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# Politics as construction of the unthinkable

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This article is the English translation of a text originally published by Ernesto Laclau in French in 1981 as part of the proceedings of the colloquium *Materialités Discursives* held in Nanterre on 24–26 April 1980. In this text, Ernesto Laclau reflects on the subject of hegemony as a discursively constructed phenomenon. Building on research on the discursive construction of the acceptability of popular front politics in 1935 during the Seventh Congress of the Komintern, the author proposes a number of broader arguments on the notion of antagonism and on some of the problems related to the Marxist conception of totality.

**Keywords:** hegemony, discourse, popular front, Komintern, Marxism

In this paper I would like to present a series of reflections on the subject of the relation between hegemony and discourse. Or more precisely on the subject of hegemony as a discursively constructed phenomenon. The proposals that I will formulate have arisen in the course of research concerning the discursive construction of the acceptability of popular front politics in 1935 during the Seventh Congress of the Komintern. Their theoretical context is however much wider. It includes an exploration of the notion of antagonism and of some of the problems related to the Marxist conception of totality. I do not claim to present these three themes of reflection as part of one and the same discourse. Rather, I will try to present them successively, as parts of an interdiscursivity from which I hope certain meaning effects and a particular productivity for political analysis will arise.

It is not my aim to give an *interpretation* of Togliatti's or Dimitrov's discursive strategies. As it has been pointed out by Silverman and Torode,

... the language of interpretation approaches another text or conversation presupposing its own version of reality. It treats the interpreted language as the appearance of that presupposed reality. It is reductionist in that it seeks to reduce the workings of one language to the mastery of another.

(Silverman and Torode 1980, xi)

Every interpretation is thus authoritarian. It attributes an ontological privilege to its own language and constitutes itself as pure transparency and as extra-discursive space. It is not a place of interdiscursivity, but one of a knowledge that wants to be absolute, of an alchemy thanks to which any other discourse becomes an object penetrated by radical opacity. It will therefore not be a matter here of *interpreting* the theorists of the turning point of 1935, but of something much more simple and more fundamental: to take their words literally and acknowledge the meaning effects these exercise on us. We will only reserve ourselves the right to interrupt their discourse, just as in any everyday-life language practice, without attributing any particular privilege to our intervention and while accepting that this intervention is inscribed in an infinite text as another difference.

These observations are not just of a methodological order, as they also refer directly to the nature of our goal. Indeed, the thesis that we will defend is that the condition which allowed the constitution of 'the popular', 'the democratic' or 'the national' as objects of Marxist discourse was the abandonment of the discursive logic of interpretation and a radical displacement in the conception of the social role of signifying practices.

The discourse of the Komintern organises itself as an attempt to articulate two different and incompatible political logics: the gradualist [étapist] and reductionist logic of the Second International – which found its zenith under Kautskyism – and the articulatory logic of Leninism. These two types of logic mutually limit each other's discursive effects and each other's capacities to constitute objects. The Kautskyst political logic is a logic of pure interpretation. The 'scientific' point of view from which it is formulated denies its discursive specificity and presents itself as pure transparency, as revelation of the necessary movement of reality. Accordingly, every other discourse becomes pure opacity, an alienated form through which the cunning of reason fulfils its task. Every society has an underlying structure that is constituted at the level of the mode of production and that produces necessary effects at the level of the superstructure. History therefore appears as an ensemble of predetermined stages, and social agents themselves are reduced to pure expressions of class essence. This type of discourse does not consider itself as a *discursive intervention*; on the contrary, in order to affirm its scientific status, it has to deny its own discursivity and the signifying practices through which it constitutes its own objects: the real speaks through it directly without any mediation. This movement of the 'real' is therefore constructed as extra-discursive, and the

discourses through which this necessary causality reveals itself are simply reflections of a process that underlies them. The distinction between the discursive and the extra-discursive is therefore established through the authoritarian practice of interpretation: one discourse constituting itself as 'the truth' of the other. This is why the type of relation between discourses that can exist from the perspective of the Second International is reduced to two possibilities: either dissipating the false consciousness of the working class, or denouncing the 'objective' nature of other discourses, that is to say their position in the extra-discursive causal chain ('petty-bourgeois deformations', 'feudal residues' etc.). The discourse of 'scientific' socialism therefore constitutes itself *qua* political practice as the construction of an unthinkable: the differences are eliminated insofar as they appear as a system of equivalences which alludes to a unifying principle that transcends them.

Leninism, on the other hand, was constituted as a discourse in a different manner: its political practice as such prevented it from constituting itself as a pure logic of interpretation. The imperialist chain, according to Lenin, constituted a structured whole, and the crisis in whichever of its points provoked a dislocation of forces in the others that made revolutionary action possible. But, if this is so, that means the purely extra-discursive character of the process of the constitution of the real is put into question. Not a single exclusively causal determination can explain why the crisis resulting from the dislocation of forces should be resolved in one way or another. For that a political intervention is necessary, that is, a discursive intervention. Marxist discourse cannot therefore limit itself to interpreting reality, it also has to constitute it. But if it does so, Marxist discourse loses its privilege of representing the transparency of a science that would show us the extra-discursive movement of reality: it becomes, on the contrary, a part of this reality, a manner of constituting it discursively. The validity of Marxism will thus depend on its capacity to interrupt other discourses, to constitute new objects and to produce a new domain of effects. The other discourses: the discourse of the nation, the discourse of democracy, the discourse of sexuality are no longer super-structures, that is to say, ideological reflections of an extra-discursive movement of things. They are material forces that constitute subjects, that produce effects and confronted with which Marxism must prove its validity through the effects it produces, rather than through an *a priori* ontological privilege of some sort. In opposition to the authoritarian practice of interpretation, the democratic practice of discursive *intervention* constitutes itself.

The Komintern oscillated between these two political logics that gave birth to radically incompatible discourses. This incompatibility manifests itself not only in the fact that they are contradictory, but also in how each of them constitutes objects which are unthinkable in terms of the other. In Lenin's writings starting from the war we find, for example, a recurrent term: 'masses'. This discursive

object 'masses' is unthinkable for traditional Marxism for which only 'classes' exist. And yet there is no doubt that in Lenin's discourse 'masses' represents something specific and distinct from 'classes'; this term serves to indicate the effects, in the field of the dominated sectors, of the dislocation of forces to which we have alluded earlier. The same phenomenon would also manifest itself during the process that led to the Seventh Congress of the Komintern with other terms such as 'democracy', 'people', 'nation', etc. The leftist criticisms of the politics of the popular fronts would be based on an appeal to orthodoxy founded on a return to the pure logic of interpretation and a demonstration of the radical 'unthinkableness' of these new objects within classical Marxism. Trotsky's discourse is a particularly clear example of discursive conservatism. To illustrate, we will analyse one of the interventions he made in 1931, where he criticised the nationalist line of the German Communist Party:

... it is understood that every great revolution is a people's or a national revolution, in the sense that it unites around the revolutionary class all the virile and creative forces of the nation and reconstructs the nation around a new core. But this is not a slogan, it is a sociological description of the revolution, which requires, moreover, a precise and concrete definition. As a slogan, it concerns an inept charlatanism, market competition with the fascists, paid for at the price of injecting confusion into the minds of the workers... The fascist Strasser says 95 percent of the people are interested in the revolution and that consequently it is not a class revolution but a people's revolution. Thälmann sings in chorus. In reality, the Communist worker should say to the fascist worker: of course, 95 percent of the population, if not 98 percent, is exploited by finance capital. But this exploitation is organized hierarchically: there are exploiters, there are sub-exploiters, sub-sub-exploiters, and so on. Only thanks to this hierarchy do the super-exploiters keep in subjection the majority of the nation. In order that the nation should indeed be able to reconstruct itself around a new class core, it must be reconstructed ideologically and this can be achieved only if the proletariat does not dissolve itself into the 'people', into the 'nation', but on the contrary develops a program of *its* proletarian revolution and compels the petty bourgeoisie to choose between two regimes...

(Trotsky 1971, 100, *emphasis in original*)<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, Trotsky proposes to the communist worker to transform himself into a professor of sociology. All the characteristics specific to the discursive logic of interpretation appear concentrated in this telltale text. Firstly, the sharp distinc-

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1. For the long citations in the text, we have attempted to find a published English translation, rather than translate to English the wording found in the original Laclau text. In some cases we made small changes to the published English translations.

tion between two levels: the extra-discursive level of the real, speaking to us without mediation through the discourse of the Marxist sociologist, and on the other side the other discourses – the nation, the people – which are pure deception, opacity, charlatanism. Secondly, the Marxist sociologist, custodian [dépositaire] of absolute knowledge *explains* to the fascist worker what the structure of reality is, and that ‘the people’, ‘the nation’, etc., are nothing but guises. In reality, the subjects responding to nationalist and popular interpellations are very real and have been constituted through a complex process which has had critical moments such as the Versailles Treaty or the Occupation of the Ruhr. But all of this does not count, they are only the guises behind which the categories of social stratification (the exploiters, the sub-exploiters, the sub-sub-exploiters) are hiding. Thirdly, it is clear that the explanation of our sociologist does not constitute a discursive intervention: *he does not interrupt* the discourse of the fascist worker by constituting new objects within it, he offers as an alternative an external discourse that is fully constituted, faced with which the fascist worker has only one possible alternative: to dissolve himself as ideological subject. Because interpretation considers that the movement of the real is extra-discursive and that its own role is limited to showing this movement, it can never constitute the real, but at most open the space of an expectation: the expectation that the causal extra-discursive logic produce the totality of its necessary effects.

Faced with the conservatism of Trotsky’s interpretative discourse, the Komintern witnessed the emergence of other discourses in which the Leninist political logic made its effects more profoundly felt. In Western Europe, the most radical of these in terms of its rupture with the political logic of classical Marxism as well as its coherence in how it accepted the theoretical consequences of its own discursive innovations, was the discourse of Palmiro Togliatti and, in general, the discourse of Italian communism linked to the Gramscian tradition. Let us take for example two texts amongst many other similar ones which could also have been cited. In 1941, speaking on Radio Moscow, Togliatti stated:

... I would like to address some words to you, young Italians... All you who are wearing a black shirt and a black beret with pompoms and who bear the name Balilla with pride. I would like to tell you, first and foremost, that the pride with which you are bearing this name is completely justified, because Balilla is a hero of the Italian people and it is a good thing that young Italians... who embody the future of our country, are proud of everything generous, noble and great that has been done by the Italian people throughout its history. But do you know who Balilla was? And do you know why, during the Risorgimento, this name obtained the value of a symbol? Balilla was a child of the people, he was what we call a son of the workers. Back then, Italy was living sad times ... Those who ruled were foreigners...”. And after having explained the revolt of Balilla against the Austrians,

Togliatti concludes: "... Young Italians! Today more than ever it is crucial that you be Balillas, and not only in name. Through the fault of its corrupt leaders, Italy is once again under the boot of the foreigner and those who rule in Italy are those same Germans against whom Balilla gave the signal for insurrection two hundred years ago..." (Correnti 1945, 23)<sup>2</sup>

The second text, which dates from 1942, also extols nationalism and represents an effort to absorb the Mazzinian and Garibaldian tradition which, as is well-known, represented Mussolini's principal ideological referent at the time of the Republic of Salo. Togliatti says:

... Even though the tyrants and the vassals [serfs] of the foreigner have deprived us of the ability to speak, to organise ourselves and openly defend our rights, Garibaldi and Mazzini said, there remains, however, an opportunity open for the people. We will organise a revolt in flocks [par bandes]. We will organise the partisan struggle, and whatever the forces the tyrants can put into action, the people will defeat it. The population of Trieste, ancient Republican and Garibaldian city, has remembered this lesson and soon also – there is no doubt about it – all the Italians who hate the tyranny of Mussolini and Hitler, who feel the end is near and who know that their duty is to speed it up, will also remember... (Correnti 1945, 129)<sup>3</sup>

If we compare these two texts with the one by Trotsky that we have quoted earlier, we see how they belong to two radically different discursive worlds. Trotsky rejects the 'people' and the 'nation' as being nothing but charlatanism; Togliatti, on the contrary, considers the national and popular subjects to be very real. Trotsky replaces the discourse of the nation with the sociological discourse of classes: to him, the Mazzinian and Garibaldian interpellations would have been mere petty-bourgeois ideologies. Togliatti accepts the discourse of the nation, interrupting it in its own terms in order to construct within it the discursive object 'Mussolini, tyrant relying on the German weapons.' Trotsky refused to penetrate into discursive domains where fascism operated and defined them contemptuously as engaging in "market competition with fascists"; Togliatti, on the other hand, tried to penetrate into these domains and to engage in a hegemonic struggle with fascism for the articulation of national and popular symbols. Trotsky, finally claimed to *reveal* the opposing extra-discursive characters of the real; Togliatti, on the other hand, *constructs* the real – that is to say, the articulation between popular interpellations and communist interpellations – through discourse. The

2. Translated from French from Laclau, 1981. We have kept the voice of Correnti in the middle of the citation as in the Laclau text.

3. Translated from French from Laclau, 1981.

discursive strategy of articulation opposes itself to the discursive strategy of interpretation. The discourse of Togliatti therefore does not try to refer what is given – the fields of meaning, the discourses – to an ultimate and extra-discursive reality which would be class struggle, he attempts to construct as political agents complex popular subjects whose unity is the result of a struggle waged between antagonistic articulatory practices. This struggle for articulation is what we call hegemonic struggle, and it thus occurs entirely within the field of discursive practices.

We shall now analyse some of the consequences that derive from this opposition. As we stated at the outset, the political debate of the Komintern was torn due to the complicated co-existence of these two antagonistic discursive strategies. We have cited a text by Trotsky as an example of discursive conservatism. Our intention has however not been to exclusively reject Trotskyism as a specific political practice. Dozens of Stalinist or Bukharinian texts could have been used in the same way. With two important nuances. The first is that some leftists opponents – such as Trotsky or Bordiga – were gifted with a *logical* mentality and therefore emphasized to the maximum, as a polemical method, the demonstration of the unthinkability of new objects within the traditional discursive problematic. As a consequence, their interventions often display the specific flaws of the discursive logic of interpretation in a more pure form than the interventions coming from the Stalinist camp, the opportunism of which forced them to seek a difficult balance between incompatible discourses. The second nuance is that every discourse of opposition that presents itself as the successor and safeguard of an orthodoxy rejects on principle every interdiscursivity: its own rules of constitution prevent it from presenting itself as articulation and interrogation of other discourses. It is obvious that it would not be difficult to find similar examples in the Stalinist camp: the petty-bourgeoisie ‘talks’ through modern art, fascism is the ‘objective signification’ of certain political positions claiming to be leftist, etc. Except that the authoritarianism of the interpretation was coupled in these cases with a repressive authoritarianism with much more tragic consequences. What we want to say, nevertheless, is that the same political practice of the masses of certain parties in the Komintern obliged them, often despite themselves, to enter into a field of an interdiscursivity which was *potentially* creative and which could also lead to a new democratic protagonism of the masses. The resistance to Hitlerism would come to prove it. It is in this respect that the Seventh Congress of the International and the Dimitrov Report were a fundamental turning point. From the possibility they opened up to think of democracy and of popular and national traditions *outside any class determination* had to emerge the politics that would permit some communist parties to take the lead in the radically democratic and anti-sectarian struggle of various national liberation and resistance movements.



It is in the Gramsci-Togliatti discursive line that we find the most radical effort to accept the consequences implied by the introduction of new objects: that is, their deconstructionist effects vis-à-vis the discourse of classical Marxism. Togliatti understood that it is not possible to maintain an account in terms of extra-discursive causal determination if one also asserted the constitution of social reality through discourse, and he clearly decided in favour of the second alternative: the infrastructure itself is discursively constructed. He asserts:

... the economic structure is never considered to be the mysterious hidden force which will automatically trigger all developments and situations. It is seen as a sphere in which the natural forces act but in which human forces also play their part, and in which the superstructure also produces effects. Thus, in this sphere, there are already historical developments that need to be studied scientifically without ignoring the moments of the superstructure. Similarly, politics and the ideas in the superstructure do not form one single bloc, but are differentiated in terms of different degrees of autonomy, in the same way that different moments of the superstructure are differentiated. (Togliatti 1979, 170)

But if the economy is not a homogenous ‘mysterious hidden force’, given that it is itself already the result of a complex discursive articulation of discrete elements, then neither can it be the *scene* of an abstract logic whose internal deployment would allow the reconstruction of the unity of a social formation. And if the elements of the superstructure do not constitute a paradigmatic and indissociable unity either, but if they can on the contrary be differentiated and rearticulated thanks to successive discursive interventions, then the type of unity existing in a social formation does not depend on essential extra-discursive articulations but on concrete discursive practices. This rejection of any essentialism – and, hence, of any teleology – is precisely what Gramsci called ‘absolute historicism’.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this notion of absolute historicism, which is just as essential in Gramsci’s conception as in Togliatti’s. As is well-known, Althusser has likened the historicism of Gramsci to other forms of ‘leftism’ from the interwar period, such as those of Lukács and Korsch. In *Lire le Capital* (Althusser 1965, 73–108), we find a specific criticism of Gramsci formulated from such a perspective. But we are dealing with an erroneous correspondence here. In Gramsci and Togliatti we find, as we have already indicated, an *explicit* refusal of any teleology and of any essentialist conception of concrete social articulations – which is certainly not the case in Lukács. If the absolute historicism of Gramsci and Togliatti is close to anything, it is precisely to the notion of ‘overdetermination’ in Althusser, which itself also implies the rejection of any reduction of the concrete to a necessary moment in the deployment of a unique contradiction. With one difference in favour of the Gramscian perspective.

Indeed, while Althusser, despite his efforts to break with any essentialism, ends up making the abstract into the organizing principle of the concrete – it suffices to remind ourselves of the relation between the mode of production and social formation in *Lire le Capital*, which has received an explicit auto-critique from Balibar (1974, 203–246) – Gramsci, on the contrary, avoids any temptation to conceive of society as a whole unified by abstract articulations that are *prior* to the historical-discursive forms that hegemonic practices take.

We cannot explain here the constitution of Italian Marxist discourse in its entirety. There are however, two points, that seem to me to be particularly important to emphasize. The first is that through this discourse a non-authoritarian discursive practice is constituted. Marxism is not the ‘truth’ of society but the basis [siège] of a productivity of meaning starting from which it is possible to interrogate other discourses, to interrupt them and to constitute new subjects. That is to say that it is the basis for discursive interventions, not for knowledge of the extra-discursive. The second point is that today it is, of course, possible to advance much further than Togliatti and Gramsci in the deconstruction of classical Marxism. In one of the Togliatti quotes we have presented, there is mention of the relation between the natural and the historical in the infrastructure. Today we understand that a large part of what Togliatti would have considered natural is historical and discursively constructed. From the recent discussions about the sources of profit through the critique formulated by Sraffa of price formations, everything converges to show us that the ‘economic’ is simply the basis of a proliferation of discourses – a discourse of accounting, of authority, of techniques, of information, etc. – which is far from being homogeneous and which presents an uneven development in each of those elements, as these elements can be articulated in different ways. It is therefore possible to interrupt the discourses of Gramsci and Togliatti in terms of their own problematic and to enlarge the sphere of political intervention of hegemonic discursive practices.

To conclude, I would like to refer briefly to two other problems which I also alluded to at the beginning: the discursive constitution of antagonisms and the notion of totality. As regards the first, it is important to signal that in the process of the discursive production of social reality, the relations between objects are not limited to those which can exist in a special type of discourse, that of physical-natural sciences. In another text (Laclau 1980), starting from this perspective, I have tried to show the difficulties that have surrounded the debate on the objective reality of contradiction which took place in Italy a number of years ago. The Della Volpe school which started from the Kantian distinction between real opposition – based on contrariety – and dialectic opposition – based on contradiction – defended the thesis that the only consistent materialist position was the one reducing social antagonisms to real oppositions, given that the notion of

contradiction was incompatible with the notion of an extra-mental real object, as one of these poles was pure negativity. But if, as we have shown, every object is constituted as an object of discourse, there can be discourses of contradiction whose objects have between them relations that are incompatible with the condition of 'real' objects. As I have argued elsewhere, the discursive construction of antagonisms requires that we establish relations of equivalence between objects through which oblique systems of reference are created which construct negativity. Certain discursive positions thus come to *signify* negativity as such. Metaphor, metonymy, synonymy can be constituted into systems of relations between objects insofar as they efface differences and constitute social relations.

Political analysis has traditionally been limited by the assumption that objective social relations have an underlying logic that is distinct and more limited than the possible discursive positions. But if this assumption is abandoned, the field of social logics is extended enormously. We could then speak of a 'poetic' of the political which would not be restricted to the secondary aspects of the latter but which would enter into the very constitution of these political subjects. One consequence of this approach seems important to me: the political-discursive struggle is based on the creation of the unthinkability of certain objects and systems of difference. Togliatti tries in his intervention to create the unthinkability of the referent 'fascist and patriot', and Trotsky the impossibility of the relation 'Marxism' and 'Socialism in only one country'. It is clear that this is not a struggle of interpretation, but the very process of the discursive construction of reality. In this sense, no discourse is innocent and indifferent to the presence of other discourses: it can only constitute the conditions of thinkability of certain objects through the construction of the unthinkability of other objects. We can therefore speak of the discursive intervention, that is, of the political, as the process of constructing the unthinkable.

Finally, a few words on the notion of totality. A traditional notion of totality presented every social formation as unified by an underlying force or articulatory principle – be it the mode of production, or practical reason, or a particular conception of the world, etc.-. This notion has become discredited and has recently been replaced by the tendency to deny any type of totality whatsoever. But this theoretical attitude is only the proof of an inverted rationality: what is not unified by a logical or metaphysical necessity is necessarily separated. The problem, however, is different when it is presented in the perspective of the discursive production of society. It is not a matter of searching for the unifying level or principle of society, but of knowing whether certain discursive practices, through the creation of certain forms of relations between objects, might have totalising effects of meaning. This is precisely the case for hegemonic practices. There are forms of relations between objects which construct general discursive equivalences

through which hegemonic practices constitute a society as totality. We cannot go any further into the analysis of this problem here. What is important, in any case, is that the totality is not an underlying given, but a totalising– and sometimes totalitarian – practice, whose success in discursively articulating society will depend on the outcome of the hegemonic struggle.

(Translation by Marianne Liisberg, Arthur Borriello and Benjamin De Cleen)

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In this translation we have attempted to stay as close as possible to the original French text in terms of word choice as well as punctuation. For a number of terms that were hard to translate exactly we have added the original French term between square brackets.

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4. The present bibliography is based on references in the original text, which had no bibliography. In the text, we have corrected a number of references from which one of the co-authors was missing.

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