

# The Under-theorization of Overdetermination in the Political Philosophy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

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Since its 1985 publication, Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has become one of the seminal works in "Post-Marxist" political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> At the time of its appearance, the charms of Laclau and Mouffe's book to a demoralized intellectual left in Britain and the United States were many. Not only were Thatcher, Reagan and neo-classical liberalism ascendant, but the theoretical tradition that had sustained the Left, Marxism, had been in a state of crisis and decay for at least a decade.<sup>2</sup> Given this climate, it is no wonder that a political philosophy like the one proposed by Laclau and Mouffe was so welcome. Not only did their book incorporate the most trendy aspects of post-modern and post-structuralist thought into contemporary discussions about democracy, rights and community, but it did so in such a way that it accounted for all the past failures of Leftist theory and practice while simultaneously justifying the continued prosecution of a classical social democratic program.

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was thus a perfect Post-Marxist text. By subscribing to its logic, those on the intellectual left no longer had to suffer the embarrassment of a past marked by failed revolutions, gulags, decaying housing blocks and tedious May Day celebrations. In Laclau and Mouffe's text, these were explained away as the fault of "Marxist essentialisms." Purged of these misconceptions and invigorated by the vision of a world organized by the malleable muses of rhetoric and hegemony and not by the obstinate fates of history and economy, post-Marxists could now and with a good conscience look towards a bright future of social activism and theoretical production. Conveniently, this future ran along much the same lines as those with which they were already engaged.<sup>3</sup> Both the New Left, represented by

the Green and Anti-globalization Movements, as well as the Old Left, represented by socialist politics and labor activism, found inspiration in this text. Even such failed and abandoned modernist projects as the artistic avant-garde were re-invigorated by this theory and its promise to: “develop a post-avant-garde democratic strategy” through the establishment “of a non-teleological progressivism.”<sup>4</sup>

For many political philosophers, and especially to those on the left searching for alternatives to a theoretically discredited Marxism, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* likewise provided a conceptual tonic, resolving vexing problems like that of distinguishing between ideological and true ideas and supplying a critical tool (deconstruction) that collapsed and resolved perennial dichotomies.<sup>5</sup> This influence though was by no means limited to political philosophers; theory-hungry academicians in fields as diverse as ethnic and gender studies; economics; history; sociology and law looked to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* for a social paradigm that would resolve key issues in their respective fields.<sup>6</sup>

But did Laclau and Mouffe’s text really hold the key to the future for the political Left and for radical social theory? Almost two decades after its publication and at a time when scholars and activists have begun to routinely cite the text as justification for their political and theoretical projects, it may be time to re-evaluate the book’s central claims. Specifically, one wonders about whether or not Laclau and Mouffe were able to (a) identify the central flaw of all previous Marxist theory and (b) sufficiently justify an argument for political practice that has socialism and democracy as its goals? In order to answer these questions, this paper will examine what has been identified as a critical step in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy’s* argument, the appropriation of Louis Althusser’s concept of “overdetermination.” It will then advance the claim that not only do Laclau and Mouffe misunderstand and therefore misappropriate the concept of overdetermination, but that this misappropriation fatally undermines the book’s analysis of social space and of the possibilities for political action within that space. Further, through a survey of their recent work, it will be suggested that this flawed appropriation of the concept of overdetermination continues to haunt Laclau’s and Mouffe’s subsequent analyses, rendering them incapable of adequately describing the causes for specific social structures and leading to a consistent under-theorization of the possibilities for democratic organization. As this flaw originates with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, it is best to begin by trying to understand that work and the role that the concept of overdetermination plays in its argument.

As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe make the transition in the third chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from a genealogical critique of post-Second International marxist theories to an exposition of the theoretical basis for their own “socialist” project, the two critics make rather strange use of the work of Louis Althusser. It is queer because, though they accuse the French Marxist of the same mistakes as the other “classical” Marxist theorists that they consider in the genealogical chapters opening the work (the sins of economic reductionism and historical necessitarianism), they choose to appropriate from him the concept of “overdetermination.” This concept they then use as the basis for their own articulation of the “true” character of the world and of the subjects who inhabit it. In order to simultaneously criticize Althusser for his mistakes and to appropriate the concept of overdetermination for their own use, Laclau and Mouffe thus find themselves in the curious position of insisting that, though Althusser was essentially correct in his definition of overdetermination, he himself did not realize the full ramifications of this concept. What is more, they argue that his system can neither tolerate nor take into account the idea of overdetermination which it originates. Laclau and Mouffe’s criticism and appropriation of Althusser is the backbone of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy’s* argument. In one stroke, this move allows them to expose the fatal flaw of all previous Marxist theory (including Althusser’s) and to appropriate his theoretical concept of overdetermination as the cornerstone and explanatory principle of their own system.

As Laclau and Mouffe re-interpret Althusser’s term, overdetermination is a way to describe the world such that the link between infrastructure and superstructure, between economy and culture, is definitively elided such that it can no longer be said that the former determines or produces the latter.<sup>7</sup> Their hope is that a new analysis of the socio-economic whole, based as it is upon a hypothesis, drawn from the concept of overdetermination, that the world can only ever be known ideologically, will provide a proper base for renewed socialist/democratic political practice. It will do so, they promise, by correcting the fundamental error of all Marxist theory antecedent to their own: that of essentialism. Given the importance to their project of its Althusserian appropriation and critique, one would do well to examine the legitimacy of Laclau and Mouffe’s thesis that, though the concept of overdetermination is sound, it is not commensurable with a system like Althusser’s which insists upon determination in the last instance by the economy.

To the end of pursuing this examination, some basic questions need be raised and answered. First, we must ask why for their project Laclau and Mouffe would wish to appropriate the concept of overdetermination from Althusser and yet would reject his economic determinism? Second, we must inquire into the rightness of their critique. Is it the case that Laclau and Mouffe have identified a fundamental flaw in Althusser's theory which - once identified and corrected - would expose the flaw of all previous Marxist theory (including Althusser's own) and which would also lead to a new and better basis for socialist practice? Or, is it the case that Laclau and Mouffe have misunderstood or misappropriated Althusser and that the correction which they make to his theory reveals the continuing untenability of their own project?

Laclau and Mouffe's discussion of Althusser appears in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* at the end of a somewhat confused discussion of Hegel. In this discussion, the authors object to Hegel's idealism because of its insistence that the whole of social history can be understood as the progressive and logical manifestation of a simple and essential Idea. In contrast to this "literal narrative," they propose a conception of the social "which denies any essential approach to social relations [and which] also states the precarious character of every identity and impossibility of fixing the sense of the 'elements' [read subjects] in any ultimate literality."<sup>8</sup> This statement is the closest that Laclau and Mouffe ever get to clearly articulating their vision of the social structure. However, at this point in the book, this paradigm is scarcely justified. We do, however, find the beginnings of this justification in their discussion of overdetermination.

Like themselves, Laclau and Mouffe note, Althusser explicitly posits his conception of society against that of Hegel. Specifically, Althusser rejects the notion of a 'totality' which can be explained as a "plurality of moments in a single-process of self-unfolding." In contrast to this conceptually ordered totality, Althusser (Laclau and Mouffe argue) sees society as a complexly structured whole which is ruled by the logic of overdetermination.<sup>9</sup> After identifying Althusser's system as working according to the logic of overdetermination, Laclau and Mouffe fail to immediately give a definition of the term (either Althusser's or their own). Instead, the two proceed to argue that the term can only be understood in terms of where it came from: the field of psychoanalysis. It is from this field, and not from Althusser's text, that we receive the definition of overdetermination. This definition is rather complex and involves several steps, not all of which are made explicit by Laclau

and Mouffe but which will be made explicit in the course of this paper's analysis.

Their definition runs like this: after pointing out that Freud saw overdetermination as a process of metonymy in which one image comes to represent a plurality of unconscious concerns, Laclau and Mouffe ascertain the "most profound *potential* meaning of Althusser's term 'overdetermination' [as] the assertion that the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order." From this "profound *potential* [if not actual] meaning" they then proceed to say that:

the symbolic or overdetermined character of social relations...implies that [these relations] lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moments of an immanent law...Society and social agents lack any essence and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order.<sup>10</sup>

With this quote one can now see the way in which overdetermination fits into and justifies Laclau and Mouffe's conception of the social as an open system comprised of largely determined but still open subjects. Because Althusser - in describing the social as overdetermined - "borrows" the term overdetermination from Freud and the field of linguistics, Laclau and Mouffe conclude that Althusser might potentially have meant that the social functions like a language.<sup>11</sup> By saying that "the social functions like a language," Laclau and Mouffe mean that the social, as well as the subjects which comprise it, all function within a symbolic economy. Following Saussurean semiotic theory, this symbolic economy, or 'discourse' as they call it, holds no relation to any real;<sup>12</sup> it is just a space in which many diverse moments become overdetermined into one social whole and a plurality of likewise overdetermined subjects. Though the two do not explicitly mention Lacan, he appears here unannounced when Laclau and Mouffe insert the additional claim into their definition of overdetermination that, because overdetermination is symbolic, essence can be assigned neither to individual subjects nor to the social as a whole. According to their definition of overdetermination, to identify any such essence would be to imply that there is a real, explicit and literal connection which can be known between a subject or a social whole and the relations which determine them.

Laclau and Mouffe's appropriation of Althusser's concept of 'overdetermination' is a crucial point in their argument and it provides them with a world - and subsequently a political practice derived from that world - with no ties to the real. But the question remains why, if Althusser originated this concept, he did not come up with the same conception of the socio-economic whole that Laclau and Mouffe develop in the second part of their book. As Laclau and Mouffe explain it, Althusser was not able to discern the necessary ramifications of his own concept because this original and startling insight became occluded in his system by his vehement insistence that the social is determined in the last instance by the economic. Laclau and Mouffe's argument against Althusser is this: if Althusser insists that the economy is an object which determines all subjects and all societies in the last instance, then this determination will always be simple, definite, and one-way. In contrast to Laclau and Mouffe's model of an overdetermined social which functions as a liquid symbolic with no relation to real objects, Althusser's subject and social must be precisely determined with the real object of the economy. Thus the promise of Althusser's concept of overdetermination which for Laclau and Mouffe pointed out the possibility and necessity of the "critique of every type of fixity, through an affirmation of the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity,"<sup>13</sup> is precluded by Althusser's insistence that the social and every subject in the social is decisively fixed by the economy.

Hopefully, the first question which this paper promised to address has now been answered: Laclau and Mouffe wished to appropriate the concept of overdetermination from Althusser because they believed it an accurate description of the social and of the subjects who inhabit the social. However, this is not "accuracy" in the sense that the social can now be seen clearly as the product of a society's mode of production but is accurate in the sense that it appears to them an adequate description of the way the social functions as hermetic whole. This conception of overdetermination also appeals to Laclau and Mouffe because it has the distinct advantage of describing a system in which relations between subjects could be understood as not ultimately fixed but as fixed only in relation to a social body which is open, plural and negotiable. We also now know that Laclau and Mouffe reject the rest of Althusser's description of the socio-economic structure (and in fact deny that the system can include such a concept as overdetermination) because of Althusser's insistence that Marx was fundamentally correct when he said that economic relations determine social relations.

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Althusser, or at least this part of Althusser's theory, is thus for Laclau and Mouffe as mistaken as the theories of Kautsky and Plekhanov.<sup>14</sup>

But what about the second set of questions which this paper promised to answer? Is Laclau and Mouffe's critique of Althusser legitimate? Are they justified in borrowing the concept of overdetermination and subsequently insisting that the system that originated it can neither explain nor tolerate it? Or is it possible that, with this borrowing, they reveal a fundamental flaw in their own theory: that just as it may be impossible to remove the concept of overdetermination from its base in the real (to do so would be to lose its meaning), it may likewise be impossible to remove socialist theory from such a base and still identify an impetus for socialist practice. If we examine closely what Althusser means by overdetermination and show how this concept fits into his system, we will see that it is indeed the case that not only can Laclau and Mouffe not legitimately remove this concept from Althusser's system, but that the concept of overdetermination which they define with reference to, and attribute to Althusser has very little to do with his actual definition of the term and everything to do with the mistaken justification of their own anti-essentialist essentialism.

As Laclau and Mouffe correctly point out, when Althusser uses the term 'overdetermination' in his essay "On the Materialist Dialectic," he acknowledges in a footnote that he is borrowing the term from psychoanalysis.<sup>15</sup> However, just because he borrows the term from psychoanalysis does not mean that the word remains unchanged from psychoanalysis or that he, in using the term, is suggesting anything like Laclau and Mouffe's assertion that overdetermination = symbolic = not tied down to any real. This assertion is nowhere to be found in Althusser's work and the concept which Laclau and Mouffe appropriate is therefore in no way beholden to him. In fact, Althusser says in another essay written just after "On the Materialist Dialectic," titled "Contradiction and Overdetermination," that he "is not particularly taken by this term" but that he "chooses to use it [overdetermination] in the absence of anything better, both as an *index* and as a problem..."<sup>16</sup>

Taking Althusser seriously and trying to understand what he means by "overdetermination," we need to examine the concept precisely as *index* (that is, as something which allows us to organize and understand certain phenomena: in this case, socio-economic effects) and as a *problem*, as something which is not yet understood or fully explained. The fact is however that the

concept of overdetermination cannot be understood, as Laclau and Mouffe would have it, apart from the related Althusserian concepts of uneven development and contradiction. These three establish the context which gives the term its meaning and allows it to be understood. Taken together and defined, this trio of notions: overdetermination, uneven development, and contradiction, define the relationship between infrastructure and superstructure, between economy and the social.

Contrary to Laclau and Mouffe's suggestion that there is no real divide between infrastructure and superstructure and that the 'whole' functions as liquid and malleable superstructure, Althusser's conception of the 'whole' is one that is marked by a complex and sedimentary structure. This structure is complex not only because a distinction is maintained between economic, political, ideological, and scientific practices,<sup>17</sup> but also because the whole, unlike Hegel's totality, is not merely the complex and varied expression of a simple Idea. Instead, Althusser insists with Marx that real difference exists. By 'real difference,' Althusser means that the differences constituting any social formation are real expressions of a socio-economic structure that has a material basis which is not the expression of an antecedent essence but which constitutes its own essence.<sup>18</sup> Freed from Hegelian jargon, Althusser argues that *there exist real and diverse material conditions*. This means that one society can simultaneously contain and be characterized by multiple modes and levels of production. Further, these real modes of production cannot be reduced to the expression of one bare essence or principle. Rather, in their real and material specificity and diversity, these conditions constitute the "essence" of a certain structure or society. The recognition that any whole will necessarily include in its totality the sum of these differences is what Althusser terms "uneven development."<sup>19</sup>

Uneven development describes the diverse reality of a complexly structured whole. The reality and materiality of uneven development determines the social formation as a site of differences or contradictions. All this is to say that the contradictions in any society's structure can be understood as the effect of the unevenness of that structure. This is not a simple relation. Though the economic is, at base, determinant of the way in which every contradiction arises, given that the economic is itself uneven and structured according to relations of dominance, the contradictions that the infrastructure manifests will never be simple and heterogeneous. It is not even clear that economic practices need be dominant in every epoch. Further, every

contradiction of a given social formation is also a necessary manifestation and reflection of every other contradiction that the structure contains. A contradiction is thus: “inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence...and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation that it animates.”<sup>20</sup>

Because every contradiction is both inseparable from its formal conditions of existence (conditions which include not only its economic determinants but also the consort of other material contradictions which compose the social formation: ideology, laws, ethics, politics, family structures, *etcetera*), Althusser states that every contradiction is “overdetermined.” By overdetermined he means that every contradiction - whether this contradiction is embodied by the social whole, a State, a class, or a subject - is not simple and can thus not be reduced to such categories as ‘capitalist state’ or ‘true proletariat.’ A specific contradiction is always overdetermined and “specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised.”<sup>21</sup> Overdetermination thus can be said to be the point at which the ensemble of contradictions that make up a ‘whole’ system are reflected on an individual contradiction. For example: a State is overdetermined in that it is an individual contradiction which ‘focuses’ and represents the contradictory expressions of both its internal uneven development (its domestic contradictions) and its external uneven development (its relations in dominance to other States). Thus the individual contradiction that is a State is made actual by the “forms of the superstructure (the state, dominant ideology, religion, political movements, etc.) that determine it on the one hand as a function of the national past and on the other as functions of the existing world context (what dominates it).”<sup>22</sup> Insofar as it is determined by a multiplicity of specific and real differences, a State, a subject, or any other “individual” can, for Althusser, be said to be overdetermined.

Above, it was suggested that “overdetermination” is an index which allows us to organize and understand certain phenomena. However, it is more accurate to say that overdetermination *is* precisely the organization of certain phenomena as these are embodied in an individual contradiction. Therefore, if we were to fix on any individual contradiction (whether this individual be subject, State, or the whole) and examine the real relations which it reflects and embodies, we could begin to decipher the whole which constitutes it. It is with this type of examination that we find the link between the psychoan-

alytic term 'overdetermination' and the use Althusser makes of it. For, just as in psychoanalysis where a dream image is said to be 'overdetermined' by the many unconscious impulses and events that it comes to represent, so is an individual contradiction in Althusser's system said to be overdetermined because it is constituted by the many contradictions of the social formation it reflects and embodies.

Contrary then to what Laclau and Mouffe maintain, the reason that Althusser borrowed the concept of overdetermination from psychoanalysis is not because the 'symbolic' or 'social' functions as a language totally removed from the real. Rather, Althusser borrows the term 'overdetermination' because overdetermination expresses the cumulative effects of social determination which are caused by or - better put - parallel to economic determination. This is a structural, not a literal analogy. The uneven development of the economic - like the 'drives' in psychoanalysis - is the real or essential that produces diverse phenomena. These phenomena come together and are focused and reflected in an individual contradiction which is overdetermined by them. Overdetermination, contrary to Laclau and Mouffe's definition, is thus always tied to the real even if it is always primarily in relation to and can only be known through the phenomena which the real or economic produces. To remove it from this base is to fundamentally misunderstand the term and to lose its meaning.

To extend the analogy between psychoanalysis and overdetermination even further and to demonstrate why, on his own terms, Althusser would choose to make such a parallel, it is important to note that, for Althusser, just as the overdetermined dream image can be interpreted in psychoanalysis, so too can the overdetermined superstructural individual be interpreted. Now Laclau and Mouffe would not reject the hypothesis that this interpretation can take place. Nonetheless, they would reject the thesis that this interpretation could ever give a definitive "why," answering the question of how an individual must of necessity be constructed in relation to a structure or logic that is antecedent to and productive of itself. However, it is just this type of interpretation that Althusser argues on behalf of and as a method of political analysis. He does so because overdetermination - interpreted in relation to all those practices that produce it - is that which allows for the possibility of correct socialist political practice. It does so by allowing for the correct identification of those factors which produce the individual as capable or incapable of precipitating change. This knowledge is, of course, fallible and rests

on the discursive interpretations of non-discursive practices. However in that it recognizes and takes into account a plurality of diverse factors and determinants (including the economic), it rests on a firmer basis and is more complete than those epistemologies that insist on the ideological nature of all knowledge.

Though the justification for this last claim is fairly complex, it should be sufficient to note that Althusser takes seriously the notion that, insofar as the superstructure is totally determined by the structure as a whole, every idea is a product of a society's modes of production. Therefore, if an object such as a State is overdetermined, we should be able to investigate and describe the way in which it is overdetermined by the specific instances of the real in order to see if that whole which it is and which it represents is open to revolutionary possibilities.

It should be obvious now that Laclau and Mouffe's conception of overdetermination is very different from that of Althusser. Whereas Laclau and Mouffe exalt their borrowed concept of overdetermination as that condition which removes the social from any determination by the real, overdetermination as Althusser defines it is precisely the way in which the diverse manifestations of the real embody themselves in an individual. The preceding discussion should have shown why Laclau and Mouffe wish to specify overdetermination as that concept which removes that social from any determination from the real: they do it because they wish to avoid essentialist reductions and they do it to reinvigorate democratic and socialist practice. However, as we examine their project's theoretical underpinnings more closely (underpinnings which both justify their political project and explain Marxism's failures chronicled in their genealogy), we see that Laclau and Mouffe do not have a strong theoretical basis for this anti-essentialist, pro-hegemonic democratic position. They argue that they obtain such a basis from Althusser and his concept of overdetermination. But, as has been demonstrated, Laclau and Mouffe fundamentally misread Althusser, taking liberties with his concepts that are not justified by the text nor even by their own arguments. For, whereas Althusser develops overdetermination as an index which is essentially determined by a material real and which points to that real, Laclau and Mouffe offer a definition of overdetermination as an internal structural result with no ties to any essential or determinate base. And yet they never justify in their text how overdetermination is to be thought apart from a real that determines it; their reader is only told that it is a "profound potential meaning."

The actual basis for their anti-essentialist position and for the definition of overdetermination they provide comes, as Robert Paul Resch points out, “from the most specious aspect of Saussurean linguistics (there is no social reality, only the reality of discourse) [and from] a perverted form of Lacanian psychology...” in which Lacan’s hypothesis that a subject’s inability to know her real desires except through language is taken by Laclau and Mouffe to mean that there is no real - desiring, economic or otherwise.<sup>23</sup> These two “insights” are thus combined and interpreted by Laclau and Mouffe in order to explain the concept of overdetermination. This concept, in turn, provides the theoretical basis of their description of a social whole having no relation to a determinant real and existing as an independent system, almost totally fixed by the relations between its elements, yet always susceptible to hegemonic manipulation and change.

To hypothesize with Laclau and Mouffe that overdetermined individuals exist without their determinants is not only logically and grammatically absurd: it is also to remove any possibility of correctly interpreting these overdetermined individuals. The problem Laclau and Mouffe’s theory leaves one with is thus much more severe than that identified by Marx in *The German Ideology* regarding the difficulty metaphorically illustrated with the example of the *Camera Obscura*.<sup>24</sup> The *Camera Obscura* merely needed its image reversed in order to accurately depict its represented object. The problem of philosophy and of revolutionary practice thus became one of how to reverse this image. Classically, this reversal was done by recourse to the material real, identifying it as the primary determinant of the ideas we hold about the world and about ourselves. In Laclau and Mouffe’s re-interpretation of Althusser, the promise of such accurate resolution and the justification of revolutionary practice that this understanding might provide is foreclosed: the image has no relation to its object.

In a critique published not long after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*’s publication, Michael Rustin succinctly points out what Laclau and Mouffe’s reformulation of Althusser’s concept of overdetermination finally does to Marxism:

Viewing Marxism as a discursive practice, they [Laclau and Mouffe] see Marx as not having searched for understanding of the material constraints on human life, but instead as having devised a new social imaginary, new terms of social cleavage...historical materialism does not, on this view, explain class conflict but merely legitimates it.<sup>25</sup>

With this point, Rustin echoes and deepens the claim made repeatedly over the last eighteen years by critics of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. This claim is that, with the privileging of discourse as sole experiential medium (and the concomitant denial of a subject's lived relation with a material real distinct from that subject's ideas about that real), Laclau and Mouffe end up espousing a thoroughly idealist political philosophy.<sup>26</sup> As many have pointed out, this has ramifications in terms of the theorization of class (which must now be understood in terms of sympathy rather than in terms of structure),<sup>27</sup> and in terms of the excessive attribution of autonomy to agents unfettered by material constraints.<sup>28</sup> Ironically, it may also remove the possibility of agency altogether as the agent - awash in rhetoric - has no objective means of deciding between competing alternatives for political organization.<sup>29</sup> Each of these deficits results from an overemphasis on discourse as opposed to an experientially warranted emphasis on ideological, political and economic analyses.<sup>30</sup> All this is not to maintain that discourse plays an unimportant role in political and subject formation. However, if one follows the logic of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and accepts discourse as constitutive of all structure, the political philosophy that results is a typical left Hegelian idealism, albeit one purged of philosophical anthropology.

Recognizing that the theoretical basis for Laclau and Mouffe's anti-essentialist project is flawed and that it is the result of what could charitably be called a misreading of Althusser, it might still be suggested that Laclau and Mouffe's concept of overdetermination might have some utility in that it could well serve to reinvigorate a moribund socialist practice. For the sake of argument then, if we were to accept overdetermination as justifying the conclusion that there is no connection to the real which can be known, then we might see our way to arguing with Laclau and Mouffe against political practices which make an appeal to the real (communism, neo-classical liberalism) and to volunteer our own political wills towards the creation of a hegemonic block which would further the acceptance and instantiation of the mythic ideals of democracy and socialism.

However, if there is really no real to appeal to, then why should we believe these specific myths and be won over to this hegemonic position? What can possibly justify political action towards the creation of socialism and democracy if there is no *real* reason to proceed in this direction? Why should we not equally believe the myth that laissez-faire capitalism and multi-national technocracy is the best form of government?<sup>31</sup> The lack of impetus provid-

ed by the material real is the fatal flaw in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy's* argument, even more so than its dubious theoretical underpinnings.

In their collaborative and individual works subsequent to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe have reproduced and exaggerated the flaw that results from the misappropriation of the concept of overdetermination. Though neither “overdetermination” nor Althusser’s philosophy are explicitly revisited in the majority of Laclau and Mouffe’s subsequent writings and interviews,<sup>32</sup> one can recognize both philosophers’ continued reliance upon the re-interpreted concept in recent theoretical analyses of the logic of the political space and in their respective practical analyses of the current possibilities for democratic change.

For Chantal Mouffe, theorizing the possibility of democratic change has lately meant a focus on the paradoxical nature of democratic politics. Recalling the insight from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that democratic forms persist because there is an argument or myth that sustains them, Mouffe has been troubled by the irreconcilability of the ideals of liberty and equality as these myths function within the greater rhetoric of democracy. Seeing no way to provide definitive legitimation for one understanding of democracy over another (as both are historically contingent myths) and fearing that one position (that of liberalism and individual rights) is about to eclipse the other (that of equality and popular sovereignty), Mouffe in recent essays has tried to challenge the hegemony of the former position. She has pursued this challenge by emphasizing the pluralistic, agonistic and, at base, irrational nature of the social space as against what she perceives to be the model of “rational consensus” that informs neo-liberal discourse. In some of these discussions, Mouffe does a very good job of pointing out the limits of neo-liberal theory and its perspectivalism. What is really of interest, though, to the present critique and that reveals her theory’s continued reliance upon the logic of overdetermination as developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is what she believes to be at stake in the battle with neo-liberal discourse and what she is prepared to do in order to combat this hegemony.

So what is at stake and what is Mouffe prepared to do in order to defend egalitarian democracy? As Mouffe avers in the introduction to the volume that collects some of her recent essays, *The Democratic Paradox*, if the neo-liberal discourse succeeds in becoming the hegemonic discourse, any possibility of resistance disappears: we will all be liberal democrats.<sup>35</sup> Fearing this outcome

(and viewing it as a distinct possibility), Laclau battles this trend by showing the contradictions inherent to neo-liberal discourse, pointing out where neo-liberalism is doomed to fall short of producing “rational consensus,” where its propositions are contested, or where there exist differences for which it cannot render an account.

For those accustomed to political philosophical arguments that appeal to such things as human nature, rational self-interest, historical unfolding, pragmatic possibility, or even care, this defense may seem a strange way to protect, preserve and extend the egalitarian strain of democracy that Mouffe believes in and that she has been championing for the last two decades. However, if one accepts the account of overdetermination developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, then this rhetorical strategy makes abundant sense and is really the only possible option. Because there is no extra-discursive object to appeal to that can justify the pursuit of the egalitarian policies Mouffe favors, one can only make an intervention within the existing discursive field, that is, within the symbolic. If this discursive field is apparently closing in on a neo-liberal consensus, then to show how it needs must fail to reach consensus is a possible way to open up space for a counter rhetoric and, therewith, a counter political movement. Whereas a more traditional Marxism might look to such causes as the increasing globalization of trade and the way in which this has in recent decades been linked to the export of a liberal democratic consensus as one possible explanation for the increasing hegemony of neo-liberal discourse (among many other possible material causes), the implicit logic of Mouffe’s re-formulated concept of overdetermination forecloses this option. Similarly, the route of seeking possible alternatives to neo-liberalism in contemporary political formations that have arisen from existing material contradictions is also blocked off. Thus instead of trying to understand phenomena like indigenous rights movements or even workplace reform initiatives as representing *possible* and *existent* democratic alternatives to neo-liberalism that might be encouraged or discouraged by strategic interventions, Laclau instead chooses to confront neo-liberalism at the level of theory. No doubt this intervention may have some influence, particularly if those who are producing neo-liberal theory read Mouffe’s recent work and are persuaded by her argument to revise their claims.<sup>36</sup> However, it is not at all apparent that neo-liberal theory is driving the neo-liberal consensus and thus that a revision in this theory to include egalitarian democratic tendencies would lead to its political instantiation.

Like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau has lately begun thinking about the possibility of democracy's disappearance. As he notes at the beginning of his 2001 essay "Democracy and the Question of Power," many political theorists have recently argued that the opportunity for democratic politics is progressively eroding. At the local level, for instance, the demands of diverse political subgroups increasingly seem to cancel one another out, resulting in no substantive political change. At the national level, as well, it seems that our political demands are increasingly mediated and managed by a "technobureaucracy located beyond any democratic control."<sup>37</sup> Should trends like these continue, democracy seems in danger of going the way of feudalism. This fear of democracy's potential eclipse put forth by a variety of contemporary political theorists is not, however, shared by Laclau. The reason for his confidence in this matter is not because he disputes these trends (in fact, he acknowledges and seconds them). Rather, it is because Laclau is pretty sure that he has discovered the logic of all politics and that this logic guarantees - at least for the time being - the possibility of democratic politics. What is more, this truth may even indicate democracy's superiority to other forms of political organization, thus justifying it as something more than an imaginary ideal.

Explaining the logic of all politics, Laclau maintains in "Democracy and the Question of Power" that every political claim must always be both universal and particular.<sup>38</sup> To illustrate, it is always a particular group (women for instance) that tries to realize a universal political goal (such as suffrage). However, should that universal goal be realized, then no further political in that direction action is possible, the ideal being attained. Thus, had suffrage been universally realized by women's groups in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, there would have been no political space for the civil rights movement to occupy at mid-century. Summarizing this principle, Laclau maintains that politics, like hegemony, is "only possible insofar as it never succeeds in achieving what it attempts."<sup>39</sup> Corollary to this principle, democracy (being the only type of politics founded on the recognition of the existence of competing particular/universal claims) makes this ambiguity explicit, and thus continually re-founds political action so long as it exists.<sup>40</sup>

This is great for democracy and compels Laclau to argue for its privileged place among political systems due to the self-consciousness of its practice. However, what is important here for Laclau's argument that democracy is not in danger of disappearing is that particular types of political imagination and

desire exist even today: groups continue to want to realize their particular claim as universal. Because individuals and groups are still able to think in this space - to imagine the difference between the world as it is ordered and as they want it to be ordered - there is still hope for democratic politics and for the emancipation that comes from democratic participation.<sup>41</sup> This is why Laclau is, if not sanguine, then at least not totally pessimistic about the prospects that this “contemporary, globalized” world holds for democracy’s further realization. Based on his analysis of the logic of politics, it seems he will not become cynical so long as a few of us can still imagine the possibility of a different world and desire to achieve this world.

The claim noted just above that it is the *desideratum*, the imaginary, the representational, the subject’s “overdetermined” dream about itself that provides the possibility for political action has remained a consistent theme in both Laclau’s and Mouffe’s work since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. If anything, this emphasis has become increasingly pronounced as the logic of overdetermination which justifies such a conclusion has ceased being interrogated and has become a propositional element in each philosopher’s thought. This emphasis on the relation between reverie and possibility has become so entrenched that Mouffe will state unequivocally that, once the dream of a certain political formation dies, so to does its possibility.<sup>42</sup> This is a long way away from Marx and his theory that political ideologies always lag behind economic developments and it is almost equally far away from Althusser’s claim that diverse material practices, when reflected in an individual, allow some things to be thought and not others (not to mention some political formations to come into being and not others). However, this emphasis is consistent with Laclau and Mouffe’s re-interpretation of Althusser’s theory of “overdetermination” as this was articulated almost two decades ago in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. No longer having diverse material determinants to refer to, Laclau and Mouffe continue to content themselves with an analysis of a subject’s ideological self-representation in order to determine whether certain political formations are possible. When these thoughts appear ‘creative’ and ‘emancipatory’, as they did shortly after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was published, Laclau and Mouffe are enthusiastic about the prospects for democratic change.<sup>43</sup> When, more recently, it appears that neo-liberal rhetorical hegemony threatens the very possibility of the democratic imaginary, then Laclau and Mouffe retrench themselves and theorize the possibilities for democracy’s reappearance in the few open spots, in the few theoretical lacunae and paradoxes that they can discover. Maybe though, if more

attention were given to the actual economic, political and ideological practices that have led to the disappearance of democratic practices over the last two decades, Laclau and Mouffe would be able to marshal stronger suggestions about what is to be done in order to alter these specific practices and to make democracy again a possibility.

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## Notes

1. Other texts that have had comparable influence are *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy's* liberal doppelganger, Francis Fukuyama's, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York, Avon Books, 1992), Frederick Jameson's *Post-modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York, Verso, 1991) and, more recently, Antonio Negri's and Michael Hardt's *Empire* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2000).

2. This was certainly the case with the Marxism-Leninism promulgated by the Soviet Union, a school of thought and a body of practices which had never really recovered from the political events of 1956. It was also true of Leninism's alternative, the tradition of Western Marxism which by the mid-1980s had degenerated into a tool for literary criticism and for keeping track of youth fashion (see for instance: Dick Hebdiges' *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London, Methuen & Co., 1979), or Stuart Ewen's *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York, Basic Books, 1988). Though Laclau and Mouffe do not evidence much awareness of this fact, the project simultaneous to their own of justifying Marxist philosophy analytically had also begun to fold-in on itself. What had started in the 1970s as a sincere effort by academic philosophers and sociologists to understand Marx's arguments as a coherent body of substantive claims was coming to the conclusion that such a body was not to be found and that liberalism rested upon more tenable grounds (see Marcus Roberts, *Analytic Marxism: a Critique* (London, Verso, 1996), 3-5).

3. See for instances: Thomas P. Hohler, (1998) 'Can We Speak of Human Rights?' in *Epoche*, Vol. 6, No. 1: 31-53 and Catriona Sandilands, (1995) 'From Natural Identity to Radical Democracy.' in *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 17, No. 1: 75-92.

4. Oliver Marchart, (1995) 'On the Final (Im-)Possibility of Resistance, Progress and Avant-Garde' in *Filozofski Vestnik*, Vol. 31, No. 2: 159-172.

5. For an instance of how *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* helped with resolving troubling problems like that of distinguishing between ideological and true ideas see David Hoy Couzens, (April 1994) 'Deconstructing 'Ideology'', in *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 18, No.1: 1-17. For an instance of Laclau and Mouffe's theory providing the tool to collapse perennial distinctions see Beverly Best, (Fall 2000), 'Necessarily Contingent, Equally Different, and Relatively Universal: The Antinomies of Ernesto Laclau's Social Logic of Hegemony,' in *Rethinking Marxism* Vol. 12, No. 3.

6. To mention just a few such uses: concepts developed by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* have in the past 10 years been used to explain the political strategy of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, labor and environmental coalition building in Nova Scotia, the nature of law, and to argue for curricular reform. See for examples: B. Lee Artz, January 1997, 'Social Power and the Inflation of Discourse: the Failure of Popular Hegemony in Nicaragua,' in *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 24: 92-113; Rod Bantjes, Fall 1997 'Hegemony and the Power of Constitution: Labour and Environmental Coalition-Building in Maine and Nova Scotia.' in *Studies in Political Economy*, Vol. 54: 59-90; Egid E. Berns, July 1996 'Decision, Hegemony and Law: Derrida and Laclau,' in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 22, No. 4: 71-80; and John Baldacchino, Oct. 1994 'Art's Gaming Lost: Within the Make-Belief of Curricular Certainty.' in *Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3: 333-334.

7. Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal 1985, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edition, London, Verso: 97-98.

8. Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: 96.

9. Whether or not Althusser saw society as a "complexly structured whole" is presently a contested issue in Althusserian scholarship. Though many have argued that especially in the first edition of *Reading Capital* Althusser does identify such an over-riding structure, most references to this whole were erased by Althusser in *Reading Capital's* second edition. Further, it is difficult to find a reference to "whole" or "structure" after 1968. In fact, as Geoffrey Goshgarian demonstrates in his translator's introduction to *The Humanist Controversy* (London: Verso, 2003), between 1965 and 1967, Althusser actively worked to purge such a notion from his theory and to develop an alternative analytic based upon the conjuncture.

10. Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 98.

11. Here, as in the rest of the book, Laclau and Mouffe focus exclusively on

Althusser's work from the early 1960's compiled in *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969). They ignore Althusser's later work on Freud and Lacan which contains explicit critiques of linguistic reductivism (as well as all those instances in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* in which the linguistic is listed as one type of practice or order among others). See for instance: "Freud et Lacan," in *La Nouvelle Critique*, 161-162, December/January 1964-65; and "Letter to the Translator" (on Freud and Lacan) in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (New York: New Left Books, 1971), as well as "La Découverte du Dr. Freud." in *Revue de Médecine Psychosomatique*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1983.

12. Ferdinand de Saussure, 1996 *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, Open Court: 67-69.

13. Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 104.

14. Though the Althusser of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* may be read in this way, it is apparent that, by 1967 and the course on "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists," Althusser had significantly revised his position on the relationship between ideology and economy. Ironically, these revisions suggest a relationship that is much closer to the one that Laclau and Mouffe develop, though still ceding primacy to the economic. It is apparent that Laclau and Mouffe have read some of the work from this era (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 179). However, they do not take these changes into account. Because this paper is concerned more with a critique of Laclau and Mouffe than it is with an exposition of the development of Althusser's thought, its argument will be limited to a consideration of the works that Laclau and Mouffe draw upon in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, namely, *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*.

15. Louis Althusser, 1977 *For Marx*, London, Verso: 206.

16. Althusser, *For Marx*, 101.

17. Althusser, *For Marx*, 229.

18. Althusser, *For Marx*, 93.

19. Althusser, *For Marx*, 212.

20. Althusser, *For Marx*, 101.

21. Althusser, *For Marx*, 106.

22. Althusser, *For Marx*, 106.
23. Robert Paul Resch, 1992 *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, University of California Press: 389n.
24. Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, 1989 *The German Ideology*, New York, International Publishers: 47.
25. Michael Rustin, Winter 1988, 'Absolute Voluntarism: Critique of a Post-Marxist Concept of Hegemony,' in *New German Critique*, Vol. 43: 155, 170, 158.
26. Henry Veltmeyer, Fall 2000 'Post-Marxist Project: an Assessment and Critique of Ernesto Laclau,' in *Sociological Inquiry* Vol. 70, No. 4: 499-519.
27. Dan Shoom, 1995 'Ridding Class of Meaning: Anti-Essentialism in the Works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,' in *Research and Society*, Vol. 8: 14-28.
28. Dallmayr, Fred, 1987 'Hegemony and Democracy: A Review of Laclau and Mouffe.' in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 13, No. 3: 283-296.
29. Shoom, 14. Besides political philosophers, scholars in race and gender studies have been quick to point out the fact that Laclau and Mouffe provide no reason for preferring some relations of dominance over others. See for example: Teresa L Ebert, Summer 1995 'The Knowable Good: Post-al Politics, Ethics, and Red Feminism,' in *Rethinking Marxism*. Vol. 8, No. 2: 39-59.
30. A. Belden Fields, 1988 'In Defense of Political Economy and Systemic Analysis,' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Nelson, Cary (ed.), Urbana, University of Illinois Press: 141-156.
31. Michael Rustin also makes this point - and more clearly - when he writes: "Why is the argument from contingency and the project of collective self assertion in antagonism not as consistent with non-democratic social identities as with republicanism and radical democracy? If all such social identities are affirmed and constituted only in practice who can rationally justify the primacy of one collective self definition over another?" See: Rustin, "Absolute Voluntarism" 173.
32. Exceptions to this rule include Laclau's discussion of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology in 'The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology' in *Modern Language Notes* Vol. 112, No. 3 (Apr. 1997): 300; and his explicit overdetermined agents in: "Democracy and the Question of Power." *Constellations* Vol. 8, No. 1 (Mar. 2001):12.

33. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, New York, Verso, 2000), 2 & 5.

34. For these discussions see: 'Agonistic pluralism and democratic citizenship,' in *Law of Religious Identity*, Sajó, András and Avineri, Shlomo (ed.), Boston, Kluwer Law International, (1999): 29-38; and 'American Liberalism and its Critics: Rawls, Taylor, Sandel and Walzer,' in *Praxis International* Vol. 8 (July 1988): 193-206; and 'Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy' in *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Jan. 1997): 21-33; and 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?' in *Social Research* Vol. 66, No. 3 (Fall 1999): 745-758; and 'The End of Politics and the Rise of the Radical Right,' in *Dissent* Vol. 42 (Fall 1995): 498-502. Many of these essays are to be found in revised form in *The Democratic Paradox*, New York, Verso (2000).

35. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 5.

36. That neo-liberal philosophers like Dworkin and the heirs of John Rawls would even read Mouffe is doubtful. Due to certain 'overdeterminations', in the Althusserian sense of the term, that may include post-war anti-communism, the pre-war importation of Anglo-Austrian logical positivisms, academic philosophy's broad acceptance of the scientific model as the paradigm for knowledge, etc., analytic political philosophers in the United States would, for the most part, not even recognize what Mouffe is doing as philosophy, let alone alter their arguments in response to her work.

37. Laclau, "Democracy and the Question of Power," 3.

38. Laclau, "Democracy and the Question of Power," 5.

39. Laclau, "Democracy and the Question of Power," 9.

40. Laclau, "Democracy and the Question of Power," 13-14.

41. Laclau, "Democracy and the Question of Power," 14.

42. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 5

43. The editorial note included in recent volumes of the "Phronesis" series of books which Laclau and Mouffe edit for Verso recounts just this scenario. As they write: "Since 1989, when the first Phronesis book was published, many events of fundamental importance to the series have taken place. Some of them initially brought the hope that great possibilities were opening up for the extension and deepening of democracy...Disenchantment, however, came quickly and what we witnessed instead

was the reinforcement and generalization of the neo-liberal hegemony. Today, the left-wing project is in an even deeper crisis than ten years ago.”