

## NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE PLURALITY OF THE SOCIAL

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We have come together in this workshop to try to throw some light on the new social movements in Latin America. Our concern is thus rooted within the numerous contemporary debates in which an attempt is made to determine the radically new forms and dimensions which social conflict has assumed in recent decades. My contribution to this discussion is not aimed at a descriptive analysis of the movements as a whole, or of some of them in particular - that is work to be done by specialists who are more competent in this particular field than I. Rather, I shall put forward certain theoretical premises which make it possible to think the novelty and the specificity of the new forms of struggle and resistance.

The first question that arises when dealing with the new social movements is: in what respects are they 'new'? In our attempt to outline a reply, we will refer this novelty, above all, to the way in which the new struggles bring about a crisis of a traditional paradigm in social sciences concerning the kind of unity which characterises social agents and the shapes which conflict between them can take. Three main characteristics have typified traditional conceptualizations of social conflicts: the determination of the *identity of the agents* was given through categories belonging to the social structure; the *kind of conflict* was determined in terms of a diachronic-evolutionary paradigm; and the plurality of spaces of social conflict was reduced, insofar as the conflicts became politicised, to a *unified political space* in which the presence of the agents was conceived of as a 'representation of interests'. The first feature refers the area of emergence of every conflict to the empirical-referential unity of the group: struggles are labelled 'peasant', 'bourgeois', 'petit-bourgeois', etc. Each of these categories thus designates both

the social agent as referent and an assumed *a priori* principle of unity between the agent's various positions. The second determines the meaning of every struggle in terms of a teleological, evolutionary scheme, through which that meaning becomes 'objective': it does not depend on the consciousness of the agents, but on an underlying movement of history - the transition from traditional to mass society, in some conceptualisations; or the transition from feudalism to capitalism in others, etc. The third aspect is an inevitable consequence of the first two: in the closed society postulated by the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of the paradigm under scrutiny, the political sphere is a precise 'level' of the social; if the identity of the social agents, then, is constituted at a different level - e.g. the economic - their presence at the political level can only take the form of a representation of interests. What is characteristic of the new social movements is that, through them, the unity of these three aspects of the paradigm has been broken up. On the one hand, it has become increasingly impossible to identify the group, conceived as referent, with an orderly and coherent system of 'subject positions'. Take the example of the worker. Is there some stable relation between his/her position in the relations of production and his/her position as consumer, resident in a specific area, participant in the political system, etc.? Evidently, the relation between these different positions is far from being obvious and permanent; it is rather the result of complex political constructions which are based on the totality of social relations and which cannot be derived unilaterally from the relations of production. In the 19th century the priority of the relations of production was due to the long hours spent by the workers in the factories and their limited access to consumer goods and to general social participation as a result of their low wages. The transformation of these conditions in the 20th century, however, has weakened the ties which linked the various identities of the worker as producer, consumer, political agent, etc. This has had two results: on the one hand, the social agent's positions become autonomous - it is this autonomy which is at the root of the specificity of the new social movements -, but on the other hand,

the type of articulation existing among these different positions becomes continually more indeterminate. At any rate, they cannot be derived automatically from the unity of the group as referent. Categories such as 'working class', 'petit-bourgeois', etc., become less and less meaningful as ways of understanding the overall identity of social agents. The concept of 'class struggle', for example, is neither correct nor incorrect - it is, simply, totally insufficient as a way of accounting for contemporary social conflicts.

Secondly, this collapse of the synchronic unity between the different positions of the agent has led to a crisis in the diachronic theory of 'stages': thus in the same way that a determinate subject position - in the example given above the position in the relations of production - does not automatically provide any necessary determination of the other positions, it is impossible to refer each single position to a rational, necessary succession of stages. Very early on Marxism had to deal with the phenomena designated as 'unequal and combined development', with the growing coexistence of 'elements' which political practice had to articulate in the present and which, theoretically, should have made their appearance in successive phases of development. Similarly, the so-called 'modernisation' theories were soon forced to recognise the uselessness for political analysis of assigning each aspect of social and economic reality to the successive stages of 'traditional' and 'modern' society, given the variety of heterodox combinations of the two, which derived from the phenomena of economic and social dependence.

Lastly, if the identity of social agents is no longer conceived as constituted at a single level of society their presence at the other 'levels' can also not be conceived of as a 'representation of interests'. The 'representation of interests' model thus loses its validity. But, for the same reason, the political ceases to be a *level* of the social and becomes a *dimension* which is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all social practice. The political is one of the possible forms of existence of the social - we shall see which. The new social movements have been characterised by an increasing politicisation

of social life (remember the feminist slogan: 'The personal is political'); but also it is precisely this which has shattered the vision of the political as a closed, homogeneous space.

At this point one might ask: is it not the case that this plurality of the social and this proliferation of political spaces which lie behind the new social movements, are basically typical of the advanced industrial societies, whilst the social reality of the Third World, given its lower level of differentiation, can still be apprehended in terms of the more classical categories of sociological and class analysis? The reply is that, besides the fact that this 'lower level of differentiation' is a myth, Third World societies have *never* been comprehensible in terms of a strict class analysis. We hardly need to refer to the Eurocentrism in which the 'universalization' of that analysis was based. It saw the categories emerging from distinctions among modes of production, among social classes - i.e. categories which had been conceived of as a way of apprehending the European experience - as constants of every possible society. Starting from this point, sociological analysis followed a very simple course: everything depended on a strategy of recognition, in which the very way in which the questions were asked already presupposed half of the answer. A question such as 'what is the class structure of the agrarian sector in country x or z?' presupposes what it sets out to show, namely, that the divisions between social agents should be treated as class divisions. Likewise, questions about the precise location of the capitalist State within a certain social formation are frequently treated as if that entity - the capitalist State - derived all its essential determinations from a level ontologically different from that in which its historically contingent variations are constituted. (A similar process of essentialist reduction is at work behind questions such as 'What path did the transition from feudalism to capitalism follow in that country or area?'; or 'Was the revolution of such a year *the* democratic bourgeois revolution?').

We should try to avoid this kind of Eurocentric universalism. To do so, we must start by taking a step backwards and look at

entities such as 'classes', 'levels' of the social, etc. as complexes resulting from the *contingent* articulation of smaller entities. We have to determine the theoretical status of these entities and the specificity of that articulatory link, existing among them, a link to which we have referred without, however, providing an adequate theoretical concept of it.

### 1. Subject positions, articulation, hegemony.<sup>1</sup>

One of the fundamental advances in social sciences in recent years has been the break with the category of the 'subject' as a rational, transparent unity which would convey a homogeneous meaning on the total field of his/her conduct by being the source of his/her actions. Psychoanalysis has shown that, far from being organised around the transparency of an ego, personality is structured in a number of levels which lie outside the consciousness and rationality of the agents. Marxism was early on forced to recognise the fundamental asymmetry between the actual consciousness of the agents and the one which should have corresponded to them according to their historical interests - although its reaction to this discovery, instead of leading to a critique of the rationalism implicit in the notion of 'interests', was rather to reaffirm the latter by means of the 'in-itself/for-itself' distinction.

This removal of the centrality of the subject in contemporary social science has led to an inversion of the classic notion of subjectivity. Instead of seeing the subject as a source which would provide the world with meaning, we see each subject *position* as occupying differential loci within a structure. This structure or ensemble of differential positions we call a *discourse*. *There is no a priori, necessary relation* between the discourses which constitute the worker, for example, as a militant or as a technical agent in the workplace, and those which determine his attitude towards politics, racial violence, sexism and other spheres in which the agent is active. It is thus impossible to speak of the social agent as if we were dealing with a unified, homogeneous entity. We have rather to approach the social

agent as a plurality, dependent on the various subject positions by which s/he is constituted within various discursive formations. This provides us with a theoretical key to understand the peculiarity of the new social movements : their central characteristic is, for reasons which will be discussed later, that an ensemble of subject positions (at the level of, the place of residence, institutional apparatuses, various forms of cultural, racial and sexual subordination) have become points of conflict and political mobilisation. The proliferation of these new forms of struggle results from the increasing autonomization of social spheres in contemporary societies, autonomization which can only be theoretically grasped in all its implications if we start from the notion of the subject as a de-centred, de-totalised agent.

We should at this point indicate the theoretical status that can be attributed to these units of analysis which we have called 'subject positions'. They certainly give us the instruments with which to think the specificity of a number of situations which have evaded classical sociological analysis. For example, they enable us to see that a category such as the 'working class' of the European experience was the result of an articulation between specific subject positions at the level of the relations of production, and other positions at a separate level which were nevertheless organised around a central axis constituted by the former. The explanation for this lies in particular historical factors connected with the specificity of that situation. In other historical contexts the positions at the level of the relations of production will be articulated with the others in a different way, without it being possible to guarantee *a priori* the centrality of any one of them. One problem, however, remains unsolved: what is it that guarantees the *separation* between the different subject positions. The answer is: nothing - none of them is immune to the action of the others. Their differentiation is certainly related to the impossibility of establishing an *a priori*, necessary link between them; but this does not mean that there are not constant efforts to establish between them historically contingent and variable links. This type of link, which establishes between various positions a contingent, non-predetermined relation, is what we call *articulation*. There is no necessary link

between racism and militancy on the part of white workers, but at different moments there will be discourses that will try to provide an articulation between the two from politically opposed standpoints - the immigrants may be portrayed as foreigners who come to steal the jobs of the white nationals, or alternatively racism may be portrayed as an ideology which tries to stir up xenophobic feelings in the interests of the capitalists. Every subject position is thus constituted within an essentially unstable discursive structure, since it is subjected to articulatory practices which, from different standpoints, subvert and transform it. If the link between anti-racism and workers' militancy were to reach the point that each would necessarily imply the other, they would both have become part of the same discursive formation and would thus no longer constitute different subject positions, but differential *moments* of a unified subject position. In such a case, there would be no room for any articulatory practice. Because this is not the case, because social reality never arrives at such a point of closure, the subject positions always display a certain degree of openness and ambiguity (in technical terms, they always retain, to *some* extent, the character of 'floating signifiers').

This last point is decisive. *There is no subject position whose links with the others is permanently assured; and consequently, there is no fully acquired social identity which is not subject, to a greater or lesser degree, to the action of articulatory practices.* The rise of fascism in western Europe at the end of World War I can be seen as a vast process of re-articulation which deeply transformed the social identities and which fascinated political analysts of totally different ideological persuasions, because it shattered the confidence in the permanence attributed by the dominant conception of progress to the basic articulations of the liberal State. Similarly, the analysis of contemporary new social movements must not allow us to fall under the illusion that they are necessarily progressive. If they open up the *potential* for advance towards freer, more democratic and egalitarian societies, it is clear that this is only a *potential*, and that its realisation will depend largely on the forms of articulation which are set up among the different democratic demands. The ab-

sorption of part of these demands by neo-conservative populist projects (e.g. Reagan, Thatcher) is an example which is only too obvious and which should serve as a warning.

The foregoing analysis shows us a double movement of opposite signs. On the one hand, there is tendency towards autonomy on the part of the separate subject positions; on the other, there is the opposite tendency to fix them, through articulatory practices, as moments of a unified discursive structure. The question then inevitably arises : 'are these two moments contradictory?' We can only reply in the affirmative : carried to extremes, the logic of autonomy and the logic of articulation are contradictory. However, there is no contradiction in our theoretical position, since there is no inconsistency in affirming that the social is constructed by the partial limitation of the effects of contradictory logics. We should stress the implications of this assertion. It would be an essentialist premise to assume that every social contradiction or incompatibility can be reduced to a moment in the operation of an underlying logic which would fully restore the positivity of the social - as in the case of the Hegelian 'cunning of reason'. It is precisely the rejection of this rationalist notion of the social which leads us to see its plurality and instability - which is shown among other things, by the possibility of contradiction - as constitutive and fundamental. In other words, the social is in the last instance groundless. The forms of rationality it shows are only those resulting from the contingent and precarious links established by articulatory practices. 'Society' as a rational, intelligible entity is consequently impossible. The social can never be fully constituted as positivity.

Now, among the factors which combine to subvert the positivity of the social, there is one which has prime importance : the presence of antagonism. When articulatory practices operate in a field criss-crossed by antagonistic articulatory projects, we call them *hegemonic practices*. The concept of hegemony supposes the concept of antagonism, to which we shall now turn.

## 2. Antagonisms and the multiplication of political spaces.

Antagonism involves the presence of negativity within the social. Let us take as an example a political discourse which seeks to create the division of social space into two antagonistic camps : 'the conservatives, liberals and social democrats are the same vis-à-vis the interests of the working class'. This discourse subverts the positivity of the social in two closely linked dimensions. Firstly, the positivity of the social is denied inasmuch as the *system of differences* on which it is based is subverted - conservatives, liberals and social democrats as positive entities, *differing* from one another, are subverted by the discourse in question, in so far as each of these positivities is presented as *equivalent to* the others. In other words, from a certain perspective they all represent the same. There is, however, a second sense in which the subversion of positivity takes place. If we look more closely we see that it is the relation of opposition to the interests of the working class which makes possible the equivalence of all these instances. Now this relation of opposition is not the differential, positive coexistence between two entities, but the fact that one of them is the purely negative reverse of the other. The division of the political space into two camps prevents them both from being constituted through determination, difference and positivity since the identity of each is established as the negation of the other and, thus, the internal differential moments of each camp are presented as a chain of equivalences which constructs the opposition to the other camp. This is why antagonism prevents the social from becoming 'society' - i.e. a stable and conceptually apprehensible system of differences.

We are thus saying that the social can only be constituted and conceived as a totality, through the expulsion of a certain 'surplus of meaning' - the other camp - which is constructed and represented as negativity. To put it in a different way, a certain social order can only be constituted on the base of a frontier which separates it from what is radically 'other' and opposed to it. Let us take two diametrically opposed examples of these opposed social logics of equivalence and difference, in order to arrive at an understanding of the radical nature of the change

wrought in the political imaginary by the rise of the new social movements.

The first case is that of millenarianism. Here the logic of equivalence is unchallenged. *All* the aspects of urban culture - differences in dress, habits, even skin colour - are presented as the negation of the culture of the peasant community. One type of community is radically exterior to the other. But this very exteriority implies, firstly, that there is *only one* space in which antagonisms are constituted, and, secondly, that this space, far from calling for a complex political construction, is a primary, fixed datum of experience. In other words, the dimension which we have defined as *hegemony* and *articulation* is absent.

The second, diametrically opposed example, is that of the practices and ideologies which have accompanied the establishment of the Welfare State. Here the focal point of constitution of the social and political imaginary is a horizon establishing the possibility of an *unlimited integration*. *Every* demand can be (potentially) satisfied, and can as such be considered as a legitimate difference within the system. Here the logic of difference is extended towards a tendentially unlimited horizon. The project is the construction of a society without internal division or frontiers (Daniel Bell's 'the end of ideology', the Tory slogan 'one nation'). It is in the movements of displacement of this internal political frontier that we must seek the distinctive features of contemporary social struggles.

The ensemble of historical experience and political discourses in 19th century Europe was dominated by the displacements and transformations of this internal frontier, of this line which constitutes social negativity. In the period 1789-1848 the dividing line was drawn by the opposition 'people/Ancien Régimes'. The 'people' was a powerful entity within the political imaginary - a 'myth' in Sorel's usage - because it organised the mass of forces opposed to the dominant order into a vast system of equivalences. Even at a time when it became increasingly difficult to see both camps as simple *givens*, and when the internal frontiers required, correspondingly, an increasing effort of political cons-

truction, one can still say that, in general, the line separating the two camps continued to act as a stable framework of significations which made it possible to identify social agents and their antagonisms. It was when this framework of stable significations began to break up, and when the symbolic productivity of the 'people' as an agent of historical struggles began to fail, that Marxism attempted to conceive the internal frontier of the social in terms of a different dividing principle : the class division. Now, it is of the greatest importance to realise that for Marxism this partition, which was constituted in the economic sphere, could only reproduce itself without alteration in the political sphere in a distant future, when capitalist development had simplified the social structure and the class struggle had reached its climax in a simple showdown between capitalists and proletarians. The failure of capitalism to evolve in this way, and the increasing complexity of class structure in advanced industrial societies, rendered class division, as a constitutive principle of an internal social frontier, less and less operative in its effects and increasingly dependent upon contingent forms of political construction. To put it in a different way, *from this point on politics was impossible without articulation and hegemony.*

The transition to this new form of politics implies a decisive change : the transformation of the role of the *political imaginary*. By this we mean the ensemble of significations which, within a determinate ideological-discursive complex, function as a *horizon* - i.e. as the moment of equivalent *totalisation* of a number of partial struggles and confrontations. This horizon is always present, but its role in the constitution of political significations can vary considerably. We can indicate two extreme situations. In the first one, there is a radical disproportion between the actual situation of domination and the possibility of combatting the dominant force and, in this respect, of waging an effective war of position against it. In such a case, the conflict is *exclusively* conceived and experienced at the imaginary level; the function of the horizon is not to allow the totalisation of a mass of partial confrontations, but, on the contrary, to constitute their primary signification. But by the very fact

that this horizon has this primary constitutive function, the social can *only* be experienced and conceived as a totality. In the second case, by contrast, each partial struggle is successful in constituting itself as a war of position and, as such, draws out of itself, from its differential uniqueness, the world of significations which allow the constitution of a social or political identity. The moment of totalisation is thus *purely* a horizon, and its relation to the concrete antagonisms becomes unstable and takes on a certain exteriority.

Within such a perspective, we can formulate the distinction between the social struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries as follows. In the 19th century, social struggles led not so much towards a proliferation of political spaces and a politicisation of each social antagonism, but rather to the construction of ways of giving to these antagonisms access to a relatively unified political space. To this extent, there was always a distance between the areas of emergence of antagonisms and the area of construction of the political. As a result of that, the presence of the former in the latter had to take on the form of a relation of representation. Moments of crisis in the political system were moments in which new social antagonisms directly impinged on the traditional political spaces (1830, 1848, 1871); but, in any case, these crises were always crises of a *total* model of society - what we have called a unified political imaginary. In recent decades, by contrast, the multiplication of points of rupture which has accompanied the increasing bureaucratisation of social life and the 'commodification' of advanced industrial societies, has led to a proliferation of antagonisms; but each of them has tended to create its own space and to politicise a specific area of social relations. Feminist, ecologist, anti-institutional struggles and those of the marginal groups do not generally assume the form of antagonisms whose politicisation should lead to the representation of each of these 'interests' in a different and preconstituted political sphere, but they lead rather to a direct politicisation of the space in which they are each constituted. This means only that the moment of totalisation, the dimension of horizon of the political imaginary, is no longer

constituted as a 'total model' of society, but is restricted to certain demands and certain specific social relations. The radically democratic potential of the new social movements lies precisely in this - in their implicit demand for a radically open and indeterminate view of society, in so far as every 'global' social arrangement is only the contingent result of bargaining between a plurality of spaces and not a foundational category, which would determine the meaning and limits of each of these spaces.

#### Political spaces and social movements in Latin America.

How are we to extend the preceding reflections to the process of formation of Latin American societies, to the specific forms in which the political has been constructed in them? We have already referred the formation of the political imaginary to a basic asymmetry : to the distance which prevents the stabilisation of any system of differences as a positive, complete totality, closed in on itself, and the referral of this moment of closure to the totalizing dimension of a horizon, instituting social division and antagonism. From this perspective we can say that the field of politics in Latin America has been constructed, in the past century, around two successive, basic , totalizing matrices : liberalism and populism. Both seem to be called into question by the social movements of the past twenty years, which point in the direction of a new experience of democracy. We will concentrate our analysis on these two historical matrices, since the crisis of them both brings the specificity of the new situation into relief.

The liberal political imaginary conceived Latin American societies as systems of differences - in the sense already indicated - whose expansion would progressively bridge the gap which separated them from the European societies. The idea of this closing gap was the dimension of horizon which was at the root of the constitution of all political significations. Each political reform, each technical innovation, each economic transformation, would be interpreted - in the light of the positivist ideology of progress - as a step towards a type of society which existed completely and explicitly

only in liberal capitalist Europe. Without this reference to a reality external to the Latin American societies, the social and political experience of the latter was meaningless : this is why this imaginary dimension became the fundamental key and the totalising moment of the whole political experience. Social division was conceived as a frontier which exactly reproduced the terms of this imaginary dimension. Sarmiento - and the rest of Latin American liberalism - had already said it : the fundamental division was between 'civilisation' and 'barbarism'. Two symmetrically opposed systems of equivalence sliced political space in two.

This political horizon was organized around the following dimensions : i) the existence of an internal frontier between the rationality of a political world modelled on Europe and that 'fringe' constituted by the native backwardness of Latin American social reality; ii) the momento of antagonism was provided by the existence of that dividing frontier - what was beyond it could not be integrated as difference, but had to be dominated and destroyed; iii) the progressive advance of 'civilisation' would end up by replacing that more primitive world - in this way the ideal could be attained of homogeneous societies, in which the logic of difference would hold an undivided sway. This last point is decisive : the horizon constitutive of the liberal imaginary found its point of closure, its totalising dimension, in a future reduction of the social to a pure logic of difference and in the ejection of the logic of equivalence ('the two nations') from the political sphere. The oppositional movements which emerged at the time could be located at either of the two sides of the political frontier resulting from the hegemony of the liberal discourse. Either they totally rejected the latter and presented themselves as counter-totalities - as in the case of the Canudos movement in Brazil - or they were constructed as antagonisms internal to the liberal imaginary, which did not question the 'Civilization/Barbarism' dichotomy - such was the case with the emerging socialist and anarchist groups, generally organized around European immigrants in the urban centers. The liberal imaginary was thus a horizon which aimed to *close* the social, to constitute it as 'society'. It is important to recall that the

populist imaginary started from an indential totalising aspiration. The imaginary dimension of liberalism ceased to be productive at the point when hope had been lost in the possibility of its unlimited expansion, in its capacity to extend its frontiers and absorb all antagonisms within a homogeneous system of differences. When this expansive dimension came into crisis, the role of the frontier was transformed : what had been *borders* became *limitations*. The liberal system was no longer seen as a tool of progress and social homogenisation, but as a simple system of domination. This is the base from which populism emerged as a new matrix of the political imaginary. Two features stand out for comment. Firstly, while the liberal imaginary point of closure was a horizon provided by a pure logic of difference, in the case of populism this horizon was constituted by the affirmation of social division and the logic of equivalence. The totalising dimension of the social is instituted through basic oppositions such as 'people/oligarchy', 'nation/imperialism', etc. Secondly, this imaginary dimension defines nodal points around which the new political horizon is organized : the leader, the armed forces, or the appeal of technical expertise and economic development. Populism, in other words, remains a discourse of the totality of the social, which sets up a frontier between the social forces whose relation of equivalence constitute the popular camp and those other, symmetrically opposed, which represent the camp of domination.

What is particularly new and striking in the social movements which have emerged in Latin America in the last twenty years is that - perhaps for the first time - this totalising moment is absent, or at least seriously called into question. Popular mobilisations are no longer based on a model of total society or on the crystallisation in terms of equivalence of a single conflict which divides the totality of the social in two camps, but on a plurality of concrete demands leading to a proliferation of political spaces. This is the dimension which, it seems to me, is the most important for us to clarify in our discussions : to what extent do the new mobilisations break with a totalising

imaginary, or, on the contrary, to what extent do they remain imprisoned within it? This problem involves an issue of fundamental importance for the future of democracy in Latin America : will the experience of the opening up of the political systems after the crisis of the dictatorships lead to the reproduction of the traditional political spaces, based on a dichotomy which reduces all political practice to a relation of representation? Or will the radicalisation of a variety of struggles based on a plurality of subject positions lead to a proliferation of spaces, reducing the distance between representative and represented?

1 The theoretical considerations in this paper are developed in E. Laclau and Ch. Mouffe (1985), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso Books.