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Abstract

This article is concerned with post-Marxism and materialism in the work of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. As 'post-Marxists' these writers use 'material' in a variety of ways, all of which indicate limits and constraints. The article focuses on one version of 'materialism' in this work, a version that is more implied than elaborated, in which 'material' is equivalent to institutionalized performativity or sedimented discourse: to 'objective' social structures and institutions. Post-Marxists often use 'the social' as equivalent to 'material' in this sense, to gesture towards the context in which politics succeeds or fails. I argue that the specificities of 'the social' cannot be theorized from within the terms of post-Marxism itself and that Butler and Laclau acknowledge this limitation in their most recent work. I therefore conclude that post-Marxism needs a supplement that I call political sociology. This is a dangerous supplement in the Derridean sense: a necessary addition that destabilizes the value post-Marxism gives to the distinction between 'social' and 'political' in which the latter is the privileged term.

Key words: hegemony, materialism, performativity, political sociology, 'the social'

This paper addresses the topic of poststructuralist political theory and materialism through the work of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It is no doubt because all three identify as post-Marxists (including Butler [2000a: 11], who is not commonly thought of as such), that, despite the contradictions and disagreements between these thinkers and across different texts, the question of the relationship between materialism and politics has run throughout the body of work they have produced.

The terms 'material' and 'political' are themselves, of course, highly contested. As we shall see, 'material' is used in a variety of different ways in this work, though its meanings are not always clearly specified. There are at least four meanings that are clearly defined and elaborated. 'Material' is used as equivalent to 'economic'; as equivalent to 'substance'; as opposed to 'ideal'; and as praxis. There is a further sense of 'material' that is more implied than elaborated in the work of Butler and of Laclau and Mouffe, as equivalent to 'the social' and opposed to 'the political'. 'The social' is often used in this work to gesture towards the sense of 'material' that runs through all these different meanings: the idea of limit and constraint. In this article I will argue that the specificities of 'the social' cannot be theorized from within the terms of post-Marxism itself, which always already relies on an unspecified understanding of actually existing social structures and institutions, and that post-Marxism therefore needs a supplement that I call political sociology. The necessary supplement to post-Marxism should be compatible with the understanding of 'the political' as constitutive that has been argued for so persuasively in this work. As distinct from 'politics', which involves the contestation of hegemonic subordination, 'the political' is conceived of as 'inherent in every human society and [as] determin[ing] our very ontological being' (Mouffe, 1993: 3). A supplementary political sociology must go beyond the limits of post-Marxist political theory, however, to develop systematic analyses, based on empirically oriented 'middle-range' theory, of what is under-theorized in this body of work: it must offer empirically and conceptually revisable accounts of the structures and institutions that always risk limiting 'politics' in particular social formations.

The 'material' of 'the social' is less excluded from theoretical consideration in post-Marxism than relied on and yet impossible to theorize from within the terms of post-Marxism itself. In this sense, political sociology is a dangerous supplement that marks the limits of post-Marxism as a political theory (Derrida, 1974). 'Adding' political sociology to post-Marxism is not an innocent or simple addition; it is a necessary addition that destabilizes the very terms within which the distinction between 'the social' and 'the political' is drawn.

Judith Butler: materialization and its limits

There are two quite different, and contradictory, versions of materialism in Judith Butler's work. Surprisingly, on occasion, Butler simply treats 'material' as equivalent to 'economic'. In an article published in *New Left Review* in 1998, 'Merely Cultural', Butler opposes her views to those of unnamed commentators on the left who, she says, claim that the politics of social movements is largely irrelevant or even pernicious because of its divisive effects. She takes the lesbian and gay movement as the critical case since, she says, queer politics is seen as the most cultural and the least relevant in that it is the furthest from any involvement in socio-economic struggles. Butler argues that, on the contrary, the concerns of the queer movement are absolutely central to any socialist strategy because the production of heterosexuality is essential to the reproduction of capitalism. Butler uses 'material' as interchangeable with 'political economy' in this case, then, and her article is studded with quotes from the works of Marx and Engels to this effect (e.g. Butler, 1998: 39). In fact, she restates what she takes to be the most useful insights of Marxist feminists of the 1970s to make her argument that there is no absolute, ontological distinction between cultural and economic concerns. She describes how Marxist feminists analysed the family as the site of reproduction of heterosexual persons as a condition of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production itself: production requires reproduction. She then extends the analysis to encompass the production of homosexuality as an 'abject', delegitimated identity that provides a condition of the production of heterosexuality as normal and normative. The production of sexuality is not simply cultural, it is functional to the capitalist economy (Butler, 1998). The production of sexuality is, therefore, material in this sense.

Butler's argument is surprising in many respects, not least because in restating functionalist Marxism, she is restating a position that for many provoked a dissatisfaction that was the starting-point of post-Marxism (Barrett, 1980, 1991). Butler's discussion of the issues is, in fact, extremely underdeveloped (see Fraser, 1998). Her use of Marxist functionalism is incompatible with the main body of her own work and specifically with the second conception of 'material' to which she is committed.

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler develops quite a different understanding of materiality. She sees it as a process taking place in time, rather than as a self-subsisting substance, so that she explicitly discusses *materialization* rather than 'material' as such. Matter is not to be seen, she argues, as 'site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter*' (1993: 9; original emphases). She is concerned with the materiality of sexed

bodies in this work, arguing that sex is produced through regulatory norms that delegitimate certain bodies and possibilities of identification while fixing others as 'natural'. She sees materialization as produced in what she calls performativity, practices involving words and acts that produce effects or a transformation in the situation in which they are enacted. She gives medical norms as an example, arguing that the 'girling' of an infant by naming it 'she' rather than 'it' brings the human subject into the domain of language, kinship and other authorities, which work to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect (1993: 7–8).

Sex is material, Butler suggests, in that although it is socially constructed it is not therefore a 'fiction'; it is rather a necessity within which we live, 'without which life itself would be unthinkable' (1993: 6). Nevertheless, she is at least as concerned with the subversion of this 'necessity' as with its consolidation. For Butler, performativity involves the institution of regulatory norms through their repetition, and this repetition is at the same time the condition of possibility of their subversion. Here she follows Jacques Derrida's discussion of John Austin's ideas in 'Signature, Event, Context', though, as we shall see, Butler also marks a difference between her theory of performativity and Derrida's (Derrida, 1988). She argues that performativity involves *citation*: the authority with which a performance is endowed depends neither on the intention of the performer nor on the context in which it is enacted, but on the forceful conventions it mobilizes and at the same time conceals through repetition. Every citation is unstable: dependent on the exclusions performatives have executed in the past and, because it must be repeated in order to be effective, open to re-citation in novel ways that may subvert the regulatory norms it produces. To return to Butler's example of 'girling', she argues that a 'girl' is compelled to cite the norm in order to continue to qualify as a viable human subject, to enact a corporeal femininity that can never be achieved once and for all. There is always, therefore, the possibility of subverting the performance or of resignifying it in radically new ways.

This possibility is, for Butler, the site of politics. It is the possibility of creating new conventions and of pluralizing legitimate identities. In her first book on this question, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler focussed on parody as a way of subverting gendered performances, speculating that drag may show up the naturalized unity between sex, gender and sexuality constructed in conventional performances of 'women' (or, less commonly, 'men'). Later, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), in response to those who mistakenly concluded from the earlier work that she saw sex as voluntary, an appearance we put on with our clothes, she insisted that gender is not so easily subverted. Drawing on the conventions of gendered embodiment, drag may involve denaturalization *or* reidealization. As a performance of excessive theatricality, drag is political insofar as it is 'the site of a certain ambivalence'; the agents of queer politics are both implicated in and opposed to the regimes of power within which they are constituted (1993: 125).[1] As we shall see, it is this issue of the success or failure of performative politics that leads Butler towards Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony as a way to contextualize constraints and limits on its possibilities in concrete social contexts.

Butler's second conception of 'material' may also be seen in terms of the Marxist tradition, as similar to Marx's idea of praxis. Indeed, Butler herself notes this, quoting Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach to the effect that materialism must be seen as 'sensuous, human activity', the ongoing transformation of matter in social practices (1993: 31 and n.). It is, however, quite at odds with the functionalism she espouses in the first conception of 'material' as 'economic'.[2] In fact, if matter is conceived of as 'materialization' through performativity, as a process of transformation over time, the very idea of 'the capitalist economy' is a reification of a set of complex and always unstable practices (Gibson-Graham, 1996).

Marxist functionalism is, then, incompatible with Butler's theory of performativity. However, it is clear that the way in which Butler uses it to supplement her theorization of politics is indicative of a lack in the theory of performativity itself. Butler has, in fact, articulated this need by distancing her theorization of performativity from that of Derrida. She argues that his conception of performativity is inadequate because it is too formal and lacks an understanding of power. For Derrida, 'iterability' or citation involves the repetition of signs that break with previous contexts. Iterability is the structural characteristic of every mark; a sign must always break with previous contexts in order to function as such and it is, therefore, susceptible to failure. In Butler's terms, it is open to subversion and resignification. Butler argues that Derrida's account is inadequate because it is necessary to consider the *social* context within which signs actually operate in order to understand how they work: why is it that some break with previous contexts more easily than others? And why do some carry more force and efficacity than others? She argues that Derrida's account of performativity must be supplemented with a theory of the '*social iterability*' of performances as implicated in relations of power (1997b: 152).

In this discussion of Derrida's theory of performativity, Butler implies that her own theory does not suffer from such deficiencies. However, this is far from evident. Butler apparently takes it that because she has elaborated a theory of performativity as cultural, as embodied and embedded in social practices that are

implicated in power relations, rather than as textual, it is not susceptible to the same kinds of criticisms. However, demonstrating *awareness* that performativity is always caught within the workings of power is not the same as theorizing how this happens to a greater or lesser extent in different contexts. It falls far short of the theory of social context that Butler implies is required by the theory of performativity. If, as Butler argues, the political possibilities of subversion formally inherent in every performance can only actually be realized under certain social conditions – when signs are able to break with previous contexts and contribute to the production of a new situation – what is needed is an understanding of those conditions under which such a break is likely to take place and of those that hinder the creation of 'something new'. In the terms I am using here, Butler's theory of politics as performativity requires a political sociology: generalizations concerning relatively enduring social institutions and structures that influence which performances are likely to succeed.[3]

Although she has subsequently been more critical of Laclau's work (Butler, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c), Butler apparently saw the theory of hegemony he developed with Mouffe in the 1980s as the theory of 'social iterability' she identified as necessary for her understanding of politics as performative (Butler and Laclau, 1997). In other words, Butler took the theory of hegemony to provide a political sociology as a supplement to the theory of performativity.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: material discourse

As post-Marxists Laclau and Mouffe clearly position themselves in the materialist tradition, opposed to idealism. In accordance with their iconoclastic reading of that tradition, however, they rework this opposition in an original way. They argue that the most important understanding of materialism does not involve claims about the existence and importance of reality external to thought; it is rather the 'affirmation . . . of the ultimate irreducibility of the real to the concept' (1990: 107). Where idealists like Hegel and Plato see the real as essentially rational thought, materialists should understand it as exceeding all determinate form and therefore any possible apprehension in thought. Drawing on the non-referential linguistics of Saussure and, like Butler, on the work of Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe argue that a genuinely materialist political theory sees all supposedly self-identical objects as constituted only in unstable relation to others and therefore as fundamentally precarious and incomplete. This instability is crucial to Laclau's and Mouffe's political theory because it provides the conditions for the articulation of differentiated identities into new relations that can rework and oppose existing relations of domination. It is in this sense that 'the political' is ontological: it determines who we are and what is possible out of antagonisms that structure the very limits of the symbolic.

There is another sense of 'material' that is implicit in Laclau's and Mouffe's work, however, that they address only summarily: the sense in which 'actually existing' social structures and institutions constrain political possibilities. This is the sense of 'material' that is so important to the way in which Butler has sought to use their work. Laclau and Mouffe deal with this sense of 'material' under the concepts of 'discourse' and 'hegemony'.

Laclau and Mouffe are clear that discourse is not to be seen as simply linguistic. It combines linguistic and extra-linguistic dimensions in social practices. 'Discourse' involves the use of a word or phrase as an act that situates its meaning in a social context and in relation to other terms (1985: 100–3). In fact, although Butler's theory of performativity has been developed using other resources, it is clear that it has much in common with this understanding of discourse: both performativity and discourse enact, and so bring about, the states of affairs that are presumed to exist prior to that enactment.

The theory of hegemony builds on this understanding of discourse. There are various different senses of 'hegemony' in Laclau's and Mouffe's work (Howarth, 2000: 109–11). Typically, 'hegemony' as developed from Gramsci's (1971) writings is taken to indicate the way in which social relations are formed through consent rather than imposed. One of the most obvious ways to understand how a theory of hegemony is developed by Laclau and Mouffe, and that which best suits Butler's use of it, is that it offers tools for analysis of the way in which social forms are politically constituted through the articulation of unstable signifiers in concrete practices. According to this understanding, although the social field should not be seen as made up of determinate institutions and structures with clear boundaries, it is not for that reason entirely chaotic and fluid. Hegemony is (only ever partially) achieved insofar as it effectively constructs 'horizons of intelligibility' that 'delineate what is possible, what can be said and done, what positions may legitimately be taken, what actions may be engaged in, and so forth' (Norval, quoted in Smith, 1998: 64). According to the different senses of 'material' I have identified in this work, then, the *material* indeterminacy of social forms enables the hegemonizing of meaning, fixing it in relatively stable, *material* social formations that limit actual political possibilities in specific ways.

Laclau's and Mouffe's understanding of politics is certainly in sympathy with that of Butler if hegemony is understood in this way. For them a hegemonic 'horizon of intelligibility' is unstable and always, therefore,

open to rearticulation in new forms. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), discursive formations are always realized through constitutive antagonism such that the unity constructed between different elements can never be finally established as necessary and complete. The unity of political signifiers is 'naturalized' where a hegemonic formation is institutionalized, but the constitutive undecidability of their articulation means that re-signification is always a possibility. For Laclau and Mouffe, as for Butler, this re-signification is the work of politics. The concretization of hegemonic articulations involves power that works to exclude alternative frameworks. Politics is the realization, in the first instance, of the possibility of other possibilities, and then, potentially, of radically different alternatives in a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Furthermore, Laclau and Butler also have compatible understandings of 'the social'. As we have seen, in Butler's call for a theory of 'social iterability', 'social' stands in for the relative fixity of regulatory norms and their resistance to subversion in particular contexts. Similarly, Laclau distinguishes between 'the social' and 'the political' (1990: 33–6). 'The social' is the routinization or sedimentation of discourse and the construction of 'objective' institutions and structures. 'The political', on the other hand, is the reactivation or rediscovery of the fact that what are taken to be 'objective' social forms are actually nothing more than contingent constructions that may be reconfigured in new ways.

However, despite the compatibility of their approaches in these respects, it is far from clear that Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony provides the tools of a political sociology to complement Butler's theory of performativity. The convergence between Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony and Butler's theory of performativity has been emphasized in Anna Marie Smith's (1998) interpretation of their work which is also an attempt to make its sociological implications more apparent. Smith's interpretation has been made partly in response to critics who argue that Laclau's and Mouffe's radical constructivism is inadequate to theorizing the social and historical conditions in which structures and identities are actually formed. She sets out to make explicit the theory of structures and institutions she sees as implied in the work of Laclau and Mouffe as a response to criticisms that they overemphasize contingency at the expense of the relative fixity of historical formations.

Smith's sociological interpretation is, however, rather creative with respect to Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe do use terms from sociological theory, but their theory of hegemony has been developed as a meta-theory, at a high level of abstraction, and what the *content* of those terms might be is unclear. The difficulty of reconciling metatheory with a political sociology concerned with more concrete structures and institutions runs through Smith's interpretation. As she points out, Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony should not be seen as prescriptive of any particular form of institutional analysis. The advantage of the theory of hegemony is precisely that it sensitizes us to the particularities of identity formation and complex structural positionings. The anti-essentialist project of the theory of hegemony dictates that there is no a priori necessity for any particular combination of social elements. On this basis she suggests that any general account of social institutions must be built 'from the bottom up', study by study, comparing similarities and differences across cases (Smith, 1998: 159–60). Although this is in some ways an attractive solution to the problem of how to develop a political sociology that would remain sensitive to contextual specificities and multiple subjectivities, it is difficult to see how it might work in practice. The possibility of realizing such a project seems to depend on a further claim made by Smith, that the theory of hegemony can be used to *detect* structures and institutions that create limits for political practice (1998: 106). It seems to me that there are certain aspects of Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony that make this impossible.

Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony is governed by an tendency towards *de*construction that makes it difficult to use as an instrument for theoretical *re*construction. This is evident, for example, in their deconstruction of the Marxist tradition. Their aim is certainly not to jettison Marxism in its entirety but rather to retain transformed, 'de-essentialized' concepts that they take to be of continuing value (Laclau, 1990: 178–9). Indeed, they do retain certain Marxist terms: 'hegemony', of course, but also 'capitalism' and even, on occasion, 'the State' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). However, the status of these terms as sociological theory, that is, in relation to historically specific institutions and structures, is unclear. This is because Laclau's and Mouffe's deconstruction of Marxist sociology is governed by more abstract philosophical, or more accurately anti-philosophical, principles. In an article called 'The Impossibility of Society', Laclau makes a clear statement of the perspective that guides their deconstruction of Marxism. As we have seen, it is a precept of Laclau's and Mouffe's materialism that any form of objectivity is impossible, because social forms are never fully present to themselves. Any totality is always constructed in relation to an excess of meaning that surrounds it. This means that it is never fully intelligible as an object of knowledge, never fully itself to be described and defined, but always in some respect indeterminate (Laclau, 1990: 89–92).

However, while this deconstructive impetus is clearly driven by the definition of materialism that Laclau and Mouffe oppose to idealism, it also makes it impossible to theorize the other sense of 'material' to

which they allude in the theory of hegemony – the way in which social forms are instituted in hegemonic discourse. Their understanding of objectivity as always constituted through negativity makes it difficult to see the validity of any sociological theory that tries to identify or establish a knowledge of social forms since they are, by definition, unknowable.[4] The deconstructive tendency of Laclau's and Mouffe's theory militates against theory-building, which requires the fixing and freezing of a complex and dynamic social process, a naming that recalls the metaphysics of presence against which Derridean deconstruction works. Guided by this deconstructive impetus, their approach suggests that what is important is to turn one's attention towards the falsely objectifying claims of sociological theory rather than towards the indeterminate objects of social life. It is not coincidental, then, that Laclau's and Mouffe's reconstruction of the Marxist tradition has been so much less developed than their deconstruction. The tendency towards deconstruction at a meta-theoretical level by no means encourages reconstruction at the less abstract level of sociological theory.

It is not, of course the case that all uses of the theory of hegemony must *necessarily* neglect theory-building simply because Laclau's and Mouffe's own work focuses less on the reconstruction of sociological theory than on its deconstruction. It is rather that the theory of hegemony does not itself provide the tools with which to construct such theory. Developed out of the Marxist tradition, it may now be used to deconstruct any theory that posits necessary, a priori social relations and objective structures. In principle it is then possible, in addition to deconstructing sociological theory, to reconstruct its objects using such concepts as 'hegemony', 'articulation' and 'antagonism' to build up an understanding of a particular social configuration. It is in this way that Smith's proposed methodology for theory-building may be understood. She sees generalizations as possible and worthwhile only if they are made on the basis of comparing similarities and differences across concrete analyses of social formations; otherwise, they go beyond the configurations to which they are appropriate, universalizing the specific and contingent and obscuring detailed differences and important exceptions (1998: 159–60; see also Fraser and Nicholson, 1990). However, Laclau's and Mouffe's concepts cannot be used to identify the *content* of relevant generalizations concerning similarities and differences: though derived from a particular tradition of thought, they are conceived of as universal tools of analysis (Laclau, 2000c: 200). As Laclau himself argues, 'Any social theory worth the name tries to isolate forms of structural determination which are context-specific in their variation and relative weight, but tries also . . . to build its concepts in such a way that they make social, and historical, comparisons possible' (ibid.: 189). But insofar as structures named as 'capitalism' or 'the State' are context-specific, the quasi-universal, and therefore relatively 'empty', tools of discourse analysis have nothing to contribute to a discussion about how and why we might delineate them in one way rather than another in a particular historic and geographic social formation. The only way Laclau's and Mouffe's post-Marxism may be used to analyse particular social formations is by employing middle-range sociological theories alongside it, to identify institutions and structures that cannot be 'detected' using discourse analysis.[5]

Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony is not, then, a political sociology of the kind that I have argued Butler has identified as necessary to supplement her theory of politics as performativity. Nor is it possible to build a sociological theory using concepts developed from within its terms, as Smith has proposed – at least, not without supplementing it with sociological theory imported from elsewhere. In fact, Laclau does import sociological theory into his work on occasion, citing Lash's and Urry's (1987) analysis of disorganized capitalism, for example, as useful for understanding contemporary social forms within which new spaces of political struggle should be identified (Laclau, 1990: 58–9). He does not, however, discuss the implications of this sociological theory for his analysis of politics, nor elaborate on its relation to the terms of post-Marxism. It is a necessary addition that goes unacknowledged in Laclau's work: an addition that should not be necessary. Post-Marxism as I have analysed it here in the work of Butler and of Laclau and Mouffe productively develops the political implications of Derridean deconstruction.[6] However, the deconstructive understanding of the precarious instability of any identity that is so productive for this work also makes it impossible to develop concepts from within its own terms to deal with the relative fixity of 'the social' towards which post-Marxists gesture. The post-Marxist theory of hegemony has little to offer towards a materialist understanding of the *limits* of politics.

Laclau: political logics and political sociology

In a number of recent statements, Laclau has sought to distinguish post-Marxism from sociology. In a foreword to a collection of studies from the Essex programme in discourse analysis, inspired by *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau (2000a: x–xi) states that he sees this work as setting out the conditions for any possible sociological analysis, rather than as elaborating a sociological analysis as such. Again, in a footnote specifically directed against Smith's attempt to develop a sociological theory from this work, he states that the research programme to which he subscribes is concerned with 'formal analysis and abstraction' rather than with the 'factual and journalistic accounts' he associates with the empiricism of sociology (2000b: 86–7). Such comments may, of course, be read, not as against sociology as such, but rather as against inadequate sociology: which does not take into account the conditions of its own

possibility, or which relies on 'facts'. However, the direction of Laclau's own thinking suggests rather that he sees the theory of hegemony as offering tools for the analysis of 'political logics' that are apparently quite independent of social structures and institutions. In this respect Laclau's conclusion is close to the position argued for in this paper: that the theory of hegemony does not, in fact, offer tools for the analysis of 'the social' at all. The question this raises, however, is the following: can such an analysis dispense with political sociology altogether?

In a recent series of essays in which Laclau debates post-Marxism with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek (2000), he suggests that formal and abstract 'political logics' are the object of study of the theory of hegemony. 'Political logics' are ambiguously related to the constraints of actually existing structures and social institutions in this account and, as we shall see, insofar as what Laclau is formulating is a methodology, he actually gives a good deal of scope to political sociology. In some respects, however, he seems to see 'political logics' as analysable quite independently of social context. He differentiates his understanding of hegemony from that of Gramsci, for example, in relation to Gramsci's own rather contradictory distinction between state and civil society. Laclau (2000b: 50) suggests that, according to Gramsci's own understanding, hegemonic 'collective will' does not respect this distinction in *social reality* so that what is to be analysed is 'a horizon of intelligibility of the social which is grounded not in *topographies* but in *logics*'. The point here is that the concrete, actually existing structures and institutions with which sociologists might be concerned are of secondary importance to the 'logic' of hegemony that is to be analysed by the post-Marxist political theorist.

The fact that Laclau continues to see 'politics' as 'constitutive of the social' does not compromise the independent relation between the two that is so important to the sphere of analysis he is carving out for the theory of hegemony. He has identified two political logics that are 'constitutive of the social': the first is that of 'difference' which separates out particular social identities; the second is that of 'equivalence' in which differentiated identities are seen as substitutable in relation to an 'empty universal' (2000c: 193–4). It is the latter that is particularly important to Laclau since he argues that a genuine politics of the left, which could compete with the current neo-liberal consensus, is only possible in relation to such a universal (2000d: 306). Laclau presumably sees this logic as 'constitutive of the social' when it is successful; that is, when it becomes sedimented in new social structures and institutions. In this respect, 'the social' is not seen as important to political analysis as such; it is just an effect of politics.

However, questions of the relation between 'the social' and 'political logics' also arise prior to the effect of the political on the social – in two main ways. First, Laclau argues that although political logics always take one of these two forms, the possibility that either of them will actually arise in any particular case is not determined by its formal characteristics. Secondly, the concrete content of either of these forms, the identities that are articulated as different or as equivalent, is 'contextually dependent' (2000c: 192). According to this account, far from being independent of 'the social', in every respect except their formal characteristics political logics are conditioned by social context.

From the point of view of the argument I am developing here, this understanding of politics as conditioned by 'the social' is very close to that of Butler. While 'politics' involves radical change and new possibilities, 'the social' is limit and constraint, involving the possibility that new possibilities will not actually be realized. As we have seen, this is the domain for which Butler has identified what I am calling political sociology as necessary, to theorize the actually existing structures and institutions within which politics takes place. Insofar as Laclau's thinking on 'political logics' is methodological (and were we unaware of the disdain in which he holds sociology), it would seem from this last point that what he is doing here is demarcating precisely the point at which the theory of hegemony 'runs out' and political sociology should take over political analysis.

However, it is not clear that such a political sociology will be as limited as Laclau's formulations suggest. Even if social space must always be divided according to the two logics he has identified – a suggestion that seems somewhat simplistic – the analysis of their formal qualities apart from the study of the context of their emergence and content is a highly circumscribed exercise. In fact, Laclau's demarcation between the domains of the theory of hegemony and that of political sociology would seem to give to the latter a good deal more to do than to the former.

Let us take the study of social movements as an example. This is far from a random example in that Butler and Laclau and Mouffe frequently refer to social movements, taking them to be the principal agents of radical politics today. There is indeed a large sociological literature on social movements, concerned with the conditions of their emergence, the constraints under which they organize and communicate, their strategies and possibilities of success. For example, there is the 'political process' school of social movement theory that looks at their emergence and development in relation to 'political opportunity structures'. The understanding that has been developed in these studies is that social movements are encouraged or discouraged by changes in state tolerance, reformism or repression (Tarrow, 1998: 18–19).

This approach is not necessarily incompatible with that of post-Marxism. It is possible to see changes in political opportunity structures in terms of Laclau's 'political logics': in some cases elements of the state elite may be articulated in 'political logics' of equivalence prior to the emergence of mass mobilization. However, what is particularly important from the 'political process' perspective is that it is changes in the state as an institution that make mobilization likely. The state is seen as particularly important in this respect because of its monopolization of force and because claims made by social movements are so often addressed to the nation-state as the power-holder in society. The most dramatic example of a successful political transformation in recent times is the 'Velvet Revolution' that swept Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s: although it was undoubtedly protest movements in civil society that brought down the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet bloc, this would not have been possible if the government of the USSR had not withdrawn the military support that would otherwise have crushed them. In this case, although the 'political process' model of social movements and the theory of hegemony may take the same object of study, and although they need not be seen as incommensurable, the explanatory value of the 'political process' model exceeds that of the theory of hegemony. It enables us to see how this particular form of collective action was possible at this time and how it was successful in achieving its aims.

This example should not be taken to mean that political analysis must always be concerned with the state as *the* political institution. One of the most important gains of post-Marxism is the shift away from seeing politics as taking place only at this level.[7] What post-Marxism offers in this respect is a way of understanding politics as central to social life rather than as a localized activity with little or no implication for how we think about social change in general. A political sociology that supplements post-Marxism must, therefore, also complement it, taking up the challenge to rethink its own categories, narrowly focused as it has been on activities directed towards state power.

There is, in fact, interesting work already being done along these lines, particularly that concerned with the topics of globalization, global governance and the power and status of the nation-state and on the conditions of emergence of social movements and their radical or reformist possibilities (Nash, 2000; Nash and Scott, 2001). Furthermore, sociology 'after the cultural turn' (Nash, 2001) is resistant to positivism and functionalism that would prioritize the universality of social laws over attention to the specificity of social context, and has much in common with post-Marxism; unsurprisingly given that both bodies of work have been directly and indirectly influenced by poststructuralism. The best of this work is methodologically rigorous, using comparative analysis and the development of ideal types to organize empirical research and produce generalizations that are theoretically informed but sensitive to similarities and differences across contexts. While post-Marxism apparently gives rise to an anti-essentialist purity that deconstructs but can not construct accounts of 'the social', or that leads to logical formalism, in Laclau's view, or to a counsel of perfection that is impossible to fulfil, in Smith's inductivist interpretation of its methodological requirements, contemporary political sociology, equally concerned not to impose dogmatic concepts on complex and fluid reality, makes use of flawed and revisable models that are to be judged both in terms of the logical clarity of the concepts used and in terms of their adequacy to the empirical. There is, then, much work in contemporary political sociology that could supplement post-Marxist political theory, providing the analyses of 'actually existing' politics on which post-Marxism more or less implicitly relies.

Political sociology: a dangerous supplement

Because post-Marxism cannot develop an adequate analysis of 'the social' from within its own terms, it needs political sociology as a supplement. The necessary supplement of political sociology is not, however, an innocent addition: it does not leave post-Marxism itself unaltered. The most obvious implication of this supplementary relationship concerns the scope of post-Marxism. If the processes by which political performances succeed in that they create genuinely new practices or become institutionalized in new hegemonic forms are relatively rare, then a political sociology that supplements post-Marxism will be predominantly concerned with the failure of political possibilities, with material constraints on realizing radical change. And insofar as post-Marxist political theory is concerned above all with those rare moments, it will be of little use to most political analysis. In this case, the tools of post-Marxism become secondary to those developed by political sociologists to study political possibilities in concrete social contexts. A dangerous supplement indeed, which supplements and supplants that which should not need to be supplemented at all.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 The site of cultural politics is also, for Butler, the site of agency. She argues that performativity is not to be understood as the act by which a subject brings into being what he or she names. It is rather that the subject herself or himself is brought into being as a willing, gendered, human being in performativity. At the same time, because regulatory norms require repetition, it is never enough simply to obey them; the subject is never outside gendered constructions, but nor is he or she completely within them. The necessity for repetition, for the continual reenactment of norms, is also the condition of agency. In Butler's words (1993: 220): '[A]gency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose.'

2 As Jorge Larrain notes, Marx's idea of praxis is that consciousness is constitutive of material reality insofar as it depends on human practice. The alternative Marxist understanding of the relation between the material world and consciousness depends on what is called the 'base–superstructure' model in which ideas are seen as independent of, and ultimately determined by, economic relations (Larrain, 1986: 16–17). This is the model on which functionalism depends: the superstructural forms of capitalism, including the family, are determined by the exigencies of the capitalist economy.

3 Butler (1997b) has addressed the question of the endurance of regulatory norms and the difficulty of destabilizing them in *The Psychic Life of Power*, focusing on the formation of the subject in relation to power. However successful this project may be, though, it clearly does not begin to deal with the question of material constraints that exist independently of subjectivity.

4 It should perhaps be noted here that these claims concern only the objects of social theory. At the meta-theoretical level Laclau and Mouffe do make knowledge-claims: concerning the unknowability of social objects and also how an overdetermined social field is constructed.

5 The question of historical specificity I am investigating here does not concern the limits of representation, which do not pose any greater problems for sociology than for any other systematic body of knowledge (see note 4). If anything it concerns the status of what Laclau calls 'the example' (Laclau, 2000c: 64). For an example to add nothing to content, as Laclau suggests, is to put 'content' on the side of concept as transhistorical *as opposed to* concept as historically specific, rather than to show how content is both universal and particular, which is what he wants to argue. When Laclau gives examples of particular political demands or mass mobilizations in relation to an 'empty signifier', we are to suppose that the details of these examples are of no importance to either the form or the content of the universal. However, as Butler points out, the very contestation of an empty signifier suggests that more attention needs to be paid to particularities, rather than to the relation between the universal and the particular as such. What the example adds to content is, therefore, concrete details of the actual contestation of the universal in question. My point here is different. It is simply that the content of Laclau's examples is important because social movements have not always existed, 'the state' has a very different structure in the postcolonial and metropolitan context, 'capitalism' is not unchanging and so on. It is because concepts of 'social movement', 'the state' and 'capitalism' are significantly context-specific that it is important to understand how and why we use them to delineate particular social phenomena. This is the task of political sociology that I am arguing for here as a necessary addition to post-Marxism.

6 I have given an account of Laclau's and Mouffe's post-Marxism that focuses on the Derridean, rather than the Lacanian, development of their work. In my view, the theory of hegemony with which I am principally concerned here makes use of Derrida and Lacan to very similar ends in showing the limits of representation and its consequences for political theory, and I have focused on the former for reasons of space. It seems to me that Laclau's later 'Lacanian turn' raises similar problems with regard to an implied but unelaborated political sociology but it is not possible to deal with that here.

7 In this respect, Laclau's normative focus on the 'political logic' of equivalence as the only possibility for a left project is somewhat limiting, suggesting as it does a totalizing view of progressive politics that, under current social conditions, must take the state as its ultimate focus.

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