POLITICAL RADICALISM AS A GENRE

TOWARDS A NON-RELATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF RADICALISM AND MODERATION

Tese apresentada à Universidade Católica Portuguesa para obtenção do grau de doutor em

Ciência Política e Relações Internacionais

Por **Pedro Góis Moreira**

Instituto de Estudos Políticos

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Summary

The years after the fall of the USSR were times of great optimism for proponents of constitutional democracy, of a Third Way between market and welfare state, and of a politics of moderation. However, this last decade has seen the emergence of antagonistic forms of politics: left and right populisms, uncompromising forms of free market liberalism, minority rights activism, and a recent nativist explosion that has caught everyone by surprise. We try to understand the ideas behind these phenomena by articulating a conception of political radicalism and of its opposite, political moderation. Radicalism in the past has often been understood as the negative contrary of moderation (especially because of the previous dominance of Marxism as the main paradigm of radical politics). It has been understood as a body of ideas that are opposed to democracy, to the rule of law, to pluralism, or that are in favor of revolution and violence. The new radical trends of today, however, do not seem so straightforwardly anti-democratic or revolutionary as Marxism once was.

Instead of defining radicalism "negatively" as a collection of ideas, policies, or attitudes that deviate from a given state of "normality" (such as anti-pluralism, anti-democracy, anti-constitutional aims, or anti-traditionalism), we instead compare it to a literary genre that a group or individual can use in order to create dichotomies and a sense of "us versus them." By describing and analyzing the thoughts of Georg Lukács, Ludwig von Mises, and Ernesto Laclau, we give examples of some "literary genres" (Marxist, free market libertarian, and postmodern), of the tropes they use to establish these dichotomies, and the way they can reinforce their arguments by using these dichotomies. In turn, we try to understand political moderation as an "anti-genre" that breaks with these attempts to create dichotomies.

Keywords: Radicalism, Extremism, Moderation, Literary Genre.

Approx. number of words: 95 000.

Abstract

Os anos que se seguiram à queda da URSS foram tempos de grande otimismo para os defensores da democracia constitucional, de uma Terceira Via entre o mercado e o Estado social e de políticas de compromisso. Nesta última década surgiram, porém, vários movimentos políticos antagónicos que vieram abalar este *status-quo*: populismos de esquerda e de direita, ideologias a favor da completa liberalização do mercado, movimentos ativistas a favor dos direitos das minorias e até uma explosão "nacionalista" que apanhou o Ocidente de surpresa.

O presente projeto de investigação visa estudar algumas das ideias por detrás destes fenómenos. Neste estudo, esboçamos dois conceitos para tentar perceber melhor esta nova situação: uma conceção de radicalismo político e uma conceção de moderação política. O radicalismo político foi frequentemente entendido como o contrário da moderação, pois o radicalismo era frequentemente definido à luz do paradigma dominante naquela altura, o marxismo. O radicalismo era entendido como um conjunto de ideias que se opõem à democracia, ao Estado de Direito, ao pluralismo—ou que são a favor da revolução e da violência. As novas tendências radicais de hoje, no entanto, não parecem tão antidemocráticas ou revolucionárias como o marxismo.

Uma conceção diferente de radicalismo pode ajudar a entender as ideias por detrás desses movimentos. E essas ideias podem ser melhor compreendidas se conseguirmos caracterizar o radicalismo por si mesmo, de forma substantiva, em alternativa a um agregado de políticas, ideias e atitudes, como o anti-pluralismo, anti-democracia, anti-tradicionalismo, ou em vez de recorrer a outros critérios que definem o radicalismo como um desvio em relação a um certo estado de "normalidade". Podemos compreender melhor estes novos movimentos radicais contemporâneos se olharmos para a maneira como criam dicotomias e desenvolvem um sentimento de "nós" contra "eles". Defendemos neste trabalho que as abordagens do radicalismo que o tendem a definir negativamente, identificando o que este rejeita, podem ser complementadas com uma abordagem mais "positiva" que analisa o que o radicalismo oferece. Sugerimos ainda na sequência desta

investigação que poderíamos entender a moderação política como um conjunto de meios que tentam romper com as tentativas extremistas ou radicais de criar dicotomias.

No decurso deste estudo, começamos por descrever as variadas formas como o radicalismo e o extremismo têm sido teorizados recentemente. De seguida, vemos como, subjacente à conceção de radicalismo que estamos a tentar evitar (como um desvio em relação a determinada forma de normalidade), parece haver uma abordagem *bottom-up* que tenta identificar as componentes constituintes do "radicalismo" (ideias, políticas ou atitudes). Nessa abordagem de baixo para cima, o grau de radicalidade do objeto de estudo é avaliado pelos elementos radicais (ideias, políticas ou atitudes) que comporta e pela sua intensidade. Em vez de considerar o radicalismo em termos de elementos constituintes, ou em alternativa, em função da dimensão da mudança social que os radicais propõem, argumenta-se nesta dissertação que se deve adotar uma abordagem *top-down* (de cima para baixo), quando analisamos o grau de dependência de um argumento em relação a uma *narrativa* radical que opera em segundo plano. Designa-se esta abordagem, de modo metafórico, como "literária": como um género literário. Os radicalismos (como o marxismo, mas outros também) podem ser vistos como histórias "familiares" cujas referências "literárias" ("a burguesia", "o trabalhador", "a revolução") podem ser usadas como indicações que apontam para a história do movimento marxista, tal podendo reforçar os argumentos de quem a utiliza. Dentro deste paradigma, quando um "autor" usa o "género" do radicalismo, os "leitores" situam-se e condicionam as suas expectativas em função de uma história cujo enredo contém dois lados, uma situação presente insatisfatória, e uma solução para resolvê-la que leva a um "final" do enredo em que a solução insatisfatória é resolvida. No exemplo clássico do marxismo, temos uma história tão conhecida que esta pode muitas vezes mergulhar intuitivamente o "leitor" na história que lhe é familiar do proletariado, a sua luta contra a burguesia e a crescente opressão de classe que eventualmente leva a uma revolução e traz a instauração do socialismo. Um autor pode usar palavras-chave – a que chamamos *referências* – da história do marxismo – a que chamamos *metanarrativa* – para referenciar a história do marxismo e reforçar os seus argumentos. Rotulando um determinado autor, grupo ou argumento como "burguês" ou "reacionário" ou, inversamente,

rotulando-o como "proletário" ou "revolucionário", um autor coloca o elemento atribuído num dos dois lados da história do marxismo. Graças a essa atribuição e ao uso desse termo de referência, o leitor é capaz de definir as suas expectativas em conformidade e continuar a ler desse modo, ao mesmo tempo que (1) lê esse argumento condicionado pela metanarrativa do marxismo em segundo plano e (2) que o autor, grupo (ou argumento que o autor acabou de atribuir) está do lado "errado" ou "certo" da história.

A fim de aprofundar a noção de radicalismo que esboçamos na primeira parte, exploramos subsequentemente um dos primeiros pensadores que analisaram exaustivamente o marxismo como uma metanarrativa, Eduard Bernstein. Descrevemos as críticas de Bernstein à ortodoxia do SPD e, especialmente, as suas críticas à metanarrativa do marxismo e às suas "referências". No mesmo capítulo, analisamos o argumento oposto de Georg Lukács em *História e Consciência de Classe* e examinamos a maneira como ele se esforçou por reconectar as diferentes partes da metanarrativa do marxismo que Bernstein separou (*referências* como "ciência", "totalidade", "classe", "proletariado" e "revolução"). Com essa reconstrução, Lukács tentou abafar o ceticismo de Bernstein e gerar novamente uma história com dois lados. Graças a essa metanarrativa binária e estruturante que guia o "texto" político e as expectativas do leitor, Lukács é capaz de fazer saltos inferenciais rápidos de uma referência para a seguinte. Analisamos especificamente seções da *História e Consciência de Classe*, onde esses saltos são evidentes. Graças a tal metanarrativa de fundo, Lukács consegue utilizar duas estratégias centrais do género radical: usa essa metanarrativa para *excluir* elementos que são relegados para o lado "burguês" da história do marxismo (por exemplo, afirmando que Bernstein era "burguês" porque adotou uma pseudociência burguesa) ou consegue fazer *alinhamentos* com o lado "socialista" da história (por exemplo, dizendo que Rosa Luxemburgo era "marxista" porque adotou a verdadeira ciência marxista).

Para entender completamente a noção de radicalismo político no sentido de género "literário" e como pode ser usada por outros, analisamos com detalhe e profundidade dois autores que constroem extensivamente o seu pensamento político dentro do que caracterizámos como "género radical". Primeiro, analisa-se como Ludwig von Mises constrói uma metanarrativa radical na qual opõe o liberalismo, a ciência e a

racionalidade ao socialismo, à pseudociência e à irracionalidade. Como no caso de Lukács, analisa-se cuidadosamente como os termos de cada "lado da história" estão ligados a tal ponto que Mises é capaz de ligar perfeitamente um termo ao outro sem interromper a "leitura" da sua teoria ou narrativa. Também analisamos um segundo aspeto que permite essa leitura subtil, que é a maneira como Mises é capaz de opor estritamente cada grupo de termos. É graças ao facto de Mises estar a escrever tendo em mente uma narrativa com dois lados que o seu "leitor" é capaz de fazer a transição de uma referência para outra. Graças a essa dicotomia como plano de fundo dos seus textos, Mises usa referências em rápida sucessão e enquadra o seu argumento numa estrutura rígida, dicotómica, enquanto continuamos a lê-lo ininterruptamente. Também tentamos perceber qual a metanarrativa subjacente de Mises e as *referências* que esta produz e que podem ser usadas por outros autores que partilham a metanarrativa liberal.

Depois de explorar as metanarrativas de Lukács e Mises abordamos a metanarrativa anti-essencialista de Ernesto Laclau. Procedemos de maneira semelhante ao que fizemos com Mises e descrevemos como Laclau constrói uma "narrativa de narrativas" formalizando cada passo da história do marxismo. Em seguida, examinamos mais de perto como a metanarrativa de Laclau funciona na prática e analisamos como seu anti-essencialismo é uma fonte de muitas operações de exclusão através do uso da referência "essencialismo". Abordamos especificamente a maneira pela qual a metanarrativa de Laclau permite que utilize um tom iconoclástico nos seus escritos. Ao descrever a ingenuidade das crenças essencialistas dos seus opositores, Laclau é capaz de criar uma linha dicotómica de "tudo-ou-nada", enquanto passa de uma referência para a seguinte.

Na mesma linha, também usamos essa abordagem "literária" para ver como se pode entender a moderação política. Tenta-se muito brevemente observar a moderação política como um género "anti-género" (anti-utopia, anti-dualismo, etc.): a expectativa que transmite é a da crítica a um *corpus* "literário" estabelecido, do qual no fim de contas está dependente para transmitir o seu distinto sentimento de expectativa. Muitos elementos da literatura e da retórica moderadas parecem apresentar esse mesmo padrão duplo, tal como "ironia" enquanto género ou tendências literárias "realistas". Para ganhar força, os recursos literários da

moderação dependem de um *corpus* preexistente em relação ao qual (ou contra o qual) obtêm a sua própria eficácia. Caracterizamos a moderação política, pois, como consistindo essencialmente na crítica e prevenção de uma metanarrativa extrema, a fim de romper os alinhamentos e as suas *referências*. A moderação, portanto, induz ou produz efeitos forçosamente recorrendo a expectativas de outras metanarrativas estabelecidas e, em seguida, oferecendo expectativas em que as *referências* dessas metanarrativas são separadas. Para exemplificar o "género político" da moderação, descrevemos sucintamente esta característica específica que atravessa o pensamento de alguns liberais da Guerra Fria, e especialmente de Raymond Aron.

Palavras chave: Radicalismo, Extremismo, Moderação, Género literário.

Introduction

It is difficult not to ask oneself what exactly happened between now and twenty-five years ago. The years after the fall of the USSR were times of great optimism for proponents of constitutional democracy, of a Third Way between market and welfare state, and of a politics of moderation. However, this last decade has seen the emergence of populisms from the left and from the right, and of uncompromising forms of free market liberalism and minority rights activism – not to mention a recent nativist explosion that has caught everyone by surprise. This project is an investigation into the ideas behind these phenomena. We try to understand these ideas by articulating a conception of *political radicalism* and of its opposite, *political moderation*. Radicalism in the past has often been understood as the negative contrary of moderation, especially because of the previous dominance of Marxism as the main paradigm of radical politics. It has been understood as a body of ideas that are opposed to democracy, to the rule of law, to pluralism, or that are in favor of revolution and violence. These new trends, however, do not seem so straightforwardly anti-democratic or revolutionary as Marxism once was. A new conception of radicalism might help us make sense of them and of the ideas underlying them. These ideas, in turn, might be better understood if we are able to draw a notion of radicalism with more substantive and positive content than the old conception.

To achieve our goal, we will compare the political theories of two authors with opposed political thoughts and projects.[1] Even though Marxism was once the dominant paradigm of radical politics – to such an extent that it was often synonymous with radicalism itself – the two authors we are going to use, Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) and Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014), were directly opposed to that paradigm. There are several reasons why we believe that they might help us with our task of understanding political radicalism. On the one hand, each author is a representative of a major ideological wave that, in these last decades, successfully challenged the dominant paradigm of Marxism. The first wave was the free market turn of the seventies, where ideas and themes pertaining to free market liberalism irrupted unexpectedly after forty

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[1] We are here assuming the usual left-right continuum (although, as we will see, Mises is critical of the left-right distinction, cf. the last section of our chapter on Mises).

years of heterodoxy.[2] Ludwig von Mises died just a few years before this free market wave, but there are no doubts regarding his major and pervasive influence on the themes, ideas, and actors of that event. His ideas on the impossibility of socialism and the necessity of dismantling the welfare state[3] would have a lasting influence on major free market groups and figures – indeed, Mises' *Socialism* and his magnum opus *Human Action* were major influences on Friedrich Hayek and Murray Rothbard, respectively. On the other hand, Ernesto Laclau belongs to a second ideological wave that saw the emergence of the New Social Movements and, more specifically, to their minority rights advocacy. Laclau's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), written with Chantal Mouffe, was a watershed at the time of its publication. It is today still seen as a central work in the history of that movement, and a major work in the foundation of cultural studies.[4] At the time, the dominant Marxist-Leninist paradigm attempted to explain minority rights' struggles as an epiphenomenon of capitalism and class conflict. By blending "postmodern" and poststructuralist themes with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe successfully created an alternative basis for minority rights which lent them legitimacy against the dominant Marxist paradigm. This wave of New Social Movements, that arguably began in the 60s,[5] ended up achieving considerable political success through to its advocacy for minority rights.[6] Not only did *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* strike a chord, but Laclau went on to promote his own poststructuralist alternative to Marxism, first under the name of Hegemony, and then by advocating that the left should adopt populist forms of politics in order to fight neoliberalism's hegemony.

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[2] For accounts of that renaissance, cf. John L. Kelley, *Bringing the Market Back In: The Political Revitalization of Market Liberalism* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1997), and Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[3] Cf. his synthetic critique of the welfare state in Ludwig von Mises, "Liberty and Its Antithesis," in *Planning for Freedom: Let the Market System Work* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008 [1952]), p. 114.

[4] Laclau's work was a decisive influence on Stuart Hall, one of the founding fathers of the field. Colin Sparks, "Stuart Hall, cultural studies and Marxism," in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 95-96.

[5] See, for instance, the description of the New Left in Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism, Vol. 3: The Breakdown* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 487-491.

[6] We here focus on minority rights, but we should not forget that the New Social Movements also included (for instance) anti-nuclear or animal rights activism.

There are additional reasons why Laclau and Mises will be especially helpful for this investigation. Not only did they explicitly try to challenge the Marxist paradigm, but their alternative views were said to be "radical" by commentators, friends, foes, or sometimes even by the authors themselves.[7] We are in a position similar to the one Aristotle was at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: even though it is not yet clear what "radical" means in this context, these received opinions are at least a starting point. At first view, some of their political proposals do seem quite "radical": dismantling the welfare state or promoting populism, for example. However, the precise meaning of "being radical" is something we will try to enlighten in this work.

A final reason as to why Mises and Laclau might help us is that, even though they did not have the same kind of spotlight as a Hayek or a Rorty, respectively, they talked about ideas that, beginning from a position of relative obscurity, ended up creating a lasting impact. A peculiarity of political radicalisms seems to be the way in which, in the space of a few decades, the rhetoric and ideas of fringe and extreme groups can end up having a widespread success whose effects are such that they force their opponents to concede to some of their ideas. Indeed, the first and second ideological waves we described had a considerable and diffuse impact. For instance, the success and impact of free market ideas was so thorough that it forced parties of the opposition to re-settle in a middle-of-the-road, Third Way style of politics that conceded a central role to the free markets.[8] We saw, too, in the New Social Movements such a profound impact that they still reach deeper in each generation and force opposed parties to settle partially for their demands.[9]

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[7] Laclau always claimed the label "radical" for his political theory. Mises, on the contrary, would deny the label. He would say that he wants to recover the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century, Nevertheless, Mises always said that there was no compromise possible between his position and his socialist opponents.

[8] This is something that Mouffe laments in *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), p. 4 and especially p. 32. Cf. also Daniel Stedman Jones, "The Neoliberal Origins of the Third Way," Damien Cahill, Melinda Cooper, Martijn Konings and David Primrose (eds.), The *SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London: SAGE, 2018), pp. 167-178. Alex Callinicos, *Against the Third Way* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). This interpretation is not uncontroversial since many of the influences and politicians that gave rise to Third Way politics argued that it was a synthesis of values from the both the left and the right, from both market liberalism and socialist interventionism. Cf. Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: A Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

[9] Edwin Amenta, Neal Caren, Elizabeth Chiarello, and Yang Su, "The Political Consequences of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2010, vol. 36, n°1, pp. 287-307, and Paul Burnstein, "Social Movements and Public

A related reason for choosing to focus on these authors is to get a better idea of the potential long-term impact of the third "right-wing populist" and "nativist" wave in which we currently find ourselves. Although it is yet too soon to tell, we can conjecture that this third wave will likely have the same kind of durable and pervasive effects that the other two waves had. In sum, since it is possible that this third, "populist" wave will have the same kind of durable effects these two other waves had, understanding the two previous waves might help us understand the third.

Given what we have said so far, we therefore suggest the following questions: since radical trends today are no longer easily detectable by their violent and revolutionary intents, their lack of pluralism, or their anti-democratic and anti-constitutionalist character, how can we define the nature of political radicalism today? Another question is linked to this one: if we are to understand radicalism differently, how will political moderation be defined in this new picture?

Our hypothesis is that, instead of trying to understand radicalism in terms of a specific set of policies, ideas, or attitude, or in terms of anti-pluralism, anti-democracy, anti-constitutional aims, anti-traditionalism or other criteria that define radicalism as a deviation from a given state of "normality," we might get a better picture of contemporary forms of radicalism if we look at the way in which they create dichotomies and a sense of "us versus them." We believe that more traditional approaches to radicalism, which often consist in defining radicalism negatively by identifying what it rejects, can be supplemented by a more "positive" approach that looks at what radicalism offers instead of what it rejects. In turn, we suggest that we try to understand political moderation by looking at the different ways in which it breaks with these attempts to create an "us versus them." Finally, we will try to shed light on the pervasive influence of radicalisms and, especially, on the way in which obscure and little-known dichotomies can gain such widespread acceptance in the space of a few decades.

Policy," in Marco Giugni, Doug Mcadam, and Charles Tilly (eds.), *How Social Movements Matter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

In the first section of this research, we will address some terminological and methodological considerations: First, we will describe the argument of a few works that, in the past decade, have specifically addressed the concepts of "extremism" and "radicalism." After describing their arguments and seeing what we can learn from them, we will then analyze some previous understandings of "extremism" and "radicalism." By looking at some of the "clusters" of scholarly debate in which these concepts were used, we can see that these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but we will also be able to see some of general tendencies in the ways in which they are used.

Chapter 1: Radicalism: Relevance, Literature, and Terminology

1. Broad conceptions of extremism and radicalism

There has been, these past few years, a growing interest in radical and extremist phenomena that have developed within our Western democracies. Arguably since 2008, movements or parties that were once marginal to the political system, both in Europe and the United States, have successfully challenged the previous political consensus. This has led to an increasing interest in the study of pro-market ideologies[1] paralleled by a growing interest in left-leaning forms of populism.[2] Reaching a peak in 2016, we then saw another wave of studies dedicated to "nativist" and rightwing forms of populisms,[3] as well as studies on

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[1] For a recent overview, see George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016), pp. 125-144. Cf. also Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), especially "Epilogue." More concretely, see for instance Jason Brennan, *Libertarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Jason Brennan, Bas van der Vossen, and David Schmidtz (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Libertarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2018). Cf. also the literature on the Tea Party, although we here see social-conservative values that would often come in tension with the libertarian ones. Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change they can't Believe in: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 151-152. Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 34-40.

[2] The success of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain were major factors behind this trend. Cf. Giorgos Katsambekis, "Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza's Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power," *Constellations*, vol. 23, n°3, September 2016, pp. 391–403, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, "Podemos: The Ambiguous Promises of Left-Wing Populism in Contemporary Spain," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 21, n°2, 2016, 99-120, and Yannis Stavrakaki and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 19, n°2, June 2014, 119–142.

[3] On populism: Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), see p. 6. Mudde's definition of populism has changed slightly, cf. Cas Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach," in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espej, Pierre Ostiguy, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 27-47, and Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). See also the earlier studies Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition*, n°39, vol. 3, 2004: 541-563, and especially his watershed Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
On the far-right: Anthony J. McGann and Herbert Kitschelt, *The Radical Right in Western Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), Roger Eatwell, "Ten Theories of the Extreme Right," in Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg (eds.), *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 47–73, Pippa Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
Some recent works that have analyzed this nativist "explosion" of 2016 are: Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), Bill Emmott, *The Fate of the West: The Battle to Save the World's Most Successful Political Idea* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), and Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

minority rights activism.[4] Only a few years ago, the West was vividly discussing the possibilities of public deliberation, rational dialogue, and the politics of consensus. Almost by way of contrast, the rebirth of the "-isms" is truly overwhelming and has generated an accrued interest in their study.

There are however some difficulties in defining what is "radical" about these emergent phenomena – except, perhaps, as a sum of the political positions and attitudes that are generally disliked. On the one hand, they are said to be "radical" because they hold one or several markedly negative characteristics – e.g., they have revolutionary political positions, endorse of xenophobia, or promote the use of violence. On the other hand, they are said to be "radical" because they reject a given state of "political normality" – e.g., they reject pluralism and/or the rule of law – which in turn does not leave much space to think about its positive contents. In other words, these two angles do not leave much space to think about what exactly constitutes radicalism or extremism. When they do, they generally describe them through a collection of negative features.

It is true that, in general, when a work addresses the subject of radicalism or extremism, it usually explores a specific form of radical or extremist politics (e.g., rightwing populism or leftwing radical politics). Nevertheless, this last decade we have seen a few works that tried to define "extremism" and "radicalism" from a larger perspective. In order to show some of the shortcomings of the former conception of political radicalism, we will now address two of these works. Each one has tried, in its own way, to broadly define and categorize ideologies or political traditions in light of the concepts of "radicalism" or "extremism."

In our first work, Uwe Backes offers a theory of extremism in *Political Extremes: A conceptual history from antiquity to the present*. He takes as his starting point the Aristotelian mixed or constitutional regime,

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[4] Several studies tried to analyze the importance and impact of "identity politics" and its minority rights variants (feminism, LGBT, and activists of color) for the "nativist explosion" of 2016. Cf. Fukuyama, *Identity* and Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*. Part of the reason behind this wave also has to do with the fact that "identity politics," that was originally understood in its minority rights variants, increasingly came to be associated with the "nationalist" identity politics that irrupted with the nativist explosion of 2016. Cf. also Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Some classical studies on identity politics in its minority rights variants are: Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M. L. Moya (eds.), *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2006) or Moya Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power and Politics* (London: Sage, 2005).

a regime that is a mixture of elements from the oligarchic and democratic regimes. Instead of being subject to the rule of the rich or the rule of the poor, the mixed regime is a virtuous regime where a middle class maintains both the liberty and the stability of the regime. Backes argues that the "extreme" of "extremism" can be understood in a similar way: an extreme position is one that rejects some essential features of the constitutional regime. This rejection prevents it from constituting itself as a mix of elements from other institutional arrangements.[5]

He defines the four basic features of what we can call his "modern mixed regime" in the following way. First, there is pluralism (in opposition to monism) in the sense that none of the groups that coexist in the mixed regime should alone decide on the regime's institutional design and processes. Second, there is a general orientation toward the common good (in opposition to an execution of merely egoistic interests). Since several comprehensive conceptions of the common good have to co-exist, a single one of them should not take precedence over those of the other groups. Third, there must be a legal state (in opposition to arbitrary rule). Indeed, if the regime is to survive, all the groups must adhere to a set of rules and to a system of control of power (such as division, limitation, and delegation of powers). Finally, Backes' modern mixed regime must possess self-determination (in opposition to outside determination) in the sense that all the groups must have a fair chance to participate in the decision-making process. In this way, the regime can execute the decisions of the coexisting groups in a controlled manner.[6]

Backes notices that this fourth characteristic is the "democratic" element of the mixed regime, while the third is its "monarchical/aristocratic" element. There might therefore be forms of extremism that accept the constitutional state but reject the *equality* between citizens and vice-versa. From there, he suggests that different types of extremisms can be arranged according to which feature of the mixed regime they reject. He gives the example of Marxism-Leninism and some forms of anarchism that are "democratic anti-

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[5] Uwe Backes, *Political Extremes: A conceptual history from antiquity to the present* (London: Routledge, 2010), chap. 9, section 1 and 3. See also Backes' classification of terminologies of extremism in the second section. See also his seminal essay, Uwe Backes, "Meaning and Forms of Political Extremism in Past and Present," *Central European Political Studies Review*, vol. IX, n°4, 2007, pp. 242-263: p. 247.
[6] Backes, *Political Extremes*, pp. 174-176. Cf. also Backes, "Meaning and Forms of Political Extremism," p. 274.

constitutionalist" extremisms, or he argues that National-Socialism is an "anti-democratic anti-constitutionalist" extremism.[7]

As we said earlier (and as we will see in the second section of this chapter), many approaches define "extremism" by looking at the degree of deviance of a given ideology or group in relation to some notion of what is *normal*. Within this deviance-approach, they then define extremism as (for instance) the apology of violence, intolerance, and/or xenophobia. A strength of Backes' approach – and other followers of his conception of extremism, such as Paul Lucardie[8] – is that he systematizes and pushes this idea to its very end: he not only considers "extreme" any ideology that deviates from that normality, but he classify different types of extremisms according to the kind of deviation they make. Thanks to his "default" constitutional regime, he can then classify different types of extremism on the basis of which feature(s) of the "normal regime" they reject. "Anarchism," for instance, is "extremist" because it rejects, in the name of equality, the element of rule of law inherent to the mixed regime. "National-Socialism," on the other hand, is "extremist" both in its rejection of the constitutional element and of the egalitarian element since it imposes one comprehensive vision of the good over all the other groups.

A problem of this approach is that not much positive is said about the extremisms thus classified. Extremism is here seen as the rejection of something else. In times like the ones we are living now, large groups of people find extremism attractive. This attraction is insufficiently explained if we see extremism as the rejection of some aspect of the liberal democratic regime. It would be interesting if, for instance, we could look at anarchism, not just in the way in which it radically rejects the rule of law of the modern democratic regime, but in the way in which it tries to build something radically different. In the end, with Backes we get a working but simplified notion of the kind of extremisms we could face. This theory ends up not saying much about what the extremisms in question actually are.

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[7] Backes, *Political Extremes*, pp. 178-179.
[8] Paul Lucardie, *Democratic Extremism in Theory and Practice: All Power to the People* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

The second work we want to address, Paul McLaughlin's *Radicalism: A Philosophical Study*, takes a different approach that avoids this problem. His point of departure are some etymological considerations on the term "radicalism" that he draws from Marx and Bauman. "Radicalism," he says, comes from *radix*, "the roots": it is an orientation, not only toward the "roots" in the sense of what is "primary" and "fundamental" about something, but also toward the "origins" and the "foundations" of that something.[9] However, McLaughlin also notes that this process of going "to the roots" means both "uncovering" these hidden roots but also the potential destructive aspect of "uprooting" these roots.[10] He therefore highlights two necessary conditions for the application of radicalism: the fundamentality of the object of concern – there must be roots to be uncovered – and the fundamentality of orientation – the potentially destructive process of uprooting the concealed roots.[11]

With these etymological conditions in mind, McLaughlin delimits the subject in which he applies this notion of radicalism. He explains that, in order to talk about a specifically "political" radicalism, this radical orientation must be directed toward socio-political fundamentals – and not religious ones, for instance.[12] Socio-political fundamentals, he says, are elements of a society – such as class, race, and gender, or political and economic institutions – whose modification would fundamentally change the political make up of that society. McLaughlin concretely describe these particular socio-political "fundamentals" by looking at a collection of radical authors and by describing their fundamentals-oriented outlook. For example, he analyzes the sociopolitical views of La Boétie, Rousseau, Marx, down to Rothbard's libertarianism and Pateman's feminism.

At first, *Radicalism* offers a promising definition of radicalism and it succeeds in disentangling many of the confusions linked to the notion of radicalism. McLaughlin is also clear about his goals: the clarification of the concept of radicalism, the artificial reconstruction of a radical tradition, and a vindication of

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[9] Paul McLaughlin, *Radicalism: A Philosophical Study* (London: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 17-18.
[10] McLaughlin, *Radicalism*, pp. 19-20.
[11] McLaughlin, *Radicalism*, p. 20.
[12] McLaughlin, *Radicalism*, pp. 21-22.

radicalism in its progressive and humanistic forms. In the end, however, there are significant shortcomings with this approach. The problem seems to boil down to the lack of concrete connection between McLaughlin's notion of "radicalism" and how it translates into practice. At a more advanced stage of his work, McLaughlin proceeds to summarize the fundamental problems targeted by the authors he just reviewed: tyranny; social inequality; private property; social class; authority; ideology; patriarchy.[13] He then asks: how can we say that these problems are "fundamental"?

> [They are] 'fundamental' in the sense that it defines particular societies: were this distribution altered – by revolutionary or non-revolutionary means – the society in question would be fundamentally different, different with respect to its defining socio-political norms, practices, relations, or institutions.[14]

In other words, Mclaughlin here repeats the idea he exposed earlier that socio-political "fundamentals" are elements that, if they were changed, then they would fundamentally change the political make-up of the society on which they are based. We are expecting his concept of "radicalism" to offer something more substantial but, in the end, radicalism ends up being the "fundamental" divergence from a given normative state. An author who is "radical" aims at consequences that create "substantive change" in a given society. We seem to be back to a negative kind of definition that takes as its point of departure some specific understanding of normality from which radicalism is said to deviate. For Mclaughlin, this happens by tracing the drastic way in which an idea diverges from the "fundamentals" of a given society.

Summing up, we see that Uwe Backes, inspired by Aristotle's notion of the "mixed regime," conceptualizes extremism as the rejection of one or several features of the modern constitutional regime – pluralism, the common good, rule of law, and self-determination. Then, with Paul McLaughlin's study on radicalism, we see how he draws a radical philosophical tradition peopled with authors who criticized the fundamental elements of the societies in which they found themselves. In both cases, we have a conception of extremism and a conception of radicalism that follow the issues that we pointed out at the beginning of this chapter:

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[13] McLaughlin, *Radicalism*, p. 132.
[14] McLaughlin, *Radicalism*, p. 132.

they define radicalism as the rejection of some form of political normality. On the one hand, Backes defines "extremism" as the rejection of one or several features of the "default" liberal democratic regime. On the other hand, McLaughlin argues that a "radical" orientation entails the critique of elements that are "fundamental" to a given society. And such "fundamentals" are defined in terms of the substantial modifications that they would create on that society if they were to be changed. In the end, radicalism is therefore defined as a critique that would entail the "substantial change" of a given society. Radicalism is a "substantial" deviation away from some given form of social normality.

These two studies, however, are only broad reflections on the notions of radicalism and extremism. More specific scholarship, such as the wave of publications on populism and the far-right, has been steadily growing for the last decade. This growing literature on radicalisms and extremisms makes sense, not only given the recent political events but also because of the significant contrast with previous expectations. Not too long ago, it was thought that these populist and radical movements were relics of the past, or at least that they could only emerge in non-consolidated democracies. But these past years have shown that these fringe movements have gained ground – and sometimes even won elections – in liberal regimes that seemed immune to the radical temptation.

So, how can we define radical or extremist movements and ideologies, especially when these seem much less "revolutionary" or apologetic of violence than they used to? For these reasons, it is worth looking at the more restricted and precise senses in which extremism and radicalism have been understood. Even though it is impossible to pick up every proposed definition of those terms, we can look at the ways in which the terms "extremism" and "radicalism" have been used in an array of academic scholarship. By looking at some clusters and debates in which these terms were used, we might be able to attain a general picture.

2. Restricted conceptions of extremism and radicalism

Traditionally, a study that gives a central place to the notions of "extremism" or "radicalism" begins with an etymological description of these concepts – this is for instance what Backes and McLaughlin do in their respective studies. By making a wide review of the different types of scholarship that use these concepts, we will try to offer something different from other studies on radicalism and/or extremism. Indeed, when we began this work on radicalism, we noticed patterns in the way these concepts were used and that might be of interest for scholars of extremism and/or radicalism. As we will see, the review we have here undertaken reveals that, despite the wide differences in the uses of the terms "extremism" and "radicalism," some general fidelity to the semantic roots of the words is maintained. The source material for this research is explained extensively in the footnotes.

In the literature on extremism, we have the following clusters of scholarships:

(1) There is extensive use of a conception of extremism and "the extremist personality" in psychology, often in terms of intolerance, uncompromisingness, and tendencies to resort to violence.[15]

(2) There are studies for which extremism means the homogenization and polarization of opinions, which in turns leads to the reinforcement of bias and the extremization of political worldviews.[16]

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[15] After the Second World War, there were some notable works such as Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* or Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Although this psychological approach ended up being strongly criticized, there is still a strong tradition in psychology that studies the "psychology" of both sides of the spectrum. There are studies on the "extremist militant" patterns of thinking and a few studies, led by Michael Hogg, on extremism as a mean to palliate the uncertainty brought by specific situations and events – such as situations of crises, or globalization. Gerard Saucier, Laura Geuy Akers, et al., "Patterns of Thinking in Militant Extremism," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 4, n°3, 2009, pp. 256-271, and Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock, *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 25. Cite Hardin and the "Crippled Epistemology." And some notable works on political psychology and voters' behavior. David Knoke, *Political Networks: The Structural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), addresses how psychological explanations have dominated the explanations of extremism in the past.

[16] Cf. especially Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 revised edition [2001]), his recent book on the same subject, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) and, more specifically on political polarization, Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

(3) There is a flow of studies that take a public choice approach to extremism and terrorism.[17] In this scholarship, there are for instance theories that explain the "rational" motivations of terrorist bombing from a public choice perspective.[18]

(4) There are also extensive studies on far-right politics where the concept of extremism is used quite often.[19] More recently, we saw an intimately connected flow of studies on the recent populist surge.[20]

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[17] These studies grew especially after 9/11.

[18] These were studies that tried to explain how "ideological motivation" and "rewards for going to heaven" could fit into rational choice theory. For instance, Martha Crenshaw, "The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorism as a Product of Strategic Choice," in Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Cambridge University Press, 1990). Ronald Wintrobe, for instance, relates the ideological motivations of extremism to solidarity ties: violent extremism is undertaken, not strictly because of any afterlife reward or ideological motivation, but because the individual values group ties to the extent where his decisions end up being taken on par with the values of the leader. Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, Pierre Salmon, and Ronald Wintrobe (eds.), *Political Extremism and Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Ronald Wintrobe, *Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On the "rewards from heaven" problem, see Eli Berman and David D. Laitin, "Religion, Terrorism and Public Goods: Testing the Club Model," in *National Bureau of the Economic Research*, NBER Working Paper No. 13725, January 2008.

[19] Famously, Cas Mudde defined the far-right as an ideology containing a mixture of five criteria: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and a strong state. Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 16-18. Cf. also: Anthony J. McGann and Herbert Kitschelt, *The Radical Right in Western Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), Roger Eatwell, "Ten Theories of the Extreme Right," in Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg (eds.), *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), Pippa Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005),

[20] Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (eds), *Populists in Power* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015); Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (London: Penguin Books, 2017); and Nadia Urbinati, "The Populist Phenomenon," *Raisons politiques* vol. 51, n°3, 2013; and the concise Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

We now turn to the clusters of scholarships that address some conception of radicalism:

(1) Historians of ideas sometimes speak of "philosophic radicalism" as the questioning of faith, tradition, and authority in light of philosophy (e.g., followers of Bentham's utilitarianism were often labeled "Radicals").[21]

(2) The term "radicalism" also has a pedigree in English historiography. It is often used to study Levellers, Diggers, and Ranters of seventeenth century England whom the so-called "Marxist British historians" saw as the beginners of a British "revolutionary tradition."[22] This reading was later criticized and challenged by other functionalist and linguistic approaches.[23]

(3) In more political approaches, political radicalism is often seen as a body of ideas and policies that consistently break away from the past and from tradition.[24]

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[21] Already in the beginning of the XX century, Élie Halévy would pinpoint the origins of the *Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* in Bentham's utilitarianism:

> The interests of all individuals are identical. Every individual is the best judge of his own interests. Therefore it is necessary to break down all artificial barriers which traditional institutions set up between individuals, and all the social restraints based on the supposed necessity of protecting individuals against each other and against themselves.

Élie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934 [new ed., 1928]), p. xvi. For criticisms of Halevy's thesis, cf. Hutt's *Economists and the Public*, p. This is echoed in Jonathan I. Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* where he identifies the radicalism of the Enlightenment with the questioning, "in the light of philosophical reason," of "the largely shared core of faith, tradition, and authority" that would have dominated the middle-ages down to 1650. Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[22] Arthur Leslie Morton, *A People's History of England* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), Glenn Burgess and Matthew Festenstein (eds.), *English Radicalism, 1550-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2007), p. 3-4, and see an overview of the subject in Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan, "Introduction," in Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan, *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 1-30, but see specifically pp. 2-8.

[23] Hessayon and Finnegan, 'Introduction,' in *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism*, pp.

[24] For instance, Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). Giddens' argument is that the label 'radical' was traditionally associated with the Left, but that conservatives took over because of their pro-market positions that are hostile to the past. There is also Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* where "radicalism" is associated with a utopian form of politics that wishes to create, like the painter's canvas, a clean slate on top of which a utopian scheme can be erected. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013 [1945]), especially chapter 9: Estheticism, Radicalism, Utopianism.

When we analyze these wide uses of "extremism" and "radicalism" side by side, we can see that both sets of scholarships have a feature in common: they are generally faithful to the etymological origin of each term. Let's have a deeper look at each set in order to develop what we mean by this.

On the one hand, the different kinds of scholarship using the term "extremism" are generally faithful to the etymological origin of the term because they usually attempt to describe a position that *goes too far* in relation to some form of normality, e.g., "intolerant," in opposition to "tolerant," "antidemocratic" or "antiliberal" positions in opposition to liberal and democratic ones, or violent positions in opposition to non-violent ones. Extremism is usually treated as a deviational concept in the sense that it is usually taken to represent a set of characteristics that diverge from a normative state. In psychology, political science, war studies, and public choice, researchers attempt to study a particular phenomenon that seems especially intense and, therefore, deviates from something else. It is not uncommon in these studies to see quantitative variables pinpointing how far on the extreme these "extreme" positions are in relation to "normal" ones. For instance, in a study on the far-right, Mudde makes a distinction between full-blown extremist parties that adhere to his five criteria and "moderate" extremists with only three of the five.[25]

On the other hand, when we shift to an overview of the uses of the term radicalism, we can see that some etymological fidelity is generally maintained as well. We saw earlier, thanks to McLaughlin's study, that the word "radicalism" comes from *radix*, "the roots," that which pertains to the fundamentals.[26] Indeed, as we have seen, scholarship employing the term radicalism, as opposed to scholarship that prefers "extremism," generally does attempt to pinpoint fundamentals-oriented strands, traditions, or outlooks.

The general etymological fidelity of each term is also probably due to the kind of approach each set of scholarships tend to use. On the one hand, "extremism" is used in more quantitative, empirical, and case-studies- oriented fields. It is more frequently used to plot degrees of "extremism" on an axis from "more"

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[25] Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, pp. 16-18.
[26] See the enlightening analysis of Paul McLaughlin, *Radicalism: A Philosophical Study* (London: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 7-25.

to "less" extreme positions. On the other hand, "radicalism" is used in more theoretical approaches – such as historical approaches attempting to pinpoint the continuity of "radical" thoughts, strands, or movements.

As we can see, the studies of extremism tend to fall into a difficulty we may want to avoid: a conception of radicalism that begins with its negative features. To be sure, there are many connections between radicalism and these negative features that could be explored (the relation between radicalism and the promotion of violence and intolerance, or its opposition to democracy and pluralism). But in this study we would like, as much as possible, to avoid drawing a conception of radicalism that assumes these negative characteristics from the onset. Studies on extremism tend to begin with a strong idea of what is "normal" and then draw an axis that indicates a degree of "deviance" of their object of study. This too often gives rise to such "negative" conceptions of radicalism that limit its discussion from the onset. These concerns give us enough reason to stick with the term "radicalism" rather than "extremism" in general.

We propose that it will be helpful to add to the existing scholarship a conception of radicalism that does not depend on defining some form of "normality" and is not reduced to a recent or fleeting socioeconomic context. In the coming chapters we will try to show that authors who do not cry for a revolution or other kind of typically radical measures can often be recognized by the *radicality of their style*. In other words, when we study radicalism in politics, we can often spot it by looking at the style a given thinker, philosopher, or ideologue deploys. Great part of this work will discuss the contours of this style of discourse and how to recognize them, using Ludwig von Mises and Ernesto Laclau as examples intentionally drawn from different political positions.

In conclusion, we saw in this first chapter, on the one hand, two studies that addressed "extremism" and "radicalism" from a broader perspective and on the other hand, studies that analyzed these concepts in light of more specific subjects, such as populism or terrorism. What we saw in the end is that these studies – both the broad and restricted kinds – tend to adopt a "deviant" approach to the study of radicalism. In other words, radicalism tends to be understood as the deviation away from a given normative state. In weaker forms, the object of study is merely said to be critical of received institutions and of traditions. In stronger

forms, this approach ascribes a great number of deviating features to the radical object of study, e.g. "intolerance," "xenophobia," "anti-democratism," "anti-pluralism," and so forth. We would like to suggest a perspective different from this "deviant" approach. Instead of looking at the specific ideas or policies that cause the "radical" label to be ascribed to a given object of study, we should try to see "radicalism" as the deployment of a *specific radical style*.[27] In other words, we propose that what the radicalism of a given author (for instance) lies less in the concrete idea or proposal he puts forth than the radical style in which he proposes it.

3. Conceptual import

There seem to be common features to the deviant approach to radicalism: first, a series of ideas, policies, or attitudes are said to be radical then, when the label is applied to a particular object of study, its degree of radicality is assessed by the number of radical elements it carries and by gauging their intensity (e.g. the extent to which they change a given status quo).[28] In order to develop an approach that does not rely as much on seeing radicalism in light of some stipulated form of normality and/or status quo, we should try to avoid starting with a set of radical elements that we would then apply to our authors. We argue that there is a way to approach *radicalism in a literary way*, which could be a first step toward avoiding the deviational conception altogether. Indeed, this would mean that we could define the radicality of an author by looking internally at the way he writes, rather than at the specific ideas, policies, or attitudes that he holds.

We could call this approach that begins with the ideas, policies, or attitudes that make-up radicalism a *bottom-up* approach. It begins with smaller units and then builds its way up to a full-blown notion of radicalism. What we suggest is a *top-down* approach to radicalism: instead of beginning with an analysis of the discrete elements that make up radicalism, we look at the *radical narrative* in the background of an

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[27] This does not mean that we are rejecting the idea of radicalism in terms of change. Cf. our conclusion.

[28] We make a similar remark to what Laclau argued about attempts to define populism through a specifiable content, cf. the first chapter of Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

argument and, then, see the specific ways that an author uses to connect his argument and his narrative. This is what we could call an approach that look at *radicalism as a literary genre*.[29] Instead of assuming that radicalism consists in specific content, such as the promotion of violence, we instead say that it is the degree to which an author relies on a well-known political story – such as Marxism.

In order to develop this top-down literary approach, we rely on the postclassical theory developed by David Herman, a scholar of narrative theory. According to Herman, from the 1960s to the 1980s there was a "classical" paradigm of narrative that finds its origins in Russian Formalist literary theory and was subsequently developed by scholars such as Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, Wallace Martin, Gerald Prince, or Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. It was also used extensively by scholars of the structuralist wave of the 1960s such as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Algirdas J. Greimas, and Tzvetan Todorov.[30] Herman explains that this classical approach tried to capture the general rules of how a reader interprets the narrative of a given text. In the same way the structuralists saw language as composed of rules of combination and association, so did they try to understand narrative in term of its general rules of composition.[31] This led the classical scholars to focus on the study of structural features of the text such as narration, plot, characters, narrative points of view, dialogue, time, and space.[32] The weakness of this classical paradigm, Herman argues, is that it focuses on the study of the text and of its constituents at the expense of the

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[29] Cf. especially Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (West Lafayette: Parlor Press, 2010) where they offer an overview of the scholarship where the concept of "genre" is used: pp. 13-28. It is clear that "genre" has come to mean something considerably different than its original meaning of literary genres in "high literature." Through the contributions of scholars such as M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hassan, John Swale, or Carolyn Miller, "genre" came to be increasingly theorized as stereotypical social mediums with potential responses that are expected by its participants (e.g. the situation between a cashier and a client when buying a product at the supermarket, or when a driver is stopped by a police officer). This view of genre has strong educational aims, e.g. teaching English students not merely how they should *write* English but how correctly learning a language entails specific kinds of answers that are dependent on the *social situations* in which one is interacting (e.g., writing an essay for a teacher, or writing a journal article, or speaking with one's neighbor). On this evolution of the meaning of "genre," Cf. John Frow in "'Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need': Genre Theory Today," where he describes his frustration with the fact that the original meaning of literary genres has disappeared while genre as ready-made textbooks ("toolboxes") have been on the rise.

[30] David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 26. See also the Anglo-American contributions to the classical paradigm: pp. 29-30.

[31] Herman, *Basic Elements*, pp. 27-28.

[32] Herman, *Basic Elements*, p. 31.

relationship between the text and the reader.[33] In other words, beyond the structural features of the text itself, there is also a context in which the text is "told" – the "occasion for telling"[34] – that enables the reader to infer further meaning from the text itself.

A good example of this classical paradigm is the work from the Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, whose 1958 English translation was a major influence on the structuralists' view of narrative. Propp was dissatisfied with other approaches that classified fairy-tales according to their themes: if the story has a fight with a dragon, then it is a dragon tale; if it has a wise-maiden, then it is about a wise-maiden tale; and so forth.[35] Instead, Propp saw that fairy-tales had a rich variety of forms and ways in which it is told, but that its simplicity lies in one of its invariant features: the function performed by the characters of the tale on the plot.[36] Once we see the characters of the tale in terms of categories such as "the villain," "the hero," or "the helper," then we can see that these characters' actions is recurrent across all fairy-tales. With this in mind, Propp decides to draws out thirty-one features of the fairy tales: the moment when the villain tricks the hero, the moment of test of the hero, the punishment of the villain, the marriage of the hero to the princess, etcetera. We can appreciate the way in which Propp is part of the classical paradigm of narrative in the sense that he analyzes and classify the fairy tale by looking at the features that are present in the text itself. He especially looks at the characters, their functions, and at the turns of the plot.

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[33] Cf. Herman, *Basic Elements*, pp. 27-29 and p. 33. Herman first came with term in "Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology." PMLA, vol. 112, nº5, 1997, pp. 1046-1059, and then developed it in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* (Columbus: State Ohio Press, 1999). Cf. Shang Biwu, "New Developments in the Study of Narrative: An Interview with David Herman," in *Amsterdam International Electronic Journal for Cultural Narratology*, nº6, Autumn 2010/Autumn 2011, http://cf.hum.uva.nl/narratology/a11_an_interview_with_david_herman.htm. The critique to the "classical" paradigm is clearer in David Herman, 'Exploring the Nexus of Narrative and Mind,' in David Herman, James Phelan, et al. (eds), *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (Columbus: Ohio State of University Press, 2012), p. 14: '(…) the structuralist narratologists (…) failed to investigate issues of narrative referentiality and world-modeling, not least because of the Saussurean language theory they used as their "pilot-science." Of key importance here is Saussure's bipartite analysis of the linguistic sign into the signifier and signified to the exclusion of the referent, as well as his related emphasis on code instead of message—that is, his foregrounding of the structural constituents and combinatory principles of the semiotic system of language over situated uses of that system.'

[34] Herman, *Basic Elements*, p. 14.

[35] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009 [1968], 2nd edition), pp. 7-8.

[36] Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, pp. 19-20.

In contrast, Herman develops his own approach within a postclassical paradigm that shifts the attention from textuality to the kind of cues that the text affords to the reader. This postclassical paradigm aims at supplying this textual approach by looking, for instance, at the reader's awareness that he is reading a fairy tale. As Herman would say, the reader is aware that he is "situated" in the "storyworld" of the fairytale, and he is then able to decode and understand the text in light of that awareness. He can infer further meaning from the text thanks to the situation in which he finds himself – i.e., the fact that he is in a context where he is reading a fairy tale.

What we can see in Herman's model is that there is a further, tacit dimension of the fairy tale that goes beyond its textual features. Thanks to the fact that the reader has a familiar knowledge of the rules of the fairy tale, that he is then able to infer meaning from the text he is reading. For instance, beginning a story with the traditional trope "Once upon a time…" is a typical cue that we are about to read a fairy tale. "Once upon a time" gives the reader a sense of expectation that will be useful to infer further meaning out of the text. If in the next sentence the author refers to "the knight" or "the princess," the reader will have a set of expectations about these characters because he is more or less familiar with the rules of the fairy tale. In turn, we can see how these background rules of the fairy tale can help an author build his own story. Indeed, the author is aware of that sense of expectation and of the kind of limits it establishes from the onset – the readers expect, for instance, that the princess is not supposed to die. On the other hand, the author can play with this sense of expectation, and he can decide, for instance, to make the princess save the knight from the dragon.

If we apply these insights to the study of radicalism, we see that, just like the genre of the fairy-tale, radicalism is a genre as well. As a reader goes on to read a political work, he too quickly sets his expectations when he sees references to the rules of the radical genre. If a political writer consistently argues that one and only one side of a political dichotomy – say, left versus right, or conservative versus liberal – is right on a given issue, that the other side is irremediably corrupted and that it is a decisive obstruction for the set of vital actions that must be taken in the political realm, that there is one and only one course of action that

could solve the problem at hand, and that, after this action, the endpoint we will achieve will be unambiguously better than the present one, then the reader knows that he is completely immersed in the radical genre. In such a full-scale deployment of the radical genre, the reader certainly does not expect the writer to argue that, after all, perhaps the other side has some valuable points or contributions to make. In fact, just like one does not expect the princess to die at the end of the fairy-tale, these stories too have a predictable ending. Since one side is right and the other is wrong, reading the first page of such political works means that we can usually predict most of the ending too – and the writers using the radical genre do not usually expect anything less from the reader. Of course, radicalism is not usually present in this full form: an author often uses it through a well-placed reference that shows the malevolent nature of the other side of a political debate, that enlightens how this other side decisively contributed to the critical situation in which we find ourselves, or that explains how only one policy can take us out of this nefarious situation.

This is also a very abstract and empty picture of how radicalism actually works in real life. Seen in this way, the radical genre is nothing but the reference to an abstract, empty, and general radical narrative. In other words, it is a plot with two sides, one problem, one solution, and one endpoint, but without setting, characters, and scenes.[37] But in practice the radical genre is almost always embodied into a specific subgenre that cultivates an array of references linked to a particular narrative of its own. One of these subgenres is the well-known story of Marxism. It has specific characters, a plot, and an ending of its own: the struggle of the proletarians against the bourgeoisie, the decisive revolution where both camps face each other, followed by the institution of socialism. By using specific terms and expressions typical of that Marxist (sub)genre, an author can use this well-known story and call it within his or her own argument. Just as "Once upon a time" is employed by the author to cue the reader that he or she is reading a fairy tale, political authors employ set of phrases or epithets or other cuing techniques to indicate to the reader that an argument is being made against the background of a political narrative.

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[37] Eric Voegelin presents six characteristics of "Gnostic" movements that are schematically similar to what we describe here. Eric Voegelin, "Ersatz Religion," in *Modernity without Restraint* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 297-298.

To make this more clear, we will continue with the example of Marxism. Some of the *cues*[38] – as we will call them – of the Marxist narrative are key terms like "bourgeoisie," "proletarian," "revolution," or "capitalism." An author uses this narrative in order to reinforce his argument. For instance, he could ascribe to a given author, group, or argument an epithet which makes it clear that the author, group, or argument is on the opponent's side of his narrative – "reactionary," "bourgeois" – or on the "right" side of the narrative – "revolutionary," "proletariat." These cues are then intuitively apprehended by the reader when he approaches the text. He orients himself within one notable genre of radicalism: Marxism. Thanks to this intuitive understanding, the reader is then able to adjust his reading of the author's argument in light of this background story: there is one "side" consisting of "the proletariat" and of "socialism," while there is another one consisting of "the forces of capitalism" and of "the bourgeoisie." This background narrative helps the reader follow the author's argument while the reader keeps in mind that the author is creating strong dichotomies in the text between the proletariat and bourgeois, for example, or between socialism and capitalism, or between other forms of dichotomies within the general story of Marxism.[39]

These "narratives" in which the reader orients himself are sometimes referred to as *metanarratives*. Marxist scholars, for instance, will sometimes talk about Marxism as a master narrative or a metanarrative with its own symbols and aesthetic. In this sense, "metanarrative" usually has a more positive connotation. Indeed, notable Marxist scholars have argued that a comprehensive metanarrative like Marxism is essential to make sense of society, history, and politics. By looking at these fields in a way that unites them in a comprehensive story, we can have a deeper insight in their nature that a specific study of each could not afford.[40] Additionally, a metanarrative is sometimes understood in a more polemical sense. Some scholars argue that we live in a "postmodern" age marked by a skepticism toward the grand narratives that have

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[38] On the concept of cues that we use in this study, cf. chap. 5.

[39] Although Marx did present such a simplified view of historical change, we are not saying that Marxism's philosophy of history can be reduced to this dichotomic narrative. A classical study that tried to rehabilitate Marx's philosophy of history is G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), See also Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[40] In the next chapter, we analyze of the most famous versions of this argument: George Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*. For a modern attempt in the line of Lukács, cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge, 1983), p. 3.

marked modernity – Marxism, for instance, but also Christianity. In this postmodern age, these metanarratives are now supposed to be "dead."[41] While we describe metanarratives as familiar stories that help the reader in the reading of a text, these two notions of metanarrative are usually understood in a more ominous sense: metanarratives are supposed to be stories that are overarching, all-encompassing, or even metaphysical.

We here take a different approach and, instead of seeing these metanarratives primarily in a grand metaphysical sense, we see the way in which there is, in fact, something almost trivial about a metanarrative such as the Marxist one. Authors use metanarratives that are familiar to their readers, which is why a single reference to a metanarrative can sometimes automatically trigger a reaction which situates the reader within the chosen metanarrative. Readers are generally expected to be familiar with these stories and their tropes. More than just being "metaphysical" or "overarching," metanarratives are familiar political stories that an author can reference and relate to in order to strengthen his own argument(s). This general familiarity is an essential component of why these metanarratives work so well.

We suggest that a study of these metanarratives, cues, and techniques employed by political authors will improve our understanding of what radicalism is when taken by itself and not in relation to a stipulated "normality." The use of cues associated with a particular metanarrative allows an author to reinforce his arguments with the aid of a much larger, more comprehensive story than his argument alone could suggest. Instead of using the bottom-up approach recurrent in the study of extremism and radicalism, our study will identify and rely on the top-down method of radical discourse. Instead of beginning with particular radical elements – such as "revolutionism," "uncompromisingness," or "anti-democratism," – that produce what we have called a "deviant approach"' to radicalism, we begin instead by identifying the general background

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[41] Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979). Cf. also Ernesto Laclau, "Politics and the Limits of Modernity," *Social Text*, n°21, 1989, pp. 63-82.

story – the metanarrative – an author adopts when he is arguing in a radical style. In order to see how this metanarrative is used concretely, we analyze the author's use of *cues* typical of that metanarrative.[42]

From this explanation, there are a few questions that remain to be solved which we will address in our next chapters:

- Isn't all political speech "dichotomic" in one way or another? What counts as a "radical" dichotomy?

- How can we know that a given cue is an instance of "radicalism"? For instance, a dictionary's entry on "Marxism" will use cues from Marxism, but it cannot be said that we are faced there with "radicalism."

- How does all of this this translate in practice?

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[42] In other words, there is a shift from what a narrative 'is' to what kind of *effects* it provides in terms of *inferential cues* offered to the reader. For Herman, the transition from a 'classical' to a 'postclassical' paradigm in the study of narrative therefore consisted in supplying this lacking referentiality to the study of narratives. It is the fact that a narrative – or, rather, a specific context for telling – cues the reader in situating himself into a storyworld that is the kernel of narrative: the reader is cued both by the storyworld evoked by the narrator, but also by the specific act of telling the story – what we called 'background metanarrative' and will later on call the 'operations' of the metanarrative.

Narrative, more than being understood purely in terms of plot and textual structure, is here also understood as a "lived experience," if we will. In this sense, Marxism, more than simply being a taxonomic class, is "a conventional function of language, a particular relation to the world which serves as norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text." (Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 159.) In the example we give in this chapter, Marxism cannot be reduced to features in a text: it is this situating within the storyworld of Marxism itself. And, for that, a simple sentence, such as "seizing the means of production," is more than enough to perform this situatedness: to "transport" us into the "living world" of Marxism.

Chapter 2: Bernstein's Polemic against Marxist orthodoxy

1. Introduction

In the last chapter, we argued that a potential way to define radicalism is, on the one hand, by looking at the metanarrative an author uses when deploying a radical genre and, on the other hand, by analyzing the cues that the author uses to refer to that metanarrative. In this chapter, we will deepen this notion of radicalism by concretely addressing the case of the Marxist metanarrative. The fact that, in our last chapter, we often referred to intuitive examples from the Marxist metanarrative only shows how its imagery is deeply entrenched into our commonsense. Like the rules of a literary genre, the ease with which we can recall the tropes of Marxism testifies to its importance as one of the central forms of radicalism of the twentieth century. As we saw, sometimes a single reference to it is enough to immerse the reader in its metanarrative. It will therefore make a good study-case to deepen our notion of radicalism. Furthermore, since both Laclau and Mises were resolutely opposed to Marxism, it only makes sense that we should begin by getting a deeper look at their greatest rival.

Paradoxically, one of the first persons who comprehensively analyzed Marxism as a metanarrative is also one of its most well-known critics.[1] The essays that Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) writes against the orthodoxy of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) were framed precisely in terms of a critique to the Marxist metanarrative. To be sure, Marxism at the time of Bernstein's writing was still far from the position of success it would eventually gain: even though several socialists started to call themselves "Marxists" by the time of Marx's death in 1883, the Socialist movement in Germany was initially somewhat

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[1] Nevertheless, even Leszek Kolakowski – who cannot be suspected of Marxist sympathies – has criticized Bernstein's arguments: *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth and Dissolution. Vol. 2: The Golden Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 104-105, 109-110. Henry Tudor is also critical in his introduction: *The Preconditions of Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1899]), pp. xv-xxxvi. For a more positive assessment, Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 16-20.

lukewarm about Marx's theories.[2] As we know, Marx writes his famous *Critique of the Gotha Program* because he saw that the Gotha program of 1875 – the program of the new Socialist Labor Party and future SPD – did not address his economic analysis, had no reference to classes or revolution, and was instead closer to the socialism of Ferdinand Lassalle.[3] Only later, when Bismarck enacted the anti-socialist laws of 1878-1890, was there a period of radicalization that made the German Socialists truly receptive to Marxism.[4] The year the anti-socialist laws were repealed, the Socialist Labor Party of Germany changed its name to the current SPD and, in 1891, the congress of Erfurt confirmed the increasingly Marxist and revolutionist direction that the party was taking at the time.

Before Bernstein began his polemical essays in the 90s,[5] he was already a notable member within the party: he was one of the executors of Engel's literary estate and even wrote part of the Erfurt program.[6] In fact, prefiguring the coming split, he wrote the second half of the program that was directed to the practical measures of the SPD and was more reformist in nature: it demanded measures such as universal suffrage, proportional representation, graduated income tax, or prohibitions of child labor. In terms of political aims, it was close to the Gotha program. This contrasted with the more orthodox, theoretical first half which

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[2] David McLellan, *Marxism after Marx* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 23; and Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, pp. 2-3.

[3] David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 3rd edition 1995 [1973]), pp. 395-400. On the socialist movement in Germany before the Gotha program, cf. Roger Morgan, *The German Social Democrats and the First International 1864-1872* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

[4] McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, pp. 23-24; and Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, pp. 3-4.

[5] One of the most comprehensive bibliographical and intellectual accounts of Bernstein's life in English is Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (New York and London: Collier, 1962), pp. 19-84, but cf. pp. 143-146 and 298-299 for more in the line of Kolakowski's critique. A thorough analysis of the years preceding the Revisionist Controversy can be found in H. Kendall Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy: Kautsky, Bernstein, and the Meaning of Marxism, 1895-1898* (London: Routledge, 2015). On this subject, cf. also the introduction in Henry Tudor and J. M. Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate, 1896-1898* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1-37. Cf. also the parts on revisionism in G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought, volume III part 1. The Second International: 1889-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 249-296 and 297-322. Cf. also the chapter on revisionism in George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), pp. 278-300, where Lichtheim presents the geographical delimitations of the controversy and reinserts the debate in its wider philosophical context. Additionally, cf. also the sections on Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Bernstein in Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, pp. 31-60, 61-97, 99-114, respectively; as well as McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, pp. 21-44. Cf. also F. R. Hansen, *The Breakdown of Capitalism: A History of the Idea in Western Marxism, 1883-1983* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[6] He was Engel's executor together with Bebel. Tudor, "Principal Events in Bernstein's life," in Bernstein, *The Preconditions*, xxxvii.

painted a bleak picture of the evolution of capitalism: growing exploitation and misery, economic crises of increasing severity, an ever more bitter class struggle between proletariat and bourgeois, with the only solution being the socialization of the means of production.[7] Even though the SPD already had strong reformist tendencies in the trade unions and the southern wing of the party,[8] Bernstein would be the first to open a general and systematized attack on the theoretical orthodoxy of the SPD and give life to what would come to be called the Revisionist Controversy.

The controversy began, arguably,[9] with Bernstein's first polemical articles in 1896 and would culminate in the publication of *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy* in 1899.[10] That same year, Rosa Luxemburg published a devastating critique of Bernstein's position, *Reform or Revolution*, which would ultimately lead to the apparent defeat of the reformist wing by the anti-reformist resolutions passed in the congresses of 1899, 1901, and 1903.[11] This succession of defeats, however, was only apparent: Bernstein would go on to become one of the main leaders of the SPD's reformist wing for many years.[12] He was a central component in a schism between radical Marxism and its more moderate Social-Democratic counterpart which would echo throughout the twentieth century.[13]

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[7] Karl Kautsky wrote the first theoretical part of the Erfurt program. McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, pp. 24; and Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, pp. 4-6.

[8] Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, pp. 7-16. On Georg Vollmar and the southern wing, Cole, *The Second International*, pp. 262-263, pp. 273-275.

[9] There is no clear date as to where the controversy begins. It could also have been in 1895 with an article on the 1849 revolution in France, McLellan, *Marxism After Marx*, p. 24, or with some un-socialist remarks he made on colonial policy in Eduard Bernstein, "German Social Democracy and the Turkish Troubles," in Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy*, p. 53.

[10] *Die voraussetzungen des Sozialismus Und Die Aufgaben Der Sozialdemokratie* is often translated as *The Presuppositions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy*. There was an English translation in 1909 under the title *Evolutionary Socialism* but, as Tudor notes, substantial parts of the work were not translated: Tudor, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, p. xi. We therefore rely on Tudor and on the French translation: *Socialisme théorique et socialdémocratie pratique* (Paris: P.-V. Stock, 1900 [1899]). Cf. the very helpful translations of articles and parts of correspondences in Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy*.

[11] Helen Scott, "Introduction to Reform or Revolution," in Helen Scott (ed.), *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and The Mass Strike* (Chicago: Haymarket books, 2008), pp. 37-40. See also Kautsky's answer *Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm*. French translation: Karl Kautsky, *Le marxisme et son critique Bernstein* (Paris: Stock Editeur, 1900 [1899]).

[12] Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, pp. 23-24. Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, p. 255.

[13] On this, see the argument of Schorske, *German Social Democracy*.

His arguments, especially in his major work, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, are often analyzed with reference to his economic, political, social, or philosophical critiques to orthodox Marxism.[14] Some readings focus, for instance, on the meaning of his Revisionism and its relationship to political reformism.[15] Or that he materialized the reformist aspirations of the SPD by showing that a seizure of power by the workers was not desirable.[16] Or, still others note that he successfully reintroduced an ethical element within Marxism.[17] Nevertheless, a less studied aspect of his thought is Bernstein's critique of the doctrinaire's rhetoric. This too is a pervasive theme in Bernstein's writings, both in the *Preconditions* and in his initial articles before this work, and it will be the focus of this chapter.

In the preface and conclusion of the *Preconditions*, as well as several parts of his initial polemics, he points to problems that ultimately have to do with the metanarrative of Marxism. As we will see shortly, his critique of the use of the Marxist metanarrative is intimately linked to our own conception of metanarrative. In this chapter, we will therefore try to enlighten our own conception of radicalism while we explore some aspects of Bernstein's critique to the rhetoric of the SPD that have not been emphasized by other scholars in the field.

2. Bernstein's opening salvo: The "mindless slogans" of orthodoxy

One of the articles of 1896 that arguably opens Bernstein's polemic against the orthodoxy of the SPD, "General Observations on Utopianism and Eclecticism," begins with a critique to the metanarrative of Marxism.[18] In that article, part of a series provocatively called "Problems of Socialism," he initially argues

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[14] For instance, McLellan, Marxism After Marx, pp. 26-37 or Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, pp. 110-254.

[15] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 29-36.

[16] Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, pp. 16-17, p. 19.

[17] Gay insists on the centrality of this point in *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, pp. 161-165.

[18] Eduard Bernstein, "General Observations on Utopianism and Eclecticism," Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy*, p. 74. There was an initial exchange on colonial policy with Belfort Bax where one could already see a glimpse of some of Bernstein's critiques. Cf. the articles in Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy*, pp.

that the Social Democratic movement has succeeded in overcoming one form of utopianism: the utopianism that thought that one could draw a precise blueprint of how mankind would achieve perfect happiness on earth.[19] However, despite its recent electoral successes, the movement has another form of utopianism – one of the "opposite extreme of the old sort" – that has yet to be overcome: the assumption that a leap from capitalism to socialism will occur suddenly, quickly and almost overnight, and so there is no need to study the capitalist system in which we presently find ourselves. This other utopianism believes that

> Everything that takes place in the [capitalist society] is mere patchwork, palliative and "capitalist"; but socialist society will sort everything out, if not overnight, then within a very short time. Miracles are not believed, just assumed. A heavy line is drawn between capitalist society on the one side and socialist society on the other. No attempt is made at systematic work in the former. Here, we live from hand to mouth and allow ourselves to be carried along by events. Any theoretical difficulties can be overcome by reference to economic development and to a very one-sided notion of the class struggle.[20]

Since Bernstein does not wish to reject socialism entirely, he quickly adds that these notions of economic development and of class struggle are certainly of great importance. However, he also retorts that we cannot use these ideas and then leave them undefined. If socialism is to be truly scientific and not merely utopian, he says, it must begin by clarifying and investigate these driving forces. He continues his critique:

> Deferring all solutions until the "decisive victory of socialism," as the current phrase has it, is no less utopian for being embellished with slogans from the arsenal of the writings of Marx and Engels. The most scientific of theories can lead to utopianism, if its conclusions are interpreted dogmatically.

We can here already see that one of Bernstein's foremost problems, right from the start of his polemical essays, is the use of empty slogans derived from the writings of Marx and Engels paired with a dogmatic faith in the political story they laid out, i.e., the thoroughly nefarious character of capitalism, socialism as

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51-72. On Bax and his exchanges with Kautsky, cf. Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy*, pp. 235-258 and then Bax and his exchanges with Bernstein in pp. 279-286 and 392-402.

[19] Bernstein, "General Observations," p. 74.

[20] Bernstein, "General Observations," pp. 74-75.

its entirely benevolent antidote, and socialism as headed toward its inevitable victory. The "utopianism" he keeps referring to in this article is therefore not merely the lack of rigorous empirical and analytical analysis, but also the use of the metanarrative of Marxism and of its cues as an excuse to not have to look at the empirical facts. In other words, one of Bernstein's initial concerns in this polemic has to do with the galvanizing strength that these empty terms have over the Social-Democrats. This critique, however, is not merely "rhetorical" in the sense that it only concerns the slogans and the sloganeering tendencies of the socialists. It has to do *both* with these slogans and the connections they make with the story of Marxism.

There are two examples in this essay that nicely illustrate this problem of the relation between empty terms and their relation to the metanarrative of Marxism. After these initial critiques against the Social Democrats' "utopianism," he criticizes the "mindless slogans," as he calls them, of "state capitalism" and "municipal capitalism."[21] As the working class will grow in influence, he says, it will unavoidably have to discuss which private industries have harmful effects on society as a whole and, therefore, which ones it would be better to nationalize. Unfortunately, the empty slogans "state capitalism" and "municipal capitalism" prevent a serious discussion of this issue because whoever uses these terms sees nationalizations made under capitalism through the lens of the future socialist society: they assume that only industries owned by the worker – as it will be in the future socialist state – can be truly be called socialist.

As we can see, we have here a deployment of the metanarrative of Marxism through a cue – "capitalism" – which has a surprising power: the very use of the word "capitalism" next to these terms write them off *as* capitalist and therefore outside of the field of discussion.[22] Bernstein criticizes this practice and says that "socialist" and "capitalist" should be defined in light of where the profits are distributed, not of some hypothetical future condition.

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[21] Bernstein only hints at this problem in his essay, but there was a more general problem with nationalizations and why they were called "state *capitalism*." Many nationalizations ended in the government simply reaping its profits and, therefore, they were seen as being appropriated by the bourgeois state and not in the benefit of the workers.

[22] Bernstein, "General Observations," p. 76.

The use of the word "capitalism" could only be justified with reference to the present form of distributing the profits of production and industrial enterprise, but to regard the form of *distribution* as the decisive criterion is anything but scientific socialism. (…) the term "state capitalism" conceals a markedly *utopian* train of thought, proceeding not from the laws of social development but from some sort of preconceived future state with its own individual form of distribution. (…) The trouble with all such catch-phrases based on secondary factors is that they pre-empt any rational distinction and militate against any systematic understanding and treatment of things.[23]

Bernstein criticizes the term "capitalism" for being empty in these discussions, but we can see in the end that the very ascription of "capitalist" to any other term somehow *transfers the nefarious nature of the former to the latter*, preventing even its discussion. As we will see, this is a worry that will still echo in the *Preconditions*.

In this first article, we can already see the way Bernstein opens his critiques by pointing out some of the excesses of the use of the Marxist narrative and its slogans, i.e. the stringent division between capitalism and socialism that prevents the analysis of anything that seems remotely capitalist, or the empty use of notions such as class struggle or "the future victory of socialism" as justifications for this attitude. Bernstein develops some of these initial critiques further in the fifth article of his "Problems of Socialism" series.[24] In this article, he asks how exactly the socialist communities will be managed and how socio-political accountability will be enforced – in other words, what the form of the political and civil institutions will be under socialism.

Initially, Bernstein begins his critique in a manner similar to before: he writes that the German Social-Democratic movement has a tendency to take Engels' expression concerning the "withering away" of the state too literally. Since they believe that the victory of socialism means that the state will "wither away,"

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[23] Bernstein, "General Observations," pp. 76-77.
[24] Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance of Space and Number," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 83-97. The three other articles are of a more economic character, although they too try to undermine some of Marxism's doctrinarism and, in specific, its idea that public and private property are opposed: Tudor and Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 14-15.

the German socialists insist in a doctrinaire manner that the state can *never* be socialist, only capitalistic or feudal. When the revolution will occur, there will not be a socialist state but socialist *society*: "With the victory of socialism the state ceases to exist, and socialist *society* begins."[25] To this, Bernstein retorts: "the state" is here defined, from the onset, as an entity that derives its authority from another source than the will of the nation (from the bourgeoisie). Given this definition, then it can never be seen as democratic and socialistic and, therefore, there will always be resistance to entrust the state with socialist tasks. We can see how Bernstein is touching again on the problem of definitions addressed earlier. The social-democrats are making the mistake of defining their terms faithfully at the light of Marxism and its political story. They define "the state" in a much too narrow manner and not simply as an entity that embraces a whole nation.[26]

Bernstein admits that we could simply abandon the word "state" altogether, but he goes on to show how this would not solve the problem. The removal of the term "state" only creates more confusion by increasing the indiscriminate use of "society." Society, he says, simply means the forms that a community takes, e.g. feudal or bourgeois society. We would be able to talk about a "socialist society" if we had more concrete details about this "socialist society." Unfortunately, socialists often speak of all the good things that this hypothetical socialist society will do, but without knowing the precise form that such society will take. This leads them to use the term "society" widely but in a way that is meaningless. Bernstein goes so far as to attribute to this vacuous notion of "society" an array of divine and godly attributes:

> "Society" is, quite simply, an indeterminate concept (…). And yet this metaphysical entity, this infinite unit, is credited with achievements of an equally infinite magnitude. It brings into being and guarantees the most complete harmony and the most wonderful solidarity imaginable. In "society," exploitation and oppression have ceased, and both production and exchange are regulated to perfection.[27]

Indeed, Bernstein is so baffled with the way socialists use the term "society" that he then proceeds to compare it to the ontological argument for the existence of God. Since the "socialist society" will be purged

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[25] Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, p. 84.
[26] Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance," pp. 84-85.
[27] Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance," p. 85.

of all evils, it will also be purged of any obligation to create civil institutions and the means for their implementation. These claims about the "socialist society"

> rest on a purely metaphysical argument and have no greater intrinsic validity than the much-despised ontological proof of the existence of God: we can only conceive of God as perfect, perfection entails existence, therefore God exists. Similarly: the society we seek to create will be purged of all the evils of present society; these evils, or their consequences, include legal and other obligations together with the apparatus for their implementation; therefore the society we seek to create will not have such an apparatus.[28]

As we can see, when Bernstein criticizes the rhetoric of the socialists, he is not making a purely semantic critique of the lack of definition of the terms they use. He notices *both* this lack of definitions *and* the fact that the words are used for nothing but to call up some aspect of Marxism's metanarrative.

Even more problematically, these invocations of the Marxist narrative seem to create something out of nothing. By showing the way in which these terms are used in an empty manner, he isolates a crucial aspect of our explanation of metanarratives: he points out that these terms are not only concepts or definitions, but that they have a supplementary narrative connection that considerably enlightens our study of radicalism. Indeed, by problematizing their narrative aspect, Bernstein notices that, apart from their definitions, these terms create a galvanizing attitude and reinforce belief in the metanarrative of Marxism. They create assent out of nothing inherent to the conversation in which they are employed or, better said, they create assent out of the participants' mere belief in the general story of Marxism.

It could be said that Bernstein does not speak of "narratives" *per se,* but if we look closely we can see that he is notably awkward about what exactly he should call this galvanizing power of Marxism and its story, sometimes attributing it to ideology,[29] sometimes to tradition.[30] And in the end, even though Bernstein will

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[28] Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance," p. 85.
[29] To be sure, Marx vehemently denied that his theory was an ideology. He used the term to talk about the rationalizations that the ruling class used to oppress the workers.
[30] His attribution to "ideology" is especially clear in his article "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 229-243. There he tries to argue that the socialists' view of politics and society is much more influenced by ideology than they think. The problem is that their lack of self-

insist that there is nothing wrong with this story in itself – it is in fact essential for the socialist movement – he argues that its reinforcement at the expense of pragmatic political considerations undermines the very aim of the socialists, i.e., the emancipation of the working class.

3. Bernstein's skepticism and Parvus' riposte

We can see what kind of worries Bernstein had in mind when he begins his polemics in these first articles. We can especially see his worries with the use of the Marxist metanarrative and its cues, which are themes to which he will come back to in the *Preconditions*. Still, this first series about the "Problems of Socialism" did not yet generate much reaction.[31] Even though a second "Problems of Socialism" series, published not long after the first, began to raise the temperature of the debate,[32] it would be a two-part article published in 1898, "The Struggle of Social Democracy and the Social Revolution," that would bring in a wave of responses.[33]

In this article Bernstein makes clear again that his critique of Marxism's metanarrative and the excesses of its political slogans. In the first part of the article, headed "Polemical Aspects," he focuses on the critiques that Belfort Bax made against his views on colonial policy.[34] In the second part, which contains the main thrust of his critique against Social Democracy, he focuses on the point that would occupy him centrally in

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awareness leads them to exclusively see the future through their unconscious ideology (see for instance p. 243). The problem of "tradition" is clearer in the conclusion of *Preconditions* (see for instance p. 206).

[31] The four other articles of the series were of a more economic character, Tudor and Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 14-15.

[32] Between the first series on the "Problems of Socialism" and this article, Bernstein was involved in other polemics that did not directly involve these articles. Cf. Tudor and Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, p. 337, n62. He then opened the second series with a critique to a resolution that demanded children's compulsory schooling, made a provocative review that seemed critical of protests and public demonstrations, and then a two-parts article on trade unions. Cf. Tudor and Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 17-18 and the articles in pp. 99-134.

[33] Tudor and Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 17-19. See also Parvus' articles in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 174-191, and Bernstein's "A Statement" in pp. 191-194.

[34] This was already their second round of exchanges, cf. footnote 14.

The Preconditions of Socialism: the catastrophist theory, prevalent among Social Democrats, that a general crisis of capitalism is about to occur. Bernstein writes,

> According to this notion, a trade crisis of immense severity and magnitude will, sooner or later, occur. It will cause enough misery to arouse passionate resentment against the capitalist economic system and so completely convince the masses that the given forces of production cannot be harnessed for the public good that the movement against this system will gather irresistible momentum and, under its pressure, the system itself will suffer an irretrievable collapse. In other words, the inevitable major economic crisis will expand into a comprehensive social crisis. The outcome of this will be the political rule of the proletariat, as the only consciously revolutionary class, and, under the rule of this class, the complete transformation of society along socialist lines.[35]

We can already see, in a rough form, the general critique Bernstein will make of the metanarrative of Marxism in the *Preconditions*. More specifically, an important part of his argument will consist in pulling apart the difference cues of the story of Marxism. He does it here when he argues that the catastrophist theory relies on several assumptions, such as the growing concentration of industries, that he analyzes here.

On the one hand, he argues that a "general crisis" is not underway. With the help of tables and numbers describing the industries of Prussia, he goes on to show that, if there is indeed a growth of large and very large industries at all levels of economic life, medium size ones seems to hold and show no prospect of a great economic upheaval.[36] He further conjectures that, given how different the economic structure is now from what it was at the time Marx and Engels wrote (the evolution of the credit system, the growth of capital, technological changes), it seems unlikely that general economic crises of the kind they described will occur in the future.[37] Without this "general crisis," it is much more unlikely that the story of Marxism will develop into the much waited "revolution."

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[35] Bernstein, "The Struggle of Social Democracy and the Social Revolution: 2. The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 159-160.
[36] Bernstein, "The Theory of Collapse," pp. 162-163 and p. 164.
[37] Bernstein, "The Theory of Collapse," pp. 164-166.

On the other hand, even if we assumed that this crisis will indeed occur and that Social Democracy will be brought to power, it is clear that, given the growing diversity of branches of industries that the Prussian numbers show, the Social Democrats would not be able to manage to abolish capitalism or survive without it. If this "general crisis" is of such magnitude that it collapses capitalism altogether, it is not clear how the Socialists would manage this complex array of industries. "Socialism" would not be such a blissful state of things after all.

In the end, the catastrophe that the Social Democrats seek would result in a tremendous defeat for the Social Democratic movement: "This contradiction would irrevocably destroy Social Democracy; the outcome could only be a colossal defeat."[38] Bernstein then asks, do these observations mean that socialism is postponed indefinitely? Of course not. Even though it would be indeed utopian to think that full-blown socialism could emerge in a short amount of time, he says, there is a great deal of socialism to be done (such as specific nationalizations, the implementation of democratic self-government at all political levels, or the extension of social rights). It is at this moment that one of the most memorable mantras of the Revisionist debate emerges, and in it Bernstein puts forward a direct modification of the metanarrative of Marxism: "I frankly admit that I have extraordinarily little feeling for, or interest in, what is usually termed 'the final goal of socialism.' This goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me, the movement is everything."[39]

The phrase "the goal is nothing, the movement is everything" has always been considered an important moment of the Revisionist Controversy by its participants and in posterity. It has the advantage of depicting Bernstein's position in one stroke. It sets his modification of the story of Marxism against the original, doctrinaire story he criticizes: the final moment of the revolution is nothing, and what truly matters is the movement toward socialism. In other words, only a part of the story of Marxism truly matters. It also beautifully encapsulates his gradualism and piecemeal politics in opposition to his opponents' revolutionism and blueprint politics. It has an aesthetic effect that plays with "everything" and "nothing"

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[38] Bernstein, "The Theory of Collapse," p. 167.
[39] Bernstein, "The Theory of Collapse," pp. 168-169.

to create a sharp distinction between Bernstein's position and his adversaries'. It is therefore not surprising that so many arguments in the Revisionist debates as a whole and direct reactions to the 1898 essay in particular focus on that expression.

It has also become traditional in the literature on Bernstein to remind the reader that this expression has been considerably abused. Indeed, even though these sounding phrases have the advantage of being easy shortcuts that depict the general positions of each side,[40] they are usually inaccurate. Bernstein would often repeat that he did not mean to say that the goal of socialism was literally nothing to him but that the details of what his interlocutors usually understood by "final goal" (i.e., the creation of socialism in a short amount of time) were not important to him.[41] Even though he was always clear about his desire merely to modify but not reject Marxism, this sentence made it appear that he rejected a key aspect of Marxism: the arrival at a fully socialist society. However, Bernstein did believe in the rise to power of the working class, only in an indeterminate future that should not direct the tactical decisions of the day.

Nevertheless, this first customary moment of caution where one distinguishes Bernstein's actual position from his simplifying reformist slogan should not divert us from what essentially happened at that moment. Bernstein really *was* generating a different political story that only took "half," as it were, of the metanarrative of Marxism. But what does it mean to only take half of the story? That Bernstein recommends only some part of the metanarrative of Marxism? Of course not. *What it crucially means is that he created a position where the cues of the metanarrative of Marxism will be seen with a lot more suspicion*. Indeed, Bernstein and the Revisionists do not necessarily abandon Marxism's phraseology, its method, or its historical and political worldview. *But, when they will be faced with the cues of Marxism, they will create*

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[40] This has to do with the fact that these memorable one-liners perfectly encapsulate a given *position* within a series of alternative philosophical (and, in this case, political) positions within a given period. Unfortunately, even though these sentences powerfully describe the position of an author among other alternatives, they usually do so at the cost of vast simplifications and misunderstandings. Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" also comes to mind. It is a sentence that perfectly encapsulated a form of extreme skepticism about the existence of the world that Derrida seemed to represent – but which, of course, he did not. For more on philosophical positions, cf. the second chapter of Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 40-54.

[41] Bernstein, "A Statement," pp. 192-193 and Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, p. 5 and especially pp. 190-193.

considerably more distance between these cues and the metanarrative they are supposed to represent.
Moreover, though Bernstein thought he was simply tracing the line between one group which gave more priority to reformism and another which was more inclined toward revolution,[42] he was actually creating a deeper split between a group that would fully adhere to the cues and to the metanarrative of Marxism *and another that existed in virtue of being permanently skeptical of it.*[43]

Notice that Bernstein is not attacking Marxism and its ideas *per se*; instead, he shows the excessive doctrinairism of its members, its wrongheaded tactical direction, or the negative consequences that its catastrophist theory can create on the party and the workers. Faithful to his intentions, he is less criticizing Marxism in itself than showing that it should go at half-speed. In this way, he ended up leaving the path open to have one movement that lives in accordance with the narrative of Marxism and another that continues by being skeptical of it. The Revisionism that Bernstein generated, in the end, was not only a political position with a specific policy preference, nor was it a position that simply adopted part of the story of Marxism. It was a political position that existed in this very movement of distance from and skepticism of the full-blown story of Marxism.

His opponents would not fail to see the problematic aspect of this issue. Indeed, there is something dangerously sophisticated behind this attitude of skepticism. From the point of view of the orthodox Marxist, it would be less dangerous to simply declare one's opposition to the metanarrative of Marxism than to take Bernstein's more problematic position, i.e. claiming to agree with that metanarrative while presenting a seemingly attractive and erudite attitude that undermines it from within.[44] Beyond the specific

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[42] This however was not a "reform versus revolution" issue, as both Bernstein and his opponents recognized – even he recognized that the workers could be forced to resort to extreme measures if the German authorities drive them to this point, see Bernstein, "Critical Interlude," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, p. 221.

[43] Gay quotes literature that touches on this aspect, *The Dilemma of Democratic* Socialism, p. 162, cf. also Lichtheim, *Marxism*, pp. 293-294.

[44] Kautsky perceptively notices this problematic general attitude of skepticism in his rebuttal of the *Preconditions*. One of the great issues with Bernstein's critique, he says, is that he points out problems that would normally take several volumes to answer, but then offers relatively little in terms of positive solutions. In fact, he not only says relatively little but he is considerably vague. This led the *Preconditions* to create an upheaval with very different answers over what Bernstein exactly meant, all the while these heterogenous answers remain seemingly united in this attitude of critique. Kautsky, *Le marxisme*, pp. 8-11.

economic or sociological critiques that Bernstein made, this skeptical attitude was seen by Bernstein's opponents as a problem that required its own answer.

One of the first replies to Bernstein's essay touched on this very problem. Its author, Alexander Helphand-Parvus, wrote not one but several ripostes (totaling seventeen essays in two months!)[45] In these essays, he spends much time arguing that Bernstein did not see the whole picture – Parvus tried to show, among other things, that there was indeed a concentration of industries.[46] The point that hit home, however, was his denunciation that Bernstein failed to understand the tendencies underlying capitalist development and that this, in turn, led him to give a superficial reading of these statistics. Deep down, Parvus was saying that a lack of knowledge of the story of Marxism must lead to a partial and erroneous knowledge of society and of capitalism. For instance, Parvus says that Bernstein fell in the erroneous belief that the concentration of industries is supposed to occur uniformly in all industries in a straightforward direction.[47] No wonder that he sees any deviation away from this tendency as a confirmation of his skepticism. Bernstein's seemingly sober and scientific attitude, Parvus argued, is actually the most unscientific: data is a valuable material, but it can only be understood and assembled coherently if we are equipped with a good knowledge of the laws of society and of capitalism.[48] Without being equipped with the story of Marxism, Bernstein is interpreting erroneously these statistics and he fails to see what they really mean when seen from the point of view of the evolution of capitalism.

Amidst the reactions to his article, Bernstein published a statement to clarify what he meant in his infamous line contrasting the goal and the movement. For Parvus, this article seemed to confirm the point that he was already making: with his scholastic distinctions about "the goal" and "the movement," Bernstein clearly lost sight of the party's practical and political goal and of the laws of the evolution of capitalism. In short,

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[45] Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 21-22.

[46] Cf. the selection of Parvus' articles in the sixth chapter of Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 174-204.

[47] Parvus, "1. The Concentration of Industry," p. 176.

[48] Parvus, "2. Further Forays in to Occupational Statistics," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 179-180, and p. 181; and Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 21-22.

Parvus argued that Bernstein was so worried about these abstractions that he lost himself in the "misty realm of ideology."[49]

In the end, Parvus was not merely describing, with data and tables, the economic or sociological parts where it seemed that Bernstein was factually wrong. He was trying to answer Bernstein's skepticism about Marxism's metanarrative by showing that his arguments about the empty character of the terms "socialism" or "the final goal" were profoundly out of place. He was pointing out, as Santayana once did when writing about Hume, that

> There is a kind of courtesy in scepticism. It would be an offence against polite conventions to press our doubts too far and question the permanence of our estates, our neighbours' independent existence, or even the justification of a good bishop's faith and income. Against metaphysicians, and even against bishops, sarcasm was not without its savour; but the line must be drawn somewhere by a gentleman and a man of the world.[50]

In the concrete world of man, philosophical skepticism can sound too abstract: when Parvus calls Bernstein back to reality, he is showing that Bernstein's is an *inappropriate skepticism* in the face of problems that are actually occurring. In effect, Bernstein wouldn't see the class struggle and the oppression of capitalism even if it hit him in the face. By insisting that capitalism and society were not developing in this way and by discussing supposedly empty terms such as "socialism," "final goal," and "movement," Bernstein seems excessively scholarly and *out of touch*. Parvus' critique reminds us of a remark Engels made about Bernstein a few years before these events, namely, that he looks like someone who "lost touch with the masses and

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[49] Parvus, "Bernstein's Statement," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, p. 194. What especially annoyed Bernstein with these remarks was that Parvus implied that he was a "formalist." In dialectical materialist terms, this means that his analysis was looking at "formal" features at the expanse of "content." In other words, Parvus was accusing Bernstein of being excessively obsessed with an ideological analysis at the expense of economic factors. Bernstein, "Critical Interlude," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, p. 222 and pp. 215-216. Tudor, "Introduction," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 20-21.

[50] George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. 93.

who, from without, from his writing-desk, discourses in doctrinaire fashion on questions of immediate practical moment."[51]

Bernstein felt especially attacked by Parvus' remark. In a subsequent rebuttal to his critics, he answered Parvus at length, beginning with the line that he had lost himself in the "misty realm of ideology."[52] To this he would answer that, quite the opposite, it was Parvus who was clearly unable to see how even the *Communist Manifesto* was declared by Marx and Engels themselves to be "partly out of date."[53] Even they approved of some measures that did not necessarily promote the revolution (e.g., factory legislation). Bernstein answers that, in the end, Parvus upholds stringently the story of Marxism while it is actually open to interpretation. He insists that his skepticism is not inappropriate because of the circumstances of the moment and because moderating statements from Marx and Engels clearly show that the story of Marxism does not have to be applied step by step. Bernstein stood firm in his skeptical distance.

In fact, he would expand this answer in another notable essay before *The Preconditions of Socialism*: "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism."[54] In it, he argues that the orthodox members of the SPD are so attached to the story of Marxism that they lose sense of what is real and what is not. He begins with an anecdote where he says that Honoré de Balzac would sometimes talk about his fictional characters as if they were real: "for him, the creatures of his imagination were "reality.""[55] This opening story is very reminiscent of the problems Bernstein has been having with the doctrinaires so far (remember what he said about the divine creative power that the very term "socialism" seemed to generate):

> If a man's mind is intensively preoccupied with something, even if it is purely imaginary and he is aware of
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> the fact, it increasingly takes on the characteristics of reality until finally he begins to lose his sense of the

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[51] Engels, "Engels to Karl Kautsky," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works vol. 50: Letters 1892-95* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010 [1893]), pp. 224-225. Tudor and Tudor, 'Introduction,' in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, p. 9.
[52] Cf. note 49.
[53] Bernstein, "Critical Interlude," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 215-216.
[54] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in Tudor and Tudor, *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 229-243.
[55] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological," p. 229.

difference between what exists only in his imagination and what is actually real. It may even be that he finds

reality becoming to some extent merely conceptual, while the imaginary acquires all the attributes of reality

in his thoughts and feelings. However, it is by no means only poets, novelists, and artists (…) in whom we

find a tendency to treat the imaginary as though it were real. No-one is completely free of it, and often those

who most fancy themselves above it are most liable to it.[56]

We can see where Bernstein is going: it is not that he is being unduly skeptic. Rather, it is his opponents that seem to mix up reality and their own ideas. To prove this point, he writes this article in which he explains in detail the role of ideas and ideology in the socialist movement. He explains, for instance, that the fact that Marx and Engel's socialism is "realistic" means that it has a realistic orientation (i.e., it talks about classes and interest rather than ideas) but not that it is entirely devoid of ideology. It is not the case, he says, that Marx and Engels had an entirely unbiased view and that they peered directly into reality.[57] As we can see, Bernstein still attacks the way the doctrinaires' belief in the metanarrative of Marxism seems to create reality out of thin air. He addresses the problem of defining the category of "the proletariat," and here too we can see the divine and creative power of this term and how it seems to create its own reality:

> The category of wage-labourers covers extreme variations in income and living conditions. One can, of
> course, abstract certain demands and interests that are common to workers of all grades, but this does not
> mean that the desire to have these demands and interests represented will be expressed with equal force and
> intensity throughout. The proletariat as the sum total of wage-labourers is a reality; the proletariat as a class
> acting with a common purpose and outlook is largely a figment of the imagination, even in Germany.[58]

Bernstein's argument is an effective rebuttal to the kind of critique used by Parvus. Though Parvus countered Bernstein's critique of the catastrophist theory by saying he was perhaps out of touch and unaware of the deeper tendencies of society and capitalism, Bernstein answers that, on the contrary, the socialist movement *holds so strongly to its received story about society and capitalism that it does not*

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[56] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological," p. 229.
[57] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological," pp. 234-235.
[58] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological," p. 241.

notice its very character as a story. Bernstein speaks of "ideas" and "ideology," but it is generally not the ideas or ideology *per se* that he finds shocking. What does seem problematic to him, since the beginning of these polemics, are these key empty terms that point to each part of Marxism's metanarrative: its catastrophism, its belief that society is homogenizing, and that a revolution is at hand.

In the end, Bernstein notices that the socialists' failure to see how Marxism is a metanarrative prevents them, on the one hand, from seeing the impact it has on their own perception of reality and, on the other hand, from looking at the ways in which the story is not occurring in all the details that it abstractly suggests, e.g., that it will take much more time for the workers to rise to power, or that capitalism is not homogenizing at a quick pace.

4. The philosophical foundations of the story of Marxism

The problem of how the Social Democrats' belief in the story of Marxism leads them to confuse ideology and reality is a point to which Bernstein returns in *The Preconditions of Socialism*. Before addressing this specific issue, we should remind that the *Preconditions* is more generally a work where Bernstein pulls apart each section of the metanarrative of Marxism, especially its catastrophist theory: first, *sociologically*, where he argues that the number of property owners and capitalists have actually increased and the middle class is not disappearing; second, *economically*, where he describes that the concentration of industries happens at very different paces and intensity, with no signs that of classes or enterprises disappearing; and third, *politically*, where he says that the bourgeoisie is actually giving way to the demands of the workers, not increasing its oppression.[59]

Peter Gay, who wrote one of the only biographies on Bernstein in the English language, fittingly quote a scribble that was found in Bernstein's papers and that can serve to summarize his position: "Peasants do

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[59] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, pp. 2-3.

not sink; middle class does not disappear; crises do not grow ever larger; misery and serfdom do not increase."[60] As we can see, the different parts of the metanarrative of Marxism are undermined step by step: the conditions for the general crisis predicted by Marxism are not occurring; economic crises are less drastic and general than they used to; society is not increasingly divided into two increasingly homogeneous and conflicting classes; and not only a revolution is clearly unlikely, but it would be undesirable anyway. As we can see, Bernstein ends up making a strong case for why the belief in the catastrophist theory is misguided and why the present conditions clearly show that the right direction for the socialist movement is not the seizure of power. Instead, Bernstein proposes to organize the working class, to keep pushing for reforms from within democracy, and to make the state more democratic.

From the point of this study, the part that interests us the most is when Bernstein deals with some *philosophical* issues of Marxism, especially with Hegelian dialectics and Marx's materialism. It might at first seem paradoxical to give a lot of attention to the philosophical parts of the *Preconditions* since they are routinely criticized by the secondary literature for being too superficial.[61] Bernstein's arguments are often seen as clumsy attempts at arguing that Marxism has philosophical elements that prevented its predictions from being falsified by new facts that contradict them.

But if we look at it from the point of view of our investigation and of the frustration that Bernstein has been having with Marxism's metanarrative, we can both cast a better light on these passages and on the nature of metanarratives. Even though we have seen the way Bernstein has been criticizing the power that the story of Marxism has over the Social Democrats, and we have even seen him trying to call their attention to the fact that they are not aware of their own ideological biases, he has however not yet offered an explanation

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[60] Quoted from Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, p. 250. The entire quote is even more fitting since it also says: "There *is* increase in insecurity, dependence, social distance, social character of production, functional superfluity of property owners." (This is Bernstein's emphasis.) Because of lack of space, we have unfortunately no time to address some of solutions that Bernstein proposes, such as socialist cooperatives.

[61] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, pp. 143-144; Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, pp. 104-105; McLellan, pp. 35-36; Lichtheim, *Marxism*, p. 290.

as to where this narrative power came from. We can see him sketch an explanation in these philosophical sections.

One of Bernstein's first philosophical attempts is when he analyses historical materialism.[62] He defines the historical materialist as someone that "believe that from any particular point in time all subsequent events are, through the totality of the given material and the power relations of its parts, determined beforehand."[63] David McLellan, known for his biography on Marx, notes that this has "very little to do with Marx."[64] But, in the next line, we can already see what Bernstein seems to find problematic about – what he sees as – historical materialism: "The application of materialism to the interpretation of history therefore means asserting, from the outset, the necessity of all historical events and developments."[65]

We can here hear echoes of the issues that Bernstein has had so far: the Social Democrats, he says, are convinced that the story of Marxism is already laid out; this then leads them to define terms such as "socialism" and "capitalism" at the light of the development of that story. In this section, he tries to counter this "historical predetermination" by insisting we should be able to correct our theories at the light of new historical developments and that we should not give an excessive weight to material causes.

In a second philosophical part on Hegelian dialectics, Bernstein is even clearer about the philosophical foundations of this belief in the story of Marxism.[66] This is not clear at first because he is summary to the extreme: he explains in one paragraph (!) that Hegelian dialectic is a method that is opposed to a metaphysical view which sees concepts in isolation. Dialectics, he says, grasps concepts through the way they self-develop in opposition to an antagonistic pole.[67] To be sure, Bernstein is here referring to Engel's

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[62] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, pp. 12-22.
[63] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 13.
[64] McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, p. 35. Gay calls this part "badly phrased," *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, p. 149.
[65] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 13.
[66] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, pp. 29-36.
[67] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 30.

influent description of dialectics, but this is still very little.[68] He essentially seems to understand dialectics as a kind of purely conceptual exercise detached from an investigation of the empirical facts. He finds this problematic:

> However things may stand in reality, as soon as we leave the solid ground of empirically verifiable facts and think beyond them, we enter the world of derived concepts, and if we then follow the laws of dialectics, as laid down by Hegel, we will, before we know it, find ourselves once again enmeshed in 'the self-development of the concept.'

At first, it looks like Bernstein is only saying that Hegelian dialectics is an excuse for the doctrinaires not to look at reality. Nevertheless, Gay points out that "It seems, however, that Bernstein charged Marx with Hegel's sin, since Marx certainly never supported the 'self-development of the idea.'"[69] Indeed, Marx in fact stood Hegel's dialectics "on its head": instead of seeing history as the reflection of the development of ideas, he postulated that ideas themselves were shaped by the developments in the material world.[70]

Should we attribute this mistake solely to Bernstein's superficial and clumsy view of dialectics? Given what he said earlier in his polemics, we can see that there is more, i.e. Bernstein means a little more than the "*self-development* of the *idea*." We saw earlier that he criticized the fact that the doctrinaires seemed to have their minds made up over what constituted a "proletarian" or what "socialism" was: the story of Marxism seems to define, in advance, what these concepts are supposed to contain. If, as Bernstein says somewhat superficially, dialectics is supposed to define its concepts in light of their antagonism (for instance, the "proletarian" is defined in advance due to its revolutionary antagonism with the "bourgeois"), then it becomes clearer what exactly is Bernstein's reproach of dialectics: dialectics seems to unfold a story

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[68] Engels' popular rendition of dialectics was first described in the *Anti-Dühring*, but it became famous when Engels republished several chapters in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. This work quickly became one of the introductions to Marxism after *The Communist Manifesto*. Cf. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works vol. 24: 1874-1883* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989 [1880]), pp. 299-300.

[69] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, p. 145, note 8, and 146, note 11.

[70] Karl Marx, "Afterword to the Second German Edition," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works vol. 35: Capital vol. I* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996 [1887]), p. 19.

that is already decided, from the onset, within the starting speculations and the limited historical context of the thinker. He points out this problem in the following passage:

> (…) as soon as developments are deductively anticipated on the basis of these principles, the danger of arbitrary construction begins. The more complex the object whose development is in question, the greater this danger becomes. When we are dealing with a fairly simple object, experience and reasoned judgment usually ensure that analogies such as 'the negation of the negation' do not mislead us into inherently improbable deductions about its potential transformations. But the more complex an object is (…) the less such principles can tell us about its development because all moderation of judgment is lost from view in proportion that deductions are based upon them.

Hegelian dialectics is unproblematic with simple objects, but not with objects with complex developments that can more easily mislead the thinker who tries to understand their future development in advance.

> If the original scheme of development constructed by Hegel was to be maintained, then either reality would have to be reinterpreted or all real proportion would have to be ignored in measuring the road to the desired goal. Hence the contradiction: painstaking precision befitting the busy industry of genius in investigating the economic structure of society goes hand in hand with an almost incredible neglect of the most palpable facts; the very same theory that takes the determining influence of economics on power as its starting point concludes with a truly miraculous belief in the creative power of force; and the theoretical elevation of socialism into a science is so frequently 'transformed' into the subordination of any claim to scientific status to a preconceived tendency.[71]

Perhaps Bernstein's philosophical dabs were insufficient and superficial, but we can here see, thanks to the context provided by his earlier polemics, what he meant by it: he sees in Hegel's dialectics a good way to determine, in advance, how the story of Marxism will play itself out. In this way, concepts such as "socialism" or "society" seem to already have been defined in advance. This, he says, was the problem that had plagued Marx and Engels and led them to extrapolate an economic and social evolution on the basis of

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[71] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, pp. 34-35.

developments that were hardly even in their infancy and, especially, to underestimate the time necessary for that evolution to occur.[72]

As we can see, a strong intuition behind Bernstein's philosophical critiques is the homology he sees between Hegel's idea that a concept is defined by its antagonistic self-development and Marx and Engels' view that the material trends of their day could also be understood in light of their (potential) future development.[73] Shortly after this passage on Hegel's dialectics, Bernstein comes back to precisely the problem we saw earlier with terms such as "society" or "capitalism," only this time with the empty term "proletarian."

> (…) it is surely wholly unscientific to determine the standpoint of a politician or a theorist simply by reference to the view he takes of the speed at which the course of social development proceeds. The identification of the concept 'proletarian' with the idea of direct and immediate resolution of antagonisms amounts to a very impoverished interpretation of this concept. (…) In a scientific doctrine there ought to be at least some rational criterion for drawing the line between the visionary dreamer at one end and the petty bourgeois at the other.[74]

A "proletarian" is defined as someone who believes in the coming of the revolution. Bernstein time and again comes back to his problem of concepts that are defined solely by the story of Marxism.

Bernstein does not stop his exploration of the causes of the attachment to the story of Marxism to these philosophical considerations. In his conclusion of the *Preconditions*, he urges one last time that the Social Democrats should not let their revolutionary enthusiasm dictate the direction of the party, and he structures his plea around this problem of the foundations of the story of Marxism. So far, Bernstein addressed the ideological or philosophical elements at the roots of this issue but, this time, he talks about tradition. Tradition, he says, is a powerful factor in uniting groups that are not strongly bound by continuous interests or by external pressures – he gives the example of parties, but also of literary and artistic movements.[75] Unfortunately, people are generally not prepared to acknowledge how much the circumstances have

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[72] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, p. 32.
[73] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 46.
[74] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 35.
[75] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 189.

changed and how their own traditions need to change as well. Instead, they prefer to put their traditions, as much as possible, in tune with "traditional slogans."[76] Bernstein, of course, is talking about the obsession of the orthodox Social Democrats with "the goal" of socialism. This chapter, after all, is fittingly titled "Final goal and movement," but has the strange subtitle "Kant against cant." What is this "cant"? "Cants," says Bernstein, are precisely these traditional slogans that are used to maintain the power of tradition alive. It is an English sixteen century term that describes the saintly songs of the Puritans.

> (…) it denotes an unreal manner of speech, either thoughtlessly repetitive or used with the consciousness of its untruth to attain any kind of object, whether it be a matter of religion or politics, dead theory or living reality. (…) Every nation, every class, and every group united by doctrine or interest has its own cant. In part, it has become so much a matter of mere form and convention that no one is any longer deceived by its emptiness, and to mount a campaign against it is to take a sledgehammer to crack a nut. This, however, does not apply to cant that appears in the guise of science, or to cant that has become a political catchword.

A "cant" is, therefore, not a problem in itself, but it becomes problematic when it is held dogmatically and loses sight of the evolution of reality. The notion of "science" advanced by the orthodox Marxists, he says, is a good case of science turned into cant: the pauperism of the workers, for instance, is maintained against all facts and as an immutable axiom that cannot be revised. In order to prevent this fossilization, Bernstein calls for the kind of critical spirit that Kant had: the workers' movement needs a Kant that will fight the comfortable refuge of Hegelian dialectic.

> Such a mind, which laid bare with convincing clarity what is of value and destined to survive in the works of our great champions, and what must and can perish, would also make possible a more impartial judgment on those works which, while not starting from the premises which strike us as being decisive today, are nevertheless devoted to the ends for which Social Democracy is fighting.[77]

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[76] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 190.
[77] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 209.

Bernstein's antidote against the power of ideology, tradition, and cant is to come back to Kant, not in the literal sense that we should come back to his ideas, but to his critical spirit.[78] He maintains his skeptical distance to the end and truly saw himself as a "Kant" against the "cant" of the doctrinaires. What is more, he even shows how his skepticism is essential to keep the very story of Marxism alive.

We saw earlier how Bernstein's skepticism seemed unwarranted and out of touch to his opponents and how he rejected that accusation and argued that, on the contrary, it was his opponents who could not see their own ideological bias. What he says, in the end, is that the very Social Democratic movement depends on having a side that is more doctrinaire and "cantian," and another that is more critical and "Kantian." For Bernstein, the labor movement will win more battles through a concerted effort between two sides: one that pushes its cant and its principles to the end, and another that constantly reminds the doctrinaires that their principles do not necessarily coincide with what is real. But one side cannot win over the other.

5. Lukács' reconstruction of the story of Marxism

A decade after the *Preconditions*, George Sorel would write that what shocked the German Social Democrats the most was that Bernstein shattered the sublimity that the catastrophist theory inspired in them. His critique meant that now the socialists had to practice the earthly and small politics of compromise and negotiations: "With this new politics, no more heroic temperaments, no more sublime, no more convictions!"[79] What rings true about this idea is that Bernstein's skepticism had attacked Marxism from an angle that went beyond his philosophical, economic, or political critiques – it undermined its very *faith*.[80] His totalizing critique generated a current within Marxism that was marked by a permanent skepticism toward its purest adherents and by a regard for the *facts* of economic, social, and political evolution.

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[78] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, p. 210.
[79] George Sorel, Réflexions sur la violence, p. 147 (the translation is my own).
[80] Gay, *The Dilemma*, pp. 257-261.

As we saw, this factualism was problematic for the story of Marxism since it pulled apart each act of its storyline: capitalism is not creating more misery; nor is it increasing the homogeneity within and between classes; nor are the prospects of a general crisis growing (rather, they are diminishing). This skepticism also had a pathos of superiority in the sense that it seemed to be an impartial and detached attitude that could stand over doctrinairism and subjective partisanships.

Nonetheless, some, like Rosa Luxemburg, came out of the Revisionist Controversy "not merely unshaken in their faith, but more determined than ever to salvage the revolutionary core of Marxism from the temporary accretions of political reformism."[81] One of Luxemburg's argument was that Bernstein's seductive eclecticism and pluralism of paradigms was not a more sober and impartial attitude that stood over other paradigms but, on the contrary, that it merely lapsed into the dominant paradigm of the day. In other words, this supposed attention to "facts" detached from a comprehensive theoretical outlook missed the deeper dynamics of capitalism and fell into the bourgeoisie's method of seeing things individually, i.e., without attention to the whole. Luxemburg writes,

> [Bernstein's] doctrine, composed of bits of all possible systems, seems upon first consideration to be completely free from prejudices. For Bernstein does not like talk of "party science," or to be more exact, of class science, any more than he likes to talk of class liberalism or class morality. He thinks he succeeds in expressing human, general, abstract science, abstract liberalism, abstract morality. But since the society of reality is made up of classes, which have diametrically opposed interests, aspirations, and conceptions, a general human science in social questions, an abstract liberalism, an abstract morality, are at present illusions, pure utopia. The science, the democracy, the morality, considered by Bernstein as general, human, are merely the dominant science, dominant democracy, and dominant morality, that is, bourgeois science, bourgeois democracy, bourgeois morality.[82]

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[81] Lichtheim, *Marxism*, p. 302.

[82] Helen Scott (ed.), *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and The Mass Strike* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), pp. 98-99.

From the point of view of Marxism's orthodoxy, this very pathos of factualism, impartiality, and skepticism toward the cues and metanarrative of Marxism was a problem that needed to be uprooted. Luxemburg tries to uproot it here by showing that, since society, in reality, is made up of classes, there is no such thing as "abstract science, abstract liberalism, abstract morality;" there is rather "bourgeois science, bourgeois democracy, bourgeois morality." Bernstein's attention to "facts" actually lapses into the bourgeois dominant paradigm.

Two decades after the *Preconditions*, Georg Lukács, marked by Luxemburg's critique, would address the problem of Bernstein's skepticism and lay the groundwork for a reconstruction of Marxism's metanarrative on a new basis in his groundbreaking *History and Class Consciousness* (1923).[83] He begins his first essay by noting that "among intellectuals it has gradually become fashionable to greet any profession of faith in Marxism with ironical disdain." Making a reference to the Revisionists' "impartiality," he also says that "it came to be thought increasingly 'unscientific' to make scholastic exegeses of old [Marxist] texts with a quasi-Biblical status, instead of fostering an 'impartial' study of the 'facts.'"[84]

One of the preliminary steps of this reconstruction is precisely the criticism of Bernstein's "superficial" dialectics.[85] That reading, as we saw, consisted in a much too brief reference to Engels' popular rendition of dialectics. In Engel's view, dialectics consists in a method that sees concepts "fluidly" in the vast whole of their connections and interactions. It is opposed to a rigid "metaphysical" method that sees concepts isolated from the whole: concepts are "fixed, rigid," and "given once and for all."[86] But, for Lukács this very opposition between a "fluid" and a "metaphysical" method misses the point of dialectics entirely. Indeed, he says, Marx understood that the philosophers have only interpreted the world but that the point is

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[83] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: The Merlin Press, 1971), Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukacs and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979). Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 102-111.

[84] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 1. As Jay points out, Lukács description of the situation of Marxism at the time was not exaggerated: Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, p. 102.

[85] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," p. 3. Even though he does not reference Bernstein at first, it becomes clear that this is also a criticism to Bernstein when he is referenced on p. 5.

[86] Engels, *Socialism*, p. 300. Cf. footnote 68.

to change it. The central point of dialectics, says Lukács, is not just to think but to change reality. By defining dialectics merely as a method that sees concepts in a "fluid" manner, we are guaranteed to remain in metaphysics: we remain in a purely contemplative attitude where the concepts change, but nothing happens in practice.[87]

> If this meaning of dialectical method is obscured, dialectics must inevitably begin to look like a superfluous additive, a mere ornament of Marxist 'sociology' or 'economics'. Even worse, it will appear as an obstacle to the 'sober', 'impartial' study of the 'facts', as an empty construct in whose name Marxism does violence to the facts. (…) This objection to dialectical method has been voiced most clearly and cogently by Bernstein, thanks in part to a 'freedom from bias' unclouded by any philosophical knowledge. However, the very real political and economic conclusions he deduces from this desire to liberate method from the 'dialectical snares' of Hegelianism, show clearly where this course leads.[88]

As we can see, Lukács argues that this was Bernstein's mistake all along: he saw dialectics as a kind of purely conceptual method. If one sees dialectics in this way, then it will not be long before it will be discarded as superfluous – one will, instead, study the "real" sciences of economics or sociology.

Lukács therefore tries, at once, to discard Bernstein's "merely contemplative" approach to knowledge, and to reestablish the unity of theory and practice that is at the heart of dialectics. To achieve this goal, he asks: isn't it strange that these "impartial facts" hailed by the Revisionists conform so well with the dominant capitalist system? This is because these seemingly given, self-standing "facts" actually find themselves in a specific capitalist historical period with a scientific division of labor of its own: it has separated disciplines (such as economics or law) that assess and produce these complexes of interconnected facts.[89] What, then, is the most scientific attitude: simply accepting the way in which these complexes of facts are built along

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[87] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," pp. 3-4.
[88] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," pp. 4-5.
[89] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," p. 6.

with their own methodologies, or adopt a critical attitude toward that very "exactitude" and look historically how these complexes come to be?[90]

Lukács' reconstruction of the story of Marxism therefore begins with a rebuttal of Bernstein's sophisticated skepticism. Lukács puts his finger on the error of the Revisionists: they look at "facts" in isolation. Once separated from a method that takes into account the *whole*, these complexes of "facts" appear quite "scientific" since they are made in the image of a capitalist system that promotes the division of labor that generates them. To pierce its veil and see these facts beyond their deceptive givenness, one must perceive this historical conditioning.[91] Only a view that connects these seemingly individual and isolated facts in their historical process and integrates them in a meaningful *totality* can hope to have knowledge of *real* facts.[92] As we can see, with this reasoning, Lukács is able to do two things at once: he not only restores Marxism as the most legitimate scientific undertaking, but he is able to undermine Bernstein's approach and even go as far as to say his is an illusory and bourgeois science.

With the problem of factualism out of the way, the path was now cleared for Lukács' reconstruction of the categories of the story of Marxism that Bernstein had pulled apart. In a sense, it has already begun since he shows that the commonsensical "facts" we take for granted and capitalism are intimately linked: capitalism is the dominant system that shrouds seemingly innocuous "facts" behind a veil of givenness. To pierce this veil, we must understand Lukács' distinction between two kinds of sciences: what "constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought," he says, is "the point of view of totality."[93] In a move that pushes back even further Bernstein's skepticism, Lukács insists that, while the naïve bourgeois science takes as its point of departure the individual, the producer, or some other part of whole, Marx opened the way for a new science precisely because he began from the standpoint of the *class*. This point of view, says Lukács, emerged historically because theory for the proletarian was not a mere conceptual matter, but a

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[90] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," p. 7.
[91] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," p. 7.
[92] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," p. 8, cf. also p. 152.
[93] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 27.

matter of life and death. For the proletarian, the knowledge of one's class, and therefore of the whole, was never a detached theoretical endeavor but the precondition for its own liberation.[94] We can see that it is here that, for Lukács, theory and practice are bound together in the historical evolution of the proletariat to free himself from his chains. According to Lukács, it is thanks to Marx that we know that "*only the class can actively penetrate the reality of society and transform it in its entirety*."[95]

This is an important moment. As we know, Bernstein was eager to show that the SPD should not let its direction be dictated by a hypothetical catastrophe that intensified the party's revolutionary zeal. Bernstein took time to dismantle the desirability of this revolution and to show that socialism could do perfectly well without it. It is at this moment of Lukács' reasoning that we see how the idea of the revolution is built back in. Indeed, he says, outside the point of view of class, there are only two other courses of action: either we merely accept the laws of society, or we adopt some ethical attitude. Lukács argues that both actually fail to change society because "the destruction of a totalising point of view disrupts *the unity of theory and practice,*"[96] and such unity is the condition to avoid a merely metaphysical thought. He now can argue that theory and practice are united in *actual* social change, which takes the form of the revolution. It was no exaggeration when, after criticizing Bernstein for seeing revolution as an isolated social act, Lukács affirmed that "The whole system of Marxism stands and falls with the principle that revolution is the product of a point of view in which the category of totality is dominant."[97]

In conclusion, we can see why *History and Class Consciousness* was a pivotal answer to Bernstein's skepticism – and, strangely enough, was one especially preoccupied with the most "superficial" aspect of his *Preconditions*. Indeed, despite his lack of knowledge of Hegel, Bernstein understood that Hegelian dialectics was the head from which the entire story of Marxism sprung fully developed: since concepts were

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[94] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," p. 20.
[95] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 39.
[96] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 39.
[97] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 29, but also p. 22: "For the ultimate goal is not a 'state of the future' awaiting the proletariat somewhere independent of the movement and the path leading up to it. (…) The ultimate goal is rather that *relation to the totality* (to the whole of society seen as a process), through which every aspect of the struggle acquires its revolutionary significance."

defined through their relationship to their opposites, their very definition depended on the development of an entire story in the first place. Lukács, instead of denying this charge, pressed it forward: he argued that dialectics is indeed based on the entire development of the story of Marxism. The point of view of totality can only be maintained if we keep the Revolution in the horizon. One of the ways Lukács was able to restore the Marxism's faith was by showing that revolution and knowledge were intimately linked. He argues that thought detached from practice is sterile thought wherein nothing changed; a truly practical thought would be able to pierce the veil of the historical production of knowledge by aiming at radically changing the system altogether.

> Thus for Marxism the knowledge that capitalism is historically conditioned (…) becomes crucial. The reason for this is that only this knowledge, only the unity of theory and practice provide a real basis for social revolution and the total transformation of society. Only when this knowledge can be seen as the product of this process can we close the circle of the dialectical method (…).[98]

The potential realization of the story of Marxism and the attempt to change the capitalist system is the precondition for knowledge *tout court*.

6. Conceptual import

Through the way he connects "totality," "class," "proletariat," and "revolution," Lukács is able to re-attach the parts of the story of Marxism that Bernstein had pulled apart. These links enable Lukács to use Marxist cues more easily and without the nagging skepticism that Bernstein created. When he uses the cue "worker," for instance, this will be enough to lead the hearers to infer the rest of the whole story of Marxism, with its assumptions and explanations, without Lukács having to define anything further. Thanks to this reconstruction, it is harder for a skepticism in the kind of Bernstein to accuse Lukács of an undue connection

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[98] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 39-40.

between "worker" and "revolution."[99] Lukács is able to reinforce the *inferential leaps* from one cue to the next: he can use these cues as if they had an essential parity with each other that makes their jump from one to the other relatively innocuous.

As an example, see for instance the first paragraph of the second essay, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg":

> It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science. The capitalist separation of the producer from the total process of production, the division of the process of labour into parts at the cost of the individual humanity of the worker, the atomisation of society into individuals who simply go on producing without rhyme or reason, must all have a profound influence on the thought, the science and the philosophy of capitalism. Proletarian science is revolutionary not just by virtue of its revolutionary ideas which it opposes to bourgeois society, but above all because of its method. *The primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science.*[100]

We see how, thanks to the connections he made between theory and practice, knowledge of the whole, and totality in his first essay, Lukács is now able to create these seamless transitions between "Marxism," "totality," "science," "proletarian," "knowledge," and "revolution." He argues that only *Marxism* combines theory and practice and has the point of view of *totality*, which is the basis of an entirely new *science*. He can also unproblematically call the "science" a *proletarian* science since it is a science that is accessible

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[99] The ideas of "break," "attachment," and of the creation of two sides with terms with a "common parity" were thoroughly explored by some of the proponents of the "New Rhetoric." The "New Rhetoric" is an umbrella term attributed to several scholars that, roughly in the 50s and 60s onward, gave new life to the study of rhetoric. United in their common aspiration of breaking from the "old" paradigm of rhetoric as the study of stylistic and ornamental language, they expanded the concept to any techniques that try to increase the adherence of the public to the arguments presented by the orator. For instance, one of the major works that consolidated the very name of the movement was Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric*, published in 1958. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca begin their work precisely with the complaint that rhetoric is a twenty centuries old tradition that philosophers unfairly associated with the domain of mere opinion and therefore devoid of any philosophical value: Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), pp. 1-4, but also Chaïm Perelman, *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities: Essays on Rhetoric and its Applications* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), pp. 1-7, and the first chapter in general.
[100] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 27.

from the point of view of class, and such class must aim at changing society as a whole to achieve *knowledge*. He can also say that proletarian science is *revolutionary* since changing society entails a revolutionary aim – it cannot be the other two "false" attempts at changing society by submitting to its laws or through ethical actions. We should also pay attention to the terms that he links together on the other side of the story as well: "The *capitalist separation* of the producer from the total process of production," and then "the *division* of the process of labour *into parts* at the *cost* of the *individual humanity* of the *worker*," followed by "the *atomisation* of society into *individuals* who simply go on producing *without rhyme or reason*." All these synonyms of separation, structured in opposition to *totality*, are associated together with "capitalism" and the "cost of the humanity of the worker" – Lukács even talks of a "*capitalist separation*."

This reinforcement and establishment of this thick inferential background can, at some point, allow the author jump from one cue to the next in quick succession, effortlessly, and without breaking the reading. At that point, cues are used naturally and *in media res*, in a context where the successive cues are not necessarily related to what was just said but are inserted by the author without upsetting the text. Let's see an example from Lukács' second essay:

> *only the class can actively penetrate the reality of society and transform it in its entirety*. For this reason, 'criticism' advanced from the standpoint of class is criticism from a total point of view and hence it provides the dialectical unity of theory and practice. In dialectical unity it is at once cause and effect, mirror and motor of the historical and dialectical process. The proletariat as the subject of thought in society destroys at one blow the dilemma of impotence: the dilemma created by the pure laws with their fatalism and by the ethics of pure intentions.[101]

The first time he uses the term "criticism," he uses scare quotes because he is referring to the kind of "criticism" deployed by the Revisionists and other people with a "partial" view of science (thus, a pseudo-science and a bourgeois science). Then, in that very sentence, he repeats the term "criticism," but this time without scare quotes. Since he is addressing "criticism" the second time from the standpoint of class, which,

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[101] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 39.

as we have seen, is profoundly intertwined with "totality," he can jump easily from speaking of the "criticism" of the right kind to "total point of view" then "dialectical unity," all in one breath. Then, seemingly uncalled for, "proletariat" emerges, and Lukács inserts that the proletariat is able to avoid the dilemma of having to choose between the only two courses of action to which capitalism condemns us.[102] What enables Lukács, in this paragraph, to jump so quickly from one idea to the other is precisely the fact that he already created the basis for the inferential jumps between all the cues that are present by grounding his arguments in the metanarrative of Marxism.

If it were not for the existence of a structuring metanarrative guiding the text and the reader's expectations, these effortless jumps would be difficult to make. To be sure, there is a wider argument from which the reader is also making inferences: there is the author's general argument in his work, then this particular essay, and finally this particular paragraph. But what we have to understand is that, without this structuring metanarrative, the wider argumentative context of the author would not be enough to explain these quick jumps from one idea to the next. It is because of the divisions "totality," "revolution," "class," "proletarian," "science," and "knowledge," on the one hand, and then "partiality," "individual," "bourgeois," false-"science," "illusion," and "capitalism," on the other hand, that the quick jumps from one cue to the other occur.

How can these jumps be made so quickly? How can such a strong inferential power be generated? It is because the cues derive so strongly from one to the other that any skepticism, *à la* Bernstein, that tries to separate them involves destroying the entire dichotomy. Lukács' reconstruction is able to create a strong impression that there are *only two sides* because the cues of each side are strongly *tightened*, *made dependent* on each other. Notice the quotes we have used so far: "The whole system of Marxism stands and falls with the principle that revolution is the product of a point of view in which the category of totality is dominant"; "*only the class can actively penetrate the reality of society and transform it in its entirety*";

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[102] Of course, we have to insist that this effortless manner in which Lukács is able to easily use "proletariat" for "class" was carefully grounded before, in p. 21.

"only this knowledge, only the unity of theory and practice provide [sic] a real basis for social revolution and the total transformation of society."[103] The fact that Lukács gives only two choices, one side or the other, life or death, knowledge or illusion, enables him to easily link one cue to the other: we are aware that there are two sides; and we are aware that one side is salutary, while the other is doomed.

By bringing forth the story of Marxism and by having its cues so solidly tightened together, Lukács is able to *exclude* or *align* new elements from one side or the other of the fault line. Indeed, this was exactly what annoyed Bernstein: ascribing the term "capitalist" seemed to demonize the thing ascribed or using "proletarian" seemed to create a proletarian out of thin air. For instance, since Lukács associates a genuine proletarian science with one that takes into account the point of view of totality, he is able to exclude as "bourgeois" and "opportunistic" the critics of Rosa Luxemburg and, of course, Bernstein himself.

> The trivialisation of Marxism and its deflection into a bourgeois 'science' was expressed first, most clearly and frankly in Bernstein's *Premises of Socialism*. (…) the moment you abandon the point of view of totality, you must also jettison the starting point and the goal, the assumptions and the requirements of the dialectical method. When this happens revolution will be understood not as part of a process but as an isolated act cut off from the general course of events. (…) The whole system of Marxism stands and falls with the principle that revolution is the product of a point of view in which the category of totality is dominant. Even in its opportunism Bernstein's criticism is much too opportunistic for all the implications of this position to emerge clearly.[104]

Turning to the debate between Luxemburg and her opponents, Lukács shows that her opponents reasoned without taking into account the point of view of totality. In this way he is able to say:

> By ignoring these factors the opportunists acted quite consistently. The problem is indeed superfluous from the standpoint of the individual capitalist and vulgar economics. As far as the former is concerned, economic

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[103] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 29, p. 39, and pp. 39-40, respectively.
[104] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 29.

reality has the appearance of a world governed by the eternal laws of nature, laws to which he has to adjust his activities.[105]

In the same way that Lukács is able to show that Luxemburg's opponents are "bourgeois" since they adopted the bourgeois' "partial" point of view, he in turn show that Luxemburg had the point of view of totality all along. In this way, Lukács align her with the metanarrative of Marxism which, precisely, is what the very title of that second essay is all about: "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg."

In conclusion, we can now add another characteristic element, in addition to what we said about metanarratives in the last chapter, to our search for radicalism per se: the use of *alignments* and *exclusions*. It has now become clear that radicalism does not reside in the fact that someone merely mentions the terms that are attached to Marxism; rather, it is also necessary that the speaker or author employ these terms as cues to a metanarrative in order for their use to constitute a use of radicalism. We need not only to talk about the "worker," "revolution" and "socialism," and then "bourgeoisie," "capitalism," and "reaction"; instead, we also need a metanarrative that creates a parity between each set of terms. This parity is gained when the author creates alignments and exclusions within the alluded to background metanarrative which consolidates these cues together.

The importance of alignments and exclusions can be explained through Herman's post-classical paradigm that we addressed at the end of the last chapter. Telling a story or merely referring to a "knight," a "princess," or a "dragon" does not automatically constitute a reference to the fairy tale. Many other literary genres contain these elements. We need these elements *as cues* to the genre of the fairy tale. We need a knight saving a princess from a dragon, for instance, as here we can see the potential cue words strung together into a narrative with its own genre assumptions. A cue must exist in relation to some part of the story of the metanarrative which, in turn, enables the cue to gain or maintain parity with other terms on one

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[105] Lukács, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 31.

of the two sides of a metanarrative's dichotomy. In this way, this background dichotomy instills a sense of expectation in the reader that enables the author to use it for further exclusions and alignments. In conclusion, alignments and exclusions are essential for this study since they enable us to see how a given term is actually a reference to a metanarrative, which in turn enable us to detect a use of radicalism.

These considerations leave two questions unanswered:

- Where do cues come from and how are they formed? When does one "detect" the use of a cue?

- Even if we know what constitutes a *use* of radicalism, when can we ascribe the epithet "radical" to an author, idea, or work?

Indeed, the fact that we analyzed the *uses* of radicalism in Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* does not allow us to say that Lukács, his work, or his ideas were therefore "radical." But we have only analyzed how the use of a metanarrative can strengthen one's argument thanks to the tools provided by that genre, e.g. the reinforcement of inferences from one term to another. The use of a literary genre does not automatically mean that the work in question is of that literary genre, or that the author should be classified as a representative of that literary current. To answer these questions, we will plunge into the works of authors that boldly built their political thought within the radical genre. In order to fully understand how a genre is structured and how it can be used by other authors, it makes sense that we should go have a look to some of the authors that have practiced it most comprehensively.

Chapter 3: Mises against the Marxists

What distinguishes the Austrian School and will lend it everlasting fame is its doctrine of economic action, in contrast to one of economic equilibrium or nonaction. The Austrian School makes use of the ideas of rest and equilibrium, without which economic thought cannot get along. But it is always aware of the purely instrumental nature of these ideas. The Austrian School aims to account for prices actually paid in the market, and not just prices that might be paid under certain never-realizable conditions. (…) The Austrian School has never succumbed to the fatal illusion that values can be measured, and has never misunderstood that statistical data has nothing to do with economic theory, but belongs to the history of economics alone.[1]

Memoirs

it is in this subjectivism that the objectivity of our science lies.[2]

Human Action

Ludwig von Mises is one of the eminent representatives of a distinctive and controversial economic liberalism that experienced a revival in the 70s and 80s. While some argue that this economic liberalism is in essential continuity with nineteenth century's liberalism, others argue that it is a reaction to the growth of the state and that it breaks substantially with the liberalism of the classical liberals. We argue that Mises' liberalism is not merely a localized reaction but a highly ingenious and successful appropriation of the Marxists' use of the radical genre. Mises reframes traditional liberal themes in a radical metanarrative and he gives pride of place to economic elements over political ones. Taking his lead from the argumentation

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[1] Ludwig von Mises, *Memoirs* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises institute, 2009 [1940]), p. 28.
[2] Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1998 [1949]), p. 21, but cf. also Ludwig von Mises, *Epistemological Problems of Economics* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2003 [1933]), p. 101.

style of his Marxist opponents, he creates a genre with a fault line and cue terms of its own and gives his opponents a taste of their own medicine.

In this chapter, we analyze how Mises builds a radical metanarrative where he opposes liberalism, science, and rationality to socialism, pseudo-science, and irrationality. As we did with Lukács, we carefully look at how the terms on each side are attached to such an extent that Mises is able to seamlessly jump from one term to the next without breaking the reading of the reader. We also analyze a second aspect that enables this smooth reading, which is the way Mises is able to strictly oppose each group of terms. It is also thanks to the fact that Mises is writing with two sides in mind that the reader is able to transition from one cue to the next.

1. Historical and biographical introduction

Two historical trends of the first decades of the twentieth century are essential in order to understand Mises: the widespread rejection of *laissez-faire* and the rise of Marxism. We will need to go over them at some length, not so much because of the rise of Marxism *per se*, but because the rejection of *laissez-faire* is an intricate event that involves an essential asymmetry. There was a fundamental difference between two kinds of *laissez-faire*: the one that really happened and the one that was being rejected.

At the turn of the twentieth century, many raised their voices across the West over the fact that the *laissez faire* of the nineteenth century no longer made sense. In his 1924 "The End of Laissez Faire," Keynes encapsulated the spirit of this moment: "For more than a hundred years our philosophers ruled us because, by a miracle, they nearly all agreed or seemed to agree on this one thing. We do not dance even yet to a new tune. But a change is in the air."[3] After the First World War and especially after 1929, a widespread

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[3] Based on a lecture pronounced in 1924, the essay was originally published as a pamphlet in 1926: John Maynard Keynes, "The End of Laissez Faire," in John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 [1931]), pp. 272-294: p. 272.

consensus emerged that the night watchman state to which the classical economists subscribed no longer made sense.[4]

Even the closest allies of the *laissez-faire* cause in the 30s were in agreement on this point: a more interventive state was required.[5] These first "neoliberals"[6] of the '30s – authors such as Henry Simons in the United States or F. A. Hayek and Lionel Robbins in the UK – are notorious today because of the debates surrounding Neoliberalism. But the truth is that the rhetoric of these firsts neoliberals was often structured around this rejection of *laissez-faire*: they rejected the old "negative" *laissez faire* and adopted a "positive" one instead.[7] In other words, they were worried about the encroachment of the state over individual freedoms, but they were also critical of nineteenth century non-interventionism. They believed that a strong state with significant redistributive and regulatory powers was an essential prerequisite for a free society based on private ownership.[8]

Symbolically, one of the works that gave the initial impulse for this early neoliberal movement, Walter Lipmann's *The Good Society* (1937), thoroughly rejected the *laissez faire* approach of the last century: "The latter-day liberals became mired in statu quo by the political dogma of laissez-faire which held them to the idea that nothing should be done, by the confusion of the classical economics which held them to the idea that nothing needed to be done."[9] In a letter to Lippmann, Robbins agreed with him and with the rejection

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[4] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995 [1994]), pp. 94-95. Cf. Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, pp. 1-11.

[5] As we will see, Mises is here the exception. Ben Jackson, "At the Origins of Neo-Liberalism: The Free Economy and the Strong State, 1930–1947," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 53, n°1, March 2010, pp. 129-151: p. 135. Cf. also the case of Frank Knight in the United States: Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, p. 4.

[6] "Liberalism" has very different meanings in the United States and in Europe, but it is common to differentiate the "classical liberals" who proposed limited government in opposition to absolutism, and the revival of these ideas but essentially based on economic grounds.

[7] Cf. Henry Simons, *A positive program for laissez faire: Some proposals for a liberal economic policy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949 [1934]. Hayek also uses this "positive" and "negative" image in *The Road to Serfdom* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1944]), p. 72. Mises routinely criticizes this image, cf. for instance Ludwig von Mises, "Laissez Faire or Dictatorship," in Ludwig von Mises, Planning for Freedom: Let the Market System Work (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008 [1952]), pp. 23-24.

[8] Ben Jackson, "At the Origins," p. 134.

[9] Walter Lippmann, *The Good Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), pp. 207-208.

of *laissez-faire* but also suggested that many nineteenth century liberals would have also agreed.[10] Already at the time, Robbins hinted at the fact that this widespread rejection of the "night watchman state" was based on a misconception: the classical economists did not advocate such unrestricted *laissez-faire*.[11] In a series of lectures in 1939, he criticized at length this "popular mythology":

> I do not think that it is any exaggeration to suggest that to-day, apart from a handful of specialists, the great body of the educated public tends to regard the Classical conception of the functions of the state as sufficiently characterized by Carlyle's phrase, "Anarchy plus the constable", or by Lassalle's simile of the night watchman.[12]

Robbins did not disagree that the nineteenth century contained "specimens of extreme individualism," as he called it. He cited Bastiat's *Harmonies économiques* or Spencer's *Man versus the State* as examples.[13] What he disagreed with was his contemporaries' widespread tendency to conflate these opinions with the ones of the classical economists at large – by which he meant authors such as Hume, Smith, Ricardo, or the two Mills. Despite these authors' preferences against state interference, he argued that they could not decisively be accused of holding a "night watchman" vision of the state and even that they had varying views of the functions the state should perform.[14]

As in all dark legends, this was a myth of disproportional conflations: not only the classical economists, but classical liberalism and the whole nineteenth-century were seen as instances of ruthless *laissez-faire*. Together with Robbins, other figures wrote against the popular myth. William Hutt, another of the early neoliberals, dedicated large parts of his *Economists and the Public* to dismantling the myth, and the famous

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[10] Jackson, "At the Origins," p. 135.

[11] Apart from the "popular myth" that we will analyze below, the question of what it means for the nineteenth century to be an "age of *laissez-faire*" has been widely debated. Cf. Arthur J. Taylor, *Laissez-faire and State Intervention in Nineteenth-century Britain* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972). Donohue argues that American *laissez-faire* was also distinctively more interventionist than its British counterpart: Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

[12] That were then published, with revisions, in Lionel Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy: In English Classical Political Economy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978 [1952]).

[13] Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy*, p. 36.

[14] Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy*, pp. 36-46.

Chicago economist Jacob Viner criticized it as well.[15] If we come back to "The End of Laissez-Faire," Keynes also admitted that "The phrase laissez-faire is not to be found in the works of Adam Smith, of Ricardo, or of Malthus. Even the idea is not present in a dogmatic form in any of these authors."[16] For Keynes, the idea of *laissez-faire* was a popular rendition and a simplification of what the classical authors actually advocated.[17]

How did this myth become so popular? There were several reasons. Keynes and Hutt blamed, among other things, economic textbooks and the sweeping statements of "popularisers" and "vulgarisers."[18] Hutt also cited intellectual celebrities who promoted the myth – Bertrand Russel, Walter Lippmann, and, of course, Keynes himself.[19] Robbins further highlighted that the classical economists sometimes spoke in a way that suggested this interpretation. For instance, they sometimes couched their conclusions in a theological language,[20] or their descriptive economic models gave the impression that they prescribed a stringent *laissez-faire* approach in the realm of politics.[21] There was also a widespread disappointment in the old political, social, and economic system that existed after the First World War.[22]

Of course, none of these authors failed to see the role played by the ascension of Marxism in the propagation of the myth. More than simply a new power in the international scene, the rise of the USSR meant the ascension of a new political and economic model that had come to replace the old one. From our

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[15] See for instance Jacob Viner, "The Intellectual History of Laissez Faire," *The Journal of Law & Economics*, Vol. 3, October 1960, pp. 45-69: pp. 45-46. Jackson, "At the Origins," p. 133.

[16] Keynes, "The End of Laissez Faire," p. 279.

[17] Keynes believed that, even though the economic profession had increasingly come to criticize this simplification, the maxim of *laissez-faire* was still widely held by the general population. Keynes, "The End of Laissez Faire," p. 282. As a commentator put it fittingly, Keynes believed that "laissez- faire was dead, and only the public had yet to know." Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, p. 2.

[18] These are Keynes' expressions, "The End of Laissez Faire," p. 277, and p. 285 for his criticism of "economic textbooks." See Hutt's own criticism of textbooks in William H. Hutt, *Economists and the Public: A Study of Competition and Opinion* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), pp. 160-161.

[19] Hutt, *Economists and the Public*, cf. especially pp. 245-247 for Keynes, pp. 40-41 for Russel, and p. 40 for Lippmann. See Robbins criticism of Keynes' misconceptions in *The Theory of Economic Policy*, pp. 36-39.

[20] Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy*, p. 24.

[21] Taylor, *Laissez-faire and State Intervention*, p. 25.

[22] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, p. 55. Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), p. 3.

contemporary point of view, the 1917 Bolshevik revolution was the beginning of a disastrous experiment, but from the point of view of its observers, it was not uncommon to see it as an event of historical proportions – it was often compared to the French Revolution.[23] Thanks to the First World War and the crash of 1929, Marxism appeared to many observers to be the next major political paradigm that would abolish an outdated capitalism – and, for great part of the twentieth century, it was not clear whether this would turn out to be true or not. It is therefore not surprising that the ascension of the new model came with the propagation of legends that delegitimized the old one.

Seen in this light, the liberalism of Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) presents a unique case. Indeed, Mises developed a *laissez-faire* liberalism specifically designed to answer the challenge offered by the Marxists. Faced with their attempts to delegitimize classical liberalism and their attacks on the old *laissez-faire* as a dogmatic non-interventionist creed, Mises redoubled and rebuilt liberalism on the very *laissez-faire* of which it was being accused. Furthermore, thanks to his training as an economist and the fact that the Marxists presented an eminently economic critique, Mises rebuilt a liberalism with a distinctively economic bend. He gave a central importance to these economic elements over other political features traditionally ascribed to liberalism.

We can already see this *laissez faire* and anti-Marxist dynamic in his first political work, *Nation, State, and Economy*, which he publishes in 1919.[24] Mises started writing his work in December 1917 and, at the time, he wrote at length about several linguistic and national issues that he blamed for the rise of imperialism and the fall of liberalism.[25] Initially, the work focuses mainly on how from 1789 onward, liberalism swept the nations of Europe, united its peoples against despotic kings, and brought economic freedom, democracy, peace, and national self-determination.[26] At the same time, Mises also describes how, by the end of the

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[23] On the analogy between the two revolutions, cf. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[24] Cf. also Mises, *Memoirs*, p. 52.

[25] Jörg Guido Hülsmann, *Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007), p. 286. Cf. also the third chapter of *Memoirs*.

[26] Ludwig von Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy: Contributions to the Politics and History of our Time* (New York: New York University Press, 1983 [1919]), p. 37.

nineteenth century, a counter-wave of "imperialism" arrived and started to undo all the advances of liberalism. It was a bellicose spirit that overthrew democracy, curtailed freedoms, undertook aggressive expansionist policies, and systematically used the state in economics matters.[27] He also spends quite some time describing the linguistic roots at the origin of this imperialist spirit. Indeed, the Austro-Hungarian empire before the War was not mainly worried about economics and *laissez faire*, but rather about its internal nationality issues.[28] As the work progresses, the tone changes considerably.[29] By the third part in which he addresses socialism, we arrive at anti-Marxism and some of the seminal arguments for which Mises will be most famous. We should not forget that, before he fled Europe in the '30s, Mises lived most of his life in Vienna where he was close to the events of the rise of Marxism: the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the Spartacist uprising of 1919, and the entirety of "Red Vienna" from 1918 to 1934 when the Social Democrats had the majority of the city parliament.[30] Since he refers to each one of these in that third part[31] and that he finishes the manuscript in July 1919,[32] these events must have made a strong impression on him and must have led him to write on this ascending opponent.

In that last part, Mises argues that socialism is a new and deeper form of imperialism.[33] Because of the arrival of Marxism, he says, contemporary socialism has acquired new ideological elements that have made

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[27] "Imperialism" at the time was usually understood in the more restricted, colonialist sense we understand it today, but Mises defines it more broadly: cf. Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, pp. 106-107.

[28] In the words of Kirzner, "the frontier of political and ideological conflict in late nineteenth-century Austria was not that which separated proponents of pure laissez faire from those of aggressive state intervention." Israel Kirzner, "Menger, Classical Liberalism, and the Austrian School of Economics," in Bruce Caldwell ed., *Carl Menger and his Legacy in Economics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 106. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austrian-Hungary* (Hamish Hamilton: London, 1948), p. 170. Barbara Jelavich, Modern Austria: Empire and Republic, 1815-1986 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[29] The second part is much more economic and addresses the problem of the economy of war undertaken by Austro-Hungary (many of these arguments are reproduced from an article of 1916). This was a problem that worried him during the war, cf. Ludwig von Mises, "On the Goals of Trade Policy" in R. M. Ebeling (ed.), *Selected Writings of Ludwig Von Mises, vol. i: Monetary and Economic Policy Problems Before, During, and After the Great War* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), p. 185.

[30] On Red Vienna, cf. Helmut Gruber, *Red Vienna: Experiment in Working-Class Culture, 1919–1934* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[31] He begins by addressing German Social Democracy in p. 211, then refers to the Bolshevik revolution in p. 230, and makes a reference to the Spartacist uprising in p. 241.

[32] Hülsmann, *Mises*, p. 299.

[33] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, pp. 211-213, 215, 242, and 246.

it more dangerous than ever. For Mises, its doctrine that the interests between classes are irreconcilable, together with its idea of a necessary direction of history, has given socialism a new religious rhetoric able to enrapture the masses.[34] Because of these new characteristics, socialism is even more relentless than imperialism in its expansionist aspirations and will not stop until the entire world is socialistic as well.[35]

For Mises, socialism is the "new main enemy," so to speak. *Nation, State, and Economy* had the initial working title *Imperialismus*, and it seems that the increasing relevance of Marxism led Mises to change the emphasis: he went from a much more political analysis focused on imperialism to a much more socio-economic one that aimed at socialism.[36] We should now turn to some of the ways in which Mises answers back the Marxists. As we will see, the seeds of his metanarrative are already present here in their basic form.

Against the Marxists' claim that the means of production must be socialized, Mises answers that liberalism is essentially about private property. That is, he says that the *essential difference* between liberalism and its opponents is the question of ownership: "socialism means the transfer of the means of production out of the private ownership of individuals into the ownership of society. That alone and nothing else is socialism. All the rest is unimportant."[37] He puts it well again in *Liberalism* in 1927: "The program of liberalism, therefore, if condensed into a single word, would have to read: *property* (…). All the other demands of liberalism result from this fundamental demand."[38] As we will see, this division has to do with the Aristotelian way in which Mises look at social organizations and which he already touches upon in this work: there is the rule by the many (liberalism), the rule by one (socialism), and the rule by the few (syndicalism, an economy where groups act like consumers).[39] As he already says here: "It is a matter of

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[34] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, pp. 216-217, 218-220, 226-227, 238-239, and 242-243.

[35] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, pp. 245-246.

[36] Hülsmann, *Mises*, p. 286.

[37] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, p. 205.

[38] Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition* (New York: the Foundation for Economic Education, 2002 [1927]), p. 19. Mises also sees political institutions as means to safeguard the smooth workings of the free market, cf. Mises, *Human Action*, p. 285-287, or Ludwig von Mises, *Omnipotent Government: The Rise of the Total State and Total War* (Auburn and Indianapolis: Ludwig von Mises Institute and Liberty Fund, 2010 [1944]).

[39] Cf. his discussion of syndicalism, Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, pp. 232-233.

complete indifference (…) who holds power in a socialized community, whether a hereditary emperor, a Caesar, or the democratically organized whole of the people."[40] This view of social organizations is important, since it will enable Mises to make a sharp distinction between "liberalism" and a wide array of "socialistic" ideologies (from fascism to communism) that are united in the way in which they control the economy.

The sharp distinction between liberalism's "science" and socialism's "pseudo-science" is also already present here. Mises sees the fact that socialisms holds a kind of religious rhetoric that is grounded on a pseudo-science that claims to know the direction of history and, therefore, has no need to discuss different political alternatives. The "religious" aspect of Marxism already worries Mises, and he will regularly come back to it in his writings.

Mises redoubles against the pseudo-science of the socialists by arguing that liberalism has a science of its own. Even though he will go on to develop this science considerably in his later writings, in *Nation, State, and Economy* he already calls it the "utilitarian point of view."[41] He here uses a reasoning that echoes throughout his works: since the socialists and the liberals have the same political aims – i.e., bringing the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people, – the conflict between them can be solved by figuring out which means are the best to fulfil this function, i.e. the private or the public ownership of the means of production.[42] Mises says that he is primarily concerned with the effectiveness of a given approach, and he goes on to elucidate in his epistemology and politics that only liberalism is an effective approach to property ownership.

We can already see here how Mises' conceives liberalism and socialism as twin children of rationalism and of the ideas of the Enlightenment, locked into a conflict of historical and universal proportions and out of which only one can win. In *Nation, State, and Economy*, he pushes back the Marxists at every step: he

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[40] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, p. 205.
[41] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, p. 251.
[42] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, p. 218.

counters their insistence that the means of production should be socialized by arguing that the essential difference between liberalism and its opponents was the question of ownership and private property; he offers a liberal utopia against the Marxist one (though Mises would become critical of utopianism in subsequent writings); he proposes a utilitarian science against the science of the Marxists; and he draws a teleological liberal narrative against the teleological Marxist one. Mises will often suggest that the very fact that socialism is the corrupted twin of liberalism only makes it stronger. It tries to use the powerful ideals of liberalism against itself, but the socialists deceive themselves by resorting to the wrong means to achieve them.

As we can see, already in *Nation, State, and Economy*, Mises closely follows the metanarrative of the Marxists and oppose them with the seeds of a liberal metanarrative that he will go on to substantially develop. One of the few elements that is not yet as present here is his argument against government interventions in the economy.[43] At the time, Mises was still mainly concerned with the problem of the alternative between full-blown socialism[44] or *laissez faire* but, especially in 1929 in *A Critique of Interventionism*, he would address the problem of government intervention in more detail.[45]

Even though Mises was trained as an economist (his first major work was *The Theory of Money and Credit* (1912)), he would go on to develop his political thought in works such as *Socialism* (1922), *Liberalism* (1927), *A Critique of Interventionism* (1929), and *Omnipotent Government* (1944). In this initial period, Mises wrote his famous argument concerning the impossibility of socialism, which marked the beginning of the socialist calculation debate of the '30s (we will analyze Mises' argument later on). Starting in 1929,[46] he acquires a growing interest in epistemology and methodology with works such as *Epistemological*

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[43] Cf., however, the passage in p. 126 where he addresses the "statification" of the economy.
[44] This is Mises' expression to talk about the political and social scheme that several communist authors wanted to achieve, i.e., what at the time was often called "communism." We use his expression "socialism" here.
[45] He had addressed the subject before in 1923 in an essay republished in *A Critique of Interventionism*, "The Theory of Price Controls." Cf. also Don Lavoie, "The Development of the Misesian Theory of Interventionism," in Israel Kirzner, *Method, Process, and Austrian Economics: Essays in Honor of Ludwig Von Mises* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1982), pp. 169-183.
[46] Hülsmann, *Mises*, p. 211.

Problems of Economics (1933), his magnum opus *Human Action* (1949), *Theory and History* (1957), or

The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science (1962).[47]

Mises was a prolific author, but he was never able to secure a permanent academic position either in Vienna

or after his exile in the United States in 1940.[48] One of the reasons for this was the post-New Deal consensus

that postulated a welfare state middle-way between socialism and *laissez-faire* capitalism. His death in

October 1973 was exactly one year before one of the landmarks of the free-market revival: the attribution

of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Hayek. Mises' intellectual path was marked by a life in which he was

always at odds with the intellectual mainstream.[49] When he arrived in the United States, there was also an

initial shock on the part of other American free-marketeers. Mises' approach was utilitarian, but he arrived

in a context where the defense of the market was traditionally voiced in natural law language. Therefore it

took some time before Mises' ideas came to be recognized.[50]

Mises is also a controversial figure because his staunchly uncompromising character.[51] We saw earlier how

the first neoliberals of the '30s rejected the *laissez-faire* approach of the nineteenth century and were in

favor of a more interventive state. Mises was part of these early neoliberals, but his approach was closer to

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[47] There are some notable political texts in Mises' later period: Lectures such as *The Free Market and its Enemies* (1951) or *Marxism Unmasked* (1952), and his speech *Liberty and Property* (1958). Ludwig von Mises, *The Free Market and its Enemies: Pseudo-Science, Socialism, and Inflation* (Irvington-on-Hudson: Foundation for Economic Education, 2004 [1951]), Ludwig von Mises, *Marxism Unmasked: From Delusion to Destruction* (Irvington-on-Hudson: Foundation for Economic Education, 2006 [1952]), and Ludwig von Mises, *Liberty and Property* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2009 [1958]).

[48] Cf. Bruce Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge: An Intellectual Biography of F. A. Hayek* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 145-147. Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of The Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), pp. 93-94. On the reasons why Mises was not able to secure full professorship in Austria, Israel Kirzner, *Ludwig von Mises: The Man and his Economics* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2001), pp. 10-11.

[49] Mises' epistemology has also generated strong reactions from his critics. Misean scholars sometimes quote as an example historian of economic ideas Mark Blaugh, who said that "[Mises'] later writings on the foundations of economic science are so idiosyncratic and dogmatically stated that we can only wonder that they have been taken seriously by anyone." Mark Blaugh, *The Methodology of Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [second edition]), p. 81. On Blaugh's quote, cf. Roderick Long's unpublished manuscript: Roderick T. Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics, and the Logic of Action: Praxeological Investigations*, retrieved from http://praxeology.net/wiggy-draft.pdf, pp. 3-4.

[50] Julian Joseph DelGaudio, *Refugee Economist in America: Ludwig von Mises and American Social and Economic Thought, 1940-1986*, dissertation of the University of California, Irvine, 1987.

[51] Kirzner, *Mises*, pp. 14-16; Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge*, pp. 146-149; Jackson, "At the Origins," pp. 140-141.

a strict "night watchman" state, and he was not part of the group that rejected the *laissez-faire* of the nineteenth century.[52] This uncompromisingness, coupled with the strong language with which he often rebuked his opponents, also explains why Mises was sharply attacked for his positions.[53]

Finally, there is the fact that Mises ended up having a considerable influence on the ideas and figures of the free market revival of the '70s and '80s on authors such as F. A. Hayek, Murray Rothbard, Ayn Rand,[54] and several free market groups (also thanks to his Vienna circle and his NYU seminars).[55] He is therefore at the center of the debates over the free-market renaissance and its critics.[56]

Indeed, critics will sometimes look at the roots of this economic liberalism – as we did with *Nation, State, and Economy* – and see a mere "reflection" or "reaction" to Marxism, to the growth of the welfare state, or to other historically contingent circumstances.[57] These critics often minimize the importance of this economic liberal strand for the liberal tradition at large. At the extreme, some authors minimize it to such an extent that they see the twentieth-century emphasis on economic liberalism as a corruption of what liberalism really was all along. Michael Freeden, a British scholar, pushes this idea so far that he excludes this twentieth-century "libertarianism" from the ideological family of liberalism altogether.[58] On the other

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[52] Jackson, "At the Origins," p. 141.

[53] Norman Barry described him as "a child of the Enlightenment mistakenly deposited in the twentieth century," *On Classical Liberalism and Libertarianism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), p. 59. And from friends as well, cf. a statement from the ex-Misean David Prichytko, "Praxeology," in Peter J. Boettke (ed.), *The Elgar Companion to Austrian Economics* (Brookfield and Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1994), pp. 81-82. Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, p. 87.

[54] Hayek especially talked about the impact of *Socialism* on his thought: Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge*, p. 145, Alan Ebenstein, *Hayek's Journey* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2003), p. 45-46, and Jeremy Sheamur, *Hayek and After: Hayekian Liberalism as a Research Programme* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 32-35. Rothbard was a self-avowed disciple of Mises and was decisively influenced by *Human Action*: Gerard Casey, *Murray Rothbard* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 6-7. And despite Rand's and Mises' disagreements, she recognized the importance of his economics on her: Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 142.

[55] Kelley, *Bringing the Market*, pp. 84-85. Doherty, Radicals for Capitalism, p. 9 and pp. 205-212.

[56] On the free-market renaissance, cf. footnote 2 of our introduction and footnote 1 of the first chapter.

[57] Cf. most notably Michael Freeden's arguments, for instance in *Ideologies and Political Theories: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 276-311, especially p. 280. Cf. also Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). In my MA thesis, I have suggested this reading as well: Pedro Góis Moreira, *From Technician to Ideologist: How Von Mises' Libertarianism Arose from the Trenches, 1907-1919* (Oxford: University of Oxford MA thesis, 2014).

[58] Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theories: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 276-311. See also Samuel Freeman, "Illiberal Libertarians: Why Libertarianism is not a Liberal View,"

end of this debate, there are authors who see economic liberalism as the very core of classical liberalism.[59]

Ralph Raico puts it concisely when he says "there was no "classical" liberalism, only a single liberalism, based on private property and the free market that developed organically, from first to last."[60] As we can see, Raico goes so far as to say that there was no "classical" liberalism, but only one liberalism *tout court*. On this side, it is often argued that the very term "liberalism," at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, had gained interventionist connotations and came to mean something contrary to what liberalism really is.[61]

Since we are interested in the way Mises appropriates the Marxist metanarrative, this chapter comes close to this debate. As we saw above, it is true that there is a sense in which Mises' liberalism is formed in opposition to his socialistic opponents. But this does not mean that we should see his liberalism as a mere reaction.

On one hand, we can sometimes see in Mises' writings that there was something intentional about his "tit for tat" with the Marxists. For instance, in *Liberalism* (1927), he has a passage where he says that liberalism has a "positive" program which consists in the achievement of a society based on private property. However, the program of liberalism also has a "defensive" aspect that depends on the position taken by its adversaries.

> In this defensive posture, the program of liberalism—and, for that matter, that of every movement—is
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> dependent on the position that its opponents assume towards it. Where the opposition is strongest, the assault

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Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol. 30, n°2, Spring 2001: pp. 105-151, and the recent back and forth between Peter J. Boettke and Rosolino A. Candela, "Liberal Libertarianism," and Samuel Freeman, "Liberal and Illiberal Libertarianism," in Jason Brennan, Bas van der Vossen, and David Schmidtz (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Libertarianism* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). There are no doubts that many of the differences in defining the terms "liberalism" also have to do with the different ways in which the term is understood on both sides of the Atlantic.

[59] Cf. Eric Mack and Gerald Gaus, "Classical Liberalism and Libertarianism: The Liberty Tradition," in Gerald Gaus and Chandran. Kukathas (eds), *Handbook of Political Theory* (London: Sage, 2004), and John Tomasi and Jason Brennan, "Classical Liberalism," in David Estlund (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[60] Ralph Raico, *Classical Liberalism and the Austrian School* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2012), p. xxv.

[61] An argument forcefully made by Alain Laurent, *Le libéralisme américain: Histoire d'un détournement* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006).

of liberalism must also be strongest; where it is relatively weak or even completely lacking, a few brief words, under the circumstances, are sufficient. And since the opposition that liberalism has had to confront has changed during the course of history, the defensive aspect of the liberal program has also undergone many changes.[62]

Since the defensive program depends on the position of the adversaries of liberalism, it makes sense that Mises felt that he had to answer his opponents in kind. Where the attack of the opponents of liberalism is strongest, he says, liberalism must counter with similar strength. And where the attack is weaker, only a few words are necessary. In fact, as we can see in the first sentence, it is not only liberalism but "every movement" that follows this defensive posture.

Two decades later in *Human Action* (1949), Mises also comes close to this subject when he talks about the necessity of making ideologies comprehensible to the common man. Criticizing the liberals of the nineteenth century, Mises says that they were naive in believing that the truths of economics can be directly grasped by the general population. It is necessary, he says, to couch these teachings in a way that the majority can understand.

> The flowering of human society depends on two factors: the intellectual power of outstanding men to conceive sound social and economic theories, and the ability of these or other men to make these ideologies palatable to the majority.

In other words, it would be too quick to say that there was a "reactive" component to Mises' economic liberalism. Faced with a liberalism that was under attack, Mises considered that it was necessary to bring liberalism up to date so that it could fight its new Marxist opponent. Mises sometimes criticizes the naiveté of the "old liberals," as he calls them, and it is usually to point out that they had an excessively natural-law and metaphysical approach to politics and society in general.[63] He argues that a more utilitarian philosophy,

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[62] Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 137.
[63] Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007 [1957]), pp. 45-49.

coupled with the new insights brought by the subjective theory of value, must be incorporated to give liberalism a new life.[64]

The second thing we must keep in mind is the way in which Mises reconstructs liberalism on this economic basis. He liked to say that liberalism is the application of the teachings of science to social life, and since science has evolved since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, liberalism has evolved as well.[65] While he did see liberalism "in its nineteenth century sense" as the advocacy of democracy, anti-militarism, peace, constitutional rights, and economic freedom, he also believed that the advances in economics of the last decades of the nineteenth century deepened and revealed the real core of liberalism, which, as we will see, is primarily economic. Unfortunately, the "old liberals" were too enmeshed in their natural law vision of liberalism: they failed to see liberalism's real core, and they failed to build an attractive, economic case that could fend off the new contenders. Mises took on the task of making that case.

In short, there are two ways to look at the Mises' liberalism: either as a mere reaction against his Marxist opponents or as a highly successful appropriation of the Marxists' method. It is this second answer that we explore in this chapter.

In order to understand how Mises frames liberalism as a radical metanarrative, we use a method similar to the one we used with Lukács: we reconnect the cues of his liberalism and identify the way he tightens them together. In order to do this, we need to understand one of Mises' central intuitions: his insight into Menger's subjective theory of value. This is an essential insight for Mises since it forces us to redefine the traditional limits of science, objectivity, and rationality. Economics has a central role for this reformulation and we will also highlight it. Once we have explained these epistemological elements, it will then be easier

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[64] Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981 [1922]), p. 418.

[65] Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 3, but also the first pages of *Human Action*, pp. 2-3, and cf. "On the Development of the Subjective Theory of Value" in *Epistemological Problems*, especially p. 163. Ludwig von Mises, "Epistemological Relativism in the Sciences of Human Action," in Ludwig von Mises, *Money, Method, and the Market Process* (Norwell and Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1990), p. 41.

to analyze Mises' liberalism. Indeed, liberalism is the application of the discoveries of science to politics and, especially, there is an intimate connection between the application of liberalism and Mises' insight in Menger's theory of value. Finally, we will be able to see what is so problematic about socialism and why the attempt to establish a socialist system is based on a pseudo-science, why it is unfeasible and irrational, and why it goes against Mises' very conception of man.

To be sure, this is not the way Mises presents his own thought. Mises wrote in a classical and continental vein.[66] *Human Action*, for instance, is written like a treatise that begins with the "particular" then builds up to the "general."[67] Mises also wrote hundreds of pages at a time. Our approach will help reveal his conceptual edifice as a whole, and in it we try to understand what is central for his political vision.

2. The subjective theory of value

2.1 Menger's subjective theory of value

Mises' starting point was the study of money within the Austrian School's framework and, as we will see, it is through the study of money that Mises arrived at his seminal intuition regarding the subjective theory of value. Through that seminal argument, we will then be able to arrive at his political arguments and "rebuild" his liberalism block by block.

Although the very term "Austrian School" only appeared later on, it is normal to introduce it with its founding text, Carl Menger's *Principles of Economics* (1871), a work that was central for Mises and his

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[66] Mises was a continental and classical scholar. Delgaudio describes him as a scholar in the "mandarin tradition": DelGaudio, *Refugee Economist in America*, pp. 26-48. While nowadays academic writing tends to state a main point and develop it, Mises' *Human Action*, for instance, is written like a classical treatise: it begins with the "particular" then builds up toward the "general" (from epistemology to economics).

[67] Human Action is subtitled "A Treatise on Economics." Other works follow this classical format, such as Ludwig von Mises, *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science: An Essay on Method* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1962).

intellectual development.[68] In Menger's time, there was in Austria and Germany a widespread distrust for economic generalizations and the speculation reminiscent of the English classical school.[69] To counter this, Menger's *Principles* tried to show that there were such things as "general laws" of economics. "Laws of economic behavior" is a good expression to capture what he has in mind: it is possible, he says, to enunciate the conditions under which a "thing" becomes an economic "good," or under which conditions this good acquires "value," or under which conditions an "economic exchange" will take place. Menger says that, with this, he does not mean that these laws can exactly predict how men will behave in specific instances.[70] Rather, he says that laws of economics describe situations that happen once we assume specific presuppositions.[71]

Menger's starting point in the *Principles* was the idea that human beings have needs to satisfy, and that when a thing is capable of satisfying that need, then that thing becomes a *good*.[72] More precisely, it becomes a good of "first order" when it directly satisfies a need, and then a good of "second order" when it satisfies a need indirectly by being constitutive of the good-status of that first order good (e.g., flour for bread). It is a good of the "third order" when it participates in the "second order" good (e.g., wheat, but also the grain mill and the labor for making the flour), and "fourth order" when participating in the "third order" (e.g., instruments, but also the fields and the labor of the farmers).[73]

We now arrive at the central point for Mises: Menger's theory of value. For Menger, value is the importance or significance that certain goods gain for us because we are aware that we must have them at hand to

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[68] Cf. also the third chapter of Israel Kirzner, *The Meaning of Market Process: Essays in the Development of Modern Austrian Economics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 57-69.

[69] Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge*, p. 50 and pp. 42-63.

[70] Carl Menger, *Principles of Economics* (Ludwig von Mises Institute: Auburn, 2007), p. 48.

[71] Anthony Endres, *Neoclassical Microeconomic Theory: The Founding Austrian Vision* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 18.

[72] The technical term *Bedürfnisse* is central for Menger and we translated it by "needs." It can also be translated by "wants." For a discussion, cf. Max Alter, *Carl Menger and The Origins Of Austrian Economics* (New York: Routledge, 2018). Endres also tend to use "needs" and "wants" synonymously, Endres, *Neoclassical Microeconomic Theory*, p. 20.

[73] Menger, *Principles*, p. 57.

satisfy our needs.[74] Mises gave a lot of emphasis to the fact that Menger targeted the "classical theories of value." For Mises, this "classical" (or "objectivist"[75]) theory explained the price of a good by looking at the history of its production and did not take the consumer's valuation into account.[76] This created issues like the paradox of the water and the diamond: water is an essential need for human's life but, in the marketplace, water cannot be exchanged for anything while the diamond, a mere luxury, has great worth. Using the classical economists' terminology, there was a paradox in that water had a high "use value" but had a low "exchange value." Since the demand-side of the good did not seem to offer much to explain the price of a good, it made more sense to rely on its supply-side – for instance: the price of water can be explained because it is easy to obtain water, but a diamond is expensive because one has to go to great lengths to acquire a diamond.

For Mises, a major aspect of Menger's thought is that he reverses that classical view: it is not that something on the side of the good determine its price.[77] The value of a good, Menger argued, consists in the varying importance people attribute to the satisfaction of their needs. If the satisfaction of a given need is not pressing because of an overabundance of a good that could satisfy it, then the good in question will not be highly valued. This low value will be reflected in its price in the marketplace, even up to the point where the good will not be considered a good at all. The importance of a good, says Menger, is evaluated in two ways: through "subjective" factors, i.e., through the fact that men have more important needs (e.g. hunger) and less important needs (e.g. smoking) that they rank differently; and "objectively" through the quantity of goods to which they have access and that influences the relative importance that they give to each need.[78] As we can see, Menger reversed the classical assumptions concerning prices: the value of the goods

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[74] Menger, *Principles*, p. 116. See also appendix C, pp. 292-295.

[75] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 21.

[76] This view of a "classical" theory of value is, of course, a simplification. But this simplification is one that Mises made and that is important to understand his own theory of value. Cf. for instance Mises, *Human Action*, p. 121, or Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 186. More on how Menger saw himself as targeting a "classical" theory of value and on this "simplification" in the footnote in Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge*, p. 26.

[77] Menger, *Principles*, pp. 272-273.

[78] Menger, *Principles*, p. 122.

involved in producing goods of first order is dependent on the importance people attribute to the goods of first order. Prices do not come from their costs of production or some other form of "objective" standard; they come from the valuation of the consumer.

As we can see, Menger's subjectivism pushes back on the idea that the value of a good is supposed to correspond to some "objective" standard (such as its costs of production). Instead, it is dependent on people's valuations of their own needs and on the quantity of goods they have access to.[79]

To finish this analysis of Mises' background, we only have left to address the question of prices and money, and understanding how bartering works for Menger will be central to understanding how prices and money work for Mises. On the one hand, bartering occurs when two individuals have their needs more fully satisfied by exchanging goods than by keeping their own goods. The exchange occurs only up to the point at which their needs would not be as fully satisfied with their own original goods;[80] therefore, prices mark the intervals of the extent of what each side is willing to give up in order to perform the exchange. The price takes into account the objective factors – the quantity of goods at the moment – and the subjective factors – the importance people attach to the needs they want to fulfill at a given moment.[81] Money, for Menger, is therefore a convenient commodity that facilitates these exchanges. However, its importance does not merely reside in that convenience: money becomes a measure of prices and allows one to compare goods that are not alike.

2.2 Mises' insight in Menger's theory

A major strength of Menger's theory of value is that it successfully showed that there was no such thing as a strict goods-to-needs equivalence: a quantity of goods stands in relation to a complex of needs – food, for

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[79] Cf. also Hüslmann's introduction of Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. xxxiv-xxxv
[80] Menger, *Principles*, p. 187.
[81] Menger, *Principles*, pp. 191-225 onwards.

instance, can as much satisfy a need for social distinction as it can hunger.[82] Nevertheless, for Mises, Menger's theory still had some remnants of the objectivism of the old theory of value.[83] Indeed, we saw Menger's classification of goods of first, second, third, and fourth order. For Menger, *civilizational progress* happened to the extent that there was an increasing knowledge of how things can become goods. In other words, there was civilizational progress to the extent that men became increasingly aware of the connections between these goods, and to the extent that they directed them toward the satisfaction of their needs.[84] In this vein, Menger distinguished between real needs from imaginary ones, which led him to have a specific category of imaginary goods, i.e. goods that do not truly fulfil one's needs and are the product of ignorance (such as cosmetics or tools used in idolatry).

For Mises, even though Menger had successfully showed that there was not a strict goods-to-needs correspondence, this category of imaginary needs and imaginary goods still led him to believe in a reality of underlying needs. This, for Mises, led to an inadequate view of money as an actual "measurer" of values and prices, which in turn made money a mere intermediary between needs that were very real.[85] But money, for Mises, was not a mere intermediary and had a value of its own, as the quantity of money available in the market, for instance, can cheapen money and raise prices.[86] Therefore, in the Mengerian framework, money was still a measurer of *something* objective and measurable. Money still reflected in a faithful way an underlying universe of specifiable and "real" needs; money is therefore a mere intermediary between needs that are "out there" and very real.[87]

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[82] Menger, *Principles*, p. 129. Endres, *Neoclassical Microeconomic Theory*, p. 35. Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 156; and Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 234-235.
[83] Mises, *Epistemological problems*, pp. 182-185. Endres criticizes this reading of Menger, cf. *Neoclassical Microeconomic Theory*, pp. 32-33 and pp. 37-40.
[84] Menger, *Principles*, pp. 53-54, pp. 73-74. Endres, *Neoclassical Macroeconomic Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 32-33 and 38. Paul Silverman "The Cameralistic Roots of Menger's Achievement," in Caldwell, *Carl Menger*.
[85] Ludwig von Mises, *The Theory of Money and Credit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953 [1912]), pp. 38-39.
[86] The idea that there is a money market is now very much part of current economic theory.
[87] Hülsmann, *Mises*, p. 223. Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 155.

Mises' first major work, *The Theory of Money and Credit* (1912), criticizes this conception.[88] In a deceptively small chapter, he begins by restating what we said above: it would make sense to try to establish a measure of value in a framework where value could be derived from objective factors – such as the costs of production – which would be added up in the price and represented by money. However, given the subjectivist premises set by Menger, this is no longer possible. Indeed,

(…) modern value theory has a different starting point. It conceives of value as the significance attributed to individual commodity units by a human being who wishes to consume or otherwise dispose of various commodities to the best advantage. Every economic transaction presupposes a comparison of values. But the necessity for such a comparison, as well as the possibility of it, is due only to the circumstance that the person concerned has to choose between several commodities.[89]

When one person exchanges good A for good B, the valuation this person makes is defined within the context of other valuations. For Mises, we can say of such situations that the person in question prefers A to B. In other words, we can form an idea of the intensity of the desire for one good over another, or, to use Mises' terminology, "gradation" is possible. Such gradation, however, is set within very specific circumstances where one valuation is related to countless others. It is not possible to say that these desires are in some way equivalent. "If a man exchanges two pounds of butter for a shirt, all that we can assert with regard to this transaction is that he – at the instant of the transaction and under the conditions which this instant offers to him – prefers one shirt to two pounds of butter."[90] A passage from Mises' magnum opus, *Human Action* (1949), encapsulates this quite well:

(…) [E]very act of preferring is characterized by a definite psychic intensity of the feelings it implies. There are grades in the intensity of the desire to attain a definite goal and this intensity determines the psychic profit which the successful action brings to the acting individual. But psychic quantities can only be felt. They are

[88] As Hülsmann points out, however, Mises in 1912 did not yet achieve his mature views on money (Hülsmann, *Mises*, pp. 238-240) and his subjective theory of valuation (pp. 401-402, footnote 52).
[89] Mises, *Theory of Money*, p. 38.
[90] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 205.

entirely personal, and there is no semantic means to express their intensity and to convey information about them to other people.[91]

Mises deepened Menger's insight that there is not a goods-to-needs equivalence: a multitude of goods can combine in a multitude of ways to satisfy a multitude of needs, and because each situation of valuation is different, there are no means to fully express which need is being filled at what moment through what good and to what extent.[92]

The crucial point here is that Mises sees that there is *an ungraspable relationality in what people value*. Each individual act of valuation gains its unique property *in the very valuation each person makes alongside all of the others*. When several people are valuing several goods, there is no common yardstick "out there" that could quantify their desires. As Mises would say in *Theory of Money*, "Value can rightly be spoken of only with regard to specific acts of appraisal. It exists in such connexions only; there is no value outside the process of valuation. There is no such thing as abstract value."[93]

3. Praxeology

Now that we addressed Mises' insight into Menger's subjective theory, we will analyze how Mises' notion of objectivity and science follows from this seminal insight. After describing Mises' epistemology, we will be able to see how Mises' political opponents are not just wrong *politically*, but how they rely on unobjective pseudo-sciences that arbitrarily posit human needs that, as we saw, are essentially inscrutable. This epistemology will be one of the cementing aspects of his strongly dichotomic metanarrative that he lays throughout his writings.

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[91] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 205-206. Cf. also p. 97 or 332.
[92] Compare with Menger, *Principles*, p. 129.
[93] Mises, *Theory of Money*, pp. 46-47.

3.1 The significance of the subjective theory of value for Mises' conception of science and objectivity

Mises sees the untransmittable character of human valuations as a discovery with vast consequences.[94] Philosophers and theologians of the past, he says, have always tried to answer the question of why people act the way they do and how they end up creating global effects at the social level.[95] In other words, they have always tried to determine what the "sociological laws" of society were. Thinkers like Adam Smith, for instance, have argued that self-interest was an essential motivation behind phenomena like bartering or the division of labor. But for Mises, this further insight into Menger's theory of value undermines this idea. What a person values is ineffable, and each specific act of valuation is unique.

Even more crucially, this insight into Menger's subjective theory makes the very distinction between the economic and the noneconomic untenable. Classical economists, he says, used to resort to economic motives to distinguish between economic and non-economic activity. Since the subjective theory makes clear that valuation comes from all kinds of "noneconomic" motives as well – shame, love, honor, and pride, – a criterion of distinction between what counts as "economic" and "noneconomic" can only be temporary and never final.[96] Could, perhaps, psychology pinpoint all the factors that would make a given class of men behave in a specific way in all given situations?[97] Or perhaps the study of history?[98] For Mises, these two branches of knowledge could not help us since there is a multitude of unquantifiable factors that influence the actions of human being. They can only imperfectly extrapolate future behavior on the basis of past behavior.

Mises sometimes uses the image of "the ascetic" to make this point.[99] The ascetic abhors this world and its materialism: he does not necessarily wish to be involved in this world or to consistently preserve his life

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[94] Its importance is such that he calls it a "Copernican revolution" in the social sciences. Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 162-163.

[95] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 1-2; Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 2-3.

[96] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, 63-64, 155-158, 185-190; Mises, *Human Action*, 233-235

[97] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 11-12.

[98] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 11. Mises, "Epistemological Relativism," p. 40.

[99] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 19, but cf. more details of the ascetic worldview in pp. 178-179. Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 41. Cf. also Mises, *Socialism*, pp. 364-367.

and health. Since there are ascetics in this world and since, more generally, we cannot fully determine man's ends but only contingently and tentatively, it seems that we cannot generate the much sought-after objective laws of human behavior. The ascetic will thwart our efforts by being the exception.

As we can see, Mises has high standards for what he considers to be genuine knowledge and objective laws of society and human behavior. In order to be laws of society and human behavior, they have to enunciate the conditions in which specific human behaviors always happen, and they can allow no exceptions. They must "express that which necessarily must always happen as far as the conditions they assume are given."[100] We should note, he does not mean that a doctor should not tell us what is and what is not ill-advised for our health.[101] He is saying that the variation of ends prevents that knowledge from constituting knowledge and objectivity in a full sense.

Nevertheless, Mises says that there is a way out of this problem within economics itself. When Adam Smith talked about the division of labor yielding more productivity or David Ricardo drew the law of comparative advantage, they opened the way to remove man's ends from these theorems and formalize these findings into objective laws: the laws of human action, what he initially called "sociology" but ended up calling "praxeology."[102]

3.2 Praxeology: Context

Mises believes that the laws of praxeology can be deduced a priori, and that they are self-evident, certain, and irrefutable. Understandably, what Mises' praxeology exactly means and what its status is has been subject to a lot of debate.[103] Nevertheless, these polemical ideas are essential to understanding his political thought. Indeed, similarly to what we saw with Lukács, assertions of "certainty" and "self-evidence" are

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[100] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 98. Cf. also Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, pp. 33-34.
[101] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 96-97. It is a fundamental distinction that Mises makes between praxeology and thymology, conception and understanding. Cf. especially Mises, *Theory and History*.
[102] Hülsmann, *Mises*, p. 594, and cf. Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 71-136.
[103] Cf. footnote 48 of this chapter.

essential ingredients in the formation of a strong political dichotomy between a "scientific" liberalism, on one side, and its "pseudo-scientific" opponents on the other side. We will therefore have to unpack each one of these claims. To help us, we will use the interpretation of Roderick T. Long.[104] Long analyzes at length the affinities in the thoughts of the late Wittgenstein and Mises.[105] His interpretation will help us navigate some of the most polemical aspects of Mises' praxeology.

Looking at Mises' context will help us better understand where he is trying to take us. Mises' view of science goes against the grain of the growing tendency of the time. In his writings, he identifies two trends that deny the existence of universal economic laws: "historicist" trends, on the one hand, and "empirical" trends, on the other.[106] The first, he says, argue that it is hopeless to look for universal laws of economics because knowledge cannot be separated from one's context.[107] The second models knowledge on the natural sciences and believes that it is possible to draw scientific laws by building them out of empirical observation.[108] Of these two trends, it is Mises' "empiricists," and, more specifically, the "positivists" that Mises puts together with the empiricists, that had the most success after the Second World War.[109] Karl Popper and Milton Friedman are two representative examples of what Mises would consider "positivism."[110] Popper's falsificationism posited that the possibility of falsifying a theory, not its

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[104] In a strange history of crossovers, the analytic philosopher Saul Kripke understood this connection between Mises and Wittgenstein early on in a short footnote of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 112-113, n89. There are some comments on that very footnote: cf. chapter 6 "The Analogy with von Mises" of David Bloor's *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 74-78; or also Richard McDonough, "Wittgenstein's Philosophy and Austrian Economics," *Studies in Sociology of Science*, vol. 5, nº4, 2014, pp. 1-11. Don Lavoie touches this subject in *Rivalry and Central Planning: The Socialist Calculation Debate Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), cf. the footnote in p. 173.

[105] Even though Long has not yet managed to publish it, we cannot recommend enough his *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics, and the Logic of Action: Praxeological Investigations*, unpublished manuscript, retrieved from http://praxeology.net/wiggy-draft.pdf, where he organizes many of the arguments from his other essays on the subject of Mises, Wittgenstein, and praxeology. Mario Rizzo quotes Long approvingly: "The Problem of Rationality: Austrian Economics between Classical Behaviorism and Behavioral Economics," in Peter Boettke and Christopher Coyne, *The Oxford Handbook of Austrian Economics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 379.

[106] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 5. Mises, *Human Action*, 4.

[107] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 5-8.

[108] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 8-13. Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 68-69

[109] Mises, *Ultimate Foundations*, p. 13.

[110] Mises addresses Popper's view of science in Mises, *Ultimate Foundations*, pp. 69-70.

objectivity or certainty, is the criterion for demarcating a scientific from a non-scientific theory.[111] Friedman argued that the assumptions of a theory matters less than its potential to predict future occurrences.

For Mises, a problematic aspect of this "positivist-empiricist" trend is that it sidesteps the question of what the laws of society really are. Instead, these positivist trends try to reduce science to theories that describe what reality is not, or to the predictive potential of scientific theories.[112] Even more problematic for Mises was the fact that these positivists only accepted a posteriori knowledge, i.e., knowledge derived from the observation of past experiences. As we saw above with the cases of history and psychology, extrapolation on the basis of past occurrences can be useful for the natural sciences, but it cannot produce objectivity in the human sciences since men can always act differently and away from the human ends that the scientist posits on the basis of past behavior.

How does Mises avoid this positivist trend? And how does he establish objective laws of society? In a few words, Mises says that, to the extent that human beings act, then they must use categories inherent in the structure of the human mind to fulfil their ends. Classical economics, says Mises, contain some of the categories that form the basis of this science of human action, such as "costs," "benefits," "exchange," or "value." For instance, when a human being weights whether he wants to do A over B (say, getting an ice cream or go fine dining), he weights the costs and benefits of undertaking course A or B. When he weights A and B, he is establishing a scale of value. And when he chooses A over B, he "exchanges" one situation over the other in the sense that he sacrificed times and resources by choosing one alternative over the other. By removing the self-interest motive of classical economics, Mises says, we can formalize and generalize these categories, and we can then systematize and draw the laws behind how human beings act ("the logic of human action"). When human beings act, Mises say, they must use specific categories to do so, and economics contain some of these inherent categories.

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[111] Although Popper also argued that we can approach truth by progressively discarding falsified theories: Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 485-511, especially p. 491.
[112] Mises, *Ultimate Foundations*, p. 70.

To understand Mises' praxeology, we should give one last example that will help us understand where Mises is trying to get at. More specifically, we can look at the recent literature on embodied knowledge and, especially, Charles Taylor and the late Hubert Dreyfus's *Retrieving Realism*.

In *Retrieving Realism*,[113] Taylor and Dreyfus criticize the epistemology of Richard Rorty. In a few words, Rorty argued that it was hopeless to make a hard distinction between believing and knowing: if I say that I know *p*, then I am simply saying that I have reasons to believe in *p*. Indeed, if I say that I "know" *p* in a hard sense, then I am also saying that I can hold my belief in *p* against all future arguments that could try to refute *p*. Since it seems impossible to know in this hard sense, then we should simply treat "knowing" *p* as "having reasons to believe" *p*.[114]

Taylor and Dreyfus counter Rorty's reasoning with an argument (unintentionally) reminiscent of Mises'. Human beings, they argued, have a primordial and preconceptual "knowing" in the sense that there are some things that they *do* and that are *beyond dispute,* lest they frustrate their goals and fail to fulfill their needs.[115] Human beings are primordially beings that are engaged in the world and that bring about certain results. The sharp distinction between "knowing" and "believing" is part of a detached, theoretical attitude that only comes after this primordial, acting attitude.

This preconceptual "knowing-acting," and this is another of Mises' points,[116] is also the basis for our communication with others. We understand ourselves and the others as human beings acting in the understanding, seeking to fulfil our goals, and so forth. Taylor and Dreyfus argue that, even if I am in an entirely different culture, there are basic things that we know universally about our interlocutors that enable us to start learning their language right away. I can, for instance, point to a "moving thing," a "rabbit," and

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[113] Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2015).
[114] We're following Rorty's argument in his opening essay "Universality and Truth" in Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 10.
[115] Taylor and Dreyfus, *Retrieving Realism*, pp. 18-19, p. 69, but cf. especially p. 71 onwards.
[116] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 35.

know that it is useless to point at the rabbit if the interlocutor has a blocked view. As Dreyfus and Taylor say,

> The reality of contact with the real world is the inescapable fact of human (or animal) life, and can only be imagined away by erroneous philosophical argument. And it is in virtue of this contact with a common world that we always have something to say to each other, something to point to in disputes about reality.[117]

As we can see, Taylor and Dreyfus talk of "preconceptual knowledge," while Mises speaks of the categories that are part of the "structure of the mind."[118] But the three are interested in innate/primordial forms of knowledge that exist because of the fact that human beings are in a world that imposes constraints on them. These constraints, in turn, lead human beings to innately/primordially see themselves and their peers as acting beings. What are some elements of this preconceptual knowledge that is essential for us, human beings, to attain our objectives as acting beings? This is the subject toward which we now turn.

3.3 Some praxeological categories

For Mises, notions such as "costs," "benefits," "exchange," "value," or even "medium of exchange" are all concepts from classical economics that can be formalized and that can give us an idea of these basic categories. In other words, praxeology consists in generalizing and formalizing categories from classical economics in order to include all means and all ends; we stretch them to such an extent that they include what the classical paradigm considered to be "noneconomic" means.[119] By emptying classical economics from its view of an economic man who is trying to satisfy his self-interest, we can have a grasp of some of the basic, pre-conceptual notions that human beings must necessarily have to successfully attain their objectives.

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[117] Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, p. 107.
[118] Cf. Dreyfus and Taylor's disagreement with McDowell, *Retrieving Realism*, p. 72 and 75.
[119] Cf. also Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, pp. 14-15.

But how will Mises formalize economic models that up until this point postulated some kind of self-interest, a *homo economicus* that aimed at his material well-being? Perhaps we could postulate a few dominant ends, such as the preservation of life, food, or shelter. But Mises wants to empty "ends" of all content. He argues that the objective and scientific character of praxeology would be compromised if, at this level, we assumed some set of ends, even if very dominant ones.[120] By assuming some content in a person's end(s), Mises argues, praxeology would only be objective up to the moment where that person would act with different ends in mind. Here, again, we are faced with the problem of the ascetic that does not consistently want to preserve his life and health. By assuming some definite set of human ends (such as the fact that men are self-interested), the laws of human behavior thus drawn would only apply up to the moment where a person would not act in a self-interested way. They would not always occur given the presuppositions that we give.

Therefore, a genuine science of human action must remain formal and empty in order to not compromise its objectivity.[121] Mises will say that *happiness*, understood in a formal and empty sense, is the only end we can scientifically ascribe to the acting man: all men strive toward a state of rest in which they no longer need to strive.[122] The acting man understands that he is in a world of scarce resources and that one's needs cannot be fully satisfied. Man has specific ends he wishes to attain, and he uses limited means to do so.[123] He knows that he cannot fulfil all his needs equally, so man chooses and categorizes situations in which his subjectively-chosen "basic" needs can be satisfied first before other types of needs. In a world of scarcity, men have to act in order to satisfy their most urgent needs with the least expenditure.

From there, it is easier to understand what Mises means by a science of human "action": man "acts" in the sense that he "exchanges" one unsatisfactory situation for a more satisfactory one.[124] From this seminal notion, Mises says, we can simultaneously grasp other neighboring concepts, such as the fact that man

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[120] Mises, *Theory and History*, pp. 35-36.
[121] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 96. Mises, *Ultimate Foundation*, p. 77
[122] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 159-161. Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 14-15, but also p. 93; Mises, *Socialism*, pp. 113-114.
[123] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 33-34.
[124] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 97-98; Mises, *Theory and History*, pp. 20-21.

"values" and makes "scales of values."[125] Indeed, when humans try to shift from an unsatisfactory state to a more satisfactory one, it means that they are able to establish and enact preferences.[126] We can also understand "gain," "exchange," "price," and "cost." When humans act and make valuations, they also understand what it means to have "costs" or to experience a "gain" because they are trying to improve their condition. For instance, I want to go get a glass of water to quench my thirst. But, for that, I will have to stand up and make the effort of getting the water, which will interrupt my study. However, if I get a bottle of water instead of a glass, then I will have "accumulated" water for later when I will be thirsty again, which will in turn enable less frequent water breaks and more productive study.

Mises also makes the startling claim that, by contradicting these praxeological categories, we must necessarily contradict ourselves in the same breath.[127] A good way to understand this idea is to look at another of Mises' claim, i.e. that there is only *one* logic.[128] Mises insists that only logic can help us deal with reality because we necessarily *act* in a logical manner. I could counter Mises and say that what he calls logical, I call illogical, and vice-versa (against him, I could *say* that I see the rabbit through the obstacle). And, of course, I can *say* that. But this is exactly Mises' point: what one *says* logic is and what logic actually *is* are two different things. It would be a category mistake to mix what we say about logic and the way we act as human beings.[129] And when I act, I act to the extent that I obey logic. If I am talking with someone who denies logic, then the person will be *using* logic in order to refute me. Mises often repeats that the study of the history of logic or the psychology of other logics cannot contribute in any way to the study of logic itself. By distinguish the use logic and its speculative aspect, we can now better understand what Mises means with this claim.[130]

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[125] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 24-25

[126] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 25.

[127] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 34. Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, p. 14.

[128] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 24-25 and p. 68. Mises, *Theory and history*, p. 305.

[129] Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, p. 14.

[130] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 36-38.

Mises also argues that the axioms of praxeology are "self-evident": they can be neither refuted nor proved.[131] Someone would have to use logic in order to refute praxeology. The praxeological categories are an integral part of being human. Taking again our example from Taylor and Dreyfus, we could explain through words and gestures what it is to not be able to see a rabbit through an obstacle, but we cannot transmit the actual experience of not being able to see it. We cannot even *conceive* of someone who would think in categories at odds with these basic human notions: we can conceive of someone who, because there is a hole in the obstacle or because the person has superman's "x-ray vision," could see through the obstacle, but we cannot conceive of a human being who does not, *like us*, think in terms of being unable to see a moving object when there is an obstacle in front of him.

> The fundamental logical relations are not subject to proof or disproof. Every attempt to prove them must presuppose their validity. It is impossible to explain them to a being who would not possess them on his own account. Efforts to define them according to the rules of definition must fail. They are primary propositions antecedent to any nominal or real definition. They are ultimate unanalyzable categories. The human mind is utterly incapable of imagining logical categories at variance with them. No matter how they may appear to superhuman beings, they are for man inescapable and absolutely necessary. They are the indispensable prerequisite of perception, apperception, and experience.[132]

For Mises, the "certainty" of praxeology also derives from the fact that we "know" these things; they are self-evident to us. We "know" that our thirst would be quenched if we were to fetch a glass of water. Whether this *will* happen is part of the future and, for Mises, no certainty is possible there. After all, many things could prevent me from getting my glass of water. We should always remember that the propositions of praxeology are conditional: if and only if all the conditions are present will I be able to get my glass of water.[133]

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[131] Cf. Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, p. 57, p. 69 and the quotes
[132] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 34.
[133] For a statement on this, cf. Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, p. 33.

Finally, we can understand one of Mises' points that has created the most confusion, i.e. that the categories of praxeology are *a priori*. Mises even compared praxeology to mathematics or geometry.[134] This claim has muddled what Mises meant because his "apriorism" was compared to others', such as Kant's. We know today that Mises meant something less drastic than a form of knowledge independent from real-world experience in some hard sense.[135] What he meant was that the categories of praxeology can be inferred from one's armchair and without having to resort to the real world. Just as I can reflect on triangles and on the principles of mathematics without having to think about concrete triangular tables, so too can praxeology be reflected upon without real-world examples.[136]

Before closing this section, we will address one last point that will come back in Mises' argument on the impossibility of socialism: his idea that "medium of exchange" is also a praxeological category. Here, we have to understand that there is a "phenomenological" side in praxeology. For Mises, we apprehend ourselves as acting individuals and make sense of the people around us through their actions (i.e., as human beings that value, satisfy their needs, and so forth). Similarly, human beings apprehend what it means for something to be a medium of indirect exchange.[137] Indeed, money is not just a bag of coins I happen to have or the dollar bill. We can, after all, decide to use dollar bills as bookmarks or to play with coins instead of

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[134] Even though he compares praxeology with mathematics and geometry, he also advises that they're not the same. Cf. the first pages of *Ultimate Foundations*, especially pp. 4-5.

[135] Roger Koppl cites this excellent passage from an interview with Machlupp: "Construction is always a priori, even if you construe with some experience in mind. The domain of construction needs constructs and postulated relationships between constructs, but it is itself not the result of observation; it is a priori. So you don't have to take these distinctions so seriously as Mises himself did and as some of his followers do today." In *Big Players and the Economic Theory of Expectations* (Houndmills: Palagrave, 2002), p. 34. Cf. also Hülsmann's introduction to Mises' *Epistemological Problems*, pp. xlii-xliii, and the first chapter of Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*.

[136] Nor does it mean that these categories are, like floating platonic ideas, separated from the empirical world. Mises, in fact, offers the hypothesis that perhaps there were different categories and logics in the evolution of man from a primate. But since *these* categories were the ones that helped man survive and evolve, man kept using them. Man went on to understand what costs and benefits were, what an exchange is, how to value, and even what a medium of exchange is. What *is* logic and how it *came to be* are two different things: it would be a category mistake to mix them both. It is not because we cannot make sense of the study of mathematics outside of attributing it to "real" things such as triangles or squares that we must consequently say that mathematics is not a priori. Cf. Mises, *Ultimate Foundations*, p. 8, pp. 15-16, and Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 34-35, pp. 86-87.

[137] We follow a lot of Long here: Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, p. 27

exchanging with them.[138] If everyone started doing so, we would not perceive these items as money. It is because others see money as mediums of indirect exchange and use it as such that we recognize a given money as a medium and not as something else.

3.4 Rationality and the limits of science

We can now better understand how Mises sees a deep congeniality between science, economics, objectivity, and certainty. Thanks to economics, we have a better understanding of the proper boundaries of science. The discovery that the ends of men are ultimately ineffable does not stray us in nihilism but, on the contrary, gives us insight into what we can objectively know. All these in turn are profoundly linked with Mises' thorough commitment to a thinking geared toward practical consequences. In other words: knowledge, objectivity, economics, and science make sense to the extent that human beings can achieve the goals they aim at.

> The real thing which is the subject matter of praxeology, human action, stems from the same source as human reasoning. Action and reason are congeneric and homogeneous; they may even be called two different aspects of the same thing (…) action is an offshoot of reason[139]

This congeniality between action and thought becomes very clear when we see Mises' practical view of rationality. Indeed, for Mises, just as the boundary between the "economic" and the "noneconomic" becomes untenable, so the boundary between "rationality" and "irrationality" becomes untenable as well. For Mises, in the classical economic model, someone was "rational" to the extent that he managed to fulfil his material well-being. But since valuations have origins in "economic" as well as "noneconomic" factors, "rationality" is now emptied of its content as well. To claim that an action is "irrational" because it has ends

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[138] Here, Lawrence White is aptly quoted by Long in a footnote: "It is not the case that whatever any individual in an economy plans to use as money is properly considered part of the economy's stock of money. (…) Moneyness depends not merely on one person's plans, but on an interwoven net of many individuals' plans." Long, *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics*, p. 27, footnote 33.

[139] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 39. Cf. Rizzo, "The Problem of Rationality," p. 380.

with which we disagree is to pronounce a value judgment, and therefore to step outside of the objectivity of praxeology. Praxeology therefore assumes that action, if taken in this specific sense, is always "rational."[140] For Mises, this is how we can talk of an action being "rational": it uses the best means available to achieve one's given ends.[141] Is "rational" an action that is successful in fulfilling the ends that the acting agent chose. A doctor, for instance, who claims she wishes to cure her patient is "rational" because she uses the best means available to her to carry out her aim, i.e., to cure her patient.[142] Action is always rational in the sense that the actor best achieves his subjectively chosen ends with means that are scarce.

For Mises, the subjective theory of value (and especially the further insight that he gave to Menger's theory) is able to solve the problem of objectivity in epistemology by sidestepping the question altogether. The way he sees it, the thinkers of the past erroneously tried to presuppose man's ends. This, in turn, led to the introduction of metaphysical postulates that led to endless strife among doctrines. For Mises, economics was the first branch of knowledge to understand how a person's subjective valuations are formed and, in this way, it was finally able to shift the attention away from attempts to distinguish "rational" (i.e., subjectively-perceived *reasonable* actions) from "irrational" ones.

> When we ascribe the character of universal validity and objectivity to the propositions of catallactics, objectivity is not only to be understood in the usual and literal epistemological sense, but also in the sense of freedom from the taint of value judgment (…). Only the subjective theory of value, which treats every value judgment, i.e., every subjective valuation, in the same way in order to explain the formation of exchange ratios and which makes no attempt whatever to separate "normal" action from "abnormal" action, lives up to this demand. The discussion of value judgments would have been more fruitful if those who took part in it had been familiar with modern economics and had understood how it solves the problem of objectivity.[143]

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[140] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 34-37, p. 157.
[141] Cf. Rizzo, "The Problem of Rationality."
[142] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 20.
[143] Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 96.

Science gives up the hopeless cause of trying to scrutinize the ineffable ultimate and metaphysical aims of man, and it shifts its attention to means-ends considerations.

> The limits of scientific method are misconceived when one attributes to it the role of judge and valuer; the nature of scientific method is misunderstood when it is expected to influence action not merely by showing the effectiveness of means to ends but also by determining the relative value of the ends themselves.[144]

Therefore, for Mises, it is better to aim for the more modest position of looking at the logic of action itself. This is why Mises, for instance, sometimes criticizes debates on whether external reality exists or not. One could doubt the fact that there is an external reality, but this ultimately irrelevant for praxeology. In terms of the concrete actions of the individual looking for the adequate means to fulfil his chosen ends, it is not clear what difference this interrogation could make. The individual cannot fulfil his ends in a fiat and, therefore, he resorts to aprioristic categories that help him in his life.

> From the praxeological point of view it is not possible to question the real existence of matter, of physical objects and of the external world. Their reality is revealed by the fact that man is not omnipotent. There is in the world something that offers resistance to the realization of his wishes and desires. Any attempt to remove by a mere fiat what annoys him and to substitute a state of affairs that suits him better for a state of affairs that suits him less is vain. If he wants to succeed, he must proceed according to methods that are adjusted to the structure of something about which perception provides him with some information. We may define the external world as the totality of all those things and events that determine the feasibility or unfeasibility, the success of failure, of human action.[145]

By looking at the logic of action, we avoid intractable problems and are able to produce the surest form of knowledge there is. To be sure, Mises believes that economics is, *so far*, the most elaborated part of this general science of action, but he says that other fields will have to grapple with the problem of subjective valuation at one point or another.[146] In any case, the discovery of this science of human action (that, in the

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[144] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 10, see also Mises, *Socialism*, p. 102.
[145] Mises, *Ultimate Foundations*, p. 6, or also cf. p. 81; or also Mises, *Human Action*, p. 92.
[146] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 3; Mises, *Theory and History*, p. 309,

future, might extend to other sciences) was nothing short of a profound revolution. Even though he sometimes says that he is not intending to make a contribution to philosophy or epistemology but only to economics, we understand that his claim to have found the surest form of knowledge possible and, in fact, the *only* way to speak of human society (apodictically) is a big discovery indeed.[147]

Most importantly, this view of science and objectivity finds its greatest practical fulfilment in politics and in Mises' liberalism. It is to this subject that we now turn.

4. Politics

4.1 What is liberalism?

Liberalism, says Mises, is an ideology and a political program that derives from the discoveries of science and economics, and this program has brought (and, if re-adopted, could bring even more) incalculable benefits to mankind. These incalculable benefits are one of the elements that grounds Mises' preference for science and liberalism and that help us understand why liberalism, science, objectivity, and rationality are so close (while, in turn, they explain why socialism has the exact opposite aims of liberalism and represents pseudo-science, arbitrariness, and irrationality). Apart from the evident benefits that exist in following a demonstrably rational and scientific policy, a radical metanarrative is also naturally based on the beneficial consequences that one side would bring over the other. We analyze these consequences in this section, as well as the specific points of the program of liberalism that, as we will see, are also highly attractive: freedom, equality, peace, and democracy.

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[147] Cf. the preface of *Ultimate Foundations* and pp. 1-2. Cf. also *Theory and History* where he says that "There is only one way of dealing with all problems of social organization and the conduct of the members of society, viz., the method applied by praxeology and economics," p. 55.

We should begin by defining what an ideology is for Mises. Ideologies are collections of ideas that offer an interpretation of what it means to act socially and of the kind of conduct that individuals should have.[148] They are important because they give to the acting person a sense of the advantages one can gain by acting in certain ways toward other persons. It performs the double function of "filling" man's ends and it raises or lowers the stakes of acting socially in a given manner.[149] For instance, a society dominated by a racial ideology might lead the acting person to see trade with other people of his own race as beneficial, and trade with other races as harmful.[150] If an ideology attributes a divine origin to the political power, then it might disincentivize dissent with the establishment.[151]

As we can see, to speak of ideologies is to shift from a scientific point of view agnostic about man's ends to one focusing on public policy. For Mises, the first step to shift from a strictly scientific point of view to a political one is by ascribing a specific set of ends. Mises determines the ends of liberalism in the following way: it is a fact, he says, that most men desire wealth over poverty, life over death, and prosperity over misery. Mises admits that his liberalism cannot satisfy everyone and, consequently, to ascribe these ends means to exclude some groups like the ascetics (who, as we saw earlier, do not give much value to life, health, and prosperity). Since we cannot know what mankind's ultimate values are, the liberal polity has no pretension to accommodate absolutely everyone. It tries to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number with ends that are as dominant as possible.

These ends, he argues, can be best achieved through the deepening of the division of labor. For Mises, the division of labor is the fundamental fact of social life: human beings are more productive when they cooperate to satisfy their needs than when they work in isolation.[152] In fact, he says, the first steps of man's rationality occurred when human beings went beyond than the satisfaction of their most direct needs and

[148] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 178.
[149] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 644.
[150] Mises, Ultimate Foundations, pp. 81-82.
[151] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 177-178. Cf. also Mises, *Theory and History*, pp. 370-371.
[152] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 143-145.

started to think in the long term. Hunting can be more efficient if I make a bow, or I can fetch more water if I make a bucket. Men sacrificed time they could have spent to satisfy their needs but, by sacrificing this time, they were able to achieve more and better goods to better satisfy their basic needs.[153] In the same way, humans made yet another step in their rationality by working together to remove their uneasiness. As Mises says, "Society is a product of human action, i.e., the human urge to remove uneasiness as far as possible."[154]

The division of labor is key for Mises. The "early" Mises of *Socialism* describes the importance of the division of labor in much more sweeping terms than the "later" Mises.[155] But even in *Human Action*, Mises still described the division of labor as the great cosmic principle that is present in all life, human and animal. The difference between man and animals, however, is that mankind can understand and apply this knowledge in order to better its condition:

> The principle of the division of labor is one of the great basic principles of cosmic becoming and evolutionary change. The biologists were right in borrowing the concept of the division of labor from social philosophy and in adapting it to their field of investigation. There is division of labor between the various parts of any living organism. (…) Human society is an intellectual and spiritual phenomenon. It is the outcome of a purposeful utilization of a universal law determining cosmic becoming, viz., the higher productivity of the division of labor. As with every instance of action, the recognition of the laws of nature is put into the service of man's efforts to improve his conditions.[156]

To be sure, at the primitive level of the household, man's *economic calculations* are still relatively uncomplex. If I am an isolated farmer, I can roughly determine how much water I will need to produce the required hay so that my cows can produce milk. As social cooperation and the division of labor deepen, this primitive method of calculation becomes increasingly more complex but also more reliable: I rely on my neighbor to give me the required hay for my cows, and I can spend more time doing something else.

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[153] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 159-160.
[154] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 146.
[155] For instance, Mises, *Socialism*, pp. 259-261, p. 265, or p. 275. Cf. also Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 18 or p. 26.
[156] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 144-145.

The tool I rely on to make these increasingly complex economic operations wherein I increasingly rely on an ever-growing network of goods and services is *money*. While human beings originally directly exchanged one good for another, this method was less accurate and more cumbersome than the modern establishment of a *medium of indirect exchange*.

As we can see, thanks to a growing division of labor and tools (e.g., money), humans deepened their social cooperation and further removed their uneasiness. However, Mises says that, for most of man's history, societies remained at a primitive level where the division of labor was still very undeveloped.[157] Indeed, before the arrival of liberalism, a "war of all against all" predominated. Dynasties ruled arbitrarily through violence and freely disposed of their subjects' property.[158] This, in turn, prevented the deepening of the division of labor. In other words, at the time where the first scientific and economic breakthrough were being made (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), a lagging ideology still reigned, dominated by short-term considerations. This war of all against all prevented the emergence of the stability necessary for fruitful production and generalized abundance, as well as intellectual and civilizational progress in general. Up to the eighteenth century, this "*Imperialismus*,"[159] as he sometimes calls it, reigned, and whatever civilizational gains made were always derived from moments when the powerful, for one reason or another, gave to the individuals some margin of power over their own properties.[160]

For Mises, this short-term ideology is very much linked to the fact that the rulers of the past (along with theologians and philosophers) claimed to know the ultimate ends of man (whether God, Nature, or History).[161] The history of the discovery of economics is, on the contrary, the history of the realization that there is a form of knowledge that does not have to be about ultimate ends. It was when economists and philosophers noticed that society had underlying laws of cooperation that liberalism emerged and the first

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[157] Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 188. Mises, *Socialism*, pp. 275-276. Mises, *Theory and History*, pp. 234-235.

[158] Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, pp. 65-66, especially pp. 108-109. Compare with Mises, *Omnipotent Government*, pp. 18-21.

[159] Cf. Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, or "militarism" in Mises, *Theory and History*, p. 351, or Mises, *Ultimate Foundations*, p. 81.

[160] Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 18; Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 761-762.

[161] Mises, *Ultimate Foundations*, p. 82.

effects of fruitful cooperation began to be felt. Civilization made leaps like never before, both intellectually and materially. The history of economics is the history of how men came to understand that society had laws to which its members can adjust and reap the benefits of this knowledge.[162] And, finally, it is the history of how the West came to realize that, if its inhabitants use these insight to think in the long-term instead of the short-term, they will benefit more from living together. Essentially, economics is the rise of the idea that benefits can be derived from having a stable environment in which the acting person can carry out valuations and calculations.

The period around the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries was a time without precedent, when the wave of liberalism began. The essence of liberalism for Mises consists in making everyone understand that the interest of the majority can be best assured through the application of the program of liberalism. The liberal idea of self-determination, i.e., the idea that a nation and its people should be able to determine their own future and policies without being commanded by autocrats, was foremost.[163] The ideas of liberalism are the application of the science of economics to political life and, therefore, they are geared toward deepening social cooperation between citizens. Liberalism advocates that property has to be respected, that exchanges had to be liberalized, that there should be toleration, and that nations should strive for peace. For Mises, the benefits of liberalism when it was first implemented were immense: infant mortality dropped, toleration of opinions began, persecutions ceased, education was widespread, anyone with talent could rise in society, all lived better than any of the noblemen of the past, and "Optimists were already hailing the dawn of the age of eternal peace."[164]

By now, we can already see the importance that this historical account has for Mises' metanarrative. According to Mises, the discovery and deepening of the subjective theory of value is linked to the development of economics. In turn, these insights and developments are applied in politics through the

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[162] Cf. Joseph Salerno, "Ludwig von Mises as Social Rationalist," *Review of Austrian Economics*, vol. 4, pp. 26-54 and Joseph T. Salerno, "Mises and Hayek Dehomogenized," *Review of Austrian Economics*, vol. 6, nº2, pp. 113-46.
[163] Mises, *Omnipotent Government*, p. 80.
[164] Mises, *Liberalism*, pp. 1-2.

supremely beneficent program of liberalism. We can see the struggles between a rational vision concerned with the long-term and the benefit of the majority of mankind, versus a short-term vision that, refusing to take the insights of science into account, arrogates to itself the right to tell what are the ultimate ends of man. This description is very suggestive of Mises' great opponent, socialism, and it is also thanks to this story he writes that Mises is able to connect together socialism with a host of opponents that are bundled in their attempts at ascribing the ultimate ends of man.

Before closing this section, we should briefly refer the elements of the liberal program. Each one strictly derives from Mises' consequentialist approach and he opposes it to deontological approach of the "old liberals" of the nineteenth century.

For instance, freedom and equality, says Mises, were once understood in a metaphysical sense, as something natural to some or all men, or as a gift from God. For Mises, freedom and equality must be given to all and without distinction, not because of some natural law, but because it is the most beneficial course of action in the long term. Indeed, a system where all are free yields greater productivity. A servant has less incentives than a free man to produce more. Even the interests of the masters, in the long term, is hurt by any kind of servitude.[165] Mises also advocates the equal treatment of all men in the eye of the law and he uses the same consequentialist reasoning: to disfranchise some part of the population will simply create tensions that will upset the cooperating order. The creation of class privileges would create a society where the privileged faction would always have to be prepared to face an onslaught from the unprivileged one.[166]

Democracy falls into the same type of reasoning. For Mises, democracy is a way of avoiding violence, thanks to the vote of the majority.[167] The older liberals, he says, believed that democracy was an inherent right of mankind. In fact, Mises argues, democracy is simply cogent with social peace.[168] The government

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[165] Mises, *Liberalism*, pp. 21-22

[166] Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 28.

[167] Mises, *Liberalism*, pp. 39-42.

[168] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 153.

cannot govern without the assent of the governed. Democracy is therefore the best mean to preserve that peace.

Foreign policy follows the same idea as well: peace and division of labor. Liberalism does not consider that there is any opposition between domestic and foreign policy. Indeed, says Mises, the liberal has a world-embracing vision and therefore the very distinction between domestic and foreign policy only holds for purposes of convenience and classification. Here again, the early Mises is much more sweeping and forceful about this idea than the later one: "The ultimate ideal envisioned by liberalism is the perfect cooperation of all mankind, taking place peacefully and without friction. Liberal thinking always has the whole of humanity in view and not just parts."[169] Ideally, the division of labor should one day encompass the entire humanity. For Mises, ideas such as the removal of protectionist measures, freedom of movement and goods, all foreign policies also follow from this essential idea of furthering cooperation and the division of labor.

Liberalism, for Mises, is thus entirely coherent with these policies – democracy, freedom, equality, liberal foreign policy – because they are united in their effects. They maintain and further the cooperation of individuals within a market economy; they deepen the division of labor. Therefore, *capitalism* (by which he means a social system where property is privately owned) is entirely bound together with the liberal ideology. Liberalism wants to achieve a free market where the intervening power of the state is at a minimum.

4.2 The connection between liberalism and property

We are still left with an important question: why does Mises believe that liberalism and capitalism are so profoundly interwoven together? Perhaps the aims of liberalism could be better fulfilled through *socialism* (i.e., a social system where property is owned collectively). Perhaps one should not adopt the liberal but

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[169] Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 105.

the socialist ideology and fight for a system that will establish a rational organization of production and redistribute resources according to each person's needs.

Mises does not consider that liberals throughout history have always understood how central private property was for liberalism. For Mises, however, science has evolved and it has now become clear what had been the real core of liberalism all along: property.[170] From property, he says, the other elements of liberalism can be deduced. We here arrive at one of the core elements of Mises' political theory. We will now describe why, in Mises' terminology, liberalism is the most *rational* alternative, i.e. why it is indeed the best mean to achieve the dominant ends of life, wealth, and prosperity.

One of the works in which he is most forceful about his description of ownership is his early *Socialism*. However, we should keep in mind the distinction we made between an "early" and a "later" Mises. The "later" Mises will deemphasize his former description of ownership. In fact, already in *Socialism*, Mises admits that his description of ownership is one that is far from how it is conventionally understood.[171] Nevertheless, introducing Mises' early notion of ownership will enable us to fully understand the place of liberalism as a "democracy" and of socialism as a "despotism."

According to the Mises of *Socialism*, one colloquially speaks of "property" in a legal, formal sense: the law merely sanctions an exclusive power to control and dispose of specific goods to specific individuals. There is however an economic and more natural sense of "ownership" that the juridical conception overlooks: the physical enjoyment of a good. While consumption goods cannot be subdivided among many owners – an apple can only be consumed by one person – it is possible for production goods to have multiple owners in this economic sense. Production goods can produce the consumption goods of many people and, therefore,

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[170] "The classical economists were not (…) fully aware that the private property order alone offers the foundation for a society based on division of labor, and that the public property system is unworkable." Ludwig von Mises, *A Critique of Interventionism* (Irvington-on-Hudson: Foundation for Economic Education, 1996). The classical economists' lack of a solid theory of value led them to be seduced by the socialists' scheme: Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 206-207. Cf. also Mises, *Liberalism*, p. 3. Cf. also Hülsmann's considerations on how Mises brings liberalism "up to date" in *Mises*, p. 556-557.
[171] Mises, *Socialism*, pp. 41-42.

they indirectly participate in the physical enjoyment of many people. In a self-sufficient farm, says Mises, the farmer can indeed claim to be the owner of the means of production in the sense that these only serve him. But in a more complex system of division of labor, the farmer's means of production are owned in two senses. First, they are owned by the farmer in the "physical" sense that he directs the means of production toward the consumers. And, second, they are owned in a "social" sense by anyone who buys what is generated by these means of production.

As we can see, what Mises is trying to convey is that, contrarily to what his socialist opponents think, the owner of the means of production are not "exclusive owners" of their lands and fabrics. In an unfettered capitalist system, the owner has no other choice but to bow to the decisions of the consumers. In fact, and even though Mises concedes that this terminology would be too cumbersome, one should see the consumers as the true owners of these means of production in the original sense, while one should see the supposed "owners" as mere administrators.

If we develop Mises' reasoning in *Socialism* to the end, its surprising conclusion is that, in a thoroughly free market, private property does not exist. Mises' understanding of natural ownership breaks down the distinction between consumers and producers: everyone is a consumer according to Mises, and the consumers are the ones who "own" the means of production by "commanding" the producers.[172] In an

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[172] When he addresses ownership in p. 42, Mises quotes Horace in a footnote:

If what's bought with scales and copper coin is yours,
Ownership comes by use too, if you believe lawyers:
Any land that feeds you is yours: Orbius' steward
When he harrows the field that will soon give you grain,
Treats you like an owner. You give the money for grapes,
Poultry, eggs, a jar of wine

He could have left the next part of the poem, it finely completes his idea:

Poultry, eggs, a jar of wine: aren't you buying that farm
Bit by bit, once purchased outright for three hundred
Thousand *sesterces* or it might be for even more?
What matter whether you paid for it just now or then?

Horace, *Epistles*, Book II, Epistle II, retrieved from https://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineashoracesatepap.php

unfettered, free market, the "real" owner is everyone: "in the society based on division of labour everyone is the servant of all and all the masters of each (…)."[173] In later writings, Mises would deemphasize this description and give it a less central importance.[174] In his 1958 lecture "Liberty and Property," he will say instead "[In capitalism,] [t]here prevails a *tendency* to efface *to some extent* the once sharp difference between those who own factors of production and those who do not."[175]

Thanks to this explanation, it is now easier to see in what sense Mises' division of economic systems is Aristotelian.[176] There is the rule of one, of the many, or of the few; socialism, capitalism, and syndicalism. Mises often talks about capitalism as a "consumers' democracy" and about the "sovereignty of the consumer."[177] In this "market democracy," says Mises, every penny spent by the consumer decides of what good and what quantity of this good will be produced. The market place is the consumers' ballot, a daily election. An entrepreneur's wealth is only his to the extent that he satisfies the consumers; if the entrepreneur does not bow to the wishes of the consumer, he loses the democracy's elections and is thrown out of the competition.

Even though the criticism of socialism through the idea of ownership is an idea that is more present in the "earlier" Mises of *Socialism*, we can see how socialism is a despotism.[178] For the Mises of *Socialism*, socialism is the attempt to transfer the legal and physical ownership of the means of production to the State so that it can be used "for the many and not for the few." Since, as we will see, socialism is incapable of putting the means of production at the disposition of all, socialism reestablishes the separation between

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[173] Mises, *Socialism*, p. 276.
[174] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 678-680.
[175] In *Liberty and Property*, p. 46 (the emphasis is our own). He says that, if the market is unfettered, then there is a tendency for the employee to invest and himself become the dreaded Marxist "exploiter."
[176] Mises is critical of the Aristotelian division when applied to political regimes. For him, this distinction gave the wrong impression that we should equate a democratic government with freedom. In fact, he argues, the tyranny of the public opinion often led to the suppression of opinions that are contrary to the ones of the majority. TH, 65-68
[177] Socialism, p. 443. Cf. also Ludwig von Mises, *Interventionism: An Economic Analysis* (Iwington-on-Hudson: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1998 [written in 1940]), pp. 2-3. Cf. also the argument of *Liberty and Property*.
[178] Mises, *Liberty and Property*, p. 25

consumer and producer and ends up, ironically, directing production for the few and not the many by favoring a given group of producers or of political leaders.

If it is in this sense that Mises' theory is "democratic" and that the socialism he opposes is "despotic," it also becomes clearer why Mises sees syndicalism as an "oligarchic" system. For Mises, syndicalism is a middle-ground between the rule of the consumer and the rule of the supreme planner: it is the rule of the producer.[179] It is an attempt to emulate a kind of pseudo-market by creating a "market of groups" (groups of workers, for instance, or even corporations). The groups would exchange goods between them and attempt to generate prices in the same way a free market would. But for Mises this would mean a system built for the producer and not for the consumer. Part of the reason behind syndicalism, Mises says, is the demonization of the free market's entrepreneur: he "irresponsibly" uses vast amounts of capital, and through his "speculation," he "gambles" with people's lives. But for Mises the entrepreneur is analogous to the politician of this democracy: he hunts for votes, satisfies his clients so that they keep buying from him, and tries to convince the consumer that his products are essential to them. In syndicalism, however, the entrepreneur is at best a formal functionary: the producers themselves are who need to be satisfied. It is the rule of the few and not of the many.

4.3 Why socialism is impossible and capitalism is the only possible system

We saw in our last section that, for Mises, capitalism is like a democracy with voters-consumers that are being served by entrepreneurs-politicians. But the strength of Mises' view and the extent to which capitalism and liberalism are rational are not yet fully evident with this analogy. We still need to take two more steps before we can see how Mises decisively consolidate his metanarrative and the set of cues that he has on each side. First, we must see what is problematic about socialism, i.e. in what sense exactly socialism represents an irrational and negative political alternative. Second, we need to explore Mises'

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[179] See in specific Mises, *Socialism*, p. 401, and cf. Mises, *Human Action*, chap. XXXIII on syndicalism.

critique of a possible "middle way" between capitalism and socialism, what he called interventionism. Through the description of these opponents, we will see how Mises consolidates his metanarrative in two senses: he shows how "irrational" and infeasible socialism is, thus consolidating the cues of the opponents of liberalism, and he shows how there can be only two sides to Mises' metanarrative since a middle ground is also irrational. Additionally, we will get a strengthened image of what is attractive about Mises' liberalism and view of capitalism, and why is he able to create a radical metanarrative with a sharp dichotomy.

The next step in the history of Mises' liberalism is the fact that, as he says, the program of liberalism was never fully carried out. By the end of the nineteenth century, an antiliberal wave set in and out of the ideas of the liberals were born its enemies. We have also already touched on the *ideology* of socialism (although we have not yet addressed the socialist *system*). For Mises, the first generation of socialists were "utopians" because they saw capitalism as morally undesirable and wanted to return to a life with small communities. The second generation is much more dangerous. Because of Marx, socialists now had an added historical component that made socialism much more attractive. By positing that socialism is inevitable and that it is the next historical stage of mankind, it now has a scientific critique added on top of its moral one.

Did the socialists find a way to realize the socialist system? Do they have a way to collectively own property and redirect it toward everyone's needs? No, says Mises, because the creation of a socialist system is "impossible." This second generation of socialism is trying to achieve an economic model devised by the classical economists themselves, he argues, but it is a model that was never meant to be translated in the real world. The classical economists originally developed the method of making imaginary constructions based on the categories of human action (such as examples involving Robinson Crusoe and his island). In this way, they could disregard real-world conditions and draw interesting conclusions. Mises argues that when the classical economists first discovered the laws of society, they believed it was Providence itself that guided men. It was as if men, without central coordination, were able to better provide for themselves directly than through government decrees. From this observation, the classical economists devised the imaginary construction of a pure market, i.e. an imaginary market that would be completely unchecked by

any government intervention. Socialism was the counterpart that these economists created where they imagined a society in which the entire division of labor would be planned by a central authority.[180]

Why would a centralized system be impossible? Essentially, Mises argues that the extensive economic calculation that the consumer and the entrepreneur can undertake in the market cannot be reproduced outside of it. Indeed, money quantifies prices and prices *reflect* the valuations of the consumer. "Reflect" is the key element of this argument: for Mises, it cannot be said in any way that price "correspond" or put a number on the relative scarcity of the goods on the market or the way in which consumers rank of their needs. Needs cannot be said to be "correctly" reflected in the prices.

According to Mises, if we were to try to implement socialism and leave the means of production in the hands of a socialist planner, then there would no longer be exchanges, which means there would not be prices. Therefore, we would not have the means to understand if we are correctly allocating the right scarce resources toward satisfying everyone's needs. A socialism that managed to abolish the market thoroughly from the face of the earth would be "blind" in the sense that it would not have any means to understand if it is matching the right resources toward satisfying the needs of the consumers. Since resources are always scarce, this essentially means that the socialist director would be constantly redirecting limited resources from one alternative that would satisfy the customers as much as possible to another that is above that optimal level.

We should clarify that Mises' argument is not a problem of technological means.[181] For Mises, an engineer can ascribe what means should be used for what ends from the point of view of a neutral observer. He can objectively quantify and create causal relations between means and ends. But he cannot scrutinize men's subjective needs. Indeed, men act in order to satisfy their most urgently felt needs and to not waste the

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[180] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 240. Mises believed, however, that the socialist construction had *logical* precedence, even though it afterwards and out of the imaginary construction of a pure market, cf. 239.

[181] Cf. David Ramsey Steele, *From Marx to Mises: Post-Capitalist Society and the Challenge of Economic Calculation* (La Salle: Open Court, 1999), chapter 1, section iii, for a good description of the distinction between technical and economic efficiency.

means at their disposal. The central planners could build the railroad, but they would waste resources because they wouldn't know *what kind* of railroad: they wouldn't know the length of the railroad, how many stations it should have, for what kind of train the railroad should be adapted, etc.[182] An engineer can build *a* railroad, but, in a larger context of scarcity of resources, more is needed to understand *toward what* it should be built. In a free market economy, Mises says, the resources (which are always scarce) can be allocated as best as possible because money and prices help the consumer and the entrepreneur by offering pointers of people's subjective preferences.[183] Thanks to these clues, the entrepreneur makes a profit when he is able to both satisfy the customer and use his resources efficiently.

Could the socialist planner do better than the entrepreneur? It is true that, after successfully abolishing capitalism, the socialist planners could rely on the prices that they inherited from the capitalist system they just abolished. But those prices would only help for a time. As soon as the consumers' preferences would change, the planners would no longer have the means to reorient the right resources to most efficiently meet the new preferences. It would therefore be a system of "groping about in the dark."[184] For Mises, socialism is "impossible" because, in a world where the market would have been entirely abolished, society would quickly return to a pre-civilizational state of household economies where primitive economic calculations would indeed be possible.

Of course, Mises knows that, in practice, the socialist planner in the Soviet Union has a lot of help and technical expertise. He has a battalion of functionaries that are compiling data and studies, statisticians and mathematicians are devising complex models of people's preferences, and he has competent recruiters who are selecting the finest managers.[185] But consumers' valuations cannot be quantified. Without the very structure of the market, the free interaction between consumers, entrepreneurs, and resources, the only mean available to reflect the consumers' needs do not exist. Ironically, says Mises, what truly helped the Soviet

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[182] Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1990 [1920]), p. 16, Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 694-697, and Steele, *From Marx to Mises*, cf. chapter 4, section vii.
[183] Mises, *Human Action*, 207-210
[184] Mises, *Human Action*, 696
[185] Mises, *Human Action*, 692

planners was not this multitude of technical means, but the fact that the USSR was still integrated in an international market and could therefore rely on market prices abroad to find some orientation at home.

As we can see, Mises' argument is very significant to his metanarrative for two reasons. First, Mises tighten his fault line by showing that anything that is not capitalism is not a feasible option. We will deal with potential middle ways later but, at least, we now see how socialism is not a feasible mean to achieve wealth, life, and prosperity. We also saw how Mises' "oligarchic" system, syndicalism, would best serve the producers and not the consumers. Socialism and syndicalism are therefore not *rational* in the sense that Mises understands it.[186] Even though he readily accepts that this does not mean that capitalism is perfect in the sense that there are always discrepancies between what the consumers desire and what the entrepreneur provides, it is the only one that can most efficiently redirect scarce resources toward satisfying the needs of the consumers.

Even though this is one of Mises' central and most famous argument, we should highlight how socialism is not solely a narrow economic problem. Indeed, and this is our second point, socialism contradicts Mises' conception of humans as praxeological beings.

We saw how mankind deepened its rationality as it learned to use tools, sacrificed time, and relied on increasingly complex economic calculation. When the socialists take over capitalism, they arrive in a system that has a division of labor and an economic rationality that is already well under way. In their efforts at emulating an economic system that can replace the price system, the socialist planners will have to ascribe tasks to each citizen of the socialist polity and drastically reduce their capacity to choose. This is Mises' (and Hayek's) famous argument that liberalism is planning by the many and not by the few. However, the deeper issue here is Mises' view of rationality. Socialism erodes mankind's capacity to undertake complex economic calculations. It leads the acting man to leave the task of economic calculation

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[186] A synthetic statement in Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, p. 40.

to a supreme planner. As Salerno puts it well, "socialism not only exterminates economy and society but the human intellect and spirit as well."[187] The attempts to implement it will destroy even man's spirit.

As we can see, socialism for Mises is not solely a narrow economic problem, it is profoundly *inhuman* because it is contrary to what it means to be an acting human. The second sense in which socialism is inhuman is also related to Mises' conception of man. Mises often criticizes socialism's attempt at ascribing definite ends to mankind that all men should strive toward (that is, ends that are more ambitious than liberalism's dominants ends). For Mises, this is tantamount to say that socialism will have to decide on a definite set of ends for everyone. But for Mises the process of valuation is also part of the human mind. In fact, what men value itself emerges out of the interaction between valuations. To enforce an overarching set of ends is the very opposite of how the valuation process occurs. Humans' valuations are composed through the very back and forth of the consumers between them and of their interactions with the entrepreneurs. Mises sometimes compares this attempt at picking a set of ends to freezing man in time. It is impossible to pick a definite set of ends because there is no way to know what man will prefer tomorrow and what it will decide.

While discussing the use of fictious stationary models (which, as we analyzed earlier, were the intellectual origin of the socialist fiction), Mises describes the man inhabiting this model would be unable to use his rational faculties. He would be like an ant or a "soulless vegetative being."

> The economists who constructed and used this imaginary scheme were fully aware of its fictitiousness and its unreality. They did not fail to recognize that in such a hypothetical world, man would no longer be human, but a soulless vegetative being. He would not be in a position to make use of his most human faculty, reason; he would live like an ant in its hill.[188]

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[187] Joseph T. Salerno, "Postscript: Why a Socialist Economy is "Impossible,"" in Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth*, p. 38.
[188] Ludwig von Mises, "Monopoly Prices," *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*, vol. 1, n°2, 1998 [1944], p. 13.

There are scattered parts of his writings in which Mises touches on these ineffable ends of man. For Mises, these ends are the nature of life itself, the ungraspable, ineffable, and most human realm. To try to posit definite ends is to try to achieve a perfection that, if it could be implemented, would be tantamount to freeze man's capacity to change.

> The very idea of absolute perfection is in every way self-contradictory. The state of absolute perfection must be conceived as complete, final, and not exposed to any change. Change could only impair its perfection and transform it into a less perfect state; the mere possibility that a change can occur is incompatible with the concept of absolute perfection. But the absence of change—i.e., perfect immutability, rigidity and immobility—is tantamount to the absence of life. Life and perfection are incompatible, but so are death and perfection.[189]

4.4 Interventionism

Mises' view of the scope of the government is straightforward: government interventions are justified to the extent that they successfully bring about people's ends. As we saw, Mises transitions from science to policy by positing a set of ends: he assumes that the vast majority of people desire wealth over poverty, life over death, and prosperity over misery. The most rational course of action to attain those ends, he argues, is to let the market work and reduce the scope of the government to a minimum. The government should create a minimal apparatus of courts, police, and military that will maintain the smooth working of the market.[190]

We should carefully distinguish these minimal interventions with Mises' opponent that remains to be analyzed, *interventionism*. Interventionism is an ideology which argues that *laissez-faire* capitalism and collectivist socialism both have good and bad things and one should try to create a system that combines the good things of both. The interventionists try to "improve" capitalism's supposed defects through

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[189] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 70.
[190] Mises, *Human Action*, p. 716 and p. 718.

policies that can maintain the capitalist system all the while it mitigates its negative effects. To return to Mises' Aristotelian understanding, the interventionists attempts a "mixed regime": a doctrine arguing that the excesses from both capitalism and socialism could be corrected with a system that would balance out the problems of capitalism.

Mises' argument is that interventionism always leads back to a situation where the interventionist will have to choose between more socialism or more capitalism. For instance, let's say that the interventionists want to make milk more affordable.[191] They will proceed to fix the price of milk so that consumers can have access to more milk. The consumers will purchase more milk, but the supply however will remain the same. In this way, the government successfully created a shortage of milk, which was the contrary of what the interventionists intended to do all along. They are therefore back in a situation where they have to increase the interventionist measures or come back to the status quo ante. Let's say that the interventionists decide to ration the milk and now each buyer can only buy a given quantity of milk. Eventually, the supply of milk will run out since selling milk will no longer be profitable for its producers and its production will be halted or curtailed. Once more, the interventionists are in a position where they must either take a further step toward socialism or remove their interventionist measures.

Mises' argument that the interventionists fail to achieve their goal of supplying milk is not what is most significant for Mises' metanarrative. These anti-interventionist arguments are of course helpful to reject potential alternatives to capitalism. But what is essential here is the endless potential for exclusions that this argument opens. We saw in our chapter on Lukács that Bernstein and the Social Democrats were "bourgeois" as well since their adoption of a partial point of view led them to renounce to the point of view of totality altogether. Here too we see that interventionism and socialism are, in the end, not very different. Interventionism, whose purpose was to avoid both capitalism and socialism, has only delayed socialism but not avoided it. In their attempts at fixing capitalism, the interventionists must pursue new measures that

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[191] Mises, *A Critique of Interventionism*, pp. 30-31. Mises, *Interventionism*, pp. 26-30.

will eventually lapse into full socialism. Ultimately, they will have to face the ultimate consequence of their policies, i.e. the control of the production of milk (and, in the end, to the branches and materials that are related to the production of milk).

We saw so far how Mises built two lines facing each other, liberalism and socialism, and how each represented science versus pseudo-science, rationality versus irrationality. With this view of interventionism, Mises opens up one the quintessential radical move: the possibility of saying that the attempt at striking a middle ground is, in the end, socialistic as well. We should now analyze how all of these elements combine to form the unique in which Mises uses his metanarrative in his writings.

5. Summing up

As we can see, a striking and fundamental aspect of Mises' metanarrative is the fact that liberalism has thousands of opponents, but only one evil. These opponents all have their own political scheme – collectivism, dictatorship, national-socialism, etc. – but what ultimately matters is the fact that they all strive to arrive at Mises' socialistic system. The scattered enemies of liberalism are united in their relentless pursuit of expanding government's control over private property. As Mises says, the only meaningful political distinction is not between "left" and "right," but between more or less government control:

> It does not matter that the socialists call themselves today "leftists" and smear the advocates of limited government and the market economy as "rightists." These terms "left" and "right" have lost any political significance. The only meaningful distinction is that between the advocates of the market economy and its corollary, limited government, and the advocates of the total state.[192]

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[192] Ludwig von Mises, "The Market and the State," in Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Freedom and Interventionism: An Anthology of Articles and Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1990), p. 44.

Mises' corpus is traversed by these sharp dichotomies between liberalism and socialism, science versus pseudo-science, rationality and irrationality, cooperation versus destruction, etc., which he always falls back on. Or, better said, he has *one* sharp dichotomy which he falls back on. Look, for instance, at the way he first introduces his Marxist and polylogist opponents (i.e. opponents that reject rationality) in the initial pages of *Human Action*:

> From time immemorial men in thinking, speaking, and acting had taken the uniformity and immutability of the logical structure of the human mind as an unquestionable fact. All scientific inquiry was based on this assumption. In the discussions about the epistemological character of economics, writers, for the first time in human history, denied this proposition too. Marxism asserts that a man's thinking is determined by his class affiliation. Every social class has a logic of its own. (…)

> This polylogism was later taught in various other forms also. Historicism asserts that the logical structure of human thought and action is liable to change in the course of historical evolution. Racial polylogism assigns to each race a logic of its own. Finally there is irrationalism, contending that reason as such is not fit to elucidate the irrational forces that determine human behavior.[193]

It is important to note, first of all, that Mises makes these statements in stark terms that reinforce the dichotomy he lays down over the text: "From *time immemorial* men (…) had taken the uniformity and immutability of the logical structure of the human mind as an *unquestionable fact*," that "*All scientific inquiry* was based on this assumption," or that "writers, *for the first time* in human *history*, denied this proposition." These terms, of course, also follow from the story Mises has been laying down since the beginning of *Human Action*. He has been describing how philosophers and thinkers of the past could not explain human behavior and its social regularities because they tried to grasp the ultimate ends of Nature or God. He then described how economics opened the way for a groundbreaking form of knowledge that did not presuppose such ends. But this revolutionary knowledge was delayed because its pioneers, the classical economists, did not have an adequate theory of value.

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[193] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 4-5.

Secondly, remember that what interests us here is not whether or not Mises is right, or if he is making legitimate or illegitimate jumps from one cue to another. What we want to transmit is that, since Mises establishes this sharp dichotomy between liberalism/science/rationalism and its opponents, he can use cues in quick succession, frame his argument in these stark, all-or-nothing, and dichotomic terms, all the while we can go on reading what he says uninterruptedly.

Mises sees contemporary politics and its subjacent irrationalism as the greatest and most dangerous challenge of our times, if not of human history. He puts it sharply when he says that, *from time immemorial*, human beings have accepted *as an unquestionable fact* that man's mind has a logical structure (*all* the science of the past was based on this assumption). But this is denied *for the first time* in the history of mankind by these opponents, which only shows the depth of their irrationality and the unique, new, and dangerous nature of the challenge at hand.

Then, Mises jumps right away to introducing his Marxist opponents for the first time. The jump is sudden (in the middle of a paragraph and in a seemingly non-political section) but it can be easily made: the logical structure of the human mind is first and foremost denied by the Marxists. In fact, Mises goes ahead and says that they deny logic altogether. They are one of the first lines of this irrationalist attack and, for them, "[e]very social class has a logic of its own." After a brief description of the Marxists' false approach to science and their critique of the legitimate science, Mises introduces a multitude of other opponents in quick succession, all united in their common rejection of rationality: historicism, racial polylogism, and irrationalism.

We can also see Mises' notion of rationality at work. At the time Mises wrote his first works, he had to refute his opponents' arguments that their political alternatives were more "rational" – not just the Marxists' claim that capitalism and its decentralized character was "irrational," but a multitude of ideologies that saw their political alternative as more "rational" for one reason or the other. With the way in which he intimately connects agnosticism toward the ineffable ends of man and rationality, Mises shows at once the absurdity of calling "rational" any political scheme one prefers. He also shows how his own approach to science is

indeed "rational" since it follows a rigorous means-ends approach. In this way, he bundles together a host of opponents who are united in their subjective, unscientific expression of their personal ends.

Thanks to the dichotomy, which he maintains throughout his corpus, Mises is able to put a great number of opponents together even if he is not addressing a specific political topic. For instance, he has "methodological opponents" who are opposed to the methodological individualism inherent in praxeology. In *Human Action*, he calls them universalism, collectivism, and conceptual realism. For Mises, these opponents deny the methodological individualism of praxeology and they put the study of the whole (society, nations, states, classes) above the study of the individual.[194] With these approaches, these methodological opponents have no other choice but to resort to the subjective and unscientific approach of positing ineffable human ends.

> Universalism, collectivism, and conceptual realism see only wholes and universals. They speculate about mankind, nations, states, classes, about virtue and vice, right and wrong, about entire classes of wants and of commodities.[195]

In his first jab against his methodological opponents, we can already see that, when Mises suggests that these opponents are interested in very specific kinds of "wholes" (classes or nations, for instance), he is in turn suggesting what are the political implications of these doctrines. Since they follow an irrational and unscientific approach, we can already deduce the political implications of these approaches. When Mises addresses these opponents again in his chapters on human society, he points out more explicitly the necessary political implications of these methodologies:

> According to the doctrines of universalism, conceptual realism, holism, collectivism (…) society is an entity living its own life, independent of and separate from the lives of the various individuals, acting on its own behalf and aiming at its own ends which are different from the ends sought by the individuals. Then, of course, an antagonism between the aims of society and those of its members can emerge. In order to safeguard

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[194] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 44-45.
[195] Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 45.

the flowering and further development of society it becomes necessary to master the selfishness of the individuals and to compel them to sacrifice their egoistic designs to the benefit of society. At this point all these holistic doctrines are bound to abandon the secular methods of human science and logical reasoning and to shift to theological or metaphysical professions of faith. They must assume that Providence, through its prophets, apostles, and charismatic leaders, forces men who are constitutionally wicked, i.e., prone to pursue their own ends, to walk in the ways of righteousness which the Lord or *Weltgeist* or history wants them to walk.

Since Mises applies this major dichotomy between liberalism and socialism, rationality and irrationality, science and pseudo-science, etc. throughout his writings, since he stringently tightens these two sides, and since he frequently and quickly shifts from one side to the other of the dichotomy, it was not strictly necessary for him to explicitly draw the political implications of these methodological opponents. Because we are already comfortably installed into Mises' metanarrative, we can effortlessly deduce these implications: whoever strays away from the scientific path must necessarily fall back into socialism. Nevertheless, we can see that, in this part, he develops these political consequences. By seeing society as an entity with ends of its own, these methodologies must ultimately posit some forms of ends for the individuals that are part of society. In this way, they will have to abandon the objective point of view of science, thus falling back into the pseudo-scientific views of the past, and the individual members of that society will have to follow the ends dictated by some prophet. Indeed, these inscrutable ends could only be known by someone pretending to be in touch with Providence itself (or one of the many other mystical entities that Mises refers in his texts).

His view of interventionism is essential to solidifying this division since it excludes the countless opponents that aim at a middle-road solution. As we saw, Mises' notion of interventionism goes a bit further than just arguing that any attempt to implement an interventionist system must eventually lapse into socialism: they fool the voters in thinking that they can understand the voters' needs better than what the market. These "moderate socialists" never announce the inevitable economic cuts and setbacks that would inevitably result from their political scheme. In fact, each promises to bring even more prosperity than all the other

alternatives. Thanks to Mises' view of capitalism where the market is composed of consumers' valuations catered to by entrepreneurs, we can see that the government intervening in this process of give and take is always an interruption. For a government to act, it must necessarily tax, cut, prevent, or inhibit that virtuous mechanism. Each one of these interventionists, says Mises, is eager to promote its own voters' base. They must necessarily redirect from the many to give to the few.

Thanks to the fact that there is a socialist *ideology* (one of the thousand opponents) but also a socialist *system* (the one evil), there is a constant slippage in Mises' writings between his countless opponents and "socialism." In Mises, "socialism" goes beyond a particular concept, idea, or notion: it is a fault line, a *parity* that links Mises' opponents. He can use "socialism" without using the word "socialism." Thanks to the way he opposes private and public ownership of the means of production, we constantly fall back into a multitude of "socialistic" opponents and the one "liberalism." In this way, there are countless instances in which Mises can insert a cue term from the "socialist" fault line, even on topics that are not necessarily political. The flow of the reading remains uninterrupted since the dichotomy he established is solidly anchored in this background.

It is important to understand to extent to which this kind of metanarrative can be shared with other authors that also use the same kind of cues, exclusions, and alignments (in our chapter "On Metanarratives," we will look at the case of Murray Rothbard). What is important to keep in mind for now is that, like a literary genre, one can make references to that liberal metanarrative. The parity between the cues we analyzed can be transmitted thanks to the cues that Mises puts at the disposition of his readers: "irrationality," "pseudo-science," "interventionism," and most importantly "socialism." On the other hand, one can also transmit the parity of the cues of the other side and reference the fact that someone who is genuinely non-socialist is "liberal," "scientific," "rational," and "noninterventionist." In this way, an axis of positions can therefore be traced between "moderately interventive" liberalisms and more extreme anti-interventionist versions. Members of this liberal metanarrative can become the target of exclusions thanks to the "socialist" cue that we analyzed – for instance, when Hayek has been called a "social democrat" or Milton Friedman a

"statist."[196] We must insist that these exclusions *do not mean* that the excluded targets *become* the cue with which they are excluded. The fact that author A considers author B a "socialist" does not mean that author A can from now on be legitimately called a "socialist." Nevertheless, we can see how central these references and exclusions are since they help construct this axis of positions from "less interventionist" to "more interventionist" all the way to full blown "socialism."

As we can see, this liberal metanarrative produces "extreme" and "moderate" positions. Many of the arguments that we analyzed in our chapter on Marxism can be sometimes found in new "Bernsteins" of this liberal metanarrative. Through several key arguments, these authors will come to inject some skepticism of their own and try to dismantle some of the cues of the liberal narrative.

Milton Friedman, for instance, was someone who often had to counter some of the most doctrinaire arguments of his own metanarrative. A good example of such key arguments is Friedman's notable essay where he criticizes the epistemologies of Mises and Rand.[197] However, given our subject, one of his most interesting texts is his correspondence with Walter Block,[198] a self-described anarcho-capitalist. In this back and forth between the two authors, Friedman insists on his gradualist position to achieve a libertarian society and argues that many socialistic evils should be tolerated as long as they are one more step toward the ideal society. Against him, Block argues that, on the contrary, if we do not condemn every form of socialism, we would be like an abolitionist that proposed a compromise between slavery and emancipation.[199] Proposing

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[196] For Hayek, cf. Hans Hermann Hoppe, "F. A. Hayek on Government and Social Evolution: A Critique," *The Review of Austrian Economics*, vol. 7, n°1, 1994, pp. 67-93, and for Friedman, cf. Murray N. Rothbard, "Milton Friedman Unraveled," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. 16, n°4, 2002, pp. 37–54: p. 49. On an email list, Peter Boettke criticized these attempts at excluding Friedman as a "socialist": "Let's be honest with ourselves. Friedman is not a socialist, he is a free market advocate who is thinking pragmatically and not just on first principles. He agrees with you that if we could abolish the state in education we would be better off, but since that is not going to happen tomorrow he is thinking of marginal steps that could be made that would move the ball forward. We can disagree with him, but what possible gain is to labeling him something which he is obviously not and when we do so just reinforces our isolation in the intellectual world?"
Petter Boettke, quoted in Stephan Kinsella, "Friedman and Socialism," 6 October 2005, retrieved from https://mises.org/blog/friedman-and-socialism
[197] For Friedman on Mises' and Rand's "intolerance," see Milton Friedman, "Say 'No' to Intolerance," in *Liberty*, vol. 4, n°6, July 1991, pp. 17-20.
[198] Walter Block, "Fanatical, Not Reasonable: A Short Correspondence Between Walter Block and Milton Friedman," in *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. 20, n°3, summer 2006, pp. 61–80.
[199] Block, "Fanatical, Not Reasonable," pp. 69-70.

both compromises and political ideals would be like trying to put one saddle on two horses. The libertarian should stick to advocating the ideal solutions, while others should take care of what is politically feasible.[200]

Here again, we must note that this does not mean that Friedman "is" moderate or that he does not "belong" to this liberal metanarrative. Paul Krugman, the Keynesian economist, once said that "It's extremely hard to find cases in which Friedman acknowledged the possibility that markets could go wrong, or that government intervention could serve a useful purpose."[201] The fact that Friedman was arguably "more" or "less" interventionist than other members of his metanarrative does not eliminate the fact that he has voiced important arguments that toned-down some of the cues of the liberal metanarrative.

In this chapter, we described how Mises' liberalism is a reconstruction of what he called the "old liberalism" in a powerful metanarrative which can be used by other followers. We also saw that Mises does much more than merely creating dichotomies or simply devising a liberal political theory: he provides compelling arguments that enable him to connect specific cues together, and these cues can in turn be used by other authors sympathetic with Mises' political case.

We would like to close this chapter with one last point that we will deepen in our chapter "On Metanarratives." Mises' metanarrative, we argue, is not only important for the specific political aim he has in mind, but it is also something that we, as political theorists and political analysts, can profit from. Indeed, by adopting Mises' point of view and understanding his metanarrative, we can also better appreciate the way in which other metanarratives (such as Marxism) also have cues of their own. Mises' metanarrative (and the study of metanarratives in general) is essential to *lay bare* the connections between the cues of all kinds of metanarratives. See, for instance, this passage from *Socialism*:

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[200] Block, "Fanatical, Not Reasonable," p. 69.
[201] Paul Krugman, "Who Was Milton Friedman?," in *New York Times*, 15 February 2007, retrieved from http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/02/15/who-was-milton-friedman/

To the socialist, the coming of Socialism means a transition from an irrational to a rational economy. Under Socialism, planned management of economic life takes the place of anarchy of production; society, which is conceived as the incarnation of reason, takes the place of the conflicting aims of unreasonable and self-interested individuals. A just distribution replaces an unjust distribution of goods. Want and misery vanish and there is wealth for all. A picture of paradise is unfolded before us, a paradise which - so the laws of historical evolution tell us - we, or at least our heirs, must at length inherit. For all history leads to that promised land, and all that has happened in the past has only prepared the way for our salvation.[202]

Mises is here describing, in a characteristic and highly caricaturized fashion, the metanarrative of his Marxist opponents. Note how he describes it in the form of the bare bones of a simplistic political story. For the socialist, he says, Socialism means that the present irrational economy will be replaced by a rational one. Society, which the socialist sees as the incarnation of reason, will replace the selfish individuals. It is also very typical for these caricatures to be couched in the language of religion (as we will see in the next chapter, Laclau uses and abuses this religious language to describe his opponents). In this passage, Mises describes socialism as a prophetic doctrine that heeds the coming of a paradise where misery and want will be abolished.

What we wanted to highlight before closing this chapter is that studying radical metanarratives (and, especially, studying a great diversity of metanarratives) is an essential component to see how metanarratives work and how cues are generated. The strong rivalries that they nourish is an energy we can harness for our study of politics. Authors such as Mises are very sensitive to cues and metanarratives from their opponents, while these very opponents are often unaware of their own cues and the connections between them. By studying a great number of metanarratives, we can learn to be aware and analyze a great number of cues from a great number of metanarratives.

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[202] Mises, *Socialism*, p. 457.

Chapter 4: Laclau's New Radicalism

> 1968 represents a fundamental turning point whose long-term
> effects are going to be as important as those of 1848.
>
> Ernesto Laclau, *Marxism Today* (1987)[1]

> It seems to me that children in the next century will learn about
> the year 1968 the way we learned about the year 1848.
>
> Hannah Arendt, letter to Karl Jaspers (1968)[2]

> Althusser used to say that philosophy is always preceded by a particular science that, by making accessible a new
> objective field, makes it possible to entirely recast the question of objectivity in general. Thus, Platonic philosophy
> would have been unthinkable without Greek mathematics; seventeenth century rationalism, without Galilean
> physics; Kant, without Newton. Well, we are at the epicenter of an intellectual transformation whose two basic
> starting points are Saussure's notion of *langue* and Freud's discovery of the unconscious.
>
> Ernesto Laclau, "Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric" (2012)[3]

Contrarily to Ludwig von Mises, the appropriation that Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014) makes of the

metanarrative of Marxism is much more sympathetic. Instead of describing him as the thinker of hegemony

or of populism, we will instead try to explore how Laclau problematizes the construction of narratives, and

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[1] Ernesto Laclau, "Class War and After," in *Marxism Today*, April 1987, pp. 30-33: p. 32. Cf. also Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 128.
[2] Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1992), p. 681.
[3] Ernesto Laclau, "Afterword: Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric," in Dušan Radunović and Sanja Bahun, *Language, Ideology, and the Human* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), and see also the very first lines of Laclau, *Reflections*, p. 3, or the last lines of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 306.

how he tries to create a narrative that can resist its eventual breakdown – a sort of narrative of narratives. From there, we will be able to understand how he creates a distinctive anti-essentialist metanarrative with cues of its own. In this chapter, we will retrace Laclau's solution to the problem of the bankruptcy of Marxism and of its metanarrative. As we can see from the quote above, Laclau understood that he was at the beginning of a new era and we will see how he tried to formulate its political implications.

We will proceed similarly to what we have done with Mises. First, we introduce with Laclau's context and intellectual path, especially the less frequently studied part of his life when he was in Argentina.[4] Laclau is still sometimes seen as a kind of "Schmitt-Machiavelli" who promoted politics for politics' sake.[5] Thanks to this first part, we will push back that view and, after, see how Laclau tries to replace the former Marxist paradigm with one that can resist its encounter with new contexts and its own eventual dissolution. To arrive at that point, we will need to analyze his epistemology and then his politics.

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[4] Cf. some of the bibliographical points in Alejandro Varas Alvarado, *Laclau contra Laclau: una aproximación crítica y psicoanalítica a la categoría de antagonismo en* La razón populista, thesis published at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Facultad De Filosofía Y Educación, Instituto De Filosofía, retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Alejandro_Varas_Alvarado/publication/321586668_Laclau_contra_Laclau_una_aproximacion_critica_y_psicoanalitica_a_la_categoria_de_antagonismo_en_La_razon_populista/links/5a27e5490f7e9b71dd0cc8d8/Laclau-contra-Laclau-una-aproximacion-critica-y-psicoanalitica-a-la-categoria-de-antagonismo-en-La-razon-populista.pdf, pp. 19-29.

[5] Cf. for instance Andrew Arato, "Political Theology and Populism," in *Social Research*, vol. 80, n°1 (spring 2003), pp. 143-172: pp. 165-167. Christopher Bickertonab & Carlo Invernizzi Accettiab, "Populism and technocracy: opposites or complements?," in *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 2015, pp. 7-8. Benjamin Bertram is also skeptical of Laclau and Mouffe's "Nietzschean" enterprise, see "New Reflections on the "Revolutionary" Politics of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe," *Boundary*, vol. 22, n°3, Autumn 1995, pp. 81-110. Some of the literature we address in footnote 54 also suggests this reading.
Conversely, an enthusiastic supporter of a "Schmittian" approach (although he would not argue that Laclau's is merely in favor of politics for politics' sake) is Oliver Marchart and his reading of Laclau through the lenses of his concept of "antagonism." Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) and Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology after Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). We do not address the concept of "antagonism" since Laclau argued that he believed that *dislocation* was more fundamental than antagonism. Cf. Oliver Marchart, "Laclau's political ontology," in Mark Devenney, David Howarth, Aletta J. Norval, Yannis Stavrakakis, Oliver Marchart, Paula Biglieri and Gloria Perelló, "Critical Exchange: Ernesto Laclau," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 15, 2016, pp. 304–335: pp. 321-322. Ernesto Laclau, "Hegemony and the Future of Democracy: Ernesto Laclau's Political Philosophy," interview by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, *JAC*, vol. 19, n°1, 1999, p. 9.

Prelude: Laclau and Mouffe

We saw in our last chapters that metanarratives go through periods of skepticism and reconstruction. To understand Laclau's politics, it is essential to understand that his thought formed gradually at a time of loss of enthusiasm for the Marxist metanarrative and what it came to represent. Since the revisionist debates that we addressed in the methodological chapter, the Marxist genre had gone through the crucial events of the Russian revolution of 1917, and an association grew up between the Marxist metanarrative with its cues and Russia with its Soviet experiment. Questions over the extent to which the soviet experiment coincided with Marx's intent, over the growing awareness of Marxism as a metanarrative, and over the innumerable ways in which the cues of the Marxist metanarrative came to be expressed are fascinating questions that, unfortunately, we have no space to address here. We can only briefly address some of the historical, social, economic, and political factors that led this loss of enthusiasm to a climax.

The events in Prague in 1968, where protests in favor of liberalization were repressed by the Russian army, are often symbolic of that shattering of hopes for the USSR – a shattering which, by proxy, entailed a loss of confidence in the Marxist alternative that the USSR was supposed to represent. As a commentator aptly noted, "Only the sternest Stalinist would cling onto the rubble of failed hopes and expectations regarding the progressive character of Soviet communism after this point."[6] The protests of May 1968 were also decisive for that loss of credibility.[7] Indeed, the students' radicalization to the left in the 60s and 70s was often more detrimental than not to the Marxist cause. During these years, a great number of splits and Eurocommunist, Maoist, Trotskyist and Stalinist factions burgeoned, fracturing Marxism even further. These splits only seemed to point out that, far from being the only alternative, there could be forms of non-

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[6] Simon Tormey and Jules Townshend, *Key Thinkers from Critical Theory to Post-Marxism* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 3.

[7] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995 [1994]), p. 444. For an account of 1968, cf. Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004).

Marxist radical lefts (what has sometimes been called the New Left).[8] Finally, and because of the success of the free market renaissance of the 70s and 80s, it even seemed that the Marxist critique of capitalism was no longer safe.[9]

To be sure, many Marxists and Marxist sympathizers tried to rebuild the Marxist metanarrative and its cues on fresh foundations. Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are two good examples of thinkers who, after the Second World War, tried to place Marxism on phenomenological grounds. But there were also notable cases of pessimism, such as the skepticism of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno that a revolution and complete break from the affluent society would be possible.[10] Indeed, capitalism after the Second World War was going through a period of uninterrupted growth and showed no signs of slowing down.[11]

The historical and ideological pointers we have indicated often reemerge in the literature on Laclau and, more generally, on the emergence of the New Left and the crisis of Marxism. We should also add that Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (the groundbreaking work Laclau and Mouffe published in 1985 which shot them to fame) is seen as a "post-Marxist" work. "Post-Marxism" is an umbrella term for several trends that tried to move beyond or revise some traditional aspects of Marxism, such as its emphasis on economics or class politics.[12] The emergence of these "post-Marxist" currents comes together with the emergence of the New Social Movements – especially minority rights movements – that several prominent Marxists insisted could be explained as "class epiphenomenona."[13] Laclau's work

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[8] George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1987).

[9] Tormey and Townshend, *Key Thinkers*, pp. 2-3. Stuart Sim, *Post-Marxism: An Intellectual History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), first chapter.

[10] On the subject of the pessimism of the Frankfurt School, cf. McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, pp. 283-286, but also Tormey, *Key Thinkers*, pp. 5-6 and Kolakowski, *Main Currents*, pp. 341-395.

[11] For the "crisis of Marxism," cf. Alex Callinicos, *Is there a Future for Marxism?* (London: Palgrave, 1982). The first chapter offers some historical pointers and the statements of eminent Marxists of the time (especially Althusser), pp. 5-24, and the second chapter explains some of the "postmodern" challenges to Marxism, cf. the pages 48-52.

[12] Tormey and Townshend, *Key Thinkers*, pp. 1-12. Sim, *Post-Marxism*, pp. 4-11.

[13] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001 [1985]), pp. 159-160.

also follows the trail of eminent critics of Marxism, like Althusser and Lyotard, and of postmodern thinkers, like Foucault and Derrida.[14]

What is less frequently discussed, however, is the fact that the opponents of Marxism had dealt truly strong blows to Marxist narrative, successfully calling into question what the narrative and its political project consisted in. These critiques of Marxism had a distinctively negative and skeptical bend, and it is notable to see that Laclau and Mouffe's answer can be read as riding the wave of these critiques. In other words, if we were to look at Laclau and Mouffe not in terms of the internal debates and struggles within Marxism but in more general terms, we can see that they follow a more general skeptical wave that goes beyond the limited intellectual context in which they emerge.

Let's begin by giving a schematic overview of the arguments of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In this work, Laclau and Mouffe criticize some aspects of traditional Marxism, which they call "orthodox Marxism." They argue that orthodox Marxism consistently try to explain social reality and wage its political struggle through an a priori class/proletarian/revolution framework no matter the context. In other words, they argue that the orthodox Marxist invariably reads a political situation by trying to uncover where "the proletarian" lies, and who is "the bourgeoisie," and in what conditions "the revolution" will happen. This creates at least three problems: it explains away facts that contradict this framework (such as political actors who do not identify with classes); it rigidly imposes political theory over political strategy (for instance, alliances with other classes are considered heretical); and it has a problematic epistemology with scientific pretensions that tries to "get to the bottom" of the mechanisms regulating society.[15]

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[14] Cf. Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen, *Discursive analytical strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2003) Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999) and Simon Susen, *The 'Postmodern Turn' in the Social Sciences* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[15] It generates, for instance, endless "scholastic" attempts to determine what "truly" constitutes "proletarian labor" and could therefore distinguish a proletarian from a non-proletarian. Cf. Laclau's and Mouffe's critique of some of these attempts in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 75-85.

It is no wonder, then, that, when we read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we can easily see how this work follows the trail of the critiques voiced by the Cold War liberals after the Second World War. As we will explore in more depth in our chapter on political moderation, the Cold War liberals were thinkers who made a distinctively negative, anti-utopian, and institutionalist critique to Marxism and the radical genre in general. Like Bernstein, they held a skeptical position whose success owed much to the fact that they presented a "sober" and "realistic" critique that carefully dismantled each part of Marxism, its metanarrative, and its cues. For instance, some Cold War liberals argued that a program that attempts to achieve a political utopia seems to bet on a rigid set of values into which human nature would have to fit like a procrustean bed – this was, for instance, a typical criticism reminiscent of Isaiah Berlin and his "Two Concepts of Liberty."[16] Related to this was also the problem of political pluralism and the legitimate existence of opponents. The Marxist metanarrative was solidly anchored on the notion of "revolution," the direction of history, and the final struggle against the bourgeoisie, and this was a central critique of Raymond Aron's *L'opium des intellectuels*.[17] Finally, there was the decisive problem of the Marxist's metanarrative intimate connection with certainty which, in the theoretical realm, meant the attachment to an epistemology that offered an access to a secure knowledge that could guarantee the transition from science to politics – and this was arguably one of the element that attracted the strongest criticisms from Karl Popper's *Open Society* and his falsificationism at large.[18]

Even though, of course, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* does not literally answer the arguments of these Cold War liberals, we can easily see how it closely follows their critiques. To the "utopian" problem of Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe answered that, firstly, the democratic tradition, which they see as intimately connected to the Jacobin values of the French Revolution, contains values of liberty and equality that can be radicalized. In other words, the democratic tradition contains a gap between what "ought" to be and what

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[16] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Isaiah Berlin, Liberty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1958]), p. 216.

[17] Raymond Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2004 [1955]).

[18] Cf. Tormey and Townshend, *Key Thinkers*, pp. 5-6 where they make similar points.

"is" that the Left can and should exploit. They argue that these values, however, can never be truly achieved in a utopian scheme, nor would such attempts ever be desirable. Indeed, the imposition of a utopian scheme in the orthodox Marxist sense would mean that we have reached the end of politics and that no new political struggles need to be waged. In fact, they argue, we never know which political struggles will have to be fought tomorrow – we never know what form the struggles for liberty and equality will take. As we can see, Laclau and Mouffe not only sidestep the utopian problem, but they offer a sobering anti-utopian answer without giving up on the notion of utopia altogether. They argue that these values of equality and liberty must be "imagined" in an ever-receding horizon.[19]

The second problem of pluralism and the legitimate existence of opponents is intimately connected to the first. Since, they argue, we never know which political struggles will be waged tomorrow, we do not know which identities will emerge either. Therefore, the Left should entirely reject Marxism's traditional attempts at a "totalizing" revolution that would liquidate the bourgeoisie and it should, instead, accept an "articulating" practice where specific political demands can be aggregated together in order to form a political block.

The answer to the third issue, the issue of scientific certainty, cements all the others. For Laclau and Mouffe, the "essentialist illusions" of an epistemological access to the nature of man, the fabric of society, and the true direction of history and politics have been shattered. Not only that, they celebrate such shattering and elevate it normatively: the Left can be democratic, pluralistic, and fulfill its role if and only if it rejects essentialism and its illusions of an access to the things-as-they-are. Indeed, both orthodoxy and Social-Democratic forms of political reformisms are mistaken, not so much because of their concrete political actions but because of their intent. Orthodox Marxism attempts to generate a final revolution that will unavoidably impose an erroneous political scheme because it does not have the privileged epistemological access it says it has, and the Social-Democrats are mistaken because they think they can make reforms and

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[19] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 191. Laclau, *Reflections*, p. 232.

changes within a fixed political universe while still leaving the most fundamental political stakes and actors unchanged. For Laclau and Mouffe, a true democratic practice of democracy must presuppose the rejection of essentialist forms of politics that aim at fixing the rules of the game before it even begins.

As we can see, Laclau and Mouffe surf the wave of the skeptical arguments of the Cold War liberals. The difference, however, is that the Cold War liberals offered a distinctively negative political vision in opposition to their more ambitious Marxist counterpart. They held a more institutional-minded alternative against the utopianism of the Marxists. They tended to see democracy as a mean to avoid bloodshed and they celebrated party competition. Laclau and Mouffe's alternative, however, draws a new anti-essentialist metanarrative that, though it finds itself in the trail of the Cold War liberals, it has an anti-utopianism, anti-teleologism, and anti-epistemologism that is framed into a new fault line. Laclau and Mouffe try to show how it is possible to be both radical and still hold this new skepticism and rejection of "naïve" utopian politics and historical teleologies.

Laclau went further than Mouffe into the conscious systematization of a metanarrative that thought out all of the implications of its seminal anti-essentialism.[20] This is why in this chapter we explore how Laclau accepts these new times of political skepticism, all the while he tries to mount a radical genre. We will proceed similarly what we did with Mises. First, we contextualize Laclau historically and look at his less explored life in Argentina, as well as some of his less studied early texts. We will use these initial considerations to counter Laclau's widespread reputation as an "apologist of populism," i.e. as a kind of "Schmitt-Machiavelli" who that was impressed by the populism of Perón and who preconized a "politics

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[20] After *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, there occurred, as Townshend puts it fittingly, a "division of labor" where Mouffe went on to develop her conception of agonistic democracy, while Laclau consolidated the ideas of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (this idea is valid up to the moment Laclau publishes *On Populist Reason* in 2005). Cf. Jules Townshend, "Laclau and Mouffe's Hegemonic Project: The Story so Far," *Political Studies*, vol. 52, 2004, pp. 269-288: p. 279, and Mark Wenman, "Laclau or Mouffe? Splitting the Difference," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 29, nº5, 2003, p. 601.

for politics'" sake. From there, we describe Laclau's epistemology and rebuild his anti-essentialist metanarrative.[21]

1. Introduction

1.1 Historical and bibliographical introduction

The Marxist scholar Antonio Negri once aptly described Laclau's thought as "a reflection on the concept of "transition" and power in the transition – in the passage from one era of its organisation to another."[22] It is unfortunate that, in the next paragraph, he had to compare Laclau to Carl Schmitt. Indeed, some commentators, often in a critical tone, read Laclau as someone who held to a kind of "politics for politics' sake" thinking. We will see in this introduction that Laclau's early political path and Argentinian context has made this interpretation all the easier. Pushing back this view,[23] we will instead analyze Laclau's early thought and see how his original field of history led him to a political thought structured in term of historical paradigms which do not resist the pressure of increasing contradictions.

Laclau was born in 1935 in Buenos Aires in a time when Argentina was undertaking deep structural and political changes.[24] From the end of the nineteenth century, the country's traditional political fault line consisted of disputes between Conservatives and Radicals. The intensification of nationalist themes in the

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[21] We should be especially careful, however, because Laclau's thought, even more than Mises', has evolved over time and changed emphasis. We are here making a reconstruction of his metanarrative that will enable us to have a clear view of how he uses it and how it can be used by other authors. For instance, we construct one version of "hegemony" that has also evolved over time: David Howarth, "Discourse, hegemony and populism: Ernesto Laclau's political theory," in David Howarth (ed.), *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, populism and critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 7-12. The study of this evolution is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[22] Negri was here talking about Laclau's notion of populism and he was using this expression in a negative sense. We will see that Laclau's political thought is very well encapsulated in this sentence. Antonio Negri, "Negri on Hegemony," in *Verso*, 20 August 2015, retrieved from https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2179-negri-on-hegemony-gramsci-togliatti-laclau.

[23] The interpretation misses what is most interesting about Laclau, his metanarrative, and his view of narratives.

[24] Cf. also Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 177-194.

Argentinian political scene and the first military coup of 1930 led to a central shift. Indeed, by 1945, the rise of Juan Domingo Perón in the political scene

> had rendered the fifty-year-long feud between the Radicals and the conservatives an anachronism; he had
>
> precipitated the working class into politics, while virtually eliminating the traditional working-class parties,
>
> in particular the Socialists; he had divided the country into the '*peronista*' supporters of 'economic
>
> independence' and 'social justice' and '*antiperonista*' defenders of the old liberal order.

In the '30s, both extremes of the Argentinian political spectrum were increasingly populist, nationalist, and anti-imperialist. Two notable groups would be united under Perón: FORJA and the nacionalistas. From the Radicals came the Fuerza de Orientacion Radical de la Juventud Argentina (FORJA), a small group emergent from the oil nationalization campaigns of the end of the '20s and nostalgic for the years of the paradigmatic radical-populist Hipólito Yrigoyen.[25] Laclau was the son of a notable *yrigoyenista* and informal FORJA member active with the revolutionary factions in the '30s.[26] Parallel to FORJA, the other populist and national trend was the far-right *nacionalistas*, emerging in the '30s, also in an anti-imperialist fashion and with a strong emphasis on the social justice of *Rerum Novarum*. Between the two wars, the UK was slowly realizing that it could not sustain its imperial status, and the growing U.S. played a few political games moves with in Argentina that yielded heavy political costs and reinforced its anti-imperialist factions.[27] Both extremes of the political spectrum used the opportunities of the shift in foreign relations to reinforce their national and populist status.

This context would be key for Perón. Coming from the *nacionalistas*, Perón ascended to power from 1943 to 1955. Even though Perón came from the Argentinian far-right, he had a significant support from the workers, symbolized in the workers movement of the *17 de Octubre* which were essential to reestablishing

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[25] Bethell Leslie, *Argentina Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 200 onwards. Cf. the introduction in Arturo Jauretche, *FORJA y la década infame* (Buenos Aires: A Peña Lillo, 1984).

[26] Julián Melo and Gerardo Aboy Carlés, "La democracia radical y su tesoro perdido: un itinerario intelectual de Ernesto Laclau,' in *PostData*, vol. 19, n°2, October 2014-March 2015, pp. 395-427: pp. 395-396 and p. 398.

[27] Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, pp. 178

Perón in 1945.[28] As Laclau noted, Perón's populism managed to unite diverse factions by dividing society between the liberal establishment and his own democratic populism.[29] We should also note the role of Perón's wife, "Evita" Perón. She strongly expanded the Peronist bases through her charisma, and she created networks that provided for the poorest and most politically-alienated groups, all while she fought for women's right to vote during Perón's presidency.[30] The role of "Evita" Perón is not without reminding Laclau's own political theory and how a populist project can capture specific "demands" and build a political ("equivalential") frontiers.[31] As we will, Laclau does not see politics so much as a conflict between different homogeneous factions or ideas ("the proletarians" versus "the bourgeois," or "left" versus "right"), but rather in terms of the construction of a political bloc and the capture of smaller demands.

Even so, Perón was forced to back off in 1955 amid violent clashes between peronistas and antiperonistas and was soon replaced, in 1958, by the contrasting Arturo Frondizi, a much more technocratic and "neoliberal" figure. If Perón's populism profoundly marked Laclau's thought, there are no doubts that this "anti-populism" marked him, too. Indeed, Frondizi tried to avoid the charged language of the Peronist struggles and he tried, in Laclau's language, to absorb the demands of Peronism ("differentially") in order to take down the political ("equivalential") frontier that Perón represented (i.e., he tried to undermine the political block whose unifying feature was Perón by capturing the demands within it). In his election campaign, Frondizi promised a lenient attitude toward the Peronist factions, to the point where he received the support of Perón himself. However, shortly after his elections, Frondizi reinforced the pressure on

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[28] Leslie, *Argentina since Independence*, p. 238.
[29] Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, p. 189.
[30] Leslie, *Argentina since Independence*, p. 253.
[31] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 73-74.

Peronist workers' unions and outlawed the communist party, instigating the rage of the Peronist factions and radicalizing the left in what came to be called "the Frondizi betrayal."

This leftward radicalization was essential for Laclau's political and intellectual evolution.[32] Since the '40s, there had been attempts from the left and from some Trotskyist groups to create some possible alliances with the Peronist forces.[33] The intensification of governmental pressures in the Frondizi years, coupled with a revolutionary Cuba with which the government cut relations in '62 and the strong presence of Perón in the working classes, led to numerous debates and scissions within the left over whether there should be some form of alliances with the Peronists. It was around 1954 that Laclau began his studies in history at the University of Bueno Aires – a traditional bastion of the Radicals, consistently anti-Perón – and began his political participation. By the end of the 60, he had integrated into left wings parties, become active in the student movement, and participated in several journals.[34] He entered the *Partido Socialista Argentino* (PSA) in 1958, a scission of the historical Socialist Party between, on the one hand, Social Democrats that were moderately antiperonists and, one the other hand, the PSA, more antiimperialist and disposed to cooperate with Peronism.

Following the radicalizing tendency of the left at the time, Laclau abandoned the PSA and entered the more radical *Partido Socialista de la Izquierda Nacional* (PSIN).[35] Among their founders was Jorge Abelardo Ramos. Ramos, who was among the Trotskyists who attempted an approximation of Peronism in the '40s, was notable in providing theoretical foundations to the left for supporting Perón's "national revolution."[36] One of Ramos' critiques of the traditional left was that the workers who supported Perón could not be

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[32] Laclau gives more details of his intellectual evolution in Jorge Alemán and Ernesto Laclau, "Psicoanálisis, retórica y política," *La Biblioteca*, nº11, Easter 2011, pp. 367-373: pp. 371-373.

[33] Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 39-41.

[34] Alvarado, *Laclau contra Laclau*, pp. 22-27.

[35] Omar Acha, "El marxismo del joven Laclau (1960-1973): una antesala del postmarxismo," *Herramienta*, retrieved from www.herramienta.com.ar/articulo.php?id=2329

[36] Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, p. 40, Carlos Miguel Herrera, "El Partido Socialista de la Revolución Nacional: entre la realidad y el mito," *Revista Socialista*, nº5, 2011. Carlos Miguel Herrera, "Corrientes de izquierda en el socialismo argentino, 1932- 1955," *Nuevo Topo*, vol. 2, April-May, 2006, pp. 127-153: pp. 141-149.

merely explained away by saying, for instance, that the workers who supported during the *17 de Octubre* were mere *lumpenproletariat*, underclass workers. The PSIN was an attempt by a party to be both pro-worker and national, thus creating a doctrine that was "more in tune" with the Argentinian context and less entrenched in the dogmatism of the "ultraleft."[37] Laclau would later write of the profound impact that Ramos had on him, especially Ramos's idea that the category of "class" alone could not explain this new proliferation of antagonisms and that the traditional socialist paradigm had to be revised. However, Laclau also established some distance between them. For Laclau, Ramos was still too entrenched in a Leninist vision that saw the party as the conscious builder of the working class. Already at the time, Laclau said that he believed the Left should articulate itself more within the emergent "national-popular" movement.[38]

It is true that, after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau would often repeat that he neither fully endorsed Marxism nor that he rejected it outright, but that he always tried to find a middle ground.[39] "I was never a dogmatic Marxist. I always tried to, even in those early days, to mix Marxism with something else."[40] But this does not mean that he did not have his Marxist moment. Although Laclau became a staunch critic of orthodox Marxism, these were times where he wrote lines such as "History is working in our favor and the emergence of revolutionary socialism is as necessary as it is close."[41] In these early articles, we can see Laclau discussing the tasks of the popular classes in performing functions that the Argentinian

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[37] Acha, "El marxismo del joven Laclau," cf. section II "La búsqueda de un populismo marxista."

[38] Ernesto Laclau, "Ramos en la historia de la izquierda argentina," retrieved . More on Ramos and Laclau in Alvarado, *Laclau contra Laclau*, pp. 24-26, footnote 49.

[39] This would begin very early on, with his 1977 "Postscript" in Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, pp. 42-50, all the way down to the introduction of Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014).

[40] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Socialism," *Palinurus*, issue 14, April 2007, retrieved from http://anselmocarranco.tripod.com/ Cf. also Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 178.

[41] "La historia trabaja (…) a nuestro favor, y el surgimiento del socialismo revolucionario es tan necesario como próximo." Quoted from Acha, "El marxismo del joven Laclau," cf. the fifth paragraph of section II. Cf. also Laclau, *New Reflections,* p. 178.

bourgeoisie was too weak to undertake. It was necessary, he argued, to see the Argentinian context for what it was and to create a hegemonic block in order to build a socialist revolutionary party.[42]

As we can see, while in Europe political thought was often framed as bodies of mutually exclusive doctrines, Laclau grew up in a context in which extremes were more fluidly made of the "articulations" (to use Laclau's term) of positions and identities. Perón's Argentina had a fluidity of seemingly opposed identities and ideologies that marked Laclau's thought. As he would say many years later, "this sense of the popular and of the national, I have felt it since the crib."[43]

The most notable aspect about the relation between Perón and Laclau is the former's political genius: Perón not only assembles workers and popular masses with a program the left easily classified as "fascist," but he also managed to unite both left and right while he was in exile.[44] The way the figure of Perón united both the Argentinian left and right had an impact on Laclau, and he touches on the subject in his book, *Populist Reason*. Though up to 1955 Perón was becoming increasingly associated with the established regime, his exile and struggle looked, from outside, like a symbol of resistance and the center of aspirations of the forces against the new oppressive regime.[45] Furthermore, Laclau says, the countries receiving Perón forbade him to make political statements, so he would send to Argentina "private letters, cassettes and verbal instructions" that were always ambiguous and could be read by any of the factions.[46] As Laclau indicates in *Populist Reason*, this would become an "empty signifier" and a typical tactic of condensing a political struggle around the "empty" figure of the leader.

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[42] Acha, "El marxismo del joven Laclau."

[43] "todo ese sentido de lo nacional y popular lo viví en la cuna." Ernesto Laclau, "Grandes pensadores del siglo XX," interview by Ricardo Foster, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faAQ0qXznSQ, 10:30 to 10:50.

[44] Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, pp. 189-191.

[45] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 214-215.

[46] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, pp. 215-216.

(…) [Perón's] word was indispensable in giving symbolic unity to ail those disparate struggles. Thus his word had to operate as a signifier with only weak links to particular signifieds. This is no major surprise: it is exactly what I have called empty signifiers.[47]

Perón was the epitome of this articulation of seemingly incompatible ideas and ideologies. The potentially valuable aspect of these improbable encounters is something Laclau would notice and theorize. In fact, and even though Laclau fought against Peronism in his youth,[48] he ended up seeing the democratic potential that Peronism's politics could have in integrating the depoliticized masses into the political arena.[49]

Laclau's relationship with Ramos also enlightens a second pervasive tendency in Laclau from these Argentinian years. Laclau sometimes describes a conversation he had with Ramos in which he says they broke relations over irreconcilable differences over the direction of the national left. While Laclau argued that the movement should become even more flexible in order to articulate this irresistible movement, Ramos answered that the party was the vanguard of the proletariat.[50] This polished story illustrates how much of Laclau's intellectual evolution is underlined by a direction toward "freeing" socialist strategic politics from the straitjacket of theoretical impediments. Much of Laclau's dynamic can therefore be read not simply as an heir of revisionist tendencies within Marxism but as a radical prioritization of strategic flexibility.[51] This story Laclau tells of Ramos is significant not simply because it shows Ramos as a middle

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[47] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, p. 216.

[48] Ernesto Laclau, "Laclau "la reelección indefinida es una fórmula más democrática en América Latina,"" interview by Julia Mengolini and Tomás Aguerre, *Ni a palos*, retrieved from http://www.cadenaba.com.ar/nota.php?Id=3720

[49] Ernesto Laclau, Interview by Carolina Arenes, "El populismo garantiza la democracia," *La Nacion,* 10 July 2005, retrieved from https://www.lanacion.com.ar/opinion/ernesto-laclau-el-populismo-garantiza-la-democracia-nid719992

[50] Laclau, "Ramos en la historia de la izquierda argentina," and Laclau, "la reelección indefinida," and Ernesto Laclau, "Ramos en la historia de la izquierda argentina," *Centro Documental Jorge Abelardo Ramos*, retrieved from http://jorgeabelardoramos.com/dicende.php?id=38

[51] Cf. Bertram "New Reflections on the "Revolutionary" Politics of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe" that criticizes their primacy of practice over theory.

way between Laclau's position and full-blown Marxist, but also because it shows how Laclau is very much the continuation of Ramos and his initial intent to loosen the dogmatism of the Argentinian left.[52]

To conclude this first part of our introduction, Laclau's increasing demand for strategic flexibility is a good stepping stone to understand his intellectual evolution. Laclau's path can be seen as the radicalization of something that began in his early years in Argentina, i.e., the push for strategy within Marxism. It is not surprising that he had such a staunch belief in this dynamic when one sees the heated debates and sharp positions held by that Trokyists, "ultraleftists," and other factions of the left had back then.[53] In the end, Laclau is truly the son of a generation that believed that even the kind of strategic concessions undertaken by Leninism were not enough, that strategic flexibility should go all the way down, and that theoretical straightjackets should be thoroughly rejected.

1.2 A Machiavelli from Argentina?

From this first point, the temptation sometimes is to reduce Laclau as a kind of Schmitt-Machiavelli. Some commentators, often in a critical tone, read Laclau as someone that not only lacked a normative program, but held a kind of "politics for politics' sake" position. Deep down, they say, Laclau simply continued his initial Argentinian vocation of freeing emancipatory politics from theoretical restraints above all else.[54] Laclau's reputation as an "apologist of populism" and Mouffe's engagement with Schmitt's thought have likely helped further this image.

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[52] Laclau, "Ramos en la historia de la izquierda argentina."

[53] María Elena García Moral, "Entre el campo político y el historiográfico: el 'grupo de Ramos' a través de sus publicaciones periódicas," *IV Jornadas de Historia de las Izquierdas*, Buenos Aires, 14, 15, and 16 of November 2007, retrieved from http://www.peronlibros.com.ar/sites/default/files/pdfs/garcia_moral-panella.pdf, pp. 31-49.

[54] Antoni Negri makes a remark in this vein in "Negri on Hegemony: Gramsci, Togliatti, Laclau," *Verso*, 20 August 2015, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2179-negri-on-hegemony-gramsci-togliatti-laclau and Omar Acha has a similar reading: "Del populismo marxista al postmarxista: la trayectoria de Ernesto Laclau en la Izquierda Nacional (1963-2013)," *Archivos de historia del movimiento obrero y la izquierda*, nº3, 2013, pp. 57-78.

Although it is true that the normative aspect of Laclau's thought is a matter of debate, this view misses his deeper point. We must remember that Laclau was marked by his political upbringing, but also that history was his original field of study. We will now analyze one of his early and less-studied texts in which we can see one of the pivotal preoccupations that will come back throughout his life: the birth, evolution, and eventual breakdown of historical and theoretical paradigms. One might even say that Laclau seems to hold a kind of Marxist materialism at the level of theory. In Marxism, history is made of historical periods that accumulated material contradictions over time, which eventually led to the downfall of their respective ruling class at the hands of the underdogs who took their place. For Laclau, historical periods contain "ruling" theoretical paradigms – e.g., "Middle Age," "Enlightenment," "Positivism," or "Marxism." The paradigms eventually accumulate contradictions by having to adjust to new, unanticipated settings, which eventually leads to their downfall and replacement with a new emerging paradigm incommensurable with the previous one. We will try to see how the question of the flexibility of strategy is not what ultimately matters for Laclau, but the very problem of thinking the transition from one paradigm to another and how to offer a solution to this problem.

In one of his first essay of 1963, called "Nota sobre la Historia das Mentalidades,"[55] Laclau comments on the Annales School's "history of mentalities." In a few words, the history of mentalities consisted in an approach to history that explored how ordinary people saw themselves in a given historical period (it described, for instance, the history of worldviews and beliefs). The history of mentalities was undertaking a revival in the '60s with studies such as Philippe Ariès' famous work on the history of the idea of childhood.[56] Laclau argues that this approach to history has the unfortunate effect of "snapping" a picture,

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[55] Ernesto Laclau, "Nota Sobre la Historia de Mentalidades," in *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 3, nº 1/2, April-September, 1963), pp. 303-312.

[56] Cf. Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 17-19 for the origins of the history of mentalities, and 67-74 for its revival in the 60s and 70s.

which he felt was too static. In this article, he criticizes the history of mentalities for focusing too much on the structure of thought at a specific time and leaving unexplained the role of historical change.

> (...) this kind of historical reconstruction is able to grasp the infinity of new structures and axes, but it is incapable of explaining what is most specific to [history]: the sense, the direction, the meaning of historical change. What is essential [to it] is not to know descriptively all the structures that limit human action in a given [epoch]. What is essential is to see the development of how a process really happens, how the specific elements of historical reality connect and link with each other. In other words, what is essential is to [grasp], beyond the human sceneries that the transversal cuts of the past show to us, the specific dynamic of historical change.[57]

In order to explain the importance of integrating the role of historical change, Laclau structures his article as a history of paradigms and of their birth, crisis, and death.

First, he analyzes the Enlightenment and sees it as a double breaking away from the dominant paradigm of the Middle Age. On the one hand, he argues that there is a break away from "political Augustinism" that saw the social order as corruptible, decaying, and contingent, and yet as necessary and supernaturally justified. The Enlightenment, he says, will gradually look at the social order not as a corruptible and necessary order, but as a collection of immanent "facts" that have to pass through rational scrutiny. On the other hand, historical change will no longer be viewed as a purely negative and decaying phenomenon, but as the instrument of human progress itself. Indeed, the Enlightenment will try to make the social "facts" conform to its universalized values; the rationalized society of the future will be seen as the next step of mankind. For Laclau, the Enlightenment brings with it this double social and historical break: a new *radical*

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[57] "(…) este tipo de reconstrucción histórica capta la presencia de infinidad de hechos y estructuras nuevas, pero es incapaz de transmitirnos lo que es mas especifico del acontecer hist6rico: el sentido, la dirección, el significado del cambio. Lo esencial no es conocer descriptivamente el conjunto de estructuras que limitan la acción humana en un momento del tiempo: lo esencial es ver c6mo se articula realmente el desarrollo de un proceso, cómo esos distintos elementos de la realidad hist6rica se conectan y vinculan los unos con los otros; vale decir, que lo esencial es reconquistar, por detras de los paisajes humanos que nos muestran los cortes transversales del pasado, la dinámica especifica del cambio histórico." Laclau, "Historia de Mentalidades," p. 312.

and revolutionary way of looking at the social order, as well as a method of conceiving of history with a *totalizing* character that did not exist before.[58]

From there, Laclau analyzes the breakdown of the paradigm of the Enlightenment. The price to pay for the Enlightenment's view of the social order as a set of "facts," he says, was a reinforcement of the Middle Ages' rigid distinction between a corrupted and unintelligible social world and a world of eternal truths.[59] Indeed, in opposition to the world of purified "facts" posited by the Enlightenment, the sheer diversity of social institutions and customs was bound to remain unexplained. These institutions and customs were seen as the unintelligible and transitory remnants of a history that was increasingly rational. These institutions and customs could therefore not be "explained" due to the paradigm's presuppositions but, rather, they only be seen as the negative contrary of the fully enlightened society that was to come.

This faith in an ever-rational historical change came to be shaken by the events of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which deepened this duality even further. The rationality of historical change was increasingly theorized as a rationality that, *ultimately* and despite its apparent contradictions, *will occur* in the end, no matter what. The Enlightenment's faith in the mechanisms of change was redirected into deeper, underlying mechanisms – such as the mechanism of the "cunning of reason" – the idea of a rational society was increasingly seen as a regulative idea lying beyond the apparent contradictions of the day – such as the struggle of opposite groups that will, ultimately, advance history.

Out of the demise of the paradigm of the Enlightenment, says Laclau, emerged the two major historic-universal constructions of the nineteenth century: positivism and Marxism. It is here, Laclau points out, that we can see how the *histoire des mentalités* repeats the mistakes of the positivist paradigm. Indeed, after the nineteenth century and the critique of the myths of bourgeois progressivism and its faith in a rational history, the notion of historical change itself entered into a crisis. The positivist paradigm started seeing

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[58] He takes some of these themes again in "God Only Knows," *Marxism Today*, December 1991, pp. 56-59, cf. also Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of identity," in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 2007 [1996]), p. 24.
[59] Laclau, "Historia de Mentalidades," p. 306.

historical periods as units that could be analyzed on their own, and Laclau admits that the twentieth century opens with historical studies that are markedly rich in empirical details.[60] However, he argues, since the positivist paradigm had lost all faith in trying to understand the future, it saw these historical periods as closed on themselves and refused to analyze how the transition from one period to another occurred. Positivism, he says, attempted to freeze change and ended up not only denying historicity itself, but actually seeing change as an opaque, hostile, and mysterious force.

This rejection of historical change, says Laclau, is deeply problematic. In a way reminiscent to what some Marxist authors have argued,[61] Laclau argues that the past of mankind can only be imagined if some kind of future is postulated. In other words, despite positivism's successes, History itself still had to be written. One must not give up historiography and the attempt to build a vision that can reconcile History's short and long-term dimensions, Laclau argues. He then finishes his essay in his characteristic way, with one last "dramatic" sentence: "In this sense, Marxism represents, so far, the only valid attempt to connect the meaning of a particular moment in time with the totality of the history of mankind."[62]

2. Epistemology

In these initial writings, Laclau had still hopes that Marxism was the best paradigm to explain historical change. In this early text, we also see a few themes which will be present throughout his thought: the fact that our modern condition is characterized by striving toward a harmonious and rational society; that this reconciled society consists in connecting back to an "essential" image of itself (which is present beyond the multitude of existing social arrangements); that paradigms accumulate contradictions due to the increasing accumulation of new facts the paradigm cannot explain; that these paradigms deepen their categories by

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[60] Laclau, "Historia de Mentalidades," p. 307.

[61] Such as Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, but also Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 3.

[62] "En este sentido, el marxismo representa la uinica tentativa valida, hasta el presente, de ligar la significación peculiar de un momento del tiempo con la totalidad de la historia humana." Laclau, "Historia de Mentalidades," p. 312.

creating ad hoc explanations to delay their fated breakdown; and that, in the end, one must gather the strength to accept this unavoidable destruction of paradigms, but still take control of one's destiny by positing a paradigm for oneself.

By the time of his first book, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977), Laclau had already assumed a more critical stance. Marxism, which was hailed fifteen years earlier as the only valid attempt (so far) to offer a unifying vision of history, now seemed to be entrapped in the same problem that the paradigms of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment fell into, i.e., Marxism progressively postulated ad hoc explanations that explained why there was a growing discrepancy between its paradigm and the reality it was supposed to explain.

Indeed, in his introduction, Laclau touches again on the distinction between a world with a contingent diversity of social arrangements and a world of immutable underlying rules. He describes how Plato's Allegory of the Cave was the first theory of *articulation*: it is the first time in history that a theory posits a division between doxa and knowledge. In other words, for Laclau, Plato made a fundamental distinction between "common sense" as the ensemble of concepts that seem necessarily linked together but are in fact only connected thanks to custom and tradition, and then the world of the effective connections between these concepts, the real source of their intelligibility that lies behind the deceptive veil of tradition. Plato, he says, advances the idea that knowledge presupposes a break with this customary links: ideas must be disarticulated from these false necessary connections and, thanks to critical thinking, we can "purify" and reconstruct these concepts' genuine and essential coherence.[63]

For Laclau, Marxism's progress has been hindered because of the Platonic trap. Indeed, Marxist theory has a host of concepts that are both customarily linked together and that seem to theoretically entail each other. When Marxist theory talks about the concept of the "capitalist," it *evokes* all its other Marxist concepts that are *connotatively* linked with it (Laclau does not use these examples, but the notion of proletarian, for

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[63] Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, pp. 7-8.

instance, or the revolution).[64] These concepts, such as "capitalist," are less actual concepts than *names* related to other names. And when the theorist is faced with a contradiction, he relegates the inconsistency to an underlying class-process. For instance, if the perceived "capitalist" does not conform to the intuitive idea of what the "capitalist" is in the Marxist scheme, then it can always be said that "we have not yet achieved the required level of capitalist development." In other words, the contradiction is *part* of the unfolding of the true class essence of the capitalist.[65]

We can easily hear the echoes of the problem Bernstein had with the doctrinaires: their key terms did not really have a content per se but evoked a story that was unfolding itself and almost created the reality they wanted to see. Laclau's verdict is resolute: "The abandonment of the Platonic cave of class reductionism demands, today, an increasing theoretical formalization of Marxist categories, breaking at once with the connotative articulations of political discourse and with the postulation of paradigmatic relations between concepts."[66]

This task of formalization of the Marxist categories is something Laclau began to undertake with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.[67] After *Hegemony*, Laclau began to write parts of a "rhetorical theory" that could explain the foundations of politics and society,[68] and so, chronologically speaking, it would make more sense to address *Hegemony* first. Nevertheless, in order to understand Laclau's construction of his narrative, it makes more sense to begin with his epistemology. Indeed, even Laclau tended to describe himself this way and wrote two articles with a kind of systematization of his thought. His entry in "Discourse," written in 1993.[69] together with another, lesser-known article called "Afterword:

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[64] Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, pp. 10-11.

[65] Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, pp. 11-12.

[66] Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, p. 12.

[67] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. x.

[68] Ernesto Laclau, "Metaphor and Social Antagonisms," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 249-257, Ernesto Laclau, "The Politics of Rhetoric," Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, and Andrzej Warminski (eds.), *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and cf. the essays in Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*.

[69] Andersen uses it for his chapter on Laclau, cf. Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen, *Discursive analytical strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2003).

Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric" written in 2012, near the end of his life, are two articles with a similar didactic and summarized format that indicate some of the oscillations and regularities of his thought twenty years apart.[70] These articles follow a similar argumentative and formal structure. Perhaps this was the seminal structure of a general work on which Laclau was working since at least 2003, *Elusive Universality*, and that would have systematized and put all his thoughts together. Unfortunately, he never managed to publish it.[71]

2.1 Saussure's Linguistics

The point of departure of Laclau's thought in these articles is the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. It is on the basis of a formalized linguistics that Laclau will then formalize Marxism. But why linguistics? As it will become clear by the end of this section, for Laclau linguistics is not a superior epistemological point of view like economics was for Marxism. In fact, Laclau sometimes touches on the fact that other philosophical paradigms could have served as points of departure.[72] However, these paradigms, some of which have already been developed in the way Laclau does here with linguistics, essentially arrive at similar conclusions.

Let us then turn to Saussure's linguistics. In his canonical *Cours de linguistique Générale* (published posthumously in 1916), Saussure tried to study language not just diachronically and by studying its historical evolution, as it was usually done in the nineteenth century, but synchronically by seeing it as a system of formal rules. Saussure argued against a "nomenclaturist" view that saw language as merely a

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[70] Ernesto Laclau, "Discourse," in Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas Pogge, *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 542 and his text written twenty years later is Ernesto Laclau, "Afterword: Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric," p. 238. Compare with his summary in: *On Populist Reason*, pp. 67-72 and "Ideology and Post-Marxism," in David Howarth (ed.), *Post-Marxism, Populism, and Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 96-107.

[71] Cf. Laclau's interview "La política como proyecto emancipatorio," interview by Carlos Gazzera, *La Gaceta-Cordoba*, 27 July 2003, retrieved from https://www.lagaceta.com.ar/nota/207042/la-gaceta-literaria/politica-como-proyecto-emancipatorio.html

[72] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. xi, pp. 3-4.

process of attaching a name to a thing.[73] In this paradigm, a word means something because it refers and stands for a concrete thing. Against this "substantialist" view of language, Saussure will try to establish a "formalist" view that sees the meaning of words not as dependent on some relation to reality, but as entirely dependent on their relation to other words. In this way, Saussure tried to avoid philological approaches to languages that tended to study language from a historical point of view. Instead, he tried to create a "linguistic science" of the study of language.[74]

To achieve that objective, Saussure posits *the sign* as the central component of a system of formal language.[75] A sign is composed of a signified and a signifier, i.e., the "concept"[76] that is signified (the tree) and the sound associated with it (the English *tree,* the French *arbre,* the Portuguese *árvore*). An essential insight of Saussure was that the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary, i.e., there is nothing in reality itself that could establish a link between the signified and the signifier.[77] Of course, this does not mean that the speaking individual can use any signifier he wants: he inherits a system of signifiers which he learns to use from childhood on. For each group of speakers, each sign has a specific *value* that distinguishes one sign from another. For two signifiers in two different speaking groups, the meaning could be the same (they can point to the same concept) but the value of the signifier different. Saussure gives the example of *sheep*: in English, *sheep* has the same meaning as the French *mouton*, but not the same value. Indeed, *mouton* can also indicate a grilled piece of meat from the sheep, but *sheep* cannot.[78]

There are two things that Laclau often highlights about Saussure's linguistics and that will be important to explain Laclau's thought. First, Laclau highlights the role of the *signs* in Saussure's linguistics: the fact that Saussure understood language as a system that has no "positive terms" but only "differences." In other

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[73] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique Générale* (Payot: Paris, 1971 [1916]), p. 34 and pp. 97-98.
[74] Saussure, *Cours*, pp. 13-19.
[75] Saussure, *Cours*, p. 32.
[76] Saussure talks about the *concept* and not the *thing* because we connect the signifier with the image that we have of the tree, not the real-world entity "the tree." This is part of his point that there is no direct link between a word and a thing.
[77] Saussure, *Cours*, p. 101.
[78] Saussure, *Cours*, p. 160.

words, the value of each term is defined in relation to each of the others, and, therefore, the meaning of words like "father," "mother," "son," etc. can only be understood in contrast with other words. *Contrast* generates meaning, for Saussure. Second, Laclau highlights the fact that Saussure created *a system made of rules*: he saw language as strictly formal. Indeed, there is nothing substantial in language that defines it, but only the relations between words. Language contains strict rules comparable to a game of chess wherein each wooden piece could be changed for a marble piece without changing the game's structure.[79] For Laclau, Saussure therefore has a *system* in which every *element* is strictly defined in relation to each other.

However, in a movement similar to the one that Mises undertakes toward Menger and his subjectivism, Laclau sees in Saussure some remnants of the strict "substantialist" paradigm that Saussure was trying to overcome. This paradigm, he argues, still has within it the idea that each stream of sounds forms a word that is tied to one concept: one signifier (the word composed of sounds), indicates one signified (the concept).[80] For Laclau, it was Louis Hjelmslev and the glossematic school of Copenhagen that made the step toward full formalism. By further dividing sounds and concepts into even smaller units, he argues, the glossematic school was able to arrive at the conclusion that there was no such rigorous harmony between sounds and concepts – hand movements, such as in sign language, can just as well carry meaning. For Laclau, from this point on, there was no longer a strict connection between signifier and signified, as was the case in Saussure, and linguistics finally became the formal undertaking Saussure was aiming at all along.

We should take some time to explain this step since this is a crucial moment for Laclau. For Laclau, this freeing of the signifier and the signified that he described in linguistics has been occurring in several theoretical paradigms throughout the twentieth century. It happened more generally in structuralism (thanks to poststructuralism), but also phenomenology (Heidegger) and analytical philosophy (Wittgenstein), as well as epistemology (Feyerabend) and Marxism (Gramsci). For Laclau, these trends herald the end of the

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[79] Laclau, "Discourse," p. 542, and Laclau, "Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric," p. 238.
[80] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," in *New Reflections*, p. 109, Laclau, "Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric," p. 237, Laclau, "Discourse," p. 543.

belief that our theoretical models have their sources on a stable source in reality and outside of these theorical models.[81]

Any attempt at drawing a line between what is the theorical model and what is "reality" is already a line that is drawn from within the theorical model. In other words, for Laclau, the epoch where we had the *illusion* that we could ground our theorical models in a stable reality is over and we now have to ground them with other conceptual resources – such as Laclau's "rhetorical" theory that we will analyze below.[82] In other words, for Laclau, we now find ourselves with theorical models that no longer have their original presuppositions (the illusion of a stable grounding) and that are in dire need of reformulation.

As we can see, the theoretical paradigm that Laclau formalizes in order to ground his politics is linguistics, but it could have been another theoretical model as well. The first step toward this formalization is Laclau's argument that it is pointless to distinguish between the linguistic and the non-linguistic: no brute fact can justify a clear distinction between the two. With the signifier "freed" from the signified, Saussure's model of language can now be generalized to any signifying system: dress codes, art, or literature are some examples of systems whose categories could be formalized in terms of Saussure's linguistic model.[83] More radically, for Laclau, any signifying system can be formalized and, therefore, so can *any aspect of the social*. As we will see, the main focus of his attention will be the formalization of politics.[84]

2.2 The source of meaning: metaphor and metonymy

We must now understand what "meaning" means in this new paradigm. Since for Laclau there is no longer any kind of essential link between language and "reality," meaning will have to be an operation that happens strictly within language itself. The political significance of this will be, for instance, the idea that our

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[81] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. xi.
[82] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. xi.
[83] Laclau, "Discourse," p. 543; Ernesto Laclau, "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor," p. 65.
[84] He touches on this in Ernesto Laclau, "Politics and the Limits of Modernity," *Social Text*, Nº21, 1989, pp. 63-82: pp. 68-69.

political identities are defined, not by because of some kind of relation with reality (such as the kind of "labor" that defines the Marxist proletarian), but by of our very difference and opposition with other identities. By describing Laclau's view of meaning, we will then be able reconstruct his political thinking.

Saussure's model saw language as formal and as composed of differences. After defining the sign, Saussure then studies how one sign relates to other signs concretely. A conglomerate of words or the structure of the sentence, for instance, follows Saussure's basic ideas, i.e., that a sentence is a series of elements which gain their value due to their relationship with the elements that come before and after.[85] Signs have two kinds of relations between them:

> (a) Syntagmatic, what Laclau calls *combination*. Just as signs are not "arbitrary" in the sense that the speaker cannot use signifiers in any way he wishes, so is it the case with the rules of how signs can be combined to make a meaningful sentence (or a meaningful paragraph, chapter, or text). Saussure included in this syntagmatic dimension the study of syntax. "Cup of milk," for instance, is a conglomerate of words which follow specific rules of combination: all terms are in a sequence with the others and follow prescribed rules of combination and, in this instance, some of these rules are the syntactic rules of grammar. However, Saussure uses "syntagmatic" to mean any rules that more generally indicate how different elements can be combined.

> (b) Associative/paradigmatic, what Laclau calls *substitution*. This kind of relationship between words is less straightforward. Indeed, each syntagmatic position has terms that can be replaced by other terms associatively/paradigmatically: "Cup" can be replaced by "pint," or "milk" can be replaced by "tea." But, says Laclau, there seem to be no clear rules behind these associations.

As we can see, for Saussure, while the syntagmatic level has strict rules, the paradigmatic level does not: the person that is using language can associate terms in an infinity of ways. Laclau gives an example from Saussure: the French "enseignement," for instance, can be related to other similar terms like "enseigner" or

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[85] Saussure, *Cours*, pp. 170-171.

"enseignant," or it can be related to other terms but at the level of the signified, like "éducation" or "apprentissage."[86] Since substitutions can be made at the level of the signifier *or* the signified, there can be no rules encompassing all possible combinations. In other words, says Laclau, Saussure's model cannot be a closed system and linguistics has no choice but to use some explanation "beyond" itself to explain associations. It seems that linguistics cannot, therefore, constitute itself as a closed science. Laclau moves on and tries to understand what that "beyond" could be in order to close the circle.[87]

What he argues is that, if there are rules to this associative/paradigmatic dimension but they cannot be confined to the signifier or the signified, then a substitution of one word for another is necessarily *figural*. For Laclau, *rhetoric* is the art of the figural par excellence, and he uses it to create a coherent linguistic scheme (although, of course, Laclau will not define rhetoric as an ornamental art of the figural operating above the literal, as we will see).

When we see the associative pole, then we see that the dimensions of substitution and combination are also operative in it. The associative pole contains two dimensions:

> (1) M*etaphor*: Laclau emphasizes that, classically, "metaphor" means the replacement of a literal term for a non-literal one on the basis of analogy (when we say, for instance, that "God is my fortress"). Therefore, an associative/paradigmatic substitution, says Laclau, must necessarily involves some *analogy* (some partial similarity) between the elements replacing each other, even if what is analogous is only a common context. *For Laclau, rhetoric calls a substitution on the basis of analogy a metaphor.*

> (2) *Metonymy*: Laclau emphasizes that, classically, metonymy is a figure of speech in which we use a word *closely related* to the thing we want to describe. We should not mix this figure with the *synecdoche*, by which we refer a thing by referring one of its part (the "sail" to refer to a whole

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[86] We are closely following his reasoning in Laclau, "Afterword: Language, Discourse," p. 240. Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, pp. 60-61.

[87] Laclau, "Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric," p. 240.

ship). The "crown" in "lands belonging to the crown" is a better example of metonymy, as the monarch and crown are separable but so intimately related that a speaker can use one to refer to the other. *A metonymy, Laclau says, is therefore made on the basis of spatial contiguity.*

For Laclau, these two additional rhetorical dimensions and the relation between them is crucial. The figural elements (metaphor and metonymy) that, at first, seem to be the more "ornamental" aspect of these four dimensions (syntagmatic/combination, associative/paradigmatic, metaphorical, and metonymical), are actually the most fundamental. The dimensions of substitution and combination are grounded in those of metaphor and metonymy.

Metaphor and metonymy are classically understood as two separated or even opposed rhetorical figures: one happens between elements that are similar enough to overlap (A is B, such as "God is my *fortress*"), the other between elements that are bordering each other (from B to A, such as "the lands of the *crown*"). However, Laclau sees them as mutually interdependent. On the one hand, a metaphor can only be performed thanks to seminal metonymical operations. For instance, a Portuguese student will often say that he is going to take a "chair" (*uma cadeira*) in constitutional law, by which she means a course in constitutional law. The *chair* originally refers to the ominous chairs on which the teacher used to sit on in his classroom. What Laclau means when he says that metaphors are dependent on metonymies is that we repeat metonymies to such an extent that they become metaphorical expressions.[88] It becomes hard to tell the difference between metaphor and metonymy because the metonymic associations can become so strong that one forgets they were born of casual proximity and not analogous relationship. One begins to see a metaphorical, i.e. inherent, relationship between two things that were only related by habitual coincidence. On the other hand, says Laclau, metonymies themselves would not be possible without metaphors. Metaphors supply us with abundant material that was once metonymical in order to make further metonymies. Metaphors are, as

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[88] Laclau, "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor," pp. 60-61.

Laclau says, "the point of no return" of metonymies: they are the moment when metonymies are no longer felt as metonymies but are fully integrated. Metaphors are dead metonymies.[89]

The essential point in Laclau's theory of meaning is that *all signifying systems are ordered along the metonymy-metaphor axis*.[90] Indeed, what we see at the rhetorical level, says Laclau, happens homologically at the linguistic level between the syntagmatic and associative pole. The syntagmatic pole is metonymical because it indicates the differences between elements; the associative pole is metaphorical because it swaps elements that were once metonymical. To give an idea of how all-encompassing Laclau sees this axis to be, here he quotes Jakobson, on whose argument he bases his own:

> For Jakobson [the metaphoric/metonymic] alternative applies equally to non-verbal art: in cubism, the succession of synecdoches is essentially metonymic, while in surrealism the quasi-allegorical images lean towards metaphor. And, in film, the plurality of angles and close-ups in Griffith's production is metonymic in nature, while in Charlie Chaplin and Eisenstein a metaphoric substitution of images structures the narrative. Indeed, any semiotic system can, for Jakobson, be understood in terms of the metaphoric/metonymic alternative.

Or another passage, this time with his direct opinion, in the didactic text from 2012 whose structure we are using:

> (…) the basic distinction combination/substitution that was originally formulated within the context of Saussurean linguistics, is one that we see reproduced at most levels of structuration of human reality: it is the distinction between syntagm and paradigm in linguistics; between metonymy and metaphor in rhetoric; between displacement and condensation in psychoanalysis; and between difference and equivalence in politics. And, as we have seen, it is not a matter of casual analogies, but of deeper homologies that point to

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[89] It would be more rigorous to say that catachresis is the figure of the dead metaphor for Laclau, cf. "Language, Discourse, Rhetoric," p. 243, and *Rhetorical Foundations* pp. 61-62. Laclau has a negative characterization of metaphors versus metonymy in Laclau, "The Politics of Rhetoric," p. 250. And of the logic of difference in Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" in *Emancipation(s)*, p. 43.

[90] Although in "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor," he advises against making the metaphor/metonomy distinction *too* encompassing, p. 67.

the constitutive structure of these fields. It is my deep conviction that it would also be found operating in other fields if the list is expanded.[91]

In conclusion, the essential point we must take from this is the following: for Laclau, meaning is the result of a constitutive balance between metaphor and metonymy, i.e., between meaning deriving from the metaphorical similarity we perceive between elements, and meaning deriving from the metonymical similarities we make between elements. On the one hand, there are similarities of things we got used to pairing together – "God is my fortress" – and, on the other hand, there are similarities of things we pair together due to them being spatially related – "the scepter" to talk about "the king."

2.3 The importance of Empty Signifiers for politics

The fact that we have a grasp of how meaning is generated in Laclau's paradigm will help us greatly when we will arrive at his formalization of Marxism's metanarrative. Indeed, the interaction between metonymy and metaphor helps to explain how agents form their political identities. For instance, Laclau sometimes gives the example of a neighborhood plagued with racist violence and the only political force that can stop it is a trade union. Even though "anti-racism" might not be a task that one would intuitively ascribe to trade-unions, the trade-union ends up endorsing it because of its relation of proximity.[92] If that endorsement continues for a long time, then people might come to associate "trade-union" with "anti-racism": it will become a normal task of trade-unions. We have here a relation of contiguity that shades into analogy, from contingent spatial proximity to a unity that solidified and became natural over time.

However, Laclau wants to do more than just analyze small cases like this one. His famous notion of "hegemony" (and, as we will see, his notion of populism) are built on the idea that a great number of political entities and grievances can band together by being opposed to a common enemy. From a situation

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[91] Laclau, "Language, Discourse, Rhetoric," p. 242.
[92] Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 63.

where several political entities have no especial kind of relation at first (like in our example of trade-unions and anti-racism), it can become natural to see them as united by an essential link (in cases where, for instance, a great number of political entities will equally blame a given opponent for the state of dissatisfaction in which they all find themselves). In other words, even though we now have an understanding of how meaning is generated in a formalized paradigm, we have to see how Laclau takes this intuition to the political arena at large.[93]

How should we think the political arena or, to come back to Saussure, how should we think the totality of the system in which the specific political identities find themselves? Remember that, for Saussure, language is a system of differences. This also means that to say one thing is to reference it within a system of differences. Language is no longer a correspondence between a word and a thing; rather, a word is connected to other words and, strictly speaking, to *all* the other words. This, for Laclau, leads us to think about the *limits* of that system: to mean something is to mean it inside of a totality of differences.

The problem is that we cannot think the totality and limits of the system.[94] If we did, that entire thinkable system would itself exist within a system of differences. If we think the totality of differences in terms of a difference, we would only have *one more* difference within the system. We seem to be faced with a kind of infinite regression. This means that we have to think the limits of a system of differences not as a positive limit but *as a negative one*: what gives the differences a sense of cohesion is the fact that they have in common, not one more difference, but something that they all reject. As Laclau would say, "to give a political example: it is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion."[95] Perhaps Laclau would agree with this example: in this paradigm, it is thanks to the figure of the *prisoner* that a society acquires its cohesion and what it means to be a good citizen.

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[93] It would be more rigorous to say that Laclau has a social/political distinction rather than an isolated "political arena." However, this image of a "political arena" will help us understand what Laclau wants to arrive at.

[94] Cf. Ernesto Laclau, "the impossibility of society," in *New Reflections*, pp. 89-91.

[95] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, p. 70.

As Laclau would say, we can therefore see that all differences in any signifying system are always "constitutively split." They are always *different from each other* but they are also always *equivalent in their difference toward something they all reject*.[96] For Laclau, by sketching this crucial distinction at the level of politics, we are only repeating what we already said about metonymy and metaphor in our last section. Political entities are, on the one hand, metaphorically related to all the others ("we *are* all good citizens"). All these elements can be swapped in that they are all good citizens. On the other hand, all political identities are metonymically related in a "us" that is faced to a "them" that is excluded from the system ("we are not *these* prisoners"). This metonymy-metaphor relation translated to the political realm are two other key terms that we now add to Laclau's arsenal: the *logic of equivalence* and the *logic of difference*. Any system of signification, says Laclau, hangs on a balance between these two poles. A system must be held together by being different from something all the elements of that system are not. But then each element must be different from all the other elements of that system.

However, the way in which a system is balanced between difference and equivalence is not a perfect balance. Since, in the end, the totality of a signifying system is expressed by saying, not what it is, but what it is not, there is always an unsolvable tension in all meaning that is constitutive of meaning itself. Meaning is possible to the extent that we fail to say what we mean. Since a difference always exists in a wider system of references, but since it is impossible to use one more difference to point to that wider totality, then that difference makes a reference to something that is not a difference: it is a difference-that-is-not-one, an element of Laclau's theory that indicates the failure of the totality to constitute itself as one more positive difference. That difference-that-is-not-one is yet another key term of Laclau's paradigm, what he has called *empty signifiers*.[97]

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[96] Laclau, "Empty Signifiers," *Emancipation(s)*, p. 38.

[97] Stephen Jeffares offers a careful analysis of the notion of empty signifiers: Stephen Jeffares, *Why public policy ideas catch on: empty signifiers and flourishing neighbourhoods*, PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Birmingham, December 2007, p. 57 onwards.

Empty signifiers are "empty" terms that point out the negative limits of a system of signification. In politics, "justice," "democracy," or "equality" are typical examples of empty signifiers. With this, Laclau does not mean that these terms are literally empty, in which case they would be incoherent noises. What he means is that terms like "justice," "democracy," or "equality" are prized by everyone in a political community, but any attempt at fully specifying their content must fail since they point to a situation where the community (the totality) would itself be fully specifiable. In other words, these are the terms that point the inexpressible excess that all the differences of the system reject. They are not truly "empty" since they still reflect some contents that are not enough to express everything they point to (we could say that "democracy," for instance, is still attached to "vote").

In turn, these empty signifiers should be carefully distinguished from *floating* signifiers. Floating signifiers can also be terms like "democracy" and "justice," but Laclau uses the epithet "floating" for terms that different *discourses* are fighting over. This is an important step since, when scholars describe the distinctive "discourse theory" approach of Laclau, "discourse" fits exactly here: discourses prevent the play of differences from becoming a frenetic whole of relations that are permanently changing each other.[98] Indeed, the explanation we gave of Laclau's conception of systems and meaning gives the impression of a coherent arena where a single change would modify the entire system. In fact, the political arena is made up of smaller systems that attempt to arrest the flow of meaning through *nodal points*. Marxism or ecology, for instance, are examples of discourses that are solidified around nodal points such as "class" or "nature," respectively. These elements are reference points that organize a discourse around them.[99] These discourses then struggle to fix the meaning of terms that are dynamic and hotly debated – crucial terms such as "democracy" or "welfare state."[100]

[98] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 105-114.
[99] Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 59. Cf. also Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 112-113.
[100] Laclau and Mouufe, *Hegemony*, p. 112. Cf. also Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*, p. 62.

We seem again to be remote from the domain of politics, but Laclau's notion of empty signifier is a major concept that will enable him to think politics at the level of the arena in which it occurs. Laclau sometimes give the example of the *Solidarnosc* in Poland where, from a situation where workers were asking particular and specific demands, the *Solidarnosc* became the empty name of a large number of groups that were united in their opposition to the government (liberals, conservative, and dissidents on the left). Perhaps Laclau would say that we are seeing something similar in the recent Honk Kong protests. From protests targeted against a specific extradition law, the protests became an empty name for a wider dissatisfaction toward the regime.

3. The formalization of Marxism

3.1 Hegemony and Socialist Strategy

We now have the bases for Laclau's formalization of the metanarrative of Marxism. Thanks to this formalized linguistics, Laclau will be able to isolate each section of the metanarrative of Marxism and make it independent from the "economic" realm that illusorily provided a stable ground for its politics.

Before beginning to see how Laclau formalizes the categories of Marxism, we should first give a short summary of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* since it is such a crucial work for Laclau's thought. In a few words, Laclau and Mouffe begin by drawing a history of how Marxism, from the end of the XIX century onwards, had to face increasingly new contexts and situations that its theory could not encompass. This story they tell almost reads like a continuation of Laclau's dramatic sentence at the end of "Nota sobre la Historia das Mentalidades": just as he analyzed the paradigms of the Middle Ages, of the Enlightenment,

and of Positivism in light of their birth and breakdown, it seems that the day of reckoning has arrived for Marxism as well.

In a sense, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has two movements: on the one hand, it contains an inwards critique of the Left and Marxism;[101] on the other hand, it contains a second, outward movement against the opponent of the day, the New Right.[102] In the first "inward" movement of *Hegemony*, Laclau and Mouffe argue that Marxism, as it was initially formulated, was able to strive within its limited context of nineteenth century Europe. They argue that Marx's success was partly due to his use of the Jacobin imaginary and supplying it with his framework of proletariat, revolution, and classes that seemed to strongly reflect the situation of the workers at the end of the XIX century. The problem is that, in proposing that paradigm, Marx created a time-bomb that, over time, would become increasingly problematic: how can we reconcile the paradigm offered by Marx with new contexts, such as the fact that capitalism was becoming increasingly more fragmented and not homogeneous as Marx predicted? And what about the interests of the classes, how to isolate this crucial interest that would then lead to the final revolution? What Laclau and Mouffe tell us in the beginning of *Hegemony* is the story of how Marxism, from a state of original innocence where theory and political struggle coincided, began to realize that theory was increasingly less adequate.

We are back again to Laclau's take on the paradigm of the Enlightenment or his vision of the platonic cave: there is a constant attempt to articulate the problem of the already discovered "essential" truths and to make sense of the superfluous obstacles that seem to stand fall in the way of theory. Very much like Laclau's paradigm of the Enlightenment, Marxism has a theory of articulation of its own – the belief in an overarching historical teleology, which is itself based on underlying laws of economics. But it also has an increasingly harder time reconciling this idea with the fact that the concepts within its paradigm have

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[101] Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 193.
[102] This second movement is essentially present in the last chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

necessary and intrinsically valid connections, i.e. that they have a secure grounding on these underlying laws of economy.

> (…) Marxism finally lost its innocence at that time. In so far as the paradigmatic sequence of its categories was subjected to the 'structural pressure' of increasingly atypical situations, it became ever more difficult to reduce social relations to structural moments internal to those categories. A proliferation of caesurae and discontinuities start to break down the unity of a discourse that considered itself profoundly monist.[103]

As we saw earlier, the manutention of the old paradigm can be made only at the cost of positing ad hoc features: Marxism, instead of solving the more contingent aspects of its theory, decided to remain locked within its original categories. It is here that one of the great opponents of Laclau, *orthodox Marxism*, emerges. For Laclau and Mouffe, when the crisis of Marxism became evident and the Second International occurred, the "orthodox Marxist" current tried to maintain the theory as much as possible within its own paradigm: it argued that the fragmentation of capitalism was transitory (or merely apparent) and maintained that there were underlying and necessary laws of history. Orthodox Marxism was also keen in creating theories that would endlessly capture what was the "true" interest and identity of a "class."[104]

> Marxist orthodoxy, as it is constituted in Kautsky and Plekhanov, is not a simple continuation of classical Marxism. It involves a very particular inflection, characterized by the new role assigned to theory. Instead of serving to systematize observable historical tendencies (…) theory sets itself up as a guarantee that these tendencies will eventually coincide with the type of social articulation proposed by the Marxist paradigm. (…) It is the laws of motion of the infrastructure, guaranteed by Marxist 'science', which provide the terrain

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[103] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 14-19 and p. 18.
[104] Laclau repeats this part of his narrative many years later in Ernesto Laclau Laclau, "Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, nº4, Summer 2006, pp. 646-680. The essay is reprinted in *Rhetorical Foundations*.

for the overcoming of this disjuncture and assure both the transitory character of the existing tendencies and the future revolutionary reconstitution of the working class.[105]

"Orthodox Marxism," far from being the "original" Marxism, was the result of a stubborn attachment to the categories of Marxism. Since, however, there was an increasing gap between theory and practice, new ad hoc concepts had to fill the growing gap between Marxist theory and political practice.

One of the first concepts of Laclau's formalization of Marxism grew from this predicament. The concept of "hegemony" emerged out of Marxism and Laclau and Mouffe argue that this concept came to fill this void between theory and practice. "Hegemony" was, at first, a way for the proletariat to seize the power of the state in countries where the bourgeoisie was too weak to perform its historical task – in Russia, for instance. The working class could therefore articulate its struggle with other classes while simultaneously maintaining its own class identity. In other words, "hegemony" introduced an element of contingency within the Marxist scheme of historical necessity.

From Laclau and Mouffe's perspective, this original sense of "hegemony" was therefore one of these ad hoc concepts that prevented the breakdown of the Marxist paradigm. Indeed, the hegemonic block was still understood as being under the leadership of the working class and of a vanguard that had a decisive epistemological advantage and truly knew the political direction of the hegemonic block. In the Marxist teleological scheme, these allies would eventually disappear. It was also a perfect way to maintain the illusion of the Marxist paradigm (i.e., the fact that the working class was not becoming more homogeneous, that there was no such thing as a Marxist teleology, that the economic does not determine the political, and so forth)

With the epistemological explanation we saw earlier, we can now understand how Laclau undertakes the formalization of hegemony. Marxism posited that the main agent of its narrative was the proletarian and that it was opposed to the bourgeois. Thanks to a revolutionary process that would wipe out the bourgeoisie,

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[105] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 19.

the socialist society could then be achieved. "Hegemony" adds one more step in that narrative: the proletarian will gather temporary allies to its cause in order to further its struggle against the bourgeoisie.

However, none of this is possible in Laclau's new scheme.[106] In the Marxist scheme, the underlying economic and historical laws coordinated a clean transition from one state of thing to the next and, eventually, we would have a socialist society where the proletariat would be emancipated from the bourgeoisie. But in Laclau's paradigm, we no longer have such laws. In fact, to posit them would be to come back to the problem we addressed earlier: by positing an underlying mechanism of economics or of history that would coordinate the transition from capitalism to socialism, we are only positing one more difference in a system of differences (even if that difference are historical or economic laws).

Furthermore, we saw that each difference in Laclau's linguistic paradigm is related to all the others. Therefore, the meaning of "proletarian" is dependent on the meaning of "bourgeois." Only the existence of a wider, underlying mechanism could indeed have made a clean transition from a state where "proletarian" could be safely transitioned into a new identity.[107] But the struggle with the bourgeoisie is a part of the very identity of the proletarian. Marxism's idea that the proletariat must "liquidate" the bourgeoisie is problematic precisely because, as Freud would say, "One only wonders, with concern, what the Soviets will do after they have wiped out their bourgeois."[108]

3.2 The formalization of hegemony

In the former Marxist paradigm, we had the element of *economic interest*. It was the real interest of the proletarian to fight the bourgeoisie and bring about socialism. In Laclau's paradigm, we instead have something closer to a *common grievance*: a series of agents that are dissatisfied with the situation in which

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[106] Ernesto Laclau, "Beyond Emancipation," in Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 3.
[107] Laclau, "Beyond Emancipation," p. 4 and "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of identity," p. 29, both essays are in Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*.
[108] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton & Company, 1962), p. 62.

they find themselves.[109] As with our example of the *Solidarnosc*, these reasons do not necessarily have to be economic nor do they have to be of the same nature (the liberal faction might find it problematic that they do not have freedom of expression, while the problem for the nationalist might be that the government is not correctly representing the country). An economic crisis, however, is a good case of a situation where a large proliferation of grievances occurs.[110]

In the Marxist paradigm, the proletariat was supposed to become increasingly aware of its interest over time as the class struggle intensified. For Laclau, however, the political arena is usually quite stable and is punctuated with moments of crisis. Political identities can never fully constitute themselves and they are always traversed by the inherent tension between logic of difference and logic of equivalence, between metaphor and metonymy. But for Laclau the political arena is a realm where the metaphorical pole of this tension tends to predominate. In other words, the political arena is usually relatively stable and, to use our example, the notion of what constitutes a "good citizen" will not change from one day to the next. It is true that the tension between metaphor and metonymy can never be superseded: a fully metaphorical order would not be able to make metonymical changes (we would have decided what is "the prisoner" and "the good citizen" once and for all), and a fully metonymical order would have no coherence whatsoever. But we have a relatively stable system of meaning in this metaphorical order.

What we call the "metaphorical order" is what Laclau would call a realm dominated by the politics of administration. The Marxist paradigm aspired to a society purified of contradictions and where we could specify once and for all each difference within a coherent totality. For Laclau, ironically, everyday politics already tends to be that way. Throughout his corpus, he sometimes identifies some of these stabilizing forms of politics that use a political rhetoric where each difference within the political system is heightened (such as discourses where the politicians emphasize that "we are all one nation" and where each has its own place,

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[109] We should note that Laclau's view of the subject has changed over time: Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*, pp. 53-54. One of the main reasons behind this change were the arguments in Slavoj Zizek, "Beyond Discourse Analysis," in Laclau, *New Reflections*.

[110] On this subject, cf. Arditi's review of Laclau's *Populist Reason*: Benjamin Arditi, "Populism is Hegemony is Politics," *Constellations*, vol. 17, n°3, 2010, pp. 488-497: pp. 493-494.

or multicultural discourses where sexual and racial differences are celebrated for their own sake). The politicians of the metaphorical order operate on the basis of a politics where each difference is equal in its difference and where the real difference is with the common element that all the differences reject.

For Laclau, it is in the metaphorical order that what we ordinarily understand as "time" occurs. Metaphors are also the social practices that became metaphors – gained their objectivity – through repetition and can, therefore, be anticipated to a certain degree. Receiving a letter from the mailman or buying a ticket at the cinema are two examples of these socialized and ritualized processes that we commonsensically understand as "time."[111] In Laclau's terminology, these familiarized and metaphorized repetitions are "sedimented"[112] social practices: they populate systems of signification and are the *spatial* side of Laclau's thought. They are the ossified metaphors with which we can regularly live our lives. In the apt words of a commentator: "Every form of relationality – even the relation of successive temporal moments – produces space, spatializes time."[113]

But there are situations where the metaphorical order is suddenly eroded. Even though "time" (as we commonly understand it) is on Laclau's metaphorical side, *change* is on the metonymical side: change itself is explained as the re-invasion of the negative excess that the differences of the system have excluded. Or, to use the term that Laclau uses in opposition to "sedimentation," change is the "reactivation" of former metonymies that have sedimented into metaphors. The notion of dislocation thus introduces the very element of temporality in Laclau's theory. The metonymical "re-invasion" disrupts the play of the already installed metaphors.

We saw that metaphors are dead metonymies: metaphors are simply former metonymies that are no longer felt as metonymies (the Portuguese student will say that he takes a "chair" in law (*uma cadeira*) to talk

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[111] Laclau, *Reflections*, p. 33.
[112] Christopher Kølvraa, "The discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau," in Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 96-108: p. 100.
[113] Oliver Marchart, "Institution and dislocation: philosophical roots of Laclau's discourse theory of space and antagonism," *Distinktion*, 2014, vol. 15, n°3, pp. 271–282: pp. 273-274.

about a course in law). A metonymical *dislocation* is a moment in which the contingent character common to metaphors suddenly emerges.[114] "Suddenly," because, since the common negative element rejected by the metaphors is precisely only "negatively" rejected and not "positively" subsumed under a wider principle, then it is also something essentially *unexpected* that threatens our sedimented routines.[115] When dislocations occur and metonymies invade the social, the subjects suddenly feel the incompleteness of their identities. Traditional hierarchies and institutions are put into doubt in ways that could not have been expected. Eventually, the common lack and frustration of the subjects can make them identify with each other from the very lack which they all share.

We should not forget that Laclau and Mouffe's notion of "discourse" (the smaller systems of differences such as "communism" or "ecology" that are fixed by nodal points) prevents metonymical invasions to turn in the complete chaos of the metaphorical system. Nevertheless, by dividing society between the subjects with a lack and the ones without it, and by showing how this lack is generated by the institutionalized order itself, the communists or ecologists can generate what Laclau calls a *chain of equivalence*.[116] The communist or ecological discourse might try to create equivalence with this common lack around nodal points such as "democracy," "freedom," or "workers." They will try to create a metonymical relation against the established order, while they will try to generate a metaphorical connection between their own cause and these dissatisfied agents.

As we can see, it is at this moment that the "enemy" of the story of Marxism (the "bourgeoise") is gone. The "enemy" has been formalized into Laclau's "negative excess" that prevents the chain of equivalence from constituting itself. The communist politician will blame "capitalism" for the problems that emerged from an economic crisis, while the nationalist politician will blame "the immigrants." Instead of having a metaphorical system with politicians that try to present each difference as a difference, we will instead have

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[114] Christopher Kølvraa, "The Discourse Theory of Ernesto Laclau," pp. 102-103.
[115] Marchart, "Institution and dislocation," p. 277.
[116] More details on the notion of chain of equivalence in Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 63.

a political arena where the equivalential pole will prevail. The number of differences will be drastically reduced and tend to become two: us and them, the unfiled ones and the establishment preventing our fulfilment. This is the moment where the metaphorical order turns metonymical and the dominant tension, once tipped in favor of the logic of difference, now turns to the logic of equivalence.[117]

The "hegemonic block" of the Marxist paradigm here comes to life but, instead of having economic interests, we have a common lack that unites the political agents. There is also no inherent direction in the construction of that block since it must be constructed in a chain of equivalence. Where is the "proletarian" of Marxism, the central character of the hegemonic block? For Laclau, there are no longer pre-given heroes that would naturally have the task to lead a chain of equivalence and the notion of empty signifier helps us understand why. Indeed, the "socialist society" of the paradigm of Marxism is now also formalized into the state of fulness toward which the hegemonic block is striving. Since that state of fulness is impossible to specify, it produces empty signifiers in order to have points that reference that impossibility. If "the workers" is part of that chain, then it can very well become the empty name that will represent the entirety of that chain, but none of the elements within the hegemonic block will have a natural advantage over the others. The *Solidarnosc*, for instance, came to represent widely different particular demands, many of them without much relation to each other, but all united in their common frustration. Thanks to the situation of disorder at the time, these heterogeneous demands became metonymically related and the *Solidarnosc* became the empty name of these grievances.

3.3 Populism and the normative aspect of hegemony

We will now turn to how these considerations translate normatively. Indeed, why should we adopt this formalized narrative of Marxism? What Laclau's politics essentially means is that we have to stop looking for ways in which our politics could be grounded into a stable reality. Instead, we have to accept that the

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[117] Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, pp. 68-69.

meaning of our political identities is internally determined. In other words, we have to reject the kind of politics that Marxism undertook when it gave rise to Marxist orthodoxy. We have to break with our stubborn attachment with fetishized sets of categories and accept that our identities will eventually pass. For Laclau, the real problem of Marxism is not the fact that it proposes a political narrative of its own but that very stubbornness, what he calls *essentialism*. Instead of trying to adapt itself to the new social and political circumstances, Marxist orthodoxy keeps trying to impose its own narrative on every new context because it believes that it is in touch with a stable economic reality beyond the temporary contingent discrepancies between its theory and practice. As Laclau says, essentialism is "self-referentiality"[118]: it is the belief that I can constitute meaning outside of the play of differences we discussed above.

When hegemony first emerged in the Marxist tradition, it acquired a profoundly authoritarian character precisely because of this self-referential character. As Laclau and Mouffe argued in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, when hegemony emerged, there was the potential for hegemony to become democratic and pluralistic since it could finally give some room for other agents to integrate the Marxist block and articulate a wide variety of groups. However, in order for the struggle to remain within the classist framework of Marxism, a leader with a tremendous epistemological vantage had to be present. Only such a leader could establish the distinction between the "true struggle" dictated by the laws of history and the "contingent" one.[119]

The break with "essentialist" forms of politics and the acceptance of the contingency of our identities is the preconditions for a democratic and pluralistic politics. By operating in the framework of hegemony, a wide number of identities can be articulated and there is not one overarching struggle that will take precedence over the others. As Laclau says, it is a politics where the agents are aware that other unforeseeable struggles will come tomorrow and that we should leave the place open for these struggles to emerge: "In one of the

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[118] Judith Butler, Stanley Aronowitz, Ernesto Laclau, Joan Scott, Chantal Mouffe and Cornel West, "Discussion," vol. 61, October 1992, pp. 108-120: p. 109.
[119] Laclau and Mouffe. *Hegemony*, pp. 47-71.

most crucial passages of his work Ortega y Gasset recalls that a proverb can be heard in the thirsty deserts of Libya saying: 'Drink from the well and leave the place to your neighbour.'"[120]

As we can see, for Laclau and Mouffe pluralism and democracy are not guaranteed by accepting their anti-essentialism. Rather, anti-essentialism is their precondition: politics can become pluralistic because we can articulate a wide number of identities without a vantage point that could privilege one identity over the others, and it can become democratic because it no longer postulates an illusory state of affairs where politics would be abolished for good. Only when an element of contingency is introduced through hegemony in the Marxist scheme that the political struggle could stop being exclusively focused on "the working class" and finally had the potential to acquire a pluralistic and democratic dimension.

Given the claims Laclau and Mouffe are making, however, their anti-essentialism can still move in an authoritarian direction. Couldn't a fascist have a non-essentialist practice of hegemony as well? This will be the source of many objections: why prescribe anti-essentialism if anti-essentialism can still be either authoritarian or democratic? Shouldn't there be something else that would distinguish, say, a fascist from a socialist practice of hegemony? It looks like hegemony is a kind of *politics for politics' sake*, no matter the content. We saw earlier that this was where the Schmittian-Machiavellian interpretation of Laclau came from. Hegemony, however, does not secure democracy, it is simply the presupposition for the only pluralistic and democratic form of politics there is.[121] Laclau and Mouffe are staunch supporters of emancipatory forms of politics, but they condemn essentialist politics as being necessarily non-emancipatory, non-democratic, and non-pluralistic.

This argumentation enables Laclau and Mouffe to make a decisive critique against Marxists that were still overly attached to its fetichized categories such as "class" and "the economy." What is more, Laclau and Mouffe are able to say that even the Right has learned the lessons of hegemony better than the orthodox Marxists. Indeed, the "New Right" that they describe in the last chapter of *Hegemony* is itself a chain of

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[120] Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 84.
[121] Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational*, p. 157.

equivalence that is able to successfully articulate conservative and neoliberal themes (a conservative defense of society and tradition, together with a free market discourse that dismantles the welfare state). Even though, for Laclau and Mouffe, this New Right is not anti-essentialist or emancipatory by any stretch, it was able to win successive battles against the left precisely because it has learned to articulate its categories in a way that the Left stubbornly refuses.[122]

Laclau's notion of *freedom* (that he describes in a subsequent work) follows a similar reasoning.[123] Just like democracy and pluralism, Laclau does not hand over freedom but indicates that the dislocations we analyzed earlier are the pre-condition for freedom. Indeed, moments of dislocation are unexpected and traumatic moments where the subjects' certainties are shaken, but they are also the moment where the subject can strive toward their own reconstitution. To be sure, Laclau is not postulating a kind of decisionist agent since the subjects always exist in an order of sedimented meanings. But since they are not striving toward a pre-existent identity (e.g. the worker that is obeying the laws of history), they can decide how they will reconstitute their identities. Nevertheless, the agents can also remain paralyzed by this sudden vision of the contingency of the metaphorical order. A nationalist discourse as much as an emancipatory one can use this dislocation to impose a new (non-)democratic order: "xenophobia" can become the answer to "democracy" as much as "equality." Dislocations only give the subjects the *possibility* of freedom.

Laclau is clear in his conviction that the times in which we live are precisely times when *the greatest freedom possible could be attained*: never was there a moment where the potential for creation was opened to such an extent. Indeed, there were times, he says, when society did not suffer so many dislocations as it does now. But, as capitalism becomes increasingly fragmented, it becomes more difficult to aprioristically determine the political struggles and the identity of the subjects involved.[124] These are crucial times for Laclau: either we remain paralyzed in the face of this proliferation of meanings and of the "death of narratives" (he often says that the postmodernism of Baudrillard is a good case of such paralysis), or the

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[122] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 169-171.
[123] Laclau, *Reflections*, pp. 43-44, p. 47, and p. 60.
[124] Article on how Laclau's hegemony is based on a narrative of a fragmenting capitalism

dislocated subjects take over the task of constructing their identities. Here, the "Nota sobre la Historia das Mentalidades" rings again: we must refuse paralysis and fully embrace the potential of constructing history. This is why Laclau says in one of his essays – and here he uses once more uses the dramatic effect of a last sentence – that we are at the beginning of an era where we are finally coming to terms with the contingent character of our identities. In other words, we are "at the beginning of freedom":

> Contemporary social struggles are bringing to the fore this contradictory movement that the emancipatory discourse of both religious and modern secularized eschatologies had concealed and repressed. We are today coming to terms with our own finitude and with the political possibilities that it opens. This is the point from which the potentially liberatory discourses of our postmodern age have to start. We can perhaps say that today we are at the end of emancipation and at the beginning of freedom.[125]

Of course, we should not forget that Laclau considers that a fully metonymical society is an impossibility. But a heightened metonymical order does open the way for the greatest freedom there is. Indeed, chains of equivalence are not possible in a metaphorical order where the logic of difference dominates. In this situation, the institutionalized order insists on a non-dichotomic discourse that highlights the way in which all elements are equally different. When metonymies invade the metaphorical order, a political arena that gains a metonymical dominance will have a binary and simplified syntagmatic structure in which associations will be privileged. Laclau thus deposits a great hope in equivalence, metonymy, and in the dichotomization of the political space.

But how can such dichotomization of the social space occur? It could be argued that Laclau tried to answer this question in 2005 with his theory of populism in *On Populist Reason*.[126] To be sure, Laclau had already

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[125] See the footnote after this passage where Laclau carefully explains what he meant with this sentence: Laclau, "Beyond Emancipation," in *Emancipation(s)*, p. 18.

[126] He has an essay with some of the arguments of *Populist Reason*: Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," in Francisco Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005).

touched on the subject of populism in the '70s and early '80s,[127] but he decided to explore the subject again for several reasons.

One of the major reasons is that the political panorama, twenty years after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, could not have been more different – both for the world and for Laclau himself. On the one hand, Laclau and Mouffe were very quickly projected to the forefront of the contemporary scene, for which they had both *Hegemony* and the fall of the Wall to thank. Although they were very well received by the general public, there is a noticeable difference in the way numerous scholars reviewed the works of each. Laclau's continuation of post-Marxism and hegemony at times received especially strong negative reactions.[128] In *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (1996), Richard Rorty saw in Laclau the kind of political jargon that he thought was detrimental to the Left – "an unfortunate over-philosophication of leftist political debate."[129] In a strained exchange with the notable feminist scholar Judith Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000), Butler decided to no longer answer Laclau's arguments because "much of what [Laclau] produces by way of argument is more war tactic than clear argument."[130] In this same work, we also saw the first salvo of harsh criticisms between Laclau and Žižek that would lead to their eventual break.[131]

This conflict with Zizek was symbolic of the greater rupture that was becoming more evident at the time, against a Left that was increasingly considered to be too "negative" in its critique of objectivism,

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[127] Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, Ernesto Laclau "Populist Rupture and Discourse," *Screen Education*, nº34, 1980, pp. 87-93, and Ernesto Laclau, "Populismo y transformación del imaginario político en América Latina," *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, nº42, June 1987, pp. 25-38.

[128] This difference is especially clear in Wenman, "Laclau or Mouffe? Splitting the Difference," pp. 581–606, and Townshend, "Laclau and Mouffe's Hegemonic Project," pp. 275-279.

[129] Richard Rorty, "Response to Ernesto Laclau," in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 71.

[130] Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 271.

[131] After their exchanges in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Laclau would continue his criticisms of Zizek in *Populist Reason*, then followed by Slavoj Zizek, "Against the Populist Temptation," *Critical Inquiry*, 32, 2006, pp. 551-574. This will be followed by Laclau, "Why Constructing a People," and finally by Zizek's "Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend!," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, 2006, pp. 185-211.

essentialism, and the Enlightenment and not offering anything "positive" in return.[132] In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, which he published with Butler and Zizek, Laclau would explicitly enunciate the problem:

> A (…) criticism (…) which could legitimately be directed at my work is that in the passage from classical Marxism to 'hegemony', and from the latter to 'radical democracy', an enlargement of the addressees of the descriptive/normative project takes place, and that, as a result, a corresponding enlargement of the area of normative argumentation should have followed - while, in my work, this latter enlargement has not sufficiently advanced. In other words, in formulating a political project which addresses the new situation, the descriptive dimension has advanced more rapidly than the normative. I think this is a valid criticism, and I intend to restore the correct balance between the two dimensions in future works.[133]

Laclau's return to his roots can therefore be read as an answer to these criticisms – and even, perhaps, as the fatal delay that prevented him from publishing on time *Elusive Universality*, his major work, which he had been preparing since at least 2003.[134]

Even though the normative aspect of *Populist Reason* has not escaped the commentators, this is not evident at face value because Laclau's stated aim in this work is to reestablish populism as a legitimate theoretical tool. His reasoning is the following. Populism, he says, is a notion that is regularly used by scholars and that seems to capture something very important about politics. However, no one so far has been able to define it very well. The literature on populism either starts with a given definition of populism, or it offer a preliminary typology of populist movements. Both approaches, however, always fail to correctly define populism because they begin with the same mistake: by trying to define populism in light of an ideology

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[132] Chamsy El-Ojeili, *Beyond Post-Socialism: Dialogues with the Far Left* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillanm, 2015), p. 40. Gregor McLennan, "Post- Marxism and the 'Four Sins' of Modernist Theorizing," *New Left Review*, vol. 218, 1996, pp. 53-74. Gregor McLennan, "Recanonizing Marx," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 13, n°4, 1999, pp. 555–576. Other versions of these "negative-positive" arguments toward postmodernism can be seen in Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and John Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). See also David Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After: Structure, Subjectivity and Power* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 77 and onwards.

[133] Butler, Laclau, and Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 295.

[134] Cf. footnote 71.

(such as "nationalism") or a specific social stratum (such as "farmers"), these approaches create a myriad of exceptions and end up reducing what populism actually consists of.[135]

Laclau, at some point of his work, proposes the following example to better encapsulate what populism is.[136] Imagine a large number of agrarian migrants settles in a shantytown on the periphery of a developing industrial city. The migrants at some point will begin to have *requests* for the political establishment – care for health or housing, for instance. If the political establishment does not meet those requests, they will accumulate over time. Each unfulfilled request will then begin to identify with all of the others on the sole basis of this unfulfillment: the claimants will begin to see each other as linked on the sole basis of an unfulfillment. Now, this lack will be directed against something very concrete, the political establishment, and these claimants with demands, at some point, will attempt to give a name to this constitutive unfulfillment. This is where the rhetoric of populism emerges: those with unfulfilled demands will call each other "the people"; they will call the political establishment "the establishment," or "the oligarchy"; and they will fight in the name of "empty signifiers," that is, concepts such as "justice" or "equality" that mean nothing but the opposite of the situation of unfulfillment in which "the people" finds itself. And this is what, for Laclau, populism is all about: it is a radical antagonistic discourse between a "people" and an "establishment" in the name of concepts that, in fact, are empty. This explains the previous criticism of theories populism that attempted to give it a concrete content from the onset: populism is not any specific content but, rather a discourse and a way of articulating the political that is eminently antagonistic. In conclusion, populism is about a part of society thinking that it represents the *true* people, against another part that prevents it from becoming the true people.

If this example makes clear the way in which "hegemony" and "populism" are intimately linked, the normative aspect of populism also emerges in several places of *Populist Reason*. At face value, however,

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[135] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 3-20. One should note the similarity of our introductory chapter critiquing literature on radicalism to Laclau's critique of populist literature. Laclau's approach to populism is indeed one of the inspirations for our current study of the formal, stylistic underpinnings of radicalism.

[136] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 73-74.

Laclau presents *On Populist Reason* as a theorical defense of populism as a concept. But, as some commentators have noted, we can see several sleights of hand in the work (and in the essay preceding the work[137]) where the equation between "hegemony," "politics," and "populism" occur.[138] What these equations have in common is that they are stated in a tangential manner which, for an author known for his systematicity, must necessarily raise some eyebrows. An explanation for these "elusive" equivalences is that Laclau's normative underpinnings are themselves elusive, and explicitly so. In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, which he published five years earlier with Butler and Zizek, Laclau had already explained that a pure description is impossible: a description of anything – of hegemony, of populism – always entails some normative commitments – and Laclau really talks, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, about his own "hidden normative grounds."[139]

What, then, are these elusive normative underpinnings? Predictably, that there is something fundamentally democratic in populism: it intensifies the metonymization of the political arena which in turn creates the conditions for democracy to occur. Indeed, in *Populist Reason*, Laclau argues – again, in a conspicuous "annex" – that a fundamental ingredient of any form of democracy is that it must reintegrate "underdogs" excluded from politics back inside. The negative excess that we addressed consists of precisely these "underdogs," and the metonymical invasion of the social consists precisely in the displacement populistic constructions exert over the established institutional order. In *Populist Reason*, hegemony and populism

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[137] Laclau, "What's in a Name?," p. 47.

[138] He already hinted at these equivalences in his essay Laclau, "What's in a Name?," p. 47. Cf. also Arditi's review of *Populist Reason*, "Populism is Hegemony is Politics?," pp. 491-493, or Peter Baker that speaks of a "slippage" between the three concepts: Peter Baker, "(Post)hegemony and the Promise of Populism: Reflections on the Politics of Our Times," *Política común*, vol. 10, 2016, retrieved from https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/pc/12322227.0010.002?view=text;rgn=main

[139] Butler, Laclau, and Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 294.

almost seem to be two faces of the same coin: both are political and democratic because they divide society into two camps and articulate particularities in order to form a hegemonic bloc.[140]

To what extent are "populism" and "hegemony" the same for Laclau? When he countered Zizek's critical "Against the Populist Temptation" with "Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics," Laclau made it clear that the Left should build a populist project (and Mouffe has been taking up this project to this day);[141] however, the connections between "hegemony" and "populism" are still debated. Is populism a type of hegemony? Or, is populism the modern form of hegemony *par excellence*? What we could argue is that there is no way to give a definitive answer since Laclau seems to be purposefully playing with his metanarrative.

Indeed, Laclau is clear about the fact that his hegemonic project cannot be a mere mirror image of Marxism.[142] It would not make sense, he says, to replace Marxism's totalizing paradigm with a paradigm that would avoid positing any totalization at all costs. As we saw, it is in this line that he criticizes the "particularist" position of Butler, or the pessimism of some postmodern currents for which any encompassing political project has become impossible.[143] For Laclau, a reversed paradigm where "the worker" would be replaced by "particular identities" would prevent the construction of a common, sustained, and transforming political project. Instead, we should accept the tension at the heart of the political categories (in his case, Marxist categories) that we inherited from the past. Democracy, pluralism, and freedom are possible to the extent that we accept the unresolvable tensions at the heart of any political project.

In the end, it would not make sense to replace the "revolution" of Marxism with "equivalence," "metonymy," or "populism." In fact, it would be irresponsible to do so since this would translate in a

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[140] Arditi, "Populism is Hegemony is Politics?," pp. 488-497.
[141] Cf. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.
[142] Laclau and Mouffe were already clear about this in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 188-190. Laclau, *Reflections*, pp. 26-27.
[143] Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. viii.

permanently subversive political position that could not build a common political project. But this does not mean that Laclau does not play with this line of thought. Look, for instance, at this passage toward the end of *Populist Reason*:

> Perhaps what is dawning as a possibility in our political experience is something radically different from what postmodern prophets of the 'end of politics' are announcing: the arrival at a fully political era, because the dissolution of the marks of certainty does not give the political game any aprioristic necessary terrain but, rather, the possibility of constantly redefining the terrain itself.[144]

As we know, Laclau does not believe that a fully political metonymical system is possible and here he seems to finish, as he often does, with one final dramatic line. But whether or not *he* believes in the normative implications of his anti-essentialist metanarrative is a different thing than the normative conclusions his metanarrative pushes toward, and it seems that Laclau is playing with that distinction.

Let's turn to another author, the philosopher Gabriel Rockhill, in order to enlighten this point. In *Logique de l'histoire*, Rockhill argues that the teleologies of postmodernity must be replaced by a more rigorous view of history that undermines the very supposed unity of the concepts and timelines that are being deconstructed (when we talk about an "epoch of the Enlightenment" and of "the moment" where it "began," for instance). This "counter-history," as he calls it, should focus on the history of the formation of concepts, their reception, and how our own constructions of a history of concepts already influences the very construction we are trying to make. In this work, he also analyzes the narratives of "postmodern" figures such as Lyotard, and he ends up making this useful description:

> Lyotard remplace (…) le telos de l'histoire moderne par une finalité sans fin axée sur la libération de l'irreprésentable exception. Étant donné que cette libération est toujours à renouveler, elle prend la forme d'une révolution permanente dont la structure formelle se répète incessamment.[145]

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[144] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, p. 222
[145] Gabriel Rockhill, *Logique de l'histoire* (Paris: Hermann, 2010), p. 408.

In other words, Rockhill carefully reads the work of Lyotard and traces his narrative of narratives where the major enemy are totalizing metanarratives like Marxism that attempt to decisively capture the nature of reality. For Rockhill, Lyotard's metanarrative postulates an ever-renewed struggle where the flow of differences will never cease and new narratives will prevent the freezing of the play of differences. This is problematic for Rockhill since this is already a way to get a decisive hold on reality: it permanently reproduces a metanarrative where reality consists of something that can never be fully captured by any theoretical scheme.[146] Rockhill tries to do away with this postmodern narrative of narratives through his counter-history. There is even a moment of his work where he even describes the essentialism of Derrida's philosophy.[147]

In the end, even though Laclau does not adopt this postmodern metanarrative, he is aware that any political project contains these kinds of normative indicators. He writes at length about how a political project must borrow the categories from its opponent: even though he tries to put the categories of Marxism in tension, rather than merely reversing them, he knows that his theory cannot help but reflect these broader normative commitments.[148] We will see later how the most interesting point is not whether Laclau adopts this metanarrative or not: what matters is that he creates the cues and literary resources that will enable other authors to use this metanarrative as well. This is something we will address later on in our conclusion.

3.4 The ethical

There is another normative aspect that we have not yet addressed. While, after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, several criticisms pointed out that Laclau's theory was "negative" and did not offer a "positive" alternative in return, there were other criticisms that, in a similar vein, accused hegemony of a "normative deficit": since there is no "vantage point" from which one could decisively pick one political alternative

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[146] Rockhill, *Logique de l'histoire*, pp. 405-406 and p. 408.
[147] Rockhill, *Logique de l'histoire*, p. 353.
[148] Ernesto Laclau, "'The Time is Out of Joint,'" in Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 66-68, then cf. the normative aspects of this borrowing in pp. 73-82. Laclau, "Politics and the Limits of Modernity," p. 77.

over another, what are the reasons one should pick hegemony in the first place? This was a critique that was forcefully made by Simon Critchley in 1996, which he then touched again in 2004 in "Is there a Normative Deficit in the Theory of Hegemony?"[149]

Here too we should read this critique as inserted in a broader intellectual trend. Indeed, Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction* was a central piece of the '90s that began what came to be called "the ethical turn" in the deconstructionist movement.[150] Even though Derrida denied he undertook such ethical turn,[151] several commentators noted a change in Derrida's emphasis and the way in which he explored more in detail ethical themes, such as the fact that deconstruction had, at its roots, an irreducible responsibility toward the other and an undeconstructible justice (some commentators noted the influence of Emmanuel Levinas on his thought).[152] These changes seemed to signal that there was an irreducible ethical "experience of the other" at the bottom of deconstruction, and this move was quickly seen as a *rapprochement* of Derrida in the direction of his direct opponent, Jürgen Habermas.[153]

Laclau was palpably annoyed at this change. In 1995, he strongly advised against deconstruction's ethical turn:

> I think that deconstruction *has* important consequences for both ethics and politics. These consequences, however, depend on *deconstruction's ability to go down to the bottom of its own radicalism* [my emphasis] and avoid becoming entangled in all the problems of a Levinasian ethics (whose proclaimed aim: to present

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[149] Simon Critchley, "Metaphysics in the Dark: A Response to Richard Rorty and Ernesto Laclau," *Political Theory*, vol. 26, n°6, December 1998, pp. 803-817: pp. 806-809.

[150] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000 [1992]).

[151] Jacques Derrida, *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2003), p. 64.

[152] Cf. the essay that is often singled as the point of departure of that ethical turn, Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority,"" in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), see especially the moment when Derrida describes justice as "undeconstructible" and that has made quite an impression, p. 15. Cf. especially the appendix "The Setting to Work of Deconstruction," in Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 426-427. Cf. Peter Baker, *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), see Baker's discussion of Levinas and Derrida in pp. 71-72, and then p. 97, and the two last chapters. Cf. Simon Critchley, "Metaphysics in the dark," pp. 803-804.

[153] Critchley, "Metaphysics in the dark," p. 804.

ethics as *first* philosophy, should look from the start suspicious to any deconstructionist). I see the matter this way. Undecidability should be literally taken as that condition from which no course of action necessarily follows. This means that we should not make it the necessary source of *any* concrete decision in the ethical or political sphere. That is, that in a first movement deconstruction extends undecidability - i.e. that which makes the decision necessary - to deeper and larger areas of social relations.[154]

And, in 2004, to Critchley's critique regarding his "normative deficit," he summarily answered:

> One possible line of mediation between universality of the rule and singularity of the decision would be through some kind of openness to the otherness of the other, to a primordial ethical experience, in the Levinasian sense. This is the route that Simon Critchley is apparently prepared to take. Mine, however, is different—among other reasons because I do not see in what sense an ethical injunction, even if it only consists of opening oneself to the otherness of the other, can be anything else than a universal principle that precedes and governs any decision.

We earlier saw Laclau's formalization of politics. Another target of this formalization was the fact that the decisions the political agents should undertake can no longer be based on any secure foundation. While, in the Marxist paradigm, the workers had the insights of the laws of history to guide them, in hegemony the moment of political decision is, as Laclau provocatively puts it, a moment of "madness" in the sense that it lacks some underlying dynamic guiding the decision (it is *reasoned* in the sense that it relies on the sedimented meanings in which the agent finds itself, but it never gets to be fully *rational* in the sense Marxism would have understood it).[155]

Therefore, for Laclau, such primordial "experience of the other" is already a way to preemptively ground a decision. Against these Levinasian tendencies, he decided to press on and push his anti-essentialism to its last consequences. The fundamental ethical experience, he argues, is not the experience of an "other" that would preemptively close the rules of all future political games; it is the experience of the contingency of

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[154] Laclau, "'The Time is Out of Joint,'" p. 78.
[155] Cf. especially his discussion in "Politics and the Limits of Modernity," p. 78.

the ground on which our identities stand.[156] As he put it in response to Critchley, the ethical is the "experience of the presence of an absence."[157]

> There has been a lot of discussion in recent years about the consequences, for moral engagement, of 'postmodernity' and, in a more general sense, of the critique of philosophical essentialism. Does the questioning of an absolute ground not deprive moral commitments of any foundation? If everything is contingent, if there is no 'categorical imperative' that would constitute a bedrock of morality, are we not left with a situation in which 'anything goes' and, consequently, with moral indifference and the impossibility of discriminating between ethical and unethical actions?[158]

To this, Laclau answers that the exact opposite is true. Our "postmodern condition" led us to the conclusion that no kind of direct contact with a stable world of essences is possible and will ever be possible. From this fundamental ethical experience, we must then use the sedimented resources present in the context in which we find ourselves in order to create norms that respect this ethical experience. The highest ethical imperative is therefore to understand this fundamental experience and, then, to try to apply it within one's own political context. Already in 2000's *Hegemony, Contingency, and Universality*, Laclau had said that "The only democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations."[159] It is when we finally understand the ethical imperative on which Laclau's politics stand that we can fully appreciate the true scope of his arguments.

It is not for nothing that Laclau would be increasingly interested in the literature on mysticism and mystical experiences by the end of the '90s and throughout the 2000s. By reading the writings of mystics and applying his theoretical approach to them, he arrives at the conclusion that the mystical experience must

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[156] Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, pp. 132-135.
[157] Ernesto Laclau, "Glimpsing the Future," in Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (eds.), *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 286.
[158] Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 50.
[159] Butler, Laclau, and Zizek, *Hegemony, Contingency, Universality*, p. 86.

necessarily be the experience of the Nothing. It is this very experience of the fleetingness of one's morality that can give it its greatest seriousness.

> It is only insofar as I experience my contact with the Divinity as an absolute, beyond all particularised content, that I can give to my particular courses of action their moral seriousness. (…) it is only if I experience the absolute as an utterly empty place that I can project into contingent courses of action a moral depth that, left to themselves, they lack. As we can see, the 'postmodern' experience of the radical contingency of any particular content claiming to be morally valid is the very condition of that ethical overinvestment that makes possible a higher moral consciousness. As in the case of 'hegemony', we have here a certain 'deification' of the concrete whose ground is, paradoxically, its very contingency. Serious moral engagement requires a radical separation between moral consciousness and its contents, so that no content can have any aprioristic claim to be the exclusive beneficiary of the engagement.[160]

To be sure, Laclau is not arguing for passivity in the political realm, quite the opposite. A political project is ethical – and democratic, pluralistic, and so forth… it is *anti-essentialist* – to the extent that it recognizes the contingency of its own foundations and of all foundations.[161] As we can see, anti-essentialism really is an ever-renewed struggle. At some point, he even identifies two kinds of mysticisms: the ones that think they are in contact with God, and the ones that see God as the name of Emptiness.

In the end, whether or not one finds this "mystical leap" one step too far, Laclau has been consistent up to the end. It is precisely this consistency that is one of the most interesting aspect of his theory. Indeed, as we saw, the fundamental ethical experience leads us to use our particular symbolic resources to create norms and a political project that respects this primordial experience. As we can see, the distinction Laclau makes between "the ethical" and "the normative" is precisely this distinction between the fundamental experience of contingency and the investment in a contingent order that respects this ethical injunction. Many left-leaning authors will try to "fill" the ethical with some normative content. Indeed, though they are tempted

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[160] Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, pp. 50-51.
[161] Although the potential passivism of this kind of negative ontology has been a point of critique, cf. Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), pp. 178-179.

to try to posit some theoretical content that would tip the scales toward emancipatory forms of politics, Laclau will reject every single one of them. He will insist that there really is no way to determine what kind of political struggles will be waged tomorrow. All of these are "essentialistic" attempts to fix future struggles a priori.

4. Summing up

This last point will help us transition to one of the most interesting aspects of Laclau's metanarrative: the fact that Laclau's consistent anti-essentialism is a source of many of his operations of exclusion through the use of the cue "essentialism." For instance, he accuses some other figures of the left, such as Badiou and Zizek, of smuggling some normative element into the ethical experience we described above.[162] Badiou and Zizek try to show that specific elements are, from the onset, privileged in an equivalential chain – Badiou's *sans papiers* – or that some are excluded from it – Nazism. This for Laclau represents a typical case in which future political struggles are being determined beforehand and where the idea that our identities are contingent is not taken seriously enough. If we are to say that this or that particular identity that we favor is not contingent, then how to draw the line between what is contingent and what isn't?

Through Laclau's anti-essentialist metanarrative, it is possible to perform many other operations of exclusion. We saw earlier the sharp criticism of the feminist scholar Judith Butler. Laclau saw himself as being wedged between more Marxist oriented positions, such as Zizek's, and what he called "particularists" like Butler.[163] Indeed, from Laclau's point of view, Butler held a view that was too strongly in favor of particular demands (such as feminism) and not enough in favor of constructing a common project that

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[162] Laclau, "Why Constructing," pp. 147-148, and Laclau, "An Ethics of Militant Engagement," *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 184-187.
[163] This is something Laclau said in an interview three years after *Hegemony, Contingency, Universality*, cf. Laclau, "La política como proyecto emancipatorio." See also his interactions with Butler in Butler, Aronowitz, Laclau, Scott, Mouffe and West, "Discussion."

would include these particular demands. In "Universalism, Particularism, and the question of identity," (1991) Laclau argues that one cannot be in favor of these particular demands while denying that they should have some universal dimension. To aspire to a politics of particular demands without a common political project is inherently self-defeating. On the one hand, such politics would mean that particular demands would have to be celebrated *as* particular demands, which implied that one would also have to be in favor of rightwing particularisms as well. On the other hand, such politics also means that, in order to harmoniously and differentially coordinate these different demands, some wider *apolitical* scheme would have to be adopted. As if the first *rapprochement* of particularisms with rightwing ones was not enough, Laclau unflatteringly uses South Africa's apartheid as an example for this second point.[164] And, in this second point, he also charges this "particularist" position with apoliticism which, as we can see, is a form of "essentialist" exclusion as well. One of Laclau's followers, Oliver Marchart, put it even more explicitly in his *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (2007). These "particularist" positions, he argues, simply replace an essentialism of the coordinated center with an essentialism of the dispersed elements, an essentialism of the ground to an essentialism of the no-ground. Only a *negative* ground à la Laclau can guarantee that the political game will remain.[165]

As we can see, Laclau produces cues and a metanarrative with a fault line from which, like Mises' and "interventionism," one can build an axis with more and less "essentialist" positions. The scholar Stephen K. White has a famous distinction between "strong," "weak," and "thin" ontologies that is very close to what we are describing here.[166] On the "strong" side, he puts authors such as Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, and Alasdair MacIntyre that, he argues, are committed to the search of strong ontological foundations

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[164] Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of identity," p. 29.

[165] Marchart, *Post-Foundational*, p. 82.

[166] We should not forget that Straussians routinely deny that Leo Strauss has an ontology of his own, with the possible exception of J. A. Colen and Svetozar Minkov (eds.), *Toward natural Right and History* (Chicago: Chicago University press, 2018). On the same vein, McIntire is often criticized for asserting that morality should be grounded, not on ontology, but on sociology. Cf. for instance, David McPherson, "To What Extent Must We Go Beyond Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol 86, n°4, 2012, 627-654. The main point, however, is that this taxonomy is fruitful independently of its precision and it is useful to analyze Laclau and understand his use of the radical genre.

concerning the nature of man and the world.[167] At the other side of this "foundationalist/anti-foundationalist" spectrum, he puts authors such as Richard Rorty that criticize both foundationalists and attempts to create a middle-ground between the two. Authors such as William Connolly, Charles Taylor, and George Kateb are considered to be "weak ontologists" because they reject that any specific ontology can claim a decisive superiority over the others, but they still consider that there are specific existential categories that constitute human beings and that should be fleshed out (e.g. language or mortality). He gives Judith Butler a special status as a "thin" ontologist because she has a weaker "methodological" commitment toward these categories, but she does not develop them in detail.[168]

So far, we have only seen how Laclau excludes positions that usually consider themselves to be consistently anti-essentialist as well. But we can also see how Laclau's political theory rejects, from the onset, the theorization of deliberately "moderate" forms of anti-essentialisms.[169] As a commentator has noted, to try to draw a line between what is contingent and what isn't means that we have to ask whether that very line is contingent as well. For Laclau, of course, the answer is that tracing the line is contingent as well.

> Is it not possible, critics ask, to accept the presence of articulable contingency without 'going all the way' and firming an essential kernel in objects? (…) Attractive as it might seem, it is contradictory. The question we have to answer is what to make of the dividing line between the necessary from the contingent, and the permanent from the articulable? This dividing line cannot be made contingent. In that case an essential part of the necessary would paradoxically become contingent. But it cannot be necessary either, because in that case, strictly speaking, we have not defined this dividing line but remained within the field of the necessary.

> As Laclau and Mouffe have shown, this dividing line is impossible to establish, so the only possible conclusion is that if any one thing is articulated, then everything else must also be articulated.[170]

Since the major political evil according to Laclau's anti-essentialism is the attempt to arrest the flow of potential struggles and of the formation of identities by preemptively fixing those struggles, he and Mouffe have criticized approaches that do not fully accept their anti-essentialist conclusions, such as deliberative politics in the Habermasian vein. Mouffe, for instance, has an essay where she argues that the Habermasian model of democracy is essentially trying to reconcile the "classical" view of democracy as the rule of the people with the idea that ruling should be made from the point of view of the common good. For Mouffe, however, the way in which this reconciliation is made is unacceptable: it consists in drawing the ideal conditions where the agents that are affected by political decisions can agree on the norms and institutional arrangements behind these decisions.[171]

This is entirely incompatible with democracy for Mouffe and Laclau. By creating ideal situations where rational discussion could occur unconstrained, deliberative and procedural views of democracy pre-determine future political outcomes outside of the decisions of their concrete agents: they create ideal situations where who is considered a "relevant party" is decided outside the political terrain. As a commentator puts it, Laclau sees deliberative politics in the Habermasian vein as being one step away from totalitarianism.[172]

> (…) a decision that claims for itself an incontestable 'rationality', is incompatible with a plurality of points of view. If the decision is based on a reasoning of an apodictic character it is not a decision at all: a rationality that transcends me has *already* decided for me, and my only role is that of *recognizing* that decision and the

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[170] Allan Dreyer Hansen, "Dangerous Dog, Constructivism and Normativity: The Implications of Radical Constructivism," *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, nº11, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 93-107: p. 98.

[171] Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?," *Social Research*, vol. 66, nº3, Fall 1999, pp. 745-758.

[172] Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 194.

consequences that unfold from it. This is why all the forms of radical rationalism are just a step away from totalitarianism.[173]

To be sure, the rejection of middle-of-the-road essentialisms does not mean that the punctual acts necessary in any political project are irrelevant. But a program that celebrates a politics of the punctual acts is indeed discarded from the onset. It does not have a place within the theoretical scheme of Laclau's political theory. This is because, for Laclau, gradualism is "the first of utopias": it is the belief that one can have a politics of gradual approach toward an ideal situation where the actors and struggles have already been decided from the onset.

> 'Gradualism', in fact, is the first of the utopias: the belief that there is a neutral administrative centre which can deal with social issues in a non-political way. If we think of major transformations of our societies in the twentieth century, we see that 'partial' reforms, in all cases, were made possible only through significant alterations in the more global social imaginaries - think of the New Deal, the welfare state, and, in more recent years, the discourses of the 'moral majority' and of neoliberalism (…).[174]

For Laclau, gradualism is very close to Saint Simon's motto: "from the government of men to the administration of things."[175] It is the idea that one can make political reforms within a stable framework that does not change. But he wants the very opposite: preventing that politics becomes the government of things.

In our last chapter, we analyzed how Mises powerfully deployed his metanarrative through the creation of a myriad of enemies, and Laclau also has no shortage of "essentialist" opponents. We saw earlier some of the ways in which "apoliticism" was a form of exclusion, but *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, where Laclau, Butler, and Zizek exchange three rounds of answers and replies, has quite a few of them. Indeed,

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[173] Daniel de Mendonça, "The place of Normativity in the Political Ontology of Ernesto Laclau," *Brazilian Political Science Review*, vol. 8, n°1, 2014, pp. 58-79: p. 74.

[174] Butler, Laclau, Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 198. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, p. 234. As he would say, it is to "assert that there is a point of the social fabric which is the locus of both knowledge and power, and from which society can be "rationally" organized." Ernesto Laclau, "Totalitarianism and Moral Indignation," *Diacritics*, vol. 20, n°3, Autumn 1990, pp. 88-95: p. 90.

[175] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, p. 225.

Laclau makes several exclusions in this work because he is attacked on two sides: Zizek makes an exclusion of his own by saying that Laclau's politics lapse into a non-emancipatory and gradualist form of politics that accepts capitalism, and Butler makes an exclusion of her own when she points out that Laclau holds an "ahistorical" view of universality.[176] In his rebuttal, Laclau points out that Butler has a "pre-social" view of language,[177] or a view of the cultural and the social with "atemporal" and invariant categories.[178]

Despite these powerful exclusions, one of Laclau's most interesting aspects is the way he uses his epistemology. He deploys a kind of "there is no" register that permeates his writings. He explains it more thoroughly in his work *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*. Let's give some context before analyzing the way in which Laclau writes.

Laclau begins by explaining that, since he writes the preface of his work in 1990, the circumstances since when the book was originally planned (1988) have vastly changed. He says that it is now clear that the Soviet experiment has been a disaster. Even though any ideology always exerts some violence in the process of being embodied in a limited and contingent bearer, it is now clear that the greater the gap between the historical reality of the bearer and its universal ideology, the more likely we are to end up with a "monstrous symbiosis."[179] He says that there must be a profound revision of the assumptions of the traditional discourse of the left, and the post-Marxist perspective he exposes in the *New Reflections* is "much more than a mere theoretical choice: it is an inevitable decision for anyone aiming to reformulate a political programme for the left in the historical circumstances prevailing in the last decade of the twentieth century."[180] In the first paragraphs, Laclau's intentions are clear and the inevitable and binary choice at which the Left finds itself is laid down.

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[176] Butler, Laclau, Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 163, Laclau points it out in p. 188.
[177] Butler, Laclau, Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 189
[178] Butler, Laclau, Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 191
[179] Laclau, *Reflections*, p. xi.
[180] Laclau, *Reflections*, pp. xii.

Even though there is here already a critique of "universalizing" politics in Marxism's style, Laclau then touches on the problem that we addressed above: he is not only trying to create distance from Marxism but from "classical forms of social democracy as well."[181] It is here that we see, from the onset, Laclau's anti-essentialism at work. Indeed, in order to avoid both sides, he explains that both social democracy and communism have a common faith that the centralized state is the instrument that can guarantee economic growth, and a more free and egalitarian society. Since the welfare state has now been discredited, he says, the opposite alternative has emerged: the idea that we should oppose any regulation and let the automatic mechanisms of the market work. Laclau retorts that, not only is the automatism of these market mechanisms "largely a myth," but both pro-social/pro-regulation and pro-individual/pro-market sides have the same underlying assumption: the fact that there is such a thing as a homogeneous community to which "the social" or "the individual" are the two possible answers.

This, he says, is exactly the point of departure for thinking a new politics for the Left. Remember what we said earlier about Laclau's view of the negative excess. Similarly, he argues here that both socialist and capitalist ideologies define each other within an identical essentialist framework they both hold. Socialism is dialectically defined as the radical elimination of private property in opposition to the second side of this equation, i.e. leaving the individual pursue its profit.

> (…) if the notion of social underlying the idea of social regulation of the production process acquires content exclusively through its opposition to *individual*, then the homogeneous and indivisible nature of community must be automatically accepted. This social homogeneity, which assumed the function of giving concrete embodiment to universality in Marxist discourse, was guaranteed by sociological hypotheses such as the growing proletarianization of society and the progressive simplification of class structure under capitalism. But if this simplification does not occur, the homogeneity of the 'social' assumed by socialist discourse as the agent of planning will be necessarily absent; planning will not be carried out for the benefit of a supposed

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[181] Laclau, *Reflections*, pp. xii.

'universal community' — a non-existent entity — but for the particular constellation of forces exercising control of the state (…).[182]

Note here how Laclau, even though he was explicit earlier about the mythological and fictitious nature of the "automatic" mechanisms of the market, he is also forcefully describing the fictitious nature at the core of pro-market, Marxist, and social-democrat ideologies all at once. He has no need to say it directly, and this is exactly where his anti-essentialism steps in: all of these ideologies naively believe in a mythical homogeneity of "the" community. Look, on the one hand, at the way he draws a stark contrast between *either* believing in a mythical community *or* accepting the reality that such entity does not exist. If the "social" side "acquires content *exclusively*" in its opposition to the "individual" side, this means that the mythical community "*must* be *automatically* accepted." If socialist discourse does not have the kind of sociological hypotheses that, in Marxism, guaranteed the growing homogeneity of society (such as the proletarianization of society and the simplification of class structure), then that homogeneity will be "*necessarily* absent." Prefiguring his own argument, Laclau says that, if planning cannot be made with this belief in the mythical community, then it must be with "the particular constellation of forces exercising control of the state" in mind.

The examples that we have offered so far are already present in our treatment of Lukács and of Mises. But Laclau has an epistemological aspect in his metanarrative that is especially pervasive. Look above at the suggestive way Laclau describes the belief in the social homogeneity of the community: it is a belief in the "*homogeneous* and *indivisible* nature of community." When, by the middle of the paragraph, he talks "of the 'social' assumed by socialist discourse," he refers it with scare quotes to talk about this wrong-headed view of the social – like Lukács when he was distinguishing the "good" criticism from the "bad" one. After referring it as a "a *supposed* 'universal community'" while, again, using scare quotes, Laclau then says explicitly that this "universal community" is "*a non-existent entity*."

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[182] Laclau, *Reflections*, pp. xiii-xiv.

Indeed, as he will indicate in the beginning of the next paragraph, the non-existence of that social and universal homogeneity should not lead us to draw a negative conclusion and, on the contrary, "If the word of God can no longer be heard, we can start giving our own voices a new dignity." The analogy between essentialist beliefs and religious faith helps us understand what is so compelling about the way in which Laclau constantly falls back on the *illusory* and *absurd* belief in a channel of contact with Reality or Truth – with the first letters capitalized.

As we know, the postmodern wave used and abused the analogy between religion and essentialism and, in 1990, Laclau is at one of the highest points of that postmodern trend.[183] In *New Reflections*, he touches several times on the subject of the essentialist connection between religion and modern philosophy. More specifically, he describes how modern philosophy "reoccupied" notions that it inherited from Christianity. He gives the example of the immanentization of the Christian notion of Original Creation that was turned into a self-contained totality instead of a divine intervention. He also gives the example of how modern ideologies adopted Christian millenarist eschatology by seeing any discrepancy between the course of history and its predicted final state as "mere events" that would become clear once the final state would be achieved.[184]

The way in which Laclau uses this "there is no" register throughout his writings creates a compelling, idol-bashing skepticism, which he uses comprehensively, but we should not forget that Laclau does not hold a summarily "skeptical" epistemological position. He holds that any form of objectivity is traversed by contingency and that it can never be taken for granted.[185] But this deflationist approach gives him a way to always fall back on his own political alternative. He destroys the essentialist objects or beliefs from several angles: from the point of view of the *unity* and *homogeneity* of the object, its complete *coherence*, the way

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[183] "(…) the flow of publications with postmodern/postmodernism/postmodernity in their title (…) expanded from a total counted number of 37 publications in the 1970s to 534 in the 1980s and 4219 in the 1990s." Nico A. Wilterdink, "The Sociogenesis of Postmodernism," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie/European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 43, n°2, 2002, pp. 190-216: p. 192. Quoted from Simon Susen, *The Postmodern Turn*, p. 32.

[184] Laclau, *Reflections*, pp. 18-20 for immanentization, and pp. 74-75 for "reoccupation" and teleology.

[185] Laclau, *Reflections*, pp. 26-27.

in which it is fully *consistent* and free of contradictions, its *exclusive* character, the extent to which it is *pure* and separated from the contingent changes of the world, its deceptively *self-evident* character, its *redemptive* potential, the belief in a grand *eschatology*, and a variety of similar deflationisms.

Despite his criticism of essentialism's self-evident character, Laclau is able to give this pervasive impression that his anti-essentialism is self-evident as well. Indeed, how could we not believe that essences do not exist, that there is no such thing as an irrefutable form of knowledge, or that there is no utopia that would spell the end of politics? Through this idol-bashing skepticism, Laclau is able to generate, just like Mises, an all-or-nothing fault line in his writing, all the while he seamlessly jumps from one cue to the next.

Let's now close this chapter by addressing the fact that Laclau's metanarrative generates some problems of its own. This was something that Butler had already noticed back in *Hegemony, Contingency, Universality* when she argues that a notion of "critical translation" should be incorporated in the vocabulary of hegemony. Indeed, competing views in the Left on what counts as "universality" or "normativity" will not always match and there should be some sort of practice of overlapping consensus. Furthermore, these notions will eventually have to be incorporated in new cultural contexts, and this should be done without the imposition of a dominant vocabulary on the receiving end. It was here that Butler argued that even Laclau's formal categories should not be seen in an ahistorical fashion: even these categories will change and will have to face – as she puts it fittingly – "semantically dissonant discourses."[186] Laclau is palpably angry at being characterized as an "ahistoricist" and he answers Butler by contextualizing her contextualization:

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[186] Butler, Laclau, Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 163 and p. 167, and the critique in p. 168.

(…) is [Butler's] assertion that 'no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm' a structural limit or a context-dependent assertion, in which case the possibility emerges of societies in which universality does arise apart from any cultural norm?[187]

He counter-argues that Butler's objection that there are different cultural contexts begs the question: she is implying that there could be such a thing as a non-cultural point of view. Of course, we know that this is not what Butler is saying. She is simply arguing that these abstract notions of "hegemony" and "universality," once they will meet divergent quarters of the Left or different cultural contexts, should enter in dialogue with these new contexts. They should be *inserted* in these new contexts, rather than being forcefully imposed. This is why she speaks of a "practice" of translation, rather than a "theory" of it.

What is interesting in this exchange is Laclau's answer. His concern with the awareness of one's own contingency seems to topple other legitimate concerns. Instead of engaging with Butler on the level of her argument, he tries to knock her feet out from under her with a sweeping, and characteristic, exclusion.

Take as another example the summary of this work on *Indian Political Theory*, published in 2017 by Routledge:

> In this book, this concept of svaraj is defined as a thick conception, which links it with exclusivist notions of spirituality, profound anti-modernity, exceptionalistic moralism, essentialistic nationalism and purism. However, post-independence India has borne witness to an alternative trajectory: a thin svaraj. The author puts forward a workable contemporary ideal of thin svaraj, i.e. political, and free of metaphysical commitment. The model proposed is inspired by B.R. Ambedkar's thoughts, as opposed to the thick conception found in the works of M.K. Gandhi, KC Bhattacharya and Ramachandra Gandhi. The author argues that political theorists of Indian politics continue to work with categories and concepts alien to the lived social and political experiences of India's common man, or everyday people. Consequently, he emphasises the need to decolonize Indian political theory, and rescue it from the grip of western theories, and fascination with western modes of historical analysis. The necessity to avoid both universalism and

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[187] Butler, Laclau, Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 184.

relativism and more importantly address the political predicaments of "the people' is the key objective of the book, and a push for a reorientation of Indian political theory.[188]

As we can see, the author uses cues from the same metanarrative as Laclau and applies it to Indian political theory. On the one hand, a svaraj that is even said to be "essentialistic," and then another that is "free of metaphysical commitment." While trying to "decolonize Indian political theory, and rescue it from the grip of western theories," he then falls into categories that are very much Western. We therefore have this paradox where the kind of categories that Laclau uses attempt to maintain the awareness to our contingency alive, but this very process naturalizes these anti-essentialistic categories.

How to successfully criticize this "negative ontology"? (One that is being enthusiastically embraced today by some protagonists of the "ontological turn" in political theory, such as Oliver Marchart.[189]) To merely argue that Laclau and his followers "naturalize" their own categories misses the mark. Indeed, to this critique, Laclau and his followers simply answered by placing contingency as an ethical imperative: since we experience that no epistemology can ever ground society and politics, then the highest ethical demand is to foster political projects that uphold this fundamental insight.

Another straightforward critique is to show the theoretical impracticality of this approach. One of the most notable attempts in this line – although not straightforwardly addressed to Laclau – is Lois McNay's *The Misguided Search for the Political* (2012). In this work, McNay argues that the systematic preference of negative ontologies for the subject of ontology is undermining the empirical study of politics. Emancipatory politics, McNay argues, should reflect more on forms of embodied suffering in order not to remain closed in its scholarly ivory tower.

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[188] Aakash Singh Rathore, *Indian Political Theory: Laying the Groundwork for Svaraj* (London: Routledge, 2017), cf. executive summary.

[189] Cf. Marchart, *Post-Foundational*, and his essay in Mihaela Mihai, Lois McNay, Oliver Marchart, Aletta Norval, Vassilios Paipais, Sergei Prozorov and Mathias Thaler "Critical Exchange: Democracy, critique and the ontological turn," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 16, 2017, pp. 501–531.

The problem of this class of critiques is that, strictly speaking, it leaves Laclau and his negative ontology untouched. We see a similar kind of problem in the critiques addressed at Ludwig von Mises' subjectivism. Many criticisms were directed to the fact that his subjectivism was *theoretically cumbersome*. It precluded an array of models and analyses that could only happen if Mises' subjectivism was softened. Many of the answers to Mises' subjectivism took the form of trying to posit some form of value – by determining an individual unit of a good, or a whole class of goods, or by the creation of "artificial competition" that could recreate artificial prices. The problem is that, strictly speaking, this left Mises' subjectivism intact. Still today, the Austrian School provides a sharply subjectivist perspective that often criticizes other economic paradigms for not taking this subjectivism seriously enough.

In the next chapter, we will suggest a critique of our own. What if we argued that Laclau's ethical injunction would be *impossible* if not for the existence of the very essentialism that the negative ontologists reject? To arrive at this point, we will need to peer one last time into the deeper workings of metanarratives.

Chapter 5: On Metanarratives

> To neglect the field of political thought, because its unstable subject matter, with its blurred edges, is not to be caught by the fixed concepts, abstract models, and fine instruments suitable to logic or to linguistic analysis – to demand a unity of method in philosophy, and reject whatever the method cannot successfully manage – is merely to allow oneself to remain at the mercy of (…) uncriticised political beliefs.
>
> Isaiah Berlin[1]

In this chapter, there are two questions that we would like to answer:

- What are cues and metanarratives, and how are they formed?

- What is problematic about Laclau's metanarrative?

We will be able to answer the second question by answering the first, and we will answer the first question by carefully distinguishing two points of view. On the one hand, there is the point of view of the actors that are part of the metanarrative that we have analyzed so far and that are the ones using cues to perform alignments and exclusions. On the other hand, since a Marxist perceives the world as being dominated by "capitalism," while a free market libertarian, on the contrary, sees a world with very little "capitalism" and much "socialism," we will have to distinguish these first point of view(s) from our own point of view as political theorists and spectators of these cue-generating dynamics.

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[1] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1958]), p. 167.

In order to deepen our understanding of how metanarratives and cues work, we will analogically resort to the work of the American sociologist Andrew Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines*.[2] We are not here interested in Abbot or the argument of his work *per se*; rather, Abbot makes an argument that will help us understand how metanarratives work on an analogical level.

In a few words, Abbot is an American sociologist who in *Chaos of Disciplines* uses a specific approach from sociology of knowledge to understand how disciplines in the social sciences evolve intellectually. One of Abbot's more negative conclusions is that, when we study the patterns and cycles of how academic research evolves in social science departments, they seem to, as it were, circle around. Abbot, for instance, looks at research groups that decided to take a "quantitative" approach to their object of study, then looks at how the next generation of researchers "rediscovers" supposedly new "qualitative" approaches and topple down the old guard. Abbot notices that we can easily divide research programs along these kinds of binaries: between "constructivist" and "deconstructivist" approaches, or "consensus" versus "conflict" approaches to social conflict, or approaches that privilege "culture" over "social structure," and so forth. From there, we can notice the way scholarly trends cycle back and forth with the same "new discoveries" over and over again. As Abbot says, "A glance at these articles makes one think that sociology, and indeed social science more generally, consists mainly of rediscovering the wheel. A generation triumphs over its elders, then calmly resurrects their ideas, pretending all the while to advance the cause of knowledge."[3]

What is of interest to us here is not Abbot's thesis but the method he uses to make his point. Indeed, in order to describe the research trends he sees in sociology, Abbot uses something he calls fractal distinctions. While we have an intuitive idea of how hierarchies work – the captain stands over the lieutenant, the lieutenant stands over the squad leader, and so forth, – Abbot takes from Kant the idea of a distinction that repeats itself at each level.[4] Abbot applies it to methodological trends in sociology in the following way:

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[2] Andrew Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[3] Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines*, p. 17.

[4] Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines*, pp. 5-9.

Abbot's *Chaos of Disciplines* Fractal Model

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                        METHODS

        QUANTITATIVE                      QUALITATIVE

  QUANTITATIVE    QUALITATIVE      QUANTITATIVE     QUALITATIVE

   Regression       Scaling,       Formal Measure      Pure
                    Clustering      of Culture      Interpretation
```
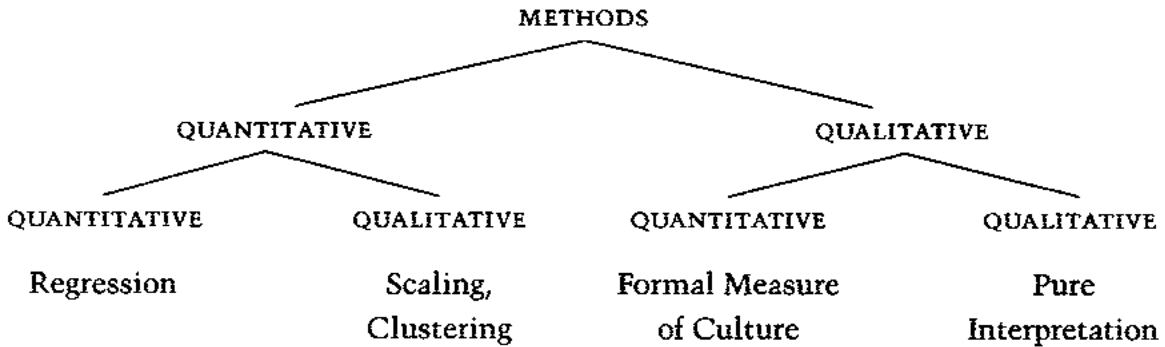
Figure 1.1

In other words, Abbot explains that the methodological distinctions qualitative vs. quantitative, narrative vs. analysis, positivism vs. interpretation, and so forth – distinctions learned by almost any graduate student – repeat themselves at the next level. He writes, "if we use any one of them to distinguish groups of social scientists, we will then find these groups internally divided by the same distinction."[5]

We can apply this analogy to our own study of metanarratives as well. When we look more deeply into debates that use the kinds of cues we analyzed in the last chapter, we can see that each metanarrative has further subdivisions. What does this mean? As we saw, radicals use operations of exclusion that draw a fault line between insiders and outsiders of the metanarrative. We saw how, for the Marxist metanarrative, the cue "bourgeoisie" enabled these kinds of operations: by ascribing the term "bourgeoisie" – or, conversely, by saying that a given element is "socialistic," – we are able to push the given element outside the metanarrative or pull it within.

Let's give two concrete examples of such sub-division from Mises' and Laclau's metanarratives. We will call Mises' metanarrative *the libertarian metanarrative* while Laclau's will be called *the postmodern metanarrative* (it will become clearer later on why we gave them these names).

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[5] Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines*, p. 10.

On the one hand, Murray Rothbard famously developed an "anarcho-capitalistic" sub-fault line within the libertarian metanarrative. For Rothbard, "the State" is an oppressive apparatus that parasitically depends on the peaceful exchanges and the productive process of the individuals.[6] Rothbard's anarcho-capitalism advocates the abolition of the centralized state and seeks as a replacement a thoroughly free-market and a strict respect for private property. As we can see, he goes even farther in the rejection of "government intervention" in the economy and society than even "minimal-state" libertarians (or, as they are sometimes called, "minarchists"). In fact, in a conference where Rothbard was describing how he became an anarcho-capitalist, he said that he was initially a minimum-state libertarian, but that he was pushed into full anarchism because of what he saw as the inconsistency of his former position.[7] If we take a fully *laissez-faire* position, said Rothbard, and if we let people decide what services the state should provide through a social contract – e.g., security and legal services, – then

> "why can't society also agree to have a government build steel mills and have price controls and whatever? At that point I realized that the laissez-faire position is terribly inconsistent, and I either had to go on to anarchism or become a statist. Of course for me there was only one choice: that's to go on to anarchism."[8]

As we can see, by creating a second fault line within the libertarian metanarrative, Rothbard is able to create operations of exclusion even for "minarchists" members of the libertarian metanarrative: any concession to the State, says an anarcho-capitalist, is already on the other side of the fault line and is already to "become a statist." Fault lines can be reproduced within the fault line itself, here through Rothbard's anarcho-capitalistic position in which the libertarian fault line is further divided between "statism" and "*laissez-*

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[6] Murray N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), pp. xlvii-xlviii.

[7] Gerard Casey, *Mursray Rothbard*, pp. 6-7, Murray N. Rothbard, "Transcript: How Murray Rothbard Became a Libertarian," *Mises Institute*, 28 April 2014, retrieved from https://mises.org/wire/transcript-how-murray-rothbard-became-libertarian

[8] Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, pp. 246-247.

faire."[9] And indeed, as we know, this distinction between "minarchists" and "anarcho-capitalists" is a famous distinction within the libertarian metanarrative.

On the other hand, we saw in our chapter on Laclau that Oliver Marchart developed a distinctive "negative" and "post-ontological" approach to epistemology and political theory. His debate with a critic of his political ontology, Lois McNay, will give us a good example of a sub-fault line within the postmodern metanarrative.[10]

Vastly simplifying, we could say that Marchart's alternative finds its intellectual roots in a reaction against Marxism. While Marxism – at least in its "orthodox" variants – tried to understand what constituted "the proletarian," waited for the moment when "the revolution" would occur, and used a "science" of its own to attain these conclusions, Marchart's "negative ontology" says the exact opposite: it opposes attempts to arrest the flow of political antagonisms by positing some essence of what society, politics, or the relevant political actors "truly" are. Marchart argues that, at the onset of this theory, there is a "negative horizon," meaning there is no way that we might, one day, find our "true" identity and constitute society according to a scheme that would respect that "essential" identity. Quite the contrary, he says, the recognition of the contingency and of the lack of a way to definitively ground our political and social identities is the precondition for freedom and democracy itself.[11] Indeed, for Marchart, we could not truly choose our identities and our own path if we definitely knew in advance what our identities and future struggles will look like. The recognition of this "lack of ground," a position that Marchart calls *post*-foundationalist, therefore opposes itself to "essentialist" attempts to ground identities definitely and, thus, attempts to block the potential for freedom and democracy.

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[9] Erick Mack, "Libertarianism," in George Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 675.

[10] Cf. especially Lois McNay, "Ontology and Critique," and Oliver Marchart, ''What's going on with being?': ontology as critique," in Mihaela Mihai, Lois McNay, et al., "Critical Exchange," but also Marchart, *Post-Foundational*, and McNay, *The Misguided Search*.

[11] "Freedom" is more explicit in Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, p. 22, but "democracy" is both in p. 158 of this work and in Marchart, ''What's going on with being?," pp. 508-513.

On the other side, we find Lois McNay and, especially, her work *The Misguided Search for the Political*, criticizing these "ontological" trends. To be sure, McNay does agrees that these ontological approaches to politics offer great potential to fight the "depoliticizing tendencies" of neoliberalism.[12] The problem, she argues, is that the success of negative ontologists such as Marchart led them to adopt a "ontology-first" approach that systematically subordinates the empirical in favor of a "socially weightless" form of thinking, thus leaving in the background other dimensions such as concrete forms of inequality or suffering. McNay argues that these ontological approaches have been promising, but that their excessive abstraction has thwarted their potential. Instead, McNay argues, there should be more attempts at drawing accounts of social suffering that could give a concrete perspective of the social evils one must fight.

In this debate, we have a use of a metanarrative that makes further exclusions between "essentialism" and "anti-essentialism" within the postmodern metanarrative. We saw how, a decade before these debates, Stephen K. White made a useful classification of differing ontologies, from "strong," to "weak," and "thin" ontologies.[13] In the debate between McNay and Marchart, we can see these kinds of distinctions at work: between "weaker" and "stronger" forms of "anti-essentialism," on the one hand, and full-blown "essentialisms," which find themselves outside the postmodern metanarrative entirely. In our methodology, this is another way to show how the "postmodern" fault line can be invoked to strengthen one's argument *within* the postmodern metanarrative itself.

These are important notion for us, political analysts. Not only Abbot's example helps us see how metanarratives and cues are generated, but we can also see how these "fault lines within the fault lines" are one of the great sources preventing people within a metanarrative from recognizing their own cues as a cue. Indeed, while someone belonging to a metanarrative *strongly* feels any cue from a rival's metanarrative, this same term does not usually mean much for a person belonging to that rival metanarrative. For instance,

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[12] Lois McNay, "Ontology and Critique," in Mihai, McNay, Marchart, et al., "Critical Exchange," pp. 524-525. For a crystal-clear answer of Marchart against McNay's position, Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p. 4.

[13] See Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); for a synthesis, cf. Stephen K. White, "Weak Ontology, Genealogy and Critical Issues."

when a Marxist sees a cue from the libertarian metanarrative, he will directly feel that cue and relegate it to the libertarian metanarrative, while that same cue will not mean much for a libertarian (he might not even see it as a libertarian cue at all). Furthermore, members of a sub-fault line within a metanarrative feel rival cues even more strongly than their more moderate counterparts. They are even more restrictive when it comes to decide what counts as "liberal," "non-essentialist," or "Marxist," i.e. as being part of the metanarrative.

As political theorists, it is therefore important to keep the way in which these metanarratives work in mind. Indeed, by studying different metanarratives, their exclusions, and their fault lines, we can see cues that are usually not obvious for someone for which these cues are simply part of their metanarrative. On the one hand, it is very important to look at a wide number of metanarratives and mechanisms of exclusion in order to detect as many of them as possible and in order to not be oblivious to some cues of our own. (In this study, we only focus on the most basic and straightforward cues in order to have a minimal methodology, but ideally we should also diversify and make a wider typology of cues – expressions, analogies, soundbites, *tournures de phrase*, the kind of examples one uses, predictable "direction" of an argument, the way an argument is framed, and so forth.) On the other hand, it is especially important to study sub-fault lines, their authors, and their arguments since they are the most sensitive members of a metanarrative.

We should now continue our description of how metanarratives work in order to arrive at the bottom of how metanarratives and cues are generated. So far, we have only seen how metanarratives work within themselves, but we should see how and why members of different metanarratives excel at seeing the cues of their opponents' metanarratives.

Let us now turn, for a second time, to Abbot's *Chaos of Disciplines*. As we saw, Abbot uses a model of model of fractal distinctions in order to describe the intellectual evolution of trends within the social sciences. While he is describing his fractal distinctions, however, Abbot notices that

(…) people know only their near kin well. I may be quite clear that my collaborator is more positivistic than I and that our research group as a whole takes a more complex, interpretive approach than do other groups working in the area. But I am likely to be hazy about matters further away. To a sociological theorist, OLS and LISREL amount to the same thing, just as ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism are indistinguishable to a sociological empiricist.[14]

The essential idea to take from here is not Abbot's concrete examples, but rather his first sentence: "people know only their near kin well." As we saw in Abbot's fractal model, the fractal distinctions repeat themselves at the next level: "qualitative" and "quantitative" research trends reproduce again within themselves into "qualitative" and "quantitative" again. This is exactly what we said happened in our metanarratives as well: the "socialist" and "essentialist" fault lines repeat themselves again within the metanarratives themselves.
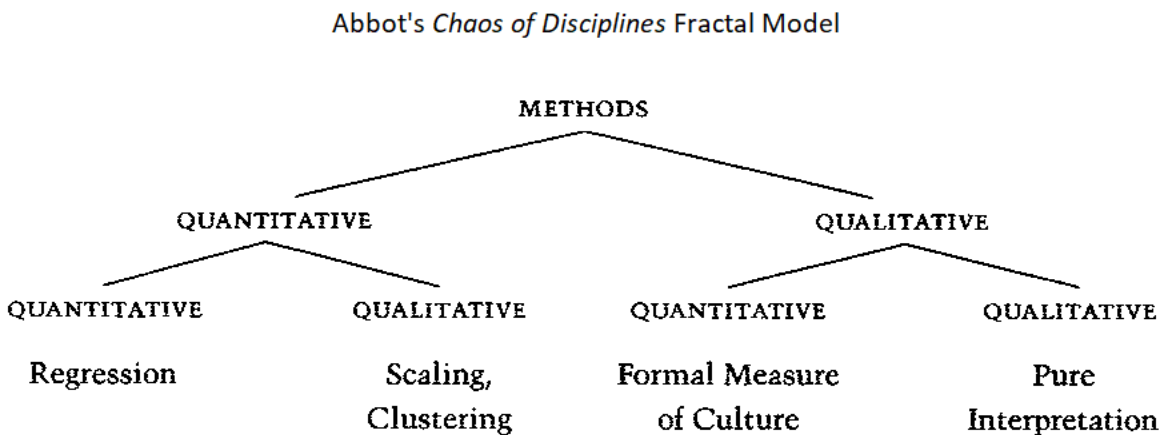

Figure 1.1

When Abbot says "people know only their near kin well," he is saying that researchers who are within a sub-division on one of the general "quantitative" or "qualitative" sides have a harder time distinguishing the sub-divisions that are happening on the other side. Hypothetically, we could say that the members of

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[14] Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines*, p. 11.

the "pure interpretation" sub-division in the figure above will be able to understand their "formal measure of culture" colleagues, but they will have a harder time distinguishing their "regression" and "scaling, clustering" colleagues from each other.

The important lesson to take from here is, again, not Abbot's particular idea in itself, but the fact that interaction between metanarratives works in the same way. Even though a libertarian excels at seeing a Marxist cue that a Marxist would not even see as a "cue" at all (and vice versa), the consequence of this detection is also that the cue is "relegated," as it were, to one big metanarrative with undifferentiated sub-fault lines. Someone with "Marxist" sensibilities, once faced with a cue to the libertarian metanarrative – cues such as "interventionism," "liberalization," "free market," – will intuitively refer back, not to the intricacies of their internal debates – on anarcho-capitalism, for instance, – but to the more general fault line of "libertarians," "capitalists," or an equivalential term pointing to these broad fault lines. The same happens, for instance, when a member of the libertarian metanarrative is faced with a cue pointing back to the Marxist metanarrative – for instance, "revolution," "workers," "socialization." He will not refer back to their fine-grained debates, but directly to the general fault line of the metanarrative.[15]

This action of "relegating" to a very general term encompassing a great number of sub-fault lines is often shocking for a member of the relegated metanarrative. For instance, in the passage below, the feminist scholar Judith Butler encapsulates perfectly this kind of frustration. This is part of a paper she gave at a convention on feminism and postmodernism in 1990 (as we saw in our chapter on Laclau, we were then at the peak of the postmodern wave) where she is contesting the facile use of the label "postmodernism":

> A number of positions are ascribed to postmodernism, as if it were the kind of thing that could be the bearer of a set of positions: Discourse is all there is, as if discourse were some kind of monistic stuff out of which all things are composed; the subject is dead, I can never say "I" again; there is no reality, only representations.

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[15] It often happens that particularly staunch members of these metanarratives will swiftly ascribe terms such as "fascism" to any "libertarian" cue, or "communism" to any "socialist" cue, or "relativism" to any "postmodern" cue. To be sure, why and how these strong relegations happen is an interesting subject of study. But they very much feel like political smears and there is no need to use them in the context of this study.

These characterizations are variously imputed to postmodernism or poststructuralism, which are conflated with each other and sometimes conflated with deconstruction, and sometimes understood as an indiscriminate assemblage of French feminism, deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucauldian analysis, Rorty's conversationalism, and cultural studies. On this side of the Atlantic and in recent discourse, the terms "postmodernism" or "poststructuralism" settle the differences among those positions in a single stroke, providing a substantive, a noun, that includes those positions as so many of its modalities or permutations. It may come as a surprise to some purveyors of the Continental scene to learn that Lacanian psychoanalysis in France positions itself officially against poststructuralism, that Kristeva denounces postmodernism, that Foucauldians rarely relate to Derrideans, that Cixous and Irigaray are fundamentally opposed, and that the only tenuous connection between French feminism and deconstruction exists between Cixous and Derrida, although a certain affinity in textual practices is to be found between Derrida and Irigaray.[16]

Butler expresses her frustration with the fact that the term "postmodernism" is used in such a way that it encompasses a wide variety of ideas ("discourse is all there is" or "the subject is dead"), positions, method, and approaches (such as deconstruction, French feminism, or Foucauldian analysis). All of these elements are in fact substantially different. "Postmodernism" is a term whose use entails vast oversimplification. "Postmodernism" also puts together a wide variety of authors that do not always have easy or straightforward relations with each other (the fact Foucauldians rarely relate to Derrideans, or that there are only tenuous connections between Cixous and Derrida). In fact, she says, some of the targeted authors (Kristeva) are against postmodernism and have condemned it.[17]

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[16] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism,"" in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 36-37.

[17] Abbot touches on this when he says that

> (…) intense issues within fractionalized battles can seem incomprehensible to outsiders; most non-Marxists never took the position of extreme economic reductionism and hence had no particular need for Althusser's great insight, which took the form of "bringing the non-economic back in." The "discovery" of the problem of structure and agency is the same. Those who never believed in absolute structural determination wonder what all the fuss is about.

Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines*, p. 26.

There are several problems with performing exclusions and that members of the targeted metanarrative find shocking, but we can at least identify two of them. On the one hand, there relegations conflict with our *academic sense*, which consists in making careful distinctions and eschew blunt generalizations. On the other hand, it comes in tension with our *social awareness*. As Butler noted, it seems unthinkable that several different authors – some of which nourish intense rivalries – could be put together in this way.

As political theorists, it is important to take these relegations and general terms seriously. First, it is because the actors involved in these conflicts also take these labels and categories seriously. Some will not find it problematic to be called "libertarians" or "postmoderns" and, in fact, will wear it proudly. Milton Friedman called himself a liberal "in nineteenth century sense," but he also called himself "libertarian" and a member of the "libertarian movement" because, even though there was a great variety of positions under this umbrella, all of them work toward the reduction of government intervention.[18] Or it might happen that, with time, these encompassing terms will become overused and that they will live out their usefulness. For instance, Richard Rorty ended up abandoning the term "postmodernism" precisely because of this problem.[19]

Secondly, we have to take these relegations and general terms seriously because, even though members of a metanarrative do not see very well the internal sub fault lines of their rivals, they are the best to detect cues that are oblivious to their opponents. To call something "postmodern" and "libertarian" can seem extremely reductive from the point of view of someone inhabiting these general metanarratives. But, in the end, these metanarratives do generate cues that can then be used by others, and even by people that do not especially feel very "postmodern" or "libertarian." These cues and the metanarratives from which they come from do create an intuitive shock for people inhabiting rival metanarratives.

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[18] Milton Friedman, "Best of Both Worlds: An Interview with Milton Friedman" by Brian Doherty, *Reason*, June 1995, retrieved from https://reason.com/1995/06/01/best-of-both-worlds/
[19] Richard Rorty, "Introduction: Pragmatism and post-Nietzschean philosophy," in Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers, Volume 2: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 1.

We should not forget, however, that "postmodernism" or "libertarianism" must be taken with a grain of salt. As Butler pointed out, the ideas of "postmodernism" are sometimes ascribed to "postmodernism," but sometimes also indiscriminately conflated with "poststructuralism," as if the difference between the two terms did not matter. In our case, we decided to ascribe to Mises the "libertarian" metanarrative and to Laclau the "postmodern" metanarrative because of the way in which both use exclusions and cues that are typical of their respective metanarratives. Whether they *are* "libertarian" or "postmodern," respectively, is something we will address in our concluding chapter.

But why does this happen? Why do we use these cues and fault lines? How do they emerge, exactly? In phenomenology, we sometimes hear this idea: when I am familiarized with a context, I can better "see" the details making up that context. If I visit a friend with a farm, I will not intuitively "see" all the tools and things that my seasoned friend is used to handle. I can stay at that farm for a while and then learn and gradually acquire my friend's sensibility to his context. I will then learn to intuitively see each tool and each thing, just like he does. Especially if I work with him, I will see the relevance of each thing and how it connects with others, thus "seeing" them in a way I could not before.

With metanarratives, we have a process that works in the opposite way. Cues and fault lines emerge because people tend to *intuitively obliterate* the sub-fault lines and subtleties of rival metanarratives. Cues, metanarratives, and fault lines are not simply "concepts" or "ideas" in the way we usually understand it. They are not simply the result of different perspectives and of different points of view. For a member of the Marxist metanarrative, reality will *feel* much more "capitalist." For a member of the feminist metanarrative, reality *feels* much more "patriarchal." For a member of the libertarian metanarrative, reality *feels* much more "socialist." And so forth. In turn, a member of an internal fault line within the libertarian metanarrative will not feel like his more moderate colleagues are very "liberal." Quite the contrary, within each metanarrative, there are some canonical arguments that routinely try to exclude moderate members of a given metanarrative – for instance, the way in which Social Democrats are said to actually be "bourgeois," or how moderately interventionist libertarians are said to be "social-democrats," or how moderate feminists

are said to not be feminists at all. These are not mere puristic arguments. For members within a fault line of a metanarrative, their more moderate colleagues do not *feel* very much like members of their metanarratives – they are not very "feminist," or "liberals," or "socialists."

This asymmetry of feelings also helps explain why terms such as "postmodernism" and "libertarianism" can, at times, be impossible to define. These terms, when they are used in a context where they are connected to the cues we analyzed, encapsulate these kinds of debates about boundaries that cannot be strictly defined. Especially, when cues start to emerge, a sub-fault line will usually follow and its members will have a much more restricted understanding of what counts as being inside the metanarrative. In other words, defining these polemical terms in a moment where it would be most interesting to define them – i.e., to indicate the boundaries between the inside and the outside of each metanarrative in moments where many exclusions are occurring – really becomes impossible.

Conclusion

As political analysts, we often dealt with political ideologies as packets of policies or bodies of ideas. In this chapter, we tried to show how what we call "ideological" often goes farther than bodies of ideas or policies. When we carefully distinguish our own point of view as political analysts and the point of view of the actors that form the metanarratives that we study, we can notice that ideologies are not only about ideas and policies but about these very processes of labeling and relegation that we have studied. Even though a given author might not especially feel very "leftwing," "rightwing," "conservative," or "socialists," it can happen that the author in questions uses cues from these metanarratives. By studying these different sensibilities, especially coming from radicals that perform a great number of exclusions, we can learn to see each other's cues and the way in which they are casually used even by people that would reject any label.

Our literary approach tries to acknowledge, by using cues and metanarratives, these inherent slippages and blurred frontiers. By studying a great variety of radicals, we will be able to be aware of cues the we would not otherwise be able to see.

Furthermore, recognizing the obliviousness that we have toward our own cues complicates Laclau's project. As we saw, the ethical core of Laclau's political theory is the experience of the contingency of our political struggles and that our most cherished identities will come to pass. This, he argues, is the fundamental insight brought to us by this new postmodern age. In turn, we argue that the problem is that Laclau's postmodernism generates cues and a metanarrative of its own. This in turn means that these cues can only be identified from the point of view of the essentialism that Laclau condemns. In other words, the belief in essences that Laclau criticizes is an essential ingredient of his own political theory.

Note that we are here saying something different than the recurrent argument that there is a "hegemony of hegemony" and that Laclau's ontological approach is becoming too dominant. Nor are we arguing that this pervasiveness of hegemony is "naturalizing" its categories. As we saw, these are arguments that, in a sense, miss the mark since the recognition of the contingent nature of our identities is the highest ethical imperative. If hegemony is naturalized, then it is the "least bad" of all kind of naturalizations since it recognizes its own naturalization. What we are arguing is that, to the extent that Laclau and his followers are consistent with their ethical imperative, then they must resort to the very essentialism that they reject.

As Bernstein said at the end of *The Preconditions*: it is only by keeping a balance between doctrinaires and skeptics that Socialism will be able to progress. In the same way, only by adopting the essentialist's point of view and, therefore, by preserving some essentialism can the champions of contingency be consistent to the end. The best means we have to see our own flaws and our own contingent nature is only through the eyes of our opponents. This, in turn, seems to suggest that the precondition for democracy is not the recognition of the contingency of our own identities, but to learn how to see thing from the perspective of the ones that are most different from ourselves.

Chapter 6: Political Moderation

Les libéraux ont parfois tendance, comme les marxistes, à croire que l'ordre du monde pourrait réconcilier nos aspirations avec la réalité. Cette confiance ne manque pas de grandeur. Souffrez que je l'admire et ne l'imite point

Raymond Aron[1]

Comment combiner passion et modération ? Des passions modérées ne sont pas des passions et en tout cas risquent d'être impuissantes et fades. Une modération passionnée risque d'être aussi utopique ou du moins aussi rare que les philosophes-rois (…).à l'heure où nous sommes menacés par l'escalade de la peur et de la haine, du mépris et du ressentiment, mais aussi par la paralysie impuissante, où il nous faut combattre à la fois le fanatisme et le scepticisme, à la fois l'aventurisme et la passivité, il n'y a pas d'autre voie que l'alliance rare, fragile et souvent conflictuelle de la modération et de la passion.

Pierre Hassner, *La Revanche des Passions*[2]

1. Political moderation as anti-genre

We have so far described a model of political radicalism by using a literary approach. In this chapter, we will try to answer the other question that we formulated in our introduction: how can we define political moderation given this new picture of political radicalism?

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[1] "Sometimes, we see in liberals – as in Marxists – a tendency to believe that the global order can conciliate reality with our aspirations. This conviction has its greatness. Permit me to admire it without imitating it." Raymond Aron, "La définition libérale de la liberté," in *Études Politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 215. Translation quoted from João Carlos Espada, *Social Citizenship Rights: A Critique of F.A. Hayek and Raymond Plant* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 58.

[2] "How can we combine passions and moderation? Moderate passions are not really passions and they risk to become powerless and dull. [On the other hand,] A passionate moderation risks to become as rare and as utopian as the philosophers-king (…). in these present times where we are menaced by the escalation of fear and hatred, of contempt and resentment, and by the paralyzing effect of helplessness, we must face both fanaticism and skepticism, adventurism and passivity; we have no other choice but the rare and fragile (and often conflictual) alliance between moderation and passion." Pierre Hassner, *La revanche des passions : Métamorphoses de la violence et crises du politique* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), last paragraph of the introduction (the translation is my own).

First, we should review some conceptions of moderation so that we can draw our own view of political moderation. It is notable that, if we look globally at the body of literature on moderation and on radicalism, there is a rich literature on extremism and radicalism but comparatively little on its opposite. In our introduction, we have listed some of the clusters of debates that use notions of extremism and radicalism, and now we note again how they say relatively little about the opposite of radicalism/extremism.

On the one hand, in our cluster on *extremism*, moderation is seen as:

(1) The opposite of the "extremist personality," i.e. a personality with low intolerance, uncompromisingness, or a low tendency to resort to violence.

(2) The opposite of the polarization and homogenization of opinions in a group, i.e. the tendency to be unsure about one's opinions.[3]

(3) The opposite of the use of violent means to achieve the objectives of the extremist, i.e. moderate means.

(4) The opposite of far-right and populist ideologies, i.e. technocracy and/or elitism.

On the one hand, in our cluster on *radicalism*, moderation is seen as:

(1) The opposite of philosophic radicalism, i.e. a philosophy friendly to tradition or not outwardly against it.[4]

(2) The opposite of radical movements, i.e. movements that defend the prevailing order or that advocate a middle ground between the defenders and radicals.

(3) The opposite of radical politics, i.e. a politics of reforms or conservatism.

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[3] Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, p. 23.

[4] An important element of Jonathan Israel's argument in *Radical Enlightenment* is that there was, parallelly to the philosophic radicalism of the Enlightenment, a "moderate Enlightenment" that included authors such as Locke or Montesquieu.

Secondly, there are several works that have addressed the subject of political moderation and moderation at large.[5] Harry M. Clor, for instance, describes three sense of political moderation: as a political position that stands between two extreme ones, as a more substantive political doctrine that cultivates specific moderate virtues (e.g., reformism, realism, low expectations, or long-term vision), or a leader can be said to be "moderate" if he takes into account and tries to balance out competing political views.

One of the scholars that treats the subject of political moderation most comprehensively is Aurelian Craiutu.[6] For Craiutu, moderation is a kind of disposition – or, as he says, a "virtue" or an "ethos." In his works, and especially in *Faces of Moderation*, Craiutu retraces moderation in the political thoughts of authors such as Burke, Tocqueville, Staël, Guizot, Constant, Aron, Berlin, Oakeshott, and Bobbio. These authors, he argues, are united in the way in which they sought to avoid the radicalisms of their day and in their rejection of Manichean political views. Politically, moderates usually understand that some values (such as equality and freedom) cannot be fully reconciled and, therefore, they advocate a politics of prudence and of sensitivity to one's context.[7] Moderates reject overarching systems and abstract political plans and, instead, adopt a politics of "trimming" and of creating institutional arrangements that can balance competing political claims.[8] For Craiutu, moderation cannot be reduced to a cohesive doctrine or tradition,

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[5] See especially Aurelian Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 18-23, and Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Harry M. Clor, *On Moderation: Defending an Ancient Virtue in a Modern World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Uwe Backes, Political Extremes: A conceptual history from antiquity to the present (London: Routledge, 2010), see chapter 1 section 2, chapter 2, and chapter 9, but see also his essay Uwe Backes, 'Meaning and Forms of Political Extremism in Past and Present,' *Central European Political Studies Review*, Vol. IX, N°4, pp. 242-262, Robert McCluer Calhoon, *Political Moderation in America's First Two Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Pierre Serna, 'Radicalités et modérations, postures, modèles, theories: Naissance du cadre politique contemporain,' *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 357, juillet-septembre 2009.

[6] Aurelian Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), and Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). See also Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003).

[7] Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation*, p. 230.

[8] Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation*, pp. 18-23, and Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds*, pp. 13-15.

which is why he talks of the "faces" of moderation.[9] To avoid creating such monolith, he takes a historical approach in his two major works on the subject.[10]

Like many of the authors who study political moderation and whom we have addressed in this study, Craiutu takes from the study of moderate authors that political moderation does not merely consists in being in the middle of two competing political positions. Rather, he argues, moderation is a heterogeneous collection of substantive values and modes of thinking of people who promote a "politics-in-the-middle" and such values as pluralism, constitutionalism, individualism, compromise, and centrism. This is why he insists that being moderate does not mean systematically holding a "middle-way" position and that political moderation cannot be reduced to merely conservatism. Moments of courage, steadiness, and strength are necessary to create and foster the conditions for a politics without extremes. Uncompromisingness can therefore be justified, says Craiutu, but only for a time and not as an enduring feature of a civilized society.[11]

These two last insights of Craiutu each contain a good point of entry for a notion of moderation built on our own literary approach. On the one hand, political moderation is the *avoidance* of radicalisms, and, in our terminology, it is the avoidance of metanarratives and their cues. In our chapter on the Marxist metanarrative, we saw the way Bernstein criticized the doctrinaires' uncritical acceptance of the story of Marxism. One by one, he severed the connections between its cues and showed that, for instance, society was not becoming more homogeneous, that the bourgeoisie was not increasingly more oppressive, that there was no growing prospect of a crisis of capitalism and of a general revolution, or that, even if a revolution did happen, then it is not clear how the revolutionaries would manage to implement socialism.

It seems that there is a specific *skepticism* about cues and metanarratives at the root of a view of political moderation through literary lenses. At first, this seems to make sense given the problem of the "nagging

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[9] Craiutu, *Faces of* Moderation, pp. 32-33, and Craiutu, A *Virtue for Courageous Minds*, pp. 240-241.

[10] *A Virtue for Courageous Minds* and *Faces of Moderation* are some of Craiutu's works in English, but he also wrote in Romanian: *In Praise of Moderation* (Lași: Polirom Publishing House, 2006). Cf. also Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003).

[11] Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation*, pp. 21-23, and Cf. Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds*, p. 239. Cf. also Eugene Goodheart, "In Defense of Trimming," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 25, n°1, April 2001, pp. 46-58: pp. 48-49.

skepticism" of Bernstein that his opponents, from Parvus and Luxemburg to Lukács, saw as one of the fundamental problems of his position. This skepticism about the cues of Marxism offered a seemingly erudite and scientific attitude that, in the words of Lukács, made it "fashionable [to greet] any profession of faith in Marxism with ironical disdain."[12]

However, "skepticism" may not seem to be the most fitting term if we remember that Mises and Laclau were also quite skeptical of the cues and metanarratives of their opponents. In fact, both ridiculed their opponents' metanarratives and showed the simplistic connections of their opponents' cues (the fact that socialism could implement a paradise on earth with a blissful and rational economic system, or the fact that essentialism can give access to Truth or Reality and reveal a blueprint that could do away with political conflicts).

However, the *radical skepticism* that we saw in Mises and Laclau was more a skepticism made from the point of view of another metanarrative. What we see in Bernstein is rather a skepticism about cues and metanarratives in general. In a radical genre, we see a skepticism about cues that generates an opposed set of cues of a rival metanarrative. Moderation's skepticism seems to entail a criticism of cues that does not fall back on a metanarrative. In fact, Bernstein finishes his *Preconditions* by reminding his readers that only with a "Kant" skeptical of the "cant" of the doctrinaires will socialism be able to progress. He saw his critique as being made from within the metanarrative of Marxism. As we saw, this was also another complaint from his rivals: if only Bernstein had said that he was *opposed* to Marxism, then it would have been easier to exclude him. There would not be a "nagging" skepticism that operated from within.

It is therefore more accurate to say that the radical genre's skepticism is in fact a relentless *suspicion*. The radical genre depicts a reality where the enemy is everywhere (for instance, where "socialism" or "essentialism" lies under a variety of opponents). We pointed out in the conclusions of our chapters on Mises and Laclau, as well as in our chapter on metanarratives, that this ethos of suspicion was one of the

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[12] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 1.

fundamental aspects of Mises' and Laclau's metanarratives. Thanks to a strong sensibility against the cues of their rival metanarratives (like one that generates strong reactions from a "feminist" when faced with a "patriarchal" cue, or from a "libertarian" when faced with a "socialist" cue), the study of the metanarratives of these authors can help us, political theorists, to see cues that we would otherwise not see or not be aware of.

In order to translate these considerations into our work's literary genres approach, we could say that, if radicalism is similar to literary genres to which one can make references, then moderation is similar to some of these literary resources that rely on the existence of other literary canons in order to express themselves. There is the famous example of irony in literature, for instance. Irony is a distinct literary mode because it feeds off of other modes and genres: it uses and distorts the rules of comedy, romance, and so forth, in order to cast doubt and derision. See this famous quip from Don Quixote: "No one in a romance ever asks who pays for the hero's accommodation."[13] Irony is not the only example. There are several "realist" or "anti-rhetorical" trends in art, movie, or architecture that gain their effect by being a "return to simplicity" and by taking a deliberate "sobering" turn.[14] These "realist" and "anti-rhetorical" trends are able to brand themselves by showing how they are going "beyond form" and by the way they show that they see what is "really" happening.

We have not yet addressed, however, Craiutu's second characteristic of the ethos of moderation: the fact that moderates are not merely an *avoidance* of radicalisms, but that they hold substantive moderate values. The values that Craiutu describes are suggestive: pluralism, constitutionalism, individualism, compromise, and centrism. This seems to entail a second point about moderation, i.e., that it has alignments of its own. This seems to present another problem. Indeed, we just described how Bernstein's skepticism was different from Mises' and Laclau's precisely because Bernstein avoided falling back on some form of metanarrative.

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[13] Quoted from Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 223, cf. also Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 37-38.
[14] Yuri M. Lotman encapsulates this quite well in *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London and New York: Tauris Publishers, 1990), p. 44.

We will have to take a deeper look at these "moderate alignments" in order to further define what moderation consists of.

Already in *Preconditions*, Bernstein made a very curious form of alignment. Democracy, he argued, is not the domination of a class (the workers), but it is the absence of domination of a class.[15] This definition is similar to the definition of another notable adherent of political moderation, Norberto Bobbio, that is well-known for his left-right distinction. In *Old Age and Other Essays*, Bobbio says plainly that "Democracy is where extremists do not prevail (and if they prevail, then democracy is finished)."[16]

In the work where he discusses his left-right theory, Bobbio includes a chapter on "Extremists and Moderates" in which he fleshes out his understanding of political moderation. In this chapter, he argues that what distinguishes extremism from moderation is, not the nature of their ideas, but rather their common strategies.[17] The most enduring feature of extremisms, says Bobbio, is their shared hatred and strong rejection of democracy (which, in another work, he defines as "a set of procedural rules for arriving at collective decisions in a way which accommodates and facilitates the fullest possible participation of interested parties").[18] In other words, Bobbio essentially sees the extremes as similar in their opposition to democracy and its alleged *mediocracy*.[19] Indeed, says Bobbio, democracy presupposes a collection of "merchant" virtues necessary for its working, and extremists are similar in their collection of "warrior" virtues: they see democracy and its reformist solutions as an impediment to the violence necessary to clean up the problems barring the way.

> The extremists on opposing sides (…) have much in common on moral questions and in their doctrines of virtue, and have similar reasons for opposing the moderates: the heroic, warrior virtues of courage and

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[15] Bernstein, *Preconditions*, pp. 140-141.

[16] Norberto Bobbio, *Old Age and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 68.

[17] Bobbio uses "extremism" as the opposite of "moderation" in a positive sense – that we will define below. "Radicalism," however, is positive for Bobbio and he opposes it to "moderation" in a negative sense. Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 93.

[18] Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy: A Defence of the Rules of the Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 19.

[19] Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 25.

boldness, as against the virtues of prudence, tolerance, calculating reason and patient mediation, which extremists consider distastefully commercial.[20]

For Bobbio, the moderates consider extremists as analogous, not as opposed.[21] He argues that there are even philosophical similarities between extremisms: while moderates believe that actions should be guided like the "growth of an organism from its embryo according to a pre-established order," extremists have a catastrophist vision of history that leaves much room to "human intelligence and forcefulness."[22] This shared view of history enables extremists to leave more room for clear cut and bold political action. "Moderatism," he says, is more developmental and deterministic.

In conclusion, democracy for Bobbio is aligned with moderation in a fault line against radicalisms. In fact, Bobbio goes as far as to argue that *the very survival* of democracy depends on the kind of virtues rejected by the extremes – such as pragmatic outlook, capacity for compromise, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

As we can see with Bobbio's example, moderate alignments do not merely fall back on another metanarrative. The moderate genre has a primary trait where it avoids cues and metanarratives, but it also leaves open the possibility of creating a fault line around the very lack of radicalism. Moderate alignments are therefore *anti-radical alignments*. A traditional way in which such anti-radical alignments are made is simply by showing how radicalisms of both sides are, beyond the appearances, united by some essential parity. This is truly an alignment in the same style as the radical metanarratives: just like Mises made several alignments with "socialism" (from "interventionism" to "communism") and Laclau made his alignments with "essentialism" (from "reformism" to "totalitarianism"). What is different about it is that we have a metanarrative that tries to fight back radical metanarratives.

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[20] Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 25.
[21] Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 23.
[22] Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 22.

Here again we have to ask the same question we have asked earlier about skepticism: don't both radicalism and moderation have alignments? Yes. But here again we have to also give the same answer, which is that they are different kinds of alignments. We should not forget that two genres having a common element does not mean that we are warranted in saying that they are the same thing. The genre of tragedy and the genre of the detective story both have the recurrent and common element of the knife. However, the significance of the knife for both genres is entirely different. It cues the reader on very different levels. The bloody knife of Hamlet is different than the knife of Poirot: in the first, the knife represents the culmination of all of the dramatic action of the work, while in the second it is a clue or the weapon of the crime. In the end, the difference between genres always consists in what each suggests to the reader. Since moderation can be defined as an (anti-)genre, and since it draws its distinctive character from being *a genre against genres*, it makes sense that we should address it in its specificity.

2. The Cold War Liberals

In order to give an example of a period where the moderate genre was extensively used, we will turn again to a group of authors that have been put under the umbrella term of "Cold War liberals."[23] We will focus especially on one of them, Raymond Aron. Aron is still today celebrated for being a quintessential "on the one hand, on the other hand" intellectual, someone who paid special attention to avoid the political dichotomies that the French intelligentsia of his time revered.[24] He will make a good example of an author with a panoply of arguments that are made in the moderate genre that we just described. Describing the

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[23] Cf. the introduction our chapter on Laclau. Jan-Werner Müller has studied the thought of the Cold War liberals in several publications: Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom: On "Cold War Liberalism,"" *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 7, n°1, pp. 45-64, Jan-Werner Müller, "Value pluralism in twentieth-century Anglo-American thought," in Mark Bevir (ed.), *Modern Pluralism: Anglo-American Debates since 1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Jan-Werner Müller, *Isaiah Berlin's Cold War Liberalism* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2019) and especially his essay "The Contours of Cold War Liberalism (Berlin's in Particular)."

[24] Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 137-138, and pp. 141-142. Cf. the bibliographical guide to Aron's works in José Colen and Elisabeth Dutartre-Michaut (eds.), *The Companion to Raymond Aron* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), pp. 293-299. This work present a good state of the art of the field on Aron.

Cold War liberals and the thought of Aron will help us exemplify and it will give a deeper answer to how we should understand political moderation given our literary framework.

The context of the Cold War Liberals is essential in order to understand their political theory and some of the reasons why they have been grouped together. A key aspect to keep in mind is the fact that the Second World War divided the world in two, and Aron has an apt description of this context in one of his works.[25] On the one hand, we had what Aron calls the "multi-party" regime. It is a regime that allows more than one party to exist and, therefore, it allows these parties to compete for a share in the exercise of power. For Aron, the other characteristics typical of a constitutional-pluralistic regime emerged from this fundamental variable: competition between parties; the fact that this competition is peaceful; the legal exercise of power and of this competition; and, ultimately, the fact that these rules are usually codified in a constitution. On the other hand, there was what Aron calls the "monopolistic party" regime. From this fundamental variable, Aron also derived several characteristics of this type of regime: while the multiparty regime derives its legitimacy from the competition for the exercise of power, the monopolistic regime needs an official ideology that justifies the elimination of competition; its rulers claim to be the genuine representatives of the popular will; and although the competition between several parties is prohibited, there is indeed a competition for leadership within the party itself.

The Cold War was not just a struggle over institutions, however. Both sides were backed by substantially different visions of what politics and democracy were supposed to be. Cold War liberals such as Aron, Isaiah Berlin, or Karl Popper,[26] were good representatives of what, in hindsight, has been called a "liberalism of fear": a liberalism of the avoidance of cruelty and bloodshed that offers not "a *summum*

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[25] Some argue that the title of the work, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, is misleading since Aron does not usually use these terms throughout his work, preferring instead to speak of "constitutional pluralistic" regimes and "monopolistic party" regime. Raymond Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990 [1965]), p. 40.

[26] George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) is one of the best overviews of Berlin's thought. On Popper, cf. Malachi Hacohen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years, 1902-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

bonum toward which all political agents should strive, but (…) a *summum malum*."[27] A pervasive theme in the political thought of these authors was the defense of a "pragmatic" view of democracy in opposition to the "redemptive" vision of democracy of the Soviet Union.[28] They often described democracy in terms of "the best possible," as an imperfect form of government that could avoid violence and the domination of one group over society as a whole (a conception reminiscent of the standard aphorism that "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.")

Even though these authors can be put together because they were opposed to "utopian" political aspirations and saw themselves as proponents of more sober political projects, we should not exaggerate these similarities.[29] Judith Shklar, another famous name of this Cold War Liberalism (she dubbed the expression "liberalism of fear"), carefully distinguished her own position from Berlin's.[30] Although he was on good terms with Berlin, Popper also had his own reservations toward his "Two Concepts" essay.[31] As a commentator notes, these authors would also not describe themselves primarily as political theorists, nor did they put forward a compact and systematized liberal political theory.[32] Despite these caveats, these authors delivered key anti-utopian arguments against political theories that aspired to a "genuine," "harmonious," "monistic," or "authentic" politics, or one where the people would be "truly" represented.[33]

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[27] Although, as we will see, Judith Shklar (that created the expression "liberalism of fear" and was arguably a cold war liberal as well) carefully distinguished her own position from Berlin's. Cf. Müller, "Fear and Freedom," pp. 28-29. This expression comes from Shklar's essay of the same name, "The Liberalism of Fear," in Nancy L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 21-38, and it is applied to Aron, Berlin, and Popper by Müller in "Fear and Freedom," p. 45.

[28] We borrow Margaret Canovan's terminology from her essay "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies*, 1999, vol. XLVII, pp. 2-16.

[29] Müller, "Fear and Freedom," p. 61, footnote 16.

[30] Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," p. 28.

[31] Hardy and Holmes have included some extracts of Popper's letter to Berlin where he makes some critical remarks on the "Two Concepts" in Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening. Letters 1946-1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009) pp. 680-682. More about these letters in: James Schmidt, "Karl Popper & Isaiah Berlin on Liberty & Enlightenment (Part I)," in *Persistent Enlightenment* [blog post], retrieved from https://persistentenlightenment.com/2013/04/14/popperberlinpart/#fn1

[32] Müller, "Fear and Freedom," p. 47.

[33] For Berlin on Aron and Popper, see "Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes," *Salmagundi*, vol. 120, Fall 1998. For Berlin on Popper, see Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006) pp. 124-128. For Aron on Berlin, Popper, and Hayek, see J. A. Colen, *Futuro do Político, Passado do Historiador* (Lisbon: Moinho Velho, 2010), pp. 54-57.

Let's come back to Aron's description of the multi-party and monopolistic regimes to see a good example of this conception of politics.[34] One surprising aspect of Aron's analysis of regimes is that, at first, he does not dismiss the Soviets' claims that they represented the "true" democratic ideal, nor does he deny their accusation that, in some sense, the multiparty regimes were indeed "oligarchical." Indeed, he said, a multiparty regime inherently contains some form of oligarchy because it is always a small group that rules for the whole.[35] Therefore, a multiparty regime has an inherent tension within itself: on the one hand, it must maintain enough distance between the rulers and a specific minority within the regime to avoid the oligarchic temptation, and, on the other hand, it has to keep a good sense of compromise in order to avoid an excess of democracy, that is, an excessive tendency for each part of society to push toward its own side without trying to reach a general agreement. (Here, Aron was probably making a reference to the Fourth republic that had a constitution that facilitated the existence of intense factional rivalries.)

Aron therefore says that, it is true, there are cases where a multiparty regime is corrupted because of an excess of oligarchy. In other words, a multiparty regime can come to have an excessive closeness between the rulers and a minority within society. Nevertheless, most of the multiparty regimes are able to maintain the rivalry between parties precisely because they maintain a balance between an excess of oligarchy and an excess of democracy. Therefore, Aron concludes that this oligarchic aspect does not justify calling multiparty regimes "oligarchies."

For Aron, a multiparty regime lies on a delicate balance that it has to conserve in order to remain as close as possible to its democratic ideal: it has to maintain enough distance between the rulers and a minority in order to avoid the oligarchic temptation; and it has to keep a good sense of compromise in order to avoid an excess of democracy, that is, each part of society pushing toward its own side without trying to reach a general agreement. In the end, after considering the Soviets' claims that they represented the "true" democratic ideal, Aron characteristically concludes that we cannot decisively say that one of the systems is

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[34] I address this aspect of Aron's thought in Pedro Góis Moreira and J. A. Colen, "Civilização industrial" in J. A. Colen (ed.), *O Pensamento de Raymond Aron* (Moinho Velho: Lisboa, 2019 (forthcoming)).

[35] Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, p. 109.

good and the other bad: both are imperfect. However, the imperfections of the multiparty regimes are practical, while the flaws of monopolistic party regimes are inherent.[36] Democracy, he concluded, resided more on the side of the "multiparty" regime rather than the "monopolistic" one. As a commentator puts it: "[i]n its modesty, constitutional-pluralist democracy is able to protect society and individuals from evils that other regimes cannot. Nothing that will inspire men to poetic greatness, to be sure. But, like health in a person, one only appreciates it only once it is already lost."[37]

We see here a typical argument of this kind of Cold War liberalism. It is an institutionally minded vision of democracy especially preoccupied with the competition of parties and with the rule of law. It looks at democracy as a way to avoid evils rather than a way to achieve an authentic image of itself. It also has a typical normative conclusion that, even though the constitutional model of democracy of the Western kind is a profoundly flawed regime, and even though it cannot be said that it is "the" authentic regime where the "voice of the people" can be heard, it is at least a realistic form of regime and, therefore, it is worth fighting for.

A characteristic element of this "negative politics" was an attempt to draw a vision of politics that would avoid metanarratives without falling back on one. This was, in part, a normal reaction after a second world war that saw intensive struggles between Manichean worldviews. An essential element of these Cold War liberals was, therefore, how to think politics in a way that avoids these dichotomic schemes. One way to do it was by paying special attention to politics through the lenses of interests, institutions, party competition, and the avoidance of particular evils rather than the achievement of a *summum bonum*.

To give concrete examples, let's address a few well-known authors that, apart from Aron, were proponents of a politics of moderation with a similar style and used arguments in the same vein. Popper, for instance, famously argued that democracy enabled the change of government without bloodshed. While, for Popper,

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[36] Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, p. 237.
[37] Miguel Morgado, "Montesquieu and Aron on Democracy's Virtues and Corruption," in Colen and Dutartre-Michaut, *The Companion to Raymond Aron*, pp. 254-255.

the West has asked the question "who should rule?" for too long; he believed that it was more realistic to ask "how can we get rid of bad rulers without bloodshed?"[38] Instead of a supposed "rule of the people," Popper thought that his view of democracy, even if less appealing, was more effective in avoiding the evils of violence than other more idealistic versions of democracy. In the same evil-avoidance vein, Popper also believed that public policies should not be drafted with a *summum bonum* in mind: one should, in fact, have a "piecemeal social engineering" approach, that is, not the transformation of the whole fabric of society through a utopian plan, but the gradual reform of society by taking into account particular evils. Instead of seeking to attain justice, equality, or happiness, Popper believed that the social planner should focus on fighting evils such as unemployment, poverty, or violence. Berlin is another central name of this moderate position. He gave much emphasis to freedom in its negative form, as the absence of coercion, and he warned incessantly that democracy, understood in its "rule of the people" sense, could easily crush individual liberties. For Berlin, pluralism framed within strong laws and a system with a good dose of compromise was a more humane ideal than what the apologists of "positive" liberty were proposing.[39]

In the end, one of the core elements of these authors' political thoughts was their *pluralism*.[40] This was also one of the essential ways in which these thinkers were able to not fall back on a metanarrative. But we should understand this in two senses. On the one hand, these thinkers believed that political values could not ultimately be reconciled (they were *anti-monistic*) and, therefore, they were apologists of pluralism of opinions and of values, and of a system that could best accommodate (rather than reconcile) these divergent currents.

On the other hand, however, these thinkers were pluralists in the active sense that they believed both friends and foes should balance and correct one another. This "active" pluralism also stemmed from these thinkers' recurrent thought that their pragmatic politics could become *anemic* if it fell under the illusion that it could

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[38] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013 [1945]), cf. chap. 7 of the first volume.

[39] Isaiah Berlin, ""Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[40] Müller, "Fear and Freedom," pp. 53-55.

live off of its institutional pragmatism alone. As they would say, it was an excessively negative view of politics and democracy. Even though they were all anti-Marxists in different degrees and in different moments, and although they saw the Soviets' democratic pretensions as mistaken, the three of them also took Marx seriously and thought, in one way or another, that their opponents' call for justice, freedom, and genuine democracy had something legitimate. They believed that democracy under the rule of law should be a fertile ground for a conversation with the claims of their opponents. For instance, Berlin said that negative liberty should not rule unfettered, but should be balanced with the "positive" liberties that, at the time, were typically associated with Marxism. Popper's Open Society was strongly based on his idea of fallibilism: The Open Society needed movement, refutations, and exchange of ideas in order to thrive, and, for Popper, someone like Marx made timely criticisms to unbridled capitalism.

Michael Oakeshott (admittedly a less straightforward Cold War *liberal* given his avowedly conservative disposition)[41] also advised against leaving the "politics of skepticism" unchecked without "the politics of faith."[42] Oakeshott describes at length two ways of conducting the affairs of government: while the politics of faith attempts to impose a comprehensive social blueprint in which all human activities will be directed toward the fulfillment of an overarching social goal, the politics of skepticism sees the activity of government as one more activity among others and is more worried to draw the limits of each kind of activity rather than enforcing common goals. Given this description, we can understand why Oakeshott would be warry of an unrestricted politics of faith. But he also advised that, where the politics of skepticism becomes dominant, the skeptical polity will become anemic over time because of the lack of a common overarching goal.

> in the absence of a larger enterprise, the sceptical office of keeping the system of rights and duties relevant to the current activities which compose the community may be expected to be sluggishly performed. Without

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[41] On this subject, cf. Terry Nardin (ed.), *Michael Oakeshott's Cold War Liberalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[42] Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 91-92, and his description of the politics of skepticism's nemesis in pp. 105 and onwards.

the pull exerted by faith, without the 'perfectionism' which we have seen to be both an illusion and a dangerous illusion (…) government in the sceptical style is liable to be overtaken by a nemesis of political quietism.[43]

Here again, Aron encapsulates this "active" pluralism perfectly. In his essay *Machiavelli and Marx*, for instance, Aron compares the thought of Machiavelli, the "counselor of Princes" and analyst of the most efficient means for each political occasion, with Marx, the "confidant of providence" and prophet of a better world that has yet to come.[44]

Why did each have such different visions, Aron asks? While Machiavelli looked at men and their struggles, Marx looked at institutions and their eschatological and transitory character. One wanted a united country, he says, while the other aspired to a society reconciled with itself. Aron draws further philosophical distinctions, such as the fact that one described history in terms of cyclical repetition, while the other saw progress in the long run versus. For Marx, man unconsciously made history and will one day be able to fully control it. But, for Machiavelli, even though mankind is responsible for its own history, there is little pride in it: moments of virtue are rare and brief.

In the end, Aron ends by saying that he tends to side with Machiavelli. However, in his typical balanced style, Aron adds that it would be wrong to side decisively with one of them over the other. Indeed, he says, it might dangerous to side with a vision of man and history that is too ambitious, but it would also be dangerous to side with a vision in which man is base and powerless. Between the pragmatic analyst of the political realm and the dreamer of a better world, Aron concludes, the best is to let both authors continue in an endless conversation.[45]

> Although it is dangerous to give human beings an excessively flattering idea of their potential destiny, it is
> no less dangerous to convince them of their indignity and powerlessness. Between Machiavelli, the observer

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[43] Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, pp. 107-108.
[44] Raymond Aron, "Machiavel et Marx," in *Les sociétés modernes*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006 [1972], p. 99.
[45] Aron, "Machiavel et Marx, " pp. 93-110.

without illusions, and Marx, the prophet, it is best to not pick one of the two and simply let them pursue, within and outside of ourselves, an endless and open-ended dialogue.[46]

As we can see, the politics of moderation of these Cold War liberals could even try to avoid metanarratives to the point where they sometimes argued that their politics *depended* on the politics of their opponents. A politics of moderation, they said, depended on having a more enthusiastic counterpart that kept pushing for the realization of more ambitious values than the mere maintenance of political institutions.

However, we should not go too far in one direction. Indeed, these authors all have several notable anti-radical alignments. For instance, of the three Cold War liberals we addressed, Popper was arguably the most anti-radical. Indeed, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Popper presents us with no less than an historical exploration, from Plato to Marx, that tries to uncover the common philosophical roots of the radicalisms of his days.[47] Underlying both fascism and Marxism, he argued, there is a belief in inexorable laws of history that determine the course of human events.

Popper's *The Open Society* is one of the major works of this Cold War Liberalism and a profoundly anti-radical work. Nevertheless, one of the texts where Popper is most synthetic about his anti-radicalism is his 1972 interviews in *Revolution or Reform?*[48] This text is particularly interesting because it was deliberately framed as a series of interviews between Popper's reformist view and the more revolutionary views of the notable Frankfurt School's scholar, Herbert Marcuse. To be sure, Popper reiterates many of the negative arguments in terms of the avoidance of radicalisms that we addressed earlier: he admits that western democracies have many evils (such as poverty and destitution) but that they are societies where these evils can be reduced to a minimum, and he touches again on the fact that we should discuss *how* the ruler governs and influences rather than *who* should rule.[49] But, after these initial points, Popper's arguments grow

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[46] "Il est dangereux de donner aux hommes une trop haute idée de leur destination possible : il ne l'est guère moins de les convaincre the leur indignité et de leur impuissance. Entre Machiavel, observateur sans illusions, et Marx, le prophète, mieux vaut ne pas choisir et laisser se poursuivre, en nous et au-dehors, un dialogue inépuisable et indéfini." Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, p. 108 (the translation is my own).
[47] Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.
[48] Herbert Marcuse and Karl Popper, *Revolution or Reform? A Confrontation* (Illinois: Transaction Publishers, 1985).
[49] Marcuse and Popper, *Revolution or Reform?*, p. 55 and p. 78, respectively.

increasingly anti-radical. He insists, for instance, that, while western democracies have institutions that foster the rational exchange of opinions and enable some degree of influence on the political process, Marxists and fascists are united in their common belief that one cannot and should not discuss with an opponent. A Marxist will only discuss with someone that believes in the revolution.

> Fascist anti-intellectuals and revolutionary Marxists are therefore agreed that one cannot and should not discuss with an opponent. Both reject a critical discussion of their positions.

> But let us consider what this rejection means. It means the suppression of all opposition when one comes to power. It means the rejection of the open society, the rejection of freedom, and the adoption of a philosophy of violence.[50]

As he says a few lines later, "Marxists don't believe in reason, because they think that behind all arguments there are hidden only the selfish interests of men."[51] Marxists, he says, use their ideas on economic determinism to reject, from the onset, the possibility of rational discussion. If a Marxist revolution was to happen, it would inexorably lead to the abolition of the freedom to criticize and of a legitimate opposition.

> Whether the resulting dictatorship is of the Left or Right depends partly on chance and is chiefly a difference in nomenclature. I maintain that only in a democracy, in an open society, do we have the possibility to redress grievances. If we destroy this social order through a violent revolution we will not only be responsible for the heavy sacrifices of the revolution but will create a state of affairs that will make the abolition of social evils, injustice, and repression impossible.[52]

For Popper, it does not really matter whether a leftwing or a rightwing form of radicalism wins the day. In the end, only a democracy and an open society can create a situation where social evils can be progressively removed. Such situation would be impossible in a society where radicalisms win.

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[50] Marcuse and Popper, *Revolution or Reform?*, pp. 83-84.
[51] Marcuse and Popper, *Revolution or Reform?*, pp. 86.
[52] Marcuse and Popper, *Revolution or Reform?*, pp. 87.

Let's come back one last time to Aron where we can see several notable anti-radical arguments. Indeed, even though Aron's political thought is structured around balancing competing political views, it is also full of decisively anti-radical moments.[53] One of the most notable ones was the publication of *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955) in which Aron polemically criticizes the French intelligentsia and its enthusiasm for Marxism. Aron goes as far as to compare Marxism to a "secular religion."[54] Despite their proclaimed atheism, he argues, the Marxists are also animated with a faith of their own: Marxism has a secularized eschatology in which socialism took the place of the city of God. In this new earthly heaven, oppression will cease to exist.[55] Just like the Christians have their Scriptures, the Marxist sees Marx's writings as prophetic texts that announce the direction of history.[56] And, just like religion was the opium of the people for Marx because it led the common man to disregard the oppression of this world and look at the afterlife, so is Marxism the opium of the intellectuals because it leads them to ignore the horrors perpetrated in the name of their ideology.[57]

In several parts of his work, Aron draws a vision of the United States and of the United Kingdoms as nations purified of the religious dogmatism of the Marxists. Aron's view is not without reminding a recent article that argued that notable "anti-utopian" authors such as Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt also had an ideal society of their own: a decent society, modeled after the United Kingdom and the United States, with a solid anti-extremist culture and with citizens that support democratic institutions framed in the rule of law.[58] Nevertheless, Aron goes further and even argues that, when a country is purified of the abstracts and grandiloquent claims of the extremes, its citizens can finally focus on actual and concrete problems: "In the absence of either a Fascist or a Community Party, the discussion of ideas in Britain [relates] to immediate

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[53] Cf. also Raymond Aron, *D'une Sainte Famille à l'autre: Essais sur les marxismes imaginaires* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969).

[54] Raymond Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2004 [1955]), pp. 177-186.

[55] Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels*, p. 61, p. 100, and p. 176.

[56] Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels*, pp. 79-80.

[57] Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels*, p. 185.

[58] Kei Hiruta, "An 'anti-utopian age': Isaiah Berlin's England, Hannah Arendt's America, and utopian thinking in dark times," *Journal of Ideologies*, vol. 22, 2016, pp. 12-29.

and practical problems and conflicts."[59] For Aron, "Political thought in Britain is contemporaneous with reality. The same could certainly not be said of France."[60] The United-Kingdom and the United States are ideals of moderation for Aron and their inhabitants focus on what really matters: they have debates that are purified of ideology and are more technical in nature.

Nevertheless, in the last paragraphs of his work, Aron comes back to the problem of the anemia that can emerge from a politics without extremes. After exploring the possibility that the West is arriving at an age where the ideologies of the nineteenth century no longer make sense (and, perhaps, at the end of the age of ideologies), Aron then asks: does the criticism of fanaticisms lead to more reasonable forms of faith, or does it lapse into wholesale skepticism?[61] Will we cease to fight for a better world once we give up on ideological systems and in the belief of an universal class? Aron concedes that, once we will no longer believe in the secular religions, then something will be lost. What was once a lively dogma will become mere opinion. But it is not true, he says, that the man that no longer believes in miracles or in Revolutions will necessarily fall into indifferentism. It is not true that, once fanaticism will pass, we will no longer have higher ideals or causes worth fighting for.

> Perhaps the intellectual will lose interest in politics as soon as he discovers its limitations. Let us accept joyfully this uncertain promise. Indifference will not harm us. Men (…) have not yet reached the point where they [will have] no further occasion or motive for killing one another. If tolerance is born of doubt, let us teach everyone to doubt all the models and utopias, to challenge all the prophets of redemption and the heralds of catastrophe.[62]

Aron then finishes his work on a resounding anti-radical note: "If they alone can abolish fanaticism, let us pray for the advent of the sceptics."

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[59] Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels*, p. 26. Translation quoted from Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York: Norton & co., 1957), p. 25.
[60] Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels*, p. 28. Translation quoted from Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, p. 28.
[61] Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels*, p. 203.
[62] Aron, L'*opium des intellectuels*, p. 203. Translation quoted from Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, p. 324.

3. Potential pitfalls of the moderate genre

Before closing this chapter, we will dedicate this last section to understand the potential issues of the moderate genre. As we saw in our example of the Cold War Warriors, the moderate genre can be fruitfully used to draw a political position that avoids radicalisms and/or faces them by creating an anti-radical alignment. Nevertheless, a recurrent interrogation of these moderate authors was whether there could be a politics of moderation without its more enthusiastic counterpart. There was, for instance, the potential issue that a politics of moderation could suffer from anemia (something that Oakeshott and Berlin feared, but that Aron in the *Opium of the Intellectuals* rejected). In this section, we will address this problem, along with a second one that is less often addressed in the literature on political moderation: what happens when the moderate genre becomes excessively anti-radical.

To address the problem of the relation between the moderate genre and political anemia, we can turn to the case of the Cold War Warriors and see how they make an illustrative example.

First, we should note that, in many ways, the "anti-" genre of the Cold War liberals was defined in opposition to the position of their Marxist opponents. In other words, these Cold War theorists' understanding of radicalism relied heavily on the dominant radicalism of the day, Marxism, because their view of moderation was also largely pervasively defined in opposition to it. Some of their notable ideas, such as Berlin's apology of "negative liberty" or Popper's view of democracy as avoidance of bloodshed, were largely shaped with the shadow of Marxism in the background (Berlin's "positive" liberty or Popper's construction of a "totalitarian" streak running from Plato to Marx).

This game of oppositions and this back and forth with the Marxists was also one of the factors that led this Cold War liberalism to strive. Against the Marxist critique that their opponents defended "merely formal"

views of democracy and freedom, the Cold War liberals upheld that very characterization. Against Marxism's aspiration to a democracy that was firmly utopian, the Cold War warriors opposed a "negative" democracy as the alternative. Against its claim to an unmediated and deinstitutionalized politics, they argued that institutions and party competition were in fact signs of a healthy political system. And against its aspirations to an unambiguous freedom and equality, they proposed pluralism and compromise as more desirable. In other words, the genre of the Cold War liberals gained a lot of its success thanks to the fact that it was in a context where an anti-genre could strive.

As we can see, a lot of the success of our Cold War liberals depended on their radical opponent and came from the negative rhetoric in which they framed their ideas: they declared their political theories to be "sober" or even "pedestrian,"[63] but they always supplemented this with the fact that, at least, their political theories were more "realistic" than their Marxists' counterpart. The Cold War liberals argued that perhaps their political ideals were not "as inspiring," and indeed they claimed that they did not aim at a fully "true" or "authentic" notion of democracy and freedom, but they also added that these ideals were more possible and more realistic and, therefore, worth fighting for. And, as we saw, since they admitted that their ideas were admittedly too negative and uninspiring, they sometimes went as far as to recognize that the existence of their opponents was necessary in order to maintain a healthy balance between a system that was too institutional and one that went too far in a utopian direction.

As we can see, this rhetoric of moderation was partially dependent on a radical counterpart. It was especially efficient in a context where the adversarial structure with Marxism was maintained. Our Cold War authors offered a view of politics and democracy that was admittedly "less seductive," "less ambitious," and "less utopian." The "less" is central: their alternative was institutional, deliberately "dispassionate," and it drew much of its strength from a clear and visible enemy that represented everything the Western model was not.

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[63] Aron's wonderful self-characterization of his position in *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, p. 108.

The moderate genre depends on other literary canons in order to strive and we believe that this is especially clear in the political thought of the Cold War liberals. However, there is a more general issue that we also wanted to identify. The Cold War liberals were also dependent on the existence of Marxism, not just in a rhetorical, but also in a theoretical sense. Indeed, we saw how they argued that the values of moderation could become anemic and insufficient: they could not be defended for their own sake. Pluralism was not just a plea for tolerance and diversity, but the realization that these thinkers' political values *needed* their opposite as a necessary corrective and a way to maintain a healthy balance.

Here again, Aron's political theory perfectly enlightens this issue. In his *Essais sur les libertés*, Aron draws a theory of freedom in which he offers at five different ways one can understand "freedom." Aron then concludes that freedom consists precisely in this sheer plurality of freedoms.[64] The problem of fighting for pluralism for pluralism's sake here repeats itself. The moderates' struggle for pluralism seemed to justifying itself in the light of an anti-pluralistic counterpart. Since Marxism was such an important component for the definition of moderation as these Cold War thinkers understood it, the bankruptcy of Marxism removed one of the basic stones of their political edifice.

Nevertheless, we saw in our last section how the moderate genre can generate anti-radical alignments of its own. These anti-radical alignments consist in "stealing the fire," as it were, of the radical genre. From a genre that is originally an anti-genre, an author can decide to frame radicalisms as the very enemy of a metanarrative against metanarratives. He can also sketch an endpoint to this story: a society that would be free from radicalisms. He can also align a series of other beneficial features with the lack of radicalism: democracy, rationality, freedom, and so forth.

In other words, if we understand moderation in literary terms, it becomes possible to talk about "radical moderation." This idea, together with other seemingly paradoxical notions such as "extremism of the center," are often seen with suspicion by the literature on moderation and radicalism. For instance, in his

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[64] See Raymond Aron, *Essais sur les libertés* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1965).

study on political extremes, Uwe Backes rebukes the oft-quoted sentence from Barry Goldwater that "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." To this, Backes answers that "the plausibility of this statement results from topically emptying out the concept of extremism which means hardly anything more than 'decisiveness.'"[65] He is also wary of the "polemical" and "colorful" aspect of talking about an "extremism of the middle."[66]

However, Backes has a specific definition of "extremism" that he identifies with the opposition to the basic elements of the constitutional state (such as the legitimacy of political opposition, rule of law, or the avoidance of concentration of power).[67] Thanks to our terminology, we are able to see the ambiguous relationship between moderation and radicalism and why they are not necessarily opposed – why expressions such as "extreme middle," "radical moderation," and so forth, are not necessarily antithetical. Just like it is possible after all to write an "ironic romance," the genres of moderation and radicalism can also be mixed: the moderate genre can gain the form of the radical one by generating anti-radical alignments.

Arrived at this point, we should be careful and remember Bobbio when he says that "to assert that moderates are always right and extremists always wrong would be to think like an extremist."[68] Indeed, anti-radicalism can itself become extreme. A paradigmatic case is the example of J. Edgar Hoover, the former director of the FBI. Hoover was infamous for using the FBI in his crusades against what he called "the subversives." Hoover career against radicalism began in 1919 when he became head of a division (dubbed the "Radical Division") within the future FBI. He undertook several raids during the first Red Scare and monitored the activities of anarchists and communists that the Bureau deemed dangerous. In the 30s, he used the FBI to pursue fascists and communists. And, in the '60s, he tried to undermine the Ku Klux Klan, but also closely

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[65] Backes, *Political Extremes*, next paragraph after footnote 17 of chapter 9, section 2.
[66] Even though he does not reject its importance out of hand, see Backes, *Political Extremes*, chapter 8 section 2, after footnote 67.
[67] Backes, *Political Extremes*, chapter 2, chapter 9, section 3, after footnote 24.
[68] Bobbio, *Old Age and Other Essays*, p. 68.

monitored several civil rights groups (he even monitored Luther King Jr).[69] Hoover kept an extensive record of any "subversives" that he believed were a threat to America and its institutions.[70]

Even though Hoover is often seen as an anti-communist, his enemies were actually the radicals that happened to be gaining strength at any given moment. This can be seen in the way in which Hoover often aligns radicalisms with expressions such as "Red Fascism."[71] In his book *Master of Deceits*, Hoover argued – probably against the heated rhetoric of the American conservatives – that communists should not be conflated with liberals, progressists, democrats, or social reformers.[72] Even though Hoover would monitor several civil right groups, he insisted that moderate democrats were legitimate elements of America's venerable political tradition.

The irony of an anti-radicalism that became radical was not lost on the sociologist Edward Shils that, in the 50s, wrote his work *The Torment of Secrecy* to tackle the anti-radical paranoia of the McCarty period. In a way that put this anti-radical rhetoric on its head, Shils argued that liberal democracy necessarily hanged on a balance between three fundamental elements: "privacy" (the autonomy necessary for individuals to live and be left alone), "publicity" (liberal democracy's inherent aspiration of wanting to keep governmental affairs public), and "secrecy" (information kept hidden from the public but necessary to have an efficient government).[73]

Extremist worldviews, Shils argues, are ideologies that aim at removing one or several elements of this delicate balance. For instance, there are extremist ideologies that are obsessed with what the "establishment," "the elites," or "the bourgeois" are hiding from the public eye and, therefore, they demand

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[69] Paul Finkelman and James E. Percoco (eds.), *Milestone Documents of American Leaders Exploring the Primary Sources of Notable Americans* (Dallas: Schlager Group, 2009), p. 1036.

[70] Ballard C. Campbell, *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 237-238.

[71] J. Edgar Hoover, "Red Fascism in the United States Today," *American Magazine*, February 1947.

[72] J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958), pp. 97-104.

[73] Edward A. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956), pp. 21-27.

the removal of "secrecy" out of the liberal democratic balance. However, Shils further argued that extremism can either come from the side of civil society or from the side of the government. If the government itself is obsessed with "the subversives" that are mining civil society, then we have yet another form of extremism that attempts to remove "privacy" from the liberal democratic balance. In this way, Shils criticizes McCarthyism and America's postwar problem with the "subversives": he aligns the supposed defenders of the established order with the very radicals they are fighting against.

In conclusion, even though there exists the possibility of generating anti-radical alignments within the moderate genre, one should be wary to not push these alignments to such an extent that we become the very thing we were supposed to avoid. As the scholar Ronald Wintrobe put it, "a society that tries to stamp out extremism is trying to stamp out its capacity to dream."[74]

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[74] Ronald Wintrobe, *Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 260.

Conclusion

We began this study by describing why, from the point of view of a political moderate, it feels necessary to ask oneself what happened between now and twenty-five years ago. It seems we have moved from a situation where the Western model of constitutional democracy seemed to have won the day and where "third way" political programs strived for a middle ground between market and welfare state to a revival of antagonistic forms of politics. Political radicalism in the past has traditionally been understood in negative terms as the opposite of political moderation (in terms of the opposition to democracy, the rule of law, and/or pluralism, or in terms of positions that are in favor of revolution and violence). Since these contemporary movements do not seem as straightforwardly anti-democratic or pro-violence as the radicalisms of the past once were, we set as our purpose to sketch a notion of political radicalism and a notion of political moderation that could help us explain the ideas behind these phenomena.

To begin our study, we addressed the rise of populisms from the right and the left, and we also touched on three other strands: uncompromising forms of free-market liberalism, minority rights activism, and the recent nativist explosion. We also described the way in which, along these practical advancements, there was a correspondent renewal of academic interest in these strands (in libertarianism, populism, and in radical democratic and agonistic literature). We then introduced the two authors as examples in order to build a notion of political radicalism – Ludwig von Mises and Ernesto Laclau – and we explained our rationale in choosing each. First, they were major figures of the two ideological waves that successfully challenged Marxism's dominant paradigm (the free market liberal wave of the '70s and the New Social Movements, respectively). Second, each tried to offer alternatives to Marxism and had a reputation for being "radical" (a reputation that we would have to clarify). Third, we noted that these authors discussed ideas of these two ideological waves that, initially, were more obscure and marginal. Several decades later,

however, these ideas ended up having a widespread influence. We speculated that, since radical political ideas seem to begin from more fringe positions and then become mainstream decades later, it might be worth studying these ideas in order to understand how the third "right-populist" wave in which we find ourselves might come to have a similar impact in the future.

We formulated the following question: "given that radical trends today are no longer easily detectable by their violent intents, their lack of pluralism, or their anti-democratic and anti-constitutionalist character, then how can one define the nature of political radicalism today?" Then we linked this main question to another: "if we are to understand radicalism differently, then how will political moderation be defined in this new picture?"

To these questions we offered the following hypotheses. First, we suggested that instead of defining radicalism "negatively" as a collection of ideas, policies, or attitudes that deviate from a given state of "normality" (such as anti-pluralism, anti-democracy, anti-constitutional aims, or anti-traditionalism), we could try to look at radicalism in terms of what it offers "positively," i.e. how it creates dichotomies and a sense of "us versus them." Second, we hypothesized that political moderation, in turn, could be defined as the attempts to break these "us versus them" and create ambiguity within these dichotomies.

We began by analyzing broader trends in which radicalism and extremism have been theorized in the past, followed by a section on more specific conceptions of radicalism and extremism, and ending with a concluding section in which we sketched a first outline of the methodology we would use in this study.

In our section on "Broad Conceptions of Extremism and Radicalism," we looked at Uwe Backes' *Political Extremes* and Paul McLaughlin's *Radicalism*. We saw that, for Backes, "extremism" could be understood as the rejection of one or several basic features of the modern constitutional regime. Backes identifies four such features (pluralism, orientation toward the common good, legal state, and self-determination) and categorizes different kinds of extremisms on the basis of the features that each rejects. We pointed out that

a strength of Backes' approach was the very way he stretched the understanding of extremism as the rejection of something else to its logical conclusion. He is even able to make a typology of extremisms on the basis of what each rejects. Nevertheless, we also said that a weakness of his approach was that it did not say much about what these extremisms offered positively, since they were seen only in terms of their rejection of something else.

We then proceeded to analyze McLaughlin's argument and began by describing his etymological exploration of the concept of radicalism. According to McLaughlin, "radicalism" refers to the process of going to the "roots" of something, but also refers to the process of "uprooting" those roots. From these etymological considerations, McLaughlin says that a specifically *political* radicalism consists in an orientation toward the socio-political fundamentals of a given society. McLaughlin defines these "fundamentals" as elements of a society whose modification would fundamentally change its composition (he gives the examples class, race, and gender, or political and economic institutions). He concretely describes these fundamentals by reviewing the thought of a few radical authors, such as Rothbard's libertarianism and Pateman's feminism. We pointed out that a strength of McLaughlin's analysis was his systematic and analytic approach that disentangled many of the confusions linked to the notion of radicalism. We also noted that a weakness of his approach was that his notion of radicalism seemed to fall into the "negative" conception that we are trying to avoid. Since McLaughlin's radicalism consists in the "substantial change" that a given political orientation would entail if it were put into practice, we seemed to be back to a notion where radicalism is defined as the "substantial deviation" away from a given state of normality.

In our section on "Restricted Conceptions of Extremism and Radicalism," we identified general clusters of scholarships that use a given notion of "extremism" or "radicalism." We argued that, since many studies on extremism and/or radicalism traditionally start by looking at the etymological roots of these words, we could try to offer something different by making a review of the ways in which these concepts have been used in a wide variety of literatures. We identified four clusters of scholarship that used some notion of

extremism: psychology, public choice theory, history of ideas, and seventeenth centuries English studies. We noticed that the bodies of scholarship that use "extremism" and the ones that use "radicalism" have one thing in common: they are generally faithful to the etymological origins of each term. On the one hand, the "extremist" scholarship fields usually try to assess the degree of *extremity* of their objects of study, i.e. they tend to use this concept in order to assess the degree of deviance of something away from a given state of normality (e.g., the degree of "extremism" of an extremist personality, or to assess the degree of extremism of a far-right party). On the other hand, the "radicalism" scholarships are usually trying to determine the composition of a given body of "radical" ideas. As we saw in McLaughlin's study, "radicalism" comes from *radix*, "the roots," that which pertains to the fundamentals, and these studies generally try to capture a "radical" strand, tradition, or outlook. We pointed out that these tendencies could also be explained because of the nature of each group of studies. On the one hand, scholarships that use "extremism" are usually more empirical and, therefore, they generally try to generates an axis of "more" or "less" extreme positions. "Radicalism," on the other hand, is usually used in more theoretical approaches (e.g., history) that try to capture a body of "radical ideas" or a "radical tradition." We concluded that, since "extremism" seems to be more linked to the "negative" conception of radicalism that we are trying to avoid, it seemed logical to stick with the term "radicalism" instead of "extremism" in the context of this study.

Finally, we noticed that underlying the conception of radicalism we are trying to avoid (i.e., radicalism as the deviation away from a given state of normality), there seems to be a *bottom-up* approach that tries to pinpoint the discrete elements (ideas, policies, or attitudes) that make up "radicalism." The degree of radicality of the object of study is then assessed by the number of radical elements it carries and by gauging their intensity. Instead of looking at radicalism in terms of discrete elements, we said that we could take a *top-down* approach where we look at the degree of reliance of an argument with a *radical narrative* that operates in the background.

We called this a *literary* approach: like a literary genre, radicalisms (such as Marxism) can be seen as familiar stories whose tropes ("the bourgeoisie," "the worker," "the revolution") can be used as references

that point to the story of Marxism and that can reinforce one's argument. We described how the roots of this approach come from David Herman's postclassical paradigm of narrative theory. According to Herman, the "classical" paradigm of narrative theory tended to focus on the structural features of the text and of its constituents (such as plot, characters, or dialogue) at the expense of the relationship between the text and the reader. Herman argues that the "postclassical" paradigm can supplement the classical one if we look at the way the reader infers further meaning from the text by being aware that he is reading a specific literary genre. For instance, if a reader sees "Once upon a time" at the beginning of a book, or sees a story that refers the struggle of a knight to save a princess from a dragon, then he is aware that he is in the genre of the fairy tale and is able to draw inferences from this knowledge and set his expectations accordingly (e.g., that the knight is expected to save the princess, or that the princess is not supposed to die).

In the same way, we argued that we could compare radicalism to a literary genre: when an author uses radicalism, the readers situates himself and constrains his expectations within a story whose plot contains two sides, an unsatisfactory situation, a solution to solve that situation, and an ending where the unsatisfactory solution is resolved. We described the classical example of Marxism, a story so familiar that a single reference to it can often intuitively immerse the reader in its familiar story of the proletariat, its struggle against the bourgeoisie, and the increasing class oppression that eventually leads to a revolution that brings about socialism. An author can use key terms – what we called *cues* – from the story of Marxism – what we called its *metanarrative* – in order to point back to the story of Marxism and reinforce his argument. For instance, by labeling a given author, group, or argument as "bourgeois" or "reactionary" or, conversely, by labeling it as "proletarian" or "revolutionary," the author is able to put the ascribed element on one of the two sides of the story of Marxism. Thanks to this ascription and the use of this cue-term, the reader is able to set his expectations accordingly and keep reading all the while he understands that he (1) is reading this argument constrained by the metanarrative of Marxism in the background and (2) that the author, group, or argument the author just ascribed is one on the "wrong"/"right" side of that story.

We concluded by suggesting that, instead of looking at radicalism in the light of a stipulated form of "normality," we could improve our understanding of radicalism by looking at the cues associated with specific metanarratives and that can help authors reinforce their arguments.

How to think radicalism: Bernstein's and Lukács' case

This is why we turned to the concrete example of the metanarrative of Marxism and, more specifically, we turned to one of the first persons who comprehensively analyzed and criticized that metanarrative, Eduard Bernstein. After providing some historical background on Bernstein's path and his relation with the SPD, we addressed some of his arguments against the orthodoxy of the SPD in the essays preceding his famous *Preconditions of Socialism*.

Next we addressed some of his opening arguments of the Revisionist Controversy. Even though, of course, Bernstein does not talk of metanarratives explicitly or in so many words, we saw numerous passages in his polemical essays in which he made several critiques related to the metanarrative of Marxism. First, we saw how he criticized the Social Democratic movement's belief that the inherently flawed nature of capitalism and the eventual victory of socialism meant that they did not have to study the capitalist system. Bernstein notices that the Social Democratic movement uses slogans that refer to some part of the narrative of Marxism, such as "the decisive victory of socialism," in order to not have to look at empirical facts. We gave Bernstein's example that the working class will eventually have to decide which private industries should be nationalized under capitalism, but the slogans "state capitalism" and "municipal capitalism" prevent a serious discussion of this issue. Bernstein notices that industries that are not owned by the workers, as it will happen in the future socialist society, are not considered genuinely socialistic and, therefore, the use of the term "capitalist" next to these industries writes them off *as* capitalist and therefore as outside of the field of discussion. We analyzed similar critiques of Bernstein, but this time with the terms "state" and "society."

In another article, and prefiguring his argument in the *Preconditions*, Bernstein pulls apart the different parts of the story of Marxism. A major crisis is not underway. Concentration of industries is not happening. And even if it was, the socialist movement would have no way to implement socialism since capitalism is so complex one needs capitalism to manage it. Bernstein then gives his notable line that he is not very interested in what the Social Democrats call "the final goal of socialism" and that "This goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me, the movement is everything." We described how this sentence was itself an elegant modification of the story of Marxism by creating a position where only "half" of the metanarrative of Marxism would be taken seriously. We saw how this actually meant that he was creating a political position that existed by being skeptical of the metanarrative of Marxism and of its cues. Bernstein's opponents saw this skeptical attitude as a seemingly erudite and scientific attitude which attacked Marxism from within and required its own answer. Alexander Helphand-Parvus answered that Bernstein had a poor knowledge of the laws of society and capitalism that the story of Marxism provides. Without a solid knowledge of these laws, Bernstein is bound to read these statistics erroneously and unscientifically (it led him to believe, for instance, that the concentration of industries was supposed to occur uniformly in all industries). A point that would especially offend Bernstein was the fact that Parvus was telling him that his seemingly erudite skepticism was out of touch: by discussing concepts in the abstract ("the goal," "the movement," "capitalism") without seeing the real tendencies of capitalism and society, Bernstein was being *inappropriately skeptical* and he looked like a scholar that had lost touch with the practical and political priorities of the party. We saw how Bernstein criticized Parvus' characterization and how he stood firm in his skeptical position. Before turning to the analysis of the *Preconditions of Socialism*, we analyzed one last article where Bernstein analyzes the influence of ideology on the Social Democrats. There, he argues, not only his skeptical position is not unjustified, but that it is the orthodox members of the SPD that are in fact out of touch: the socialist movement, he argues, holds so strongly to its received story about society and capitalism that it does not notice its very character as a story.

We arrived at Bernstein's *Preconditions of Socialism* and we briefly described how he pulls apart each section of the story of Marxism. We then focused one some of the philosophical parts of the *Preconditions*. As we saw, the secondary literature tends to see these philosophical sections as parts where Bernstein offers superficial description of Marx and Marxism; nevertheless, we focused on these parts because in them, Bernstein tries to explain where the power of the metanarrative of Marxism on the SPD came from. We focused on two of his "philosophical" arguments: his description of historical materialism and his view of Hegelian dialectics. We then analyzed the conclusion of the *Preconditions* in which Bernstein talks about the "cant" of the SPD. "Cant," he explains, is an English sixteenth century term that describes the saintly songs of the Puritans. He says that, like these Puritans, the SPD has its own "cants," its own thoughtless and repetitive slogans (such as the "goal" of socialism) that prevents it from facing the facts and seeing that reality has changed. Bernstein says that to have a "cant" is not, in itself, a problem. It is however necessary to have a "Kant" also, i.e., a voice of critical thinking like the philosopher Kant, that counterbalances the moments when the thoughtless "cant" becomes too strong.

We saw that Bernstein's skepticism was a problem for the orthodoxy of the SPD: this skepticism created a sophisticated attitude, a preference for "the facts" over the supposed doctrinairism of the Marxist orthodoxy. This skeptical attitude in turn created a skepticism for the metanarrative of Marxism and its cues. We analyzed how Georg Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, reconstructs the metanarrative of Marxism by building back the cues that Bernstein had separated. The first step for this reconstruction is the critique of Bernstein's supposed spirit of impartiality and, surprisingly, Lukács pays special attention to Bernstein's "superficial" view of Hegelian dialectics. Bernstein, he says, failed to see that dialectics is not a method that merely analyzes concepts in isolation. To see dialectics as a method that abstractly look at concepts in their interconnections is to miss the point of dialectics altogether: dialectics is the unity of theory and practice. Bernstein's view of dialectics guarantees that one will stay at the level of theory but that nothing will ever change in practice (as Marx would say: the point is to change the world, not just interpret it). To reestablish the unity of theory and practice that Bernstein severed, Lukács begins by undermining

his scientific ethos. What he concludes is that the "facts" hailed by the revisionists are produced by a capitalist system with an intellectual division of labor that creates its own basis that validates these seemingly self-standing "facts." A truly scientific view, Lukács argues, is able to see these isolated facts from the point of view of *totality*: one must see how these deceptive "facts" are interconnected and historically conditioned in order to have an insight into real, actual facts.

The difference between bourgeois and Marxist thought, Lukács argue, is this very point of view of totality. Thanks to this argument, Lukács is able to show, on the one hand, that Bernstein's ethos is unscientific but he is also able, on the other hand, to side him with the bourgeoisie. Indeed, while the bourgeoisie's pseudo-science adopts a *partial* point of view by beginning its analysis with the consumer, the producer, or some other part of the productive process, Marxist science begins by looking at the whole rather than the parts. Contrarily to the bourgeois point of view that looks at facts in isolation and in their deceptive self-givenness, Marx opened the way for a new science because he began from the standpoint of the *class*. Indeed, Lukács argue, theory for the proletarian was never a mere conceptual matter, but a matter of life and death: the knowledge of one's class, and therefore of the whole, was never a detached theoretical endeavor but the precondition for the proletariat's liberation. With this argument, Lukács is able to reestablish the unity of theory and practice. Furthermore, he is also able to build back the idea of revolution that Bernstein had criticized: far from being a mere tactical consideration, the prospective of a revolution is the very condition of a genuine knowledge made from the point of view of totality. Since the only genuine knowledge is the one that unites theory and practice, the prospect of a wholesale transformation of society is the only horizon from which the point of view of totality is possible.

Thanks to his reconstruction of the metanarrative of Marxism and the way he reconnects "science," "totality," "class," "proletariat," and "revolution," Lukács is able to do away with Bernstein's nagging skepticism and generate a story with two sides. Each section of the story that Lukács rebuilds are strictly tightened and made dependent on each other. For instance, a genuine science depends on the point of view of totality, but the point of view of totality depends from a revolutionary horizon that represents genuine

social change. Or genuine knowledge depends from a total point of view, and such point of view depends on the point of view of class since the proletariat sees knowledge, not as a detached theoretical undertaking, but as the concrete precondition for its liberation. Thanks to this binary and structuring metanarrative that guides the text and the reader's expectations, Lukács is able to make quick inferential leaps from one cue to the next. We specifically analyzed sections of *History and Class Consciousness* where these leaps were evident. We addressed not only the connections between "totality," "revolution," "class," "proletarian," "science," and "knowledge," but we also saw the cues that Lukács connected on the other side of the fault line he lays over his text: "partiality," "individual," "bourgeois," false-"science," "illusion," and "capitalism." Thanks to this fault line, Lukács is able to perform to operations central to the radical genre: Lukács can use that metanarrative to *exclude* chosen elements to the "bourgeois" side of the story of Marxism (e.g. by saying that Bernstein was "bourgeois" because he adopted a bourgeois, pseudo-science) or he is able to make alignments with the "socialist" side of the story (e.g. by saying that Luxemburg was "Marxist" because she adopted the point of view of totality).

2. Marxism's metanarrative: for and against

In order to take a closer look at the use of the radical genre, we turned to one of its prominent critics and that drew a metanarrative of his own against it: Ludwig von Mises. We began by describing two important historical trends of the first decades of the twentieth century to help situate Mises' thought: the rejection of nineteenth century *laissez faire* after the First World War and 1929, and the ascension of Marxism. First, there was a widespread rejection of the "unrestricted *laissez faire*" of the classical economists of the nineteenth century. However, several economists, such as Lionel Robbins, William Hutt, or Jacob Viner, criticized this popular view and showed that the classical economists did not typically hold to unrestricted *laissez faire* beliefs. We saw that part of the reason behind this dark legend was our second historical trend, i.e., the rise of the USSR, Marxism, and the attempt at delegitimizing the former liberal paradigm of the nineteenth century.

We then briefly analyzed Mises' first political work, *Nation, State, and Economy* and analyzed how this work already contains the seeds of the liberal metanarrative Mises would go to develop. Against the Marxists' insistence that the means of production should be socialized, he countered that the essential difference between liberalism and its opponents was the question of ownership and private property. He also offered a liberal utopia against the Marxist one (though Mises would become critical of utopianism in subsequent writings), a utilitarian science against the science of the Marxists, and a teleological liberal narrative against the teleological Marxist one. We pushed back on the idea that Mises' liberalism was merely a "reaction" against the Marxists and, instead, we saw that Mises' "tit for tat" with the Marxists and the way he built his liberal metanarrative seemed at least partially intentional. We argued that, instead of seeing Mises' liberalism as a "reaction" against the Marxists, it was better to see it as a highly successful *appropriation* of the Marxists' metanarrative that he framed in a liberal metanarrative of his own.

Even though Mises does not describe his own work in the way we did in this chapter, we said that, by beginning with Mises' insight into Carl Menger's theory of value and, then, by seeing how his epistemology grounded his politics and then describing his politics, we could get a coherent picture of each step of Mises' metanarrative.

We analyzed how, for Menger, a good acquires its value, not because of some characteristic inherent in the good (such as its costs of production), but because of the subjective judgments of the people that desire the good. More specifically, the value of a good comes, on the one hand, from the extent to which the parties involved believe that the good in question can satisfy their most pressing needs and, on the other hand, from the quantity of goods to which they have access and that influences the relative importance that they give to their needs.

Mises relied on Menger's subjective theory of value to develop his own thought. More specifically, he considered that Menger had not been fully consistent with his subjective theory because he still maintained a category of "imaginary goods," i.e. goods that do not truly fulfil one's real needs and are the product of ignorance (cosmetics or tools used in idolatry). Menger's framework still had remnants of the objectivist

paradigm Mises was trying to break from since Menger still saw human needs as a specifiable phenomenon that could be quantified through money. Against this, Mises proposed his own insight in the subjective theory of value and argued that since each act of valuation is made in the context of other valuations, every act of valuation is ineffable and unquantifiable. Money, he argued, cannot be said to quantify value. Rather, it imperfectly reflects it.

Mises' consistent subjectivism reveals that we cannot determine an underlying universe of "real" needs. This creates a problem for Mises because it means that we cannot determine sociological laws of society, i.e. since we cannot specify mankind's real needs (its *ends*), we cannot determine the parameters of the objective laws that could foresee the situations in which human behavior would always occur.

Mises' solution to this problem is what he calls "praxeology": the logic of human action. He argues that by removing human ends from the equation and by formalizing the models and categories of the classical economists, we can achieve objective knowledge and can determine the laws behind the ways human beings act ("the logic of human action"). Mises argues that the laws of praxeology can be deduced a priori and are self-evident, certain, and irrefutable. Since these elements are essential to understand Mises' politics, we decided to give two previous pointers that could help explain where Mises is trying take us. On the one hand, we saw how Mises was reacting to what he called "positivist" trends which renounced the attempt to discover objective laws of society and which only accepted knowledge derived from the observation of past experiences, i.e. a posteriori knowledge. On the other hand, we compared Mises' praxeology to some of the recent literature on embodied knowledge. Touching on Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor's *Retrieving Realism*, we saw how their own criticism of Rorty's epistemology was (unintentionally) reminiscent of Mises' praxeology. Rorty attempts to reduce "knowing *p*" to "having reasons to believe *p*" since "knowing *p*" in a hard sense would entail that one can defend *p* against all potential future objections. Taylor and Dreyfus criticize this conception and argue that, since we are human beings engaged with and acting in the world, we have a preconceptual knowledge tied to the fact that we are also beings trying to bring about concrete ends and fulfil specific objectives. Taylor and Dreyfus also argue, and this another point

reminiscent of Mises' praxeology, that such preconceptual knowledge is the basis for our communication with others since we understand other human beings as acting beings as well.

In order to understand Mises' praxeology, one must understand that Mises formalizes the ends of human action by positing that human beings strive for "happiness," i.e. they strive toward a state of rest in which they no longer need to strive. The acting agent chooses between alternatives in a world with scarce resources. Human beings therefore have specific ends to achieve but limited means to do so. They choose and categorize situations in which their subjectively-chosen "basic" needs can be satisfied first before other types of needs. Therefore human beings "act" in the sense that they "exchange" one unsatisfactory situation for a more satisfactory one.

From here, we were able to describe some of the categories of praxeology. When human beings act, they "value" and establish scales of value because they establish and enact their preference at the light of their self-chosen ends. They weigh the "costs" and "benefits" of taking different courses of action. When they choose an alternative over another, they "exchange" one unsatisfactory situation for a more satisfactory one. We saw that, for Mises, to contradict the laws of praxeology is to fall in self-refutation since I have to *use* the categories of praxeology in order to refute them. We also saw that these categories were "self-evident" in the sense that we necessarily see ourselves and other human beings as acting beings who possess these categories of human action. These categories are "certain" because we must know them in order to act at all, and these categories are "a priori," not in any specific Kantian sense, but because we can infer them from our armchair and without having to resort to the real world.

For Mises, science, economics, objectivity, and certainty are deeply congenial. This will be the basis for his reconstruction of liberalism in a metanarrative of its own. Especially important here is Mises' argument that "rationality" consists of the extent to which an acting agent chooses the most efficient means to achieve his self-chosen ends (it is here that liberalism will draw its decisive superiority over its opponents). For Mises, the thinkers of the past have tried to ground science and epistemology by grounding it on a set of human ends but, in this paradigm, science shifts from trying to scrutinize mankind's ends to means-ends

considerations. Mises argues that praxeology reflects on objectivity to the extent that it helps the acting agent to achieve his own ends.

After explaining Mises' epistemology, we turned to his politics in order to continue building a picture of how he uses the radical genre. Mises' political theory begins with a step outside of his science. He argues that most human beings desire wealth over poverty, life over death, and prosperity over misery, and that liberalism is the best mean to achieve these predominant ends. Indeed, the policies of liberalism foster a stable system propitious for the deepening of the division of labor, i.e., it makes a person's labor more productive. Liberalism offers the greatest happiness possible to the greatest number of human beings possible. We also described Mises' view of the historical emergence of liberalism and the tremendous benefits that it has brought (such as national self-determination, toleration, reduction in mortality, or rise in education). We saw how the emergence of liberalism is intimately connected to the discoveries of economics and of the subjective theory of value. The opponents of liberalism, on the other hand, are connected to the refusal to take these scientific insights into account, and their attempts to posit specific sets of human ends are, according to Mises, the greatest scientific sin. We then saw the different parts of the liberal program and how Mises argued that they were congenial to a political system that would promote stability and deepen the division of labor. Mises argues that freedom (the lack of serfdom) makes man more productive and that equality before the law should be granted to all so that one part of society does not become alienated and potentially rebellious. In turn, democracy is a way to avoid violence and foster pace by changing governments peacefully.

We then asked whether the best means to achieve wealth, life, and prosperity could be, not capitalism (a system where property is privately owned), but socialism (a system where property is publicly owned). For Mises, capitalism is "democratic" in the sense that the means of production are put at the disposal of the consumers and the consumers decide what should be produced by buying specific products and not others. The entrepreneur is thus a "politician" in the sense that, if he does not satisfy his consumers-voters, he is thrown out of the market. The consumers therefore indirectly "control" the means of production.

Conversely, socialism is "despotic" in the sense that, since it is unable to put the means of production toward the satisfaction of the consumers (as we will see in the next section), it ironically ends up redirecting the means of production toward the few and not the many. Mises argues that the transfer of the means of production from the individual to the socialist planner would abolish exchanges, which in turn would abolish prices. Without prices, the socialist planner would not be able to most efficiently allocate resources toward the consumers' most pressing needs. Economic calculation cannot be reproduced in a socialist system because, even though the consumers' needs are *reflected* in market prices, it cannot be said that prices *quantify* these needs. Valuations cannot be quantified. Without private property, exchanges, and entrepreneurs, the only means available that could weigh the relative scarcity of goods and how they should be redirected toward the consumer do not exist. We also saw that socialism, more than just a narrow economic problem, is also *inhuman* because it goes against Mises' conception of the praxeological man: the socialist planners take over the acting man's capacity to undertake valuations and economic calculations. It is no surprise that Mises supports liberalism and believes it to be the best choice for society.

We then saw how Mises' metanarrative enables him to create a sharp dichotomy between liberalism/science/rationalism and its opponents. We analyzed specific passages where Mises is able to align countless opponents (Marxists, socialists, national-socialists, fascists, and so forth) that are aligned in their relentless pursuit of a socialist system. Even attempts to strike an interventionist middle ground must inevitably lead to an escalation of successive interventions attempting to palliate the defects of the original interventions until it eventually arrives at socialism. We also explored how these opponents that are aligned in the "socialist" fault line do not necessarily have to be strictly *political* opponents: Mises also has countless methodological opponents that, since they do not adhere to a genuine scientific approach, they end up lapsing into socialistic conclusions as well. Mises' corpus is traversed by these sharp dichotomies between liberalism and socialism, science versus pseudo-science, rationality and irrationality, cooperation versus destruction, etc., which he always falls back on. Thanks to this dichotomy in the background of his texts, Mises can use cues in quick succession and frame his argument in stark, all-or-nothing, and

dichotomic terms, all the while we go on reading him uninterruptedly. Furthermore, we also described how Mises' metanarratives and the cues it produces can be used by other authors that populate this liberal metanarrative. These authors can use these cues to perform exclusions of their own (they can, for instance, use the "socialist" cue to exclude an author that they consider excessively interventionist). This metanarrative will also produce its own "Bernsteins" in the sense that typical arguments that break the cues of this metanarrative will also emerge.

After the exploration of the Marxist and liberal metanarratives, we then addressed the anti-essentialist metanarrative of Ernesto Laclau and his attempt to create a "narrative of narratives." We began by historically contextualizing Laclau's metanarrative and by showing how there was an increasing disbelief in Marxism and its cues. On the one hand, the USSR became associated with Marxism, but events such as the repressions of the protests in Prague in 1968 or the students protests that took place the same year undermined the belief that the USSR was a progressive force. On the other hand, capitalism after the Second World War went through a period of uninterrupted growth and, after the free market revival of the 70s and 80s, it seemed that even the Marxist critique of capitalism was no longer safe. We then described a few points that are usually referred when one describes the context where *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* emerged (the groundbreaking work Laclau and Mouffe published in 1985 and which shot them to fame): the fact that the work is "post-Marxist" and emerge at a time where several trends criticized and/or tried to move beyond Marxism; that these "post-Marxisms" coincide with the emergence of the New Social Movements (most importantly, with minority rights movements) that many Marxist authors insisted could be explained as "class epiphenomena"; and the fact that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* follows the trail of notable critiques of Marxism (Althusser for instance, but especially Lyotard) and the emergent postmodern wave (Foucault, Derrida).

To this, we added that there is another connection that is not usually made in the literature: the fact that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* also follows the trail of the critique made by the Cold War liberals after

the Second World War. In other words, even though it cannot be said that Laclau and Mouffe literally answer the critique of the Cold War liberals, they do follow the skepticism and step by step critique that these thinkers dealt to the metanarrative of Marxism. We saw three classes of such critiques: Isaiah Berlin's idea that a utopian scheme attempts to force a rigid set of values into which human nature would have to fit like a procrustean bed; Raymond Aron's critique of Marxism's teleology, of its belief in a totalizing revolution, and of the final struggle against the bourgeoisie; and Karl Popper's epistemology that undermined the idea of an access to a secure knowledge that could guarantee the transition from science to politics. In turn, we can see that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* contains three answers that follow similar skeptical conclusions. First, Laclau and Mouffe assert that the struggle for liberty and equality is an ever-renewed battle and that the imposition of a utopian scheme would mean that we have reached the end of politics. Second, they say that we never know which political struggles will be waged tomorrow and, therefore, that the Left should entirely reject Marxism's "totalizing" revolution. Third, they argue that the Left can only be democratic and pluralistic to the extent that it renounces Marxism's epistemological ambitions. In other words, the Left must give up Marxism's attempt at peering into the nature of reality, of imposing an aprioristic political scheme that is independent of all contexts, and it must accept that our present identities and political struggles are contingent. Even though Laclau and Mouffe follow the skeptical that the Cold War liberals begun, we noted that the alternative they offer against Marxism is notably different. While the Cold War liberals offered a more institutional-minded alternative against the utopianism of the Marxists and they tended to see democracy as a mean to avoid bloodshed, Laclau and Mouffe frame this skepticism into a new anti-essentialist metanarrative that has cues of its own. We then decided that we would describe Laclau's political thought in order to see how he builds that new skeptical metanarrative.

First, we described Laclau's early years and the political context of the Argentina in which he grew up. We paid special attention to the populism of Juan Perón, as well as the more technocratic politics of Arturo Frondizi. We noted that, while in Europe political thought was often seen in terms of bodies of mutually

exclusive doctrines, Laclau grew up in a context of fluid political identities where Perón was able to unite both extremes of the political spectrum. We then saw Laclau's early political activity in Argentina and how it was marked by a Trotskyist critique of Marxism that saw it as "too dogmatic" and not open enough to new contexts and different political strategies. At the light of this Argentinian context, some commentators have argued that Laclau's intellectual path can be read as a radicalization of political strategy above all other considerations. They also argue (often in a critical tone) that this dynamic ultimately led Laclau to fall in a kind of "politics for politics' sake" position that lacks normative content. We pushed back this interpretation and we argued that this view seems to miss the deeper point of Laclau's thought. Noting that history was his original field of study, we analyzed one of Laclau's early essays where he sketches an history of theoretical paradigms (the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, and Positivism). For Laclau, theoretical paradigms accumulate contradictions and, even though they try to postulate ad hoc explanations that try to palliate these inconsistencies, they end up breaking down under the weight of these contradictions. We saw that one of Laclau's pivotal preoccupations that will come back throughout his life was the explanation of how historical change occurs, and how to theorize the birth, evolution, and eventual breakdown of theoretical paradigms.

Even though, in this earlier text, Laclau still believed that Marxism was the best paradigm to explain historical change, he was already much more critical by the time he published *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977). In this work, Laclau argues that Marxism too began to postulate ad hoc mechanisms in order to not have to revise its own theoretical presuppositions. It fell into the trap of thinking that, beyond the apparent inconsistencies between theory and practice, these concepts ultimately entail each other (we gave the examples of "proletarian," "bourgeoisie," or "revolution"). If the Marxist is faced with a contradiction, then he can always relegate the inconsistency to an underlying class-process. For instance, faced with a "capitalist" that does not entirely conform to Marxism's image of "the capitalist," the Marxist can argue that "we have not yet achieved the required level of capitalist development" and that the apparent contradiction is actually the unfolding of the true essence of "the capitalist." Laclau argues that, instead of

remaining in this theoretical impasse, Marxism should formalize its categories, give up the idea that there are necessary connections between its concepts, and decisively break with these ad hoc features.

It was at this point that we arrived at Laclau's epistemology and his first step toward the construction of his metanarrative. As we saw, this metanarrative could be described as a "narrative of narratives": a metanarrative that can resist its encounter with new contexts and its own eventual dissolution. To arrive at this point, Laclau will try to formalize each step of the story of Marxism. In this way, political identities such as "proletarian" will not be defined at the light of underlying economic or historical laws, but in their very difference and opposition with other identities. Laclau's point of departure for this formalization is the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure that we went on to describe. Saussure was trying to avoid a "substantialist" view that saw language merely as the process of attaching a word to a thing. In this paradigm, "meaning" was merely the fact that a word referred to a concrete thing. Instead, he drew a formal model of language where the meaning of a word would be dependent on its relation to other words. To achieve this objective, Saussure posits the sign. The sign is composed of a signified and a signifier, i.e., the "concept" that is signified and the sound that is associated with it (we gave the example of the concept "the tree" and then the example of the signifiers *tree* in English or *arbre* in French). Saussure noted that the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary: there is nothing in the world itself that establishes a link between the signified and the signifier but, rather, each sign has a specific *value* that distinguishes one sign from another. In other words, even though two signifiers in two different speaking groups can have the same meaning (they can point to the same concept), the value of the signifier can be different (we gave the example of how *sheep* in English and *mouton* in French have the same meaning, but they do not have the same value since *mouton* can also indicate a grilled piece of meat from the sheep, but *sheep* cannot.)

However, for Laclau, there was still a "subtantialist" element in Saussure's model since each stream of sounds forms a word that is tied to one concept. Once the glossematic school of Copenhagen was able to show that there was no such harmony between sounds and concepts, it was at this point that we achieved the formal model that Saussure was aiming at all along. For Laclau, this "freeing" of the signifier and the

signified is a crucial moment that has been occurring, not just in linguistics, but in several other theoretical paradigms such as structuralism, phenomenology, or analytical philosophy. In other words, other theoretical paradigms have reached the conclusion that our theoretical models cannot be grounded in a stable reality: Any attempt at drawing a line between what is the theorical model and what is "reality" is already a line that is drawn from within the theorical model.

For Laclau, this also means that we now have to ground these models through new conceptual resources, and this is exactly what he does by giving a new basis to linguistics. For Saussure, signs had two kinds of relations between them: syntagmatic (what Laclau calls *combination*, i.e. the rules that dictate how each sign can combined in a sentence (rules of syntax, for instance)) and associative (what Laclau calls *substitution*, i.e. the fact that each sign in a sentence can be replaced by another (e.g., in the sentence "cup of milk," the term "cup" can be replaced by "pint"). For Saussure, substitutions can occur at the level of the signifier or the signified and, therefore, there does not seem to be clear rules that govern how substitutions occur. Although this suggests that linguistics cannot constitute itself as a closed science, Laclau presses on and explains how we can understand the rules that govern substitutions. For Laclau, a substitution is necessarily figurative: it is the replacement of a literal term for a non-literal one. This for Laclau means that the rules of substitutions must be found in *rhetoric*, which he sees as the art of the figural. He therefore adds two further dimensions in the substitutive pole: *metaphor* (when we replace a word for another on the basis of *analogy* ("God is my *fortress*")) and *metonymy* (when we use a word *spatially related* to another ("the lands of the *crown*")).

For Laclau, metaphor and metonymy are classically understood as two separated or even opposed rhetorical figures: one happens between elements that are similar enough to overlap (A is B, such as "God is my *fortress*"), the other between elements that are bordering each other (from B to A, such as "the lands of the *crown*."). However, Laclau sees them as mutually interdependent: we often repeat metonymies to such an extent that they eventually become metaphors (we gave the example of how a Portuguese student will take a "chair" in Constitutional Law (*uma cadeira*) to talk about a course in Constitutional law). For Laclau, the

metaphor-metonymy relation happens homologically at the linguistic level between the syntagmatic and associative pole: the syntagmatic pole is metonymical because it indicates the differences between elements, while the associative pole is metaphorical because it swaps elements that were once metonymical.

We saw that the political significance of Laclau's theory of meaning is that identities emerge, not from the laws of history or of the economy (as it was the case in Marxism), but from their relation with other identities. We gave Laclau's example of a trade union that endorses the anti-racist struggle in a specific neighborhood because no other political force is present to do it. Even though anti-racism is not necessarily a natural task of trade unions, the trade union can be seen over time as a natural anti-racist political force. We have here a typical case of metonymy that shades into metaphor: "anti-racism," that was initially a task borne out of spatial contiguity, becomes an essential and natural part of "trade unions." However, we noted that Laclau is interested in more than just small cases like these ones: he wants to understand how several identities can band together in the political arena and shape their identity in opposition to a common enemy.

To think the political arena at large, we had to think in terms of the whole in which these political identities find themselves. Thanks to Saussure's paradigm, we understood how Laclau sees language as a system composed of differences. The problem is that the whole in which all these differences find themselves cannot be though without itself being another difference. This seems to create a kind of infinite regression since that very difference must find itself in another overarching difference. Therefore, Laclau says that the whole in which these differences find themselves must be thought, not as yet another difference, but as a "negative difference" that all the differences of the system commonly reject. It is a "negative excess" that gives coherence to the signifying system (we gave the example of how, in this paradigm, the figure of "the prisoner" gave cohesion to the "good citizen"). All differences in a system are therefore split: they are, on the one hand, always different from each other but they also are, on the other hand, always equivalent in their difference toward something they all reject. This deep down is a repetition of what we said about metaphors and metonymies: all the differences can be metaphorically swapped with one another, but they are metonymically related in a "us" that is faced to a "them" that is excluded from the system. In the political

realm, Laclau calls these two dimensions the *logic of equivalence* and the *logic of difference*. Since the system would be unthinkable with only one of the poles, any system of signification hangs on a balance between these two poles.

Another important concept that we addressed is Laclau's notion of *empty signifier*. Since the totality of the system cannot be expressed, there are differences-that-are-not-one that populate the signifying system and that are referred to when we want to talk about the impossible whole in which all the differences find themselves. "Justice," "democracy," or "equality" are typical examples of empty signifiers: these are terms that can never be fully specified since to specify them would mean that we could also specify the impossible totality. They are not, however, literally "empty" since they have remnants of some content ("vote" when we talk about "democracy," for instance). We then described Laclau's notion of *discourses*. Indeed, our description of Laclau's signifying systems gives the image of a coherent arena where a single change would modify the entire system. In truth, the political arena is made up of smaller systems that attempt to arrest the flow of meaning through *nodal points* (we gave the example of Marxism or ecology that are solidified around nodal points such as "class" or "nature," respectively). These elements are reference points that organize a discourse around them. These discourses then struggle over the meaning of terms that are dynamic and hotly debated, what Laclau calls *floating signifiers* (crucial terms such as "welfare state"). We then closed our explanation of Laclau's conception of the political arena by giving the examples of the *Solidarnosc* or the Honk Kong protests: starting from a concrete grievance, both became the empty name of a large number of identities that were united in their opposition to the government.

We finally had enough conceptual material to describe Laclau's formalization of the categories of Marxism. First, we briefly described the argument of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and saw how it could be read as the continuation of his early essay on the breakdown of theoretical paradigms: just like the paradigms of the Middle Ages, of the Enlightenment, and of Positivism, Marxism too began to posit ad hoc features that could prevent its breakdown. For instance, to the problem that capitalism was becoming increasingly more fragmented and not homogeneous as Marx predicted, Marxism developed the notion of *hegemony*.

"Hegemony" was the idea that the working class could articulate its struggle with other classes in order to seize the power of the state in countries where the bourgeoisie was too weak to perform its historical task (Russia, for instance). It was therefore a way for the working to articulate its struggle with other classes while simultaneously maintaining its own class identity.

For Laclau, if we can expand the Marxist concept of hegemony so that politics is entirely seen in terms of articulations and without a privileged actor (the working class), we can achieve his project of formalization. First, we noted that, in the former Marxist paradigm, the workers had an underlying and guiding economic interest: the struggle against the bourgeoisie. However, the Marxist paradigm is standing on a void for Laclau. There are no longer inexorable laws of history or economy that give direction to politics and guide the proletarian toward a socialist society. Therefore, in Laclau's paradigm, we instead have *grievances*: several agents that are dissatisfied with the situation in which they find themselves. There are specific moments of crisis where these grievances proliferate and where political blocs can be built around them. It is true that, for Laclau, the political arena is generally a relatively stable realm where the logic of difference tends to predominate. In other words, even though all political identities are traversed by the unsurpassable tension between logic of equivalence and logic of difference, the political arena tend to be metaphorical for Laclau: politicians tend to operate on the basis of a politics where each difference is equal in its difference and where the real difference is with the common element that all the differences reject. However, moments of crisis are moments when *dislocations* occur and where the habitual, objectivized character of the metaphors suddenly show their contingent character. Traditional hierarchies and institutions are put into doubt in ways that could not have been expected. Eventually, the common lack and frustration of the subjects can make them identify with each other from the very lack which they all share.

The discourses that we saw earlier can now seize this opportunity by creating a *chain of equivalence* where they will try to divide society between the subjects with a lack and the ones without it: they will try to show how this lack is generated by the institutionalized order itself (e.g. the communist discourse will try to create equivalence with this common lack around nodal points such as "democracy," "freedom," or

"workers"). Instead of having a metaphorical system where politicians try to present each difference as a difference, we will instead have a political arena where the equivalential pole will prevail. It will tend to have two positions: the dissatisfied group, "us," and the institutionalized order, "them." As we can see by now, the "enemy" of the Marxist paradigm is gone and, instead, the chain of equivalence cannot become itself because of the "negative excess" we addressed earlier. The "socialist society" of the paradigm of Marxism is also formalized into the state of fulness toward which the hegemonic block is striving. And, finally, the proletarian "hero" of Marxism now becomes the empty signifiers that signify the impossible fullness toward which the chain of equivalence is striving (remember our example of the *Solidarnosc*: the *Solidarnosc* came to represent widely different particular demands, many of them without much relation to each other, but all united in their common frustration).

We then addressed the question of why one should adopt Laclau's formalized model of politics. What we saw is that, for Laclau, the adoption of his anti-essentialist scheme is the precondition for the most democratic and pluralistic politics there could be. The problem of Marxism was its *essentialism*, i.e. Marxism's stubborn attachment to its own categories and its refusal to understand that political identities are contingent and not directed by overarching laws. Marxism's essentialism and its classist framework ended giving a tremendous epistemological vantage to a leader that could establish the distinction between the "true struggle" dictated by the laws of history and the "contingent" one. By operating in the framework of hegemony, a wide number of identities can be articulated without an overarching struggle taking precedence over the others. It is a politics that leaves the place open for the future unforeseeable political struggles that will emerge tomorrow. As we can see, even though pluralism and democracy are not guaranteed by accepting Laclau and Mouffe's anti-essentialism, they are the preconditions for pluralism and democracy. Similarly, we saw how, for Laclau, dislocation is the precondition of freedom: thanks to moments of dislocation where the contingency of the identity of the agents is made visible, the agents can begin to strive toward the reconstitution of their identities.

As we can see, even though Laclau does not believe that a fully equivalential order is possible, he deposits a lot of hope in a political arena with a heightened equivalential pole. We analyzed how Laclau's work in the '90s became the target of criticisms that accused it for being too "negative" and not of not having a sufficient normative dimension. We argued that *On Populist Reason* (2005) can be seen as a work that comes to palliate this issue. After briefly describing the argument of the work, we saw that there were clear similarities between Laclau's hegemony and his theory of populism: populism is a radical antagonistic discourse between a "people" and an "establishment"; the chain of "the people" is composed of unfilled requests that identify with each and against the "establishment" on the basis of their common unfulfillment; and "the people" fights in the name of "empty signifiers" such as "justice" or "equality" that mean nothing but the opposite of the situation of unfulfillment in which "the people" finds itself. The normative aspect of *Populist Reason* is not obvious at first because Laclau's stated aim is to reestablish "populism" as a legitimate concept of analysis. What he argues, ultimately, is that "populism" is more a dichotomic form rather than a content since any attempt at specifying the empirical content of populism must necessarily leave something out.

We saw however that Laclau makes several sleights of hand in his work that have not escaped the attention of some commentators. On the one hand, it seems that Laclau sometimes equates "populism" with "hegemony" and "politics," although this is stated in a tangential manner (which is odd for an author known for his systematicity). On the other hand, he has a conspicuous "annex" where he makes it clear that a fundamental ingredient of any form of democracy is that it must reintegrate "underdogs" excluded from politics back inside (i.e. the negative excess that we addressed earlier and that, as we saw, invades the political arena in moments of dislocations). Even though Laclau made it clear that the Left should endorse a populist politics and try to build a "people," it is not entirely clear what is the relation between hegemony, democracy, and populism. What we argued is that Laclau might be purposefully playing with his own anti-essentialist metanarrative. Indeed, on the one hand, Laclau always refused the idea that one could reverse the categories of Marxism and replace, for instance, "revolution" for "equivalence." Instead, democracy,

pluralism, and freedom are possible to the extent that we accept the tensions at the heart of any political project. We have to put the political categories we inherited from the past in tension, we should not try to merely reverse them. On the other hand, Laclau was aware that his political theory suggested such normative conclusions. He seems to be purposefully playing with these broader commitments when he elusively refers to them.

We then addressed a last normative aspect of Laclau's work: the ethical. In the '90s, Derrida and deconstructionism at large undertook what was called the "ethical turn." This led several commentators to describe how there was, at the bottom of deconstruction, a primordial and undeconstructible "experience of the other." Laclau was opposed to this ethical turn that he saw as a weakening of the radical potential of deconstruction. In Marxism, the proletariat had its political decisions preemptively decided by laws of history that dictated what course of action the workers should take. In the same way, it seemed that deconstruction was preemptively grounding the decisions of the political subject with a primordial "respect for the other." Laclau therefore tackled this ethical turn with an ethical argument that pushed his anti-essentialism to the end. The ethical, he argued, is the "experience of the presence of an absence." Our "postmodern condition" led us to the conclusion that no kind of direct contact with a stable world of essences is possible and will ever be possible. From this fundamental ethical experience, we must then use the sedimented resources present in the context in which we find ourselves in order to create norms that respect this ethical experience. The highest ethical imperative is therefore to understand this fundamental experience and, then, to try to apply it within one's own political context. Only then could we fully understand the way in which Laclau's politics and his anti-essentialism were linked and why, as he says, "The only democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations."

We then took a closer look at how Laclau's metanarrative works in practice. We began by analyzing how his anti-essentialism is a source of many operations of exclusion through the use of the cue "essentialism." He excludes, on the one hand, authors that attempt to preemptively close the play of politics by positing some particular content that violates Laclau's fundamental ethical experience (for instance, he criticizes

leftwing authors that try to elevate specific political actors above their inherent contingency). On the other hand, he excludes authors that attempt to create a politics of "particularities" and permanent subversion where a common political project would not be necessary. For Laclau, these forms of politics create inacceptable political conclusions: it would mean, not only that we would have to value particularities as particularities and, therefore, that rightwing forms of particularities would have to be accepted, but it also means that a wider *apolitical* framework that coordinates these particularities would have to be accepted. Describing Stephen K. White's classification of authors as "strong," "weak," and "thin" ontologists, we saw how these exclusions enabled the classification of authors along a "foundationalist/anti-foundationalist" axis in the same way that Mises' "socialism" generated a "interventionist/non-interventionist" axis. Since the line between what is contingent and what isn't is already a contingent operation, Laclau pushes his anti-essentialism to the end and precludes forms of "moderate" anti-essentialism.

We took a closer look at Laclau's metanarrative and saw how he deploys a "there is no" register in his writings. By describing the naïveté of the essentialist beliefs of his opponents, Laclau is able to create an all-or-nothing fault line all the while he seamlessly jumps from one cue to the next. We addressed, for instance, how Laclau criticized the "market or regulation?" debate by putting both sides on the "essentialist" side of his fault line. Laclau does this by showing how both the pro-market and the pro-social side have a common underlying belief that "*the* market" or "*the* social" are the unilateral answers to a mythical and homogeneous "community" that does not exist. We looked at how Laclau tightens the alternative between naïve essentialism or the sober acceptance that such mythical objects do not exist by using terms that establish a clear contrast between both sides ("either/or," "must," "necessarily," and so forth). We saw that Laclau's "there is no" register is a compelling idol-bashing skepticism that systematically deflates the "essentialist" beliefs of his opponents and enables him to always fall back on his fault line. The deflationist attacks on these essentialist beliefs and objects come from several angles: from the point of view of the *unity* and *homogeneity* of the object, its complete *coherence*, the way in which it is fully *consistent* and free

of contradictions, its *exclusive* character, the extent to which it is *pure* and separated from the contingent changes of the world, its deceptively *self-evident* character, its *redemptive* potential, the belief in a grand *eschatology*, and a variety of similar deflationisms. In the end, even though Laclau criticizes his essentialist opponents for and their belief in self-evidence, he is able through his writings to transmit the self-evident character that essences cannot exist.

We transitioned to our next chapter by making a critique of Laclau's negative ontology. We showed that Laclau's concern with the awareness of one's own contingency seems to topple other legitimate concerns, such as the fact that these categories might end up forcefully imposing themselves when they must be inserted in entirely new contexts. We therefore have this paradox where the kind of categories that Laclau uses attempt to maintain the awareness to our contingency alive, but this very process naturalizes these anti-essentialistic categories. We then showed two classes of critiques against Laclau's ontology. On the one hand, we could argue that Laclau is indeed "naturalizing" his own categories. But, as we saw, Laclau elevates contingency as an ethical imperative: since we experience that no epistemology can ever ground society and politics, then the highest ethical demand is to foster political projects that uphold this fundamental insight. The second possibility is to argue that Laclau's negative ontology is *impractical*. In other words, it is possible to argue that Laclau's negative ontology is an excessively abstract view of politics that turns us away from its empirical study. As Lois McNay argues, emancipatory politics should reflect more on forms of embodied suffering in order not to remain closed in its scholarly ivory tower. Here too, however, the critique does not attack Laclau's argument directly but, instead, it shows how it is *theoretically cumbersome*. We suggested that, in the next chapter, we would address a critique of our own: the fact that Laclau's ethical injunction is only possible to the extent that it allows for the existence of the very essentialism that it rejects.

Deepening our notion of metanarratives

We began this chapter by making a distinction between two points of view: the point of view of the actors that are creating metanarratives and cues, and our own point of view as political theorists and spectators of these cue-generating dynamics. In order to deepen our understanding of how cues and metanarratives are generated, we analogically used the work of the sociologist Andrew Abbot and his work *Chaos of Disciplines*. So far in our work, we have seen how an author could relegate a given author or argument to another metanarrative thanks to specific cue terms. Thanks to Abbot's argument, we added that our metanarratives have further fault lines within themselves. After calling Mises' metanarrative the "libertarian" metanarrative and Laclau's metanarrative the "postmodern" metanarrative, we gave an example of a sub-fault line within each. On the one hand, we gave the example of Murray Rothbard's anarcho-capitalism and his call for the abolition of even the minimum functions of the government. In this way, Rothbard created a further fault line and further exclusionary mechanisms within the libertarian metanarrative, between "minarchists" and "anarcho-capitalists." On the other hand, we described the further fault line that was created between the arguments of Oliver Marchart's post-ontology and those of Lois McNay and her work *The Misguided Search for the Political*.

We used Abbot's argument a second time to show how metanarratives interact between them. We saw, on the one hand, how a member of a given metanarratives excels at detecting the cues from a rival's metanarrative (we gave the example of how a member of the libertarian metanarrative, for instance, excels at seeing "socialist" cues). On the other hand, we saw that, when a member of a given metanarrative detects a cue from a rival one, he relegates this cue to a very general fault line that does not distinguish the smaller sub-fault lines within it (the fact that someone with Marxist sensibilities, once faced with a cue to the libertarian metanarrative – cues such as "interventionism," "liberalization," or "free market," – will intuitively refer back, not to the intricacies of their internal debates – on anarcho-capitalism, for instance, – but to the more general fault line of "libertarians," "capitalists," or an equivalential term pointing to these broad fault lines. We analyzed how these relegations could be shocking for the person that is being

relegated. Indeed, these broad terms seem too encompassing: they embrace authors, ideas, and groups that, from the point of view of that person's metanarrative, are just too different (we saw how the term "postmodernism" had exactly this effect). Nevertheless, we argued that, as political theorists, we should take these relegations and general terms seriously. First, because the actors involved in these conflicts also take these labels and categories seriously. Second, even though to call something "postmodern" and "libertarian" can seem extremely reductive from the point of view of someone inhabiting these general metanarratives, these metanarratives do generate cues that can then be used by others. Furthermore, these cues are used even by people that do not especially feel very "postmodern" or "libertarian." Even though members of a metanarrative do not see very well the internal sub fault lines of their rivals, they are the best at detecting cues that cannot be easily seen by their opponents.

We explained that cues and metanarratives emerge because of two factors. On the one hand, members from rival metanarratives tend to *obliterate* the finer distinctions that exist within their rivals' metanarratives. For instance, a "libertarian" will be considerably more sensitive to the internal fault lines of his libertarian metanarrative. But a "libertarian" will much more easily obliterate the internal fault lines of the Marxist metanarrative. It will matter considerably less for a "libertarian" whether there is a distinction between "social-democrats" and "orthodox Marxists," since the member of the libertarian metanarrative tends to exclude both terms to the other side of the "socialist" fault line. On the other hand, members from within sub-fault lines are much more sensitive to what counts as being "inside" of their own metanarrative. For members within a fault line of a metanarrative, their more moderate colleagues do not *feel* very much like members of their metanarratives – they are not very "feminist," or "liberals," or "socialists." We said that these asymmetries help us explain why some terms, such as "postmodernism" or "libertarianism" can be, at times, impossible to define. In times of intense exclusions where these concepts try to transmit a fault line, the limits of that fault line are *felt* differently by people that are positioned on different part of one or several fault lines. In other words, these concepts are at times impossible to define, not because scholars cannot *rationally* agree on a definition, but rather because they *feel* these notions differently.

We ended this chapter with two conclusions. First, we argued that, when we carefully distinguish our own point of view as political analysts and the point of view of the actors that form the metanarratives that we study, we can notice that ideologies are not only about ideas and policies but about these very processes of labeling and relegation that we have studied. Even though a given author might not especially feel very "leftwing," "rightwing," "conservative," or "socialists," it can happen that the author in questions uses cues from these metanarratives. By studying these different sensibilities, especially coming from radicals that perform a great number of exclusions, we can learn to see each other's cues and the way in which they are casually used even by people that would reject any label. Second, we saw how our conclusions complicated Laclau's ethical injunction. Since Laclau's postmodern metanarrative produces a fault line and cues of its own, this means that these cues can only be identified from the point of view of the essentialism that Laclau condemns. In other words, the belief in essences that Laclau criticizes is an essential ingredient of his own political theory. Democracy, we concluded, resides in our capacity to put ourselves into our opponent's place.

Political Moderation as an "anti-genre"

In this chapter, we tried to answer the second question of this study: how can we define political moderation given this new picture of political radicalism? We decided to apply our literary approach to political moderation. First, we began by reviewing how political moderation is understood from the point of view of the clusters of debates that we studied in our terminological chapter. We then addressed the work of scholars that have studied the subject of political moderation and, especially, the works of Aurelian Craiutu. We saw that Craiutu traces a tradition of political moderation in the thoughts of authors such as Burke, Tocqueville, Staël, Guizot, Constant, Aron, Berlin, Oakeshott, and Bobbio. We noted two interesting features of Craiutu's conception of political moderation. First, moderates reject overarching systems and abstract political plans and, instead, adopt a politics of "trimming" and of creating institutional arrangements that can balance competing political claims. Second, political moderation does not merely

consist in avoiding extremes and holding a consistent middle-of-the-way position: it is also a heterogeneous collection of substantive values and modes of thinking of people who promote a "politics-in-the-middle" (values such as pluralism, constitutionalism, individualism, compromise, and centrism).

From these two insights, we singled two basic features of moderation from a literary perspective. First, we saw that political moderation is the *avoidance* of radicalisms, and, in our terminology, it is the avoidance of metanarratives and their cues. In other words, it seems that, at the root of a view of political moderation through literary lenses, there is a specific *skepticism* about cues and metanarratives. We then noted that "skepticism" was perhaps not the best term since Mises and Laclau were also quite skeptical of the cues and metanarratives of their opponents. We then distinguished the *skepticism* of the moderate genre and the spirit of *suspicion* (the *radical skepticism*) of the radical one. The skepticism of the radical is made from the point of view of a metanarrative and it generates a fault line of its own. Moderation's skepticism seems to entail a criticism of cues that does not fall back on a metanarrative. We compared moderation to literary resources that rely on the existence of other literary canons in order to express themselves (such as irony, realism, or anti-rhetoric). We then addressed Craiutu's second characteristic of the ethos of moderation: the fact that moderates are not merely an *avoidance* of radicalisms, but that they hold substantive moderate values. This seemed to suggest that moderates have alignments of their own, which in turn seemed to go against what we just argued about moderates, metanarratives, and fault lines. We analyzed some "moderate alignments" and saw how authors such as Bernstein and Bobbio have *anti-radical alignments*: they do have alignments of their own, but these are special kinds of alignments since they are alignments against radicalisms and metanarratives (when Bobbio, for instance, argues that democracy is a regime where extremists do not prevail, or when he sees extremisms as analogous). We then asked the same question we asked earlier about the skepticism of the moderate and of the radical genres: don't both radicalism and moderation have alignments? We answered that yes, they do, but that this does not mean that they have the same kinds of alignments. The fact that two genres have a common element does not mean that we are warranted in saying that they are the same thing (just like two or several literary genres can have several

common elements, but these elements cue the reader in very different directions). Moderation is an (anti-)genre. It has a distinctive character because it is a *genre against genres*.

In order to give an example of a period where the moderate genre was extensively used, we turned to a group of authors that are sometimes put under the umbrella "Cold War liberals" (authors such as Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, and we gave special emphasis to the thought of Raymond Aron). The Cold War liberals were thinkers that, especially after the Second World War, delivered key anti-utopian arguments against political theories that aspired to a "genuine," "harmonious," "monistic," or "authentic" politics, or one where the people would be "truly" represented. A pervasive theme in the political thought of these authors was the defense of a "pragmatic" view of democracy in opposition to the "redemptive" vision of democracy of the Soviet Union. They offered an institutionally minded vision of democracy especially preoccupied with the competition of parties and with the rule of law. We saw how a characteristic element of these moderates' "negative politics" was that they tried to draw a vision of politics that would avoid metanarratives without falling back on one. This was, in part, a normal reaction after a second world war that saw intensive struggles between Manichean worldviews. An essential element of these Cold War liberals was, therefore, how to think politics in a way that avoids these dichotomic schemes. One way to do it was by paying special attention to politics through the lenses of interests, institutions, party competition, and the avoidance of particular evils rather than the achievement of a *summum bonum*.

We argued that these Cold War liberals were *pluralists* in two senses. On the one hand, these thinkers believed that political values could not ultimately be reconciled (they were *anti-monistic*) and, therefore, they were apologists of pluralism of opinions and of values, and of a system that could best accommodate (rather than reconcile) these divergent currents. On the other, they were also pluralists in an *active* sense: they believed both friends and foes should balance and correct one another. They felt that their institutional and pragmatic minded view of politics was perhaps too negative and there was the danger that it could become *anemic* without its more enthusiastic counterpart. In other words, the politics of moderation of these Cold War liberals could even try to avoid metanarratives to the point where they sometimes argued that

their politics *depended* on the politics of their opponents. A politics of moderation, they said, depended on having a more enthusiastic counterpart that kept pushing for the realization of more ambitious values than the mere maintenance of political institutions. However, we also argued that we should not push too far in one direction since these authors also have several notable anti-radical alignments. We here gave the example of Popper's and Aron's thoughts and how they deliver strong anti-radical arguments. For instance, we saw the way in which Popper aligns Marxists and fascists by arguing that they foreclose the possibility of rational discussion, or the way in which Aron calls for a society without extremes and his criticism of the idea that this could create anemia.

We closed this chapter by addressing some of the potential pitfalls of the moderate genre. On the one hand, we described how the moderate genre of the Cold War liberals really was, in some sense, dependent on the fact that they had Marxism as a dominant rival. Indeed, not only their own political views were partially defined in opposition to their rivals' (their preference for the "merely formal democracy" that the Marxists criticized, or their preference for pluralism against Marxism's aspirations to an unambiguous freedom and equality), but their moderate views were able to strive precisely because of the fact that it was deliberately "negative" and "sober." In the end, there really was some dependency between the moderate genre of the Cold War liberals and their radical counterpart. On the other hand, we highlighted how, in the end, the possibility of creating anti-radical alignments really means that one can "steal the fire" of the radical genre. To generate anti-radical alignments means to create a metanarrative where its different categories (such as its enemy or its idealized society) would be replaced by the radicals. This meant that, in the terminology of this work, there is nothing contradictory about an "extremism of the center" or "radical moderation": the moderate genre can gain the form of the radical one by generating anti-radical alignments. Nevertheless, a potential shortcoming is that these anti-radical alignments can go too far. Even though there exists the possibility of generating anti-radical alignments within the moderate genre, one should be wary to not push these alignments to such an extent that we become the very thing we were supposed to avoid.

1. Answering our questions and hypotheses

We will now review and try to answer our initial questions and hypotheses.

First Question: Given that radical trends today are no longer easily detectable by their violent intents, their lack of pluralism, or their anti-democratic and anti-constitutionalist character, how can one define the nature of political radicalism today?

Hypothesis: Instead of defining radicalism strictly in terms of a definable content, we tried to compare it to literary genres. The nature and strength of political radicalism seem to lie in the way it is able to create a sense of "us versus them" through the literary resources it generates. Indeed, the strength of a literary genre lies in its ability to induce in its reader a state of expectations which the writer can use to produce intrigue and emotions. The same seemed to happen with political radicalism and the literary resources it deploys to generate a sense of "us versus them."

Answer: Instead of defining radicalism "negatively" as a collection of ideas, policies, or attitudes that deviate from a given state of "normality" (such as anti-pluralism, anti-democracy, anti-constitutional aims, or anti-traditionalism), we instead compared it to a literary genre that a group or individual could use without necessarily acquiring the label "radical." We saw radicalism as a way of using a metanarrative in order for an author to reinforce his arguments or undermine his opponents. For that, an author must use specific cues derived from that metanarrative and *align* or *exclude* a given argument to the "us" or "them" side of the metanarrative within which he operates.

Instead of looking at radicalism "negatively" by seeing how it diverged from a given state of normality, we tried to see it "positively," i.e. in the way it creates dichotomies and a sense of "us versus them." By describing and analyzing the metanarratives of Lukács, Mises, and Laclau, we gave examples of some metanarratives (Marxist, free market libertarian, and postmodern) and of their cues. Some of the cues we

saw were: "worker," "proletarian," "revolution," "socialism," "totality," versus "bourgeois," "capitalism," "liberal," "partiality," or "market" in the case of Marxism; "liberalism," "free market," "capitalism," or "democracy," versus "collectivism," "socialism," "interventionism," "totalitarianism," or "statism" in the case of free market libertarianism; and "hegemony," "democracy," "political," "freedom," "contingency," "the ethical," or "pluralism" versus "essentialism," "rationalism," "apriorism," "objectivism," or "ahistoricism" in the case of postmodernism.

Second question: if we are to understand radicalism differently, then how will political moderation be defined in this new picture?

Hypothesis: In line with what we argued about radicalism, we said that we could try to see political moderation as an "anti-" genre: the sense of expectation it transmits is one of criticism of an established literary corpus, but it is dependent on this very corpus in order to transmit its distinctive sense of expectation. Many elements in literature and rhetoric seem to present this same double pattern, such as "irony" as a genre, or certain "realist" literary trends. In order to strive, these literary resources must depend on a pre-existing corpus against which they can derive their own efficacy.

Answer: We described political moderation parallelly to the way we described radicalism, but with some differences that were due to the very nature of the use of political moderation. We defined the essence of political moderation as the critique and avoidance of a metanarrative in order to break the alignments of its cues. Moderation therefore induces its effects by using the expectations of other established metanarratives and, then, by offering a state of expectation where the cues of that metanarrative are split apart. We saw some of these moves through the study of Bernstein and by looking at the way he broke some of the links between "democracy" and "socialism," "revolution" and "socialism," or "proletarian" and "socialism."

2. Analysis

In this study, we have seen that political radicalism is the degree in which an author is able to transmit to the reader the sense that he lives within a dichotomic political story. Political radicalism is the *degree to which an author's argument relies on an overarching metanarrative that operates in the background of his argument*. As we saw with the three authors we addressed, this degree of reliance is determined by looking at the *references* that are made to that metanarrative – what we called *cues* – and by evaluating to what degree each part of that narrative is *tightened* and *made dependent* on all the others.

However, since this study only scratched the surface of the kind of references that an author can make to a metanarrative, it is not possible to definitely ascribe the label "radical" to an author, work, or argument based on this work. In the end, even though we were able to build the bare bones of a method of analysis to detect the use of political radicalism, what we have advanced so far is not enough to decisively ascribe the label "radical" to a given object of study. This study has been only the first building blocks toward a framework that could understand political radicalism without directly depending on a stipulated normality from which it is supposed to diverge.

By describing political radicalism as a literary genre rather than a specific body of ideas, attitudes, or policies, we were able to sketch such an approach. The radicalism of a given author consists less in the fact that the author is revolutionary, uncompromising, or anti-pluralistic *per se*, but rather on the extent to which the author is relying on a dichotomic metanarrative in order to reinforce his arguments. Nevertheless, these ideas, attitudes, or policies that are traditionally ascribed to a "radical" author are usually good indicators that the author in question does belong to a given metanarrative. For instance, for a Marxist author who advocates a revolution, or who is uncompromising, or anti-pluralistic, and so forth, these "negative" elements that are traditionally ascribed to a "radical" are indeed good indicators that the author in question consistently deploys his Marxist metanarrative. In other words, though the fact that someone is uncompromising in politics does not necessarily make that person a radical, a cue to a metanarrative coupled with an uncompromising stance is often a solid indication of someone's radicalism.

In order to arrive at the conclusion that a given author or work is radical, we would have to create specific thresholds above which a given object of study could gain the label "radical." In fact, we saw that there is even the possibility of creating thresholds at which the degree in which an author relies on a Marxist, libertarian, or postmodern metanarrative could lead one to apply the radical label. Unfortunately, in this work we have only had the space to address, on the one hand, a very limited set of references to a metanarrative (what we called *cue terms*) and, on the other hand, we addressed a very limited number of metanarratives.

The first step to achieve a full methodology with which we could ascribe the "radical" label would therefore have to begin with a typology of references toward a given metanarrative. We already saw some basic references in the three authors we studied (i.e. cue-terms such as "capitalism," "socialism," or "essentialism."), but many other cues could be added to the list: expressions, analogies, "soundbites," *tournures de phrase*, the kind of examples one uses, predictable "directions" of an argument, or the way an argument is framed. Then, we would have to weigh the importance of different kinds of cues for different publics. As we argued in our chapter on metanarratives, a single reference to a metanarrative can create indifference in one public, but it can trigger strong reactions from another and relegate the person, work, or argument toward a given metanarrative.

Linked to this first task is the necessity of expanding the number of metanarratives beyond the restricted context of Marxist, libertarian, or postmodern ones. As we saw, cues largely exist in the eye of the beholder. They are what lead a follower of a given metanarrative to relegate the person or work using the cue to a given metanarrative. Therefore, to further this study we would need to expand the number of metanarratives and draw up exhaustive lists of cues belonging to a given metanarrative. Feminism is an obvious candidate since we hear, even in everyday life, exclusionary cues from the feminist metanarrative such as "sexism" or "patriarchy." There is also the possibility of building "leftwing" and "rightwing" metanarratives. We would need to create a typology of cues that belong to each metanarrative, to understand how exclusions are performed in each, and to measure the degree to which different publics are more or less sensitive to a

cue from a rival metanarrative. Expanding the number of metanarratives will be an essential part of weighing to what extent a given cue can relegate an author, work, or argument to what kind of metanarrative.

Only then could we establish thresholds at which one could classify a given person, group, movement, work, or argument as "radical" or "moderate." Beyond a given threshold of the use of cues and the degree of tightness of a fault line (i.e., the use of terms such as "only," "always," or "never," that make one part of a narrative strictly depend on another), and the degree to which the reader is able to follow an argument because of a built-in background metanarrative, then the object of study in question could receive the label. These thresholds could even be built with specific publics in mind: for a given public, the threshold for someone that belongs to metanarrative A could be very low, but it could be very high for someone that belongs to metanarrative B.

Political moderation would have to follow a generally similar process. Indeed, on the one hand, even though an author can spend a long time taking a moderate position in a debate, a single reference to a given metanarrative can topple his position as a moderate. Here, again, the offending reference can heavily depend on which public we are talking about. Further, the degree to which a person is undermining (rather than tightening) a given metanarrative would have to be assessed. The degree to which he is using the techniques belonging to the moderate "anti-" genre we analyzed in our chapter on political moderation and in the sections on Bernstein would also have to be weighed.

We have tried to offer the bare bones of a methodology that could hypothetically, once developed, ascribe political labels. But we also tried to offer an explanation of how this political labeling occurs. As political theorists, we often use an approach that relies on ascribing given sets of policies, attitudes, or ideas to a given author, work, or movement. But, as we tried to explain, porous terms, such as "libertarianism" or "postmodernism," often depend on the kind of cues that an author uses as well as on the person that is perceiving these cues. In other words, it is often dependent, not on a disagreement over what counts as a genuinely "libertarian" or "postmodern" idea, but on the very fact that the ascription of these labels depends

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on the degree to which a person will feel that one single "libertarian" or "postmodern" cue will be enough to relegate the author in question. For instance, there are specific sub-fault lines within the "libertarian" fault line (we examined Rothbard's anarcho-capitalism). For someone of that sub-fault line, it takes very little, or even just one "socialist" cue, to relegate a given person or argument to the "socialist" metanarrative. Hypothetically, the same could be applied to leftwing and rightwing distinctions. For someone within a sub-fault line within the leftwing metanarrative, for instance, his companion of the moderate left will not "feel" very left. That same moderate left-winger, however, will feel very much on the left for a right-winger.

However, these sub-fault lines, which are usually peopled with radical theorists where the world is depicted as dominated by "socialism," "neoliberalism," "essentialism," or "patriarchalism," should not be seen as mere exercises in purism. They are in fact the source of all kinds of cues, which are then used by author or movements that might not even consider themselves especially "libertarian," "Marxist," "postmodern," or "feminist." By carefully studying radical authors, we, as political analysts, are enriched with new tools that enable us to see all kinds of cues that we would not have even noticed before.

In fact, as we pointed out in our critique to Laclau's political theory, our own implicit cues (which, in the end, are our ideological biases) can best be seen by a metanarrative that stands opposite to us. By studying radical authors of a great variety of political colors, we can be more acutely aware to the fact that we ourselves are relying on given cues in our own arguments, or that we tend to relegate this kind of work, author, or argument toward a given metanarrative.

Even if we never get to fully ascribe a given label to an author, work, or argument, the approach that we described in this work can help us identify what stands as a cue reminiscent of a given fault line and from which point of view. When we hear literary theorists, we do not usually hear them definitely labeling and categorizing the works and authors they study. Instead, they tend to describe what they are reading at the moment is evocative of something else (how, for instance, a given line of this poem is reminiscent of another one). By studying a great number of metanarratives, we too can come to see politics in the same way: in

terms of arguments and ideas that are reminiscent of a given ideological sensibility but that, perhaps, cannot

be definitely classified as belonging to it as such.

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