differential relations with the other subject positions that are found in a given discursive formation.” (Smith 1998, p. 87)

However, Laclau and Mouffe stress that the notion of 'dispersion' of subject positions in a given discursive formation should not be confused with the notion of 'separation' among them: the subject positions constituted in a given discursive formation are not only dispersed, but also connected through relations of overdetermination and totalization (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 116-7).

6.3 Overdetermination

The term 'overdetermination' is here used in its psychoanalytical sense and should, Laclau and Mouffe insist, not be confused with a concept of multi-causality:

“[O]n the contrary, it is a very precise type of fusion entailing a symbolic dimension and a plurality of meanings [...] The symbolic – i.e. overdetermined - character of social relations therefore implies that they lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moments of an immanent law.” (p. 97-8)

This quote draws attention to two features of 'overdetermination' that are decisive in Laclau and Mouffe's use of the concept: First, 'overdetermination' is understood as a process whose outcome is not just a combination of different elements, but a product of condensation “whereby various different [...] elements are merged together such that they give rise to a single manifest sequence” (Smith 1998, p. 88). Applied to the formation of identities, this means that “[t]he identity of an individual, group or movement is also in this sense a product of condensation: it is always a product of an irreducible plurality of subject positions. Insofar as the coherence of that plurality is always context dependent, every identity is at least potentially precarious” (p. 88). It is, furthermore, the precariousness of every identity, i.e., 'the impossibility of closure' which leads Laclau and Mouffe to postulate the 'impossibility of society' (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 122).

The second important property of the notion of 'overdetermination' in Laclau and Mouffe's

reading is that it describes the constitution of a *symbolic* order, i.e., that it “refers to the formation of nodal points where several chains of signification intersect in a single signifier” (Boucher 2008, p. 91), thereby producing a systematic effect in all chains of signification. Laclau and Mouffe apply this principle to the issue of gender theory, and state that

“[e]very construction of sexual differences, whatever their multiplicity and heterogeneity, invariably constructs the feminine as a pole subordinated to the masculine [...] The ensemble of social practices, of institutions and discourses which produce woman as a category, are not completely isolated but mutually reinforce and act upon one another. This does not mean that there is a single cause of of feminine subordination. It is our view that once female sex has come to connote a female gender with specific characteristics, this 'imaginary signification' produces concrete effects in the diverse social practices.” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 117-8)

6.4 Logics of difference/Logics of equivalence

As I have indicated above, Laclau and Mouffe argue that identities are constituted through their differential positioning within a discursive structure. In this sense, they can be assumed to exist in a reciprocal relation of difference. However, this differential logic of discourse is subverted not only by the excess of meaning that escapes it, but “[i]t is also prevented by the presence of an alternative logic of equivalence which collapses the differential character of social identity by means of expanding a signifying chain of equivalence” (Torfing 1999, p. 96).

The logic of equivalence can be characterized as a relation in which differential positions are transformed in a such a way that they attain the status of being equivalent to each other. As Laclau and Mouffe argue: “[E]quivalence creates a second meaning that which, though parasitic on the first, subverts it: the differences cancel one other out insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 127).

Laclau and Mouffe refer in this context to the example of the relation between colonizers and colonized. They argue that in this relationship, the dominant power is, on the one hand, signified through differences of dress, language, customs, and so on. On the other hand, however, each of these contents is equivalent to each other in terms of their common differentiation from the colonized people. Hence, it is precisely in their signification of difference, that these contents are equivalent to each other (p. 127). In a chain of equivalence, identities are thus defined not by their differential positions, but by their common reference to

something external, that - and this is decisive for Laclau and Mouffe - they are *not*:

“[A] relation of equivalence absorbing *all* the positive determinations of the colonizer in opposition to the colonized, does not create a system of positive differential positions between the two, simply because it dissolves all positivity: the colonizer is discursively constructed as the anti-colonized. In other words, the identity has become purely negative.” (p. 128, emphasis in original)

The logic of equivalence thus presupposes a division of the discursive space into two camps, and can hence be understood as a logic that simplifies the political space (p. 129-30). The logic of difference, on the other hand, is a logic of the expansion and increasing complexity of the political space and thus points to the proliferation of antagonisms, which makes “more difficult the construction of any centrality and, consequently, the establishment of unified chains of equivalence” (p. 131).

Laclau and Mouffe argue that the simplification of the political space through the workings of chains of equivalence - and the subsequent division of the former into two opposed fields - results in the reduction of the diversity of democratic struggles. Consequently, they use the term 'popular subject position' to “refer to the position that is constituted on the basis of dividing the political space into two antagonistic camps; and *democratic subject position* to refer to the locus of a clearly delimited antagonism which does not divide society in that way” (p. 131, emphasis in original).

6.5 Hegemony

Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of hegemony to theorize dominance and stability. Their reworking of 'hegemony' can be understood as an attempt to resolve the questions of the reproduction of dominant social relations, and the conditions for historical change. The Gramscian notion of 'hegemony' referred to a situation in which the domination of a particular social force was secured by its self-representation as universality through the successful establishment of moral and intellectual leadership (i.e., ideology). That is to say, in Gramsci, “the hegemony of a particular social sector depends for its success on presenting its own aims as those realizing the universal aims of the community” (Laclau 2000, p. 50). As I have argued above, such a conception designates a form of misrepresentation (since a particularity *represents* itself as universality, i.e., as something which it is not), and thus relies on a distinction between reality and appearance.

Since this distinction is not sustainable in the context of Laclau and Mouffe's ontological position, their conceptualization of 'hegemony' is best regarded as an attempt to re-think the latter under post-structuralist conditions. 'Hegemony', in Laclau and Mouffe, refers to the construction of a predominant discursive formation, and can be defined as “the expansion of a discourse, or a set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed elements into partially fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces” (Torfing 1999, p. 101). Consequently, Laclau and Mouffe argue that 'hegemony' presupposes the existence of unfixed elements, i.e., of “‘elements' that have not crystallized into 'moments'” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 134). Hence they state: “In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice” (p. 134).

Now, I would like to suggest that this can be understood as a consequence of Laclau and Mouffe's abandonment of the distinction between reality and appearance I discussed in the last chapter.

For if we assume a 'closed' system of relational identities in which the meaning of each moment is fixed, we would be able to judge its representation in terms of the latter's correspondence – that is to say, a hegemonic practice would involve a practice of misrepresentation.

In order to avoid this notion, one must assume the existence of floating signifiers whose meanings are temporarily specified through hegemonic articulatory practices. In this sense, 'hegemony' does not at all refer to the representation of something, but assumes a *constitutive* role, i.e., it is conceptualized as a practice instituting the social.

This is, I believe, a consequence of Laclau and Mouffe's ontological position, which makes it impossible to think of any discourse in terms of 'representation'. Not least because the very notion of 'representation' requires a distinction between 'what is', and the way it is represented. In other words, it requires a realist ontology separating 'reality' from its representations in which the latter is, in principle, capable of grasping the former.

Now this is, as I have argued in the last chapter, a theoretical move that is impossible in the context of an irrealist ontology, which takes the real and the discursive to be co-extensive. For if we presuppose that there is no way of accessing what discourse represents, and simultaneously accept that there is no way of discriminating between discourses in terms of

their correspondence to reality, then 'discourse' cannot be thought of as representing 'something', but as constructing this something, i.e., 'reality', in the first place.

Again, Laclau and Mouffe's claim regarding the independent *existence* of reality is emptied of all theoretical efficacy by their concomitant postulate that nothing follows from reality's independent existence, since it is discourse that endows objects with meaning, and our access to the world is confined to the sphere of meaning. Said differently, our knowledge claims and our inquiries are, according to this conception, necessarily restricted to discourse.

Now, if we accept their theoretical presuppositions, the notion of 'hegemonic practice' can be understood to refer to the successful integration/organization of a set of discourses into a relatively stable discursive formation through the construction of nodal points that “creat[e] and sustai[n] the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings” (Torfing 1999, p. 98).

In order to highlight the significance of Laclau and Mouffe's use of the concept of 'nodal points', I would like to go back for a moment to the notion of 'floating elements'. What Laclau and Mouffe seem to suggest is that said elements result from the overdetermination of their meaning caused by the field of discursivity (Boucher 2008, p. 100). In this sense, the notion of 'floating elements' is analogous to the notion of 'floating signifier', defined as “[a] signifier that is overflowed with meaning because it is articulated differently within different discourses” (Torfing 1999, p. 301).

In this context, a 'nodal point' can be understood as assuming the function of a 'master signifier' or an 'empty signifier', i.e., a signifier so over-coded that it loses all specific meaning (p. 301). As Torfing notes: “As such, nodal points like 'God', 'Nation', 'Party', or 'Class' are not characterized by a supreme density of meaning, but rather by a certain emptying of their contents, which facilitates their structural role of unifying a discursive terrain” (p. 98-9). Thus, the notion of 'empty signifier' can be defined as referring to 'a signifier without signified'. Hence, 'hegemony' can be understood as that which establishes the unity of a discursive formation by partially fixing the meaning of floating signifiers through the construction of nodal points. As Torfing notes:

“What happens is this: a variety of signifiers are floating within the field of discursivity as their traditional meaning has been lost; suddenly some master signifier intervenes and retroactively constitutes their identity by fixing the

floating signifiers within a paradigmatic chain of equivalence.” (p. 99)

This practice can in turn be understood as temporarily domesticating the flow of differences and the social's excess of meaning, and consequently, involves the construction of frontiers between the thus 'cut out' partial totality, and the excess of meaning that surrounds and subverts it (Boucher 2008, p. 100). In the words of Laclau and Mouffe: “Every 'society' constitutes its own forms of rationality and intelligibility by dividing itself; that is, by expelling outside itself any surplus of meaning subverting it” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 137). In other words, 'hegemony' can be defined as the practice of temporarily fixing meaning in a terrain dominated by the infinite play of difference (i.e., the social). As Laclau elaborates:

“The social is not only the infinite play of differences. It is also the attempt to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order. But this order – or structure – no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt – by definition unstable and precarious – to act over that 'social', to *hegemonize* it.” (Laclau 1990a, p. 91, emphasis in original)

'Hegemonizing' a content therefore consists in the practice of fixing a meaning around a nodal point (Laclau 1990b, p. 28). It is, in this sense that 'hegemony' can be understood as the practice of 'deciding in an undecidable terrain' – that is, the practice of instituting the social in a field that escapes its permanent institution by constantly subverting it. This is the theoretical background against which Torfing posits that deconstruction and hegemony mutually imply one another, since

“[d]econstruction points to the fact that metaphysical closure is reached through ethico-politico decisions taken in an undecidable terrain; but in order to show that these decisions have the form of hegemonic articulations the constitutive and contingent character of these articulations must be shown by a deconstruction that reveals the undecidability that every decidable inscription must necessarily presuppose.” (Torfing 1999, p. 103)

On the one hand, this quote resembles Mouffe's statement from 1979 about the politicizing effect of Gramsci's concept of 'ideology,' which she located in the fact that *every* kind of practice can be understood as materialized ideology (Mouffe 1979b, p. 186). The alleged 'critical' moment consists, I believe, in both cases in the practice of connecting social phenomena with the power relations at work in their constitution. This is accomplished through denaturalizing social phenomena and practices by making visible the acts of their

original institution. However, this is just to say that Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony presupposes a post-structuralist ontology, and to affirm Laclau and Mouffe's claim of the status of 'hegemony' as the very logic of the construction of the social (Laclau/Mouffe 2001b, p. xiv, Laclau 1990c: p. 208).

Wording differently, if we “consider the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or 'negative essence' of the existing, and the diverse 'social orders' as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 95-6), 'hegemony' can be understood as the temporary establishment of order in a field of differences.

There are, however, more criteria that must be met in order to speak of 'hegemony.' Although 'hegemony' presupposes the existence of a field dominated by articulatory practices, the articulatory moment is – as Laclau and Mouffe stress – not sufficient: “It is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices – in other words, that hegemony should emerge in a field criss-crossed by antagonisms and therefore suppose phenomena of equivalence and frontier effects” (p. 135-6). However, not every antagonism supposes hegemonic practices: the precondition of the latter is, as I have indicated above, the existence of floating elements which can be temporarily fixed through the construction of nodal points:

“Only the presence of a vast area of floating elements and the possibility of their articulation to opposite camps – which implies a constant redefinition of the latter – is what constitutes the terrain permitting us to define a practice as hegemonic. Without equivalence and without frontiers, it is impossible to speak strictly of hegemony.” (p.136)

If we combine these different determinations of 'hegemony', the constitution of latter can be defined as involving “the construction of chains of equivalence and difference that link disparate signifying elements as moments of a relatively unified, but fundamentally incomplete, discursive totality.” (Boucher 2008, p. 100).

6.6 Hegemonic formation, organic crisis

After reconceptualizing 'hegemony', Laclau and Mouffe incorporate and reformulate Gramsci's concepts. Thus, they re-define 'historical bloc' as “[a] social and political space relatively unified through the instituting of nodal points and the constitution of *tendentially*

relational identities” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 136, emphasis in original), whose elements are joined by regularity in dispersion. The similarity to Laclau and Mouffe's concept of 'discursive formation' is obvious, hence they state that “[i]nsofar as we consider the historical bloc from the point of view of the antagonistic terrain in which it is constituted, we will call it *hegemonic formation*” (p. 136, emphasis in original).

They proceed by defining 'organic crisis' as a conjuncture in which “there is a generalized weakening of the relational system defining the identities of a given social or political space, and where, as a result there is a proliferation of floating elements” (p. 136). However, Laclau and Mouffe stress that an 'organic crisis' does not emerge from a single point, but from an overdetermination of circumstances (p. 136), and, similarly, emphasize that 'hegemony' has no single center in the social, and that there can be a variety of hegemonic nodal points:

“Evidently some of them may be highly overdetermined: they may constitute points of condensation of a number of social relations and, thus, become the focal point of a multiplicity of totalizing effects. But insofar as the social is an infinitude not reducible to any underlying unitary principle, the mere idea of a centre of the social has no meaning at all.” (p. 139)

6.7 Hegemony's original cause: social antagonism

So far I have presented Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical concepts as effects of the theoretical problematic of ideology under the condition of discourse theory. From this perspective, their conceptualization of identity formation through discursive articulations can be understood as an attempt to resolve the question of the mechanisms at work in the constitution of social agents (or, in their terminology, of political identities). Moreover, their theory of hegemony can be regarded as the means through which to resolve the problem of theorizing the reproduction of dominant social relations, as well as the condition of social change.

Now, as I have argued in chapters 3 and 4, every theory of ideology relies on an additional analysis that generates the former's original problem. This is to say, a theory that seeks to investigate how relations of domination are reproduced, and under what conditions they can be challenged, rests upon an analysis of these very relations of domination. In other words, a theory investigating how social cohesion and consent is established in a fundamentally conflictual society needs to offer some kind of 'vision' of the nature of these conflicts.

In chapters 3 and 4, I suggested that this analysis was provided for Marxist theories of

ideology by the Marxian analysis of capitalism and the antagonisms (i.e., class antagonism) this mode of social organization engenders. Now, we have already seen that the term 'antagonism' figures prominently in Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse – in fact it is hegemony's precondition. Let me repeat one of their central statements in this context: “It is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices – in other words, that hegemony should emerge in a field criss-crossed by antagonisms and therefore suppose phenomena of equivalence and frontier effects” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 135-6).

What I would like to suggest is that the concept of 'social antagonism' developed in *HSS* assumes a central position within Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse because it is deployed to account for the conflictual nature of the social, which remains hegemony's condition of possibility.

Laclau and Mouffe engage with the notion of 'social antagonism' against the backdrop of the Marxist claim about the basic antagonism between capital and labor in capitalist societies (or, for that matter, claims about class struggle as accounting for antagonisms in all class societies).

Within this theoretical framework, the antagonism between capital and labor is explained by reference to the conflicting interests of workers and capitalists that are generated by the capitalist mode of production itself, and are, thus irreconcilable within capitalism (see above p. 35).

The equation of antagonism and *contradiction* is, naturally, highly unsatisfactory for Laclau and Mouffe, since they already reject claims as to the existence of 'objective interests', and the idea that there might be any kind of logical, i.e., necessary, connection between an agent's position in the relations of production and his or her political identity (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 84-5). Moreover, they criticize previous discussions of the problem of antagonism for focusing almost exclusively on the description of particular antagonisms and their original causes (p. 122).

It is important to note that Laclau and Mouffe seek to do something quite different, namely, to develop an *ontological* conception of antagonism. Their main question, thus, is: “[W]hat is an antagonistic relation? [W]hat type of relation among objects does it suppose?” (p.122). 'Contradiction' cannot be a sufficient explanation for antagonism, since subjects participate in

a number of contradictory belief-systems, which, in most cases, do not lead to the emergence of antagonism. Moreover, they argue that the category of contradiction, on a conceptual level, refers to a relation between full identities: “[I]t is because *A is fully A* that being-not-A is a contradiction – and therefore an impossibility” (p. 124, emphasis in original).

Thus this approach, i.e., the equating of contradiction with antagonism, is fundamentally at odds with the ontology of 'the social' that Laclau and Mouffe have sought to develop, which has revolved around the claim of the impossibility of any full, i.e., 'sutured', positive identity, and explicitly emphasizes its precarious and relational, i.e., 'negative' character. Hence they state that an antagonistic relation “arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution” (p. 125).

Put differently, 'antagonism' describes a relation in which the presence of 'the Other' prevents one from fully being oneself. This definition derives from Laclau and Mouffe's theory of identity formation (i.e., their theory of discourse): since political identities are, like all identities, constituted (i.e., given meaning) within discursive totalities, i.e., hegemonic formations, they are never complete but permanently subverted and overflowed by the field of discursivity that surrounds them. As Boucher makes clear:

“[E]very subject-position is a floating signifier whose polysemy makes possible limitless rearticulation. Since political identities are formed through equivalential oppositions ('us' and 'them'), every identity is relationally determined, or rendered incomplete, by the necessary existence of an antagonistic identity against which it is defined.” (Boucher 2008, p. 102)

In this sense, antagonism indicates the impossibility of what Laclau and Mouffe call 'a final suture', or the ultimate fixing of meaning: “Society never manages fully to be society, because everything in it is penetrated by its limits, which prevent it from constituting itself as an objective reality” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 127). Hence, Laclau and Mouffe locate the reason for the ever conflictual nature of the social in the incompleteness and precariousness of every identity, and the (hopeless) quest for fullness resembles the Marxist notion of class conflict as the 'motor of history': “Hegemonic articulation ultimately involves the negation of identity, through the exclusion of a political opponent from the discursive universe, and this leads to social antagonism” (Boucher 2008, p. 102-3).

I would like to draw attention to some problems this concept entails: First, this is a strictly

ontological (i.e., transhistorical) proposition that is, as we shall see, employed by Laclau and Mouffe to analyze concrete historical situations. The effect is, as with all transhistorical concepts, that historically specific situations are explained by reference to an aspect of the 'human condition'.

The second problem is that the concept of 'social antagonism', although presented as 'root cause' of social conflict, is actually theorized as a reaction. Laclau and Mouffe seem to use said definition of 'social antagonism' to interpret social struggle in a non-essentialist way. Hence, while they criticize the Marxist notion of class conflict for its inherent 'economism' insofar it assumes that workers have a logical interest in preventing capitalist absorption of the economic surplus (Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 84), they state that "it is because a peasant *cannot be* a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner" (p. 125, emphasis in original). Similarly, in their discussion of the workers' council movements in Italy and Germany at the End of the First World War (p. 157-8), they locate the root cause of the workers' radical mobilizations in the "transformations which called into question traditional forms of worker identity" (p. 157). In referring to different explanations of the role of the skilled workers, they argue:

"For some it is a question of the defence of skills against the already present danger of Taylorization. For others it is the experience that these workers had acquired during the war which made them think of the possibilities of self-organization of the process of production and pressed them to a confrontation with their employees. In either case, however, it is the defence of a certain identity which the workers had acquired (their skills or their organizational functions in production) which leads them to rebel." (p. 158)

On the one hand, this presents a deeply reactionary conception of social struggles by suggesting that they are ultimately about the *preservation* of social identity and, consequently, of the status quo. But this conception, although given an ontological status, only seems to apply to selected struggles. This is to say, if social antagonism is defined as "defending a type of identity under threat" (p. 158), how can we then understand the various struggles of feminist movements, which aimed precisely at a transformation of women's social identity? Or, how are we to make sense of the struggles of the anti-slavery movements, which were certainly not concerned with defending the identity of African-Americans as slaves. The reverse assumption, which emphasizes the threat these movements presented to the identity of the beneficiaries of those power relations which the former challenged, however, gravitates

towards a crude psychologism.

In other words, why should we conceptualize the root cause of antagonisms between, say, slaves and slave-owners in terms of a 'threatened identity', thereby rendering antagonism as 'natural' reaction of ever incomplete subjects. How is such an explanation preferable to explanations that highlight the role of racism and the simple fact that the abolition of slavery meant the abolition of unpaid labor?

The rationale of Laclau and Mouffe's definition of 'social antagonism' seems to be that they have to explain the latter on the terrain of discourse theory, i.e., to identify the *discursive* conditions of antagonism and social conflict. They argue that struggles against subordination cannot be the result of the situation of subordination itself, and that there is “nothing inevitable or natural in the different struggles against power” (p. 152). They furthermore suggest that it is only when a relation of subordination becomes a relation of oppression and hence a site of antagonism, that resistance becomes political (p. 153). The difference between a relation of subordination and a relation of oppression is, for Laclau and Mouffe, a discursive difference. They define a 'relation of subordination' as a relation in which “an agent is subjected to the decisions of another” (p. 153), and 'relations of oppression' as “those relations of subordination which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonism” (p. 154). Finally, they introduce the term 'relations of domination', understood as “the set of those relations of subordination which are considered as illegitimate from the perspective, or in the judgement, of a social agent external to them, and which, as a consequence, may or may not coincide with the relations of oppression actually existing in a determinate social formation” (p.154).

Laclau and Mouffe suggest that relations of subordination cannot be antagonistic as such, for the former “establishes, simply, a set of differential positions between social agents, and we already know that a system of differences which constructs each social identity as positivity [...] cannot be antagonistic” (p. 154). Hence, what is needed to transform a relation of subordination into a relation of oppression and hence into a site of antagonism is a 'discursive exterior' from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted (p. 154). Thus, they argue that

“[s]erf, 'slave' and so on, do not designate in themselves antagonistic

positions; it is only in the terms of a different discursive formation, such as 'the rights inherent to every human being', that the differential positivity of these categories can be subverted and the subordination constructed as oppression.”(p. 154)

Now, the problem here consists in the fact that Laclau and Mouffe similarly want to define what *constitutes* the specificity of oppression, subordination, etc., but can only do so by treating these notions as purely discursive constructs. Hence, the decisive difference between subordination, oppression, and domination is in their analysis a difference in the construction of these notions in discourse. This is to say, Laclau and Mouffe effectively theorize how said notions attain their specific meaning, but cannot differentiate this project from the project of developing propositions about the nature of oppression, subordination, etc. This conflation corresponds to their definition of discourse which, as I have argued, assimilates reality to meaning.

However, one of these definitions relates to 'how things are' as opposed to 'how their meaning is constructed in discourse': that is, their definition of 'relations of subordination', understood as a situation in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of another (p. 153). One of the problems with this definition, however, is that it stretches the notion of 'subordination' to such an extent that the latter loses all specificity. Hence, I here agree with Norman Geras when he objects:

“[O]ne is ‘subjected to the decisions’, on a perfectly regular basis, of all sorts of people: as, for example, of bus conductors, with regard to deportment on the bus; of neighbours, in respect of the kinds of exterior and garden and car they oblige you to see; and—in case that should seem footling—of employees, if you have them and they belong to a strong trade union; of democratic majorities, if you are a member, say, of some radical rightist minority which does not believe in democracy.” (Geras 1987, p. 76)

Laclau and Mouffe's definition of 'oppression' as a relation of subordination which has been transformed into a site of antagonism entails a similar problem. As we have seen, the transformation of a relation of subordination into a relation of oppression is carried out by a discursive intervention. The difficulty here is, as Boucher makes clear, that this definition proposes “a fundamental symmetry between the oppressed and the oppressor, implying a perspectival relativism, according to which my judgement that the other is my oppressor is simply an expression of a relational identity (which is necessarily decompleted by the antagonist)” (Boucher 2008, p. 105).

I would thus like to suggest that such an explanation empties our analysis of all historical and analytical specificity, drawing attention away from the concrete historical and social circumstances of social struggles, ultimately explaining them by reference to a transhistorical human condition.

6.8 The Democratic Revolution and the NSM

It is important to note that Laclau and Mouffe put forward a historicized version of the 'logic of hegemony'. As we have seen, hegemony's condition of possibility is the existence of 'floating elements', which result from an overdetermination of meaning (i.e., signifiers whose traditional meaning has been weakened or lost through their deployment in different discourses). In the context of a hegemonic articulation, these floating elements are retroactively invested with meaning through the construction of nodal points.

Since the presence of floating elements is theorized as the condition of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe claim that this form of politics only becomes dominant in the wake of modernity, which brought about a proliferation of differences (Boucher 2008, p. 101; Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 150-1, 155). Laclau and Mouffe suggest that the logic of hegemony was unleashed by the French Revolution, which they conceptualize as the key moment of the 'democratic revolution' that, they argue, inaugurated modernity (Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 150-1, 155).

As Smith notes:

“From the authors' [Laclau and Mouffe's, C.P.] perspective, the 'democratic revolution' is much more than a series of historical events. Laclau and Mouffe consider it instead as the very condition of possibility for the radicalization of social resistance [...] They argue that it is only in specific historical contexts that resistance becomes political in the sense that it begins to aim not only to oppose a specific instance of domination but to put an end to the entire structure of subordination itself.” (Smith 1998, p. 6)

Determining the specificity of those historical contexts in which 'resistance becomes political', not surprisingly, consists for Laclau and Mouffe in identifying “the *discursive* conditions for the emergence of a collective action, directed towards struggling against inequalities and challenging relations of subordination” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 153, my emphasis). Laclau and Mouffe argue that the 'democratic revolution' represented

“the decline of a form of politics for which the division of the social into two antagonistic camps is *an original and immutable datum, prior to all hegemonic*

construction, and the transition towards a new situation, characterized by the essential instability of political spaces, in which the very identity of the forces in struggle is submitted to constant shifts, and calls for an incessant process of redefinition.” (p. 151, emphasis in original)

The relationship between the 'logic of hegemony' and the 'democratic revolution' is thus established on a symbolic level. Following Claude Lefort, Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize the fundamental rupture between the ancient regime and modernity as the emptying of the place of power, formerly occupied by the monarch who embodied the social whole.

“The social body was conceived of as a whole in which individuals appeared fixed in differential positions. For as long as such a holistic mode of institution of the social predominated, politics could not be more than the repetition of hierarchical relations which reproduced the same type of subordinated subject.” (p. 155)

In modernity, by contrast, the locus of power ultimately remains empty and can only be temporarily occupied “by some particular group and the corresponding hegemonisation of the content of the universal” (Boucher 2008, p. 108). This empty place of power can thus be understood as an empty signifier, i.e., a symbolic place “that cements society by creating a myth of unification around some universal value” (p. 109).

Laclau and Mouffe here indicate the historical conditions of the logic of hegemony. The French Revolution, initiated the break with the *ancien regime*, and this break, they argue, is symbolized by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which introduced the logic of equivalence. That is to say, the Declaration of the Rights of man provided the “discursive conditions which made it possible to propose the different forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 155). This logic of the equality of rights has thus unleashed a dynamic which has made it increasingly difficult to ground subordination in a discourse of natural inequality. However, the Democratic Revolution also entails the extension of a differential logic, the logic of liberty, which marks the difference between moments of the social (Boucher 2008, p. 109).

The *NSM*, according to Laclau and Mouffe, can thus be regarded as product of this democratic discourse engendered by the Democratic Revolution, i.e., as an “extension of the democratic revolution to a whole new series of social relations” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 160).

So far, the history of social struggle and the *NSM* have been explained by Laclau and Mouffe in terms of discourse, and the reason for social conflict has been located in the incompleteness of identity.

Interestingly enough, Laclau and Mouffe refer to a second dimension of this process, and state:

“One cannot understand the present expansion of the field of social conflictuality and the consequent emergence of new political subjects without situating both in the context of the commodification and bureaucratization of social relations on the one hand, and the reformulation of the liberal-democratic ideology – resulting from the expansion of struggles for equality – on the other.” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 163)

Thus, they identify a continuity between the *NSM* and struggles of the 19th century (consisting in the permanence of the 'egalitarian imaginary'), as well as a discontinuity:

“[W]e can speak of discontinuity, as a good proportion of the new political subjects have been constituted through their antagonistic relationship to recent forms of subordination, derived from the implanting and expansion of capitalist relations of production and the growing intervention of the state.” (p. 160)

To account for this process, Laclau and Mouffe suggest an additional perspective, namely, an *economic* perspective and draw on Michel Aglietta's analysis of the transition from an extensive to an intensive regime of accumulation (p. 160). They argue that the latter is

“characterized by the spread of capitalist relations of production to the whole set of social relations, and the subordination of the latter to the logic of production for profit [...] This 'commodification' of social life destroyed previous social relations, replacing them with commodity relations through which the logic of capitalist accumulation penetrated into increasingly numerous spheres.” (p.160)

This process of commodification, they argue, resulted in the creation of new forms of subordination. For example, Laclau and Mouffe refer to the waste of natural resources, pollution and destruction of the environment, as well as to the “general urbanization, which has accompanied economic growth, the transfer of classes to the urban periphery [...] and the general lack of collective goods and services” (p. 161). All of this, they argue, gave rise to social struggles. They also emphasize another form of subordination brought about by the transformation of capitalist organization, namely, the growing bureaucratization that, they suggest, has come to constitute one of the fundamental sources of conflicts and inequalities.

Now, I would like to suggest that this presents a rather odd intervention in Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse. For one, they effectively analyze the emergence of the *NSM* by reference to the concepts of another theoretical discourse (i.e., through the concepts of the Regulation School), without invoking their own conceptual apparatus. Of course, they ultimately argue that the *NSM* are only conceptually graspable if one takes into account both factors, the democratic revolution as well as the transformations of capitalist social organization (Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 163). But I would, nonetheless, like to suggest that it is the framework provided by the Regulation School which accounts for the explanatory power of their analysis.

It is, however, not clear how the concepts they incorporate can be made compatible with their own ontological assumptions. If it is not possible to differentiate the discursive from any other dimension of reality, how can we theorize some dimensions of social reality (capitalist accumulation, capitalist social relations etc.) without conceptualizing them on the level of discourse? Moreover, how do the categories that underlie their own theoretical discourse relate to the concepts they employ to supplement their analysis?

In the concluding chapter, I will elaborate on these questions and argue that they point to the serious constraints of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse. I will further discuss their concepts and connect the difficulties I identify to Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical trajectory and ontological position. In doing so, I seek to draw attention to the implications of this position for theoretical practice. Finally, I argue for a meta-theoretical position that recognizes the specificity of both discourse theory and social theory.

7 Conclusion

In the last chapter, I problematized the fact that Laclau and Mouffe analyze the history of the *NSM* by drawing on concepts from the Regulation School, without examining the relation of these concepts to their own theoretical discourse. Hence, one of the problems I alluded to was that it remains unclear whether the concepts they incorporate are compatible with their own ontological assumptions. That is to say, if it is not possible - as Laclau and Mouffe claim - to differentiate the discursive from any other dimension of reality, how can we theorize social phenomena on a level different from discourse? Moreover, although Laclau and Mouffe clearly connect capitalist social relations to inequality and subordination and environmental destruction (Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 159-61), they can neither explain what categories underlie their critical analysis, nor elucidate the connection between capitalism and these processes¹⁵.

Hence, their representation of the relationship between capitalism and the processes of commodification, pollution, and bureaucratization remains on a purely descriptive level. It is here that we see the boundaries of Laclau and Mouffe's analytical framework. In other words, the conceptual apparatus they developed relates to the sphere of discourse – it can be deployed to explore the discursive dimension of social struggles, identity formation, or power relations. It cannot, however, help us understand the relationship between, say, capitalism and environmental destruction or commodification. Neither can it elucidate the *nature* of power relations, or their function in the context of a particular form of social organization. To be sure, my intention is not to argue that their concepts *should* be capable of grasping these issues – to the contrary, I would suggest that the latter are simply not *HSS*'s objects of knowledge. Neither am I suggesting that the incorporation of concepts from another theoretical discourse is illegitimate. Instead, I want to draw attention to the fact that Laclau and Mouffe seem to be unaware of the explanatory limitations of their theoretical discourse.

They presented their theoretical discourse from the outset as an *alternative* explanatory framework to Marxist theory, thereby insinuating both, the superiority of their own discourse and a shared object of knowledge with Marxist theory. Moreover, the concepts that make up Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse are *ontologically* grounded. Hence, their statement that it is not possible to differentiate the discursive from any other area of reality (Laclau/Mouffe 1990, p. 105), or their determination of 'the social' as the “infinite play of

¹⁵ For a similar criticism of Derrida see Postone 1998, p. 378

differences” (Laclau 1990a, p. 90) are propositions that purport to have universal and transhistorical validity. From this perspective, the incorporation of categories like 'capitalist social relations' or 'commodification' would at least require a critical examination of the relation between those categories and Laclau and Mouffe's ontological stance. The reason for their misrecognition of the specificity and boundaries of their own project is, I believe, to be found in both, their anti-realism and in their theoretical trajectory.

Regarding the first point, I would like to foreground the effect of Laclau and Mouffe's insistence on the analytical primacy of 'meaning', and hence of 'discourse'. In the last chapter, I argued that their theoretical presuppositions lead to a situation where Laclau and Mouffe could not theorize anything but discourse (p. 106). This effectively requires them to subsume all phenomena under one single category, and, consequentially, to explain them by reference to that very category, i.e., discourse.

The problem here is that this deprives Laclau and Mouffe of the capability of analytically differentiating between different instances of a social formation. Their theory of identity formation is here a point in case. I have argued that one of the questions that makes up the theoretical problematic of 'ideology' the concern with the relationship between structures and consciousness. As I have shown, this question is transformed in *HSS* into the question of the relationship between discourse and the construction of subject positions. Effectively, then, the category of 'structures' is replaced by the category of 'discourse', and this transformation is triggered by a position that allows one to approach structures *as* discourses. Similarly, the resulting discursively constructed subject positions can themselves be subsumed under the category of 'discourse'. Ultimately, the original question of how structures shape consciousness has been transformed into the rather tautological question of how discourses shape other discourses. To be sure, this is a conceptual question concerning the possibilities entailed by different modes of theorizing.

Another problem is that Laclau and Mouffe's decision to make 'discourse' the basic analytic is *ontologically* grounded. Thus, the only valid object of inquiry is the discursive dimension of social phenomena – this is to say, this vantage point requires us to approach the latter as discursive phenomena. In other words, the categories that underlie Laclau and Mouffe's concepts assume universal validity and applicability, and thus impede an awareness of the

constraints of the latter's explanatory potential.

Now, this is not to diminish Laclau and Mouffe's efforts and accomplishments in the field of discourse theory - I actually do believe that some of their concepts are very helpful in analyzing the internal processes of discourse formation. The problem is, rather, that their theory of discourse, and the ontological position it relies on, implicitly render other, non-discourse oriented approaches illegitimate. Or, at the very least, they make it rather difficult for Laclau and Mouffe to determine the relation between their own conceptual framework and the theoretical discourses whose focus is not on discursive processes.

Regarding the second point, I would like to come back to the theoretical problematic of 'ideology'. In chapter 3, I argued that the expansive as well as the restrictive concept of ideology rely on an additional mode of analysis that engenders 'ideology's original problem' (p. 43-4). I have also argued that ideology is, in this sense, conceptualized as an effect of something else, and that this is made possible by the fact that it relies on a realist ontology (which allows one to differentiate between 'reality' and 'appearance'). The incorporation of the category of 'discourse' into this realist framework, and the consequent abandonment of this distinction has, I believe, serious consequences for the practice of theorizing.

On the one hand, I would like to suggest that the distinction between the actual nature of things, and the way these are represented in (political) discourse is an important one – from an analytical as well as from a political perspective. One problem Laclau and Mouffe's approach entails is, thus, that it deprives them of the grounds to criticize any discourse in terms of its empirical adequacy. The fact that they still do so, as in the case of the New Right (Laclau/Mouffe 2001a, p. 171-5), raises the question of the adequacy of a mode of critique to its object¹⁶. Moreover, in order to challenge said interpretations, Laclau and Mouffe would need to provide categories that support *their* analysis. That is to say, a critique of neo-liberal discourses would require the conceptual tools that allow Laclau and Mouffe to account for their *critical* analysis of the consequences of capitalist accumulation.

On the other hand, I would like to argue that the link of 'ideology' to a different kind of analysis, i.e., a structural analysis, also works to establish the boundaries of the former's object of knowledge. In other words, neither the restrictive nor the expansive approaches identify the *root-cause* of social conflict in conflicting 'ideologies'. In the Marxist tradition,

¹⁶ This insight is also owed to a remark made by Postone, see Postone 1998, p. 378

this root-cause is conceptualized in terms of a social order that structurally opposes the interest of the individual to the interest of the community (see above, p. 114). My point here is not so much to support a Marxist analyses, which conceptualize this basic contradiction in terms of *class* conflict, but to emphasize the theoretical possibilities of a conceptual approach that conceives of 'ideology' as a product of such (societal) contradictions. In the case of Marxism, the notion of 'contradiction' works to critically link 'ideology' to a historically specific form of *social* organization. 'Ideology' is thus not explained by reference to an inevitable human condition, but draws attention to relations of domination and exploitation, which are concealed (i.e. *appear* different than they are) in and through 'ideology'.

Conceptualizing 'ideology' in terms of appearance does not necessarily cast it as mere illusion, without efficacy. A different way of understanding the reality/appearance distinction would be in terms of structure and effect. Thus understood, the point about 'appearances' would not be that they are not 'real' (or have no efficacy), but that they have the status of effects, i.e., products of the interplay of a number of instances that underlie and engender the former.

I have argued above that this link is provided by the notion of 'mystification' or 'distortion', and suggested that this notion cannot be upheld in the context of an irrealist ontology (p. 48-9). I would now like to propose that the absence of this link between 'ideology' and a form of structural analysis (in the context of an irrealist framework) works to flatten out different analytical levels into one. Consequently, the root-cause of ideological struggle is itself ultimately identified in ideological (or, discursive) struggle. I think this is obvious in Laclau and Mouffe's concept of 'social antagonism'. The ever-conflictual nature of society is no longer explained in terms of a historically specific system of social organization, but in terms of an ontologically grounded threat the 'the Other' poses to the identity of subjects. Since the notion of 'the subject' is defined as a discursively constructed subject position, this ultimately suggests that the conflictuality of society is rooted in the struggle between different discourses that seek to redefine, and in the process negate, the identities of social agents.

It is here that the difference between Laclau and Mouffe's concepts and social theory proper manifests itself most clearly. To be sure, one *can* conceptualize the root cause of social conflict this way, and it is certainly possible to analyze, say, the advent of the *NSM* in these terms. But the question really is for what purpose one should do so. I would like to propose

one minimum requirement necessary to qualify a theoretical practice as being a social theory: The latter should present an attempt to explain social phenomena as products of *historically specific* modes of social organization, and provide the categories that account for the historical specificity of the latter. The concept of 'social antagonism' prohibits an understanding of social struggle as a historically specific phenomenon. It is, as I have argued, a transhistorical and ontological category that ultimately explains social conflictuality by reference to a human condition, thus it is closer to philosophical anthropology than to social theory.

Moreover, social theory explores the way a given society is instituted, the social relations by which it is characterized, and the interplay between, and the effects of, these relations. These are questions that Laclau and Mouffe are clearly unable to address with their conceptual framework. I would indeed like to suggest that it is, in general, impossible to address these questions by discourse analysis or theory. Now, one could, again, object that their theoretical discourse simply does not revolve around these objects of knowledge – which is without a doubt true. But the problem is, as I have already indicated, that they present their concepts as an alternative framework to Marxist theory (see e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 2001b, p. ix-x; Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 2-5; Laclau and Mouffe 1990, p. 97-8).

Now, some authors have qualified Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse as a *political* theory (Smith 1998, p. 1; Torfing 1999, p. 17-20; Bowman 2007, p. 10). Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse seeks to elucidate the making of political identities and to explore the conditions of collective political action (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001a, p. 153; Laclau and Mouffe 2001b, p. x). However, while Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical concepts can be deployed to theorize the logic of politics, their theoretical discourse does not provide the conceptual means to theorize social and political institutions. This is to say, notions like 'the state', 'democracy', or 'power' remain essentially vague in *HSS*. Moreover Laclau and Mouffe's approach does not allow, as I have suggested above, for a theorization of institutions, since their position requires them to subsume the latter under the category of 'discourse'.

I would, thus, finally like to raise a question I have been trying to avoid so far: that is, the question of Laclau and Mouffe's assessment of Marxism. I think it is safe to say that Laclau and Mouffe, somewhat inattentively, fail to make some analytically important differentiations. Thus, they do not distinguish between Marxism as a political movement, and Marxist theory

as a multifarious intellectual tradition that is made up a numerous and very different strands and theoretical paradigms. Moreover, they fail to determine the specificity of their own research project *vis-à-vis* the theoretical discourses with which they engage.

Hence, their main objections to Marxism are based on three claims (Boucher 2008, p. 21): First, that the main cause of social struggle in the contemporary world cannot be explained from a Marxist perspective; second, that the proletariat is not the subject of history; and, third, that Marxism cannot generate a democratic program. The problem, however, is that by failing to differentiate between the specific objects of knowledge with which different Marxist theorists have been concerned, Laclau and Mouffe effectively insinuate that Marxist theory, and Marx's analyses, primarily revolve around these exact questions – that is, around the questions of socialist strategy, social conflict, and socialist alternatives.

What I would like to suggest is, thus, that Laclau and Mouffe fail to determine the specificity of both their own object of knowledge as well as Marx's. Their assumption that these are identical, however, allows us to infer from their interpretation of Marx's central claims the terms in which they assess their own project. To be sure, Marx's and Marxism's theoretical legacy are extremely contested, and there certainly exist a good number of profoundly conflicting interpretations. My own understanding of Marx's analysis of capitalism is strongly influenced by Moishe Postone's interpretation (Postone 1996). Postone's approach conceives of Marx's categories as referring to historically specific social relations, constituted by a historically and socially determinate system, i.e., capitalism:

“These social relations, grasped by categories such as 'commodity' and 'capital', are not primarily class relations – as it is assumed by traditional Marxist understandings – but peculiar quasi-objective forms of social mediation, constituted by determinate forms of social practices, that exert a historically new, abstract, 'structural' form of compulsion on the actors who constitute them.” (Postone 1998, p. 381)

From this perspective, Marx's analysis of capitalism not only constitutes a fundamentally different research project from Laclau and Mouffe's. It also has the merit of conceiving of historical and social dynamics as *historically and socially determinate*, thereby casting light on the specific mode of social organization that engenders the former. The radicalness of this approach lies in a stance that conceives of social phenomena and historical dynamics as products of social relations rather than attributing these to transhistorical processes or a human condition.

However, this is not to generally discredit discourse analysis or theory, but to problematize an ontological and epistemological stance that situates the former in opposition to structural analyses, or assigns to discourse primary causal and explanatory power. Besides suggesting that these two domains shed light on different dimension of social reality I would also like to suggest that nothing that I have argued here prevents them from being productively combined. For instance, this could be done by conceiving of social structures as the conditions of possibility of specific discourses.

Finally, I would like to conclude by arguing for a meta-theoretical stance that conceives of theoretical discourses and concepts as tools which allow us to investigate *different aspects and dimensions* of reality. This, as I argued in chapter 2, requires an ontological position which establishes a rupture between reality and our means for investigating it, but, nevertheless, renders knowledge of the former possible. In the case of *HSS*, this means recognizing the specific object of knowledge to which Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse relates. In other words, Laclau and Mouffe's concepts (i.e., 'chains of equivalence', 'discursive formation', 'articulation', etc.) are designed to investigate the *internal mechanisms* of the constitution of meaning within discourse. What I would object to is the explanatory potential Laclau and Mouffe assign to their concepts, and the fact that they ground them ontologically.

In this work, I have sought to demonstrate that these problems can be explained by investigating the *internal* structure of *HSS*. Hence, my aim has been to understand the formation of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse, and to develop a critique that confronts it on its own terms. I am convinced that, while this is certainly not the only mode of critique that supports productive theoretical debates, it is one that helps to establish a 'common ground' necessary to put different theoretical discourses 'in touch' with each other. At the very least, I hope that it conveys a stance that takes theoretical work seriously. This is to say: different theories are not simply competing narratives, and theoretical work is more than 'story-telling'. It is a product of the world in which we live, and a craft providing us with a rich arsenal of tools to investigate, debate, and criticize this world. Thus it is – in both the most critical and most promising sense – a social practice.

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LEBENS LAUF

Persönliche Daten

Name: Clara Teresa PICKER

Geb.datum: 23.10.1984

Schulische Ausbildung

2003: Am GRG Rahlgasse (1060 Wien) mit Auszeichnung maturiert (Fachbereichsarbeit zum Thema "Die Bedeutung von weiblichen Vorbildern und Identifikationsfiguren für junge Frauen und Mädchen")

Universitäre Ausbildung

Seit Oktober 2003: Studium der Internationalen Entwicklung an der Universität Wien

Seit März 2007: Studium der Politikwissenschaft an der Universität Wien

September 2006: Teilnahme an Exkursion der TU Wien/Uni Wien zum Thema Urbanisierung, Stadt- und Regionalentwicklung nach Chile

September 2008 – Dezember 2008: Auslandsemester an der University of Ottawa, Kanada im Rahmen des Joint Studies Programms der Universität Wien

Berufserfahrung

2003-2007: Freie Mitarbeiterin des Instituts SORA (Institute for Social Research and Analysis, 1150 Wien)

Aufgaben & Tätigkeiten (Auswahl):

Medienresonanzanalysen; Transkription qualitativer Interviews (Einzelinterviews, Fokusgruppen) mit Schwerpunkt auf Arbeitsmarktpolitische Fragestellungen; Auswertung qualitativer Interviews (Kodieren offener Antworten in quantitativen Umfragen nach Kategorienschema); PR-Assistenz (Homepage, Recherche), Sekretariatsvertretung

2004: Freie Mitarbeiterin der Akademie der Wissenschaften (1010 Wien)

Aufgaben & Tätigkeiten:

Transkription englischsprachiger Interviews

April 2006 bis Juni 2006: Praktikantin bei Joanneum Research (Institut für Technologie- und Regionalpolitik, 1090 Wien) im Bereich Gender Mainstreaming (Mitarbeit an Studie zur Verbesserung der Arbeitssituation von Frauen im Pflegebereich)

Aufgaben & Tätigkeiten: Recherche, Auswertung qualitativer Interviews, Transkription qualitativer Interviews

März 2006- Juni 2007: Tutorin an der Universität Wien bei Dr. Johannes Jäger (Proseminar Transdisziplinäre Entwicklungsforschung: Internationale Politische Ökonomie I)

November 2006 bis Jänner 2007: Projektmitarbeit bei Joanneum Research im Bereich Gender Mainstreaming (Mitarbeit an Studie zu Frauenarmut in NÖ)

Aufgaben & Tätigkeiten: Recherche, Entwicklung von Interviewleitfäden, Durchführung von Einzelinterviews, Auswertung qualitativer Interviews

Dezember 2007: Gastvortrag zum Thema “Einführung in Grundkonzepte des Marxismus” im Rahmen der Vorlesung von Martin Krenn “Globalisierung und Künstlerischer Widerstand” an der Universität für Angewandte Kunst, 1010 Wien

Sprachkenntnisse

Deutsch/Englisch (Sehr gut); Französisch/Spanisch (Grundkenntnisse)

Abstract (Deutsch):

In dieser Arbeit entwickle ich eine meta-theoretische Kritik des theoretischen Diskurses von Ernesto Laclau und Chantal Mouffe. Ich setze mich mit deren Werk "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy" auseinander, in dem Laclau und Mouffe kritische Gesellschaftstheorie mit post-strukturalistischer Philosophie zu verbinden suchen. Mein Ziel ist es die theoretischen Implikationen und Konsequenzen ihrer Diskurstheorie, welche den Begriff der Realität auf den des Diskurses reduziert, zu untersuchen. Mein Anspruch ist, überdies, eine Form der Auseinandersetzung mit einem theoretischen Diskurs zu liefern, die sich nicht auf eine dem Diskurs externe Vergleichsinstanz stützt. Hierzu setze ich mich im ersten Teil dieser Arbeit mit den Möglichkeiten der Theoriekritik, und deren philosophischen Implikationen auseinander. Mit Hilfe von Louis Althusser's Konzept der "theoretischen Problematik" verorte ich dann, im zweiten Teil, Laclau und Mouffe's theoretischen Diskurs in der Tradition marxistischer Ideologietheorie. Ich untersuche welche theoretischen Strukturen Laclau und Mouffe dazu veranlassen den von ihnen entwickelten Konzepten einen ontologischen Status zuzuweisen. Meine These ist, dass dies ein theoretischer Effekt des Umstands ist, dass Laclau und Mouffe das Konzept der 'Ideologie', das nur im Rahmen einer realistischen Ontologie denkbar ist, mit dem Konzept des 'Diskurs' ersetzen, welches in ihrer Definition auf einer irrealistischen Ontologie beruht. Abschliessend diskutiere ich die Bedeutung ihrer Konzepte für die theoretische Praxis.

Keywords: Postmarxismus, Strukturalismus, Poststrukturalismus, Hegemonie, Ideologie, Diskurs, Kritischer Realismus, Marxismus, Laclau und Mouffe, Althusser, Idealismus, Theoriekritik, Marx, Theoretische Problematik.

Abstract (English):

In my thesis, I examine the central theoretical postulates of post-Marxism by developing a meta-theoretical critique of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (first published in 1985, henceforth *HSS*), which can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of the merging between post-Structuralist philosophy and critical social theory. My overall aim is to explore the consequences of Laclau and Mouffe's version of discourse theory, which takes the social and the discursive to be co-extensive, for the practice of theorizing.

In the first part of my thesis, I investigate different ways of approaching a theoretical text and argue that these 'modes of critique' not only imply distinct conceptions of theory and knowledge, but are furthermore characterized by profoundly different objects of knowledge. Following Louis Althusser's conception of theoretical practice as mode of production of knowledges, I problematize the fact that most modes of critique tend to explore a theoretical discourse in relation to something which is external to the latter (e.g. in relation to another theoretical discourse, or to a specific historical period etc.), thereby failing to engage with a theoretical discourse 'on its own terms'. I suggest that while all of these modes of critique are perfectly legitimate, they work to illuminate different dimensions of a given theoretical system and thus produce fundamentally different knowledge effects. Drawing on Althusser's concept of the 'theoretical problematic', I develop a methodology that allows me to access and engage with Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical discourse on its own terms as well as to identify its potential problems. In the second part of my thesis, I deploy this mode of critique to explore those dimensions of *HSS*, which I regard as potentially problematic for the practice of theorizing - that is, especially the implicit equation of discourse theory with social theory, and the fact that Laclau and Mouffe assign to their concepts an ontological status. However, I investigate and explain these problems from the standpoint of Laclau and Mouffe's concepts and theoretical assumptions itself, and without reference to empirical reality or another 'superior' theoretical discourse. Hence, I approach these two aspects as *theoretical effects*, and seek to illuminate which combination of instances in their theoretical discourse engender these. I argue that these theoretical effects can be regarded as product of the combination of the theoretical problematic of ideology, which is only thinkable on the basis of a realist ontology, and Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse which, as I demonstrate, relies on a irrealist ontology. I draw on Roy Bhaskar's critical realism to challenge Laclau and Mouffe's ontological claims, and demonstrate the impoverishing effects their equation of social theory with discourse theory has on the practice of theorizing. Finally, I suggest that social theory

and discourse theory are concerned with profoundly different dimensions of social reality, and should thus neither be equated nor opposed to each other.

Keywords: Ideology, Laclau and Mouffe, Discourse, Structuralism, post-Structuralism, post-Marxism, Althusser, Marx, Theoretical Problematic, Critical Realism, Irrealism, Theoretical Critique, Hegemony.