In the course of the "public" debate on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, the Clinton administration, as well as economists, business leaders, and other politicians, repeatedly used the word dislocation to describe the "temporary" effects (i.e., unemployment) many workers would encounter from the trade agreement. Dislocation is hardly unique to workers in the United States; the ever shifting global flow of capital constitutes and undermines the survival and sense of stability (or location) of vast numbers of people around the world. And unemployment is only one aspect of dislocation. For many, dislocation is the disjunction between the desire for meaningful, life-sustaining work and the maximization of profit, the transnational flow of money often accompanied by violent shifts of manufacturing space.

When dislocation was bandied about during the debate on NAFTA, it meant more than the displacement of workers; it resonated with many post-
modern celebrations of the “dislocated subject.” In 1985, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe published *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which remains one of the most sophisticated and important explications of the theoretical link between poststructuralist theory and postmodern political practice. The book emphasizes the new political possibilities that have become available since World War II, when the “‘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.”¹ This new social life should be viewed with optimism, they argue, since, as Laclau puts it in his recent book, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), the “dislocatory rhythm of capitalism” has created new antagonisms in political life.² Capitalism and rapid technological change, he argues, are the preconditions for modern pragmatic, anti-essentialist, and historicist political views. Radical politics should no longer be understood as a collective struggle against a dominant system, then, but as a series of disconnected but potentially linkable nodes of resistance, or intertextuality.

This kind of resistance, which thrives off of negation (without the Hegelian negation of the negation), creates numerous paradoxical, if not incoherent, statements about metaphysics and identity. Laclau argues that “the location of the subject is that of dislocation. . . . This is only possible if there is something in contemporary capitalism which really tends to multiply dislocations and thus creates a plurality of new antagonisms” (*New Reflections*, 41). I would like to argue that Laclau and Mouffe fetishize “dislocation.” Like NAFTA, the anti-essentialist celebration of pluralism and difference that plays a prominent role in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (as well as that of many other theorists of postmodern politics) has as its “traumatic kernel” the subjugation of workers and consumers under current market conditions.³ The dislocatory effects of highly advanced modes of

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¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), 161. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically as *Hegemony*.

² Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 39. Although dislocation is central to Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony*, Laclau develops the idea more fully in this work. On many occasions, I will be referring to the first part of *New Reflections*, which was not jointly written. Hereafter, I will cite this work parenthetically in my text as *New Reflections*.

³ Slavoj Žižek uses this term to describe the “dimension of radical negativity” in social and political life. The “traumatic kernel” is a condition that “defines the radical contingency of human identity.” See *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 5. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically as *Sublime*. 
profit maximization (corporate mobility in the post–cold war globalization of capital) have virtually dissolved the hope, defined in the great project of the Left, for a revolutionary intervention designed to change fundamentally the organization and meaning of labor and to generate new public and democratic power in economic life. While Laclau and Mouffe are unique in that their Marxist training still compels them to offer a historical explanation for the economic underpinnings of anti-essentialism and subjectivity—something the vast majority of poststructuralist critics lack—nevertheless, their appropriation of Derridean and Lacanian notions of difference and lack, which are crucial to their idea of fragmented social movements and identities, or dislocation, remains trapped in the notorious web of negation that characterizes these discourses. Laclau and Mouffe dismiss any notion of determinate negation and the dialectical motion of historical change. As a result, they are uninterested in any alternative to consumerism and representative (liberal) democracy. Notions such as “public spiritedness,” which have little political bite, provide the basis for fragmented social organizations. Under the yoke of this global “system,” dislocation is inevitable. But it is not inevitable that we attribute magical qualities to this new social condition of postmodernity. By retaining a historical sense of the trauma of this condition and an a priori pessimism-of-strength about democratic political power under the conditions of late capitalism, we can maintain a healthy desire for an alternative.

Laclau and Mouffe’s argument for new social movements is now well known, at least in many academic circles. In 1987, Norman Geras published a scathing critique of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy in New Left Review. The article (entitled “Post-Marxism?”) comes close to branding Laclau and Mouffe as heretics. Despite the ad hominem nature of his attack, Geras makes many astute comments. In particular, he notes that Laclau and Mouffe reduce all of Marxism to a crude economism and fail to acknowledge the importance of notions such as “relative autonomy” that have enriched Marxist theories of base and superstructure. Although many of Geras’s criticisms are powerful, the article is marred by his unwillingness to grant any validity whatsoever to Laclau and Mouffe’s attempt to theorize new social movements of a non-Marxist nature. My critique of dislocation focuses on particular weaknesses in Laclau and Mouffe’s appropriation of

In this particular case, the trauma is not part of “la condition humaine”; this “antagonism” is at the heart of global capitalism in the late twentieth century. Anti-essentialism is not new in the philosophical tradition, but its social and political meaning today generally relates to the economic and ontological condition of rootlessness and market hybridity.
poststructuralism and hermeneutics. The continuity and power of notions such as “dislocation” or “multiple subject positions” in recent debates over postmodernism and politics suggest that further criticism may be useful. Laclau shows how dislocation, a key element of poststructuralist theory, has its roots in the economic dislocations of the late twentieth century. But these dislocations are never precisely located on the map of the world; instead, they are the grounds for a grand, universalizing, philosophical claim for fragmented subjectivities, or multiple subject positions. In this essay, I analyze the importance of this claim in Laclau and Mouffe’s work as it is developed through a hermeneutic theory of discursive practices. The danger of this particular political form of hermeneutics, I argue in the final section, is that it cannot account for how we achieve what Slavoj Žižek calls “a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world” (Sublime, 75). I compare and contrast Žižek’s hermeneutical, phenomenological, psychoanalytic theory to the poststructuralist theory of Laclau and Mouffe. In the latter theory, there is little, if any, potential for what Gramsci called “a collective will.” In the absence of any dialectical conception of negation, there is no possibility for positive identities to emerge. The dislocated subject is left in a perspectival position, one “nodal point” that does not allow for a larger view of the whole. This perspectival theory, I argue, is symptomatic of the reification of the “democratic consumer society” described by Laclau and Mouffe. Žižek’s hermeneutical theory of ideology suggests that there are possibilities for intersubjectivity in contemporary politics and social life. The word intersubjectivity is usually associated with Jürgen Habermas’s work on communicative reason. Žižek, Laclau, and Mouffe are hostile to this Enlightenment model of rationality and transparency in political and social interactions. Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek follows Lacan’s efforts to value the positivity of the “we” and the “I” as the necessary counterparts to their respective negations.

In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Laclau and Mouffe refer to Claude Lefort’s thesis that

the democratic revolution, as a new terrain which supposes a profound mutation at the symbolic level, implies a new form of institu-

4. Ernesto Laclau refers to Gramsci’s “collective wills” as “unstable social agencies, with imprecise and constantly redefined boundaries, and constituted through the contingent articulation of a plurality of social identities and relations.” I will later comment on this odd transformation of Gramsci into a postmodern pluralist. See Ernesto Laclau, “Power and Representation,” in Politics, Theory, and Contemporary Culture, ed. Mark Poster (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 283.
tion of the social. In earlier societies, organized in accordance with a theological-political logic, power was incorporated in the person of the prince, who was a representative of God—that is to say, of sovereign justice and sovereign reason. Society was thought as a body, the hierarchy of whose members rested upon the principle of unconditional order. *(Hegemony, 186)*

Drawing from Lefort's *L'invention Democratique*, they argue that in modern democratic societies, there is no longer any "transcendental guarantor" with the power to establish a totally unified society. This end of unity is the ontological and political basis for Laclau and Mouffe's definition of the social. The breakdown of unconditional order allows human social relations to be regarded as unfixed and contingent. Laclau and Mouffe suggest that any attempt to definitively suture the social space results in totalitarianism. Yet, we must wonder whether Lefort's celebration of the end of unconditional order in the modern era, to which Laclau and Mouffe subscribe, is premature. Dislocation has been important to Marxists as a means of understanding the shift in Europe from feudalism to capitalism. The emergence of wage labor in early market societies created a new form of oppression through enclosures and the generation of "free" laborers but simultaneously opened up new, long-term possibilities for an alternative to both the oppression of agrarian workers (located on the land) and that of wage laborers (dislocated and brought into factories). For Laclau and Mouffe, there is no alternative to the dislocatory effects of capitalism. Their work attempts to continue the project of liberal capitalism while altering some of its traditional assumptions about the subject (i.e., the bourgeois ego). Postmodern dislocation is an intensified form of the interpellation of the subject under late capitalism. The consumer must have multiple subject positions in order to maximize his or her accumulation of economic goods and social services. The new antagonisms, as Laclau and Mouffe make clear, are best suited for the postindustrial society in which there is no opposition to a dominant system.

One of the most radical aspects of Laclau and Mouffe's conception of the social is its deconstruction of the public/private duality and of the notion of "citizenship," which has been one of the central tenets of modern "democratic" societies. The deconstruction of this binary opposition allows Laclau and Mouffe to "politicize social relations" *(Hegemony, 181)*. The concept of citizenship, they tell us, was based on a model of the subject as a unified and unifying essence. Their conception of hegemony, then, allows for multiple subject positions that can form an axis of equivalence in order to further a plethora of democratic political ambitions. The logic of equivalence
relies on the force of negativity: “certain discursive forms, through equivalence, annul all positivity of the object and give a real existence to negativity as such. This impossibility of the real—negativity—has attained a form of presence” (Hegemony, 128). “Presence,” for them, exists only paradoxically at the junctures of antagonisms and difference. There can be no positivity of being, and no polarity of being and not-being, but only the continual disintegration of all objective identities as fully articulated positions. Articulation is radical only insofar as it is radically unstable. There can be no underlying essence that might lend it the status of Truth. This destabilization of the subject undermines the basis of the classic Aristotelian separation of the bios politikos and oikia, since there is no longer any privileged realm of political activity (as in the polis). The politicization of the social occurs when we no longer view consumer “lifestyles” as private matters (housekeeping). The Left, then, can no longer believe it is battling against a few dominant ideological formations, since ideology is implicit in all social practices, from shopping to sexuality. This strategy has the advantage of foregrounding struggles hitherto repressed by the public/private dichotomy, such as feminism, gay/lesbian rights, and environmentalism. However, it often has the disadvantage of leveling major political disputes to a matter of “lifestyles” in the age of late capitalism.5

For Laclau and Mouffe, the decentering of the subject is a key moment in the great modern expansion of pluralism. The death of “Man” (which accompanies the death of the centered subject), however, does not entail the end of humanist values. In fact, Laclau and Mouffe want to envision a “real humanism” (i.e., a historicized humanism) (New Reflections, 245). The numerous writings by Laclau and Mouffe provide some of the most sustained and comprehensive philosophical and political arguments of the academic Left in the last two decades. Yet, since they appropriate so much from a wide array of disparate thinkers, their work has been linked to agendas radically different from their own. Unlike many hermeneutic thinkers of the post-1968 variety, Laclau and Mouffe do not have a separatist, anti-humanist, or postliberal agenda. They believe that once we historicize and localize the great emancipatory movements for equality and the “rights of Man,” these movements will become more meaningful.

Since the publication of Hegemony in 1985, Laclau and Mouffe have

5. In a dialogue with Laclau, Robin Blackburn asks, “If this historical and socially rooted perspective [Marxism] is abandoned, is there not a risk of opening the way to validating arbitrarily constructed, and even quite fanciful identities such as might be proposed by religious fundamentalists?” See Laclau, New Reflections, 242.
established a new series for Verso Books called *Phronesis*, which comes with a mini-manifesto that reads, in part:

There are those for whom the current critique of rationalism and universalism puts into jeopardy the very basis of the democratic project. Others argue that the critique of essentialism—a point of convergence of the most important trends in contemporary theory: post-structuralism, philosophy of language after the later Wittgenstein, post-Heideggerian hermeneutics—is the necessary condition for understanding the widening of the field of social struggles characteristic of the present stage of democratic politics. *Phronesis* clearly locates itself among the latter.6

The shift from rationalism and more traditional epistemological assumptions to hermeneutics has important political consequences. By “hermeneutics,” I will be referring generally to a number of theoretical views that utilize a process Derrida says was first implemented by Nietzsche: “Radicalizing the concepts of interpretation, perspective, evaluation, difference,” and the “liberation of the signifier from its dependence of derivation with respect to the logos and the related concept of truth or the primary signified, in whatever sense that is understood.”7 Derrida is certainly one of the most important post-Heideggerian hermeneutic thinkers. The “post” here cannot be over-emphasized. One of Heidegger’s motives in critiquing Western metaphysics (especially the Cartesian ego) was to find a new home, a new location, for Being. Whereas Laclau and Mouffe celebrate alienated modern subjectivity, Heidegger, the “conservative revolutionary,” mournfully declared that “the essence of the modern age can be seen in the fact that man frees himself from the middle ages in freeing himself to himself.”8 For Heidegger, modern individualism and the idea of “man” (man as the measure of all things) have few redeeming qualities. Laclau is more in the progressive spirit of Marxism

6. *Phronesis* is a term borrowed from Aristotle’s tripartite division of science into theoretical, practical, and productive forms of knowledge. *Phronesis* means “practical reason.” For Aristotle, *theoria* is the highest form of knowledge, but it, nevertheless, is only possible with the use of practical knowledge. Laclau and Mouffe use *phronesis* in strict opposition to *theoria*, however. *Phronesis*, in their political philosophy, is antitheoretical and pragmatic, in that it resists any larger, metaphysical claims for its own conditions of possibility.


when he announces the importance of contingency, in this case the existential recognition that all meaning is a human construct. He has nothing in common with Heidegger's despair over the disappearance of the gods, which Heidegger believed had led humanity toward total nihilism. Hermeneutics, in the Derridean definition given above, moves entirely away from its older religious context; it emphasizes the radical instability of all interpretation. The logos, or primary signified, disappears without any belief in a transcendental authority or in fixed essences.

In addition to Derrida's work, Laclau and Mouffe recruit a large number of twentieth-century thinkers under the banner of anti-essentialism. Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, and others have shown how the subject lacks a transparent consciousness (as in the Cartesian cogito). It is always formed by what Heidegger calls "pre-understanding"; Gadamer, the "fore-structures of knowledge"; Freud, the unconscious. The subject, in Laclau and Mouffe's account, thus cannot conceive of society as transparent, either. Both the subject and society lack any a priori status; they are constructed discursively.

In Hermeneutics as Politics (1987), Stanley Rosen argues that hermeneutics (in its postmodern form) amounts to a bourgeois quietism. Hermeneutics, which he understands as a move toward historicity, always stresses the private, artistic affairs of the individual (as exemplified by Nietzsche and Heidegger). Hermeneutics, the glorification of interpretation and perspectivism, is both a continuation of the Enlightenment project (the liberal defense of human rights and the rights of the individual) and the destruction of the Enlightenment concern for reason and truth. Thus, Rosen argues that "postmodernism is the Enlightenment gone mad," informing us that postmodernism has not surpassed the Enlightenment, it is merely a "decadent" form of it. For him, the postmodern critique of totalizing discourses is a symptom of political fatigue. This argument is not unfamiliar. But just as Laclau reminds us that there is no inherent political or apolitical agenda of poststructuralism, we might add that there is no politics of hermeneutics, either. Nevertheless, Rosen's polemical stance is preferable to the conclusions of Stanley Fish, who is the embodiment of political fatigue par excellence. These two thinkers, Fish and Rosen, make a similar argument about the political possibilities of "negative" theory (deconstruction): the Left is seriously deluded in its belief that hermeneutic theory (Heidegger,

Wittgenstein, Derrida, Gadamer, etc.) has consequences outside of particular interpretive communities. This belief is what Fish calls "theory-hope," the misguided practice of academics who believe that after dismantling all truth discourses (anything with the suspect pretense of objectivity, rationality, etc.), they can then make political or ethical claims of their own that have importance beyond the institutions from which they originated. Leftists, then, create a kind of bad faith by undermining the possibility of making informed or enlightened claims about the world outside their interpretive communities.

These arguments are vital to my reading of Laclau and Mouffe, since their work would seem to provide the greatest defense of the political possibilities of hermeneutics. They reach the opposite conclusions of these critics, namely, that the result of this shift to hermeneutics allows us to open up a vast new terrain of political possibilities. This new, supposed expansion of political life thrives on negation and, unlike the traditional Left, abandons the desire for a transparent society. True to their post-1968 nature, Laclau and Mouffe link utopianism to Stalinism.

Far from offering a critique of liberal, bourgeois values, Laclau and Mouffe often celebrate them. The new social movements, as they make clear, are products of the "commodification of social life," which "destroyed previous social relations, replacing them with commodity relations" (Hegemony, 161). Their entire philosophy is predicated on an optimistic view of an emerging "democratic consumer culture," in which subjects are "interpellated as equals in their capacities as consumers" (Hegemony, 164). Still, Laclau and Mouffe insist they are not economic liberals but rather political liberals. They oppose the traditional liberal faith in the "free market" and believe that the proliferation of antagonisms in the era of late industrial capitalism includes the possibility of certain socialist struggles. Laclau writes, "It is without doubt true that the phenomenon of commodification is at the heart of the multiple dislocations of traditional social relations. But this does not mean that the only prospect thrown up by such dislocations is the growing passive conformity of all aspects of life to the laws of the market" (New Reflections, 51). The "deep pessimism" (New Reflections, 51) of the Frankfurt school (and it would seem all those who resist this faith in the political possibilities of consumer organizations) relies on a Marxist view of capitalism as a total system, a notion Laclau and Mouffe believe they have undermined through their anti-essentialist, hermeneutic theory. This new faith in "the liberating effect" (New Reflections, 53) of bureaucratization and commodification, they suggest, is not completely antithetical
to Marxism, since it sees capitalism as the important basis of other political opportunities. The difference, of course, is that they are not thinking in terms of "totalizing" notions such as the dialectic of historical materialism (the imminence of socialism).

Whatever the allure of this sophisticated hermeneutic theory of social and political life, its power is dependent on its conversion effect—that is, its ability to convince us not only that the rationalism and universalism of Marxism is invalid but also that older humanist concerns about alienation need to be discarded along with the deeply antibourgeois, antimodern views vital to other postmodern theorists, such as Foucault or Lyotard. As we shall see, the conflation of the political with the social, inspired by the move to hermeneutics, runs the danger of becoming another version of pragmatism: politics becomes simply another cultural "conversation." The glorification of pluralism and the particular creates a startling aporia in the hermeneutical appropriation of liberalism. One can only advocate difference from one perspective, one nodal point. Yet, by advocating a universal perspectivism, the pluralistic thinker takes a nonperspectival view. This aporia is appropriate for the post–cold war era, when the universalizing and homogenizing trends of capitalism became increasingly masked by the insistence on free-market pluralism, or the end of ideology. In many respects, Hegemony and Reflections share the complacency and bons sens of Richard Rorty's work, where openness and contingency amount to a great cosmopolitan celebration of the free market.¹⁰ Laclau tries to justify the dismissal of the "deep pessimism" of Adorno by utilizing Lasch and Urry's work on "disorganized capitalism" (New Reflections, 58). The decline of the nation-state and the increasing power of multinational and transnational corporations in global affairs should not be viewed with great anxiety: the power of the nation-state has not been "transferred in toto" to these corporations (New Reflections, 59). Laclau tries to dispel both the older "myth" of unregulated liberal capitalism (there never was any "pure" capitalism) and that of the "limitless capacity for decision-making" of corporations under monopoly capitalism today (New Reflections, 59). Whether or not this assessment is accurate

¹⁰ In her recent book, The Return of the Political, Chantal Mouffe supports Rorty's pragmatism while criticizing his failure to distinguish between economic liberalism and political liberalism. She recognizes the failure of modern capitalist societies to generate the condition for some kind of "civic republicanism" but also wants to reject any kind of communitarian or Marxist theory of a "true democracy." Thus, she insists we need to maintain a tension between a "democratic logic of equivalence" and a "liberal logic of difference." See Chantal Mouffe, The Return of the Political (London: Verso, 1993).
cannot be discussed here. It is clear, however, that these “dislocated” consumers, whose desires are at the heart of new social movements, need to be located on the global map. The decline of the nation-state, as Masao Miyoshi has recently argued, has not put an end to colonialism. The complexity of multi- and transnational corporate economic and political activity should not deter us from trying to understand who benefits from the new mobility of capital. Who, precisely, lives in a “democratic consumer society”; who benefits from being “interpellated as consumers” (Hegemony, 164)? It would appear that Laclau has no problem using the word society, which he has declared “impossible,” when it fits his own assessment of contemporary life.

With these questions in mind, we might add another myth to Laclau’s list: the myth of the democratic possibilities for the dislocated subjects of late capitalism. In the absence of a totalizing view of capitalism, Laclau and Mouffe fail to offer any historical or political explanation as to what exactly is democratic about the experience of the “dislocating rhythm of capitalist transformation” (New Reflections, 119). In fact, their vision of the expansion of pluralism under transnational capitalism relies on the fetishism of the dislocation and fragmentation of the subject. They seem to be suggesting that the essence of modernity lies in the death of “unconditional order” and the birth of a new pluralistic universe (Hegemony, 186). They have not traveled beyond the romantic desire for wholeness or plenitude—the nostalgia for a premodern sense of Being. Instead, they have merely inverted this nostalgia by dismembering the social. Why should we attribute the history of the dislocated subject to the French Revolution? What are the systems of power/knowledge behind the formation of multiple subject positions? Jean-François Lyotard has made the compelling suggestion that the French notion of écriture (which is crucial to Laclau and Mouffe’s work


12. This view of the liberatory quality of modern and postmodern pluralism seems naïve when compared to less optimistic genealogies of the modern subject. Foucault’s theory of localized resistance, for example, has no interest in democracy and socialism. The confusion of Laclau and Mouffe’s nodal points and Foucault’s theory of subjugated discourses is common. Foucault argues that the giant machinery of power in the modern age (i.e., panopticism) can only be resisted in small pockets on the micro-level. In Surveiller et punir, the authority of the King is directly contrasted to the panoptic machinery of modernity. For Laclau and Mouffe, however, we ought to celebrate the end of monarchical forms of government and what Lefort calls the “dissolution of the markers of certainty.” See Mouffe, The Return of the Political, 122.
on difference and indeterminacy) has to be understood in terms of French history, especially the violence of the Revolution. The connection of writing, or "literature," and politics has a tragic and dangerous position in a place such as France, where, "the question of legitimacy may be posed at each instant"; Americans, English, and Germans have trouble understanding *écriture* because it is inextricably linked to "this memory of crime." In the Derridean lexicon, *écriture* is contrasted to phonocentrism and logocentrism (though not set in strict opposition). In his early work on Husserl, *Speech and Phenomena*, and throughout his career, Derrida has attempted to combat the idea that speech has any primacy or special presence that is more authentic or closer to the Being or essence of the speaker than writing. All speech is a form of writing. Derrida's work attempts to erase the "phonocentric" qualities of writing, the little voice that the reader believes creates unified or determinate meanings. This emphasis on the plurality of meanings in language and culture has a vital connection to the "tragic" and ongoing political arguments within French society. For Lyotard, and for many contemporary French intellectuals, the emphasis on writing (as in Roland Barthes) has an important cultural and political context in a nation where these philosophical disputes are granted a social and historical importance generally denied intellectuals in the United States. It is important to note that Claude Lefort's work on liberal political theory has been influential in a nation with powerful traditions of political diversity and activism. Why, then, should we try to politicize notions such as *écriture* and *différance* in the context of the United States, which lacks the political culture and history that made such theories compelling to French intellectuals in the first place? The theory of dislocation is itself dislocated. The hostility toward organized labor, and anything that smacks of socialism, in the United States makes the transcultural, universalizing nature of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* appear odd indeed.

**The Dislocated Subject**

For Laclau and Mouffe, poststructuralist theory plays a crucial role in undermining Marxism. The belief in a unified working class, in their view, suggests that there is such a thing as a "class identity," an essentialist notion they oppose with their own version of difference or negation. In their survey

of the Second International, they show the dangers of believing that certain subjects can be given a positive representation, that they can be located in one position. They replace representation with the more fluid "articulation." The advantage of this term is that it reveals how class identity is merely one discursive construct among others; it has no a priori status. "Class," as a political category, does not disintegrate but rather is seen as one point in a series of democratic struggles. By eliminating this principle of representation, the authoritarian impulse of vanguardism disappears as well.

The fact that "identity is never positive" is the basis for their view of "antagonisms." There may be a Hegelian argument here, but they attempt to move quickly beyond it: "For him [Hegel], identity is never positive and closed in itself, but is constituted as transition, relation, difference" (Hegemony, 95). They object, of course, to Hegel's move beyond negation to a higher form of rationality. Nevertheless, Hegel is vital to the post-Enlightenment project of hermeneutics because he opened up the exploration of the historicity of being.

Antagonism, however, does not operate in terms of any particular Hegelian or Marxist logic of contradiction. Both theories, they insist, depend on a rationalistic understanding of the endogenous movement of history. Therefore, having abandoned a teleological view of history, they no longer see the historical inevitability of class antagonisms. Their principle of antagonism goes further than that, however, in that it reveals "the limits of all objectivity" (Hegemony, 125). Antagonism is based neither on conceptual contradictions (as in Hegel) nor on concrete, physical struggles. Instead, it functions through the subject's lack of a full identity: "The presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution" (Hegemony, 125). As we will see with Lacanian psychoanalysis (as proposed by Slavoj Žižek), the impossibility of society resembles the impossibility of the Real. Antagonisms are always external to the subject without having any positive existence "out there." That is, they are neither subjective nor objective but are rather discursive constructs.

Hermeneutics as politics relies upon the Heideggerian destruktion of traditional Western ontology. But Heidegger, according to Derrida, is still too concerned with the "primordial homeland" of language and Being.14 The Derridean critique of the "metaphysics of presence" is important to Laclau

and Mouffe for the following reason: it enables them to argue that society and the subject exist only within the infinite play of différence; that is, to use their quotation from *L'écriture et la différence*, "in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse. . . . The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (*Hegemony*, 112). This so-called Nietzschean dance is the basis of the indeterminacy of the social—hegemonic formations are discursive constructs. In terms of (inter)subjectivity, the result is that the activist should not expect to find any kind of complete self-actualization in politics but rather a continual deferral of meaning, partially stabilized by "nodal points," in the vortex of différence.

This theory of the subject adds an intriguing twist to their critique of traditional (especially economic) liberalism. Freedom, for Laclau, is not self-determination; there is no subject located in the absence of structural identity. Instead, freedom is the result of what he calls a "failed structural identity" (*New Reflections*, 44). The subject is free not because it exists outside of institutional control, or externals; it is free because it is dislocated. The more opaque the social is, the more possibilities there are for the subject to be interpellated by hegemonic practices: "Every identity is dislocated insofar as it depends on an outside which both denies that identity and provides its conditions of possibility at the same time" (*New Reflections*, 39).

The category of the subject, which they insist is actually that of multiple subject positions, is only understood through its historicity or contingency and its (dis)location in a world of textual différence. As Derrida points out, the word *difference* has its Latin root in *differre*, which has the twofold meaning of "to defer" or "to delay" and "to scatter." Thus, the subject can only be understood in terms of its lack of presence and its inability to use language to obtain full identity or self-consciousness. This is the key to the anti-utopian idea that any totalizing view of the social is, in effect, the desire to create a transparent and, hence, totalitarian society. In a harmonious society, we would, in fact, be radically unfree, since we could no

15. Points de capiton, or nodal points, are, in Lacanian terms, defined as "privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain." Laclau and Mouffe use this term to describe the way in which every discourse "is an attempt to arrest the flow of differences." This is necessary for any hegemonic formation. See *Hegemony*, 112.

16. The discussion of the advantages of the dislocations of capitalism often sounds suspiciously like another rehearsal of the joys of the mobile, bourgeois, cosmopolitan academic. Aijaz Ahmad's recent book, *In Theory*, offers a scathing critique of a number of contemporary post-Marxist theorists on these grounds.
longer thrive off of negation. This view is often said to have a Nietzschean quality, since it values an agonistic society. Since there is no final closure, or “suture,” of the social, there is a perpetual “trench war in which different political projects strive to articulate a greater number of social signifiers” (New Reflections, 28).

**Discursive Practices**

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is one of the most coherent attempts to use what has been referred to (usually pejoratively) as “the linguistic turn” for a radical, democratic politics. The interest in structuralist/poststructuralist and Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism is supposed to supersede the mandarin quality often attributed to these discourses. The end of fixed meanings, the critique of onto-theo-phallogocentrism is not an act of political castration. The phallus (the symbolic form of the fullness of the transcendental signified) is, through its very absence, the condition of possibility for a more free (dislocated) social space.

But it would be a mistake, Laclau and Mouffe tell us, to read absence or negativity as the new ground replacing the metaphysics of presence, since such a move takes place only within the very bipolarity they are attempting to disrupt. The choice, they suggest, is not between the absolute unity of the social (as in totalitarian systems) and absolute difference. The latter carries the danger of causing the “implosion of the social,” the impossibility of political intersubjectivity (*Hegemony*, 188). But Laclau and Mouffe’s appropriation of Lacan’s *points de capiton* never succeeds as a move to avoid this presence/absence dualism. As Peter Dews has shown, poststructuralism “remains negatively bound to the philosophy of consciousness, and therefore lacks any ideal of communicative reciprocity.”¹⁷ Yet, unlike the notoriously depoliticized work of early American deconstructionists (e.g., Paul de Man), Laclau and Mouffe attempt to do more than build a new ground of negativity. The critique of self-consciousness and the stable identity of the subject parallels the critique of any theory of “society.” As we will see, the possibility for any kind of political intersubjectivity in a dismembered social space relies on the (Lacanian) theory of nodal points.

Gramsci’s work is crucial to Laclau and Mouffe’s thinking on this matter, since his notion of “historical blocs” moves from the rationalism and universalism of Marx toward a theory of a less unified social space. The

work of Gramsci and Althusser, they believe, is a step in the right direction, since we need to begin to look at the multiple sites of contestation in any social space. But unlike these so-called essentialist thinkers, they see Marx, to a great extent, as the Other. Both Gramsci and Althusser help us to see ideology as operative in many different practices, but they do not go far enough in terms of their break with the essentialist theory of base/superstructure. For Laclau and Mouffe, there is only superstructure, since there can be no underlying reality or truth to our political or economic life. Further, “superstructure” is replaced by “discursive practices.”

Although their neologistic term nodal points has much in common with Gramsci’s notion of “historical blocs” and the “war of positions,” it involves a much greater dispersion of subject positions as a means of avoiding the two problems they associate with Gramsci: first, it does not accept class as the privileged signifier for the “hegemonic subject”; and, second, it does not envision a “single hegemonic center” (Hegemony, 138). Their theory of hegemonic formations is crucial to our discussion, since it is as close as they come to describing anything like intersubjectivity. Unlike Gramsci, they do not believe that a hegemonic force necessarily divides the social space into two camps. They call these “popular struggles” and suggest that in certain situations, particularly in the Third World, such struggles might be constructed tendentially (Hegemony, 137). This theoretical move is an attempt to counter the obvious criticism that their work is useful only in advanced capitalist countries and is consistent with their general belief in the liberatory possibilities inherent in social systems that allow for greater effects of dislocation. We might say that they have their own theory of uneven and combined development: advanced industrial nations have the greater capacity for manufacturing dislocated subjects.

Hegemonic formations are forged through the interplay between the logics of equivalence and difference:

Every historical bloc—or hegemonic formation—is constructed through regularity in dispersion, and this dispersion includes a proliferation of very diverse elements: systems of differences which partially define relational identities: chains of equivalences which subvert the latter but which can be transformistically recovered insofar as the place of opposition itself. (Hegemony, 142)

The nodal points (privileged social signifiers), essential for preventing the implosion of the social, replace the Gramscian formation of historical blocs and allow for greater dispersion in political formations. Hegemonic forma-
tions thus can exist only when the social space is characterized by its indeterminacy or openness. (Inter)subjectivity, then, is not formed on the basis of a shared vision of a positive logic of the ideal society; the condition of what used to be called “community” is marked by contingency.

Laclau and Mouffe have tried to give a defense of this use of discursive practices against charges (particularly by Marxists) of idealism. This problem is important since, in the absence of the determination of objective, material conditions (i.e., class interests), there appears to be no basis for any unified political struggle. The alternative they supply is that hegemonic formations exist on a metonymic chain without any ultimately privileged signifier; there is no unified struggle for “democracy” in any transcendental sense (“justice” and “the rights of Man” are now offered secundum quid). They insist that they do not accept the dichotomy between realism and idealism that is the basis of such a criticism of discourse as having purely “mental” characteristics. They do not make the mistake, we might say, that Marx said of the “young Hegelians,” who “had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity.”18 Discourse, as they define it, has a material character. To use their examples, one cannot dispute an earthquake or the falling of a brick. But this does not mean that we can understand these occurrences objectively (i.e., without the mediation of language). Wittgenstein’s theory of language-games serves our purposes, then, because it allows us to see how diverse institutional arrangements are socially constructed. Relations of power, in Laclau and Mouffe’s language, are contingent but not necessary.

Gramsci’s essentialist theory of historical blocs has the advantage of salvaging at least some sense of what Marx called objective material conditions.19 In Hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe do not historicize Gramsci’s “ambivalent” position with regard to the working class. The fact that he actually helped start the Italian Communist Party should explain his essentialist view of class. While they appropriate a great deal of Gramsci’s work, they want to give hegemony a deconstructive logic. The subject cannot be located in any stable position; it must be dispersed throughout the “unfixity” of any social space. They never make it clear how any socialist project could be actualized as merely one nodal point among others. This deconstructive logic shifts our attention almost entirely over to cultural problems.

Chantal Mouffe's essay “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci” (1979) claims Gramsci as the hero who broke from the economism of early Marxist thinking. Her essay represents the important political, exegetical work that has used Gramsci to revitalize the term ideology by linking it to the notion of “hegemony.” Gramsci’s use of ideology does not describe false consciousness or merely class positions but the complex web of social activities or apparatuses that define power relations in any given political formation. Mouffe suggests that this theory of ideology was taken up by Althusser but proved less fertile for him, since, like virtually all Marxists, he fell into the trap of a reductive economism. The final sentence of the essay, though unproven in the essay itself, would be the basis of Mouffe’s work with Laclau in the eighties: “It is in fact quite remarkable to see the extraordinary ways in which some contemporary research—such as that of Foucault or Derrida which brings out a completely new conception of politics—converges with Gramsci’s thought.”20 In their later, collaborative works, however, it is never made clear what the distinction might be between Gramsci’s socialist thinking and the vehemently anti-Marxist ideas of Michel Foucault and the hermeneutic work of Derrida. These latter two theorists are used to create the effect of the dispersion of all subject positions and the dismissal of the essentialist (Gramscian) notion of class. Mouffe and Laclau woke up one day and found that, as Derrida put it in the late sixties, “in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse.”21

The blend of Foucaultian and Derridean theories of discourse revitalizes the possibilities of waging cultural battles in a whole array of institutional structures, since it allows the study of the socially constructed nature of all power/knowledge relations.22 But it is also used by Laclau and Mouffe to exaggerate and dehistoricize the dislocated nature of the subject. The departure from Gramsci’s view of hegemony seems to provide the pretext for abandoning any sense of a collective socialist project whatsoever. They move from one extreme, the theory of a collective will, to the other, the virtually total dispersion of subjects into discursively constructed multiple

subject positions. Whether or not we choose to abandon an essentialist understanding of a unified working class, it is unclear that this “new pluralism” is the basis of our “liberation.” The Gramscian notion of “ideology,” in this context, is merely a justification for the leveling of all political projects and the failure to account for why or how a collective will is formed. Laclau and Mouffe, like Gramsci, believe in a “pessimism of the intellect,” but they seem to have forgotten the latter part of Gramsci’s well-known line, the “optimism of the will.”

**Points de capiton**

The vast and complex history of the term ideology will not be explored in any great detail in this essay. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that this concept is the Achilles’ heel of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Since the term is virtually absent (conspicuously) from this text, we need to look at Laclau’s more recent work, New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, which offers greater clarity to Hegemony. The battle waged against essentialism gets particularly ferocious in a section entitled “The Impossibility of Society.” Like the search for society and the Real, ideology is the search for the impossible. “Ideology,” then,

would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture. The ideological would consist of those discursive forms through which a society tries to institute itself as such on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences. The ideological would be the will to “totality” of any totalizing discourse. And insofar as the social is impossible without some fixation of meaning, without the discourse of closure, the ideological must be seen as constitutive of the social. The social only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society. Utopia is the essence of any communication and social practice. (New Reflections, 92)

This passage presents a Gordian knot for the would-be political activist/theorist. What we have here is not exactly the “end of ideology,” but it does fall into a similar trap through its own performative contradiction. As we saw earlier, the implosion of the social, the destruction of all political intersubjectivity, is supposedly avoided through the possibility of nodal points,
which partially fix meaning in the metonymic chain. The social remains a
sphere of overdetermination, then, while allowing for certain limited forms of
political resistance. What remains enigmatic, however, is the assertion that
ideology, the will to totality, is characterized as both non-recognition and as
constitutive of the social. This is a subtle, if not casuistic, argument. On the
one hand, the ideologue is someone who has not entered into the proper
academic discourse, or interesting conversation, as Rorty puts it. That is,
he or she has not been properly trained in the history of poststructuralist
linguistics. On the other hand, the ideologue provides the necessary condi-
tion for any type of hegemonic practice. The problem here is that the activist
has no choice other than to essentialize; that is, he or she must accept the
metaphysical possibility of a better social order and the will-to-power that
is implicit in any ideological fantasy. In either case, the desire for utopia,
as Laclau asserts, is the “essence of any communication or social practice.”
Is this an ironic assertion? We might call it a performative contradiction for
the following reason: it suggests that we must essentialize in order to com-
municate, while maintaining an ironic sense about this very communicative
act. Laclau is being ideological at the same time that he is undermining the
basis of ideology. The theorist, then, recognizes that he or she is merely
essentializing whenever he or she engages in politics. This seems remark-
ably close to what Peter Sloterdijk calls “enlightened false consciousness,”
which describes the state of those whose “consciousness no longer feels
affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buf-
fered.”23 In this case, it is not someone who, through cynicism, continues
to damage the lives of others without any self-deception. Instead, it can be
the hermeneutic theorist who continually deconstructs all truth claims for
the sheer jouissance of acting as the Universal Refuter, or skeptic. Laclau
has not escaped the perpetual process of unmasking that Sloterdijk labels
“cynical reason.” His form of ideologiekritik insists that those who do not
recognize the infinite play of differences are unenlightened. As Slajov Žižek
tells us, however, “even if we keep an ironical distance [from our actions],
we are still doing them” (Sublime, 33). The question remains, once we’ve
become ironic about ideology, Why shouldn’t we triumphantly declare the
end of ideology? Are Laclau and Mouffe ironic when they say that society
is “impossible” and then proceed to use the word society when it fits their
own ideological interests? We live in a “democratic society”; we are “inter-
pellated as consumers”; we cannot imagine an alternative to capitalism.

23. Peter Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: Uni-
Slavoj Žižek offers a compelling use of *méconnaissance* and points de capot and provides an extension of Laclau and Mouffe's move into psychoanalysis, which is where they directed us for this mystery of ideology (or is the mystery itself ideological?). Žižek's Hegelian/psychoanalytic understanding of ideology reveals the possibilities and limits of hermeneutics as politics. Since he resuscitates ideology from its death throes in *Hegemony and New Reflections*, the project of *Phronesis* seems to have new life.

Žižek places a different emphasis on antagonism, a concept he shares with Laclau and Mouffe:

Man is—Hegel dixit—“an animal sick unto death,” an animal extorted by an insatiable parasite (reason, logos, language). In this perspective, the “death drive,” this dimension of radical negativity, cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions, it defines la condition humaine as such: there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to “overcome,” to “abolish” it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a modus vivendi with it. (Sublime, 5)

Once again, we are told to view utopianism as the dangerous attempt to “suture” the social sphere. The difficulty with this view is that it suggests we have the capacity to be ironic about ideology (the will-to-totality) while we are being ideological. How does the activist set limits on her or his destructive will-to-power without falling into complacency, or the end of ideology (History—Hegel said—is a slaughterbench)? The decentering of the subject for Stanley Fish or Richard Rorty is the grounds for skepticism, which runs ad infinitum. The openness of the social and the dislocation of the subject creates irony, not the trench warfare of different political projects.

As with Laclau and Mouffe, we are trapped in the paradoxical situation of thinking in utopian terms about the end of utopia. But that should not stop us from continuing. Just as we cannot abolish antagonism (without being totalitarian), we cannot abolish ideology or the attempt to fix meaning in the social. The idea of a post-ideological society is misguided, Žižek shows, for the following reason:

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today’s society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propo-
positions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them. (Sublime, 33)

Žižek uses the Lacanian méconnaissance to help redefine ideology. We are always distanced (with language as the mediation) from the objects of the Real (understood as the Lack). What Žižek shows is that ideology exists even if we don’t grasp exactly what it is. It is embedded in our daily practices. The belief that ideology is an illusion, however, does not necessarily imply that there is any nonideological ground to stand on (i.e., there is no “true” consciousness). Ideology is dialectical. He reworks a line by Sloterdijk to read: “They know very well how things really are, but they still are doing it as if they did not know” (Sublime, 32). The ideologies of daily practices are not transparent and can never be made transparent (the desire for transparency is “totalitarian”). An individual’s self-deception, indeed the self-deception of an entire society, is an inescapable datum. Žižek’s theory works on the importance of form in all interpretation. Marx, he argues (following Lacan), was the first to invent the symptom in his analysis of the commodity form. Marx set up a vital method of political hermeneutics by showing how the commodity form conceals the materiality of objects of exchange and the labor that is built into the inherent nature of the object. In Žižek’s idiosyncratic reading, there is no “hidden kernel,” no real object that is latent under commodity exchange. The process of understanding life under capitalism is like that of analyzing a dream. The dream itself cannot be uncovered, but its manifest content, which is itself the form of the dream (displacement, condensation, etc.) can be made accessible through interpretation. The meaning of the symptom is generated through fantasy. It is the dialectical means we have of arriving at some form of psychic identity. For example, Marx made feudalism the Other and thus enabled us to recognize our relation to the exchange-value of objects in contradistinction to the use-value of objects.

Žižek’s hermeneutic theory is useful because it recuperates a notion of ideology. The fantasy of subjects under capitalist economies is that of commodity fetishism—the misrecognition of social relations for the relations
between things. For Žižek, there is no space outside ideological fantasy (as in Althusser’s distinction between ideology and science): “Ideology is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence” (Sublime, 21). Nevertheless, there are always ways of interrogating our ideological thoughts (as there are ways of analyzing dreams). Ideology is not only in the “knowing” (as in the rational or reflective model) but in the “doing.” One example he gives is that we may know that money has “nothing magical about it,” but we continue to use it as if it did (Sublime, 31).

Although Laclau tries to borrow from this part of Žižek’s work (in the passage cited earlier on ideology), the difference between these two theories is important. For Žižek, ideology is indeed misrecognition, but not merely of the infinite play of differences. Misrecognition is part of the very structure of human (un)consciousness, and ideology has very real consequences in terms of human relations. Fantasy is the path toward a greater understanding of the Real (which has no independent existence), as Freud recognized when he placed so much importance on the dream-work rather than on the dream itself.

Žižek’s answer to the question “Why is there something rather than nothing at all?” is useful here: “the Symptom.” This Lacanian answer may offer a partial solution to the problem I have identified with Laclau and Mouffe. In Žižek’s reading, psychoanalysis offers the “necessary counterpoint” to the deconstruction of “substantial identity” (Sublime, 72). Laclau and Mouffe do not offer this possibility. Laclau’s theory of the freedom of the subject as “failed structural identity” fails to give an adequate account of what gives us “a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world” (Sublime, 75). The formulation of a Symptom does not involve a determination of the essence of the subject, but it is a construction that enables us to avoid madness:

If the symptom in this radical dimension is unbound, it means literally “the end of the world”—the only alternative to the symptom is nothing: pure autism, a psychic suicide, surrender to the death drive even to the total destruction of the symbolic universe. That is why the final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic process is identification with the symptom. The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being. That is how we must read Freud’s wo es war, soll ich werden: you, the subject, must identify yourself with the place
where your symptom already was; in its “pathological” particularity you must recognize the element which gives consistency to your being. (Sublime, 75)

What was lacking in Laclau and Mouffe was a developed theory of the Lack. Although they prevent their theory from collapsing into total negativity (contingency only subverts necessity; we cannot have the opposite of necessity, which would be an empty totality), it still fails to answer the question that is crucial to the formation of a theory of ideology: Why is there something rather than nothing? Nodal points can only function as an “ideological quilt,” a partial stabilization of the social (the requirement for any political activity), if we have at least some explanation of the desire for political intersubjectivity.\textsuperscript{24} Žižek sees the intersubjectivity of antagonism in Hegelian terms—an “insatiable parasite (reason, logos, language)”—as well as Lacanian terms—enjoyment or jouissance (Sublime, 5). These latter terms exist as the surplus in the subject after interpellation. Žižek adds to Althusser's version of interpellation, or the internalization, of ideologies by insisting on the importance of “a residue or leftover” after the process of interpellation. The Lacanian and Hegelian aspect to the formation of subjectivity in this book is evident in Žižek's idea of reflexive determination. The subject, as for Lacan, is an S. This is not a vacuous negation but rather the path toward the negation of negation (the symptom), the support for being itself. Intersubjectivity is generated through the “positive content,” or “what I am for others” (Sublime, 46). Positive consistency also arrives through fantasy. Illusion, fantasy, méconnaissance, misrecognition, and the symptom are all tied to our immediate need for gaining self-definition dialectically through others.

Žižek refers to the poststructuralist arguments of Hegemony as, “to use the good old Stalinist expression—‘a dizziness from too much success.’ ”\textsuperscript{25} Laclau's notion of the “failed structural identity” of the subject is a reference to the Lacanian objet petit a, but it lacks the more complete,\

\textsuperscript{24} My point here is not that Lacanian theory (e.g., désir) does provide an adequate solution to this problem. For Laclau and Mouffe, the subject of the lack and of indeterminacy often functions as a quick solution to problems in political theory. Žižek's Lacanian notion of the “symptom” is not the answer, but it seems to offer a little more than Laclau and Mouffe's celebration of the failure of identification and the virtually endless differentiation of the metonymic chain.

\textsuperscript{25} Slavoj Žižek, “Beyond Discourse-Analysis,” in Laclau, New Reflections, 250.
phenomenological description offered by Žižek.26 Žižek's work deals with Hegel's theory of reflexive determination as a means of offering a larger conception of subjectivation. In addition, his work emphasizes the difficult formation of the Subject and Intersubjectivity, as opposed to multiple subject positions.27 The conspicuous absence of this makes Hegemony and Socialist Strategy and Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time appear to fetishize the dislocation of the subject. In these two works, the Lacanian "object a" is appropriated as a crude form of negation or lack. Lacanian theory reveals the complexity of the subject's attempt to find wholeness in the symbolic order, the necessary fantasies and identifications of the subject with various unconscious objects of desire. Hermeneutic theory, which suggests that the relation between the part and the whole is circular, is important to Žižek and Lacan's work on identity and subjectivation. Yet, this circular process forecloses the possibility that negation can ever take on a real presence. Laclau and Mouffe, as we saw earlier, define the "axis of equivalence," the nodal point at which a collective is formed, as the point at which "certain discursive forms, through equivalence, annul all positivity of the object and give a real existence to negativity as such. This impossibility of the real—negativity—has attained a form of presence" (Hegemony, 128). This form of Lacanian and Derridean theory relies on paradox as a form of logic. For Lacan and Žižek, however, negation and presence are not the same; they are dialectically linked as the part to the whole. The whole may be a fantasy, but it is a very real fantasy. The phallus, for example, offers an imaginary sense of the whole and positivity, without which the subject would disappear. There can be no presence as pure negation. The theory of the nodal point relies on total castration. Laclau and Mouffe's occasional use of the word society to describe the condition of postmodernity marks the return of the repressed. The desire for an imaginary phallus, the will-to-totality, cannot always be rationally (mis)construed as the misrecognition of difference and indeterminacy.

We should not overestimate the difference between Žižek and Laclau and Mouffe, however, since all three of them ultimately invert the romantic

27. A number of commentators emphasize this difference between Lacan and Derrida. For example, Dews notes, "Unlike the other post-structuralist thinkers, Lacan comprehends that the understanding of meaning and of the self is necessarily grounded in a presumption of integrity." See Dews, Logics of Disintegration, 236.
conception of premodern societies and thereby celebrate “atomized individuals.” Žižek, for example, repeats Claude Lefort’s thesis in *L’invention Democratique*: he celebrates elections, the end of the “organic unity” of society, and “atomized individuals” (*Sublime*, 148). (Is the One-Dimensional Man the hero of postmodernity?) This celebration of democracy as a stochastic, or formal, process is premised on Lefort’s mythical view of premodern societies. There is no theoretical or historical justification for this inversion of the romantic vision of the organic nature of these societies. This is an essentialist and reductionist vision of the complex nature of premodern civilization that points to a fundamental flaw in a great deal of post-1968 thinking: the political activist moves from the search for “true democracy” (the totalitarian or transparent society) to the bourgeois glorification of floating signifiers, pluralism, consumerism, and elections.

A “Real Humanism”?  

Slavoj Žižek sees the paradox of his anti-essentialism in Hegelian terms. In the introduction to *Tarrying with the Negative* (1994), he argues that “Lacan accepts the ‘deconstructionist’ motif of radical contingency but turns this motif against itself, using it to assert his commitment to Truth as contingent.” Lacan, Žižek insists, is a “transcendental philosopher.”28 The radical negativity in Žižek’s work comes from a revamped Hegelian confrontation with the “terrifying dimension” of the human animal “driven” in various ways for Recognition (*Sublime*, 5). The commitment to Truth as contingent is quite different from an ironic (or postironic) hermeneutics. Hegel opened the door to our sense that all human understanding is situated within history, and historical knowledge is thus a perspective constrained by historical conditions. Yet, the vantage point within history itself always requires a larger view (a theory, as well as an interpretation) that gives it explanatory power. For Nietzsche, the will-to-power is the means of overcoming this chaos of historical becoming. The chaos of becoming inevitably gives way to a “rank ordering” organized through the special position of an artist-politics.29 As


29. Although I reject the esoteric (Straussian) Platonism of Stanley Rosen, I believe his discussion of “Nietzsche’s Platonism,” like that of *Hermeneutics as Politics*, is a necessary, but insufficient, attack on the complacencies of postmodern hermeneutics. Rosen emphasizes that Nietzsche often defines the philosopher as a prophet or lawgiver. The
I have pointed out, Laclau and Mouffe level political struggles to the point where there can be no rank ordering and certainly no justification for the greater legitimacy of one project over any other. This perspectivism is more endemic to the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe than it is to Žižek, the postmodern Hegelian. Žižek seems to be indicating that theory (in addition to interpretation and phronesis) still has a place in political thinking. Politics, in other words, is not merely conversation in the pragmatic sense. Or, if politics has been reduced to this status in academic discourse, then surely the essential worth of such post-Marxist perspectival chitchat needs to be called into question. My goal, then, is not to sever Žižek from the project of Phronesis but to emphasize (with Žižek) that our historical position may call for a reconsideration of some of the basic tenets of anti-essentialism or antifoundationalism.

As I have suggested, what we need is a genealogy of difference, perhaps even one that “accepts the ‘deconstructionist’ motif of radical contingency, but turns this motif against itself.” Genealogy, in the Foucaultian sense, is a hermeneutic historical practice. It undermines origins, totalities, and continuities. It is a playful dance through history that, if not serious in any logocentric sense, deals with serious problems (panopticism, madness, etc.). Nietzsche’s “cheerfulness” in the Genealogy of Morals is only possible with what he calls a “subterranean seriousness.” A genealogy of difference, then, would need to consider new “postmodern” politics in a well-nigh rhizomatous fashion. What we need to take seriously, I have been suggesting, is the mode of domination that underlies the postmodern political condition. The hermeneutic play of genealogy needs to be the object of genealogical study. Thus, we need to look at anti-essentialism and its metonymic chain as symptomatic (in Žižek’s sense) of particular, contingent social conditions. For our present concerns, this means that we cannot abandon the analysis of capitalism as a system. Žižek’s criticism of postmodernism is only one way we can begin to take our playfulness seriously and recognize that anti-essentialism, or liberal pluralism, does not mark the end of history. Hermeneutics as politics is not the final condition for political life.

The term politics has gone through a huge transformation in Laclau and Mouffe’s work that gives it a pragmatic, as well as hermeneutic, flavor. philosopher develops a perspective of all perspectives (a synoptic view) and can create new values based on practico-productive concerns. The role of the philosopher is to overcome chaos (i.e., différence). See The Question of Being (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
They believe they have developed a “real humanism,” a humanism that has been “historicized.” The “great emancipatory goals” are now in the purview of pragmatism (New Reflections, 242–45). An assortment of recent thinkers has elements of pragmatism in their work: Foucault, Derrida, Stanley Fish, Judith Butler, and many others share an interest in purging the desire for metaphysics, the absolute, Truth, Being, the transcendental signified, presence, ontology, identity, concepts, reason, and Man. Many of these thinkers have been able to carry their suspicion of the above terms into the productive sphere of political thinking. Like their radical, philosophical predecessors (particularly Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger), they work with what Paul Ricoeur has called a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” the unmasking of particular claims that have concealed their real motives. A great deal of postmodern theory suggests that unmasking is an endless process, since there is ultimately nothing underneath surface meaning to be exposed (as in class struggle, sexual desire, etc.). A variety of political gains have been made through this process by activists who have challenged normative claims for heterosexuality, male dominance, white supremacy, and so forth. Ricoeur refers to this unmasking as a violent process. This “violence” is rarely acknowledged by poststructuralists, who generally argue that the hermeneutic process always leads toward pleasure or liberal tolerance. It is not only ideology critique that performs a kind of philosophical violence on others (as in the rationalistic conception of false consciousness) but all forms of deconstruction. The exposure of metaphysical or logocentric ideas is itself a means of gaining power. This problem of hermeneutical violence is crucial to Žižek’s nonbiological discussion of the “death-drive,” that “insatiable parasite,” or “radical negativity” (Sublime, 4). Žižek’s means of working out ideology as fantasy (and desire) is not to negate the will (and the violence of hermeneutics) but to come to terms with it by deploying a vital form of nontransparent intersubjectivity.

In her recent collection of essays, Mouffe argues that “a radical democratic interpretation . . . should lead to a common recognition among different groups struggling for an extension and radicalization of democracy that they have a common concern. . . . [I]t should construct a common political identity as radical democratic citizens.”

30. Mouffe, Return of the Political, 70; my emphases.
of dislocation cannot account for the positivity of the social, a positivity they admit is essential to any political formation. And this predicament is not surprising, since their method of unmasking all essences could not exist without the massive development of reification in the life-world of consumer capitalism. Georg Lukács has suggested that one important facet of the "phenomenon of reification" in modern capitalism was the "destruction of every image of the whole" through specialization, bureaucracy, and economic and social rationalization. This phenomenon is not only built into the condition of labor in capitalism but also into the condition of consumerism, in which individuals are simultaneously homogenized (i.e., interpellated as a particular kind of desiring machine for the same commodities) and atomized. The hermeneutics of Laclau and Mouffe ultimately relies on this fragmentation and atomization as the condition of possibility for new social movements. Their brand of pragmatism can only create the vacuous and paradoxical notion of unity in dispersal (a phrase taken from Foucault) that accentuates the impossibility of any concepts of society that might create an alternative to the technologies of reification and social division. Any alternative is merely dismissed as "metaphysics" or "utopian," and a complacent view of the status quo is fixed in place. In a notorious footnote in Consequences of Pragmatism, Rorty admits that the liberal utopia in his vision is only possible for advanced postindustrial societies such as the United States. Laclau and Mouffe say the same thing when they reveal that post–World War II consumerism is at the heart of new social movements. Like Rorty's version, this pragmatic view of politics (the end of ideology) universalizes its own perspectivism while debunking those who do not follow the banner of anti-essentialism.

The core of this problem is that the pragmatic nature of this theory leaves the private/public dualism of postmodern liberal theory intact. Although Laclau and Mouffe claim they have left open more room for antagonisms than Rorty or Rawls, they merely repeat what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have called "the politics of avoidance." Rorty's liberal utopia keeps a strong separation between the smooth operation of the state and the antagonisms of disparate groups. The "thin state" does not maintain the disciplinary control of older regimes but instead operates as an administered society that avoids the conflicts and politics of the people. Hardt and

32. See Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 210.
Negri emphasize the importance of what Laclau and Mouffe call "new social movements" (for example, ACT-UP), but the "critique of the state-form" calls for a transformation in the "living labor" of postmodern cyborg-citizens, a radical revaluation of all values to undermine the oppressive condition of the total, postmodern "subsumption of labor under capital." My point here is that consumer society and the modes of social differentiation, or fragmentation, are themselves supported by this administered society, the postmodern Polizeiwissenschaft. Dislocation and difference, then, are part of a historical condition and a particular regime of power that is by no means fixed for all eternity. A genealogy of difference, then, would trace such conditions of domination while maintaining a subterranean affirmation of "living labor" and a totalizing critique of the working conditions of global subjects.

Perhaps the most compelling argument in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy is that negative freedom, the belief that "liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others" (Locke), needs to be replaced by a new sense of positive liberties, a greater sense of participation in democratic struggles. Laclau and Mouffe are, of course, correct in arguing that the fragmentation and proliferation of struggles (for feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, etc.) cannot be dismissed as merely superstructure or the end of ideology. The politicization of culture and the social is vital to any radical enterprise today. There is no reason, however, why we have to choose between new social movements and totalizing discourses. This opposition has given rise to an essentialist form of separatism that excludes the potential of larger, collective struggles against dominant ideological formations in the United States. The fetishism of dislocation and the related weakness of a theory of ideology limit the possibilities for the development of a sense of what positive liberty might mean in the age of late capitalism.