

# Post-Marxism

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## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AT STAKE IN POST-MARXIST THOUGHT?

The task of presenting a critical overview of all the movements, writers, and academic schools that, in a broad sense, have been connected to twentieth-century (Western) Marxism, is quite impossible. This is not just a matter of space; it is also a conceptual problem. On the one hand, the term 'Post-Marxism', refers us to thinkers who followed classical Western Marxism and in one way or another tried to overcome it. On the other hand, 'Post-Marxism' can also refer to a set of systematic issues, problems, and demands. This entry is based on the latter approach to Post-Marxism as a set of theoretical and conceptual moves. As a consequence, this entry does not follow Therborn (2008) who uses 'Post-Marxism' as an empirical term that brings together everything written after the First World War in the left tradition of thought.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, more recent attempts to

redefine the field in this manner, such as theories of intersectionality, feminist theory, post-colonial theories, and identity politics will not be discussed.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the turn toward the symbolic and language (in its connection with psychoanalysis), which is especially crucial for the French intellectual post-war world, will not be discussed, as this background could fill an entire book length study.<sup>3</sup> Instead, primary attention will be paid to what should be considered the core of Post-Marxism in relation to Marxist and Non-Marxist critical theory, namely, its conception of the social. This shift is of importance for its overall philosophical vision of society, theory, and politics.

The systematic approach can broadly be defined by how French and German philosophers (at least those who are taken here to be main representatives of Post-Marxism, such as Mouffe, Laclau, Honneth, Castoriadis, Lefort, Gorz, Negri, and Badiou) have moved away from a Marxian utilization of the capitalist social form in terms of

political economy and that which is polemically called by the popularizers of Post-Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe, 'economism'. Economism, which they identify with the classical Marxist position, is the idea that political struggle, democracy, and political movements need to be exclusively analyzed in socio-economic terms. In theories labeled 'economism', as Laclau and Mouffe put it, 'political struggle is itself only a superstructural fact, since it does not constitute reality but is simply the expression of a process inscribed in history from its inception' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 18). Put differently, 'according to such a perspective [i.e., an economist perspective, C. L.], political struggle is seen not as being constitutive of the social order, but as being a mere "superstructure" of an inexorable economic process' (17). The rejection of economism implies the rejection of Marx's critique of political economy and the rejection of a critical theory of society, which then, in turn, leads, in Post-Marxism to 'a "Copernican revolution" in Marxist theory' (17; for this, see also Choat and Rekret, 2016). According to this view, the political no longer is conceived of as a superstructural effect; instead, put in Gauchet's words, 'the political constitutes the most encompassing level of the organization [of society], not a subterranean level, but veiled in the visible' (quoted in Breckman, 2013: 151). Consequently, giving up on a critical theory of society leads to the Post-Marxist claim that we should no longer assume that our contemporary world is in any social or economic sense united or a coherent whole. Instead, it is characterized by political or normative struggles and conflicts on *all* levels of society which can no longer be synthesized into a unity. As Laclau puts it concisely in a summary of his contribution to Post-Marxism: 'One consequence of our analysis is that we have to assert the primacy of politics in the structuration of social spaces' (Laclau, 2006: 112).

Given this main struggle of how to conceive the political in relation to society as

a whole, it becomes clear immediately that Post-Marxist ideas are to a large extent rooted in political and social experiences after 1945 in Europe, such as the failure of the French and Italian Communist party, the exhaustion of the East-European socialist project, the downfall of the Soviet Union and the GDR, the development of welfare states, the stabilization of representative democracies in Europe, the development of the European Union, as well as the events in Hungary, Prague, and May 1968 in Paris. Moreover, these ideas are also rooted in the development of the neoliberal era, which began with the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in the Great Britain and in United States, and which was extended by social-democratic governments under Blair, Schröder and Clinton, which, in turn, lead to a destruction of traditional labor organizations and, through the embracement of global capital, to the fast arrival of post-industrial social structures in Europe and the United States. Moreover, new international left perspectives (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 106), new left movements, as well as of the importance of identity for these political movements and social theory had to be acknowledged. In the context of these changes and in accord with the overall liberal-democratic and centrist turn in most Western countries, most Post-Marxists gave up the idea of a fully liberated society, which is opposed to a model of philosophy that, as Adorno has it, perceives and judges the existing world from the standpoint of redemption. As Laclau and Mouffe nicely put it (and which can equally be found in Foucault, Honneth, Habermas, and others), 'the myth of the transparent and homogenous society – which implies the end of politics – must be resolutely abandoned' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 106). Equally abandoned, according to this view, should be the desire of classical Marxists to assume the emergence of a collective subject without fundamental divisions. As Mouffe puts it, 'there will always be antagonisms, struggles and divisions of the social, and the need for institutions to deal

with them will never disappear' (Mouffe, 2013: 84). Thus, thinking about political movements in a pluralistic context is more central for most Post-Marxists than thinking about the possibility of a revolutionary party (with, perhaps, the exception of Badiou).

As a consequence of moving away from Marx's critique of political economy and of the aforementioned real political and social developments, Post-Marxist philosophers shifted the ontological framework of their theories and evaluations of contemporary social changes and political events. The latter move is crucial not only for understanding how their *thinking* changed, but also since the underlying conceptual displacements tend to be overlooked by readers who understand Post-Marxism only as a loosely connected set of 'ideas'. However, looking back onto the development of left theory during the last 50 years reveals a surprisingly coherent picture. As already indicated, Post-Marxist philosophers tend to argue that the social-economic structure of society, i.e., that which Marx called the relations of production, are no longer a proper basis for thinking about social reality and the *being* of society. Consequently, their thinking of *what society is* changed, and, as such, it can easily be contrasted with how critical theory and the Frankfurt School, at least to some extent, conceive of the world. Instead of focusing on a theory of society as the *primary* level of human reality, Post-Marxist philosophers, including so-called second and third generation Critical Theory, tend to argue that social reality is either based on language and, hence, meaning (Habermas, Mouffe/Laclau), or on norms and ethics (Habermas, Honneth), or on the political (Mouffe/Laclau, Lefort, Badiou), or on power (Foucault). As we will see, the move toward making either normative or political struggle the substance of social reality is decisive, since it leads to a universalized conception of struggles, conflicts, and antagonisms. As a consequence of this move, most Post-Marxists reject that which in the literature

sometimes is taken to be a Marxist dogma, i.e., the assumption of a 'law of value', which is most visible in Hardt/Negri and Gorz, as well as that which is conceived of as Marx's preference for 'productivism' (Baudrillard, Castoriadis, Habermas).<sup>4</sup>

In sum, I follow commentators, such as Choat and Rekret (2016) and Wallat (2010), who claim that the main feature of Post-Marxist thought is the divorce of the political from the critique of political economy (as introduced by Laclau and Mouffe in Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). However, in addition, I want to broaden the perspective in this entry by indicating that other central concepts used in recent attempts to redefine, leave, or overcome classical Marxism, such as normativity and power, are also important to be considered for grasping main philosophical shifts of the last 50 years.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, in my view newer Frankfurt School proponents, such as Honneth and Habermas, can also be subsumed under the term 'Post-Marxism'.

In order to get a sense of the overall direction of Post-Marxist philosophies in contrast to critical theory and Frankfurt School theorizing, the following should be used as a guideline: Post-Marxists moved away from three central elements of Marxist and Frankfurt School thought, namely, (1) the concept of class, (2) the concept of capital as the concept of societal unity and its accompanying task of a social theory, and (3) a dialectical understanding of the relation between the socio-economic and the political sphere.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Post-Marxism shifted toward (1) the concept of antagonisms and conflict, (2) the concepts of difference and openness (and the rejection of the task of a theory of society), and (3) a hierarchical and dual model of human reality, within which the existing social organization is the effect of either norms, or politics or power struggle. Let me briefly outline the main shift, before I go into more detail.

Laclau and Mouffe put it succinctly by claiming that 'the first condition of a radically democratic society is to accept the

contingent and radically open character of all its values – and in that sense, to abandon the aspiration to a single foundation’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 102). Since they reject a single foundation for the pluralization of social conflicts and political struggle, Laclau and Mouffe also reject a single theoretical framework that could provide us with (a) a theory of society as a totality and (b) a single ‘mechanism’ for understanding the plurality of political struggles from an underlying logic. As a consequence, a dialectical theory of social reality in the Marxian and Hegelian tradition is no longer feasible to understand contemporary society and politics, and, in addition, it can no longer function as a framework for political praxis based on the concept of class conflict. Laclau’s and Mouffe’s arguments are straightforward: since contradictions are logical and since we are asked to give up the dialectical concept of social reality, they propose to develop a concept of ‘antagonisms’ that no longer can be subjected to a hierarchical ‘meta’-frame that ultimately would remove these antagonisms as a *constitutive* factor of social reality and turn them into an *effect* of social reality (see Laclau, 2006: 105). According to Laclau’s and Mouffe’s reading of Marx and classical Marxism, the pluralization of antagonisms has been reduced by classical Marxism to an underlying *a priori* framework, which led to a covering up of the *reality* of political struggle. Accordingly, classical Marxism no longer can be used to understand political movements that are based on diverse national and global contexts, on identity politics or on movements based on sexual identity, gender, or race. As a consequence, their attempt of pushing Marxism toward a new stage is centered in re-thinking the concepts of difference, conflict, struggle, and so on. The political becomes the center of Post-Marxist theory, and the concept of struggle loses its dual logic. As Dick Howard puts it, ‘because the political transcends the society that it constitutes, it can never be incarnated (by the proletariat, the party, or any social institution);

it can only be represented because, in itself, it must always remain “an empty place”’ (Howard, in Breckman, 2013: xiii). Society is now conceived as a ‘multiverse’ of struggles in which no representative logic exists that can express the ‘negative’ status of the pluriverse as *the real*. Put in Derridean terms, *differance* is inscribed in the roots of social constitution and can no longer be reduced to a unitary logic. In this version society becomes a black box that can no longer be caught and fenced in by theory and philosophy. Given this, and although we might see some connections to Adorno’s concept of non-identity, we immediately understand that Post-Marxist theory is uninterested, if not hostile, to the Frankfurt School that (though with some hesitations) did not give up a conception of society as a coherent whole that can be grasped on the level of *its own* constitution, i.e., not as an effect of something else. One of the central hinges for reconstructing social totality in the tradition of critical theory and Marxian political economy is, of course, capital as the overall determining social form of social relations under capitalism. It comes as no surprise that almost all Post-Marxist theorists, with perhaps the exception of Žižek, have given up on the idea that we need to assume an underlying principle and social form that determines the unity of capitalist social organization and enables everything and everyone to be *integrated* into *one* system. In fact, due to the pluralization of political struggle, which is now taken to be the *ground* of the social, society itself appears to be fragmented, plural, and a system of differences that can no longer be unified as ‘one’. As Lefort succinctly puts it:

Whoever dreams of an abolition of power secretly cherishes the reference to the One and the reference to the Same: he imagines a society which would accord spontaneously with itself, a multiplicity of activities which would be transparent to one another and which would unfold in a homogenous time and space, a way of producing, living together, communicating, associating, thinking, feeling, teaching which would express a single way of being. (Lefort, 1986: 270)<sup>7</sup>

As we can see here, the influence of Derrida's deconstruction and post-metaphysical thought on Post-Marxism, which also includes the rejection of Althusser's attempt to save Marx's theory, should not be underestimated.

With the rejection of critical theory as a critical theory of society, Post-Marxists, such as Laclau and Mouffe, reject the idea that there could be a political representative of this totality, such as the party. As Murray and Schuler put it, 'for Post-Marxists, the epistemological use of "totality" actually invites some Party to reserve for itself the standpoint of the Absolute, take the reins of society, and direct it according to its "scientific" vision' (Murray and Schuler, 1988: 330). Independent from the question of whether the idea of a revolutionary party is obsolete, it is important to note that we *do* find a coherent reformulation of the relation between theory and praxis in Post-Marxist thought. The experiences of the later twentieth century, especially the development of plural political movements, is intrinsically connected to the theoretical re-formulations of society and politics. In its rejection of critical social theory, Post-Marxist thought is not alone: anarchists, such as David Graeber and Noam Chomsky, are equally hostile to theory and theorizing society. For them, in opposition to philosophers such as Adorno and Marx, society is a transparent reality, which does not need to be reconstructed philosophically. As such, these movements tend to dismiss the entire problem of fetishism on the level of the commodity form, and they are equally uninterested in money and capital. It comes as no surprise, then, that the central issue of fetishism and the in-transparency of capitalist social organization and its own mystification as *the* source of (abstract) domination does not play any important role for Post-Marxists, such as Laclau, Mouffe, Foucault, Honneth, Habermas, Badiou, or Rancière. As a consequence, domination is no longer localized on the level of society and, instead, it is conceptualized as a form of intersubjectivity.

Put differently, society tends to become replaced by sociality.

## POST-MARXISM: ONE ATTEMPT OF GRASPING IT

### *The Primacy of the Normative*

Contemporary Habermasian critical theory has turned its back on classical critical-theoretical concepts, including class. Indeed, in the wake of Habermas' theoretical turn toward communication and language, it gave up a unified theory of society. As Habermas argued, (1) the production paradigm must be replaced with the communicative action paradigm (Habermas, 1989: 89), (2) the theory of society with the lifeworld/system distinction, (3) the focus on ontology and epistemology, most visible in Adorno, with a pragmatic theory of linguistics and communicative action, (4) the priority of social-economic considerations with a theory of normativity. The latter is especially important since it shifts the entire basis of critical theory toward considerations of morality, justice, fairness, recognition, and so on, that make up either the transcendental framework for discourses and communicative claims (Habermas) or the framework of intersubjective recognition (Honneth).<sup>8</sup>

Honneth's sharp move away from early critical theory is most visible in one of his more recent publications on democratic ethics. He argues that the entire framework of modern societies, under which he also subsumes the capitalist market, is framed and made possible by recognitional relations. This update of the Hegelian concept of recognition underlies, according to Honneth, all market exchanges as well as the institutional structure, including the family and the political apparatus. Independent from how we think about this neo-Hegelianism (Honneth, 2011), we need to see that Honneth has an entirely different vision of social reality than



traditional critical theory and Marxism, insofar as he argues that normativity is the true basis of society. Given this basic assumption, although Honneth does not acknowledge the ontological implications of his theory, he stands opposed to the French traditions in Post-Marxism, since he argues that the normative framework also underlies and determines political struggle. As he puts it in a very telling phrase, his approach to society is based on a concept of 'reality constituting ethics' [*wirklichkeitsbildender Moral*] (Honneth, 2013: 358). However, since he argues that society cannot be grasped on the level of *its own* constitution, he defends a similar position to other Post-Marxists who claim that the political is the ground of the social. In Honneth, the ground of the social is the ethical.

Honneth's position is nicely visible in a recent article on Marx in which he argues that the concept of capital can be reduced to a normative relation and that that which Marx called an *antinomy* between capital and labor should be taken as a conflict of normative claims. The 'capital relation', as he puts it, is 'shot through' with normativity (Honneth, 2013: 359). He thereby no longer acknowledges that the conflict between labor and capital is *constitutive* for capitalist society; instead, it is reduced to one conflict among many other social and psychological conflicts. Moreover, as Honneth claims, the 'temporal schema of a non-stoppable and uninterrupted expansion of capitalist valorization interests' (356) is unable to render understandable the dynamics of modern societies that are based, he claims, on normative progressions and advancements, such as consumer protections, the welfare state, and improved working conditions. Progress in these areas, Honneth argues, can no longer be conceptualized with the tools of critical theory, since its epistemology does not give us access to the normative struggles for recognition that are multidimensional and cannot be derived from one principle.<sup>9</sup> With the rejection of a constitutive unity of

society, a theory of society in the tradition of Marx and Adorno goes out the window, too. Categories, relations, concepts, and political economy move into the background of Honneth's theory and, instead, intersubjective relations move into the foreground. In short, the analysis of sociality replaces society. As a consequence, instead of analyzing social totality with the concept of value, Honneth, though in a different fashion than other Post-Marxists, falls back onto idealist assumptions, the most important consequence of which is that capitalism is no longer analyzed as a historically specific unity and, instead is based on a *universal* normative background and a plural definition of normative conflicts that run through all levels of social constitution.<sup>10</sup> Though this relation seems at first surprising, we can see how Honneth, although he focuses on the ethical instead of the political, comes very close to the vision of social reality that Laclau and Mouffe offer by what they call the 'multiplicity of conflict zones' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 18). Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe claim in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that 'the economic space is itself structured as a political space' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 94), the position of which is, on the one hand, close to Honneth (who claims that the economic space is shot through with what he calls 'normative claims') and, on the other hand, even Foucault (who, as we will see further down, claims that the economic space is shot through by power relations).<sup>11</sup>

Although Marx and Adorno would not have doubted that normative (or political) conflicts make up social progress, they would have denied the claim that we can base our theory of society on conflictual claims by social agents; instead, capitalist society as such would be conceived as the framework *in which* these normative conflicts unfold and find their limits. This framework as a *totality* is denied by most Post-Marxist philosophers, and, consequently, they also reject the need for a dialectical theory of society.

### *The Primacy of the Political*

One of the most prominent representatives of Post-Marxism, although his philosophy to a large extent is opposed to Laclau and Mouffe, is Alain Badiou's Maoist political thinking and his attempt to make philosophy political again by radicalizing the concept of truth.<sup>12</sup> Badiou's theory of reality is based on his concept of 'event'. According to Badiou, events are those moments in time through which entire areas of our reality are restructured and based on different principles than before. Events can only retroactively be determined and they cannot be instrumentally planned. Badiou argues that there are four 'realms' of reality in which truth events can occur: art, love, science, and politics. Whenever 'the' truth changes in these areas, reality becomes restructured. For example, one could argue that the modern revolutions with their bourgeois principles are an event in the history of politics, insofar as we no longer can understand ourselves as 'pre-modern' subjects. Who and what we are as political agents is, whether we acknowledge it or not, determined by the horizon that the modern revolutions have initiated and under which we are still defined as political agents. Events trigger 'truth procedures' that define some organized ways in which a truth can be followed up, organized and actualized. For the sake of this entry, it is important to note that the social-economic is not on the list of truth related events, according to Badiou's ontology. In short, reality restructuring events and the installment of new 'meta'-truths come about through politics, but not, however, through the event of capital, as one might want to argue from a social-economic standpoint. As a consequence, the political as a truth-related realm of reality and the realm in which humans are defined as subjects (of a specific political framework and as agents), is introduced as the primary realm of being and the root of all (possible) changes, insofar as they are not science, art, or love related. Politics is, then, the ontological ground of the

social. As Oliver Marchart demonstrates, for Badiou politics defines the reality, but it cannot be translated into social relations (Marchart, 2010: 160). Seen from Badiou's standpoint, social and economic relations are therefore always only the consequence of political revolutions. It comes as no surprise, then, that for Badiou (a) classes only exist in concrete practical confrontations, but are nothing in themselves, and (b) Marxism is neither a philosophy nor a theory, but primarily a political praxis:

Marxism [...] is neither a branch of economics (theory of the relations of production), nor a branch of sociology (objective description of 'social reality'), nor a philosophy (a dialectical conceptualization of contradictions). It is, let us reiterate, the organized knowledge of the political means required to undo society and finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is 'communism'. (Badiou, 2012: 8)

This reduction of Marxism to politics is especially visible in Badiou's rather sporadic references to capital, capitalism, and other categories of society in relation to empirical data, which thereby denies that we are in need of a *theory* of capital, as, for example, Adorno would argue. Capitalism, for Badiou, is a 'regime of gangsters' (Badiou, 2012: 12). According to Badiou, theorizing about capitalism remains within the existing paradigm, as it only analyzes what is taken to be untruth, whereas Marxism as a praxis (already) exists outside of the existing paradigm.

Since Badiou defines Marxism as a political praxis, his writings on how contemporary society could be overcome are defined in terms of ideas and subjects. According to Badiou, social reorganization is based on the 'force of an idea' (Badiou, 2012: 15) as an a priori condition, namely, the force of the idea of communism, which runs through the entire philosophical history. The communist idea can 'interpellate' individuals, the consequence of which is that they turn into subjects (of the idea). Agency is constituted, according to this model, through the

subjection of individual bodies to the truth who then, as quasi-militants, reorganize the reality in accordance with the idea. Indeed, according to Badiou, the political subject is 'a militant of this truth' (Badiou, 2010a: 3). According to this quasi-religious model of political agency, individuals now belong to a new order of humanity (Badiou, 2010: 35).

Although Rancière's Maoism is not as strong as Badiou's, some of his positions regarding radical democracy come close to Laclau and Mouffe, and his shift toward the ontology of the political can be located in close proximity to Badiou's ideas.<sup>13</sup> According to Rancière, democracy should be understood as an anarchist concept in the sense of an 'ungoverning' element in all government and as a 'non-foundation' that founds *all* attempts to organize social reality. Again, politics becomes the true ground of the social and it loses its social form. All political governing of society is forced to control the democratic and uncontrollable foundation that underlies and threatens political control. Society, as Rancière argues, becomes 'bracketed' by events of democracy. As a consequence, democracy as a *possibility* of the breakdown of the control mechanisms of society refers to fundamental instability of the entire social order. Rancière's turn to the political and his turn away from Marx's critique of political economy, as in Badiou, lead to the reappearance of historically universal concepts and to the rejection of the concept of class: 'The power of the people is not that of a people gathered together, of the majority, or of the working class. It is simply the power peculiar to those who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit' (Rancière 2006, 46; for a critique of such a position, see Wood: 1998). Rancière offers a radical version of the 'political autonomy' theorists by claiming that the political as the 'groundless ground' of society does not depend on *any* social, ethical or historical forms:

Democracy is as bare in its relation to the power of wealth as it is to the power of kinship that today

comes to assist and to rival it. It is not based on any nature of things nor guaranteed by any institutional form. It is not borne along by any historical necessity and does not bear any. It is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts. (Rancière, 2006: 97)

The problem with this position is not that it reintroduces a strong concept of politics; rather, the problem with this vision is, as in Badiou, that it is unable to conceptualize the political agent as a *historically specific* and social-economic agent who can only *be* a political agent because its being is social.<sup>14</sup>

Badiou's and Rancière's substantializing of the political can also be found in Lefort and Castoriadis. Lefort was very influential for the French discussion, and his definition of the political can be seen as paradigmatic. He writes: 'the *political* refers to the social ensemble itself, for the entire collectivity is affected by conceptions of the nature of power and the mode of the exercise of government' (Lefort, 2007: 113). As Breckman has it, 'Lefort urged us to see that social conflict can only be defined as representing an internal division, a division opening within and defined by a single milieu' (Breckman, 2013: 150).

In a similar fashion, Castoriadis detects in Marx a 'naïve contempt for the political question' (Castoriadis, 2008: 197) and a naïve belief in the disappearance of politics once the relations of productions would be revolutionized and collectivized. According to Castoriadis, Marx did not understand the full force of the political realm as a realm of freedom and equality since he underestimated the role of power in societies. In short, in search of a radical praxis and in search of a revolutionary subject after the downfall of traditional Marxism, Post-Marxist thinkers such as Castoriadis see Marxism as an obstacle to new ways of thinking about society and a different future. He criticizes traditional Marxism by arguing that its focus on theory, sciences, and laws cannot help us understand contemporary society. Socialism, as he argues,



is not in classical Marxism understood as a historical and political project of people and its praxis; instead, it conceives of society as the result of an objective historical movement (Castoriadis, 2014: 76). Castoriadis's position has immediate ramifications for the concept of class in his thinking, since he claims that the concept of class can no longer be determined by its relation to the relations of production alone. As a consequence, he identifies traditional Marxism with its political effects in the twentieth century and, given these twentieth-century failures of the left, he argues for a strong concept of social autonomy that is based on the idea that an autonomous society (which he no longer calls 'socialism') is a society that determines its own institutional reality as the result of its own collective actions and is able to make corrections whenever it realizes faults or different needs (Castoriadis, 2014: 55). Seen from this mix of Kantian and anarchist ideas, Marxism as a doctrine becomes on *all* levels and institutions of society a 'massive restriction' of human self-regulation (Castoriadis, 2014: 77), 'self-administration' (Castoriadis, 2014: 78), and 'participatory democracy' (Castoriadis, 2012: 82). Again, this idea is best expressed by Laclau and Mouffe:

We have rather to conceive society as a complex field, crossed by a diversity of political struggles, in which the multiplicity of subjects must be recognised and accepted if we are one day to achieve a truly liberated and self-managed society. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 22)

Finally, for Castoriadis, truth must be liberated from fixed knowledge and ought to become the 'free movement of people in a free realm' (Castoriadis, 2014: 61). Castoriadis himself connects the emergence and strength of the concept of self-administration to the events of 1968 (Castoriadis, 2014: 153). As in Laclau and Mouffe, any metaphysical framework of thought should be abolished, and since dialectics is ultimately rooted in metaphysics, dialectics has to go, too.<sup>15</sup>

## ***The Primacy of Power***

Treating Foucault as a Post-Marxist is contentious, insofar as Foucault's work is not only characterized by many changes, but Foucault distanced himself from Marxism and showed contempt for academic Marxists. However, Foucault appeared in public with many masks, and a more generous reading of Foucault reveals that Marx's critique of political economy is present in many of Foucault's analyses of the modern disciplinary institutions, such as the hospital, the schools, and the prisons, i.e., his work in the 1970s. The recently published lecture courses during this period of his thinking, such as *The Punitive Society*, in which Foucault develops a first version of what then became *Discipline and Punish*, shows an uncanny closeness to many issues that Marx dealt with in volume one of *Capital*. Due to Foucault's rather narrow reception as a 'Post-modernist' this important aspect of his work can easily be overlooked. Equally important is his appropriation of Althusser's concept of ideology (Althusser, 2014) and his further development of an institutional and spatial theory of knowledge. For example, in the lecture course *The Punitive Society* as well as in some writings on biopolitics, Foucault is concerned with the production the human body as a human body that must be prepared and 'inserted' into the disciplinary framework in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of application. The investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces were at the time indispensable. (Foucault, 1990: 141)

In other words, the subjection of the labor process to money and the wage form required the subsumption of the human body to the process of valorization (for this, see also

Macherey, 2015). After the first historical upset by capital the production of migrating bodies had to be controlled (vagabonds, homeless, etc.).

Foucault analyzes the *constitution of social reality* through the body. For example, the history of handwriting, as Foucault shows in *Discipline and Punish*, can be conceived of as a disciplinary process that produced the effect of different 'spatial' and bodily configurations and different social relations, which, in turn, had to be in place in order to bring about the subjection of labor to capital. Accordingly, for Foucault, knowledge is tied up with the body, the topic of which has been totally missed by critical theory, since social formations are rarely analyzed by Frankfurt School philosophers as embodied processes. As Foucault argues, capitalism

would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern. If the development of the great instruments of the state, as *institutions* of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations, the rudiments of anatomo- and bio-politics, created in the eighteenth century as *techniques* of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions (the family and the army, schools and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective bodies), operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them. (Foucault, 1990: 141)

Moreover, Foucault understands the production of knowledge in the form of ideology and in the form of social relations as a material process, which also includes architecture and geography. For example, in his analysis of power relations he includes the architectural form of prisons, and he is very interested in understanding how time and space became productive along with the historical

emergence of the wage form. As such, despite his intellectual turns and the fascinating breadth of his work, Foucault can be read in the framework of Marxism.

Although power in Foucault is a heavily debated topic and though he is not always clear about the ontological ramifications of his concept, seen from a Marxian background and the topic of embodiment, it becomes clear that Foucault moves power onto *one level* with the social-economic determinations and relations of production. As Balibar has convincingly argued, Foucault shares with Marx the anti-liberal position that power relations are prior to contractual relations (Balibar, 1992: 50).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, power, as Foucault shows, is the force that reorganizes the social relations in accordance with the new social-economic principle of capitalism, which is the wage-form.<sup>17</sup> What Foucault attacks are certain caricatures of base and superstructure in which power is solely located in the superstructure of society. According to Foucault, following Althusser's concept of structural causality, power should be analyzed on the level of social relation and not from 'above' or independent from it. As a consequence, power is something that is never 'power over' or simply oppressive; instead, it is the very struggle that *organizes* the relations in accordance with its overall form (value).

In this way, Foucault makes the same move as other Post-Marxists by arguing that the political has been reduced to the social in Marxism and that we would do well to rescue political relations as relations of struggle as a topic on its own by analyzing it on what Foucault famously calls, in *Discipline and Punish*, the 'micro-analytic of power'. According to Foucault, then, all social-economic relations are political, insofar as every reorganization of the social is connected to the struggle between power and 'counter-power'. But this relation is not one-dimensional; instead, it is a pluriverse of relations that cannot be rescued by a dialectical theory of society. This all-pervasive concept

of the political also explains Foucault's closeness to Maoist movements. Since power is all-pervasive, power relations always *transcend* the social relations in which they are expressed and which they organize.

We can see here that that which Foucault worked out in hundreds of essays and interviews, becomes then finalized and popularized in Laclau and Mouffe. As they put it,

The Gramscian concept of the war of position implies a rupture with such a conception, a rupture which finds its theoretical source in the notion of the integral state. For if the articulations of the social whole are political articulations, there is no level of society where power and forms of resistance are not exercised. Since these articulations do not come from a single and necessary source, there can be no absolute and essential location of power, but rather a multiplicity of dimensions and struggles, whose unity – or separation – are constantly being re-defined. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 20)

Although the transcendence does not occur external to existing society, as in Badiou, power always escapes the attempt to fix it in social categories, such as class, gender, or race. Put simply, power cannot be grasped as a unified principle; for power underlies those categories and brings their organization about without being determined by them.

### CONSEQUENCE: THE REJECTION OF CAPITAL AND THE LAW OF VALUE

All Post-Marxists reject that which has been (unfortunately) called the 'law of value', i.e., Marx's labor theory of value. The main proponents are, on the one hand, André Gorz (2004), and, on the other hand, Hardt and Negri (especially Hardt and Negri, 2001: 280–304). Gorz, although often not considered as a Post-Marxist philosopher, was one of the first, with Postone (1996, 2015), who understood Marx's philosophy of labor not necessarily as a critique of alienated labor and communism as a state of unalienated labor. He argues that Marx's philosophy is in

truth a critique *of* labor and a critique of wealth connected to labor and production, the thesis of which is most prominently featured in Marx's so-called 'Machine Fragment' in the *Grundrisse*. Given the further processes of automatization, the intellectualization of labor, ecological issues, the general importance of knowledge for production and the increasing unimportance of fixed capital for wealth, Gorz argues that the labor theory of value loses all of its meaning, and with it, at least to some extent, Marx's general philosophy, too. Even before Hardt and Negri, Gorz takes on 'immaterial labor' as the central issue for a Post-Marxist theory of the economy and contemporary society: 'Underpinning the capitalist knowledge economy, we find, then, an anti-economy in which the commodity, commodity-exchange and money-making don't apply' (Gorz, 2010: 13). Gorz's general thesis, which Hardt and Negri also support, is simple: immaterial labor and the centrality of subjectivity and knowledge for contemporary capitalism, points to the end of the attempt to privatize and to subsume everything for surplus value production. Since, as these philosophers argue, knowledge is intrinsically social, cannot be privatized, and belongs to the commons (Gorz, 2010: 36), capital is left with *power* and strategies to enclose knowledge. On this view, control societies are societies in which capital can no longer make labor more productive and, instead, tries to control it. Value, according to these Marx readers, is based on labor and is a measure, and, since immaterial aspects of labor products can no longer be measured, the labor theory of value becomes obsolete: 'by "immaterial labor"', as Negri explains, 'we mean the ensemble of intellectual, communicative, relational and affective activities which are expressed by subjects and social movements' (Negri, 2008: 62). Communism is already around the corner, and we are observing the last attempts by capital to go against its own downfall. Consequently, we can celebrate and declare critical theory a thing of the past.

Capitalism is now identified with 'limitless control' (Castoriadis, 2012: 83) of individuals, which no longer allows individuals to identify an overall meaning in contemporary society. Similarly, Negri and Hardt argue that under conditions of its dissolution capital turned into pure forms of control, insofar as the category of value can no longer be applied to the contemporary form of capitalism in which *measurable* labor no longer determines the value of commodities. As Negri has it, we are 'in a situation where *labour time* on the one hand and, on the other, the *criterion of measure* of this time (and hence the law of value) becomes less and less important as *central quantifying elements of production*' (Negri, 2008: 63). As a consequence, and this connects Negri and Gorz to other Post-Marxists, political relations (outside of their class determination) become again very important for understanding social relations, although, to be fair, Negri's analyses always move in close proximity to political economy:

When the entire paradigmatic framework of labour is changed, when labour comes to consist of a totality of knowledge borne and put into production by mass intellectuality, then political control comes to be exercised through war. (Negri, 2008: 65)

It is clear that the current shift toward a network society, which implies a 'socialization of production' (Negri, 2008: 64), as well as the 'internet of things' produces many problems for capital's ability to come up with new strategies to enclose the common, such as patents and intellectual copyrights. Once the products become more and more driven by digital technologies and information, commodities can be reproduced at almost no cost, which, in turn, reduces their marginal utility to zero and, ultimately, makes it almost impossible for capital to squeeze more profits out of labor power. According to Hardt and Negri, biopolitics in the form of control of entire populations, is the consequence (Negri, 2008: 71).

As a result, Hardt and Negri can be moved close to Laclau, who argues that the 'objectivist theory of history' was based (among other things) on the internal contradiction of surplus value production as well as on the assumption that the profit rate of capital will decline over time and bring capitalism to an end: 'The labour theory of value, on which it was grounded, was shown to be plagued by all kinds of theoretical inconsistencies' (Laclau, 2006: 104).

## CONCLUSION

Two concluding comments are in order: first, many of the Post-Marxist figures who have been discussed in this chapter seem to have a somewhat narrow understanding of the later Marx as an 'economic' philosopher who no longer can tell us much about our contemporary world. Second, given this, it is also crucial to understand why in more recent work done by academic Marxists who do *not* want to give up the Marxian heritage, a 'different' and 'new' Marx emerged that is most visible in the German school of the so called 'new Marx reading' (Backhaus, Heinrich, Reichelt), the re-envisioning of critical theory (Bonefeld), the Italian readings of Marx (Finelli, Fineschi), ecological Marxism (Saito, Foster, Burkett), and readings that deal with globalization and international issues (Padella, Anderson). These new readings move away from the classical understanding of Marx's critique of political economy as a theory of a specific mode of production to a wider understanding of Marx that includes all spheres of society.

Recent popular movements that are based on 'flat' political structures and that are directly influenced by Laclau and Mouffe, such as *Podemos* in Spain, can be traced back to a long intellectual left tradition after the Second World War, and should be seen in the light of the intellectual world of Post-Marxist thought. As Laclau and Mouffe have

it, 'the political subject, the agent of this outcome, can no longer be conceived of as the simple product of an infrastructural logic' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1981: 19). As such, any attempt to pose critical theory as an alternative theoretical paradigm should equally think about whether it can be accompanied by different forms of political praxis. The rejection of any hierarchical organization of contemporary left politics leaves us with the Badiouan question of whether a mass movement can be organized in a way that differs from the party conception of organization. It should not surprise us that contemporary left movements no longer look for traditional Marxist language to describe their struggles and no longer conceive of critical theory as something that helps them to understand the society within which they live. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that, as Laclau and Mouffe have it, 'any reformulation of socialism has to start today from a more diversified, complex and contradictory horizon of experiences than that of 50 years ago' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 80). We are living in a historical period in which 'new generations, without the prejudices of the past, without theories presenting themselves as "absolute truths" of History, are constructing new emancipatory discourses, more human, diversified and democratic' (80).<sup>18</sup>

However, even if this situation is undoubtedly true, we should be concerned with the tendency of Post-Marxism to reduce society to an effect of pluralized social struggles, since this leads to the assumption that we can think about the political or the ethical without determining from where, how, and what is at stake *as a whole*.

## Notes

- 1 One of the most insightful and detailed discussions of Post-Marxism as a whole is without doubt Breckman's (2013) *Adventures of the Symbolic*. Breckman, in contrast to almost all other commentators, in my mind correctly, also includes lengthy discussions of Lefort and Castoriadis.
- 2 On this, see Kouvelakis and Bidet (2008).
- 3 For a general discussion, see Breckman (2013). Baudrillard's work on the symbolic dimension of commodity culture and his critique of 'productivism' was very influential during the 1980s (for this, see Baudrillard, 1981).
- 4 Though I disagree with these two claims about Marx's theory, for the sake of this entry, I will not discuss this critique in more detail.
- 5 Engster (2013) and Wallat (2010) are too narrow since they leave out of their pictures of Post-Marxism feminist Marxism, theories of intersectionality, or, most importantly, works by Lyotard and Baudrillard. The best systematic approach to the philosophical questions raised by Post-Marxists, at least in my mind, is the work by Oliver Marchart (2010, 2013).
- 6 For this, see also Wallat (2010). As Wallat also points out (279), the concept of radical democracy, which gets pluralized and historically universalized in Laclau and Mouffe, loses its socio-economic specificity, the consequence of which is that the analysis of the state as a *unifying* force in capitalism gets lost. This stands in stark contrast to (early) critical theory and the German Marxist tradition after 1968. For this, see also Bonefeld (2014). For Badiou, the state is implied in all 'true' politics as a negative praxis, but his concept of state remains empty and becomes an equally universally unspecific placeholder for existing orders. As such, Badiou's concept of the state remains socially empty.
- 7 It would be interesting to contrast the French tradition in political philosophy with Adorno's philosophy of non-identity. Adorno's epistemological concept of non-identity implies an ethics, but its political ramifications remain unclear. For two different readings of Adorno, see Wellmer (1985) who moves Adorno closer to a theory of (post-)modernity, and Bonefeld (2016) who tries to push Adorno back to Marx. One should note though that there is an unfortunate tendency in the recent literature on the Frankfurt School, at least in my view, to remain silent on political philosophy altogether.
- 8 This and the following subsection are loosely based on what I have developed in Lotz (2014, 2016). How foreign these approaches are to Adorno's theory, can be seen nicely when we contrast Habermas and Honneth's basic assumptions about the being of society with what Adorno says in his instructive *Introduction to Sociology* (Adorno, 2002: 32). As we can see here, Adorno claims that we need to base our analyses on a constitutive principle, which, for him, is the exchange principle. As a consequence, following the logic of constitutive principles, Adorno also assumes that this principle establishes a unity and



- integration, against which his *Negative Dialectics* are posited.
- 9 As a consequence, Honneth declares early critical theory as a project of the past (for this, see Honneth, 2007).
  - 10 Choat and Rekret detect a similar problem in Laclau, since they argue that Laclau cannot solve his oscillation between his ontology of the social and the foundational role of antagonisms (which is universal) and the historicity of social formations (for this see Choat and Rekret, 2016: 284 and 285). Similarly, Wallat argues that Laclau and Mouffe do not offer a proper theory for understanding the specific form of the political (Wallat, 2010: 272). In my view, Heidegger's and Badiou's ontologies offer a way out of this problem by historicizing ontology itself, although for both philosophers the social-economic is of no importance for their ontologies of the 'event'.
  - 11 Two comments are in order: first, this position has been left behind by critical theory inspired by Lukács' early attempt to define each element of a social totality as an element of its totality and its form, as well as, to some extent by Marx himself. As Marx has it in his arguments against this Hegelian position, 'what is forgotten, finally, is that already the simple forms of exchange value and money latently contain the opposition (and inequality, C. L.) between labour and capital. Thus, what all this wisdom comes down to is the attempt to hold fast to the simplest economic relations, which, conceived independently, are pure abstractions; but these relations are, in reality, mediated by the deepest antagonisms, and represent only one side, in which the full expression of the antagonisms is obscured' (Marx/Engels 2005: 173). As Wallat points out, Marx never held the position that we can separate the logic of capital from political struggles that Post-Marxists, such as Laclau and Mouffe, ascribe to him (Wallat, 2010: 278). This thesis is also confirmed by Foucault, who detects in the process of formal and real subsumption in Marx's *Capital*, power relations on the same level as the social-economic.
  - 12 Badiou is not the only philosopher who argues for the primacy of the political. The theories of Rancière, Laclau/Mouffe, and Lefort/Castoriadis are equally influential, though it seems as if Lefort and Castoriadis have a smaller readership in the Anglo-American context. The unpopularity of Castoriadis might also be related to his undogmatic spirit and wide intellectual horizon. Castoriadis moves easily between left-wing revolutionary thoughts and the entire history of Western thought.
  - 13 For more on the different conceptions of democracy in Post-Marxism, see Zakin (2014).
  - 14 We should also note that Post-Marxist thought has led to very interesting re-readings of Marx. The best example for this is Abensour (2011), who tries to reveal that democracy can be understood as an anarchist (and Machiavellian) concept in Marx.
  - 15 Many of his ideas have anarchist roots and have moved into recent theories of democratic socialism, workplace democracy, and economic democracy, as it was developed by Erik Olin Wright, Richard D. Wolff, and David Schweickart. As Castoriadis further argues, an autonomous society cannot exclusively be achieved by a different political praxis, but it also needs a different form of how a society *imagines* itself as society, which led him to develop a theory of social imagination that still awaits its appropriation by contemporary critical theory, insofar as the analysis of the culture industry as a theory of the knowledge that capitalist society produces about itself could be easily connected to Castoriadis' idea that every society needs to *produce* an imagination of itself as that which determines itself as social reality. Accordingly, one would need to think about a different form of social imagination and ask whether the answer given by Frankfurt School thinkers, such as Marcuse and Adorno, that art and aesthetics can function as the place for envisioning a different world is sufficient.
  - 16 For the confrontation between her agonistic model of politics with the liberal tradition in Habermas and Rawls, see also Mouffe (2005).
  - 17 As Poster (1984: 95–120) argues, Marxist takes on prison development have reduced it to the issue in class and missed Foucault's broader claim that class is an *embodied* structure. Foucault's dismissal of the state as a unifying structure that belongs to capitalism and its form, moves Foucault closer to Post-Marxism (for this and his relation to Poulantzas, see Smart, 1983). A very good analysis of the problem of class in Foucault can be found in Bidet (2015).
  - 18 We can see here that, although Lyotard is rarely mentioned, the Post-Marxist framework is heavily indebted to Lyotard's famous diagnosis of the (post-modern) age as being characterized by the downfall of all meta-narratives that formerly defined philosophies of history (Lyotard, 1984).

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