Beyond Post-Marxism

A Critique of Political Ontology

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Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DPhil in Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford

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Abstract

This thesis provides a materialist critique of the post-Marxist turn in left-wing political theory. I define post-Marxism as a broad current of thinkers who, regarding Marx's theoretical and political project as flawed and outdated, abandoned it in favor of a distinct set of theoretical assumptions without relinquishing its emancipatory ambitions. Theoretically, I locate the crux of post-Marxism in the substitution of Marx's materialist outlook with an engagement with Ontology derived from Heidegger's conception of the latter. This is also called 'Political Ontology', which the post-Marxists posit as the necessary foundation of any emancipatory project worth its name. Politically, I hold that post-Marxists abandon classical Marxism in favor of renovated versions of the projects advanced by Marx's rivals, namely reformism and anarchism. It is my argument that both shifts are misguided. Accordingly, I will defend the theoretical and political superiority of Marxism over the Post-Marxist outlook, maintaining that the post-Marxist turn should be reversed.

In theoretical terms, I contend that the key to Marx's intervention lay in the transition of philosophy to science. In my view, the superiority of Marx's critical method over other forms of social and political criticism lies precisely in the fact that it is grounded in a materialist-systemic rather than a moral or abstract-philosophical basis, and therefore makes it possible to provide a strategy and a set of tactics for the real transformation of the existing order. On the contrary, I see post-Marxists as retreating into philosophy under the guise of Ontology. I hold that the starting point of Heideggerian ontology is a mystification, and that their entire project is therefore vitiated from the outset. It yields an abstract and incoherent perspective that lacks any proper grip on actuality. In turn, this abstract perspective facilitates the adoption of misguided political projects that are

incapable of fulfilling the emancipatory goals advocated by post-Marxists. Both dimensions will be explored through a close engagement with the works of Giorgio Agamben, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Alain Badiou. I take these authors to exhaust the main political contours of the broad post-Marxist spectrum. Despite their differences, I argue that their works exhibit a consistent pattern: a combination of theoretical incoherence stemming from their 'ontological' outlook, coupled with a political incoherence rooted in their adherence to reformism and anarchism, while their theoretical pitfalls blind them to the shortcomings of their politics.

The defence of Marxism constitutes the reverse of my critique of Political Ontology/Post-Marxism. This defence of Marx's scientific supersession of philosophy and his call for independent class politics will be grounded both theoretically, through a systematic contrast with the post-Marxist outlook, and historically, by analyzing the essential tendencies that underlie our historical predicament and the challenges they pose to emancipatory projects.

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In the last five years I have been occupied with questions both political and theoretical that extend beyond academia. For that reason, my engagement with the political theory community in Oxford has been somewhat unsystematic. However, the OWIPT community gave me the opportunity to present my work to an audience largely unfamiliar with my topics of interests, and they engaged closely and lucidly with my arguments. I am particularly grateful to Charlie Richards and Robert Chia, who departed from perspectives than were very different from my own yet were both brilliant interlocutors. On the other hand, Anton Jäger, Stuart White, David Leopold, and Jeannie Morefield provided excellent feedback at my Transfer and Confirmation of Status. For that, they deserve my gratitude.

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is not inimical to seriousness, but its complement, and a necessary element of any self-critical outlook.

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Contents

Introduction
Towards a Reversal of the Post-Marxist Turn 8

1. What is post-Marxism? 8
2. The authors 14

Chapter 1
From the Crisis of Marxism to post-Marxism 20

1. The crisis of Marxism: A prehistory 20
2. Marx’s intellectual revolution 26
3. The crisis of Marxism 40
4. The Philosopher’s revenge 45
5. On Political Ontology 52
6. Conclusion 57

Chapter 2
Revolutionary Theory & Strategy: On Marxism 58

1. Introduction: ‘The theory and practice of the proletarian revolution’ 58
2. On Marxism 59
    2.1. Marx’s theory 60
    2.2. Marx’s politics 65
3. Marx and his political rivals 70
4. Marx and the dilemmas of emancipatory politics 74
5. Conclusion 85

Chapter 3
Windmills as Giants: On Giorgio Agamben 87

1. Introduction: A peculiar optimist 87
2. ‘A New and Coherent Ontology of Potentiality’ 89

3. Plenty of black cows: On Agamben’s night 93
4. A dialectic of possibility 98
5. The fetish of spontaneity: Agamben’s anarchism 105
6. Conclusion 108

Chapter 4
Bernstein on Steroids: On Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe 109

1. Introduction: Renovating reformism 109
2. Discursive ontology, political liberalism 111
3. Ontology and history 126
4. The antinomies of ‘radical democracy’ 131
5. The ‘Democratic Revolution’ 134
6. The contradictions of Left Populism 140
7. Conclusion 149

Chapter 5
Idealist Communism: On Alain Badiou 151

1. Introduction: A Communist Philosopher-King 151
2. The number and the Void, or Badiou and Ontology 152
3. Castles in the air 159
4. ‘Mao-spontaneism’, or Badiou and politics 168
5. Novelty as ideology 172
6. Liberal democracy and the utopian commune 177
7. Same old, same old: On Badiou’s ‘new’ politics 181
8. Conclusion 186

Chapter 6
For a Critique of ‘Ontology’ 187

1. The legend of Being beyond all beings 187
2. Ontology as ideology 191
3. Real beings 193

Chapter 7
Beyond Post-Marxism 197

1. Introduction: We need an alternative 197
2. The crisis of capitalism 198
3. The merger of socialism and the worker’s movement 210

Chapter 8
Conclusion: The Adventure of Orthodoxy
217

References
230

Introduction

Towards a Reversal of the Post-Marxist Turn

1. What is post-Marxism?

The 1980s were dark times for Marxism. The global working class had suffered a prolonged series of severe defeats. By then, the ‘merger of socialism and the workers’ movement’ was little more than a fading memory: now, both social-democratic and communist parties in most of the world had reconciled with capitalism, joining the path of class-collaboration and gradual reform. Those regimes that self-identified with Marx’s name were bureaucratic entities that hardly represented a project for human emancipation, and the international proletariat had been severely demoted as a political force. Intellectuals had defected from the Marxist cause *en masse* and now denounced it either as dry economic determinism or as bloody utopianism, sometimes even both.

In 1985, the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* shattered a left-wing intellectual world haunted by the ‘crisis of Marxism’. It was a rare case of a book that combined vehement anti-Marxism, typical of the age, with something far scarcer: a commitment to the political Left that expressed high confidence on its future. According to its authors, the Left could survive the decline of revolutionary parties, trade-union militancy, and strong and organized working classes: it only had to abandon its calcified Marxist dogmas, leave aside the class struggle, and bow to the new *post*-Marxist gospel. This message found an audience within a generally disheartened and disoriented political spectrum.

There were many at the time loudly proclaiming how flawed Marx was both politically and theoretically. Laclau and Mouffe, authors of the book, very much agreed. But whilst others simply used their criticisms of Marx as a proxy for kissing the left farewell, Laclau and Mouffe promised to renew emancipatory thought, finally setting it on correct theoretical grounds. The demise of Marxism was not something to be mourned: it was an opportunity to finally dispel the crippling myths that had only hindered progressive causes. Echoing Hölderlin, they could claim that "Where the danger is, also grows the saving power".

Thus, post-Marxism promised an alternative to Marxism that would overcome its pitfalls and provide a superior ground for emancipatory politics. As such, the term has taken on a life that goes beyond Laclau and Mouffe's intervention. It captures a general trend comprising many authors who came to reject Marx whilst refusing to join the chorus of the converts to liberalism. On the contrary, they purportedly tried to preserve the project of social transformation by placing it on a new theoretical-political basis, furnished with the intellectual tools forged in the philosophical tradition influenced by Heidegger.

The 'post' prefix came at the right time too. In the 80s, Western intellectuals enthusiastically embraced the label, to be applied to all previous traditions. Many certainties had been shattered, and the new ones did not seem new enough to merit a completely different branding. It was the time of post-structuralism and post-modernism (Eagleton, 1996, 2003; Callinicos, 1990). 'Post-Marxism' seemed the right term for something that, like the previous two cases, sought to shatter the foundations of what it allegedly superseded (Callinicos, 1985).

This thesis will present a critique of the 'post-Marxist turn' in Left wing political theory. This critique can be described as Marxist insofar as it will argue for the political and theoretical superiority of Marxism within the field of emancipatory thought and practice. In other words, I will argue that the alleged 'supersession' of Marxism that forms the core of post-Marxism is, in truth, a regression, and that post-Marxism offers no workable ground to think or fight for human emancipation. The argument will be developed along two lines. First, I will argue for the *theoretical* superiority of Marxism

over what I describe as the theoretical bedrock of post-Marxism: Political Ontology. Second, I will argue for the *political* superiority of Marxism over the different strategic lines championed by post-Marxist authors. If my contribution is to be presented as concisely as possible, it could be summarized as follows: the Left should overcome the post-Marxism turn and recover Marxism both theoretically and politically.

Within the realm of theory, I argue that despite all its claims to conceptual novelty post-Marxism has regressed to pre-Marxist modes of thought—first and foremost, recovering Philosophy as the primary way to approach politics—a mystifying move which, as we shall see, yields incoherent results. *Mutatis mutandis*, I argue that in the realm of politics, post-Marxist authors have only reasserted political traditions that were already present in Marx's time, and rightly criticized by him and his followers. Thus, their proclaimed emancipatory ambitions are contradicted by the flaws of their political proposals.

What I call 'post-Marxism' has largely dominated left wing theory for the last 50 years. Born amidst an epoch where Marxism as a global intellectual and political force entered an unprecedented crisis (Kouvelakis, 2021), post-Marxism conceives of itself as a way of going *beyond* Marxism, which it takes to be both theoretically and strategically flawed. Post-Marxism grounds this critical diagnosis in two interrelated points: Marx's materialism, i.e., the *theoretical* primacy he conceded to the forces and relations of production, and the *political* primacy he gave to the working class. These are claimed to be philosophically flawed and politically obsolete ideas that do not provide an adequate ground for emancipatory projects. In the hands of the post-Marxists, the first is substituted with a vindication of the primacy of philosophy—under the guise of post-foundationalist Ontology, which could also be called 'Political Ontology'—whilst the second is replaced with various cross-class projects.

The term 'Political Ontology' requires some unpacking. 'Political Ontology' in the sense I use the term is a (post-)Heideggerian doctrine. Within this framework, it is argued that under social and political life lies a more fundamental dimension: that of 'Being'. This is why 'ontology', i.e., the analysis of 'being qua being', is posited as the necessary starting point of political theorising. The interrogation of 'Being' thus

substitutes the analysis of the social as the basis of emancipatory thought (Lotz, 2018). Giving a 'leftist' twist to Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, Political ontologists see their reliance on a metaphysical foundation that grounds a universe ruled by definite laws as the main weakness of previous political theories. Although this foundation can take many names—God, Matter, History, etc., —its effects are said to be always the same: turning the given into something necessary. As such, it purportedly produces a *depolitising* effect, by erasing the fact that the existing political order is nothing but the outcome of contingent arrangements. As an alternative to this predicament, Political ontologists propose to conceive of 'Being' not as a fixed foundation but as something that introduces and element of instability into everything that exists whilst also grounding it. In their eyes, this juncture of instability and stability constitutes the metaphysical basis of politics, which entails that every political system is always-already open to change and contestation.

In arguing for the contingency of the existing order and calling for its transformation, post-Marxism thinks of itself as emancipatory theory. If it goes 'beyond' Marx rather than simply rejecting him—as many did during the time and before—it is because it pretends to preserve a commitment to human emancipation. In other words, it purports to retain a certain Marxian 'spirit' as Derrida famously called it. There is, however, another sense in which post-Marxism conceives of itself as going 'beyond' Marx, which relates to its claims to novelty. In a nutshell, post-Marxism in its various forms takes itself to be *politically* new: in general, it does not claim strict allegiance to previous non-Marxist political traditions, and it does not conceive of itself as part of past political currents. I will claim, however, that this self-conception is essentially misguided.

A clarification is warranted with regard to the definition of post-Marxism adopted here, which is more restrictive than others that could be found in the literature. The term post-Marxism *could* be used to describe any theory that intends to present a certain link with Marxism's emancipatory ambitions whilst rejecting (at least some of) its fundamentals. There is nothing illegitimate in that generic use of the term, which, given the hegemony Marxism used to have in the field of emancipatory theory, would apply to a great majority of the Left-wing thinkers of the last decades (Theborn, 2008). Laclau, Honneth and Habermas would fall under it, but the same could be said of Adorno, Marcuse, or

Sartre (Yibing, 2011) –making the category partially co-extensive with that of 'Western Marxism' (Anderson, 1976).

The problem, however, is that using the concept of post-Marxism in such way, legitimate as it might be, renders it all too vague, and thus not very useful. The prefix 'post', on its own, indicates nothing but a temporal relation between a before and an after. In the realm of theory, however, the term 'post' is often used more restrictively, relating it to *specific theoretical currents*. For example, being a post-structuralist means endorsing a rather specific set of theoretical assumptions, not just abandoning structuralism or being critical of it. Thinking that structuralism was flawed and must be overcome, yet contains interesting and important impulses, does not make you a post-structuralist in the way the term is generally used –only the embracement of certain theoretical ideas does. The same applies to being a post-*modernist*, etc. In both cases, previous structuralist or modernist allegiances are not a necessary condition for being labelled a 'post-structuralist' or a 'post-Modernist'. It suffices with endorsing the main assumptions underlying both currents and engaging through those new lenses with the problems associated with what they purportedly overcome.

The same logic is commonly applied to the concept 'post-Marxism'. As clarified by *Marx200*, a prestigious blog created for the bicentenary of Marx's birth to compile thousands of materials on the history and development of Marxism:

> As early as the 1980s, highly diverse authors were occasionally described as "post-Marxist" – including Hannah Arendt, Theodor W. Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas. Today, the term usually refers to a theoretical current whose engagement with Marx has been strongly informed by poststructuralist and post-operaist readings […] Today, the term "post-Marxism" is used to describe texts by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri and Slavoj Žižek, as well as by Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière and Étienne Balibar (Marx200, 2017).

This use of the term –which links 'post-Marxism' to post-structuralist theoretical assumptions– has since become a convention of sorts (Jameson, 2008; McLoughin, 2016; Meyer, 2017; Kouvelakis, 2021), and it is in this sense that the concept of post-Marxism will be employed throughout this thesis. Thus, I will define post-Marxism as a

current whose engagement with Marxism –and the emancipatory goals associated with it–is determined by its endorsement of a set of post-structuralist/post-Heideggerian (the two terms are interchangeable) assumptions that I gather under the notion of 'Political Ontology'. In this sense, 'post' Marxism is not just about going beyond Marxism: it refers to critical engagement with Marxism defined by the adoption of an approach informed by Heidegger's critique of Metaphysics. I contend that this use of the concept is heuristically superior to the more generic one, because it renders it more precise, capturing a *singular way* of overcoming the alleged flaws of Marxism whilst preserving emancipatory ambitions. In other words, it illuminates the shared theoretical assumptions of a set of left-wing thinkers (Badiou, Zizek, Agamben, Deleuze, Derrida, Toni Negri, etc.) that include the original coiners of the term, Laclau and Mouffe. Common to all of them is the belief that: "the social-economic structure of society, i.e., that which Marx called the relations of production, are no longer a proper basis for thinking about social reality and the *being* of society" (Lotz, 2018: 1335). Rather than "focusing on a theory of society as the *primary* level of human reality" (Lotz, 2018: 1335) the current I define as 'Post-Marxist' will try to find this primary level in the domain of Ontology.

Thus, a post-Marxist is an author who tries to put forward an emancipatory theoretical project whilst substituting the fundamentals of the theory that used to be hegemonic within the emancipatory field (Marxism) by the (post-)Heideggerian assumptions that constitute the ground of Political Ontology. It is implied that, from that perspective, the inadequacies of Marxism as emancipatory theory lie precisely in its inability to come to terms with the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics. Thinkers that could perfectly fit under the broader definition of 'post-Marxism', like Habermas and Honneth, are excluded from this one since they have always remained critical of the theoretical assumptions of post-structuralism (Habermas, 1990). The same applies to most authors who moved from Marxism to Social Democracy under the banner of 'Euro-communism' whilst having no truck with the Heideggerian tradition. Post-Marxism may well be, as Norman Geras (1988) famously put it before becoming an ex-Marxist himself (Eagleton, 2023), 'Ex-Marxism', but not all Ex-Marxism counts as post-Marxism. Left-wing thinkers belonging to different traditions, such as David Graber or Patricia Hill Collins, would also fall outside the scope of the term.

On the other hand, as in the cases of Post-structuralism and Post-Modernism, previous Marxist allegiances are not necessary for being considered a Post-Marxist. Giorgio Agamben, for instance, was never a Marxist in any straightforward sense –although he was influenced by heterodox Marxists like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Guy Debord (Karmy, 2022; Agamben, 2025), and started his intellectual career in an Italy where the appeal of the mighty Italian Communist Party was pervasive–, but his work endorses post-Heideggerian Ontology as a means of providing an emancipatory alternative to the latter, which he sees as tainted by the mistakes of the Western Philosophical tradition – an assumption that is part and parcel of post-Marxism as such. Agamben's whole *Homo Sacer* project is presented as an attempt to overcome these pitfalls, describing the dictatorship of the proletariat as "the reef on which the revolutions of our century [sic] have been shipwrecked" (Agamben, 1998: 12), promising a State theory that would overcome the "weaknesses of […] Marxian critiques" and arguing that the emancipatory ambitions of Marx's work were trumped by his endorsement of the flawed assumptions of Western metaphysics (Agamben, 2016: 94) —the very assumptions that the *Homo Sacer* project intents to deconstruct. This is why Agamben clearly falls under this definition of post-Marxism, as many of his interpreters hold (Sharpe, 2009; McLoughlin, 2016, 2017; Meyer, 2017, 2019; Emden, 2026).

My basic theoretical critique could be stated as follows: the Heideggerian hypostatization of Being is a mystification, and thus Political Ontology as an intellectual project is vitiated from the outset. By placing a set of pure abstractions at the basis of political theorizing, it forgets and obscures the real world, existing beings in their actual mode of existence, and the materiality of institutions and struggles. As such, it yields an ideological mode of thinking that is unable to conceptualise what the political world is and how it could be changed. Thus, the different political projects put forward by the various political ontologies are simply unconscious of their presuppositions, conditions of success, etc. They remain helplessly abstract, lacking a proper grip on reality. This abstraction, in turn, makes political ontologists particularly blind to the weaknesses of their political projects, which replicate the mistakes of some of Marx's rivals.

2. The authors

To develop my argument, I will focus on a critique of four major post-Marxist authors: Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou. The reason why I choose these authors is twofold. First, their work is representative of the different political extremes of post-Marxist thought. Every other post-Marxist author could be located within a political field where the corners would be represented by them: Badiou, the unrepentant revolutionist; Laclau & Mouffe, renovators of reformism; Agamben, the mystical anarchist. Touching on the four of them thus exhausts the whole political field of post-Marxism. The second reason is historical: unlike many other post-Marxist authors, three of them (Agamben, Mouffe, and Badiou) are still alive—and intellectually active—today, whilst the other (Laclau) died well after the 2008 crisis. In contrast, Guattari died in 1992, Deleuze in 1995, and Derrida in 2004. To various degrees, the influence of the chosen authors peaked during the global cycle of protests starting after 2008, and they remain the main influences behind the so-called 'ontological turn' in contemporary political theory (Mihai, Paipais, McNay, Marchart, Norval, Prozorov, 2017; Marchart, 2007, 2018; Paipais, 2017; Prozorov, 2013, 2014a). Slavoj Zizek's example would serve to illustrate my use of these criteria. Although still intellectually active, in political terms Zizek has oscillated between Laclau and Badiou, offering a reformist politics that endlessly toys with the idea of great revolutionary events (Robinson & Tormey, 2006; Wark, 2017). His work, therefore, lacks the political singularity and distinctiveness of the works of the authors studied in this thesis.

Since the 80s a significant secondary literature on post-Marxism has been produced, some of it of high quality and critical depth (Geras, 1987, 1988; Meiksins Wood, 1999; Borón, 2000; Saito, 2019; Kouvelakis, 2021). However, its range has often been limited to Laclau and Mouffe, and only eventually to associated authors—something it shares with the less critical literature on the topic (Sim, 2000). On the other hand, many critical reviews of contemporary left thought have also been produced, some of which provide great criticisms of some of the authors I include within the label of 'post-Marxism' (Callinicos, 2006; Wark, 2017; Garo, 2019; Piqueras, 2022). A lot can be learned from them, and I will build on these criticisms to develop mine. However, those works are focused on providing a critical overview of the various exponents of contemporary left-wing thought, often through a set of profiles, not in *systematic* critique of their underlying commonalities.

Finally, authors like Lois McNay have provided excellent criticisms of Political Ontology along lines that are similar to the ones I will defend (McNay, 2014). According to McNay, ontological approaches to the political miss the social relations underpinning actual politics, thus falling into a 'social weightlessness' that inevitably yields political abstractionism. My argument, however, differs from hers in that 1) the socially 'weighted' approach I will favor is explicitly Marxist, which I take to be superior to other alternatives and 2) I will include a *political* criticism of political ontologists also grounded in the Marxist tradition.

An approach that is even more theoretically congenial to the one I will adopt can be found in the works of Christian Lotz (2015; 2016, 2018; 2021), Paul Rekret (2012; 2016; Rekrety & Choat, 2015) and, to a lesser extent, Moishe Postone (1996, 1998, 2009). All of them have, in different ways, asserted that 'ontological' approaches are built on an idealistic inversion. In turn, they have vindicated an outlook that sees material relations between humans as the basis of social reality and focuses on History as the necessary ground of emancipatory thought. Unlike them, however, my criticism of post-Marxism will extend from the realm of theory into that of politics. Moreover, *pace* Postone, I hold that materialist theory and the emancipatory politics informed by it are inevitably tied to *class struggle*. Paradoxically, despite Postone's claims of allegiance to Marxism his rejection of the notion of class struggle makes his own position guilty of 'social weightlessness', which inevitably leads to political abstractionism (Macnair, 2022; Piqueras, 2022).

After peaking in the last thirty years, the influence of post-Marxist authors seems now to be waning significantly. The left populist strategy inspired by Laclau and Mouffe has ended in severe defeat. Syriza has been recently ousted by PASOK, Corbyn has been expelled from the party he once led, Podemos has been reduced to a marginal party. In Latin America, progressive populist governments have either vastly degenerated or been replaced by right wing ones. Whilst Laclau died in 2014, virtually at the heights of his popularity, Mouffe keeps singing the same left-populist song to a diminishing and increasingly unenthusiastic audience. During COVID, Agamben moved towards denialism and conspiracism, fiercely attacking vaccines, and quickly squandering most

of his prestige with a series of articles that equated lockdowns to Nazi Germany—to the great embarrassment of some of his followers and translators (Kotsko, 2022). Neither the French nor the English editions of Badiou's *The Immanence of Truths*, the final part of *Being and Event*, has received much attention. The frequency of his acerbic notes on French politics has waned, possibly due to his advanced age. Slavoj Zizek, once an intellectual rockstar of sorts, now fails to rouse the enthusiasm of his former audiences or to engage younger ones. His vehement alignment with pro-establishment, hawkishly pro-war views on issues like the war of Ukraine—he commended giving nuclear weapons to Kiev's regime—has damaged his reputation amongst the left, and what was once part of his idiosyncratic attraction—the sexualized jokes, the endless production of books—now seems self-parodic and tiresome. Over the years, his work has become more and more repetitive, leaving the impression of an author incapable of new ideas.

On the other hand, Foucault's dictum whereby one day the century will be 'Deleuzian' has largely failed to materialize. In fact, it now sounds alien and even puzzling, Deleuze's influence being confined to the corners of Academia. Derrida's fate has been similar. After experiencing a boom in the 90s, Derrida's influence has gradually faded until reaching a status of what could be called 'canonical marginality'. Few would now denounce him with the vehemence they displayed in the past, but likewise, few would also vindicate him with the same enthusiasm.

Unlike other post-Marxists, the late Toni Negri did engage in economic analysis with the aim of articulating concrete theories of our historical predicament. This virtue, however, seems to pale in the face of his degree of conceptual and empirical naivety—which cannot be detached from his 'ontology-first' approach (Callinicos, 2001; Starosta, 2015; Rekret, 2016; Garo, 2019). Someone reading *Empire* in 2024 might find hard to believe that someone really wrote that down in all seriousness only 20 years ago. Amid the war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza, and recrudescence of imperialist tensions, their belief about a unified 'Empire' as the new political superstructure of capitalism reads as science fiction. On the other hand, the thesis that enshrined an amorphous subject called the 'Multitude' as the new revolutionary subject and commended a renewed sub-Bakuninism as its politics soon proved its complete helplessness (Callinicos, 2001). It was realizing how impotent this kind of

‘movementism’ was what pushed many of its former defenders to shift to populist politics (Aguiriano, 2024).

Moreover, all the post-Marxist authors who are still alive have reached an age where, some exceptions notwithstanding, most thinkers cease to produce path-breaking works. Zizek is 76; Mouffe, 82; Agamben, 83; Badiou will have turned 89 only two days after I submit this thesis. In the last years, the number of academic publications on their work has waned, and the industry is now largely confined to scholars who specialize in their figures. Whether they will have a lasting posthumous influence is far from clear. On the other hand, everything indicates that the ‘ontological turn’ in political theory will remain a marginal phenomenon. None of this means, however, than post-Marxism is definitely gone. First, because its penchant for philosophical abstraction is still pervasive across supposedly emancipatory theory. Second, because a hegemonic alternative to the latter is yet to emerge.

But we might be witnessing the first steps of this emergence of an alternative, within which this thesis seeks to position itself. Marxism, declared dead by many in the 80s, experienced a comeback after the 2008 crisis and is gradually recovering popularity. Although still mostly confined to the realm of theory, a world marked by deepened class polarization, economic decline, ecological catastrophe, reactionary fervor, and militaristic barbarism might be ripe for the gradual re-emergence of Marxist politics. If we give some credence to the dictum whereby the owl of Minerva sets fly at dusk, it might be the right time to settle accounts with post-Marxism.

With this purpose in mind, the thesis will be structured in the following way. The first chapter is a *tour the force* that intends to account for the origins of post-Marxism whilst laying bare the basic theoretical stakes of the thesis. I have tried to integrate the theoretical and historical materials to avoid producing the impression whereby intellectual developments unfold in a vacuum. In this sense, the chapter has fourth goals. First, to explore the social history of the crisis of Marxism and its theoretical effects among the left. Second, to examine the crux of Marx’s intellectual revolution, analyzing his transition from philosophy to science. In turn, this exposition of Marx’s basic perspective will serve as the theoretical bedrock of the rest of the thesis. Third, to examine the crisis of Marxism as it took place in the 1980s and explore how in

theoretical terms it opened the door for post-Marxism, whose cornerstone I identify in a retreat into philosophy, and thus as a full-blown reversal of Marx's intervention. Fourth, to lay bare the theoretical basis of this retreat by analyzing the work of whom I take to be the intellectual father of post-Marxism, Martin Heidegger, and exploring how post-Marxism/Political Ontology is built on Heideggerian philosophical grounds.

The second chapter completes my overview of what Marxism is by exploring the basic contents of Marx's scientific research and the essentials of his politics. I will also present the political views of Marx's main rivals, of whom I argue the post-Marxists are political heirs and provide a synthetic exposition of the main dilemmas of emancipatory politics and the respective answers to the latter of Marxists, Social-Democrats, and Anarchists. In this sense, the chapter has two goals. On the one hand, it lays bare what is it that post-Marxists actually reject. On the other hand, it clarifies both the perspective whose superiority I will defend in the following chapters, and the rival perspectives that underlie the political contributions of the post-Marxists. In this sense, the chapter will complete the theoretical bedrock of the thesis and expose the political one. The following three chapters will contain individual critiques of Agamben, Laclau & Mouffe, and Badiou. In every case, the chapter will be divided into a theoretical and a political section. Due to their political and theoretical partnership Laclau and Mouffe will be dealt with in one single chapter. Once and again, we will see how post-Marxist theorizing falls under Marx's critique of philosophy, and how their politics replicate the errors of Marx's adversaries. In turn, these criticisms will allow for gradually building my defence of the superiority of Marxism and the need to re-embrace it. I have tried to make my criticisms of individual authors as independent from each other as possible, with the labour of tracing their theoretical and political commonalities falling largely in the next chapters. Thus, two chapters reassessing and expanding my general argument will follow. The sixth chapter will rearrange the previous materials to succinctly flesh out the core of my critique of 'ontology'. In this case, the goal is to systematically organize the theoretical stakes of the critiques developed in the previous chapters. Finally, the seventh chapter will analyze some of the main features of our historical predicament and provide a synthesis of my political argument. I will examine the historical material in depth because it serves to anchor my critique in its sociohistorical context, clarifying from which concrete position I argue for the need to supersede post-Marxism. Accordingly, the latter will also serve to historically ground my defence of

Marxist politics. A conclusion will follow, in which I will rehearse the essential arguments of the thesis and critically assess my contribution.

Chapter 1

From The Crisis of Marxism to Post-Marxism

1. The crisis of Marxism: A prehistory

How did post-Marxism come into being? How could Marxism, once the banner of the world revolution, become something to be superseded? When did it come into crisis? This chapter will explore these questions by focusing on five issues. First, it will explore the pre-history of the crisis of Marxism, exploring how its political crisis gave way to the gradual reassertion of pre-Marxian modes of thought. Second, it will examine Marx's intellectual revolution, arguing that the crux of the latter lay in the transition from philosophy to science, from idealist to materialist critique. Conversely, I will argue that in theoretical terms the essence of post-Marxism lies in moving back to philosophy from science. The third section will explore the 'final' crisis of Marxism which opened the door for the emergence of post-Marxism. In turn, the fourth one will explore the intellectual roots of this move, that I will locate in the work of Martin Heidegger. Finally, I will rearrange the previous materials to show how and why post-Marxism/Political Ontology is a Heideggerian discipline, i.e., one whose ground lies in developing Heidegger's singular way of re-establishing philosophy to the centrality it had lost during the 19th century.

It is easy to locate the time where Marxism started to be generally seen as obsolete: the late 70s and 80s. This was the period of the last 'crisis of Marxism', from which it has not recovered yet. The crisis, however, did not come out of nowhere: it had a long pre-history. This is a general point that runs against much of post-Marxist wisdom: 'Events', no matter how seemingly abrupt and world-shattering, are always the product

of long and often invisible material processes. In fact, the first time the term ‘crisis of Marxism’ was used is dated as far as in 1898. In that case, it referred to Bernstein’s revisionist challenge, which opened a fierce debate within a Second International where Marxism had until then been largely dominant, at least within its main representative: the mighty German Social Democratic Party (Lenin, 1915, 1999; Lidtke, 1966; Tudor & Tudor, 1988; Lih, 2008; Mehring, 2013; Taber, 2022).

The emergence of revisionism was part of the political debate between the revolutionary and the opportunistic wings of the International, which foreshadowed their later split (Macnair, 2008). In 1914, opportunism disclosed its political bankruptcy (Lenin, 1974) by loyally siding with its imperialist states against the interests of the global working class. Many former revolutionaries joined. Those who remained loyal to the revolutionary wing, on the contrary, preserved the banner of Marxism in the face of opportunistic betrayal, staunchly opposed WWI in the name of the proletariat’s revolutionary interests, and gained immense influence through the October Revolution, which crystallized their call for turning the imperialist war into a civil war (Lenin & Zinoviev, 2015). From then onwards, the split between the pro-bourgeois opportunists and revolutionary Marxists became permanent. Both, however, preserved for the moment the label of Marxism. In the hands of the former it became slightly more than phraseology. In the case of the latter, it was increasingly re-shaped to provide a legitimizing cover to the rule of the increasingly powerful, and finally dominant Soviet bureaucracy.

In the aftermath of World War Two, Marxism *seemed* all-powerful. Half of the world’s population lived under regimes that claimed loyalty to Marx. There were powerful communist parties in most of the capitalist world, constituting a major political force in countries as important as Italy, France, or Indonesia. Left wing intellectuals from all over the globe glossed Marxism in one way or another. Reality, however, was more complex. After World War II, the advance of ‘really existing socialism’ forced capitalism to reform. The expansion of an alternative to capitalist rule to which the world population could turn pushed the bourgeoisie to adopt policies that were previously deemed impossible. Laissez-faire capitalism was declared buried and dead, and the US applied a global policy of ‘containment’ that implied massive concessions to

the (Western) working classes. A new social contract was signed in major capitalist countries: working class forces accepted leaving the monopoly of economic and political power in the hands of the capitalist class, and thus accept the persistence of the capitalist order, in exchange of a vast system of concessions that remarkably curtailed that power.

Within this framework of 'containment', governments from all over the world—including many former colonies—were allowed by the American hegemon to pursue interventionist economic policies and forms of redistribution of wealth that were previously ruled out as completely unacceptable. The fear that any form of discontent amongst the masses could play in the hands of the Communist, making them confident enough to try to overthrow the bourgeois order pushed even hardened anti-working-class politicians like Churchill to a tactical acceptance of the new arrangement (Nayar, 2023).

More than happy with the outcome of the war, Stalin's Soviet Union dismantled the Communist International (Claudín, 1978) and actively discouraged revolution—seizures of power in China, Yugoslavia, and Albania (to which later Cuba will be added) took place *against* its advice. Working class institutions outside the Soviet block—both unions and parties—generally accepted that reformism, not revolution, was the new agenda. Again, this *included* communist parties, who were nonetheless excluded from office because despite their faithfulness to the liberal constitution—within which they imprisoned worker's struggles, they favored an international policy that did not align with the US' anti-Soviet partisan interests. In fact, the new role of the communist parties from all around the world was to promote the foreign interests of a Soviet Union that had officially consigned the project of a world-revolution to a distant future and now preferred to secure its stability as a major global player. On an international level, this *entailed* backing bourgeois nationalist forces in colonial countries and pledging loyalty to the new liberal constitutional order established in Europe. In the Soviet Union, it implied arguing that the unity of a bureaucratic state and a nationalized economy constituted genuine socialism. The narrative of the 'national roads to socialism', monolithic and bureaucratic parties, and popular frontism—the alliance with the 'progressive' bourgeoisie—became the new form of 'Marxism' (Macnair, 2008;

2024; Martins, 2024). Revolution was largely confined to backwards countries subject to the most intense imperialist pressure (Vietnam, Cuba), led or finally hegemonized by parties who shared this outlook. Heroic as the often were, they nonetheless immediately produced regimes mirroring the bureaucratic Soviet state (Santos, 2018).

If Marxism is to be identified with the strategic line advocated in *The Communist Manifesto*, it is easy to see that at this point it had already entered a profound crisis. The fact that this crisis was disguised as a *victory* made it even more difficult to identify. But it was a crisis nonetheless, whose effects are easy to trace. A 'Marxist' Party, meaning a mass force of working-class opposition to the capitalist political and economic order aiming at their international revolutionary overthrow, and committed to establishing a revolutionary democratic order (such as the Paris Commune) that would make the construction of socialism possible, had largely ceased to exist (Macnair, 2008).

The economic roots of this phenomenon are not hard to find. The reformed capitalism that emerged out of World War Two was still premised on the exploitation of the international proletariat, but it was very different from what came before, especially in the West. The long boom that succeeded the war was accompanied by the construction of a corporatist system where the working class could give expression to some of its most basic needs and aspirations (Clarke, 1988). Its political and economic subordination was now tempered with unprecedented concessions: a state commitment to full employment, state services and social security, a regulation of global capital flows and anti-cyclical public policies, direct state intervention in industrial development, progressive taxation, trade unions having a strong voice in the regulation of labour relations, etc. All of it was accompanied, in major capitalist countries, by the expansion and consolidation of liberal democracy. The market remained the organizing principle of society, but it was now intervened to tame some of its worst effects and ensure the political stability of the bourgeois order—without, therefore, challenging any of the foundations of capitalism (Moraitis, 2024). The imperialist position of the West was pivotal in securing the stability of this system of concessions, yet some left-nationalist regimes of the Global South also benefitted from the willingness of the global hegemon (USA) to allow for certain forms of redistributive and protectionist market intervention as a means to contain socialism.

The political roots of the crisis of revolutionary Marxism, however, run deeper. First, in the reconciliation of the opportunistic wing of socialism, social democracy, with the capitalist economic and political order after 1914. Second, in the development of the great majority of its revolutionary wing towards a statist, bureaucratic, and conservative 'official communism', i.e., Stalinism, on the one hand; and towards a set of splintered groups soon captives on their own dogmas, on the other (Macnair, 2008; Gaido, 2022). For a while, at least in the developed West—which still contained most of the world's industrial working class—the combination of these two factors entailed the decline of the most formidable oppositional force capitalism has ever encountered: the revolutionary proletariat. Class struggle went on, but class antagonisms were momentarily tempered. The leaders of the working class now preached faith in the system. In the West, mass consumerism and state provision of Welfare significantly alleviated the abject miseries of the previous ages. Moreover, the ideology of the age proclaimed this regained stability to be permanent.

At the same time, most of the world was agitated by anti-colonial struggles, where Marxism's influence was often pivotal. During those years, and thanks to much suffering and heroism, the old colonial order ceased to exist. Despite its insufficiencies, this was a historical emancipatory feat. Two critical points must be made, however. On the one hand, most Marxist currents engaged in anti-colonial struggles were guided by the idea of the Anti-imperialist United Front, born out of the first congresses of the Comintern (Ridell, 1991), which favored an alliance with the 'progressive' and 'democratic' national bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries. Within that framework, premised on the independence of the communist party (Machover, 2016) anti-colonial struggles were supposed to yield a 'democratic' scenario within which the direct struggle for socialism (requiring the overthrow of the national bourgeoisie) could unfold. The problem is that the various national bourgeoisies soon proved to be far less democratic than expected, they pointed their weapons at the communists, and placed their bets of different nationalist autocracies that offered no room for communist politics. Moreover, in the following decades, this framework received a sustained 'Menshevik' twist in the hands of the Stalinist leadership, turning the tactical alliance of the bourgeoisie into straightforward (and permanent) political subordination (Maiello & Albamonte, 2017; Martins, 2024). In many parts of the world this led to the

dismembering of communist forces (Hanssen & Sander, 2025). On the other hand, as previously mentioned, the countries where the communists managed to lead anti-colonial struggles soon degenerated into minor mirror images of the Soviet regime, haunted by the constant threat of imperialist aggression. As a matter of fact, anti-colonial struggles succeeded in tearing the old colonial order apart but failed to break the back of imperialism. Colonialism was thus substituted by less direct but often similarly painful forms of subjugation (Smith, 2016; Mercatante, 2022).

In the West, the disappearance of the *revolutionary* proletariat had major effects in the field of Marxist theory. To illustrate the transformation I am referring to, it is instructive to compare a 'Marxist' thinker of the previous generation—say, Lenin, Luxemburg, or Trotsky—with one of the next one—say Marcuse or Sartre (see Anderson, 1976; Nayar, 2023). This will be important for understanding the roots of post-Marxism and my critique of it. It is all too obvious that the difference between Lenin-Luxemburg and Marcuse-Sartre is not one of degree but one of kind. Not only they had different roles: the former, fierce revolutionary leaders; the latter, comfortable university professors. They also had different *interests*, and a completely divergent way of approaching reality. Lenin and Luxemburg (and one could add here any Marxist thinker of their generation) were primarily concerned with politics and economics: materialist research, class-analysis, strategy and tactics, and political intervention. Even when they delved into more abstract philosophical questions, they did so from a political perspective, as a way of clarifying principles and fighting opponents (Yassour, 1981; Bykova, 2018). Marcuse and Sartre's concerns were different. They were, first and foremost, *Philosophers* with a capital P, who approached reality from an abstract perspective (Nayar, 2023). They had little idea of political economy or its critique (Mattick, 1972). They found capitalism to be oppressive and abhorrent, but they had few constructive ideas about how it could be overthrown. Their opposition to it was more philosophical than political. In their work, concrete class analysis is nowhere to be found (MacIntyre, 1970; 2008). Their contempt for the 'quietist' and 'bought-off' Western working class —terms that they did not apply to themselves—was often explicit. 'Utopia' became for them a catchword for the hopes of a radical transformation whose traces they could not find in the present. Sartre retreated from the social, that realm of unfreedom, towards the individual and illusory radical freedom of the existentialist subject; Marcuse lost

patience with the working class and glorified the philosopher as the figure capable of seeing through the midst of capitalist ideology. In a nutshell, their retreat into philosophy entailed abandoning (the materialist analysis of) determinate reality, moving to an abstract realm where they found more comfort (Krahl, 1975; Anderson, 1976; MacIntyre, 2008).

I mentioned Marcuse and Sartre, but in one way or another the above description of philosophical quietism applies to all the major 'Marxist' Western intellectuals of the time (Anderson, 1976; Nayar, 2023). Even thinkers who were members of their respective communist parties, such as Althusser or Colletti, were mostly concerned with philosophical questions. The economy in its concreteness was equally foreign to them, and their political interventions were scarce and often erratic. Moreover, they all bought into the post-Stalinist framework, which, as we will see in the following chapters, differs widely from classical Marxists politics (Martins, 2024). Althusser's most famous political intervention (Althusser, 1978), which contains many lucid criticisms of the internal functioning of the French Communist Parties, is about defending a policy of coalition with the pro-capitalist social democrats!

In sum, whilst communist politicians accompanied their mild reformism with a tired regurgitation of Soviet jargon, communist intellectuals embarked on a one-way trip to the ethereal realms of philosophical abstraction. Moreover, this shift was accompanied by a ubiquitous denunciation of the alleged dry economic determinism and helpless one-sidedness of 'vulgar Marxism'—a criticism that the post-Marxists would simply expand to Marxism *in toto*.

2. Marx's intellectual revolution

I will argue that in the realm of theory, post-1945 'Marxist' intellectuals started a 180-degree shift—from Marx's materialism to philosophy—that would later be completed by their 'post-Marxist' heirs. To understand this shift, I will depart from the idea that Marx's major intellectual revolution laid in moving from philosophy to materialist science, from abstract notions and moralistic preaching to a concrete analysis of (historical) reality.

However, a proper exposition of this point, which would be foundational for the rest of this project, requires a careful analysis. Marx crafted his scientific outlook through a confrontation with other theories in terms that are often highly difficult to grasp, whist he rarely engaged in systematic argumentation on these issues. Moreover, some of his infamous remarks on methodological questions, such as the image of turning Hegel 'upside down', lay themselves open to vulgar and unconvincing interpretations. In fact, the very idea of 'breaking' with philosophy could all too easily be framed as a vindication of a crude form of positivism. Thus, the issue demands clarification. In what follows I will build on some contemporary Marx scholarship (Clarke, 1982, Gunn, 1987a, 1989; Starosta, 2015; Brassier, 2018; Schuringa, 2025) to offer a reconstruction of what is really at stake in Marx's transition from 'philosophy' to 'science'.

This section will only be concerned with trying to flesh out the basic elements of Marx's scientific perspective. I will focus my exposition on a few essential theoretical issues, leaving both the concrete contents of his scientific work, and historical detail aside. Elaborating on these points will be the task of the second chapter, which will complete our general overview of Marxism. I should emphasize, however, that the points that follow are crucial for my general argument, insofar as I will be arguing that if the fight for emancipation is to be put back on a correct footing, the post-Marxist reversal should be reversed, and we should retrieve Marx's scientific perspective. Hopefully, the chapter will also illuminate why the idea whereby Marxism is 'philosophically' obsolete or flawed is a false one.

In the early *Philosophic and Economical Manuscripts*, Marx (2011) condemned philosophy as abstract, *alienated* thought—a point he repeated in *The German Ideology* and later works. Philosophy is abstract to the extent that it *abstracts* from the real world to move to a purely intellectual realm. It becomes *alienated* thought because it takes this ideational realm to be primary and self-subsisting. By making these abstractions its point of departure, it reproduces an 'inverted' perspective that fails to grasp actuality. As the speculative consummation of philosophy, Marx's sees Hegel's system as the most developed version of this problem, and the point that allows for its supersession.

Thus, to grasp how Marx built his own perspective, we must trace his intellectual origins *vis a vis* philosophy, which are rooted in two interrelated traditions that found in Hegel its most advanced exponent. On the one hand, the Western metaphysical tradition that was revolutionized by Kant, whose findings were however ridden by inconsistencies that Hegel tried to overcome in a higher synthesis (Houlgate, 2004). Past philosophers had tried to make philosophy systematic by grounding it in an absolute 'first principle', or foundation. Kant, however, had shown the illegitimacy of this procedure: by trying to grasp a foundation beyond the limits of possible experience, metaphysicians overstep the limits of knowledge. Thus, their 'absolutes' were nothing but baseless projections of reason (Kant, 2013). But whilst Hegel was fully on board with the basics of Kant's argument against classical metaphysics (Pippin, 2018), he believed that Kant's position was limited, opening the door for a rather corrosive skepticism. Thus, he intended to sublate Kant by retrieving the *systematic* aspirations of philosophy, i.e., its claim to know the absolute, whilst rejecting any appeal to first principles. His innovative solution lied in making philosophy self-grounding: a totalizing system that would not require an external presupposition, since it would be able to achieve its closure 'from within'. Instead of positing a foundation and deriving a system from the latter, Hegel intends to achieve systematicity in a three-step process. First, he follows the 'experience of consciousness' to demonstrate how, again and again, consciousness overcomes the prejudice whereby 'being' is something purely external to it, until eventually realizing that thought and being are one (Hegel, 2018). Once the unity of thought and being has been established, he shows how the analysis of the most abstract and primitive categories of thought unveils their dependence on other, more sophisticated ones, until a total system of categories that exhaust the intelligibility of the real is established. This he calls 'the Absolute Idea' (Hegel, 2010). Moreover, Hegel believes that the basic categories of empirical reality, both natural and historical, can be logically derived from the Idea, and he construes his Philosophy of Nature (2004) and Political Philosophy (2008) by building on this insight. For instance, he holds that the categories of the individual, civil society, and the state and the relationship between them can be derived from the categories of particularity, singularity, and universality, etc. This is the point of contact with the second tradition that is relevant for our purposes: the tradition of modern Political Philosophy that goes back to Hobbes and passes through the likes of Locke, Rousseau, and Adam Smith. This tradition—which

Bob Fine (1984) has named “classical jurisprudence”—emerged out of the crisis of feudal ‘natural law’ theory, and it intended to find an appropriate balance between private property, that it conceived as the foundation of civilization properly speaking, and political power, i.e., the state. Here too Hegel saw his system, which enshrined constitutional monarchy as the embodiment of reason, as the final sublation of the shortcomings of the tradition. ‘Natural law’ theory presupposed an eternal, objective normative order, to which humans only had to submit. Modernity, however, destroyed that oppressive illusion, showing that laws are man-made, not given. Hegel saw the apex of Modernity in the ‘rule of law’ monarchic state whose determinations he fleshed out in the *Philosophy of Right*. Freedom, which is the reverse of reason, finally crystallized in a social order whose members could see as reflecting their own rational nature, insofar as it respected their individual freedom whilst sublating its most destructive implications within a higher political unity. If Hegel synthesized both traditions—post-Kantian metaphysics and classical jurisprudence—it is because he saw no gulf between metaphysics and society, reason being a social affair and ‘the right life’ requiring a correct grasp of reality (Brandom, 2019). As the intellectual expression of the unity of the real and the rational, he presented his system as the endpoint of philosophy, insofar as it marked the point where philosophy was finally transformed into *science*—knowledge of the actual world.

We could list at least six interrelated Hegelian insights that would be pivotal for Marx, who in every case saw Hegel as failing to properly follow their implications. First, that philosophy (and science) has no pre-determined object: it is synonymous with *rational enquiry* as such, and thus any object could fall under its view. Second, that philosophy must be ‘actualized’ into science. If philosophy is in need of ‘actualization’ is because it had conceived of reality as a purely external object, failing to see it also as a product of subjective activity— “not just as *substance*, but just as much as *subject*” (Hegel, 2018: 12)—and thus being unable to grasp it correctly. Third, that a genuinely scientific standpoint would be one that is fully immanent: instead of confronting its object with external standards—a ready-made system or ‘method’, a set of dogmatic presuppositions, an absolute foundation, etc.—it would ‘immerse itself’ into its object, exposing its determinations ‘from within’. Fourth, that since reality is not purely given but also *made*, reality is *historical*, and the task of thought is to put its time into

concepts, i.e., reach the unity of concept and actuality. Fifth, that reason and human experience are neither individual nor static: they are sociohistorical through and through, i.e., mediated by social practice. Sixth, that thought should aspire to *concreteness*, which, contrary to common sense, means that it should be totalizing. Nothing can be properly known if we try to grasp it in abstraction for the set of relations that constitute it. The term 'concrete' derives from the Latin *con-crescere*, 'what grows together'. Thus, concreteness means 'wholeness': to grasp what is concrete is to grasp the ensemble of relations that make any object what it is.

Thus, the early Marx was fully on board with this idea of 'actualizing philosophy', but he came to realize that Hegel had failed to live up to his project (Schuringa, 2025). Nostalgia for classical metaphysics or natural law theory was totally foreign to Marx: his goal was to further revolutionize Hegel's innovations to reach a genuinely critical and scientific standpoint (Fine, 1984). But this process of actualization—wherein 'love of wisdom' can be replaced by *true knowledge*—is necessarily both intellectual and practical, true knowledge having its reverse in (the fight for) the right society.

Although a proper exposition of this point could merit several books, we could say that Marx objected that Hegel was still trapped within philosophy because instead of grasping the logic of the real he turned the real into logic. Hegel's work promises to immanently unfold the determinations of reality, but he actually imposed an abstract mental logic—the unfolding of the Idea—upon it. As a result, his speculative actualization of philosophy remains enclosed within a transcendent, inverted realm. This has conservative political implications insofar as by disguising the real as rational, Hegel construes as ideally necessary social forms that are in fact transient products of social practice.

At bottom, according to Marx, Hegel's problem lies in his method, i.e., his idealist dialectic. This method is, in essence, a dialectic of self-generating concepts which claims to lay bare the logic of reality. But its pretensions ring hollow for reasons that are internal to the method itself (Schuringa, 2025). We could list four general kinds of problems that Marx found in this approach. First, that the process of conceptual self-generation which pushes Hegel's dialectic forward is based on an illusion (Marx, 1970). We should highlight that Hegel pretends that his mode of theorizing its fully immanent,

i.e., that the theorist himself neither adds nor presupposes anything, rather they follow how concepts, once rigorously examined, generate other concepts by themselves. Like Plato before him, Hegel proceeds by showing how each concept contains a difference within itself. This process of division (or *diairesis*) thus yields two concepts, which in turn generate a third one that can be said to encompass the two. The problem here is that, as Aristotle had already argued against Plato (Cohen, 1973; Vlasits, 2017), this third concept was in fact presupposed from the beginning, and thus the whole procedure is question-begging. For any 'division' to be carried out, a concept that is more general than any of those involved in the division must be at hand. Thus, Hegel's *Science of Logic* opens by showing that 'Being, pure being' is identical to Nothing, to later sublate the two categories into the more encompassing concept of 'Becoming'. But the concept of 'becoming' does not immanently emerge out of this process, which only establishes the *identity* of pure being and nothing—which is not to say that 'Being' *becomes* Nothing. In other words, it was presupposed from the outset, which unveils the idea of a self-generating dialectic of concepts as an illusion.

Marx's second objection is that this idealist dialectic functions as a conceptual straitjacket of sorts, subsuming the real under ready-made ideal rules (Marx, 1970). Hegel, for instance, assumes that any pair of conceptual opposites can be united by means of the middle term, the result having the form of a syllogism. But, Marx argues, in the level of reality we can find *real extremes* that no middle term can reconcile. By pretending that the movement of reality coincides with his own dialectic of pure thought forms, Hegel is forced to inscribe the real within a pre-established system. Moreover, Hegel's self-generating dialectic could only work if every pair of opposites could indeed be incorporated into a syllogism, allowing every difference to be reconciled within higher forms of unity—until eventually reaching the Absolute unity of Idea. But Hegel fails to prove that real extremes cannot exist—even in the realm of logic (Marx, 1970: 74-76). Again, this means that his project, which was supposed to be 'presuppositionless', actually departs from an *unproven presupposition*: the universal applicability of the syllogistic structure. In other words, instead of genuinely following the 'movement' of concepts, Hegel creates a semblance of self-movement whilst inscribing them within a previously established ideal framework.

Marx's third objection is more straightforward. It demonstrates the illegitimacy of trying to derive empirical contents out of pure thought forms. The pure movement of concepts cannot lay bare the logic of empirical reality "for in order to achieve (the semblance of) the differentiation in empirical reality, it must help itself to (by its own lights illicit) recourse to that empirical reality" (Schuringa, 2025: 75). This means, again, that, contrary to his own claims, Hegel's method contains hidden presuppositions: empirical insights, in this case. For instance, a 'pure' concept of the state, as the one deployed in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, can only be construed by idealizing certain features of existing states. The idealist method is mystifying insofar as it pushes the process of idealization up to a point where its material foundation vanishes. This, in turn, allows for presenting the existing states as a product of logic, thus completing the process of inversion.

Finally, Marx asserts that Hegel conceives real processes in terms of merely intellectual processes. Even when he discusses labour, Marx argues, Hegel conceives of it as intellectual labour, i.e., labour that does not really transform its objects. Recall that one of Hegel's key insights is that social reality is made, not purely given. However, in Marx's eyes Hegel's idealism prevents him from drawing all the implications of this thesis. By conceiving labor as intellectual labour, Hegel misses the most important element through which social reality is construed: human productive activity, i.e., social labour, a dimension that is more foundational that ideation (Brassier, 2018). Although he sees reason as social, Hegel's idealist approach stops him from grasping the actual social relations that determine reason—and thus the ones that should be 'revolutionized' if society is to be transformed (Brassier, 2025c). By the same token, Hegel's 'sublations' are purely intellectual transactions that disguise as real transformations. This is why Marx (2011) sees Hegel's 'uncritical idealism' as an 'uncritical positivism' insofar as it leaves reality as it is.

In sum, Hegel never makes good either his claim of construing a rigorous self-generating dialectic of concepts, nor on the promise that this purely conceptual movement will reach beyond itself. Whenever he attempts to do so—as in the *Philosophy of Right* or the *Philosophy of Nature*—, he just subsumes reality within pure concepts, only yielding a mystified picture. His dialectic does not fulfill its promise of

‘immanence’: it is methodologically defective, ‘movement’ being externally imported, by means of an act of mental imposition that is illicit by its own lights, into its contents. Within this framework, merely ideal movement substitutes *real* movement whilst disguising as the latter (Marx, 2011).

Marx intends to overcome Hegel’s mystified standpoint precisely by substituting his purely ideal, and thus *external* approach by the immanent analysis of the movement of the real (material processes and practical activity), i.e., history. This is the crux of his materialism. It inverts philosophy’s inversion, thus putting it ‘on its feet’, by acknowledging the primacy of the practical, i.e., the *real* activity of *real* beings, over philosophy’s misguided assertion of the primacy of the theoretical, i.e., contemplation (Schuringa, 2025: 173-177). But since the ‘logic’ of real movement cannot be pre-settled in advance, Marx rejects the construction of a ‘general logic’ or a metaphysical system as unscientific. The previous exposition should have made clear that the crux of Marx’s break with Hegel is methodological, and thus his dialectic is different from Hegel’s self-generating dialectic of concepts. For Marx, ‘dialectics’ means nothing else than the reproduction of reality by means of thought (Marx, 1973: 100-101; Starosta, 2015). This method is *immanent*, and thus scientific, insofar as it refuses to impose an external framework over its object, rather it proceeds by carefully reconstructing its determinations. In other words, it is not a ready-made ‘logic’ that is latter *applied* to reality, but something that is *set into motion* whenever thought is to grasp a certain subject-matter (Starosta, 2015), i.e., the “real logic of the real object” (Marx, 2000: 79, translation amended). Thus, Marx’s ‘overturning’ of Hegel is not about abstractly counterposing ‘matter’ to ‘the Idea’ (Clarke, 1982), but about substituting the imposition of an *external* logic upon reality by the ideal reproduction of the determinations *of reality*. This is the core of the materialist perspective that I intend to defend against the Post-Marxist resuscitation of philosophy.

A further consequence of the previous discussion is that Marx’s ‘method’ forbids systematic formalization: it can only be appreciated by following its movement, i.e., its analysis of real forms (Schuringa, 2025: 167).[1] For the same reason, this approach does

[1] For instance, Marx does not settle in advance that his analysis of a certain object will encounter ‘contradictions’, something that would require an *a priori* commitment to the metaphysical claim whereby ‘everything is contradictory’. The latter would replicate precisely what he saw as objectionable in Hegel: imposing an external, ready-made logic into reality. Whether a contradiction is found or not is

not negotiate its grip on actuality before proceeding to analyze it: it *shows* its grip of reality in the act of analyzing its concrete forms, which yields results that could be universally assessed, criticized, and tested in practice.

As this exposition should have clarified, Marx's 'method' does not have a pre-determined object. Why, however, did he devote most of his mature life to the critical study of Political Economy? Because his early analysis of the state had unveiled that political alienation is not its own cause: it is in fact a result of a specific form of organization of human productive activities, i.e., the doublet of alienated labour and private property (Clarke, 1982). Thus, the genuine starting point of materialist analysis, i.e., analysis of the *real* activity of *real* beings, must be historically determined, human productive practice (Starosta, 2015: 55). This can be explained in reasonably straightforward terms: the 'basis' of society lies in the way in which it organizes social production, i.e., its metabolism with nature, since every other type of social practice is materially dependent on it. It should be emphasized that this is not a dogmatic presupposition, but one that could be reached by rigorously analyzing any human activity. If pursued consistently, this analysis will eventually reveal the dependence of such activity—be it art, law, etc.—on the form in which social production is organized. Hereby the unity between Marx's method and the contents of his theory, i.e., historical materialism and the primacy it grants to social relations and forces of production.

Once this point has been examined, we must add a few further clarifications, which are important both for refuting the post-Marxist claim that Marxism is philosophically flawed and therefore should be superseded by a new philosophy, and for grounding our subsequent critique of the latter. This far, we have seen how Marx overturns Hegel's subordination of the sensible (real activity) to the intelligible (pure thought). But he also reversed empiricism's subordination of the intelligible to the sensible (Brassier, 2018: 113) by demonstrating that what is sensible is not directly transparent to consciousness. Social practice is the source of ideation, yet its appearance does not coincide with its essence. In our daily lives, for instance, value appears as a relationship between things, whilst it is actually constituted by a relationship between people. The work of science is

to be established through the research process (Schuringa, 2025).

to grasp the essence that underlies appearances whilst also accounting for the *reality of appearances*, i.e., that the way in which an object appears is part of its identity.

Marx shows how sensuous social practice is mediated by suprasensible social forms—such as value—which are its product yet appear as 'natural'. Empiricism, which remains within the realm of appearances, fails to grasp these social forms as products of practice, since it takes their semblance of 'naturalness' at face value. But idealism equally fails to do so, insofar as it posits the same social forms as purely conceptual artifacts. In the first case, money appears as a purely technical entity rather than a social relation that takes the form of a thing. In the second one, it is portrayed as a concept whose roots remain equally mysterious. Marx sublates both perspectives, and thus breaks free of classical philosophy, by acknowledging the reality of abstractions whilst rooting them in social practice (Brassier, 2018: 112). This relates to the old philosophical problem of 'participation', i.e., the relation between form and content, or supra-sensuous universals and sensuous particulars. Idealism sees intellectual forms as determining reality; whilst empiricism sees them as mere subjective devices. Marx inverts both idealism and empiricism by analyzing 'forms' as products of social and material practice, and thus substituting the metaphysical relation between form and content by a historical one. Universals such as the 'State', 'Value', etc., are neither separate and eternal categories wherein individuals 'participate' nor empty mental constructs, but *real, determinate* abstractions, or *social* forms, produced by social praxis. The commodity, for instance, is a juncture of value (a social form) and use-value (a material content). This perspective allows for overcoming the dualisms that plague modern thought, such as those that oppose the individual to society, subject and object, nature to history, etc., by seeing *social practice* as the mediating term between the two poles (Clarke, 1982). The difference between 'the individual' and 'society', for instance, is not given once and for all: it practically construed in historically changing terms. This is an important point that will underlie my critique of post-Marxism, whose theories deploy 'universal' concepts whose grip on reality they are eventually incapable of demonstrating.

As part of the same line of reasoning, Marx sees his own theoretical work as a form of practice. In other words, he conceives scientific activity as internal to the reality it analyzes, i.e., society, and thus his theorizing unites reflection and self-reflection. In so

doing, he intends to overcome the gulf between first-order empirical questions and second-order conceptual questions without conflating both (Gunn, 1992). This gulf, which is constitutive of contemporary 'theory' and philosophy, is surpassed by integrating both planes in the same critical act, which interrogates the accuracy of theoretical categories whist analyzing the empirical reality they describe. Kant had assumed that the conditions of true knowledge (the 'metatheoretical' level, so to say) must be fleshed out before the actual process of knowing starts, drawing a strict separation between these two levels, which pertain to different disciplines—philosophy as the realm of metatheory, on the one hand, and the various sciences, on the other. Marx, on the contrary, integrates the meta-theoretical realm, with its questions on the conditions of true knowledge, *within the act of knowing*. This approach found its best exposition in *Capital*, where Marx tries to lay bare the essential determinations of the capitalist mode of production. As such, the work contains both systematic economic claims which are accompanied by ample empirical investigation—claims that are shown to be superior to those put forward by political economists—*and* a rebuttal of the methodological foundations of the discipline of Political Economy (Schuringa, 2025: 145-168). This shows that in Marx's mind a correct exposition of a certain subject-matter is by itself a critique of the flawed assumptions that impede other authors to grasp it, showing the origin of those flawed assumptions in the subject-matter itself. Political Economy takes private property to be natural because under capitalist production the relationship between people takes the form of a relationship between things, etc. In sum, the notion of critique, in Marx's sense, is a critique of a *real object*, which incorporates within itself reflections on how the latter is being grasped and arguments against flawed manners of doing so. With this move. Marx overcomes the gulf between philosophy as a special discipline dealing solely with conceptual issues and science conceived as a separate empirical affair (Gunn, 1989). As we will see, post-Marxist authors, on the contrary, resuscitate this distinction—with debilitating consequences.

At this point we can finally reintroduce the tradition of 'classical jurisprudence', since this would clarify the political stakes of Marx's intervention. 'Classical jurisprudence' had de-naturalized feudal law, portraying its purportedly objective, eternal norms as defective sociopolitical arrangements. But it did so in the name of the *naturalness* of

private property. In other words, classical jurisprudence—like the discipline of bourgeois Political Economy that emerged from it—is also not critical enough, i.e., it is still tied to a dogmatic standpoint (Fine, 1984). It fails to see private property as a product of social relations, depicting it instead as a 'natural' form or a dictate of logic. As part of the same move, it becomes incapable both of grasping its alienating effects and its historical transience. In other words, it misses the social content of the forms it analyzes, and thus it is forced to naturalize them, be it as purely technical objects or as products of pure reason. This is why Marx takes the latter to be as incapable of reaching a genuine scientific standpoint as he sees classical philosophy more broadly. And it is also why he claimed that the essence of the 'dialectic' is "critical of revolutionary" (Marx, 2013): by ideally unfolding the determinations of human practice, and thus is objective transformative potentialities, it can consciously assert how the latter could be actualized, i.e., how capital could be superseded (Starosta, 2015). In grasping its objects, it also captures their transient character.

A few examples could clarify the above exposition. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel logically derives the 'state' from the concept of 'universality'. This makes the existing state appear as an ideal necessity, i.e., a product of logic. A truly critical method, on the contrary, excavates how the state is a product of certain social relations. This has important political implications. Thus, the young Marx argues that since the state is always (re)produced by the activity of its subjects, the 'truth' of the state is 'democracy'—since no state exists in and for itself, but only due to the active or passive acquiescence of its subjects. On the contrary, by depicting the state as an instantiation of the abstract category of universality –and, eventually, as an instantiation of the Idea–, Hegel not only misses its real origin: it also provides a philosophical justification for existing political oppression, i.e., the state as a bureaucratic organ standing above society. Hereby the unity of his 'uncritical idealism', which fails to account for the social relations that constitute the state, with an 'uncritical positivism'.

Another convenient example could be found in Marx's critique of Proudhon's *Philosophy of Misery*. In this work, Proudhon had applied Hegel's self-generating dialectic of concepts to the field of political economy. Thus, Proudhon pretends do make each economic category 'grow out' of another, whilst this movement of concepts

is depicted as a general system of political economy. But, as Marx (2009) forcefully objects, this method is at odds with genuine science, which should not depart from ready-made concepts and externally impose a 'movement' on them by applying an ideal logical template, but to interrogate the content of real economic forms and analyze their interconnection.

Marx expressed a similar idea in his brief *Notes on Wagner* when claiming that in writing *Capital* he did not depart from a 'concept' of value (Marx, 1996). He was not implying that he had a mysterious ability for thinking without concepts. What he was saying is simpler: to start by interrogating 'what is a commodity' and then finding the notion of value is very different from departing from an abstract, ready-made notion of value than is later imposed, by means of thought, upon existing wealth. In the first case, you begin with concrete material reality; in the second, you begin with a mere idea. The first method is correct and scientific; the latter is idealistic and mystifying. In the following chapters we will see how post-Marxist authors are all guilty of the charge of imposing a mental logic upon reality.

As thinkers like Simon Clarke (1982) have shown, this line of reasoning can be expanded into a full-blow critique of 'bourgeois' philosophy and social theory. In this field, 'bourgeois' is not a term of abuse, but a descriptive category encompassing those approaches that naturalize private property. This entails that they are methodologically defective insofar as they fail to take as a starting point the real relations that (re)produce private property. The 'externality' of the method implies that they fail to grasp 'the real logic of the real object', rather imposing different abstract frameworks over the latter (Starosta, 2015).

Scholars debate on whether Marx's foundational intervention should be seen as a 'supersession' of philosophy (Starosta, 2015), or as its genuine actualization (Schuringa, 2025). But they all agree that it constitutes a break with what came before, marking a genuine intellectual revolution.

The Idea of the State, the Idea of Justice, the Idea of Freedom… Those were the idols worshipped by many of Marx's contemporaries, including socialist thinkers. In Marx's

eyes, only muddled political proposals could flow from such abstractions (as was proved by the kind of projects put forward by thinkers like Proudhon). Thus, the struggle for human emancipation had to be put onto a different, materialist, and scientific, ground. As he put it in the prologue to the French edition of *Capital*:

> The method is completely different from that applied by the French and other socialists. I do not take as a starting point general ideas such as equality, etc., but I begin, on the contrary, with the objective analysis of economic relations as they are (Marx, 1972, para. 3).

A philosophical standpoint yields political projects that are grounded in conceptual abstractions like 'Freedom', 'humanity', etc., and thus subjective. A scientific standpoint would yield a project grounded on objective historical dynamics. The former provides empty moral imperatives, quietist idealizations of the existing word, and utopian ideas, the latter, political programs for social transformation. It makes possible to identify *how* society could be changed, and *who* could change it, setting the project of social transformation on firm ground. It unearths the real dynamics underlying social life and the concrete interests that play out in the political arena. By uncovering its determinations, it makes conscious revolutionary action possible. In other words, within this framework theoretical thought is nothing but the guide of practical thought, thought that is concerned with what to do, i.e., how to act upon reality. Again, acknowledging the primacy of practice, of *changing* the world rather than detachedly contemplating it, is the key to overcoming philosophy's inversion. This is the underlying rationality of Marx's famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach.

Most importantly, Marx's innovation has profound *democratic* implications. 'Science' in his sense of the term, is critical and impersonal through and through. Its procedures and results could be universally assessed, tested in practice, and criticized. As Donald Parkinson explains:

> Scientific socialism was socialism for an age of democratic mass politics because it aimed to base socialism in the type of knowledge claims that could be collectively and transparently assessed, reasoned with, and potentially verified with the experimentation of social practice (Parkinson, 2025).

In this sense, Marx's standpoint is intrinsically at odds with the conception of theory as the construction of purely subjective doctrines—something than inevitably yields obscurantism and sectarianism and is at odds with the project of proletarian self-emancipation. On the contrary, as we shall see, post-Marxism constitutes a retreat into such subjectivist mode of theorizing.

Marx's intellectual revolution was a world-historical feat. Some parts of it, like the centrality of economic motives in explaining political behavior, could even be considered common sense by some (Hobsbawm, 2011). But the development of class struggle during the last century eventually led to the degeneration and crisis of Marxism. The philosophizing, anti-Marx turn of the post-1945 (and especially post-1975) European left should be read as part of this general historical process, which will make the content of the next section. Throughout this thesis, I will argue that this turn entailed a move away from reality to a realm of abstractions with no genuine grip on it. In this sense, it constituted a regression to pre-Marxian modes of thought, whose impoverishing theoretical and political outcomes I will examine in the following chapters. In turn, the next section will explore how this form of theorizing should be seen as a (defective) subjective response to conditions of objective revolutionary defeat.

3. The crisis of Marxism

The 1960s witnessed the last generalized example of radical working-class militancy in Europe. The dreams harbored during those years of radicalism, however, were soon confronted with the reality of a crushing defeat. In the West, the main institution of the working class—both trade unions and parties—had long ago been integrated into constitutional loyalism and were unable to meet the revolutionary expectations of new militant generations. In other words, the 'merger of socialism and the workers movement' had failed to materialize, leaving the proletariat uncapable of genuinely struggling for political power (Parkinson, 2018b). In the mid-70s, in the face of its political bankruptcy, Western European communist parties replaced Soviet-style socialism with Eurocommunism, which entailed the definitive acceptance of political liberalism and the capitalist state. It seemed about time to make explicit in theory what was already true in practice. Amongst intellectuals, however, the right-wing turn was

even more pronounced, and soon the very concept of the revolution, past or present, was condemned as synonymous with disaster (Furet, 1981, 2000; see also Judt, 2005; Judt & Synder, 2012). The Soviet Union had claimed Marx's name for decades, and the loss of the latter's popularity entailed, in the eyes of many Western intellectuals, the intellectual bankruptcy of the former—along with the whole revolutionary tradition stemming from 1789. Hereby the 'crisis of Marxism'.

The paradox is that all these developments took place in a world where the post-War accommodation of reformed capitalism was coming to an end. The crisis of the 1970s brutally asserted the accuracy of Marxist theory, that, against both classical liberal and Keynesian drams, had proved that capitalism is built on contradictory foundations that make it an inevitably crisis-ridden system (Mattick; 1991; Clarke, 1988; 1994). However, Marxism itself had declined so profoundly that few were there to echo this truth. If anything, the end of the 'Keynesian State' seemed a reason to move further away from anything resembling class politics (Meiksins Wood, 1999). 'Class' itself was, in the eyes of many intellectuals, forever identified with the forms it took the period ranging from 1945 to 1975 (and mostly in the West), with its massive industrial unions and mass reformist workers' parties, its large manufacturing companies and the hegemony of the blue-collar male worker. A vanishing world.

What is often known as 'Neoliberalism' was a class offensive of the bourgeoisie in the face of declining profitability and economic stagnation (Clarke, 1988; Bonefeld, 1993; Copley; 2021; Moraitis, 2024; Ruiz, 2024). Those optimistic Keynesians that had dreamed of a managed capitalism where slumps and crisis would be a distant memory were proven wrong: whether 'managed' or not, capitalism was still capitalism, a system where the necessary development of the forces of production stands in contradiction with the requirements of valorization.

However, its integration within the capitalist state had weakened the working-class in both political and theoretical terms. Early neoliberal measures encountered remarkable trade-unionist opposition, but none of this gave rise to a revival of mass revolutionary politics. Quite on the contrary: the political Left either accepted the new predicament or was consigned to marginality (Gray, 1998; Sassoon, 2010; Schulman, 2015). When the

institutions that had organized the proletariat in the last decades entered in crisis, the latter was largely expelled from the political arena.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90s gave a further twist to this process. Now liberal capitalism had no enemy and no alternative, the main reason it had forced it to reform. In turn, the breakdown of the very notion of an alternative to capitalism (a process where the degeneration of the Soviet Union played an important role) further weakened the labour movement. Once capitalism is taken to be unsurpassable, everything that remains must conform to its imperatives, at best, trying to tame them.

The 'Keynesian' social contract in the West had two preconditions: massive economic growth grounded on large manufactured production, mass consumerism, and the imperialist position of the West and enabled by the massive destruction of capital during WWII (1) and fear of communism and the organized working class (2). By the mid-70s, both were fatally weakened. By the 1990s, they had largely disappeared or experienced a marked decline. The imperialist primacy of the West remained, but under conditions of slow growth that have little to do with the vigorous economic development of the post-war years. This explains the hegemony of neoliberalism. However, 'neoliberalism' did not entail a full-blown return to pre-Welfare state capitalism because this was deemed politically unfeasible. The working class was (and still is) too important of an actor, no matter how politically weakened, for it to be drastically deprived of all sorts of concessions. At least in the imperialist center capitalists had learned the importance of the levels of social cohesion and political stability afforded by the provision of at least some forms of wealth redistribution. They knew that their immediate eradication would entail social chaos, mass upheavals, and the potential crystallization of a renewed alternative to their rule. Thus, abrupt changes were combined with a more gradualist approach, certain concessions were left in place, and the levels of state spending remained high. The recent decades have established a model of brutal economic inequality, liberalized capital flows, creeping financialization and the gradual proletarisation of much of the former middle classes, yet class struggle is still partially tamed by 'pacifying' economic intervention, which is combined with an authoritarian turn that has shielded major decisions on economic policy from any form of popular pressure (Gill & Cutler, 2014; Bonefeld, 2017; Ruiz, 2025) whilst amplifying the

repressive powers of the state (Robinson, 2020). Liberal democracy is gradually hollowed out to protect a declining capitalism from popular demands (Mair, 2013; Bruff and Tansel, 2020).

The capitalist class constitutes a very tiny minority. Thus, its rule always requires the active acquiescence of a sector of the population whose support must be won (Trotsky, 1993). During the 19th century, this sector was constituted by the middle classes and, in some cases, the peasantry. After 1914, however, and especially after 1945, the labour aristocracy was included in the deal, labour bureaucracies becoming a pillar of capitalist rule over the working class (Macnair, 2008). Even in the heights of 'neoliberalism' the capitalist class could not afford to completely lose this crucial ally. Thus, on the one hand, the labour bureaucracy preserved both its alliance with the capitalist class and its hold over the organized workers' movement, and the capitalist state cunningly left in place a vast network of (declining) welfare institutions whilst engaging in public spending to achieve some minimal levels of social peace. On the other hand, changes in the economic structure such as increasing automation and deindustrialization pushed the expansion of a third sector composed of small companies that gave little leverage to the working class at the level of the workplace. Finally, the 'There is No Alternative' ideology reigned supreme after defeats of the 1970s, China's transition to market capitalism, and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet bloc. The combined effects of both factors rendered the working class increasingly powerless, putting an immense obstacle to its constitution as a renewed oppositional force. It now composed a fragmented mass, haunted by expanding unemployment, divided between those who kept increasingly scarce stable jobs and those toiling in small third sector companies, and 'pacified' through a combination of government subsidies, the dampening effects of labour bureaucracies on militancy, and a policy of cheap credit that fleetingly created an illusion of increasing wealth—only to break up abruptly after the 2008 crisis. For the first time in 150 years, the Western working class seemed incapable of independent political action *as a class*. Meanwhile, the confrontational arena was gradually occupied by movements and ideologies that proudly claimed to be cross-class (Burns, 2022). This should not erase the fact, so often occluded, that the working class has remained the backbone of every moment of resistance. However, it failed to *lead* them and to organize them as part of a unified class struggle against the capitalist order. During

those years, many intellectuals went as far as to declare class struggle buried and dead (Meiksins, 1999).

In the East, the situation was not particularly promising either. On the one hand, the former Soviet states were swallowed by a brutal wave of neoliberal reforms that gave way to a distinctly authoritarian form of capitalism (Clarke 2007). On the other hand, although global industrial production had largely moved to Asia, which now counted with an industrial working class numbered in hundreds of millions, the Asian working classes are yet to become mass forces of political opposition to their respective capitalist states. Capitalist-bureaucratic regimes, like China's, have proven quite successful in preventing oppositional militancy to spread amongst workers—although they are far less able to suppress strike action, which remains widespread in Chinese economic life (Davis, 2018). Moreover, unlike in the West, despite ruthless exploitation the living conditions of much of the South-Eastern Asian population, and particularly the Chinese, have improved remarkably within the last decades (Nayar, 2023), providing these systems with a momentary source of stability.

Finally, in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East the revolutionary wave of anti-colonial struggles came to an end after the 1970s, often through brutal imperialist interventions. Whilst successful anti-colonial struggles mostly congealed into oppressive Bonapartist regimes, a series of coups leading to far-right military dictatorships (Chile, Argentina, etc.) managed to contain revolutionary forces. The scattered Soviet-like regimes that were established in Africa soon proved too isolated and politically fossilized to serve as role-models for their neighboring countries—and Cuba soon followed the same path. On the other hand, in the Middle East the defeat in Yom Kippur marked the decline of pan-Arab nationalism, soon to be superseded by reactionary forms of political Islam backed by pro-US regimes such as Saudi Arabia. In turn, the communist forces were either brutally repressed by nationalist movements or de-legitimized by their subordination to them (Hanssen & Sander, 2025). Later, the wave of neoliberal policies stymieing from the 'Washington consensus' largely demolished the minor concessions conquered by the popular masses of the global South in the previous decades (Westra, 2009; Saad-Filho, 2021).

In the 80s and 90s, the dismembering of those forces who had opposed capitalism was accompanied by the triumph of a post-political predicament that embodied the optimism of Western capitalist elites. Besotted by the extinction of their long-term enemy, they loudly proclaimed the 'End of History' (Fukuyama; 1991; Anderson, 1999). This has been the scenario of the development of Post-Marxist theory. Post-Marxists challenged the end of history narrative. Even so, it is striking how incapable they have been of providing any meaningful alternative explanation of the dynamics that underlie it. With the partial exception of Toni Negri, who preserved a stronger link with Marxism, one can read the complete works of any Post-Marxist author without finding any detailed materialist explanation of the transformations of the world in the last 50 years. This blind spot is explained by the radical twist they gave to the infatuation of post-1945 left intellectuals with philosophy. The result is a complete reversal to the intellectual revolution performed by Marx.

The difference between the rarified Marxism of the likes of Marcuse and full-blown post-Marxism is that the former still acknowledge, if only in passing the primacy of social relations of production in the structure of human reality, whilst the latter scorn it as useless dogma. The foundation of human reality ceases to be socio-economic: it is now taken to be philosophical. Below the dull surface of the ways in which humans reproduce their life lies something allegedly more fundamental: Being. It is here were Christoph Lotz's analysis offers a poignant observation: political ontologists are defined by their search for the basis of society in something other than society itself (Lotz, 2018). Materialist analysis ceases to be *fundamental*—in a quite literal sense. In other words, these authors reverse the scientific supersession of philosophy that we have explored in analyzing Marx's critique of Hegel. To understand this shift, we must now turn to the intellectual genealogy of post-Marxism.

4. *The Philosopher's revenge*

If Political Ontology has a father, it is one who would hardly fit within the history of progressive thought: the philosopher and Nazi rector, Martin Heidegger. The intervention of the so-called 'Magician of Messkirch' was pivotal in restituting philosophy, in the form of ontology, to its lost centrality.

Heidegger's whole intellectual career revolved around a distinction he termed ‘the ontological difference’. This is the distinction between Being and beings, the ontological and the ontic. According to Heidegger, all Western thought—and *modern scientific thought* in particular—is founded on the failure to understand this distinction: this he calls the ‘oblivion of Being’ (1993, 2011). From this he draws the most astonishing implications. The conflation of Being and beings that allegedly starts with Plato opened the door for treating everything that exists as an object for calculation and technical manipulation (Heidegger, 1973, 1977). In Heidegger’s eyes, the philosophical tradition, which he often calls ‘metaphysics’ had conceived Being as a particular kind of entity that purportedly ‘grounds’ all the other entities—the classical notion of God being the clearest example. Nihilism, the destructive predicament that haunted the West, was the inevitable outcome of the conception of Being as *ground*, which eventually leads to discovering that the supposed ground was nothing but a human projection, making reality collapse into meaninglessness—a key Nietzschean point that Heidegger (2011) would rework and develop. This fully de-mystified outlook yields an image of reality as a disenchanted set of objects to be mastered, and measured which Heidegger takes to be fateful.

Heidegger held that every social practice, and the ‘historical destiny’ of any society more broadly, is not determined by its material features, social and politics institutions, or the like. but by something more primordial: the preunderstanding of Being, of the things and events that can appear in the world at all, which underlies it and is best articulated in metaphysics (Heidegger, 2000). This move is key in his restoration of philosophy to its lost centrality because it posits the analysis of social practice—which Marx (1969) saw as the key to all theoretical mysteries—as secondary, whilst ‘Being’ and the ‘primordial’ relationship of the Dasein to the latter become primary. This requires some unpacking. In principle, the early Heidegger gave pride of place to practice: in fact, what is ‘fundamental ontology’ interrogates is the ‘preunderstanding of Being’ that is purportedly implicit in our practical comportment toward things. Yet he did so in a way that is at odds with Marx’s (Brassier, 2025b). As we saw in the previous chapter, Marx explores the historically changing relations between human material practice and the social forms that encapsulate it, dialectically articulating subject and

object. On the contrary, Heidegger conjures a ‘primordial’ form of unity between Being and the Dasein that is purportedly prior to any social mediation or subject-object division, and which is in turn anatomized through a set of trans-historical categories (‘theyness’, ‘being-in’, ‘being-with’, etc.). From a Marxian perspective, this means that Heidegger departs from an inversion, retreating from *real* practice to freeze the latter in a set of purportedly eternal categories. It follows that the unity between Being and Dasein that Heidegger invokes as prior to social mediations is just a mystification, since our understanding of ‘the kind of things that could appear in the world’ is not previous to social mediations but rather their product. In fact, when approached rigorously, it is not difficult to see how Heidegger’s categories are idealistic generalizations of some features that derive from capitalist social relations (Kosik, 2022). This point will be explored further in Chapter 6. For now, we should continue with our exposition of Heidegger´s thought.

Because he took the metaphysical understanding of Being to be fatally flawed from Plato onwards, Heidegger became a man with a self-proclaimed mission: the ‘destruction’ of Western metaphysics. Against this tradition, Heidegger relentlessly insisted on the point that there is something deeper and more primordial than beings, and he disguised the thought aiming at it with a cloak of radicality that fascinated many of his students, including Hannah Arendt, Gadamer or Löwith (Wolin, 2015). Heidegger ‘‘separates Being, which had been understood as the Being of beings, from the beings’ (Habermas, 1990: 131) by means of hypostatization, treating it as something more primeval and evasive, something that ceaselessly ‘withdraws’ itself, whilst also being the horizon within which existence must be understood. In this sense, it is both the source of meaning and the condition for Dasein’s potentialities. Thus, for Heidegger ‘change’ in a fundamental sense derives from a transformation of the form in which being appears—its self-disclosure or ‘Event’—material processes unfolding within this more foundational dimension.

Although it is hard to paraphrase Heidegger without replicating his obscure style, we could say that for Heidegger being is not ‘what is present’ (the ontic) but what presents itself in what is present, without ever exhausting itself in the act of appearing (thus Being’s ‘withdrawal’). As Ray Brassier puts it, according to this line of thought “Being

is not given, but it is the implicitly understood meaningfulness of givenness as such" (2025). Heidegger hypostatizes the sheer fact that things 'are', i.e., their 'thatness', disentangling it from their real determinations, and later focuses on the way we understand the meaning of anything 'being' at all. But since sheer 'thatness' is not a determinate thing, it cannot be conceptually grasped, and it does not constitute a stable foundation for reality either: it is the ground of every being, but it is a 'groundless' ground. Since we are dealing with an issue that has been defined as transcending conceptual apprehension (Heidegger's Being cannot be properly *known*), he only hints at it with metaphors like 'the abyss' (2012), whilst Man's relation towards the latter is also approached metaphorically (as 'neighboring', 'sheltering', listening to the 'voice of Being, etc.). The underlying idea, however, is just that beings are not 'founded' on a stable base: on the contrary, they are founded into a kind of 'nothingness' that is nonetheless productive, insofar as it determines the ways in which beings appear. There is, in other words, something else than 'the present': an ineradicable *difference*—i.e., non-dialectical negativity—between what appears and what shows itself in what appears that splits, haunts, or destabilizes, every identity or positivity whilst also providing its conditions of existence (Heidegger, 1969). This is the basic implication of the 'ontological difference'. The 'withdrawal of Being'—its transcendence regarding the given—opens the door for the possible. Very importantly, this is a possibility that cannot be rendered determinate by rational reflection. That would reduce it to a material potentiality, which belongs in the realm of beings, thus reinstating the mistakes of the Western tradition. Since Being withdraws, which means that it is beyond what is present, it is literally *unpresentable*. The only correct relation towards it transcends reason, requiring an attitude of openness towards that which cannot be consciously apprehended. Hereby Heidegger's enmity towards rationalism in the broadest sense of the term, that places him within the strong irrationalist currents that became prominent within the right in the early 20th century (Habermas, 1990; Lukács, 2021).

At the time, German-speaking Marxian intellectuals either dismissed Heidegger as just another reactionary or framed him as an enemy to be destroyed (Adorno, 1977, 1984; Lukács, 2021). After the War, when he was expelled from university due to his links to Hitler's regime, it was reasonable to think that Heidegger's star was forever extinguished. But it was not, largely thanks to the French philosophical sphere. Much to

the astonishment of Adorno and the likes, in France Heidegger's thought was well received by fashionable left-wing intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre. Paradoxically and perhaps tragically, Heidegger's way back to prominence passed through Sartre, the archetype of the 20th century committed intellectual (Sebille, 1966).

There are two things that Sartre and his generation found attractive in the early Heidegger. They are worth examining because both—and specially the first—will be immensely influential for the post-Marxists. First, his totalizing attack on metaphysics, i.e., the Western philosophical tradition, which allegedly failed to grasp the 'ontological difference'. Second, the existentialist outlook that he derived from this difference. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger had argued that the question of Being is the question of the *meaning* of Being, and thus leads to the examination of the only being who interrogates this meaning, that Heidegger calls 'Dasein', i.e., the human. Fundamental ontology (the interpretation of Being) therefore requires the existential analytic, the examination of the basic features of the being of Dasein. According to Heidegger, the most important of them is *finitude*, which condemns the Dasein to an everlasting search for meaning.

This was an ontological rewriting of Kant's epistemology. Kant had famously argued that finite beings, whose knowledge is restricted to the boundaries of experience, cannot grasp that which lies beyond any possible experience: the Absolute, or God (the highest Being, or foundation, in the philosophical tradition). Being *as such* cannot be known; we can only know what is *for us*. Heidegger radicalized this turn to claim that the problem laid in a tradition that had conceived of Being, i.e., the Absolute (or God) as a *foundation.* In other words, an Ontology that is an *Ontotheology*, and conceives of Being as a God-like *ground* (Heidegger, 1969: 50). This was an illegitimate projection whose incoherence Kant had proved, Heidegger (1997) argues, without deriving all the necessary conclusions. Doing so requires moving from epistemology—Being as foundation cannot be *known*—to ontology—there is no such thing as Being as intelligible foundation, guarantor of the stability of meaning. Finitude is thus ontologized: the sheer 'thatness' of Being remains a mystery that humans can only endlessly interpret, trying to come to terms with it in the best possible way. The *Dasein* is thrown into a reality deprived of stable metaphysical grounds and fixed meanings. It is condemned to interrogate 'Being', but the latter remains structurally elusive. In the face of this, the early Heidegger argued for a struggle for an authentic existence, capable

of confronting those uncomfortable truths and the generalized trend towards conformism. The less palatable dimension of his argument is that since Being's ineradicable 'distance', i.e., its otherness, is complemented by its 'intimacy' as the source of meaning, the 'we' that approaches the mystery of Being can only be the kind of 'we' that Heidegger takes to be the most intimate or 'teluric': the people, the nation, the race.

Sartre's popularity contributed to saving Heidegger from philosophical oblivion, restoring him into the center of European—and especially French—philosophical debate (Janicaud, 2024). From then onwards,—and thanks as well to the previous work of popularization of his philosophy conducted by Alexandre Kojève (Sebille, 1966)—Heidegger would be common coin among progressive philosophy students—a term that was almost a pleonasm in Post-War France (Beevor & Cooper, 2007). However, the all-pervasive influence of Marxism in those years kept his influence at bay, restricting it to the purely philosophical realm.

Meanwhile, Heidegger, thus timely spared from ostracism, continued promoting his own figure, now surrounded by a carefully crafted halo of mysticism. After his famous 'turn' (*Kehre*) his thought had shifted from the militant existentialism of *Being and Time*, which lay behind his enthusiastic participation in the Nazi regime (Bourdieu, 1991), to a more quietist, semi-mystical stance. The relationship between the Dasein and Being (co-constitutive of meaning) that had occupied the early Heidegger disappeared from the picture, giving way to a more otherworldly focus on the 'meaning of Being'. In his seminars, he mixed appeals to a neo-pagan imaginary, intricated analysis of poetry and art, and his gift for making philosophical obscurity captivating to create a combo that seduced talented young philosophers coming from different corners of Europe. One of the attendants was a young Italian called Giorgio Agamben.

At the time, Heidegger's influence was also felt in the process of intellectual rebranding carried by German conservative intellectuals after the demise of Hitlerism. Once seduced by the now bankrupt regime and totally unwilling to alter the essentials of their worldview, conservative German intellectuals found a refuge in what Adorno (2002) called 'the Jargon of Authenticity'. Both theoretically evasive and rhetorically bold, the

jargon of authenticity was a pseudo-existentialist predicament that served to disguise as radical what was nothing but an incapability of developing a critical stance towards the fundamentals of capitalist society. It is in this kind of operation where Heidegger's thought provides a precious resource. It is useful to highlight it at this point because it will be important for the rest of my argument. Beyond his concrete arguments on Art, Theology, Time or any other concrete issue, what Heidegger has to offer is the possibility of combining political quietism with a posturing of intellectual 'radicality'. A radicalism for non-radicals, so to speak.

Heidegger frequently insisted on how risky and dangerous his thought was; how adventurous his demolition of the Western tradition, and how unique the ideas he wanted to develop. He constantly pushed the notion that his deepest insights were basically incommunicable, at least through rational language. All this had a captivating effect on a growing number of students and followers. In more general terms, however, Heidegger's key intervention laid in restoring philosophy, in the form of Ontology and the critique of Metaphysics, to the centrality it had lost in the 19th century. Habermas expressed it well:

> Heidegger puts philosophy back in the dominant position from which it had been driven by the critique of the Young Hegelians […] The critique of Idealism had resulted in the disempowerment of philosophy—not only in relation to the independent logics of science, morality, and art, but also in relation to the independent right of the political-social world. Heidegger returns to philosophy its lost plenitude of power (1990: 131-132).

In my view, this was a form of obliterating Marx's revolution, i.e., a reactionary rebuttal of scientific materialism. This is why I argue that 'post-Marxism', which is entirely grounded in this reassertion of philosophy's centrality, falls *behind* Marx. It reasserts the idealistic inversion which makes abstract notions primordial and material arrangements derivative. More precisely, it makes the *real* activity of *real* beings secondary in relation to a purportedly more fundamental dimension. Theoretically, this entails that scientific research is secondary in relation to the interrogation of Being. 'Ontology' is thus a metatheory of sorts, which subordinates every knowledge process to the more primordial task of dealing with the question of Being. But since what is specific of Being, following the thesis of the 'ontological difference' is its withdrawal, i.e., that it cannot be rationally apprehended as a stable foundation, this type of

‘metatheory’ is concerned with crafting different concepts or metaphors that emphasize groundlessness, contingency, and ineffability.

Heidegger’s influence in the French philosophical sphere was acutely expressed within the post-structuralist movement, which carried his imprint (Williams, 2005; Janicaud, 2024). In the 1960 and 1970s, many intellectuals gradually deserted, at least in the realm of theory, a Marxism that was seen as crude, deterministic, etc., embracing the more fashionable post-structuralist creed. Rebelliousness gradually shifted from the realm of politics to that of philosophy. In the 1980s, the political bankruptcy of Marxism opened a door for a more strictly political framing of those post-Heideggerian ideas that the post-structuralists had rebranded in a seemingly progressive spirit. This new philosophy-first approach would fill the hole created by the ‘crisis of Marxism’. This is how the ‘Magician of Messkirsch’ (Nazi Party membership number 3125894), the man who told the members of the French committee who judged him that his commitment to the NSDAP was “the only and ultimate way to halt the advance of Marxism in Germany” (Varela, 2009), became the main philosophical influence on the generation of left-wing thinkers that enacted the post-Marxist turn. Their internal differences notwithstanding, all these authors take the framework designed by Heidegger as their intellectual point of departure (Merchant, 2007; Badiou, 1992, 2005; Van Heiden, 2014, Alepuz, 2019). We could say that the late Louis Althusser saw it coming. In 1984, he laconically remarked: ‘‘I am tired of Nietzsche and scared of Heidegger”.

Once the intellectual genealogy of post-Marxism/Political Ontology has been drawn, we can finally turn towards its analysis.

5. On Political Ontology

I have asserted that ‘Ontology’ in the Heideggerian sense constitutes the theoretical foundation of what I define as post-Marxism. Within this tradition, this Heideggerian conception of ontology is often referred to as ‘Political Ontology’ (Marchant, 2007; Abbott, 2014; Paipais, 2017). This requires some unpacking. The term ‘Political Ontology’ can be taken to refer to a discipline oriented at examining the basic structures

of the types of *entities* that compose the political 'world' (Hay, 2006). 'Political Ontology' thus understood examines notions like the individual, the collective, society, etc. in the abstract, and it did gain some attention a few years ago. But the previous discussion of Heidegger's work should have made clear that this is not what it is meant by (Political) Ontology in post-Marxist theorizing, nor the way I will use the term. However, I should also add that I take that approach to be particularly prone to mystification. What the individual 'is' a question that should be approached historically, not 'ontologically'. A concept like 'the individual' would hardly refer to the same thing in ancient Athens and contemporary Los Angeles (Wood, 2010). *Mutatis mutandis*, if, for instance, politics is identified with *class* conflict (as Marx did) it cannot be taken to be eternal (Roberts, 2017a).

Heideggerian thinkers would argue that 'Political Ontology' as Hay understands it is nothing but a regional ontology, whilst theirs is a different business. From their perspective, the study of *beings* (political or not) presupposes a previous understanding of Being that is left uninterrogated, and thus 'Political Ontology' in this literal sense reinstates the 'oblivion of Being'. Ontology in the way I will use the term—which is how it is used within the 'ontological turn' in Political Theory—departs from the idea of the ontological difference: there are beings and there is Being, and confusing the two is a fatal mistake. It is thus a 'fundamental ontology', not the ontological analysis of a specific sphere.

Emphasizing this point is necessary to avoid potential misunderstandings regarding the object of my critique. 'Ontology' is a complex term, which could be used in remarkably different ways. In fact, three possible modes of 'ontological' theorizing could be distinguished.[2] The first one we could call 'essentialist' ontology, which could also be termed 'classical metaphysics'. Its main avatar would be Christian Metaphysics, and it was intellectually destroyed by Kant. The second and more contemporary one we could call 'non-essentialist' ontology. It can be seen as a mode of generalizing the results of the various sciences, which it takes as its point of departure, trying to formalize their results and produce fine-grained conceptual frameworks. Regardless of its merits, Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* could be seen as an example of this mode of theorizing.

[2] I owe this clear formulation of this important distinction to Anton Jäger.

Most of what is called ‘ontology’ and ‘metaphysics’ within Analytically minded philosophy departments also falls under this category. ‘Non-essentialist’ ontology is a risky business since it is always in danger of producing fallacious generalizations and empty abstractions. However, a critical engagement with this form of theorizing lies beyond the scope of this work. The third type, however, could be called ‘anti-essentialist’ or ‘post-foundationalist’ ontology, and it will be the sole object of my critique. It refers to the post-Heideggerian tradition, built on Heidegger’s basic rendering of the ‘ontological difference’. Throughout this work, the term ‘ontology’ will *always* be used to refer to this current. I will also indistinctly name it ‘(Post-)Heideggerian ontology’, ‘post-foundationalist Ontology’, and ‘Political Ontology’. All those terms, in sum, will refer to the same tradition. Finally, I would like to emphasize another important point. Even if I will often refer to post-Marxist authors as ‘post-Heideggerians’ the prefix ‘Post’ does not carry the same implications in both cases. ‘Post-Marxism’ entails a *rejection* of the basics of Marxism, whilst what is normally termed ‘post-Heideggerianism’ entails an *acceptance* of the most essential dimension of Heidegger’s intervention (Marchant, 2007). In the latter case, the prefix ‘post’ simply refers to the fact that they build on this intervention in ways differ from Heidegger’s, yet still belong to a unified tradition.

What is Being, then, within this tradition? As intimated in the previous section, it is a ‘groundless ground’—echoing Heidegger’s dictum whereby “The ground grounds as abyss” (2012: 25). Recall that any order is determined by the way in which beings appear, but Being is not exhausted in this appearance. This is the reason behind the analogy with an abyss (groundlessness) which nonetheless *grounds* (because things are always organized in particular ways, even if that arrangement is contingent).

The latter approach has been described as ‘post-foundationalist’ because it eschews facile *anti*-foundationalism (Paipais, 2017). Resting content with highlighting that there is no such thing as a stable foundation behind our norms, institutions, and practices risk falling into an unproductive form of skepticism that Political ontologists tend to identify with the worst expressions of Post-Modern thought. To overcome this, the stability afforded to particular orders by the (historically shifting) forms in which Being appears must be acknowledged, whilst remembering that Being is a ‘groundless ground’ and

thus every order is internally split, contingent, founded in conflict and open to change and contestation (Marchart, 2018).

Thus, political ontologists argue, the ontological difference can be deployed to describe the interplay between the constitutive groundlessness of every political order and the inescapability of 'grounding', which always yields a concrete outcome (i.e., a fixed set of arrangements that constitute a political order). The first, deeper level, is 'The Political', whist the second—the constituted political regime—is 'Politics'. In other words, 'Ontic' politics—that is to say, everyday political choices, events, and struggles—hide a more fundamental 'ontological' dimension of the political, defined by contingency, instability, etc. It is this deeper, ontological level of the political, what determines the character of everyday politics (Kowalewski, 2022: 1). This is why conflict is unavoidable and change and everlasting possibility. Existing arrangements could always be transformed: there is nothing eternal about them. On the other hand, this always leads to the creation of a new order. Although not all of post-Marxists accept that this entails that 'Being' and 'the Political' are synonymous—Badiou is a notorious objector to this idea (Prozorov, 2013)—they all share the basic structural premise of the argument. Most importantly, the latter establishes that *change* should always be conceived as the manifestation of the 'groundlessness' of Being into the order of beings. To put it in more straightforward terms, we could say that within this tradition 'Being' is the source of change/potentitality.

Once this framework is accepted, it is easier to see why post-Heideggerians pretend that the ontological difference is so important for emancipatory thought. Downplaying it would allegedly entail presenting what exists as metaphysically *necessary*, thus—or so they claim—foreclosing the possibilities for change. On the contrary, through the ontological difference we can see everything that exists as open to contestation (guaranteed by the very nature of 'Being' as something that withdraws, etc.). This is why for authors like Laclau, Mouffe, Zizek and their heirs, to ontologise—to highlight the groundlessness of any political order—becomes synonymous with *to politicise*—to prove that existing arrangements are contingent, and things could be changed.

In a sense, post-Marxism's obsession with the critique of foundationalism can be read as an overreaction to a line of argument that became common in Western Marxism: that which attributed the miseries of Stalinism—and thus the alleged bankruptcy of Marxist promises of emancipation—to its *philosophical* basis. According to this train of thought, Stalinism was the product of an economic determinism which turned History into a metaphysical foundation unfolding with blind necessity. The kind of attempts to provide a materialist examination of the preconditions of the triumph of Stalinism exemplified in works such as Bettelheim's *Class Struggles in the Soviet Union*, or even the ones of Trotsky and several Left Communists—which, regardless of their merits, tried to approach the phenomenon materialistically—was thus substituted by pure philosophizing. Through a gruesome inversion, the foundation of Stalinism ceased to be social and political to become philosophical (Greene, 2023). It appeared as the product of a wrong metaphysics. Post-Marxists would simply add that this flawed metaphysics extends to Marxism as such (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001), and that a new philosophy is therefore needed.

The 80s and 90s witnessed a boom of 'left' ontological theorizing (Strathausen, 2006, 2009). It was the time of the publication Laclau and Mouffe´s book, along with Deleuze and Guattari´s *A Thousand Plateaus* and *What is Philosophy?*, Schürmann´s *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, Badiou´s *Being and Event*, Zizek´s path-breaking *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and his provocative *The Ticklish Subject*, Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, the beginning of Agamben´s *Homo Sacer* series, Rancière´s *Disagreement*, Nancy´s *Being Singular Plural*, Hardt and Negri´s *Empire*…

It should be noted that many different political projects could follow from the truths of Political Ontology. One could accept them and become a mild reformist: change is always possible, so we should constantly push for minor changes whilst rejecting 'utopian' ideas of building a society without conflict. Someone else could depart from the same premise and become a dogmatic revolutionist: *radical* change is possible and nothing else is worth hoping for. Moreover, there is no necessary link between Political Ontology and left wing thought. This is an addendum of the post-Marxists. But the mild reforms I just mentioned could be devoted to make Britain even more racist, and the thirst for radical change could amount to craving for a Fascist dictatorship.

Hereby the internal political variety of this current. In truth, these thinkers only have two things in common, politically speaking: they are all 'Left-Wing', in the minimal sense that they aim at the transformation of the world along more egalitarian and progressive lines, and they all reject classical Marxist politics. Within that common ground, however, widely different approaches have flourished. Badiou's post-Maoist fixation on world-shattering Events and militant fidelity, Deleuze and Guattari's 'schizoid' anarchism and Agamben's quietist anarchism, Laclau and Mouffe's populist reformism… However, there is something else they all share: they all are renovated versions of the political projects attacked by Marx and defended by some of his rivals. Thus, in the following chapters I will argue that:

1) Laclau and Mouffe echo Bernstein and they reproduce the classic antinomy of reformism, whose loyalty to the system prevents it from achieving any meaningful change. 2) Badiou's sectarian revolutionism, which replicates Bakunin's positions, cannot provide a ground for communist *mass* politics, and is thus incapable of preparing the working class for revolution and leading a revolutionary process. 3) Finally, Agamben's mystical anarchism aggravates all the classical problems of the latter, by relying on a fetishization of spontaneity that leads to political impotence.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter we have dealt with several materials which, in their interrelation, are vital for the critique of post-Marxism. First, we have excavated the prehistory of the crisis of Marxism. Second. we have focused on Marx's intellectual revolution, which provides the theoretical foundation of this thesis once it is complemented by the contents of the following chapter. Third, we have explored the 'crisis of Marxism' that took place in the late 1970s and 80s, out of which post-Marxism grew. Finally, we have turned to the intellectual foundations of post-Marxism, trying to frame them as an attempt to reverse Marx's intervention. This was the crux of our discussion of Heidegger, that will illuminate our chapters on post-Marxist authors. As explained in the last section, Heidegger's work provides the theoretical basis of Political Ontology, whose basic tenets we have analyzed. Once this has been established, in the next chapter I will try to

complete the picture of what I take Marxism to be, and in what will it differs from the political alternatives put forward by his rivals. This allows for understanding what do post-Marxists leave behind and what will I vindicate in the chapters dealing with their critique. Since I have argued that post-Marxists ultimately side politically with some of Marx's rivals, this should also illuminate what is at stake in this move—a move that will be criticized from Chapter Three onwards.

Chapter 2

Revolutionary Theory & Strategy: On Marxism

1. Introduction: 'The theory and practice of the proletarian revolution'

In this chapter I will be concerned with the fundamentals of Marxism, i.e., the defining lines that make Marxism what it is, separating it from other theories and political strategies. Whist in the previous chapter I have already outlined the basics of Marx's scientific standpoint, in this one will flesh out the basic *contents* of Marx's revolutionary intervention. Since what constitutes the fundamentals of Marxism is not fully self-evident, the labour of reconstruction is inevitable. Thus, in what follows I will build on my previous discussion of Marx's 'intellectual revolution' to flesh out what I take to be, on the basis of the best available evidence, the basics of Marxism. In turn, the contents of this chapter will serve to illuminate the critique of post-Marxism that will be developed in the following ones.

The nature of the argument in this chapter is necessarily general. Theoretically, it focuses on the most essential scientific breakthroughs that are attributable to Marx. I do not intend to reduce Marxism to those discoveries, which only constitute its bedrock. As the previous chapter should have made clear Marxism is a totalizing approach that has no pre-determined object, despite the centrality it grants to material relations of production. As scientific socialism, it is an open-ended, critical approach that encompasses both the natural world and society, trying to grasp their dynamic unity. Politically, the chapter focuses on fundamental theoretical and political-strategic principles. Specific tactics, which are largely conjunctural—unlike tactical principles, which derive from the nature of the theory and the strategy—, must be left aside for the time being. The same applies to very specific theoretical arguments, regarding issues as concrete as the turnover of capital or the nature of Bonapartism. One could perfectly reject Marx's arguments on those issues and remain a Marxist. On a similar vein, one could find some of the tactics preached by Marx at any point of his life wrong or

unfeasible in the present and remain within the field of Marxism—in fact, Marx and Engels themselves were critical of some of their tactical choices (Marx & Engels, 1850) or argued for the practical obsolescence of some of their early political proposals (Marx & Engels, 2025). But post-Marxists' criticism goes directly to the heart of Marxism, which is therefore what will be further explored in the following pages.

I will first provide a brief exposition of the basic strategic outlooks of Marx's opponents within the socialist camp. I contend that the basic strategic choices and dilemmas of emancipatory politics within capitalism were already fleshed out in the 19th century—although their *systematic* development pertains mostly to the 20th. Finally, I will expand on Marx's takes on the main issues and dilemmas of emancipatory politics, trying to contrast its views with those of its rivals. More precisely, I will focus on three key issues: 1) the need for the political action of the proletariat, 2) the need for the proletariat to seize political power, destroy the existing state-form, and establish its rule over the other classes during a period of transition, 3) the equation of socialism with the socialization of production on an international scale. Thus, this chapter is mostly descriptive, its goal being to lay bare the main stakes of emancipatory politics. However, in the critiques of individual authors that make the content of the following chapters I will try to demonstrate the superiority of Marx's answers to these questions over those of the post-Marxists. In other words, the purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, to expose what do post-Marxist really reject when abandoning Marxism. Second, to preemptively disqualify misguided criticisms of Marx, like the accusation of 'class isolationism' or 'totalitarianism'. Third, to build on the insights of the previous chapter to lay bare what will I defend when vindicating the superiority of Marxism over post-Marxism.

2. On Marxism

Marxism is a unity of theory and practice. In Marx's eyes his general theoretical standpoint and his basic political framework were intrinsically linked: one followed from the other, as was already apparent in *The Communist Manifesto* (Volodia, 2025b). Hereby Marxism's description as "the theory and practice of the proletarian revolution" (Draper, 1977).

Marxism as a strategy could be summarized in four core ideas. First, the emancipation of the working class would entail the emancipation of humanity. Second, the emancipation of the working class can only be its *self*-emancipation, i.e., it will not be graciously provided to them by enlightened despots, the state bureaucracy, minorities of conspiracists or representatives of the other classes. Third, the working class can only emancipate itself, and humanity along with it, by fighting for communism. Fourth, to fight for communism, the working class must organize itself into a revolutionary political party, aimed at seizing political power and establishing working class rule over all aspects of society, with the goal of 'expropriating the expropriators' and fully socializing production (Macnair, 2008).

The soundness of this strategy depends on several interrelated theoretical points, i.e., the overall coherence of Marxism as a body of theory. Both dimensions of Marxist strategy and theory were jointly developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Draper, 1977: 23-26). Although the former was the key innovator, the importance of Engels should not be underestimated. His path-breaking *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was pivotal for fueling Marx's interests in the industrial proletariat as an agent of social transformation. He was a superb and versatile materialist theorist on his own right (Hunt, 2010; Blackledge, 2019; Kräpke, 2020), and co-autor of crucial works like *The Communist Manifesto* or the foundational *The German Ideology*. Finally, it was also Engels who popularized Marx's theory and continued his political legacy by decisively contributing to the formation of the Second International, where Marxist came to be accepted as the guiding theory of the worker's movement (Taber, 2022).

2.1. Marx's theory

Marxism conceives itself as synonymous with *scientific* socialism. As explained in the previous chapter, the underlying idea is that with its advent socialism ceased to be an abstract notion, arising either from the minds of brilliant individuals or abstract appeals to a just society, to become a project grounded on historical reality and its tendencies.
In 1880 Marx described his theorical project as an attempt to 'prepare the way for the critical and materialist socialism, which alone can render the real, historical

development of social production intelligible'. As Michael Kräpke notes, 'Marx never departed from this idea. The aim was and always remained giving the socialist movement a solid, social-scientific foundation instead of a political philosophy' (Kräpke, 2018: 92).

The previous chapter has fleshed out how Marx built his scientific standpoint by 'superseding' traditional philosophy. But we will now turn to the central contents of his scientific research. Giving Engels' talents as a popularizer, his 1878 short and relatively unknown piece, *Two Discoveries of Modern Socialism,* could serve as summary of what the two friends took their basic scientific breakthroughs to be.

According to Engels, modern, scientific socialism rests on two path-breaking discoveries, both attributable to Marx. The first and most general one is what would later be known as 'historical materialism', which Engels (2022) calls 'a revolution in the whole conception of world history' and explains as follows.

> The whole previous view of history was based on the conception that the ultimate causes of all historical changes are to be looked for in the changing ideas of human beings […] But the question was not asked as to whence the ideas come into men's minds and what the driving causes of the political changes are […] Now Marx has proved that the whole of previous history is a history of class struggles, that in all the manifold and complicated political struggles the only thing at issue has been the social and political rule of social classes, the maintenance of domination by older classes and the conquest of domination by newly arising classes. […] these classes owe their origin and their continued existence […] to the particular material, physically sensible conditions in which society at a given period produces and exchanges its means of subsistence.

With this discovery, Engels continues,

> History was for the first time placed on its real basis; the palpable but previously totally overlooked fact that men must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, and therefore must *work*, before they can fight for domination, pursue politics, religion, philosophy and so on —this palpable fact at last came into its historical rights.

Thus, as already hinted in the last chapter, Marx discovered the *basis* of human reality in the material relations through which human beings reproduce themselves at any point in time—encompassing the forces and relations of production and cohering together in a *mode of production*. When material relations are organized though different groups linked by exploitative arrangements, social reproduction takes the form of *class struggle*. This, Engels argues, had immense importance for the socialist outlook, since it finally placed socialism on firm ground, anchoring it in the movement of history, and thus to *politics*. Socialism ceased to be a beautiful idea, a moral imperative or an abstract blueprint of the perfect society; it was now rooted in the real historical process and the development of a class that had an objective interest in conquering power, overturning class society, and socializing production: the proletariat. Modes of production emerge, become dominant, and later start a process of decline which points to their replacement, through a period of transition, by a new mode of production growing out of the old—a process headed by the class embodying the new mode of production taking political power.

Most importantly, Marxism's is not a theory of an allegedly separated technical sphere, 'the economy', whose workings would purportedly determine, in a mechanistic way, the human life-process. The facile accusation of 'economism', which is all too present in the works of the post-Marxists, fails to come to terms with Marx's real intervention (Lotz, 2018; Saito, 2019, Piqueras, 2022). Instead of reducing 'society' to 'the economy' Marx saw the economy, which Political Economists had conceived as a natural sphere, as a product of social relations (Mau, 2023). Marx refuses to take as his starting point a picture of society as composed by separate spheres (the economy, Law, religion, etc.) each possessing a logic that is fully independent from others (Clarke, 1980, 1982, 1991). This picture is intrinsically question-begging, since it fails to interrogate how those allegedly discrete realms are constituted in the first place, i.e., how they are the product of a specific way of arranging the human life-process. Marx is precisely concerned with the latter, the human life process as a whole (the social totality) to which the unity of social relations of production and the forces of production provides the key, since every social activity depends on the form in which humans reproduce their lives.

In sum, Marx offered a new starting point for those trying to make sense of human reality—and particularly for those who did so with the aim of transforming it. Within this framework, a new form of grasping politics, Law, etc., arises, one which refuses to detach political projects from the way in which each society materially reproduces itself.

Marx's second great discovery, according to Engels, is more specific and it is a product of approaching the reality of capitalism materialistically, i.e., trying to reproduce, by means of thought, the basic determinations of the capitalist mode of production. Marx's opens *Capital* by interrogating the nature of the commodity, the 'economic cell form' of bourgeois society, as a juncture of use value and *value*. Value—i.e., exchangeability—is not a physical property of the commodity but a purely *social* property deriving from it being a product of private and independent labour. Each society must organize the labour of its members in a certain way to reproduce itself. But when labour is organised in private and independent units its products take the value-form, since exchange the only way through which the labour that produced them can count as socially useful. Commodity-exchange is thus an exchange between equal amounts of socially necessary abstract labour (the substance of value), which must take the form of money to make the generalized exchange-relation feasible. This entails that the social metabolism is unconsciously regulated through the *ex-post* coordination between a myriad of independent producers and consumers (the market). In turn, this means that producers stand toward each other in a relation of competition, which forces them to make a profit they can reinvest to become more productive and thus keep or expand their market share. Thus, the compulsion to generate profit is embedded in the private organization of social labour, regardless of the personal greed of the individuals who compete in the market. However, if exchange is the exchange *of equivalents*, it becomes unclear how something like profit is possible on a structural scale. This is the same as asking how *capital* as self-valorizing value can exist. The question had haunted classical political economists, who never found a convincing answer. Marx found one, however, by pointing at the exploitation of the proletariat as the key. For profit to be possible, there must be a commodity that can yield more value that the value it costs to (re)produce it. This commodity is none other than labour-power, which is sold at its value—the socially necessary labour time for the reproduction of the worker—but which can be

used to produce value beyond that. In other words, to produce *surplus* value, the foundation of capital. The separation of the producers and the means of production that forces the worker to 'freely' sell its labour-power to the capitalist, entering an exploitative relation, is thus the foundation of the capitalist mode of production. By discovering the source of surplus value Marx had finally unveiled the mystery haunting classical economists: capital, the 'all powerful economic force' that dominates modern society, becomes the name for the general social relation built on the exploitative relation between the latter and labour, i.e., class struggle. This scientific breakthrough provides the foundation for the rest of *Capital*, which lays bare the dynamics of a system based on the production of (surplus) value, ultimately demonstrating that capitalist accumulation is inherently contradictory—and thus inevitably crisis-ridden—because it tends to expand the productive forces beyond the limits of valorisation (i.e., acceptable surplus value production and realization), thereby pointing towards its own demise, to be realized by the proletarian revolution. These discoveries provide the bedrock of Marx's politics, which will constitute the content of the next section.

However, two preliminary points must be made on the political weight of the previous discussion. Both are of great importance for the critique of post-Marxism. First, the rejection of what Engels called 'the materialist view of history'—which post-Marxists do reject (Lotz, 2018)—leads us back to a world where politics is one-sidedly approached as a domain of free-floating Ideas, concepts, wills, etc. This is a mystified view, and its adherents will be uncapable to explain what drives actual processes of transformation, which material forces are determining political conflicts at each point, and how the latter will evolve in the future. The outcome, in other words, is 'social weightlessness', i.e., a reinstation of political idealism. Within this framework, the potentials for social change cease to be properly *social* to be grounded in abstract philosophical notions—'impotentiality' (Agamben), 'antagonism' (Laclau & Mouffe), 'the Event' (Badiou), etc. Second, the rejection of the materialist view of history inevitably leads to the dismissal of (self-conscious) class politics. Class ceases to be fundamental once relations of production are taken to be secondary at best for political action (Wood, 1999). As we will see in the following chapters, this is a major weakness of post-Marxism, one that fatally undermines its self-proclaimed emancipatory

ambitions. In the next section, we will see how Marx built a coherent political project on the cornerstone provided by the materialist view of history.

2.2. Marx's politics

This section will be concerned with Marx's revolutionary political outlook. First, I will explore its historical-theoretical sources. Second, I will lay bare its basic logic as a call for working-class independent political action. Finally, I will explain why this perspective should not be confused with 'economism'—that is, the reduction of politics to 'bread and butter' issues, indifferent to the state-form—and why it is necessarily internationalist.

Lenin famously portrayed Marx's intellectual formation as a synthesis of three traditions: German Philosophy, British Political Economy, and French socialism. Despite its potential limitations (Leopold, 2009), the picture is a compelling one, but it should be expanded to include two key and interrelated sources of influence that would be crucial for the formation of Marxism: European—particularly French—republicanism and British Chartism (Leipold, 2024: 8).

One dimension that was well captured by Lenin is how Marxism was not formed by simply taking its sources at face value: it radically transformed them. British political economy became the *critique* of political economy, idealist philosophy was superseded by materialist *science*; French utopian socialism became *proletarian, revolutionary-political* socialism. The same applies to this fourth component. Marx did not simply take republicanism and Chartism as they were: he aimed at preserving their best insights whilst placing them on a superior ground.

If European republicanism (i.e., Jacobinism) and British Chartism can be taken as a single source is because they both partake of the same democratic-republican revolutionary tradition that would furnish the *political* dimension of Marxism. As Leipold notes, Marx started his intellectual career as a radical republican "committed to overcoming the arbitrary power of despotic regimes through a democratic republic in which the people held active popular sovereignty through public administration by

citizens and the control of representatives through binding mandates" (2024: 8-9). During 1843-1844 he enriched and deepened this picture by transitioning to communism (Marik, 2017), because he understood that overcoming political alienation, i.e., true democracy, required overcoming private property, i.e., socialism.

From very early on Marx understood the connection between communism and the proletariat, but at first, he approached the proletariat from an abstract perspective, as a mere placeholder of Philosophy's call for a free and rational society (Davis, 2018). The full transition to materialism in the following years yielded a *concrete* understanding of the proletariat as a historical force engaged in class struggle. Overcoming philosophy entails abandoning externally imposed ideal frameworks in order to focus on the internal tendencies of reality. British Chartism, developed in the most advanced capitalist nation, proved that the class struggle necessarily takes a political character. Chartism constituted the first *political* movement of the working class: hereby its crucial importance for Marx and Engels's outlook (Engels, 2010; Macnair, 2013; Marx, 2019).

What was missing in the picture of both European Republicanism and British Chartism was the need for socialism. As Marx and Engels demonstrated, wage-slaves would never emancipate themselves by purely political means: they should thus strive to use those political means to break their *economic* chains. In fact, were they to seize power, Marx argued, they would necessarily move in this direction, since the objective economic interests of the proletariat stand in antagonism to those of private property.

With this insight, the strategic and theoretical framework sketched in *The Communist Manifesto* was completed. The working class should gradually build its organized movement within capitalism through independent trade-unions, cooperatives, clubs, etc., and most importantly, a *political party* leading the whole movement in its struggle against capital and the states of the great proprietors. In so doing, socialism will merge with the worker's movement, now conscious of the means of its emancipation (Volodia, 2025b). Most importantly, this perspective relinquishes *instrumental* conceptions of the proletariat as a tool for the implementation of a philosophical-utopian design crafted by a brilliant theorist. It does so by placing the principle of self-emancipation at its core. Within this framework, socialism ceases to be an external 'idea' to be implemented: it

becomes the internal goal of the proletariat's struggle for emancipation (Draper, 1971; Löwy, 2005; Davis, 2018).

By constituting itself as a party, the working class becomes an independent *political* actor capable of struggling for its own interests and imposing its programme of political and economic transformation. This party should be separated from, and opposed to, all the parties of the propertied classes, since the latter were tied to the defence of the root of proletarian subordination: private property. For the same reason, this party should have socialism as its goal, since only under socialism could humanity be liberated from the fetters of capital. Finally, to implement socialism, the party should lead the working class in seizing political power—i.e., 'winning the battle of democracy' (Marx & Engels, 1992)—and imposing its rule over the propertied classes. As such, the party is the *political head* of the worker's movement, comprising its most conscious members—that is, its 'vanguard'—, and providing the working class with an independent political voice—a say in all political matters, from women's rights to international politics, that reflects its class interests—deriving from a programme where its project of liberation is crystallized. It should eschew doctrinarism in favor of science, be centralized and as democratic as the political contexts allows, and strictly internationalist. Moreover, it should also be a revolutionary *mass* party, capable of leading the working class and other oppressed sectors towards the seizure of power. Once in possession of political power—i.e., the power to take collectively binding decisions at the general level of society—, the proletariat would use it to destroy its economic chains and build a classless society founded on collectivized production (Aguiriano, 2024).

Since these insights provide the ground for Marx's defence of the need for *proletarian* class politics, which post-Marxists reject, they require some unpacking. First, it should be highlighted that for Marx the proletariat is constituted by all those who are separated from the means of production and thus depend on wages for their subsistence (be it directly or indirectly), and not just of current wage workers. This lack of property entails an objective interest in the socialization of property, though which the proletariat can actualize the historical tendency leading to increasing socialization of production on an international scale. But it can only do so by organising social production through conscious cooperation, as opposed to the unconscious competitive dynamic driving capitalism (Carrera, 2007).

Due to its dispossession, the proletariat is objectively pushed to *conscious* association to defend its interests. Lack of economic power and the kind of traditional social bond uniting peasant communities renders the individual proletarian powerless against the owners of the means of production. The dynamics of capitalist production, in turn, create a ceaseless drive for increasing exploitation, which includes the tendency to push wages below the level of subsistence. All the latter forces the proletariat to create large organisations as the only means to defend its class interests—through collective action, which is where its force lies—and eventually emancipate itself, when achieving consciousness of its goals. In Kautsky's words:

> Its organisation is the weapon that will emancipate the proletariat; it is the weapon of class struggle that is particular to the proletariat, just as that of the feudal lord was the sword and armour and that of capital is money (2015).

Unlike guilds or churches, being a member of these organisations is voluntary, and thus a conscious choice. The proletariat's need for association and its objective interest in socialism, i.e., collective appropriation of the needs of production, are two objective features of capitalist reality. The possibility of the two fusing into a class-conscious movement is what makes the proletariat the revolutionary subject, providing a new organizing basis for society—one that stands in direct antagonism towards the capitalist principle of private competition. Every improvement of the conditions of the working class *as a class* requires the imposition, however partial, of this principle: conscious intervention in the economy in the form of labour regulations, fixing a maximum working day, etc. Political democracy allows the working class to organize, educate itself, and agitate for these goals. However, whilst capitalism and the capitalist state remain in place this principle will only expand in limited and contradictory ways, remaining trapped within a general framework created by and for the expansion of capital, and political democracy will remain dwarfed, being limited to acquiescence to minimal forms of popular power *within* a general context whereby the state (as a *capitalist* state) remains a bureaucratic-coercive force standing over society (and thus a form of class rule by the property-owning minority), and the organisation of production remains beyond any popular control. Thus, the working class will remain exploited and dispossessed. Only the full implementation of this principle, requiring the subjection of social production to conscious and collective decision-making, could liberate it from its

chains. Becoming conscious of this issue requires the merger of socialism and the worker's movement, most clearly crystallized in the party as the most advanced section of the class, and thus charged with extending this message, and the organizational forms tied to it. Once socialist consciousness has become widespread within its ranks, the proletariat can advance firmly towards its self-emancipation. As was acknowledged in the documents of the First International, the first step of this process is the 'conquest of political power by the proletariat'. If political power remains in the hands of the propertied classes, the working class will be incapable of fully implementing the policies that could end its economic subordination. On the contrary, once in power the proletariat could start the transition towards socialism—a classless society built on the conscious association between free producers—by establishing a genuine democracy that allows it to expand the principle of collective decision-making to every social sphere (which means destroying the sources of power of the ruling class), and crushing counter-revolutionary forces.

Most importantly, this revolutionary-political outlook entails the stark rejection of economism (Lenin, 1999; Lih, 2008), the doctrine that confines the political action of the working class to reformist trade-union politics, solely focused on 'bread and butter' issues and indifferent to the state-form. The whole point of Marxism is that the proletariat, constituted as a political party, should address all the relevant social and political issues from the perspective of the emancipatory overthrowing of present society, which requires placing a *political* revolution at the core of the project. In fact, as Kautsky clarified, Marxists see the achievement of partial material improvements as strategically subordinated to the goal of the seizure of political power by the proletariat (1881). Emphasizing the same point, Lenin (1988) argued that socialist politics is, unlike pure trade-unionist politics, about turning the proletariat into the agent capable of encompassing the struggles against any form of oppression within the project of superseding the existing political and economic order. Thus, those who claim that women's liberation or anti-racism are foreign to Marxism are simply attacking a caricature. The same applies to the charge of 'class isolationism', supported by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), since Marxist revolutionary politics presupposes the *leadership* of the proletariat over other oppressed strata (Lenin, 1988; Levi, 1924).

On the other hand, the international nature of capital makes the proletarian revolution a necessarily international process (Engels, 1847). This is also what makes it the first historical possibility for the emancipation of *humanity*, which capital has interconnected to a historically unprecedented scale. *Mutatis mutandis*, the proletariat can only organize itself as a political class by organizing on an international scale: its political action is necessarily international.

These points are pivotal for clarifying what is at stake in the defence of Marxist politics I will present in the following chapters. Accordingly, they are important for laying bare what is missed if we accept the pervasive rejection of classical Marxists politics that is espoused by many contemporary theorists, including every post-Marxist thinker. However, if the politics of the post-Marxist are to be critisiced we need first to have a clearer grasp of the views of Marx's political rivals.

3. *Marx and his political rivals*

In the following section, I will present the strategic views of the main left-wing alternatives to Marxism as they were developed by developed by Marx's political rivals. In so doing, I intend to explore the political currents of which I see Agamben, Laclau, Mouffe and Badiou as heirs. First, I will focus on the British tradeunionists and Bernstein as representatives of reformism. Second, I will examine Bakunin's thought and other variations of anarchism. Finally, I will briefly analyze Blanqui's approach. Although this means leaving aside thinkers like Proudhon or Lassalle, I take them to be broadly included within other currents.

The central argument underlying my approach is that the different strategic lines represented by Marxism and its rivals exhaust the field of grand strategic options for emancipatory politics (Macnair, 2008). In fact, these could be reduced to three major families: Reformism, Marxism, and Anarchism, each having a key strategic concept at their core: class collaboration, independent political action, and revolutionary spontaneity (Aguiriano, 2024: 187-188). Blanquism, for instance, relies on revolutionary spontaneity to the extent that its bet on conspiratorial minorities renders it powerless when it comes to the long process of patiently preparing the working class for a conscious revolution. So does Proudhon, who offers little explanation of how the mass

of the workers could come to implement the two salvific economic reforms he favored. Other early rivals of Marxism, such as State Socialism, fall within the first group. Contemporary perspectives that discuss emancipation without mentioning class are just another cross-class project, etc. This thesis has decisive implications for my argument, insofar as it establishes that an emancipatory supersession of Marxism would require proving either Reformism or Spontaneism right. In the following chapters, I will expose how post-Marxist authors fail to do so whilst nonetheless embracing either Reformism (Laclau and Mouffe) or Spontaneism—be it in Badiou's or in Agamben's version.

During Marx's lifetime, 'Marxism' was mostly identified with his basic strategic vision: the need to build independent working-class parties to struggle for political power and the socialization of the means of production. In the task of winning the worker's movement to this strategy, Marx and his followers had several major rivals. The most prominent ones, which somehow anachronistically we will call 'reformism' and 'anarchism' were represented, along with Marxism, within the First International. The center of the debate were the different views on the need for the independent political action of the working class.

In the International, 'reformism' was represented by British trade-unionists, who were more foreign to revolutionary socialism than members from other countries. In a nutshell, 'reformism' seeks the gradual improvement of the conditions of the working class through loyal collaboration with the capitalist state and bourgeois forces. Class political independence is thus substituted with *class compromise*. The version of reformism favored by British representatives in the International aimed at combining trade-union struggle with pressure on the most progressive wing of the political establishment: the Liberal Party. Political action was left to the progressive capitalists, obliterating the need for a working-class party, and confining the proletariat to economic struggles. Thus, within their framework the need for independent *economic* action was accepted whilst the need for independent *political* action was rejected.

A few years after Marx's death—and only few months after Engels'—Eduard Bernstein presented his own systematic theoretical defence of reformism. Although Bernstein already felt under acute criticism from Marx and Engels from exposing class-

collaborationist views (Marx & Engels, 1879) in the late 1870s, afterwards he had allegedly transitioned to Marxism. His ‘revisionist’ renunciation of the latter came as a shock since it was carried out by a prominent member of a Marxist party, who had been nothing less than Engels’s secretary. Bernstein claimed that capitalism was not ineluctably tied to the polarization of class conflict and the necessity of crisis, as Marxists argued. Quite on the contrary, in his eyes, capitalism was improving workers’ living standards, preserving a significant stratum of petty-producers, taming the anarchy of the market and adopting increasingly democratic political forms (Bernstein, 1899). This allegedly proved that the existing economic order could be endlessly improved through a politics of gradual reform.

In political terms, Bernstein’s position was quite straightforward: the party ought to abandon its revolutionary credentials to pledge loyalty to capitalist states and pursue a path exclusively composed of reforms. Socialism, in his eyes, could be established within the framework of the liberal state. This entailed that the party should drop its policy of class struggle—which implied irreconcilable opposition to all other parties and the existing political and economic order (Kautsky, 2018; Luxemburg, 1999; Liebknecht, 2005)—and pursue class collaboration, eventually ceasing to be the independent party of the working class to become a cross-class ‘party of the people’. Governing the capitalist state in favor of the popular masses ought to be the goal. In other words, Bernstein asserted the need for political action, but he rejected the idea that it had to be independent and revolutionary. As his critics argued, his proposal amounted to the abandonment of the socialist goal and the transformation of the socialist movement into a bourgeois movement of reforms.

Anarchism was a wholly different business. Anarchists, headed by Bakunin, were opposed to the political action of the working class whilst rejecting the trade-unionist /reformist path of gradual reform in the name of an intransigent revolutionism. Within this framework, revolutionary spontaneity replaces both class collaboration and independent political action as the key strategic concept. Direct action and ‘propaganda through the deed’ were celebrated as the only acceptable tactic, framed within a revolutionary horizon dominated by minority insurrectionary ideas that eventually crystallized in the notion of the revolutionary general strike. The revolutionary

proletariat, according to this line of thought, could dispense with forming political parties, partaking in elections, and trying to patiently gain a decisive majority for the seizure of political power and the construction of socialism. It could do so because the revolutionary general strike offered a workable shortcut: through the bold actions of a minority of workers in open confrontation with capital and the state the mass of the proletariat could be won over to the cause of revolution. That spontaneous general struggle would dislodge capitalist production whilst immediately creating a new set of socialistic economic institutions, thus making the need for a revolutionary state heading a process of transition wholly superfluous. The result would be a network of mostly self-sufficient communes, reflecting the anarchist commitment to localism.

With the years, however, anarchism acquired a more reasonable shape by fusing with trade-unionism and accepting the validity of partial strikes, i.e., anarcho-syndicalism. This allowed for the creation of some large and permanent anarchist organisations that could make certain positive contributions to the development of the working class in countries like Spain. However, these contributions were accompanied by their adherence to the mass-strike *as a strategy* and their spontaneist rejection of political action.

Other strands of anarchist thought—which also influenced anarcho-syndicalism—place more emphasis than Bakunin in construing in the here and now institutions that would abide by the principles of freedom and equality. In this sense, they are more congenial to Proudhon's version of anarchism (Roberts, 2017a). Asserting the need for constructing a vast net of worker's institutions is not specific of anarchism, however—Marxian socialism does argue for that too (Lidtke, 1985). What is genuinely specific of anarchism is the way of framing that process of institutional construction, arguing that 1) freedom from capital could be affirmed in the here and now (an idea that often goes under the name of 'prefigurative politics') by organising 'outside' the system; 2) this process renders political action unnecessary, since the superiority of these institutions will eventually provide the basis for a spontaneous revolution that would immediately destroy the state and generalize the principles of local self-government and communal production.

Blanquism was a different issue. Championed by the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui, whose name once terrorized the European ruling classes, it did understand the need for the seizure of *political* power, which both reformists and anarchists rejected. Unlike Marxists, however, Blanqui conceived of this seizure not in terms of a majority revolution headed by a revolutionary mass party, but as an act of a minority of conspiracists. The *class* dictatorship of the proletariat defended by Marx, founded on extreme democracy (Draper, 1986; Marik, 2017; Leipold, 2024), was thus substituted by the government of a tiny minority exerting an educational dictatorship over the mass of the population.

In the next section, I will examine how Marx's answer to the main strategic dilemmas of emancipatory politics differed from his rival's. In turn, this would provide some basic content for my criticism of the politics of the post-Marxists in the following chapters.

4. Marx and the dilemmas of emancipatory politics

Marx was confident about the superiority of his outlook. He placed immense trust in the proletariat—shared, some myths notwithstanding, by Lenin (Lih, 2008)—, and he believed that the latter would quickly come to understand the need to ground its movement on a scientific basis. This process, however, could only be achieved through protracted struggles both against enemies and false friends. *Pace* Kolakowski (1976), Marx was not first and foremost a 'German Philosopher', but a *European revolutionary*. It is in the light of his faithfulness to the proletarian outlook and the concrete struggles of the working class for liberation that his trajectory becomes understandable. To explore this point, this section will start by examining the difference between Marx's perspective and doctrinarism. Second, I will summarize the dilemmas of emancipatory politics by dividing them into two blocks, one economic and the other political properly speaking. Third, I will explore Marx's answer to each and compare it to the views of his rivals.

To the class struggle of the workers Marxism offers a theory and a political strategy. Both are conceived as a way of making explicit what is already implicit in the 'real movement' of the proletariat. William Clare Roberts (2017a) has brilliantly demonstrated how even *Capital* constitutes an intervention in the political debates of his

time. Understanding the capitalist mode of production was a means to put the struggle against it on right footing. Most importantly, this outlook was tied to a life-long disdain for doctrinarism. This requires some unpacking, because it is key to understanding the nature of Marx and Engels's contribution. After all, Marx and Engels did provide what could be considered a doctrine, and they thought that it should constitute the theoretical foundation of working-class parties. However, their claims to scientificity must be considered in understanding the distinctiveness of Marxist 'doctrine'. Marx and Engels wanted *science* to become the bedrock of the proletarian movement, and Marx's theory mattered to the extent that it was scientific. They conceived of it as an impersonal 'theory of the proletarian revolution', to be furthered, expanded, and (when necessary) corrected: neither Marx's personal caprice nor dogma but an impersonal guide to action, in Lenin's words. What they scorned as doctrinarism were attempts to make the proletarian movement conform to the arbitrary, subjective ideas of a given individual (be it Fourier, Blanqui or Lassalle), as opposed to the scientific examination of the existing conditions of struggle. In other words, theirs was the theory of a class movement rather than an individual doctrine. This follows from what Hal Draper rightly identifies as the cornerstone of their politics: the principle of self-emancipation, i.e., the idea, succinctly expressed in the documents of the International, whereby 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves'.

Marxism as theory tried to provide the theoretical independence that constitutes the only firm basis on which the political independence of the proletariat could stand. The reason for this is quite straightforward. A proletarian party that begins to flirt with bourgeois ideas such as the ultimate goodness of the market, private property and the liberal-constitutional state will soon abandon the path of class struggle to pursue some sort of class-collaboration. In turn, class-collaboration makes socialism impossible since the other classes are tied to the defence of property. A *sociologically* proletarian party founded on bourgeois ideas will simply take class compromise as its point of departure, as exemplified by the post-1914 SPD or the British Labour Party.

The European proletariat was *already* forming trade-unions to wage its day-to-day struggles against capital, socialist clubs to discuss projects for human liberation, and

political parties to fight for power. Marxism simply intended to fuse all the latter and turn this dynamic into a self-conscious project, thus setting it on the right path. The rest of Marx's life was devoted to promoting and grounding this initiative. Naturally, this included bitter discussion with its rivals. Marx is still remembered as a fierce polemist. The substance of those polemics, however, is often forgotten or framed as a set of curiosities without any importance for the present (Stedman Jones, 2016). I will argue the exact opposite. As I intend to demonstrate, the main stakes of the great strategic dilemmas of emancipatory politics—concerning both the economic form that could underpin emancipation and the means to achieve it—are already outlined in Marx's polemics with his rivals.

To frame this discussion, we will take as a general point of departure that all those who support emancipatory politics agree in that a society whereby economic power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority, is something to be superseded by a form of social organization where humans would be equal and free. We could this Argument 1, which relates to *economics*. Argument 2, on the other hand, refers to the acknowledgement that the powerful minority will try to use state power to preserve their privileges, and that full emancipation is impossible whilst this arrangement remains in place. Therefore, Argument 2 is about *politics*. As such, it incorporates two interrelated dimensions: whether political action, i.e., a party is needed or not, and in that case, of what kind; and whether the existing state must be immediately abolished (as anarchist argue), reformed (as social democrats believe) or destroyed and substituted by a new, and transitory state form, as Marxists claim.

Regarding the first point, i.e., the one on economics, Marxism argues that capitalism can only be sublated into a free and egalitarian mode of production if production is fully socialized on a global scale. In other words, returning to small-scale production is not an option for revolutionary politics. The reason is twofold. First, the first chapters of *Capita*l had demonstrated that a market economy composed of small independent producers would inevitably lead to the creation of capital, and thus to the compulsion to dispossess a portion of humanity, exploit it, etc. This is because competition installs the profit motive in production, and constant profit-seeking requires the extraction of surplus value. On the other hand, non-market small scale production is intrinsically

linked to economic scarcity and patriarchal despotism (domination over women and children by the *pater familias*), and thus offers no workable ground for human emancipation (Clare Roberts, 2017a, Domènech, 2019).

This point about the incompatibility between human emancipation and private property is of immense importance, because it led Marx to rule out all the very influential dreams of republicans, utopians, etc. of reinstating petty production as the basis of a free society (Clare Roberts, 2017a). Moreover, it also led him not to overstate the importance of cooperatives or any other small-scale worker-led project *within* capitalism. Although Marx valued the pedagogic role cooperatives could play in empowering workers, he insisted on how whilst capitalism remains in place cooperatives and such projects would lead a dwarfed existence, being forced to submit to market imperatives and to remain marginal in size and importance. Contrary to the presumptions of anarchists like Proudhon, the capitalist system has no permanent 'outside' where free institutions could flourish (Pérez, 2023, 2024). Economically, the general interconnectedness created by capitalism welds the reproduction of life to commodity production, and thus to the market imperatives. Politically, the bourgeois state acts as the armed agent of capital, repressing attempts to (re)produce social life beyond the power of money and Law (Clare Roberts, 2020; Aguiriano, 2023). Finally, this train of argument also proves that 'market socialism' is nothing but a contradiction in terms (MacNally, 1993; Carrera, 2007). Socialism presupposes conscious and collective control of social production; the market is a form of unconscious organization of social production, built on atomized units. Competing firms under workers control would reinstate the dynamics of capitalism, being forced to outcompete other market actors in a ceaseless drive to extract more surplus value and revolutionize productivity. In turn, this would lead to the reintroduction of standard capitalist structures of power and control, creating a hierarchy between managers (as personifications of the ceaseless drive to outcompete the opponents) and average workers faced with the compulsion to intensify work, etc. For similar reasons, the transition to socialism must be completed on an international scale. Otherwise, a comparable pattern would impose itself over the isolated 'socialist' country, that would remain tied to the capitalistically organised division of labour, and thus forced to oscillate between partial isolation—and the generalization of scarcity that comes with it, which in turn promotes the institution of a new bureaucratic ruling class

—and forms of commercial exchange that would force it to conform to the requisites of capitalist production. As a result, isolationist attempts to break free from the yoke of capital will be condemned to failure, be it in the form of immediate breakdown or through a longer route involving the creation of bureaucratic regimes that would end up reinstating capitalism.

I will now turn to the *political* dimension of the debates within emancipatory projects. On this point, Marxism' argument is twofold. On the one hand, Marx argued that 1) the conquest of political power by the proletariat, i.e., a political revolution, is a necessary precondition for the construction of socialism, since 'Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*' (Marx, 2021: 25), and 2) this conquest requires the proletariat to constitute itself as an independent party. He thus acknowledged both the need to for a transient form of state and that a communist society would be stateless. On the other hand, he learned from the Paris Commune that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes" (Marx, 1986: 328). It must *smash* the existing state-form and create a new one, subordinated to the masses rather than standing over them. In some sense, this draws the key dividing line between Marxism and reformist social democracy. Marxists aim at the *destruction* of the existing state, social democrats aim at governing it (Lenin, 1993).

From a Marxist perspective the capitalist state is essentially, regardless of it adopting a liberal-parliamentary form, a bureaucratic-military apparatus placed above society and aimed at the perpetuation of the bourgeois order. As such, any proletarian revolution worth its name should destroy it, instituting a form of state that is subordinate to the working class rather than being placed above it. Beyond this basic—and crucial—idea, Marx's arguments on the state are, however, unsystematic, and sometimes misleading (Macnair, 2008). Their rationality must be reconstructed by the analysis of the capitalist state and its role within the capitalist mode of production.

The basic idea is simple enough. The class nature of the capitalist state is inscribed in the separation between politics (as the domain of the state, understood as a separate apparatus) and economics (as the domain of capitalist relations of production), which turns the basic economic features of the capitalist system—separation between producers and the means of production, private ownership of the means of production, exploitation—into an unquestioned foundation (Clarke, 1991). Whilst this separation remains in place, the state will be forced to further the interests of *capital*, which constitutes its material ground, and it will therefore serve as a class tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie.

Capitalist states apparatuses are construed as a set of institutions standing above society, i.e., insulated from direct democratic control, and oriented at the reproduction of the bourgeois order—i.e., the class interests of the bourgeoise. Within this framework, state intervention in the economy is explicitly framed as a means of contributing to this reproduction (Copley, 2022; Moraitis, 2024). Under no circumstances could ever assume "these functions in such a manner as to endanger the overlordship of the capitalist class" (Kautsky, 1910: 108). It acts, in other words, as an "ideal collective capitalist" (Engels, 2017: 93), trying to take care of the national process accumulation as a whole.

Moreover, the very principle of a standing bureaucracy in any realm produces a trend to self-perpetuation, which in this case requires the preservation of the capitalist economic order (1) and rejection of direct democratic control, rotating principles, revocability, etc. (2). This is what turns bureaucracies into conservative forces. In a structural sense, bureaucrats are petty-proprietors, and as an institution they are thus tied to the reproduction of the existing order. They embody the principle of *managerial* control that runs against the socialist principle of conscious and collective control. Thus, the basic structure of the state ensures that the political order would be responsive to the needs of the propertied classes. Bourgeois constitutions sanction this state of affairs by turning the separation of politics from economics into their legal-structural foundation —i.e., shielding private property.

Finally, states always exists within a system of states (Marx, 2021), to which they are tied through the material division of labour, organised on a global scale. Capitalist accumulation is international in content but national in form, and the various nation-states constitute the political form of the accumulation of capital. Moreover, this chain of states is organised hierarchically, with great imperialist power subjugating other nations.

Since the capitalist state is structurally designed to serve capital, Marxists argue, the proletariat cannot simply lay hold to it. In other words, it cannot gain power without overthrowing the existing political order, i.e., revolution. It must create a different state-form, one that overcomes the separation between politics and the economy (i.e., the state and civil society), destroying the sanctity of private property, and thus a state that is subordinated to the masses instead of a means for their oppression (Parkinson, 2019a). Short of this transformation, the bureaucratic state will re-emerge, effectively blocking the transition to socialism by creating a new minority ruling class in the form of the state bureaucracy and shielding decision-making processes from proletarian control (Aguiriano, 2025a).

On the other hand, loyalty to the capitalist state entails a subordination to capital, thus blocking any serious socialist politics. That who partakes in the government of the capitalist state is, willingly or not, a manager of the national process of accumulation, based on the exploitation of labour and—in imperialist countries—the subjugation of other nations—and particularly *the proletariat* of other nations. In other words, confining politics to the limits of the capitalist nation state implies trying to promote the interest of the national working class, which leads to an alliance with the national bourgeoisie against the international class interests of the proletariat (Lenin, 2005). This is the key to Marxist arguments against social democracy. Whilst it was still dominated by Marxism, the Second International argued that:

> The Congress repudiates to the fullest extent possible the efforts of the revisionists, which have for their object the modification of our tried and victorious policy based on the class war, and the substitution, for the conquest of political power by an unceasing attack on the bourgeoisie, of a policy of concession to the established order of society. The consequence of such revisionist tactics would be to turn a party striving for the most speedy transformation possible

of bourgeois society into Socialist society—a party therefore revolutionary in the best sense of the word—into a party satisfied with the reform of bourgeois society […] The party rejects all responsibility of any sort under the political and economic conditions based on capitalist production, and therefore can in no wise countenance any measure tending to maintain in power the dominant class […] The Social Democracy can strive for no participation in the Government under bourgeois society (Taber, 2021: 83).

Marx and Engels also argued that any state is a form of class power, and thus a classless society would require the vanishing of the state. However, they found anarchist beliefs on the immediate disappearance of the state utopian. States will survive insofar as class society survives, and class society can only be dismantled though a long process of proletarian rule—i.e., dictatorship. The rule of the proletariat over the middle classes allows it to 1) learn to subject all social processes to conscious and collective decision making, 2) fully socialize production, which follows from the previous point 3) defend the revolution, through the armed power of the masses, against counter-revolutionary attempts. Authority is an ineradicable feature of the transition towards socialism because the latter requires the proletariat to impose its collective will over the propertied classes (Engels, 2002). Moreover, the state provides the immediate form of the kind of central authority that is required to coordinate large decision-making processes, which are, in turn, necessary for the transition towards socialism. Global problems like ecological devastation cannot be dealt with on a purely local basis. Once classes are abolished, however, this kind of devices for collective decision making would lose their state-like character, and the state as a tool of *class power* would (by definition) vanish. *Pace* Hannah Arendt (1958)—whose arguments on this point have influenced post-Marxists like Laclau and Mouffe—this is not a technocratic fantasy (Clare Roberts, 2017a). On the contrary, the disappearance of ‘politics’ in Marx and Engels’ sense would lead to the flourishing of ‘politics’ in terms of collective deliberation and decision-making.

Further clarifying the differences between the Marxist outlook and those of his rivals requires making a few extra points on strategy and the party question—two of the central points of our following political debate with the post-Marxists. The party question and the need for a majority revolution as the means to conquer political power and rebuild it are intrinsically tied (Engels, 1969; Volodia, 2025a, 2025b). This stands

in stark contrast to the anarchist, spontaneist strategy of the general strike, and other forms of minority insurrectionism (Lenin, 2000). It also contrasts with the reformist thesis whereby revolution, i.e., a complete transformation of the state-form, is unnecessary.

The problem with the mass strike as a strategy (not as a tactic) is, first and foremost, that a sustained general strike dislodges the economy, thus immediately posing the question of political power, i.e., of who is to wield the central authority capable of restoring production. In the absence of a mass party that functions as an alternative center of authority to that of the capitalist state, thus capable of leading the masses to the construction of a new political order (i.e., state-form), the old forces will inevitably gain the upper hand with the promise of *restoring* order by counterrevolutionary means —probably gathering significant mass support in the face of the chaos inevitably brought by a sustained general strike. Since mass-strikeists renounce building such center of political authority—i.e., a mass party—they are defenseless in the face of this, being implicitly subordinated to the existing political forces (those who could *rule* the country). The adherence of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT to the bourgeois Popular Front in the Spanish Civil War proves this point (Blackledge, 2010): the lack of a politically independent party leads to revolutionary failure. This is the bankruptcy of spontaneism, which, in all its manifestations, systematically eschews the central question of authority —be it in the form of the party as an alternative center of authority within capitalist rule or the Commune-State as a new center of authority—and its long process of construction.

In his rejection of politics (which requires party-building), Bakunin purportedly wanted to avoid the problem of *bureaucratism*. In his eyes, political action, be it in the forms of the preparatory work of elections, etc. or in the form of the revolutionary seizure of power and exercise of government would *necessarily* fabricate a ‘red’ bureaucratic elite that would reproduce the familiar monsters of authority, hierarchy, etc., perpetuating itself as a new despotic governing class (Bakunin, 1971).

However, the mass strike as a strategy does not offer a vaccine against the danger of bureaucratism, but arguably reproduces it. This is because its proponents are forced to

work *within* the mass movement with a single, fixed roadmap, which inevitably means that they must be organised as a conspiratorial sect trying to trick the movement into following their favoured course of action. It is no coincidence that Bakunin's whole political career consisted of different attempts to create secret groups that could control the mass movement from behind (Draper, 1990)—an anti-democratic conspiracism that Marx endlessly criticized. It is also no coincidence that those Marxists who were partially sympathetic to mass-strikeism/spontaneism, like Rosa Luxemburg, failed to build successful parties—as shown by the case of the Social Democratic Party of Poland and Lituania, which she lead with an iron fist along with Leo Jogiches (Blanc, 2017)—or to struggle for power in them—a shown by her failure within the SPD, where the reliance on mass action as a potential cure for the party's illnesses weakened her ability to wield a successful internal struggle against opportunism (Macnair, 2012). A properly Marxist party, on the contrary, leads the mass movement by giving it an independent political voice. In doing so, it intends to win majority for its revolutionary programme, organizing the class struggle with that goal on sight. Regarding how to fulfill them, the party can remain tactically flexible, favoring the most adequate line at each point, using all the means of the struggle at their disposal, carefully considering the mood of the broad masses, etc. This is why Lenin (1999) argued for the need to participate in bourgeois parliament and reactionary unions, using the positions conquered in both to gain more adherents for the revolutionary cause. It is also why the Bolsheviks seized power when they gained a majority in the Soviets in favour of the line 'All Power to the Soviets' (Marik, 2017). No group of conspiracist would ever be able to achieve that—a point that also runs against Blanquism. In modern conditions, Blanqui-style minority putschism is condemned to military defeat. Seizing power in the capital is not the same as doing so in the whole country—which needs a revolutionary organization with mass support for its programme and organised on a state level (this explains why the October Revolution succeeded where the Paris Commune failed: because of the Bolshevik Party). On a different level, the kind of minority dictatorship to which Blanquism lead would in fact create a new bureaucratic elite ruling over the working class—substituting its class dictatorship by a bureaucratic one and blocking the transition to socialism. This is why Engels argued that the proletarian revolution must be a majority and conscious revolution (Engels, 1969).

The reverse of the ultra-leftist perspective of the mass strike is the ‘rightist’ path of reformism, which coalesces in ‘cross-class’, ‘open’, or ‘broad’ parties, meaning political organizations that attempt to further progressive causes by means of class collaboration. This is, for instance, the approach favored by Laclau and Mouffe’s Left Populism, and it stands in opposition to Marx’s call for the creation of *working-class* parties, not meaning parties who are only composed of proletarians, but parties built around of a programme that represents the independent interests of the working class (Parkinson, 2020). We should bear in mind that the crux of a ‘Marxist’ party is its *class struggle* perspective, which sets it apart from the reformist focus on class compromise and the accompanying faith on the potential harmony between the interests of the propertied and the propertyless. As their associate Wilhelm Liebknecht put it: “For our party and for our party tactics there is but one valid basis: the basis of the class struggle” (1900: 9).

From a Marxist perspective, the problem with cross-class politics, i.e., parties lacking a socialistic and revolutionary programme and a class struggle orientation, is twofold. On the one hand, the proletariat is the only class that, due to its lack of property, has an objective interest in socialism. Between socialism and a system based on private property there is no intermediate programmatic point, and thus if the proletariat relinquishes its political independence it must give up on socialism—i.e., on its own liberation. Most importantly, political independence does not entail isolation. Being the only consistently democratic and socialistic class (Kautsky, 2019; Lenin, 2008), the proletariat must lead all the oppressed in the revolutionary process, pushing sections of the middle strata towards its goals. This need for proletarian class *leadership*, consistently advocated by Marx and Engels, is what the Bolsheviks called ‘hegemony’ (Lih, 2008). ‘Leadership’ is the key, since it guarantees that alliances are not a means for the political subordination of the proletariat but, on the contrary, a means to further its interests. On the other hand, the problem with a party uniting ‘reformists’ and ‘revolutionaries’ is that the reformists are loyal to the existing state, and thus consistently opposed to revolution. Therefore, they will block any revolutionary programme and course of action (probably in the name of not scaring the masses or unleashing state-repression) and they will demand *veto power* to do so (Macnair, 2008). Moreover, in this endeavor they can count on the help of the capitalist state and the capitalist media. This is a situation that is reproduced even if the absence of

revolutionaries: the separation between slightly 'radical' reformists and the right-wing of the party will tend to unleash a similar dynamic, as was proved by the Labour Party during the Corbyn years.

In terms of strategy, the problem with reformism is that it pretends that 'socialism'—or universal emancipation—could be built *within the existing state-form*, to which reformists are loyal. The issue here is also twofold. On the one hand, the idea of building socialism though the intervention of the state bureaucracy is a contradiction in terms, since the bureaucracy has a class interest on its own—to preserve its privileged position above the masses—that prevent it from establishing the full democratization of social life, both economically and politically. On the other hand, the existing State is structurally tied to capital through links that are both material and constitutional. The bourgeois 'rule of law' is built on the sanctity of private property (Fine, 1984; Macnair, 2019) and thus the abolition of private property requires overthrowing the bourgeois state. Otherwise, the gulf separating politics and economics will never be overcome, and economic power will remain in the hands of the owners of capital, i.e., the dominant minority. As we have seen, the bourgeois bureaucratic-military apparatus is materially dependent on capitalist production, upon which it relies for its continued existence as a privileged body. This is why it will use all means necessary for preventing the socialization of property—including military coups or launching a civil war. In fact, the state-core *routinely* intervenes in politics to suppress revolutionary forces and prevent parties they consider undesirable from gaining influence (even reform-oriented parties, as the cases of Corbyn in the UK and Podemos in Spain clearly show). Thus, unless these bureaucratic, armed bodies are displaced by forms of administration that are responsive to the working majority, the process of socialist construction cannot even get started. Moreover, a political revolution is impossible without breaking the coherence of the armed forces, which at its most basic means gaining sectors of the latter—the lower ranks of soldiers, mostly—for the revolutionary cause. But this, again, requires a party that has turned this cause into a programme to which discontent members of the armed forces could turn in times of crisis.

5. Conclusion

Theoretically, Marx achieved an intellectual revolution that actualized the transition from philosophy to materialist science. This entailed a break not only with philosophical idealism, but also with utopian socialism and every attempt to approach politics and social life through idealistic-moralistic lenses.

Economically, Marx asserted that the only means to overcome capitalism is though the socialization of production on an international scale, yielding a society of free and independent producers. According to Marx private property must be abolished, not redistributed, since the redistribution of property simply reinstates either traditional despotism of the generalized domination by the market, which in turn makes capital re-emerge. In fact, it is the very development of capitalism what turns the former into a real possibility and the second into a utopia. This kind of international socialization of property, however, must be conceived as a long and protracted process, not something to be achieved at one stroke. This is fantasy, and of a bloody type. Whilst large-scale production (big capital) is ripe for immediate socialization—since it already functions on a socialized basis, whilst making appropriation private—the expropriation of the petty producers must be dealt with gradually, pushing objective economic trends. Any other solution will lead to spectacular bloodsheds, which in turn activate dynamics toward bureaucratization and militarization that undermine—and eventually vanquish—proletarian power. Finally, the necessarily international nature of this process destroys the illusions of national socialism. Isolated states may expropriate their own bourgeoisie, but they would eventually succumb—short of an international revolution in the short to medium term—to the impersonal dictates of global capital.

This argument runs against petty-bourgeois republicanism (which dreams with the redistribution of private property), ‘market socialism’, State Socialism/nationalist socialist, and thus hard-nosed theories of ‘Socialism in one country’, Proudhonism, and the anarchist illusions of an immediate actualization of socialism. As we will see, some of these doctrines survive in the works of post-Marxist authors.

Politically, Marxism establishes a link between the need to create independent working-class parties, the need for the proletariat to conquest political power through a mass revolution, and the need to establish a new state-form as the only means to navigate the

transition towards socialism. Without a party, the working class is incapable of sustained political action as a class, including taking the lead of the mass of the oppressed to seize power in the midst of a revolutionary situation; without the conquest of political power (i.e., political revolution), it is incapable of imposing its will over the propertied classes and expropriate the means of production; without republican democracy (i.e., the Commune State), it is incapable of wielding state-power as a class, making the state apparatus responsive to its collective will and including the masses into decision-making. Finally, without the full construction of socialism, the proletariat would be incapable of breaking its economic chains.

This argument runs against anti-democratic socialism, reformism, and anarchist illusions of an immediately stateless order. In the following chapters, I will argue that post-Marxist authors reinstate the projects of some of Marx's rivals. Laclau and Mouffe offer a rebranded version of Bernstein's doctrine, Agamben elaborates a highly idiosyncratic anarchism, Badiou develops a version of Bakuninism. Their politics falls under Marx's critiques and fails to ground a proper project of emancipation. On the contrary, I believe that Marx's general theoretical and political framework can be vindicated through the criticism of the renovated versions of the outlooks of his rivals. This is what I intend to do in the coming chapters.

Chapter 3

Windmills as Giants: On Giorgio Agamben

1. Introduction: A peculiar optimist

Agamben's thought orbits around the concept of potentiality. All the main themes of his work—sovereignty, the Law, the *homo sacer*, etc.—only acquire their shape and singularity if they are read through his renovated understanding of the ontological status of potentiality and its connection to (human) Life. The same holds for the more explicitly political dimension of his work, which makes the content of this chapter.

Only after a long period devoted to the study of a wide array of topics ranging from language to aesthetics did Agamben start engaging with politics in an overt—yet highly idiosyncratic—manner. This engagement, crystallized in the monumental project *Homo Sacer* (Agamben, 2017), has made him a renowned political thinker of our time. Admired by some for his originality and erudition, dismissed by others as a hopeless mystic, the impact and scope of *Homo Sacer* surely make him one of the most influential critics of our contemporary historical-political predicament.

Agamben's popularity as a political thinker is closely linked to the timeliness of his intervention: whilst the 'End of History' did not bring universal emancipation and prosperity, but new forms of lawless violence, increasing surveillance, imperialist war, and a generalized yet vaguely articulated sense of *malaise*, the deep crisis of socialism, in general, and Marxism, in particular, seemed to call for new radical ways of thinking the political. In a context marked by the refugee crisis, the political impotence of traditional left-wing movements, and the atrocities of the 'War Against Terror', many saw Agamben's seemingly hyperbolic theses as a salutary challenge to the powers that be and their ideological underpinnings.

One of the most puzzling features of Agamben's political thought is his unapologetic "optimism" (Agamben, 2004a). The association of Agamben, the theorist of murderous sovereign violence and the concentration camp, with anything resembling 'optimism', is likely to prompt a skeptical answer. But it remains a fact that whilst most on the Left despaired or, at best, tried to counterbalance their gloomy prognoses with rather vague appeals to a pseudo-Gramscian 'optimism of the will', Agamben declared himself an *optimist*—full stop. As many of these interpreters have highlighted (Prozorov, 2010; Whyte, 2013; Abott, 2014) a sometimes untraceable yet unequivocal *positivity* underpins Agamben's assessment of our contemporary predicament.

Why did Agamben see the world of Fukuyama's 'End of History' as a stage out of which a 'new politics' could emerge—and thus as a potential site for optimism—derives from his strictly *ontological* approach to the political (Abbott, 2014: 24-26). It is this ontological approach I intend to criticize. I agree with those, like Prozorov (2014b), Abott (2014), Primera (2019), and Kotsko (2021), who argue that Agamben's work should be read as a systematic exercise in Political Ontology. Where I disagree with them, however, is in the assessment of the virtues of such an approach.

The core of my theoretical argument is relatively simple: any attempt to grasp concrete political problems through ontological concepts would remain *abstract and mystifying*, no matter how hard it tries to dress in a cloak of radicality and concreteness. This abstractness, I will argue, vitiates all of Agamben's main political concepts—the Law, Sovereignty, Biopolitics, etc.—and empties of genuine emancipatory content the redemptive proposals that structure his (political) "ontology of potentiality" (Agamben, 1998: 44).

In theoretical terms, I take Marx's materialism to be an antidote against this kind of abstract, "socially weightless" (McNay, 2014) thinking. However, the vindication of Marx's critique as a materialist alternative to Political Ontology cannot proceed in an *external* manner. It requires showing how the former allows us to 1) internally prove the inconsistencies of Agamben's approach, and 2) answer several questions regarding agency, organization, the role of critique, and the intricacies of social life that are systematically occluded by the latter yet crucial for any thinking with emancipatory

ambitions. This will reveal, for instance, how Agamben's concepts of 'the West', the 'anthropological machine', or the 'apparatus' are all-too-broad abstractions that stem from concrete, historically specific social forms. Lacking an analysis of the latter—i.e., an understanding of the links between those concepts and the material, socio-historical relations that provide their form and content, the specific *mode of existence* of 'Power', 'Life', and even 'potentiality' in a particular historical stage—the categories themselves become ideological mystifications that obscure both the real social relations that gave rise to them, and the *concrete* emancipatory possibilities contained *within* our social world.

Whilst the first two sections of the essay will introduce the core ideas and concepts of Agamben's project, the third one shall contrast his diagnosis of our present with a Marxist alternative, to highlight the deficiencies of an approach that is incapable of grasping determinate historical phenomena. The fourth section will reveal the vacuity of his emancipatory proposals by showing how his 'ontology of possibility' boils down to an invocation of abstract potentialities detached from, and oblivious to, real material processes. Finally, the fifth section will argue that Agamben's project constitutes an idiosyncratic version of anarchism that reproduces and in fact aggravates all the strategic problems of the later.

2. 'A New and Coherent Ontology of Potentiality'

Agamben's ongoing concern with potentiality should be understood as part of a more general tendency: after the defeat of the emancipatory movements of the 20th century, many on the Left tried to salvage the possibility of emancipation by retreating to philosophy and rethinking the very category of Possibility, a process that often (and unsurprisingly) drove them close to the slippery domain of theology, mostly under the form of messianism. From Agamben's 'potentiality' to Zizek's 'Act', Badiou 'Event', Deleuze's 'becoming', Derrida's 'Democracy-to-come' or, in what its perhaps its extreme form, Meillassoux's 'God to Come', engineering a concept of Possibility detached from Actuality—or a concept of Contingency detached from substantial necessity—has become one of the main obsessions of contemporary 'radical' thinkers. Philosophically, this move derives from Heidegger. If *Being and Time* (2011) aimed at a

renovated philosophy—in the guise of a 'fundamental ontology' structured around the existential analytic of *Dasein*—where possibility takes precedence over actuality, a great deal of Heidegger's thought after his 'turn' amounts to a sustained attempt to *think* beyond the principle of sufficient reason—i.e., beyond Necessity (Van Der Heiden, 2014). Its *historical* sources, however, lead us far from Heidegger's fixation on 'destiny' or 'the soil': as stated above, they can be traced back to the bankruptcy of the great emancipatory movements of the 20th century. This conundrum has been captured by Oliver Marchart's (2007) paradoxical concept: "the Heideggerian Left".

Placing Agamben within this broader current is not to dismiss the originality of his contribution. Perhaps no other author is so adamant about the emancipatory potentials and pressing urgency of a "new and coherent ontology of potentiality" (Agamben, 1998: 44). Whilst, for instance, Zizek's notion of the Act signals the *possibility* of a different political order (a radical rupture with current social arrangements), Agamben's ontology of potentiality and the 'new politics' he calls for *are one and the same thing*. As we shall see, the reverse of Agamben's acknowledgment of the historicity of ontology (Agamben, 2016: 114) is his subsumption of history, along with ethics and politics, into the former.

Agamben's ontology defies an easy summary. A good way to start, might be however, to highlight that for him the most important feature of the human is its capacity *not to do*, i.e., the fact that the human is not forced to follow any pre-determined course of action. This he calls 'impotentiality' and he sees as the harbor of freedom. The concept is structurally analogous to what other Political ontologists call 'the Political' since it is the hallmark of a form of ontological indeterminacy that underlies and destabilizes 'ontic' arrangements.

If freedom equals impotentiality, it follows that oppression consists in *forcing* the human to act in one way or another. Humans, however, are consistently exposed to this through the influence of what Agamben calls 'the apparatus', which he defines as "*literally anything* that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings" (2009: 14). In turn, he conceptualizes as 'the machine' the arrangement

of all the various apparatuses in a systematic logic that runs against human impotentiality. According to him, the history of 'the West'—which for him seems to mean universal history—has been governed by the workings of this 'machine'.

Thus, Agamben proposes a "massive partitioning of Beings" (2009: 14) between the apparatuses, on the one hand, and living beings, on the other, between Life and the machine. Whilst life is pure potentiality, apparatuses *capture* potentiality by imposing extrinsic *form* upon an indeterminate content. This form-determination is what *forces* the living to act in pre-determined ways, fulfill certain functions, etc. It is 'artificial' to the extent that it introduces unnatural roles, divisions, etc., within the continuity of life. 'Separation' is what grounds this logic of form-determination. For instance, when something is determined as 'sacred', it is immediately separated from the 'secular' and construed as a domain that demands reverence and lies beyond human use. We will see how this logic of separation is also conceived as a logic of exclusion.

In Agamben's eyes, the metaphysical translation of this oppressive predicament is the centrality of the notion of Actuality, conceived by the tradition as the endless process of actualization of pre-existing potentialities, ruled by a logic of necessity. This is the working of 'the machine', sometimes also called "the Onto-political machine of the West" (2016). Agamben construes his entire theoretical edifice against this logic. He aims at the 'deactivation' of the machine, a process that requires of the human to come to terms with its own impotentiality. Once this is achieved, the commands of the machine will be powerless, and the machine itself will collapse.

At this point we can introduce the most famous concepts of Agamben's *Homo Sacer*: *bios*, *zoe*, and bare life. They are the key to understand politics because for Agamben politics is all about the manipulation of life, which means that *all politics is biopolitics*. By taking Foucault's term and making it a feature of being, Agamben completes "the ontological turn of biopolitics" (Garo, 2020: 88).

The Greeks had two concepts for Life, distinguishing between *zoe* as merely natural life, which is excluded from the polis, and *bios* as properly human—that is, *political*—life, that gets to be included. According to Agamben, this distinction is the product of a

process of form-determination. Since this process is purely artificial, both terms can never be neatly separated, and the attempt to do so produces a zone of indeterminacy between the two. This is what Agamben calls "bare life". Thus, political life presupposes *zoe* as its 'natural' basis, but it simultaneously excludes it from the properly political domain. This logic of presupposition-exclusion, or *exclusionary inclusion* (which is a logic of separation), is what produces 'bare life', which is neither within the political order nor outside it. But, Agamben adds, the same applies to the sovereign. That who grounds the Law is also the one that could suspend it at any point —declaring the state of exception. 'Sovereignty', and thus all political power, is founded on this process of exclusion-inclusion.

With this we can finally summarize the logic governing what Agamben calls 'the machine'. It is a logic of division, presupposition, exception, and foundation. A split is produced whose very production gives rise to a zone of indifference that both separates and articulates the divided terms. That which is excluded and downgraded in the division is at the same time posited as a negative foundation, and thus kept in a paradoxical relation of *exclusionary inclusion*.

The same operation of division and foundation recurs once and again in Agamben´s analysis of the history of ontology, Law, Language, the Human, etc. (2016: 263-266). In truth, we are referring to an *onto-logic*: and thus, what he calls 'the machine' is neither solely 'juridical' (producing the split between norm and exception) nor 'anthropomorphic' (enacting the division between the Human and the animal) or 'linguistic', but first and foremost an *Onto(theo)logical* machine, that includes and ties together politics, language, ethics, and history.

Agamben´s multifarious incursions in different domains are only meant to excavate the workings of this Onto-logic. No matter whether he is discussing Auschwitz, medieval theology, or Provençal poetry, all his arguments unfold in a strict ontological register. This political ontology is also a critique of Ontotheology in a Heideggerian sense: a critique of foundationalism that aims at its *Destruktion*—i.e., deactivation. In fact, the exploration of this logic from the perspective of its potential deactivation is the central

aim of Agamben´s *Homo Sacer* project (Agamben, 2017). In the next section we will complete our exegesis of Agamben's position and turn to the critique of his project.

3. Plenty of black cows: On Agamben's night

Agamben borrows from his friend Jean-Luc Nancy the concept of 'the ban' to describe the relation between Law and bare life, which he describes as primarily *one of abandonment*. The inclusion of life within the Law (the political-juridical order) is the abandonment of bare life at the mercy of sovereign power. The *homo sacer* embodies this abandoned life. Originally a figure of Roman Right, the main character of Agamben's most famous work stands for the life that cannot be sacrificed yet can be killed with impunity. Conversely, sovereignty is defined by Agamben as the power to kill or let live. The implication of his argument is quite straightforward: in the eyes of the sovereign, the murderous mirror image of the *homo sacer*—insofar as they both exist simultaneously inside and outside of the juridical order—, we are all *homine sacri*.

Although for Agamben the difference between Modernity and Premodernity is one of degree, not one of kind, he believes that the former has generalized this condition through the systematic inclusion of the *zoe* within the political sphere, which is tantamount to the increasing exposure of life to sovereign violence. This requires some unpacking. We have seen how according to Agamben, processes of form-determination tear the continuity of human life apart by dividing the 'natural' and 'political' sides of the human. Due to its artificiality, however, this division can never be neatly established. It leaves a remainder: *bare life*, which is neither natural nor political but a zone of indifference between the two. However, with the development of modernity political power (sovereignty) becomes increasingly concerned with the natural lives of its subjects, which it intends to master and control. But insofar as this move is enacted whilst preserving the division between 'natural' and 'political' life, the outcome is the expansion of the zone of indifference between the two terms, eventually turning every human into a 'homo sacer', absolutely subject to the sovereign's arbitrary power to kill or let live. Thus, in Modernity the gulf between natural and political life is only partially bridged at the cost of making the control and manipulation of bare life the main goal of power. Unqualified life becomes *explicitly* political. The concentration camp, deemed by Agamben "the nomos of the Modern" (1998: 166), is both the apogee of this process,

whereby “the state of exception becomes the rule” (Agamben, 2005a) and the naked expression of its logic. Neither beyond the Law nor within it, the camp is the zone of indeterminacy where the true face of the Leviathan reveals itself. As such, it emerges with the crisis of the nation-state, and the subsequent creation of a space where the law is suspended, and bare life and sovereign power confront each other without further mediations.

As a diagnosis of our present, this analysis stands out for its stark *politicism*, a one-sided focus on political power that remains silent about its material foundations (Mau, 2022: 110-111). However, Agamben tried to put a remedy to this deficiency in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011), where the ‘juridico-political Machine of the West’ is further described as an *economic* machine, thus complementing the understanding of biopolitics as the power to kill or let live (the political theology of sovereignty) with a second dimension: biopolitics as the productive administration of life (the economic theology of management).

Agamben extracts his concept of the economy from early Christian theology, where the classical meaning of *oikonomia*, as the management of the household, was extended to designate the logic of the divine governing of the world. For Agamben ‘the economy’ stands for a transhistorical logic of management that has its roots in the theological understanding of Providential rule as *an-archic*. Insofar as it lacks a foundation in Being (*archê*), economic management is an empty form of ordering whose only purpose is the infinite administration of the lives and works of living beings.

However, this removes none of the abstraction of his approach, since this rendering of the onto-logics of economics utterly misses what is specific about capitalism (Whyte, 2013; Toscano, 2011). Subsuming both precapitalist production, built on various forms of personal dependence, and capitalist production, structured around the impersonal domination of the market, under an all-encompassing conception of ‘the economy’ of allegedly theological roots is just a mystification. ‘The economy’ as we know it, as a separate sphere where private and independent producers exchange their products as commodities, emerged when the capitalist firm substituted the household as the primary unit of production. This process was the result of the dissolution of the traditional bonds

of dependence under the impersonal power of money and the violence of the state and the ruling classes, with the concomitant separation between the producers and the means of production that created the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as the two main classes of modern society (McNally, 1993; Marx, 213: 501-542; Clare Roberts, 2020).

Capitalist production is certainly anarchic and boundless, but *pace* Agamben, this has nothing to do with it being a particular instantiation of a transhistorical logic of management. As explained in the second chapter, it derives from the private and independent organization of social labour, inevitably accompanied by the institution of money as the social nexus and of the market as the sphere that connects the myriad of independent producers. Insofar as capitalist production is private production, and thus only indirectly social, exchange becomes the mechanism of social validation of the multiple private labours. Only by exchanging their products in the market do particular labours become part of the total social labour, and not just a useless expenditure of energy. The socialization of private production subjects the whole of society to the anarchic laws of the market, which decide which labor is socially useful and which one is not; who eats and who does not; which firm goes to bankruptcy, and which one makes a profit. In turn, the market, where commodities are sold for a profit, depends on the exploitation of labour, which has the dispossession of the proletarian as its constantly reproduced precondition. Hereby the internal unity between value production and the class struggle between workers and capitalists.

Thus, the split that characterizes Modernity is not that between *bios* and *zoe*, but the one between the producers and the means of production, which makes the exploitation of labor the economic foundation of a society governed by the impersonal logic of value, i.e., the expansion of capital. On an abstract categorial level, proletarian life could indeed be seen as a life reduced to naked potentiality, that can only actualize itself by selling itself, commodified as labor-power, to capital (Mau, 2022). The latter, in turn, can only expand itself by entering in a relationship with which is not itself (labor-power). Despite the superficial similarity between this argument and Agamben's onto-logics, we should bear in mind that rather than a zone of indifference, labor-power as a potentiality that is only actualized by reproducing capital is, as *both* capital and non-capital, a *concretely and materially determined* dialectical contradiction, whose logic

and dynamics are carefully explored throughout Marx's major work (Dardot & Laval, 2012: 513-516).

None of this is to be found in Agamben's convoluted discussion of Christian patristics, wherein the politicism and philosophical abstractionism of *Homo Sacer* is only remedied by doubling down on abstraction. Agamben jumps from theology to theology without ever dirtying his hands with anything resembling a materialist analysis of how the abstract logic he relentlessly uncovers could relate to, or be grounded in, real social relations. In fact, Capital, "the all-powerful economic power of modern society" (Marx, 1973: 107) is remarkably absent from Agamben's work, despite the fact that he constantly engages with his effects. All we get in his critiques of capitalism are rather moralistic complaints about consumerism (Agamben, 2009), along with occasional appeals the Debord's notion of "spectacle" (Agamben, 1993; 2000a); a concept he empties of content by detaching it from its relation to Marx's critique of fetishism and the alienation of labor that is at its root (Whyte, 2013: 142-143).

This testifies to the groundlessness of the whole *Homo Sacer* project. As a result of his failure to engage with the intricacies of the capitalist mode of production, Agamben becomes unable to explain *why* sovereign power took such an interest in the control and management of life in a specific historical period. Instead, he completely begs the question by making biopolitics coextensive with human history. Hereby the empty self-referentiality of Agamben's political ontology**,** an abstract form of philosophizing that swallows particularity and blurs every historical distinction, break, and rupture. History is subsumed into metaphysics and presented as the blind unfolding of an abstract logic of divisions. As Søren Mau puts it, "Agamben's concept of sovereignty is truly the night in which all cows are black, and this abstraction is only possible because his exclusive focus on the state and sovereignty makes him blind to the relations of production" (2022: 111).

Since he systematically reproduces "the originally liberal split that tends to cut politics off from the relations of production" (Garo, 2020: 100) the inflated claims from the opening pages of *Homo Sacer* promising a theory of the state that would overcome the alleged limitations of both Marxism and Anarchism (Agamben, 1998: 12) ring hollow.

In Agamben's work, the state appears as an independent, self-subsistent entity; not a specific form arising out of determinate social relations but a metaphysical monster. This mystification, along with the many more that plague his theoretical corpus, is the inevitable outcome of approaching through metaphysical lenses questions whose nature is social and historical. At the end of the day, Agamben's ontology-first approach reveals itself as just another idealist inversion, like those criticized by Marx (Starosta, 2015). As Jameson concludes in his critique of the former:

> What is concrete is the social, the mode of production, the humanly produced, and historical; metaphysical conceptions such as those involving nature or death are ideological derivations of that more basic reality (2014: 125).

Thus "it is not bare life that we need to identify behind apparatuses of power. It's on the contrary social life, concretely determined" (Garo, 2020: 103). Only by understanding the modern state as a product of specific social relations can we get a proper grasp of the reasons for both its interest in life and its terrifying murderousness.

The discussion of the category of production in the *Grundrisse* clarifies the key methodological differences between Marx and Agamben. Preemptively disqualifying the critiques of his work as a 'metaphysics of production' of sorts, Marx bluntly asserts that there is no such thing as "production in general" (1973: 100). 'Production in general' is for Marx a methodological abstraction, not an ontological category. As such, it accounts for the fact that every social organization whatsoever will have to enter a metabolic relation with nature in order to reproduce itself. But there is no such thing as 'production in general' because 'production' only becomes concrete as production *within determinate social forms*. Marx understands modes of production as (often contradictory) unities of social form and material content. Form-determination is, in Marx's account, determination by a *social form*—not a mysterious 'apparatus'. This is to say that social forms provide the determinate mode of existence (Gunn, 1987) of material contents at a particular historical stage.

Mutatis mutandis, there is, *pace* Agamben, no such thing as 'the state in general'. Whilst it is true that most class societies have given rise to political structures where the direct power of the ruling class over society is crystallized (Mészaros, 2022: 58),

treating them all as instantiations of a *philosophical* logic leads us directly to the proverbial night where all the cows are black, obscuring the historical specificities of the *capitalist* state.

Agamben is too busy in his search for the "arcana imperii" (1998: 6) of sovereignty to pay attention to any of this. In refusing to analyze Power in its entwinement with the social relations that provide its concrete mode of existence, he ontologizes power in the shape of 'the machine'. As a result, a struggle that is social and historical in nature is mystified as a clash between metaphysical forces. This means that in his work we are dealing with an example of what Marx's criticized about philosophical standpoints: the imposition of an abstract mental logic upon reality. Regarding the problem of 'participation' explored in Chapter one, it is apparent that Agamben's concepts, crafted in separation from the real relations that underlie them, are just empty universals that fail to grasp actuality.

In the next section, I will explore how this mystification fuels Agamben's 'optimism', which, along with his many redemptive proposals, depends on a series of theoretical assumptions whose inaccuracy I intend to demonstrate. Here too the contrast with Marx's materialist dialectics shall reveal the emptiness of Agamben's politics of indeterminacy.

4. A dialectic of possibility

"The machine is running empty!" Like Nietzsche's madman screaming in the marketplace, Agamben delivers his news to a disconcerted audience. In both cases, the speaker finds himself divided between joy and dismay. Not without reason, since the implications of the message are overwhelming: whilst the death of God marks the advent of nihilism, carrying the dissolution of everything we hold valuable, true, and sacred, the emptiness of the machine also explains its transformation into a blind lethal force.

As is well known, Nietzsche aims to traverse the nihilist predicament by joyfully endorsing the relinquishment of Truth and the wild play of 'forces', freeing the strong

from the tyranny of the weak, and Life from those who 'deny' it. Once the Metaphysical Idols—Truth, God, History, the Subject, etc.—have been torn apart, *affirming* life becomes a possibility. Modernity as the apex of metaphysics—nihilism—is also the point where its cancellation is finally at hand.

However, the words of Nietzsche's madman were met with laughter, and his Zarathustra ended up suspecting that the world was not ready for his message yet. The more cautious Agamben preferred to wait until the occasion was ripe, and that is what he saw in the "End of History" (Kotsko, 2021). It goes without saying that Agamben's diagnosis of the latter differs from Fukuyama's, much like his politics of inoperativity diverge from Nietzsche's aristocratic 'pathos of distance'. Instead of the eschatological triumph of liberal democracy, Agamben discerned in the 1990s a stage where the vacuity of every historical mission became apparent (Prozorov, 2009). "In this extreme epochal situation", he argues, "Art, philosophy, religion, politics have done their time, but only now do they appear to us in their fullness, only now can we draw from them a new life" (Agamben, 2016: 174). Nihilism as a consummated crisis of *meaning* becomes an opportunity for the deactivation of the machine because it exposes the artificiality of its system of divisions.

The homology between his argument and Nietzsche's rendering of the History of Metaphysics is easy to see. In Agamben's view, the machine was always empty. The history of 'the West' is the history of the exposition of every figure of foundation—i.e., division—in its essential nothingness; the process whereby they "suffer the loss of their constructive force and become void" (Heidegger, 1977: 65). The reliance of every division in a zone of indifference between the divided terms testifies to its artificiality. If, for Nietzsche, the collapse of the belief in 'the true world' carried with it the collapse in the belief in appearances, for Agamben the absolute inclusion of natural life within the political sphere opens a path for the deactivation of the very distinction between 'the natural' and 'the political', 'Law' and 'Life', the juridical and the exception. Thus, Agamben wants to break free of both metaphysics and passive nihilism by rendering genuinely inoperative those divisions that the latter empties of content but preserves as a mere form.

The two logics governing Agamben's work—a redemptive logic of deactivation, and a sacrificial logic of separation—are tied together in the concept of the zone of indeterminacy; the threshold where the most terrible abjection coincides with the possibility of salvation. As both the sphere where the logic of division shows its most fateful consequences *and* where those very divisions are not in place anymore, the zone of indeterminacy embodies the entwinement of catastrophe and redemption that lies at the core of Agamben's political thought. This is the reason for his invocation of figures like the *Müsulmanner*, the inhabitant of the *Lager* who seems deprived of the last remnants of humanity, as a symbol of emancipation—an argument which some have found rather obscene (Bernstein, 2004). Under the generalized state of exception, where the contingency of every separation is laid bare, humans might finally come to terms with their own inoperativity: this is the reason for Agamben's "optimism" (2004). An example could clarify this: when everyone sees herself as an embodiment of 'bare life', political power is stripped of all its metaphysical/normative cloaks of legitimacy and unveiled in its naked arbitrariness as brute power to kill, master, and control. In that context, humanity might finally decide to do away with political power.

Since the "deactivation of the biopolitical machine necessarily implies a deactivation of the ontological apparatus (and vice versa)" (Agamben, 2017: 1212), we are again referred to the problem of potentiality. Recall that within Agamben 's *Homo Sacer* project, all differences are purely nominal: no matter whether he is discussing Law, animality, or language, the underlying problem is always the same, and redemption ineluctably hinges on the deactivation of the division between actuality and potentiality, variously disguised as that between constituent power and constituted power, essence and existence, meaning and meaninglessness, etc. Hereby Agamben's fixation on St. Paul's description of the messianic life as the life that is lived "as not" (2005b), or his constant appeals to Melville's Bartleby as the model of his "new politics" (Agamben, 1998: 48, 2000c; Prozorov, 2014: 49-59; Whyte, 2013: 97-122). The latter's stubborn "I would prefer not to" is seen by Agamben as a principled refusal to the logic of actualization, a 'No' that is not complemented by a 'Yes', but preserves itself in its own impotentiality, pushing the very distinction between the 'Yes' and the 'No' to a zone of indifference. By rendering this division inoperative, Bartleby escapes the capture of his impotentiality by any apparatus. In his circumvention of the extrinsic imposition of

form, he incarnates what Agamben calls a “form-of-life” (2000b), a life that would be inseparable from its form, and thus located beyond the grip of the machine and its system of divisions.

It is important to highlight that Bartleby’s endurance does not *prefigure* redemption: it embodies it. Redemption cannot be ‘prefigured’ because the very idea of figuration posits a division between an (oppressive) present and a future (of salvation) that inevitably reinstates the logic of actualization. Thus Agamben’s ‘Bartlebylian’ politics is a politics of “means without ends” (2000a), one that relinquishes prescription and refuses to set any goals. It is also, quite literally, a politics of *inaction*. Consequently, what he calls “the coming community” (1993), a community beyond identity, does not lie in an indeterminate future, but is very much with us, allegedly lingering in our impotentiality. It would be a community of “whatever beings” (Prozorov, 2014: 74-80), neither *this* nor *that*, living a life of pure indeterminacy whose rhythm would be that of “happiness”. In political terms, this is framed as the *destitution* of the existing order, and the power deriving from impotentiality is conceptualized as a *destituent* power (Agamben, 2016). Unlike constituent power, the latter would break the existing order without crystallizing in a new order. It would furnish a society *immediately* placed beyond the state, class, and any other divisionary social category.

In an astonishing passage from *Homo Sacer*, Agamben reveals the actual philosophical root of this politics of impotentiality. In a brief discussion of the relationship between Heidegger’s thought and fascism, we learn that “For both Heidegger and National Socialism, life has no need to assume "values" external to it in order to become politics: life is immediately political in its very facticity” (1998: 153). This is their common ground, the *zone of indeterminacy* between the two. However, this is also the point where catastrophe (Nazism) is said to “radically diverge” from redemption (Heidegger’s facticity): whilst the former “determines the bare life of *homo sacer* in a biological and eugenic key […] In Heidegger, on the other hand, *homo sacer*—whose very own life is always an issue in its very act—instead becomes *Dasein*, the inseparable unity of Being and ways of being, of subject and qualities, life and world” (1998: 153). The life beyond divisions that Agamben restlessly invokes is just Heidegger’s facticity, just as his ‘form-of-life’ is Heidegger’s authentic being-in-the-world in disguise, or his ‘impotentiality’ a

version of Heidegger's rendering of *Dasein* as pure 'potentiality to be'. That Heidegger, —who not only collaborated with the Nazi regime but also refused to denounce its crimes throughout his life (Marcuse, 2022)—failed to recognize the 'radical divergence' between his thought and fascism should go without saying.

For Agamben as much as for Heidegger, Being "is refractory to social and historical mediation" (Brassier, 2020: 24) because it is itself posited as the horizon of all 'ontic' socio-historical arrangements, the 'groundless ground' that they presuppose. For Agamben, ontic determinations are derivative to impotentiality as that which is ontologically primary. The imbrication of impotentiality and freedom in (human) life bears witness to the essential freedom of the human irrespectively of the particular historical shapes of unfreedom. In other words, the derivative status of ontic determinations makes their suspension an always-ready possibility. The latter is related to Agamben's ontological approach to history, which he sees as a succession of the various instantiations of an identical logic. This conception of history, which derives from Heidegger, its paradoxically *ahistorical*, since it turns History, the domain of *change*, into its opposite. As Adorno argued in the critique of Heidegger:

> When history is transposed into the *existentiale* of historicality, the salt of the historical will lose its savor. By this transposition the claim of all *prima philosophia* to be a doctrine of invariants is extended to the variables: historicality immobilizes history in the unhistorical realm, heedless of the historical conditions that govern the inner composition and constellation of subject and object (1973: 129).

This ahistorical approach to history Agamben's lack of interest in particular structures and social forms. Coming to terms with the 'contingency' of those forms (a contingency that nihilism brings at daylight) allegedly suffices to ground their potential deactivation, which human impotentiality turns into an always-ready possibility.

At this point, it becomes apparent how Agamben's turn towards ontology is simply a means to circumvent the problem of *praxis*—i.e., the historically and socially grounded possibility to change the world in a *determinate* way. As his constant exaltation of indeterminacy makes clear, the possibilities invoked by Agamben are purely subjective and abstract possibilities, as empty as Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to'. Hence the

"social weightlessness" (McNay, 2014) of his optimism, ultimately grounded in the overlapping of a Heideggerian understanding of the human as 'pure potentiality to be', and a Nietzschean (but also Heideggerian) concept of nihilism whose one-sided focus on *meaning* occludes the social and historical relationships that underlie it—thus falling into an idealist inversion.

It is precisely this Heideggerian rendering of *Dasein* that Ray Brassier objects to. Drawing on Hegel and Marx, Brassier argues that:

> *Pace* Heidegger, this negativity [the negativity of the human] is not rooted in the metaphysical difference between actuality and potentiality. It is not a pure potentiality to-be from whence ontic determinations, whether social or historical, derive as accidents. Rather, this negativity manifests the impropriety (or accidentality) of the human, upon which its determinability depends. This is to say that it does not pre-exist its estrangement in social forms such as money and exchange; it becomes possible through them (2019: 32).

Brassier's argument undercuts the intelligibility of both the opposition of determinacy and impotentiality posited by Agamben and the construction of the latter as a reservoir of metaphysical possibility that derives from it. *Pace* Agamben, (in)determinability is the obverse of determinacy, not its ontological ground. Thus, emancipation cannot be founded on a notion of impotentiality detached from its determinations—and therefore empty. If the negativity of the human is not prior to the social forms in which it takes shape, it follows that emancipatory possibilities can only be concrete possibilities inscribed *within those forms themselves*.

This is the path taken by Marx, in whose account emancipatory possibilities do not inhere in 'human impotentiality' or any other mystified abstraction, but they are not circumscribed by a fixed essence either. On the contrary, they are a determinate historical product of capital as an antagonistic relation—secreted by its contradictory dynamics—yet point beyond its rule (Chattopadhyay, 2006; Starosta, 2017; Brassier, 2019; Aguiriano, 2022). Since there is no realm of pure, unscathed possibilities, determinate emancipatory praxis can only be a struggle in-and-against social forms whose source is historical rather than metaphysical. In abstracting from the former, Agamben's approach can only yield equally abstract results.

It goes without saying that no politics—understood as collective organization and action, not as an appeal to fictional characters and their deeds—can be constructed on such a ghostly basis. There is nothing emancipatory in *indeterminacy*—just a refusal to think through the historical constraints of agency and the way they could be removed to overcome particular, socially specific forms of domination.

The emphasis on *determinacy* separates Marx's materialist dialectics from all forms of political abstractionism, old and new. As Postone puts it:

> The critique of capital does not deny the existence of historical unfreedom by focusing on contingency [read: impotentiality]. Rather, it seeks to analyze that unfreedom socially and historically, uncover its basis, and point to the possibility of its overcoming. In other words, an adequate critical theory of capital seeks to elucidate the dynamic of the modern world and does so from the immanent standpoint of its transformability (2009: 87).

Instead of turning flux and indeterminacy into ontological guarantors of emancipation, Marx conceived of communism as the "*determinate* organisation to *determinately* negate the *determinate* totality of the capitalist mode of production, and to produce the *determinate* structures of a new world in the process" (Lucas, 2022: 157).

Agamben would have none of this. First, he entirely sidesteps the problem of collective praxis: Bartleby, the solitary individual, is the sole model of his "new politics" (Whyte, 2013: 114-116). Second, he substitutes determinate negation, that is, the idea of concretely overcoming a situation by working through its real features—and thus the rational kernel of the concept of abolition (Brassier, 2025a)—with an abstract notion of 'deactivation'. Third: if emancipation, understood as deactivation, remains helplessly metaphysical it is because its object is equally metaphysical: the ontological machine, rather than capital as a concrete totality. As a result, Agamben becomes incapable of explaining what drives actual processes of transformation, and how the overcoming of the many evils he denounces could be grounded in real social processes. Fourth, since he is as oblivious to the problem of agency as he is blind to the need to organise the metabolism with nature to secure the reproduction of society, his 'new politics' remains refractory to any form of institutionalization. In fact, Agamben's infatuation with impotentiality and worklessness could arguably be explained as an otherworldly refusal

of the necessities imposed by the materiality of human life. But *pace* Agamben, humans are not angels. This is why Marx, departing from the inescapability of material needs, tried to ground in real historical tendencies the possibility of organizing social labour in a different way, one that would generalize to the maximum possible level the freedom from material compulsion (Eagleton, 2011).

Despite its superficial semblance of radicality, Agamben's mystical anarchism only testifies to his lack of interest in real social change; a change that would necessarily involve a tremendous effort of collective coordination oriented toward the substitution of those social mediations where domination is inscribed—i.e. money, commodities, capital, etc.—by new forms of mediation compatible with the abolition of social classes, along with the divisions of gender, race, and ethnicity.

Agamben writes to reassure those who are comfortable in their impotence. He fights windmills and calls them giants, whilst the actual giants laugh in the face of a politics that embellishes quietism by disguising it as the foremost example of radicality. Once this point has been established, we will turn to examining how what Agamben offers is essentially an idiosyncratic version of anarchist politics, sharing all its inconsistencies.

5. *The fetish of spontaneity: Agamben's anarchism*

Agamben's views appear in many senses to stand at odds with the insurrectionary fervor of classical anarchism, whose vociferous calls for direct action seem to contrast starkly with his praise of *inaction*. However, beyond this superficial divergence lies a substantial continuity. First, we have Agamben's resolute anti-politicism, which rejects political action and places the state—rather than the mode of production—as the ultimate enemy and the main source of evil. Second, we have his equation of emancipation with the *immediate* abolition of the state. Most importantly, what grounds this abolition is *spontaneity*, the spontaneous capacity *not to do*, which constitutes the cornerstone of the whole proposal. Much like in classical anarchism, this faith in spontaneity logically depends on a belief in the inherently good, i.e., impotential, nature of the human, which construes this goodness as a sort of essence from which we have been alienated, but with which we could spontaneously re-connect (Draper, 1990). This

re-connection would immediately destroy the familiar evils of authority—read: the machine. Third, Agamben's proposal of a politics of 'means without ends' is nothing but a version of the classical anarchist idea of the 'unity of means and ends', whilst his idea that Bartleby's refusal *embodies* redemption can be seen as a version of the anarchist belief on the possibility of establishing purely free relations in the here and now. Finally, his animosity towards any form of organization or institution is also a radicalization of traditional anarchist beliefs. On the other hand, Agamben's direct influence in contemporary anarchism is apparent in the magazine *Tiqqun*—and its successor, the Invisible Committee—, a significant source of inspiration in the anarchist movement in the last decades, which draws heavily on his views (Álvarez, 2021). He has publicly referred to the magazine, written by anonymous contributors, and some have speculated that Agamben himself is one of the authors.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Agamben political thought suffers from all the weaknesses of classical anarchism, and in facts aggravates them. We should bear in mind that in historical terms, anarchism has only achieved a partial viability when it has followed the anarcho-syndicalists in accepting the legitimacy of 'partial' strikes, and thus of permanent working-class organisations, instead of placing an all-or-nothing bet on the insurrectionary general strike. Forms of anarchism that reject this point have remained marginal, oscillating between ultra-vanguardist terrorism and individual lifestyle politics. As explained in the previous chapter, the ones who have accepted it are not free of the major problems of the anarchist proposal—i.e., the general strike as a strategy—but have at least contributed to working-class militancy. Agamben would have none of this, and thus his proposal is weak even for anarchist standards.

On the one hand, impotentiality, the source of the kind of spontaneity he favors, is nothing but a fetish. It can be praised, but it lacks any real powers. Major social change can only be conceived as the outcome of large processes of revolutionary organization and preparation, which leads to the ability to act at the right time, not as the mysteriously coordinating ability of many isolated human beings to decide 'not to act' at the same time. Moreover, the decision 'not to' reproduce a certain social institution or practice is always accompanied by the decision to create a new one. In sum, 'Impotentiality' is merely a fetish that serves to ground the illusion whereby both the

means and the outcomes of social change can be left to spontaneity. Finally, we should bear in mind that Agamben's politics has no concrete subject: it is an abstract philosophical appeal to an equally abstract 'humanity', or perhaps to the solitary individual who is willing to replicate Bartleby's gestures of refusal. In this sense, it constitutes a regression to pre-Marxian moralism.

Using the terminology of the previous chapter, we could say that Agamben's answer to the *economic* problem of emancipatory politics is nonexistent. He philosophically condemns capitalism and believes that it must be superseded, but he offers no workable alternative. More damagingly, his approach obscures the very fact that this problem requires an answer. Regarding the *political* problem of emancipatory politics, Agamben's answer is deeply flawed. Being as individualistic as it is quietist, it does not even merit the term 'political' from a Marxian perspective. Again, it constitutes a non-answer of sorts, which aggravates all the problems of anarchism to an unprecedented scale.

6. Conclusion

In depicting redemption as a withdrawal from determinations, Agamben effectively withdraws from this world. Hereby the vacuity of his Political Ontology, which ultimately reveals itself as an 'Ideology of Potentiality', as optimistic as it is sterile, favoring an illusory notion of agency and disregarding the intricacies of the social, the harsh *labor of the negative* demanded by any form of political intervention unwilling to divert attention away from real forms of social suffering, and oppression, and the concrete emancipatory possibilities arising from them. In other words, his politics of worklessness is a politics that will never work.

Chapter 4

Bernstein On Steroids:
On Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

1. Introduction: Renovating reformism

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe achieved theoretical notoriety in the 1980s by bringing what they presented as great news to a despairing political left. Gloomy as it was, they argued, the present of defeat could be overcome if the Marxist dogmas that 'weighted like a nightmare' in the minds of the leftists were substituted by the fresh truths of post-Marxism. Gifted with a pragmatic mindset, equipped with the tools of post-Heideggerian philosophy and Laclau's experience in the Latin American political landscape, and armed with a keen interest in real politics, they produced a path breaking theory that left no one indifferent. Considering their ascendancy over the Left Populism projects that shattered Western politics over the past decade, they might well compete for the title of the most influential left-wing theorists of the last 30 years. Moreover, no other thinker has claimed and vindicated the label of 'post-Marxism' with the same force and enthusiasm.

Laclau and Mouffe's "post-Marxism without apologies" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990: 97) entails two fundamental shifts. The first is methodological; the second is explicitly political. In truth, however, they both form a unity as moments of a single practical-theoretical move. The methodological shift substitutes Marx's materialism with Political Ontology. The political one replaces revolutionary socialism with 'Radical Democracy'.

In this chapter, Laclau and Mouffe's twofold shift will be criticized. It will be argued that their method amounts to abstract, formalistic philosophizing that departs from a

theoretical inversion whereby ontological concepts take precedence over real historical forms. This methodology, in turn, provides the fulcrum for a political project that is oblivious to its own material determinations. Since their method grounds transformative possibilities in general ontological axioms rather than in real material processes, their project of a 'radical democracy' becomes an *ideology of possibility* that dogmatically asserts the irreducibility of some abstract potentialities for change, disruption, dislocation, etc. instead of critically unfolding the objective potentials for emancipation inscribed in determinate social forms. The latter has its reverse in a philosophical naturalization of liberal democracy and the market as the unsurpassable horizon of politics. In other words, Laclau and Mouffe depict capitalist democracies as always-already capable of radical transformation whilst insidiously foreclosing revolutionary change (Garo, 2019), which is now identified with an illusory attempt at abolishing some ontological givens (the 'incompleteness of society'). Hence, Laclau and Mouffe's 'radical democracy' reveals itself as an ideological legitimization of the liberal state and the capitalist social relations that underlie it (Kouvelakis, 2021), providing a suitable ideological basis for the new forms adopted by social democracy as a result of the crisis of the classical workers' movement (Aguiriano, 2022). Alberto Toscano has captured this aptly by describing Laclau and Mouffe's Post Marxism as a mixture of "strategic populism, discursive ontology, and *de facto* liberalism" (2007: 531).

To substantiate these claims, I will turn my attention to the central tenets of Laclau and Mouffe's political ontology as they were fleshed out in their path-breaking *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001). Although they followed slightly different intellectual paths ever since its publication, both Laclau and Mouffe have always remained faithful to the basic theses of their seminal work: the defense of a reformist project grounded in a discursive ontology of antagonism, the main innovation of their post-1985 work being a more explicit framing of the former in terms of *populism*.[3]

More specifically, whilst the late Laclau embarked on the task of developing a formalistic theory of populism (Laclau, 2005) and clarifying the foundations of their discursive ontology (Laclau, 2014); Mouffe tried to tame the Schmittian undertones of

[3] This minimal innovation has been accompanied by attempts of enriching its theoretical ground by focusing on rhetoric (Laclau, 2014), emotions (Mouffe, 2018) psychoanalysis (see Theunissen, 2016), or the denunciation of the depoliticizing predicament preached by rival political theories (Laclau, 2001, 2005; Mouffe, 2005, 2013).

their concept of the political (*qua* antagonism) by devising the notion of 'agonism' (Mouffe, 2005, 2013), which replaces the struggle to death against political *enemies* with the virtuous competition against political *adversaries* that a well-functioning liberal democracy allegedly presupposes. Thus, Mouffe's later work develops both the strategic commitment to populism and the substantive commitment to capitalist democracy which were both at the heart of *Hegemony and Socialist* Strategy (see Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xv; Kouvelakis, 2021), now explicitly advocating for a Left-Populism directed against the miseries of 'neoliberalism' (Mouffe, 2018, 2020, 2022). Although its strict formalism guarantees its potential appropriation for more reactionary ends (Zizek, 2006; McKean, 2016) Laclau's theory of populism does not mark a departure from their shared political project (Thomassen, 2016). This continuity renders a *unitary* criticism of the conceptual bedrock of their work both possible and necessary, especially given that few authors on the Left have shaped contemporary politics in as decisive a way as them (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015; Marchart, 2018; Garo, 2019).

The first section of the essay will criticize Laclau and Mouffe's method. First, I will analyze how the specifically post-*Marxist* dimension of their theory derives from their attempt to overcome the contradictions of Althusser's structuralist Marxism. In their eyes, those contradictions became particularly apparent in the face of new historical conditions that purportedly proved the intrinsic deficiencies of Marxism itself (thus the pressing need for a *post-Marxism*). It will be argued that their solution—the turn toward Political Ontology—remains caught in unsolvable self-contradictions which are intrinsic to such type of theorizing. Since political ontology is blind to those contradictions, it reveals itself as ideology: a form of thought incapable of genuine self-reflection. Once the critique of Political Ontology has been developed, the second part of the essay will show how the latter informs Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic/Left Populist project. In this sense, I will argue that the limitations and shortcomings of actual Left populist movements find a theoretical expression in their work, which is in turn incapable of grasping them.

2. Discursive ontology, political liberalism

In *Contradiction and Overdetermination,* Althusser (2006) launched a fierce attack against the purportedly 'Hegelian' core of economistic versions of Marxism. A

materialist inversion of Hegel, Althusser argued, cannot rest content with substituting 'the Idea' with economic 'matter', the unfolding of consciousness with the development of the forces of production, because the idealist nucleus of Hegel's work does not lie in the primacy it grants to the Idea, but in its method of framing all phenomena as expressions of a single, essential contradiction. Determination is then reduced to a mono-causal process whereby the multiplicity of the real is derived from this underlying base. Since economism is built on the premise that 'the economy', as an autonomous sphere endowed with its own laws of motion, fully determines the march of history, Althusser sees it as an Idealist hangover. Economism depicts superstructures as epiphenomenal, mere expressions of a more essential reality. This move has debilitating political consequences, to the extent that it leads to an inability to seize opportunities and properly act upon conjunctures, political praxis being reduced to a quietist waiting for the hour in which the self-propelling movement of economic contradictions would finally bring capitalism to an end.

Althusser's proposed solution involves the notion of *overdetermination* which in n a nutshell means 'multiple determination'. He claims that the notion would allow for conceptualizing social processes in all their complexity—thus accounting for the 'autonomy' of the superstructure—instead of mechanistically operating a reduction of every phenomenon to an underlying 'base' or 'essence'.

Althusser is at pains to stress that his position in fact constitutes the genuine Marxist orthodoxy, 'economism' being an idealist deviation. Thus, he feels forced to combine the emphasis on the overdetermined nature of all social phenomena with an appeal to the "determination in the last instance" by the economy (Althusser, 2006: 111) that would purportedly testify to its Marxist credentials. In this model, the economy still determines everything, but this determination is never 'pure'. Economic determinations are always complemented by a multiplicity of 'efficacious determinations' (political, ideological, cultural, etc.); thus, they never appear directly.

A major difficulty with Althusser's solution was that of accounting for how this 'determination in the last instance' works. This is a problem Althusser never solved because his own model still conceived of the economy as an autonomous sphere, with production being depicted as the natural-technical base of society (Clarke, 1980;

Cicherchia, 2021). Once this is accepted, economism or pluralism will necessarily follow: either the economy is the sphere that determines every other or it is just a sphere among other equally autonomous realms. Althusser's attempt to find a middle path between the two is condemned to incoherence. Amongst discrete levels—i.e., separate spheres—only an external relation can obtain, no matter how 'structural', because if they are genuinely separate, they can only influence each other 'from the outside'. More damagingly, it is precisely this conception of the economy that Marx described as both bourgeois and fetishistic (Clarke, 1980, 1991). It is *fetishistic* because it invests things with social powers, by endowing the economic structure with 'autonomous' laws rather than understanding it as the form, or mode of existence, of determinate social relations. And it is *bourgeois* because the laws that are rendered autonomous—and thus naturalized—, are the laws of motion of the bourgeois mode of production. Whilst Marx explained how the autonomization of economic processes is a result of the private and independent nature of social labour under the capitalist mode of production (Starosta, 2015), Althusser follows Classical Political Economy in treating such autonomy as given, as a function of technical necessities rather than a product of a specific type of social praxis. Accordingly, he "turns the economy into a black box" (Cicerchia, 2021: 620), replicating the agency/structure dichotomy that runs throughout bourgeois thought (Bonefeld, 1994; Rose, 2009). The latter renders the two terms inexplicable, agency collapsing into voluntarism and structures becoming some abstract, external, and ultimately inexplicable constraints. Thus, Althusser oscillated endlessly between objectivism and subjectivism, the determination by structures and the potentialities of a voluntaristically conceived class struggle, the Marxist urge to grasp society as a totality and the emphasis on the autonomy of superstructures (Callinicos, 2006). The logic of overdetermination and the 'determination in the last instance' were impossible to reconcile.

This is where Laclau and Mouffe enter the picture as survivors of the "unraveling of Althusserian Marxism" (Callinicos, 2006: 375; see also Breckman, 2013: 186)—although as I argue, their alternative operates within a system of antinomies far more worrying than the ones that plagued to work of the French Marxist. Laclau and Mouffe's way out of Althusser's dead-end passes through getting rid of the contradiction by eliminating one of its poles: they preserve the idea of overdetermination and the emphasis on the 'autonomy' of spheres that come with it

whilst vehemently rejecting appeals to the ‘economy’ as a base (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 139-140). The last remnants of ‘economism’ vanish along with any attempts at analyzing ‘the economy’, the outcome being a fully indeterminate *pluralism*. Everything is overdetermined, society having no foundation or overarching principle of intelligibility to which all phenomena could ultimately refer. Since they saw Marxism as an essentialist ideology premised on the existence of such a principle—provided by the laws of the economy that constitute the ‘base’ of society—, Laclau and Mouffe kissed Marxism farewell.

The problem, however, is that as follows from the exposition of the previous chapters, Marx held neither the conception of the economy nor the metaphysical framework Laclau and Mouffe attribute to him (Clarke, 1982; Saito, 2017, 2019; Mau, 2023). On the contrary, he *objected* to that conception, which he found operative in the work of bourgeois economists such as Adam Smith or David Ricardo, showing how it derives from their naturalization of capitalist production. Instead of seeing the economy as a form of social relations, ‘economism’ sees social relations as determined by a purely natural-technical sphere, the economy, thus departing from an illusion. *Mutatis mutandis*, we have seen how Marx also objected to what he saw as Hegel’s failure to live up to his promise of ‘actualizing’ philosophy. Whilst bourgeois capitalist economy made capitalism eternal by identifying it with nature, Hegel presented it (i.e., private property and the ‘civil society’) as ideally necessary, thus also naturalizing it. In both cases we are dealing with ‘metaphysics’, in the sense of a dogmatic imposition of a purely mental logic on reality. Marx, on the contrary, tried to overcome it by construing thought as the mere ‘reproduction of the concrete by way of thought’ (1973: 101). In such approach, the key role of material reproduction in social life is not posited as a philosophical presupposition which is part of a ‘theory’ that is later applied into reality: it is *proved* by examining social life itself. Correct examination of any aspect of the latter would expose it as part of a ‘mode of life’ (Marx & Engels, 1975), a mode of production in the sense of a mode of reproducing human existence in a given stage.

Blinded by their will to frame Marx as a dogmatic metaphysician, Laclau and Mouffe completely miss the nuances of the points we just discussed. The argument of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* unfolds by presenting a picture of Marxism as a self-undermining theoretical current, tainted by the fatal error of ‘economism’. Marxism, in

principle is not pure metaphysics, but revolutionary theory that tries to make sense of real politics. Yet according to Laclau and Mouffe the approach of the Marxists was vitiated by their flawed metaphysical commitments, that made them constitutively uncapable of grasping the true logic of the political. There was, in other words, a genuine contradiction between their theoretic stances and their political orientation, which they tried to solve by adding increasingly sophisticated concepts that gradually moved them away from the most hard-nosed versions of economism. However, economism was never fully abandoned since it constitutes the most basic feature of Marxism. In this teleological picture, Laclau and Mouffe appears as the savers of the day, willing to push forward the best intuitions of Marxist authors like Gramsci by giving them the final twist they require: the full relinquishment of Marxism, which opens the door for a genuine grasp of the political.

However, as Laclau and Mouffe themselves made clear, the transition from Marxism to post-Marxism is not merely 'ontic': it is also *ontological* (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: x). This clarifies the stakes of their move. Because Laclau and Mouffe do not simply assert that Marxism has been rendered obsolete by historical transformations such as the crisis of the traditional working-class movement. Their claim is far stronger: Marxism was intrinsically flawed because it was grounded on untenable ontological assumptions, new historical developments simply bringing to light the falsity of its premises. Insofar as Marxism is depicted as first and foremost a logic of necessity, whereby the laws of the economy metaphysically determine the march of society, prescribing the roles, interests, and identities of social actors, breaking with it requires the transition toward a new ontology of contingency. To put it in somewhat paradoxical terms, for Laclau and Mouffe *the failure of Marxism was necessary because it could not account for contingency*.

The ontology of contingency that Laclau and Mouffe put forward in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* rejects the existence of a necessary ground constituting the basic structure of reality (philosophical foundationalism). However, it cannot be described as anti-foundationalist either, since anti-foundationalism is simply the skeptic mirror image of essentialist dogmatism: an ultimate ground might still exist, but it is deemed inaccessible *to us*. Accordingly, it is argued that consistently deconstructing the metaphysical notion of 'ground' requires a turn to *post*-foundationalism, for which the

impossibility of a necessary and essential foundation testifies to the *contingency* of every foundation, social order, or identity. Although social practice constantly gives rise to relatively stable structures, identities, and forms of order, they all contain an irreducible kernel of contingency, which reveals itself as the 'groundless ground' of reality (Marchart, 2007, 2018). An ontological concept of contingency thus becomes the starting point of political theorizing.

In the Heideggerian tradition to which post-foundationalist ontologies belong (Marchart, 2007; Van der Heiden, 2014), the question of being is inextricably tied to the question of the *meaning* of being. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* cashed this out in terms of a theory of discourse, according to which the production of meaning and the constitution of the real follow an identical logic. Since, following Derrida and others, Laclau and Mouffe reject the existence of an extra-discursive reality (2001: 110-11), discourse theory becomes *ontology*. Theories of discourse are theories of being (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Laclau, 2014a).

The central point of Laclau and Mouffe's discursive ontology is that meaning is not self-grounding but created through contingent practices of articulation and exclusion. It is relational through and through. This argument derives from the theory of meaning proposed by structural linguistics. An example might suffice to clarify it: the meaning of the term 'Jew', and thus the very Jewish identity, varies widely depending on whether it is defined as 'non-Christian' or 'non-Aryan'. Inclusion and exclusion belong together: when 'Jewish' is determined as 'non-Christian', the term includes the followers of the Jewish religion. If, on the contrary, 'Jewish' is defined as non-Aryan, the term gets a biological twist, subsuming all the genetic descendants of 'the Jewish people'. Thus, there is no such thing as the 'Jewish essence' that would fix its meaning once and for all. On the contrary, the term is historically constructed through contingent articulatory and exclusionary practices whose often fateful consequences are well known. According to Laclau and Mouffe, those practices are *political* because they are driven by power relations, their discursive ontology revealing itself as a political ontology. Practices of articulation/exclusions are power struggles, and therefore 'to be' is to be a product of struggle (Marchart, 2018). 'Struggle', in other words, is here an ontological concept which grounds their general axiom whereby *Being itself is political*. Following our previous example, as the son of a Christian mother an individual like

Theodor W. Adorno did not count as ‘Jewish’ according to the internal standards of the Jewish community. However, ‘Jewishness’ was imposed on him and many others by the power relations that gave rise to Nazi barbarism. From this perspective, the question of whether it was *really a Jew* or not is nonsensical, since the latter departs from the ‘essentialist’ conception of identity purportedly debunked by it.

As we have seen, for Laclau and Mouffe every identity or order is defined by what it excludes, and thus by a *constitutive outside* that renders it incomplete and ultimately contingent. What Laclau and Mouffe call ‘antagonism’ is this constitutive relation of any order to an outside. ‘Antagonism’ does not refer to a social relation, but to a law of Being. According to the latter, no order or identity can be deemed fixed, eternal, and necessary since they are all structured around an impossibility: the impossibility of ‘closure’, derived from their constitutive dependence on an outside, i.e., Being’s withdrawal. What a system is (its positivity) depends on what it is not (its outside, or negativity). This ‘outside’, however, is not a determinate object, but ‘pure negativity’ (Laclau, 2014b: 68), Heidegger’s ineffable ‘Being’, and thus evades totalization/conceptual apprehension. In the last instance, what every system excludes is not something concrete ‘but the simple principle of positivity” (ibid). In other words, the outside is *pure indeterminacy*. The argument follows a familiar Derridean logic: what makes identities possible is also what makes their closure (‘necessity’) impossible. Thus, ‘antagonism’ entails “ontological openness” (Breckman, 2013: 192): the everlasting possibility for change. That all this argument is nothing but a particular rendering of Heidegger’s basic framework should by now be clear. Being as sheer transcendence, or withdrawal (Laclau and Mouffe’s constitutive outside), is also the internal limit of immanence, or existing ‘identities’.

Laclau and Mouffe formalize this ontological understanding of Identity through their theorization of the logic of hegemony. Hegemony is for them “the process whereby the social world is constructed through discourse” (Breckman, 2013: 186). A ‘hegemonic project’ is a successful process of *articulation*. It unites a diffuse set of demands, desires, and wills under a single banner, creating an ‘us’ by positing a ‘they’. Although Laclau would later develop this thesis in his work on populism (Laclau, 2005), its main tenants are already present in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which affirms that as a collective endeavor, politics is always about hegemony, i.e., the struggle for power

/dominance. The partial stability of any social order as a set of 'sedimented' practices and identities is a product of a successful hegemonic project. As such, it can be contested by an alternative one, and it is in those moments where the political—the logic of hegemony—becomes fully visible. For instance, when a movement that challenges the existing political consensus arises, the artificiality of the latter is laid bare, i.e., it becomes apparent that it is nothing but a contingent arrangement.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, since the unity of the 'us' is never given by an essential determination, the constitution of a political agent depends on the contingent articulation of heterogeneous demands by forming 'chains of equivalences' between them. A chain of equivalence harmonizes a set of political claims bereft of an underlying unity. It is a discursive artifice through which, for instance, people who protest cuts in Public Health Care see themselves as sharing struggle with people demanding higher wages, more effective measures against climate change, etc. Since Laclau and Mouffe's argument is purely formal (a 'logic'), it can also account for less palatable articulations, whereby protesters against austerity might identify with racist bigots claiming for mass deportations. On the other hand, the logic of equivalence is always shadowed by a 'logic of difference'. In politics, dividing your enemies is as important as gathering your friends: the outcome of a struggle for higher wages, for instance, would depend on whether workers stand together as a single agent, or (to the joy of management) they split along lines of race, status, etc. Moreover, defining your enemies is the reverse of finding your friends: if the antagonist is 'the immigrant', friendship will be defined along xenophobic nationalist lines; if it is 'the rich', it will depend on issues of income, status, etc.

Thus, interests do not pre-exist their articulation: they are produced in the very act of being articulated into a chain of equivalences. 'Social being' is not a set of fixed material determinations but plurality/contingency, the heterogeneity of actors, demands, and desires. However, identities achieve a partial fixity as a result of hegemonic practices of articulation, whereby chains of equivalence between different elements are structured by "the constitution of nodal points which partially fix [the] meaning of the social in an organized system of differences" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 135). As with any other signifier, those 'nodal points' are themselves the product of articulations, but they are privileged to the extent that they play a central role in the fixation of meaning.

This is the case, for instance, with the term ‘citizen’ in a democratic struggle, since democratic struggles are largely struggles over the concrete meaning of citizenship (who counts as a citizen, what does it mean to be a citizen, etc.). Thus, the private and atomistic definition of ‘citizenship’ that accompanies liberalism—nowadays hegemonic—is at odds with the active, revolutionary meaning of the term in the Jacobin-republican tradition, etc. (Schulman, 2010). Laclau and Mouffe further argue that the success of a hegemonic project is primarily measured by its capability to determine the content of certain key ‘empty signifiers’. The latter are concepts whose meaning is particularly decisive in the political terrain (Laclau, 2014c) such as liberty, democracy, etc. To put it bluntly: following Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse, the meaning of the terms ‘toilet’ and ‘Freedom’ equally relies on contingent practices, but a lot more hinges (politically) on the constitution of the latter’s meaning. Margaret Thatcher, for instance, successfully appropriated the concept of freedom for her project of a neo-liberal recomposition of the British state. But freedom itself has no pre-determined content: under different conditions, it could perfectly become the cornerstone of, say, a social-democratic campaign for the institution of a Universal Basic Income. Again, the meaning of the term is traversed by *antagonism*, and thus constitutively open to reconfiguration. Who is the friend and who is the enemy, what counts as Freedom and what does not, which demands do coalesce and which ones clash: all of it is contingent. Indeterminacy punctuates every object, agent, or coalition as an irreducible remainder that renders it amenable to transformation.

Such theorizing posits a stark separation between form and content. As ontological axioms, both ‘struggle’ and the logics of hegemony in themselves lack material determinations, since every material determination is their product. They are purely formal ‘laws’ or ‘logics’ bereft of any determinate substance, and thus they could apply to any content whatsoever. As such, they are irreducible. Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of the ‘incompleteness of society’ follows from this asserted irreducibility—i.e., the ineluctability of antagonism. Society cannot be posited as an intelligible totality, no matter how contradictory, because the notion of totality presupposes the kind of full determinacy that is foreclosed by every order’s relation to its outside (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Moreover, no social sphere can claim primacy over others, since they are all identically constituted by contingent power practices. Only *the political* can claim ontological primacy because the political is not a social sphere but the meta realm

that accounts for the constitution and transformation of every sphere through power relationships of articulation and exclusion. Therefore, the political (*qua* antagonism) is turned into the foundation of the social (Lotz, 2018).

In this account, processes of determination become so random that the very idea of a critique of society is rendered unintelligible. In fact, Laclau and Mouffe essentially argue that 'there is no such thing as society'—which has led Christoph Lotz to aptly describe their approach as "Left Thatcherism" (2016). There is no way thought could unfold the essential determinations of contemporary social forms, because such 'essential determinations' are deemed inexistent. Everything determines everything, meaning that nothing really *determines* anything (Carrera, 2007: 200). Hence, Post-Marxist thought can happily detach its truth claims from any material foundations, since the latter have been dissolved in the vagaries of discourse (Breckman, 2013: 205). This means that rather than *discovering* an underlying unity between, for instance, struggles for housing and struggles for unemployment benefits—as two forms of class struggle (Aguiriano, 2022)—Laclau and Mouffe can only affirm the contingency of such unity, rejecting the idea that their links could "describe a real state of affairs" (Breckman, 2013: 206). The subsumption of materiality in discourse leads, in my view, to a paradoxical conception of self-conscious political praxis. From Laclau and Mouffe's standpoint, a 'self-conscious' political practice is simply one that is conscious of its own contingency. Insofar as it knows that its own identity as a subject is just a precarious articulation, and that commonality of interests is artificially produced rather than discovered, any collective actor would be up to date with the truths of Political Ontology. However, as Breckman (2013: 206) has argued, this is hardly the way that political actors conceive of themselves. Militants know very well that collective agency does not obtain spontaneously. It is constructed, not given. But from their perspective processes of construction are predicated upon specific social circumstances and problems. The 'Wages for Housework' campaign, for example, saw domestic workers as sharing a collective interest that preceded its political articulation, because it was grounded in the oppressive social role they performed. From this perspective, unity is not the product of the abstract will of the agents but of the material determinations that constitute their social being. As Marx would put it "there never a political movement which is not at the same time social" (2009). In other words, in political praxis construction and 'discovery' (or contingency and necessity) belong together. But Laclau

and Mouffe condemn the idea of 'discovery' as an essentialist illusion: it is contingency all the way down. A separation between theory and praxis ensues, in the form of a split between the political ontologist, versed in the mysteries of contingency, and political actors, trapped in essentialist phantasies (Breckman, 2013: 206).

A further consequence of Laclau and Mouffe's relinquishment of the idea of social determinations is that the most blatantly mystified forms of struggle could count as self-conscious on their own terms. In principle, a political project could be mindful of its 'contingency' whilst following absurd strategies and making implausible demands. Believing that if we elect the right people the government could grant everyone the living conditions of billionaires, to use an absurd example, is perfectly congruent with seeing that demand as 'contingent' and the interests articulated around it as its product. In other words, Laclau and Mouffe's self-consciousness is so formalist that it does not rule out wild forms of self-deception. This is the outcome of abstractly detaching political thinking from questions of material feasibility that are intrinsic to the latter. Going back to our example, proponents of the 'Wages for Housework' campaign knew that such demand could not be met by the capitalist state, since the dramatic expansion of the wage fund implied by the latter would lead to an immediate contraction of the rate of profit, and thus to a crisis of accumulation. In the minds of the organizers, the force of the demand was founded on its unfeasibility, since the latter would purportedly politicize domestic workers along revolutionary lines by demonstrating that capitalism necessarily relies on their unwaged labour, i.e., Politics of the impossible demand. The cogency of their analysis can surely be contested—they were, for instance, wrong in believing that domestic labour produces value (Starosta & Kicillof, 2007); more damagingly, their strategy had strong voluntaristic undertones, somehow presupposing that revolutionary struggle might stem from some strategists finding the right discursive key (Dauvé, 2016), and departing from the highly dubious (and deeply unMarxist) assumption whereby the masses ought to be mobilized through *lies* (Macnair, 2007)—but my point however is simply that actual processes of articulation are unintelligible without certain knowledge of social determinations, which is precisely what Laclau and Mouffe's theory both misses and mystifies.

A third, and even more problematic consequence of Laclau and Mouffe's formalism is that within their framework no struggle or confrontation makes more sense than others,

since none of them can be materially grounded. Insofar as the (ontic) antagonism between, say, the working class and the bourgeoisie is just the product of a set of contingent articulations, and thus bereft of any underlying essence, the antagonism between the proletarians and the philatelists or the fans of Winnie the Pooh might equally obtain.

In my view, the problems related to the emptiness of a purely formalistic approach to political issues led Laclau and Mouffe to fall into (highly revealing) self-contradictions. As we have seen, in their theory, 'antagonism' becomes the ontological guarantor of the possibility of social and political change. Existing arrangements ('politics') could always be transformed, disrupted, or reconfigured since they are all founded on contingency/antagonism (or 'the political') as the groundless ground of reality. However, not every kind of change is possible, as they themselves make clear when asserting that we ought to acknowledge "the illusory character of a total break with a market economy" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xvi)—not just in the short term, but presumably *at any point in the future*. Although they provide no arguments for why this would be impossible, they immediately affirm their trust in "the possibility of different modes of regulation of market forces" (ibid). This hints at one of the cornerstones of their political-theoretical project. The possibility that is always-already open is that of *social reform*. Markets could always be regulated differently and presumably work for the common good, at least if we succeed in creating a hegemonic project capable of winning a general election. The possibility that is foreclosed, however, is that of *social revolution* in the communist sense, because that would be an attempt to overcome the capitalist totality, and there is simply no such thing. Communism presupposes that capitalism is 'total', and it thus aims to work through its contradictions in order to enact its abolition. It thus misses the 'incompleteness of society', illusorily trying to impose a fully transparent and self-enclosed social order (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 2, 84, 188). Ironically, Laclau and Mouffe have theoretically abolished capital as a general social relation, since a 'general social relation' would be the kind of overarching principle of intelligibility whose existence they are at pains to deny. In doing so, they systematically obscure how capital poses material limitations on the politics of reform they advocate (Mattick, 1983; Hägglund, 2019; Garo, 2019; Piqueras, 2022; Smith, 2022; Aguiriano, 2022).

We should note that Laclau and Mouffe are not asserting that a communist revolution in the way Marx conceived it is empirically unlikely in the short term—which would be a truism of sorts. They seem to be claiming that it is metaphysically impossible.[4] The theoretical abolition of capital is shadowed by its practical naturalization: attempts to really break with it are, no matter if conceived as a long historical process, just 'illusions'. At this point it becomes apparent that empirical content has been smuggled within the alleged pure formalism of ontological discourse. Ontology reveals itself a means to adjudicate between the possible (reform) and the impossible (revolution) without the need to engage in social analysis. The problem, however, is that unless they want to assert that markets are also laws of Being, Laclau and Mouffe's claim on the impossibility of breaking with the market economy requires a justification that ontology cannot provide. It requires something like a 'social theory'. But if social analysis can adjudicate between the possible and the impossible, and thus between what is contingent and what is necessary, Laclau and Mouffe would have to allow for the existence of a form of 'necessity' that is social rather than metaphysical. The latter would have to be far more concrete and historically specific than truisms like 'humans have to eat', amounting to something like 'X mechanism is *the only way* in which social labour could be organized under X conditions'. If, however, social relations mediate between the (abstractly/ontologically) possible and the impossible, it follows that possibilities for transformation cannot be derived in an unmediated way from ontological axioms. This, in turn, would severely undermine the project of political ontologists. Why should we turn a concept of 'contingency' into the (onto)logical point of departure of political thought if the only thing we obtain through the former is a platitude such as 'there are no God-given social laws'? Why not begin directly by analyzing concrete historical forms? As I have argued repeatedly, the latter is the only properly rigorous option. Unlike ontology, which would leave us with nothing by a set of vague abstractions, materialist analysis could unfold how particular social forms have been historically produced (thus both their *contingency* and their *necessity*), and which real possibilities for change they contain. Moreover, this move would also reveal the abstractness, and ultimate vacuity, of Laclau and Mouffe's ontology of identity. As Lois McNay notes:

[4] In fact, Laclau and Mouffe follow right-wing critics of emancipatory politics such as Norman Cohn (1970) in depicting communism as an eschatological phantasy (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 59, 188; Laclau, 2014: 57-60). On the insidiousness of Laclau and Mouffe's deployment of anti-millennialist tropes see Geras (1988).

When viewed from the abstract perspective of a relational theory of meaning it is no doubt the case that identities might lack fixity […] When viewed, however, from the perspective of embodied power relations, identities are often found to have a phenomenal depth and durability that, whilst not making them inevitable, does not render them easily amenable to agonist reconfiguration (McNay, 2014: 81).

When social mediations enter the picture, appeals to an ontological concept of contingency boil down to a vague truism: 'identities are not given, fixed, and eternal'. More insidiously, by grounding the possibility of change in an abstract 'outside', Laclau and Mouffe's theory obscures the examination of the real possibilities and impossibilities inscribed in concrete situations of oppression, thus leaving us ill-equipped for the task of actualizing the former and removing the latter. Real forms of oppression, however, are concrete as 'the concentration of many determinations' (Marx, 1973: 100). *Mutatis mutandis*, real impossibilities and possibilities are immanent in concrete situations. Only the examination of those determinations and the capability to act upon them can bring change forward. However, identities thus conceived are not 'contingent' in the sense that they could change at any point and for no reason whatsoever: the ability to transform them requires working through the real (rather than merely formal or ideal) possibilities inscribed within the relationships that constitute them. Brassier summarizes this aptly: "what can be is a function of what is, which is not necessarily what we currently recognize" (2022: 473). In sum, the problem with Laclau and Mouffe's outside is not only that it is abstract, but that it constitutes an *empty* abstraction. By projecting the possibilities of social transformation in such empty construct, they inevitably obscure the *real* source of emancipatory potentialities.

From the abstract perspective of 'ontology' breaking free of domination is always possible. In concrete reality, however, it is not. I would argue that the crux here lies in the existence, at the level of the concrete, of *real impossibilities*, which cannot be accessed from the vantage point of ontology yet are fully actual. If domination often *feels* necessary it is arguably because emancipation is just *impossible* under certain conditions, and unless those conditions are transformed it will remain so. Moreover, those conditions are not external to the agent in need of emancipation, but the very forms of their being (Starosta, 2015). We are not abstractly free souls that are eventually bound by oppressive relations: those relations are part of *what we are*. Thus,

possibilities for change cannot be external either: they ought to be socially grounded in the 'inside' of a real form, in the movement of its internal tensions (Postone, 1996: 38-39), rather than ontologically grounded in an empty 'outside'.

This leads back to the kind of 'social necessity' I referred to, which should not be confused with a metaphysical legitimation of domination. On the contrary, accounting for the 'necessity' of domination involves unfolding its determinations, which is, in turn, the only way to consciously attempt at transforming them. It shifts the focus from the ontological thesis whereby 'domination is not necessary' to the materialist question 'Why is this form of domination the case?'. Rigorously answering the latter is also accounting for the ways in which it could be changed, and thus for the *how* and the *what* of social transformation. Marxism, for instance, accounts for the structural condition of the proletariat, which is marked by dispossession, exploitation, and oppression, by placing it within a totalizing picture of historical development. As part of the same move, it also delineates the general conditions for its liberation, i.e., the socialist revolution. Finally, materialist analysis achieves its full concreteness in providing a picture of the situation of the class struggle at a particular historical stage—placing the singularities of each juncture within a general framework that renders them intelligible. This kind of analysis, that weights issues like the state of capitalism and the form it takes in different contexts, class composition and the general development of class forces, adjudicates between what is possible and impossible at any given stage, thus delineating what forms of political practice are appropriate for the latter. Moreover, it does so within a framework that has established the historical-material feasibility of socialist revolution, i.e., the collective appropriation of our productive powers through the action of the proletariat, whilst delineating the prerequisites of this final goal. This insight allows for weighting what forms of practice are, given the objective conditions of each context, more appropriate for furthering the cause of the revolution. Since, for instance, a socialist revolution is materially impossible under conditions of proletarian disorganization, building up a socialist workers movement can be established at the task that is appropriate to those circumstances. Yet this level of abstraction proves insufficient on its own and must be supplemented by a fine-grained analysis of specific economic structures, political regimes, and balances of political forces, from which a set of concrete tasks emerges, capable of translating the general perspective into a fully determinate one.

A concept of self-conscious—i.e., critical—praxis that radically diverges from what we can gather from Laclau and Mouffe's writings could be distilled from this discussion. In this account, informed by what we previously described as Marx's intellectual revolution, praxis counts as critical when it is conscious of its determinations or, more precisely, when it acts upon its determinations by being conscious of them. Within this framework, theory is not contemplation but a guide to practice. Accordingly, 'self-consciousness' is not abstract knowledge, but the conscious organization of action. For one thing, such conception overcomes both Laclau and Mouffe's separation between theory and praxis (and the ensuing elitism that places the ontologist above existing struggles) and the paradoxes involved in the subsumption of materiality in discourse. Practical knowledge of one's own determinations is the consciousness of social (rather than 'metaphysical') necessity. It involves grasping what we are, why we are so, and how we could be something different, as part of the same movement in which we actualize such change. For this reason, which follows from the exploration of Marx's intellectual revolution in chapter one, 'critique' as I understand the term can have no truck with formalism. The separation between theory and praxis is immanent in the latter's separation of form and content. As a result, critical praxis in the way I have presented it becomes unthinkable. By eliding mediation, formalism separates what belongs together, leaving us with an abstract dualism between an empty form and an irrational content. This is the case with the rigorism of Kant's moral philosophy (Rose, 2009; Hegel, 2018), with its infamous dichotomy between the abstract moral law and a practical life driven by passions and blind impulses, and with Laclau and Mouffe's implicit depiction of all political action as 'essentialist'. In other words, whilst Marx's materialist perspective allows for the unity of theory and practice, Laclau and Mouffe's framework posits a gulf between the two, condemning practical action to irrationality whilst reducing their 'theory' to a purely formalistic affair, incapable of grasping concrete material contents. As a result, within the coordinates of their work the idea of *conscious revolutionary action* becomes literally unthinkable. Once this point has been established, we need to explore how departing from the kind of gulf between theory, i.e., ontology and practice that Marx intended to overcome pushes Laclau and Mouffe to theoretical incoherence.

3. Ontology and history

The previous discussion raises the question of the relationship between history—i.e., social praxis—and ontology in Laclau and Mouffe's work. This is a crucial point, since it brings us to the core of their theoretical project, and it allows us to demonstrate the inconsistency that lies at its heart. In exploring it, we should start by asking: what is the status of ontological axioms such as 'antagonism' or 'the incompleteness of society'? Oliver Marchart, the most philosophically minded of Laclau's disciples, has convincingly argued that following Laclau and Mouffe's premises commits us to the assertion that political ontology is *first philosophy* (Marchart, 2007: 9). There is no reason to limit the scope of political ontology to the social realm since the rejection of the existence of an extra-discursive reality entails that nature itself ought to be equally understood as being constituted by power relations of articulation and exclusion. The fact that Laclau and Mouffe did not pay attention to the latter is just a question of emphasis. However, given its post-foundationalist credentials, 'ontology' thus understood might be first philosophy, but it is surely not classical metaphysics. The latter does not separate between ontological and ontic issues, because he sees both as part of a unitary cosmos that is deemed meaningful in itself (Gunn, 1989). Within this framework, answering 'ontic' questions about determinate objects passes through grasping their fixed 'meaning' or 'essence'—i.e., their place within a harmonious, God-given order. On the contrary, by relinquishing essentialism along with any idea of a necessary order, post-foundationalist ontology posits a clear distinction between the ontic (the domain of the various sciences) and the ontological (the realm of philosophy). Ontology discloses the inner structure of reality ('Being'), but since the latter is not a necessary foundation or a set of fixed essences but 'contingency', it remains on a formal level, the task of accounting for 'ontic' issues falling on disciplines like Economics or Physics. The clause that ontology adds is that the undertakings of such disciplines unfold within a framework marked by antagonism, the incompleteness of society, etc. Thus, Political Ontology is a second-order discourse that aims at laying bare certain axioms that first-order discourses about specific ontic domains necessarily presuppose, dispelling the 'essentialist' myths to which they purportedly fall prey. Whether ontology as a meta-discourse defines its object domain as 'the social', 'nature' or both does not change its status (Marchart, 2007).

A post-foundationalist ontology, however, must be self-reflective; that is, capable of justifying its axioms. Turning the latter into self-grounding transcendent principles

would reproduce the kind of dogmatism that Laclau and Mouffe's theory of meaning disavows. But justifying ontological claims through a further meta-discourse is not an option either, because the second meta-discourse would itself need grounding, and infinite regress would follow (Gunn, 1992: 2).

An alternative option to these two dead ends would involve trying to ground metaphysical axioms through the concrete findings of 'ontic' disciplines. This is the path followed by Laclau and Mouffe, who claim that ontic historical developments (Modernity, the 'democratic revolution', the demise of the organized proletariat, the emergence of social movements, post-Fordism, etc.) *have disclosed* some ontological truths that their work simply systematizes (Rekret, 2016). From the vantage of a present marked by the fluidity and plurality of identities and the generalization of practices of hegemonic articulation, we can finally grasp certain laws of Being. History becomes the medium through which ontological axioms express themselves, giving Laclau and Mouffe's theory a *quasi*-transcendental status (Marchart, 2007).

However, this option only avoids infinite regress by either relapsing into dogmatism, falling into vicious circularity, or canceling itself. If ontological axioms condition history without themselves being conditioned by it, they remain by their own lights, transcendent and ahistorical—i.e., dogmatic. If, on the contrary, ontological axioms are conditioned by history, we either safeguard ontology by preserving a degree of separation between them, and thus justification falls into a circular structure whereby nothing really grounds or explains anything—since justifying ontology through its historical conditions whilst maintaining a separation between the two begs the question of both the specific ontological status of those conditions and the historical status of ontological axioms—or we fully overcome their division, so they lose their ontological status (their primacy). A set of troubling questions immediately arise: Why are some developments more disclosive of ontological truths than others? How could that be affirmed without presupposing the validity of those axioms before referring to history?

Let's examine this juncture more closely, since that will help us reveal the basic contradiction at the heart of post-Marxist 'ontology'. The separation between history and ontology preserves both the priority and the integrity of the latter as a self-subsistent domain by turning the processes of conditioning into one of external

interaction. However, insofar as their externality is affirmed, history cannot really condition ontological axioms themselves (which remain pure and unchangeable) but only their expression. Justification is substituted with *exemplification*: historical developments exemplify some generalized laws of Being that precedes them both logically and ontologically. This argument, however, departs from what it ought to prove: the separation between history and ontology—and thus the validity of Laclau and Mouffe's philosophical discourse—is presupposed rather than explained. Historical events only 'ground' ontological axioms to the extent that they have been previously defined as their medium of expression, and thus they do not ground anything at all. Such a form of argumentation is question-begging because it presupposes the validity of ontological axioms. But if their validity is posited as previous to their historical expression, vicious circularity ensues: ontology would be forced to justify its categories by means of those categories themselves.

It then becomes apparent that ontology can only persist as a self-subsistent domain at the cost of trumping justification: history cannot *fully* justify ontological axioms insofar as the latter remains *partially* external to it. But externality directly leads to either dogmatism (treating ontological axioms as brute givens) or vicious circularity (which does not get us beyond dogmatism). If the requisite of reflexivity is to be fulfilled, it follows that overcoming their separation is the only coherent path. By pursuing it, however, political ontology would have to negate itself by giving up on its primacy. As Rekret and Choat put it in their critique of Laclau:

> If Laclau thus affirms and seeks to sustain social struggle as the inherent possibility of any social order, this raises the question of whether the logics of hegemony, by which he formalizes this possibility, themselves have a historical character. If he fails to affirm their historicity then he is caught asserting the sort of transcendent, metaphysical principle his own theory disallows. On the other hand, if he posits that the logics of hegemony are tied to particular historical conditions, he implicitly places limitations upon the conception of antagonism and so undermines the primacy he accords to the political and the concordant contingency upon which his account relies (Rekret and Choat, 2016: 283).

As we have seen, Laclau and Mouffe cannot escape this antinomy, which pushes their theoretical project to incoherence, Political ontology being unveiled as a dogmatic intellectual edifice. But, as I have tried to show, they cannot answer a simple question:

how do you know? Why is discourse theory ontology? What defines their meta-perspective?

A few years after the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau tried to mount a defence of the conceptual status of the categories of their ontology by describing them as 'real abstractions' (Laclau, 2000: 53). That would effectively put a halt to the to-and-fro between infinite regress and vicious circularity. The problem, however, is that this cannot be the case, for reasons that are implicit in the definition of the concept of real abstraction to which Laclau appeals. A real abstraction, as opposed to a merely mental one, is one that is produced by social practice (Sohn-Rethel 1978, Brassier, 2018). Value is the best example: when exchanging commodities for money we *really* abstract from their sensuous particularity to treat them as homogeneous units of an identical social substance (value). In the practical act of exchange, we engage with commodities as expressions of *value as such*, even if what consciously interests us are their different use-values. The same, however, does not apply to categories like 'antagonism' or 'hegemony'. The practice of struggle does not abstract from its content, which is precisely what is at issue in the latter. Nothing in our practice could ever reduce a determinate struggle to an expression of 'struggle as such': the very idea is unintelligible. As Rekret and Choat point out, "the abstraction from the content of particular social struggles or demands does not occur in practice but in an *a posteriori* imposition of mental logic upon the world" (2016: 285). In truth, Laclau and Mouffe's categories are the product of an inversion whereby the theorist abstracts *from* the content of determinate struggles to construct a general concept—a pure intellectual abstraction—that is later imposed on practice as its alleged 'ontological precondition', rather than elucidating the complexities of concrete practice, i.e., real, determinate struggles. In sum, whereas real abstractions are abstractions *in* reality, Laclau and Mouffe's abstractions are abstractions *from* reality. The problem comes when we pretend, as Laclau and Mouffe do, that the latter constitute the basis of reality—the kind of procedure that Marx, as we have seen in the first chapter, would have described as an 'inversion'. Laclau's invocation of the notion of 'real abstractions' is nonetheless revealing. It demonstrates that he knew that his theory would lack coherence in the absence of the possibility of grounding it in social practice.

We are thus dealing with the 'problem of participation' as explored in chapter one. How do universals relate to particulars? What is the relation between supra-sensuous forms and sensuous contents? Laclau seems conscious of the problems involved in conceiving of universals as eternal, separate entities that externally relate to particulars. This is why he tried to describe his concepts as 'real abstractions', i.e., products of practice. Yet, as we have seen, this argument rings hollow. *Pace* Laclau, the concepts of his Political Ontology are indeed separate, free-floating entities whose source he cannot justify, and which therefore lack a proper grip on actuality. He his thus guilty of the basic sin of Philosophy: imposing an artificial mental logic upon reality.

Political Ontology is caught in an antinomy because it aims at superseding foundationalism whilst claiming primacy for philosophical concepts. Ontology thus understood—*qua* first philosophy—lives or dies with its claim to primacy—Laclau and Mouffe's 'primacy of the political'—, which is tantamount to its separation from history. Ontology construes itself as a self-subsistent, practice-independent 'realm of its own': its axioms are *unmediated*, mediation coming after as their mode of expression. But ontology's need to justify itself pushes it to reveal what it must deny. Since priority is a direct road to vicious circularity, the labor of self-justification leads from practice-independence to practice-dependence, from externality to immanence, and from immediacy to mediation. However, primacy and mediation are incompatible, and thus either the separation between ontology and history is maintained, hence safeguarding dogmatism, or we truly pursue the path of mediation, and then 'ontology' *qua* what Marx called 'self-subsistent philosophy' negates itself by dissolving into historical *praxis*. By rigorously following its own movement, ontology enacts its self-abolition, because its claims to primacy are self-contradictory. In other words, *once it becomes fully self-reflective—i.e., critical—, ontology (i.e., self-subsistent philosophy) negates itself*. Only by dogmatically refusing to take this step can the latter be safeguarded (Rekret and Choat, 2016: 285). This is the absolute limit of 'post-foundationalist' political ontologies: the kernel of dogmatism they preserve (as the incapability to adequately justify their own position) is also what grounds their identity as 'ontologies'.[5]

[5] Despite all their claims to the contrary, they remain within the familiar domain of metaphysics, which was equally structured around a set of external oppositions (see Houlgate, 1986).

Now that the theoretical incoherence of Laclau and Mouffe's system has been examined —an incoherence that stems from their conception of 'ontology'—, I will now analyze their politics. As in the other chapters, I will argue that Laclau and Mouffe's politics are both a renovated version of those of Marx's adversaries *and* incoherent with their proclaimed emancipatory ambitions.

4. The antinomies of 'radical democracy'

Instead of socialist politics, Laclau and Mouffe propose what they label 'radical democracy'. In key aspects, this is a heightened version of the politics that Euro-communists were proposing at the time (Macnair, 2008). Like them, they accept liberal democracy (rule of law constitutionalism) as the necessary framework of politics, and they substitute independent *class* politics by a form of cross-class politics oriented at building broad 'coalitions' around a programme of economic and political *reform*.

On this, Laclau and Mouffe are also radical followers of Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein rationalized the politics of the right-wing of the workers movement through a generalized attack on Marxism. Theoretically, he focused his assault on the elements that grounded the necessity of revolution: the theory of capital and class struggle, the tendency of capitalism towards collapse, etc. Politically, he advocated abandoning the policy of class struggle in favor of a policy of class collaboration oriented at gradually building socialism *within the framework of the existing state*. Thus, Bernstein and his followers advocated permanent alliances with 'progressive bourgeois forces' and 'ministerialism', i.e., socialist participation in bourgeois governments (Luxemburg, 1899, 1902). If revolution was not necessary—in the double meaning of *inevitable* and an *unavoidable requirement* for achieving certain goals—, being committed to it was nothing but a dogmatic liability. Revolutionary politics meant unnecessarily scaring the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, unleashing state repression, and isolating the proletariat for no good reason. Most importantly, Bernstein's revision of the *means* of socialist parties carried within itself a rewriting of their *goals*. For Marxists, the final goal of socialism was the point where the emancipation of the working class, and the emancipation of humanity, would be finally achieved. Their purpose was to *link* ordinary working-class struggles, the daily clashes with capital in search for better

conditions and the struggle for political reforms, with this final goal, which could only be achieved through a socialist revolution (Bebel, 1928; Luxemburg, 1999). In order to destroy this compact, Bernstein had to downplay the very notion of a 'final goal', thus reducing working class politics to a gradual improvement of the lot of the proletariat within the existing political framework. This is the meaning of his famous motto: "the final goal is nothing, the movement is everything," which is tantamount to—as both Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg forcefully argued—the relinquishment of the *socialist* nature of the movement, and of any rational pretension of representing the emancipatory goals of the proletariat. The Marxist strategy of class struggle was built on the assumption whereby only by pursuing its independent ends could the proletariat establish socialism. On the contrary, reformist methods materially imply *reformist*—rather than revolutionary—goals, even if this is not always transparent to their proponents.

As Slavoj Zizek noted, Laclau and Mouffe's politics is entirely in line with "Bernstein's archi-revisionist motto" (2009: 131). I will argue that 'Radical Democracy', in their use of the term, boils down to a metaphysically grounded reformism which posits an abstract, endless struggle for more economic and political rights. The latter, or so the argument goes, unfolds within a liberal democratic and marketized framework which has been, through a *philosophical* sleight of hand, both posited as an unsurpassable horizon and deprived of any internal limits on the amount of popular achievements it could withstand.

However, Bernstein's revisionism preserved some minimal materialist commitments—even if blurred by an erratic return to Kantianism—that made the concept of 'material constraints' theoretically intelligible. But the radicality of Laclau and Mouffe's revisionist challenge is so thoroughgoing that any notion of material constraint disappears from the picture. Their full-blown de-materialization of reality amounts to an *ideology of possibility* that naturalizes certain structures whilst implying that everything is possible within their boundaries, and thus why bother in destroying them.

When it comes to the possibilities granted by 'liberal democracy', in Laclau and Mouffe's work argument is substituted by mere *assertion*, including the invocation of the standard anti-communist trope whereby the only alternative to liberalism would be

either Stalin or Hitler. However, liberal democracy is not an abstract and infinitely flexible framework, but a specific state-form within which certain things are simply impermissible. The latter has private property and the market—that is, capitalist production—as its unquestionable material basis. The term ‘liberal’ stands for the structural shielding of the latter, which in turn imposes the need for an (expanding) bureaucratic-military apparatus standing over society. Without the latter, the propertyless masses would make their inroads into private property.

As a specific political form, liberal democracy cannot be understood outside a long historical process that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* conceptualizes in a highly abstract way: what Laclau and Mouffe label ‘the democratic revolution’. Examining their narrative is useful for proving the theoretical and political flaws of their approach. On the one hand, it shows what exactly is what their theorizing misses. On the other hand, it can explain how their political proposal is built on these blind spots, which condemn it to incoherence.

5. The ‘Democratic Revolution’

In Laclau and Mouffe’s ontologically inflected story, the ‘democratic revolution’ begins when the political power of kings is de-mystified—i.e., proved metaphysically groundless. This opens the door for a thoroughgoing demystification of political power *as such*. Existing social and political structures are, in other words, unveiled as contingent articulations, and thus changeable. Laclau and Mouffe depict the ‘democratic revolution’ as an endless expansion of political and economic rights achieved by a socially indeterminate ‘people’. But their relinquishment of materialism and class analysis as ‘metaphysical’ yields a narrative which lacks real explanatory power. What was a historical process enacted by social agents becomes a philosophical story wherein real determinations are substituted by pure concepts. In other words, as we also saw in Agamben, Laclau and Mouffe reproduce an ahistorical view of history that is intrinsic to ‘ontological’ approaches (Lukács, 1951; Adorno, 1973; Kosik, 2022). However, neither the ‘democratic revolution’ in any meaningful sense of the term nor liberal democracy as a political form can be understood outside the complex matrix of the struggle between the competing interests of different social classes: the aristocracy, the

bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie, and the proletariat (Kautsky, 1902; Domènech, 2019; Nayar, 2023).

In what follows, I will briefly recapitulate this history. I will do so because it is useful for proving the inconsistencies of Laclau and Mouffe's theory *and politics*. In turn, this exposition will provide the fulcrum for the critique of their 'left populism' in the last section of this chapter.

The first bourgeois revolutions (Netherlands, Britain) managed to turn the absolutist state into a constitutional one (be it republican or monarchic) whilst keeping political power outside the reach of the masses (thus Cromwell's repression of the *Levellers*, etc.). This proved extremely successful for the bourgeoisie, pushing both countries to global domination as vanguards of capitalist development. It did so by destroying the absolutist state forms that tied the state to the class privileges of the aristocracy, the arbitrary rule of kings, and the reproduction of feudal social relations. In so doing, it dismantled the barriers that were hindering capitalist development.

The French Revolution, however, created a different scenario. For the first time, during the Jacobin phase the masses seized political power under the name of democratic republicanism. They destroyed the previous absolutist state, along with the class privileges of the aristocracy and the clergy, to substitute it not with a state subservient to the bourgeois minority, but with *democracy* as a political form that subordinated political power to the will of the masses (Gauthier, 2014; Yannick & Belissa, 2024). The experiment was arguably doomed from the outset due to its historical limitations: capitalist production was not sufficiently developed for its abolition to be on the agenda, and capitalist production creates a concentration of economic power in the hands of the bourgeoisie which in the medium term is incompatible with any form of genuine democratic rule (Aguiriano, 2025). Thus, the Jacobin phase gave way to the Thermidor, Napoleon's empire, etc., and ultimately the assertion of the *political* rule of the bourgeoisie. The French example, however, terrified the Western bourgeoisie. And their horror would increase exponentially whilst the development of capitalism gradually made *the proletariat* arise as a distinct class from within the amorphous 'masses' of the late 18th century (a mixture of the urban poor, artisans, peasants, the petty-bourgeoisie,

etc.). As a dispossessed class that was rapidly growing in numbers, the proletariat had an objective interest in abolishing the regime of private property. Thus, any form of 'democracy', in the sense of absolute subjection of political power to the popular will, would give the proletariat the capability of launching an assault against property. Eventually, democracy would be synonymous to proletarian rule, since the proletariat was becoming the majority class in advanced industrial societies (Engels, 1847, 1891; Marx & Engels, 1992; Draper, 1986).

It is important to highlight that the bourgeoisie never had an interest in democracy as such (Macnair, 2008; Domènech, 2019), for obvious reasons. The bourgeoisie constitutes a minority of society, and thus its political and economic power is incompatible with genuine mass rule. The state-form it favored was the liberal constitutional state, and 'impersonal' institution placed above the masses with a bourgeois legal framework shielding the interests of private property (the rule of law), a body of armed men and bureaucrats capable of preserver order and managing public affairs, a parliament elected by property-owning citizens, a strong judicial power, etc. Building such a state required destroying the previous state-form, which was structurally linked to the class privileges of the aristocracy and the clergy (the feudal ruling classes). For a while, this need turned the bourgeoisie into a *revolutionary* class: by unleashing the power of the masses against absolutist regimes and skillfully leading them, it could finally seize political power. But the development of the proletariat ruined this compact (Lenin, 1965; Kautsky, 2019). Revolutions became too dangerous, shepherding the masses too difficult a task. As a result, the bourgeoisie reconciled itself with the old regimes and ruling classes, which in turn accepted the need for internal reform. This was a sort of 'revolution from above' (Germany, Italy) that turned the old absolutist machines into modern bourgeois states (Nayar, 2023).

The petty bourgeoisie has a different story. As a class of property owners, the growth of the proletariat also made its revolutionary credentials shrink. But as a class of *small* property owners, oppressed by bigger capitals and lacking real political influence under autocratic regimes, they could not rest content with the kind of arrangements that satisfied the bourgeoisie. At first, this made the petty-bourgeoisie the party of "pure democracy"; that is, a *purely political* democracy that would leave the economy

untouched, structurally shielding private property from mass decision-making (Marx, 1850, 1852). ‘Pure’ democracy is thus, perhaps paradoxically, an intrinsically *limited*, dwarfed form of democracy. Laclau and Mouffe’s ‘Radical democracy’ is a variant of the latter. It aims for the constant expansion of the democratic principle… except that some areas (the market order, i.e., social production) ought to be excluded from it *by principle*. It turns out that ‘radical’ democracy is not very radical at all.

In the late 19th century growing sections of the petty bourgeoisie started to develop an equally idealistic but much more sinister face (Evans, 2024). As the natural base of the chauvinistic, imperialist ideologies promoted by the ruling classes in the late 19th century to gather mass support (Hobsbawm, 1989), parts of the latter began to lose patience with parliamentary regimes, seeking a new form of alliance with the elites along strictly authoritarian lines. As part of this process, they eventually provided most of the mass base of fascism.

Adding some complexity to the picture, by 1914 it had become clear that the opportunistic wing of the workers’ movement, as represented by the labour bureaucracies both in social democratic parties and unions, was willing to substitute internationalism and revolutionary ideas by class-collaboration and loyalty to their own states. It thus adopted a petty-bourgeois politics, confined to the framework of political liberalism—the one that Bernstein was advocating. On the contrary, in 1871 and again in 1917, the revolutionary proletariat had proved that the state-form it aspires to is a Commune-State, a form of political power subordinate to the masses (Marx, 1871b). It was the isolation of the Russian revolution which created the counter-revolutionary bureaucratization which Laclau and Mouffe, through a philosophical sleight of hand, identify with Marxism *as such*.

It should be noted that the kind of narrative I presented does not require departing from philosophical presuppositions or applying ready-made ‘ontological’ concepts into reality. On the contrary, it renders intelligible—in a highly summarized way—the workings of an actual historical process, yielding a picture of the links between political forms, class forces and the evolution of the class struggle. This is important for the critique of Laclau and Mouffe since it lays bare some crucial issues that their philosophical approach obscures. Those blind spots, in turn, are necessary for their

justification of their political project. Conversely, bringing them to light allows for grasping the incoherence of such project.

'Liberal democracy' as a political form has its origins in the concessions made to the working class and the proletariat by bourgeois regimes during the 19th century, and it took its first coherent expression in the *anti-democratic* systems like the French Third Republic (Kautsky, 2020), built over the bodies of 20.000 thousands Communards and described by Engels as an "Empire without the Emperor" (Engels, 1891) or in the similar systems the ruling classes had to concede after WWI as a response to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation in most of the Western world. Hereby the Weimar Republic, universal male suffrage in Britain, the 8-hour working day… This regime preserved the main features of the liberal state, assuring the class rule of the bourgeosie (Lenin, 1993), whilst incorporating a vast set of democratic concessions. It was the product of a class compromise between the capitalist class, the petty bourgeoisie and the labour bureaucracy. The appropriation of the concept of democracy by the bourgeoisie has its origins in this process (Gaido, 2015; Domènech, 2019).

This liberal-democratic compromise, however, was undermined by a highly unstable economic situation that made the achievements of the proletariat too high a cost in the eyes of the bourgeoisie. As soon as the revolutionary situation faded, the capitalist class tried to recover the ground it lost and discipline the working class by imposing austerity (Mattei, 2022). Fascism came into the picture as a movement of the radicalized petty-bourgeoisie that the capitalist class of the weakest liberal countries saw as an alternative to social disorder and a proletariat emboldened by its gains. Only its defeat, and the massive expansion of a (by then highly legitimized) Soviet Union that constituted a concrete alternative to bourgeois rule, did finally gave rise to the consolidation of liberal democracy. Most importantly, this re-establishment of the parliamentary order was consciously construed in less democratic terms than the inter-war republics, empowering the executive and limiting the powers of Parliament (Domènech, 2018). The post-war economic recovery, which incorporated the most impressive period of expansion that capitalism has ever experienced, provided the economic basis that gave it

the stability it lacked before. But when a crisis finally shattered this stability, the whole compact began to crumble—as analyzed in the first chapter.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory is structurally uncapable of grasping such complex historical dynamics because, as I argued, within their framework class analysis is substituted by the movement of philosophical concepts whilst political structures become equally abstract and indeterminate. Within this realm, which replicates what Marx described as "self-sufficient philosophy" (Schuringa, 2025), reality itself seems to emerge out of pure concepts: ontological pluralism (the correct position) yields democracy, economistic monism (wrong position) yields totalitarianism, etc. This theory is *ideological* insofar as it both naturalizes existing political arrangements and obscures their true nature and origins. In relinquishing history as *class* history, Laclau and Mouffe's own *political* commitment to liberalism is fallaciously presented as the mere recognition of a set of ontological facts. This line of argument eviscerates liberal democracy and the market which provides its material base of any social content. In so doing, 'liberal democracy' and the market are naturalized by depicting them as the mere political reflection of ontological pluralism—a move that deserves the title of 'reformist metaphysics' to which we referred earlier, and which replicates the classical reformist conception of the liberal state as a neutral entity. More damagingly, the latter also makes their theory self-defeating as *left* theory. No one doubts that Laclau and Mouffe's commitment to liberalism was accompanied by a genuine belief on the possibility of furthering progressive causes, and by a distaste for the depoliticizing effects of standard liberal theory. But since they cannot explain either why the capitalist class is undermining the same popular achievements that they see as the gains of the 'democratic revolution' nor the material constraints that the capitalist economy and liberal political structures place on progressive causes, they cannot but promote political myopia.

There are two paradoxes connected to Laclau and Mouffe's shortsightedness regarding the actual processes of reform. The first one is that the force that made liberal democracy possible as the concession of a bourgeoisie which was desperate to preserve its power is precisely the one that Laclau and Mouffe would like to kiss farewell: the organized proletariat. The second one is that liberal democracy came to the world

precisely to place limits on what the masses could achieve—the 'democratic *and socialist* revolution'.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory constitutes a mystified rationalization of the withdrawal of *proletarian* class politics after the defeats of the 60s and 70s and the changes in the economic structures of Western societies prompted by de-industrialisation, financialization and the expansion of the third sector. The irony is that at the time that they declared the demise of class politics as such, an emboldened bourgeoisie was enacting an aggressive class offensive against many of the concessions achieved by the Western working classes in the 1945-1970 period.

Hal Draper argued that "Marx's socialism (communism) as a political programme may be most quickly defined, from the Marxist standpoint, as the complete democratization of society, not merely of political forms" (1974: 101). Laclau and Mouffe's abandonment of Marxism entails that their 'radical democracy' is a variant of *radical liberalism*—a project that is incompatible with the genuine rule of the poor majority, subjecting the state and the economy to their collective power (Fine, 1984, Draper, 1986, Leipold, 2024). Once this point has been established, we will proceed to examine the politics advocated by Laclau and Mouffe.

6. The contradictions of Left Populism

Despite the abstraction of their work, Laclau and Mouffe's theory has had considerable influence on real political movements. In fact, they are generally considered the main theorists of the Left Populist projects that shattered Western politics in the last decade. This provides a precious opportunity: measuring the consistency of their proposals through the analysis of a real political movement. Thus, in this final section, I analyse the politics influenced by Laclau and Mouffe. I do not wish to imply that the limitations of left populist politics emerged out of their theory, as Athenea from Zeus' mind. That would be naively idealistic: something like left populism would have surged in the 2010 even if Laclau and Mouffe had never written a single page of theory. Its limits are not purely theoretical: they derive from its nature as a reformist project in an age of working-class demobilization, economic stagnation, and the historical demise of

‘bourgeois’ revolutions. However, I argue that the shortcomings of left populism *reflect* the flaws of their theory and politics. Most importantly, they lack the resources to explain the reasons behind this failure, and thus their theory reinforces the structural blind spots of the type of projects they favor. In other words, Laclau and Mouffe can be blamed for providing a mystifying theoretical textbook for a project that was doomed to be contradictory and historically limited.

I focus on the case of the Spanish party Podemos because it is the one most closely attached to Laclau and Mouffe’s theorizing (Errejón & Mouffe, 2015). Very simply, the leaders of Podemos saw the political and economic crisis Spain was undergoing after 2008 as a ‘populist moment’. The economic crisis gave way to a political crisis. The masses were advancing progressive political and economic demands, reflecting their growing distrust of the establishment and the desire of for an alternative. According to the founders of Podemos, those demands had to be articulated in a hegemonic political project that would construe a ‘people’ in confrontation with the corrupt elites. Most importantly, such articulation (or ‘chain of equivalences’) had to be as vague as possible, following a ‘catch-all’ logic that would claim to encompass all the interests of an indeterminate ‘people’. In other words, a cross-class programme. This indeterminacy was grounded in a reformist logic: the goal of achieving full economic and political regime change had to be left aside, implying that all the purposes of the movement could be accomplished *within the existing political and economic framework* once the resistance of the corrupt elites had been defeated. The vehicle for such articulation was a *political party* that would capitalize on amorphous but widespread discontent to win a general election and rule the (capitalist) state in favour of the people. In coherence with the latter, Podemos displayed its loyalty to the Spanish capitalist state by accepting the constitutional order and NATO, watering-down its republicanism, etc. Meanwhile, the party was turned into a strictly hierarchical electoral machine where genuine democracy was absent and dissent a sure road to marginalization. Lacking a proper structure, militancy and organizational rules, a top-down structure of command was accompanied by a careerist logic which promoted obedience, ambition, and media skills (Rodríguez, 2016). On the other hand, Laclau (2000) had theorized how populist politics requires a leader in whose figure the heterogeneous demands achieve unity. The founders of Podemos were systematically faithful to this logic: ‘the leader’ played a central role

from the outset, with Pablo Iglesias' face present in the very electoral ballot and the party being strictly identified with him and his closest associates. At the same time, the media were construed as the privileged and almost exclusive domain of politics.

Left populism provided new form for old content. Both social democrats and euro-communist had long ago abandoned revolutionary goals, turning their parties into 'parties of the people' that aimed at reforming the existing political and economic system rather than abolishing it. Loyalty to the latter was thus intrinsic to the project. However, what is new about Podemos and similar forces is that, unlike old reformist social democratic parties, they lacked a strong link with the workers' movement (or any organized movement). This has led some authors to label this kind of projects "neo-reformist" (Albamonte & Maiello, 2017). Until now, Laclau and Mouffe have been the most articulate theorists of this type of politics. As practiced by Podemos and the likes, 'Neo-reformism' is not only *contingently* detached from any densely organized movement, composed of unions, cooperatives, collective spaces, an independent media, etc. It is *structurally* so because it tends to dichotomize 'politics' and 'society', reducing the former to a *purely* 'cultural' warfare taking place within social media and Television, entirely oriented towards the electoral field and the struggle to win offices. In this sense, neoreformism is the mirror-image of 'movementism', equally positing an either/or dichotomy between 'the ballots' and 'the streets'—a question that, as August Nimtz (2012) has masterfully explored, Lenin answered by saying 'both' whilst turning the two into means of strengthening the revolutionary movement instead of trying to rule the capitalist state of forever protest against it. The very idea of *building a movement* is thus foreign to Podemos-style neo-reformism. Within this framework, 'Parliamentary cretinism'—the idea that political life unfolds solely within the boundaries of the Parliament—is substituted by a 'media cretinism' of sorts, whereby politics take place essentially within the mass media. Rather than working through it, this approach takes working class de-organization at face value, turning politics into a competition for the *votes* of a purely atomized mass of electors, and *party*-politics into a strictly mediatic and electoralist endeavor. In turn, the latter requires a strictly hierarchical form of internal organisation, the party's structure being a mere means of echoing the discursive choices of the leadership. Circumscribing political struggle to the media logically entails turning political militancy into a purely virtual affair, unfolding

strictly within the boundaries of the Internet. Thus, we are facing a highly paradoxical "populism without the people" (Riofranco, 2018) that is the logical outcome of Laclau and Mouffe's dissolution of the social in discursive ontology. Instead of a concrete historical agent whose existence is crystallized in a dense net of practices and institutions, their 'people' is an abstract aggregate of heterogenous demands which remains entirely weightless, its unity being purely virtual and discursive, confined to the support of the Party-leader. The non-very-democratic conclusion is not only that there can be no people without a leader, but that the people cannot ever turn against the leader since it lacks any actual cohesion beyond the one provided by his figure. The internal life of Podemos, composed of a series of purges against anyone who did not submit to the will of Iglesias, forcefully proves this point. It is quite ironic that Laclau and Mouffe, so keen on deploying anti-Soviet tropes to de-legitimise Marxism in any of its forms, ended up providing a philosophical justification for personality cults. It turns out that 'left populist' politics is about isolated individuals giving support to a leader that is omni-present in the mass media, in a self-expanding circle that would eventually lead to a parliamentary majority.

It should be highlighted that this perspective is built on an illegitimate theoretical separation of 'politics' and 'society', which leads to a rather one-sided conception of 'cultural struggle'. In criticizing the watered-down, reformist Gramscianism that constitutes one of the sources of Laclau and Mouffe's thought, Richard Gunn argues that their project of waging a 'war of positions' aimed at appropriating some 'key signifiers' for progressive purposes "is in fact interminable, since the line dividing the critique of ideas from the critique of social conditions is one drawn on rightist terrain" (1989: 108-109, see also Kolitza, 2021). Already in his first texts Marx highlighted that the 'weapon of criticism' and the 'criticism of weapons' belong together, foreclosing idealist attempts to detach the change of ideas from the change of the social relationships that ground them. The underlying lesson is that any genuine change of ideas requires the careful construction of an *organized* mass movement where the project contained in those ideas would be crystallized. Deep subjective changes—changes in mass consciousness—demand objective alternatives to the alienated forms of social and political life promoted by the ruling class: a mass movement like the one the

socialist proletariat used to compose, built on conscious association, democracy, and solidarity.

More generally, the outcome of all the previous points is that the 'neo-reformist' parties inherited all the structural limits of reformism *minus* the force that the organized working class could provide. During the 20th century, the capitalist establishment had good reasons to give concessions to the working class and accept social democratic parties: the former could become revolutionary; the latter were making them a precious service by preserving working class politics within the boundaries of the existing system. Neo-reformism, on the contrary, lacks both the leverage and the usefulness of its political ancestors. Moreover, 1) it emerged in a more depressed economic landscape than the one existing in Europe during the golden years of social democracy, with the consequence that granting concessions was a more painful way of manufacturing consent, 2) it exists within an international order where there is no concrete alternative to capitalist rule, like the one that the Soviet Union used to provide.

Thus, left populism is caught in a double self-contradiction. As *reformism*, its means are incoherent with its proclaimed ends: the capitalist state cannot be ruled 'in favor of the people' (Luxemburg, 1999; Macnair, 2015a). As *neo*-reformism, it lacks the power to gain significant concessions (Maiello & Albamonte, 2017). Thus, left populism is a self-undermining project, evident in its different instantiations: Syriza, which once governed Greece, now commands 4% of the votes; Podemos has been reduced to a marginal political expression; Corbyn has been expelled from the Labour Party, and the political limitations of Latin American Populism (Martins, 2007) are nowadays all too apparent.

Again, Podemos' example is illustrative of the shortcomings of the politics preached by Laclau and Mouffe. From the very beginning, they dramatically weakened their demands, accommodating to the Spanish constitutional order, the EU, NATO, etc. The next step was to exclude the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) from the ranks of the corrupt elite against which the 'people' had to fight: its votes were now necessary to rule cities and regions. During the process, the establishment launched a multifarious campaign against them, ranging from incredibly hostile media cover to illegal political espionage, fraudulent judicial prosecutions, and manufacturing of fake proofs against

their leaders. But their complete dependence on their charismatic leaders made them particularly vulnerable to such attacks. On the other hand, their internal top-down structures soon proved uncapable of managing internal dissent, tactical differences immediately giving rise to unprincipled maneuverings, purges, and, eventually, splits. Moreover, the local and regional governments where they participated were uncapable of delivering their promises of radical change, whilst the Socialists managed to overcome their internal crisis and preserve their status as the main party of the left. Thus, Podemos' original goals—winning a general election—were soon watered-down: becoming the junior partner in a coalition government was now the new horizon. On this, they succeeded in 2019.

This late replication of "ministerialism" (Luxemburg, 1899) was as unsuccessful as its antecessors. The pro-capitalist and monarchist coalition government (Conrad, 2025), celebrated by the left-wing press as the "most progressive government in [Spanish] history", not only failed to conduct deep structural reforms of any sort: it also expanded the armed apparatus of the state by soaring military and police budgets, repressed striking workers with tankettes, raised retirement age, and preserved some of the most damaging laws passed by the previous conservative governments. Moreover, the minimal progressive reforms it approved were either swallowed by inflation and the 'cost or living crisis' or mostly capitalized by the Socialists as the senior part of the coalition, armed with a much more powerful media apparatus. By 2021, Podemos was sinking in the polls. Iglesias had to retire after his failed attempt at avoiding his party's disappearance from Madrid's regional parliament. The whole experiment has had a massively de-mobilising effect on the Spanish Left, now entrenched in its new role as a minor coalition partner of the previously despised Socialist party.

It should be emphasized that despite the centrality that the 'logics of hegemony' has in their writings, Laclau and Mouffe's framework obscures the basic distinction between overthrowing a political order (revolution) and working within the latter (reform). This derives from their belief in the neutrality of the liberal state. By implicitly promoting constitutional loyalism, they also promote *coalitionism*, i.e., the alliance of 'radical democratic'/Left Populist forces with more systemic ones around a programme of minor reforms. This will for class collaboration is inscribed in Mouffe's key concept of

"agonism" (2013), which posits a respectful struggle between adversaries around a stable underlying consensus—something that, as Trump's example shows, the oligarchy is not exactly willing to grant. But as Rosa Luxemburg, Kautsky, and others argued, coalitionist attempts to rule the liberal state—which they also called 'ministerialism'—implies giving up on the project of radical transformation, and assuming responsibility over the effects of the liberal order upon the masses. Even non-socialist, Left populist forces are damaged by assuming the role of the minor partner in a coalition, since the latter inevitably leads to betraying the expectations of change upon which they are built. The immediate effect is increasing demobilization and demoralization amongst the forces of change and a remarkable loss of electoral support, as both the example of Podemos in Spain, and Rifondazione Comunista in Italy prove. However, the crux of the problem lies not just in being a minor partner in a coalition, but more generally in taking office as part of a government that swears loyalty to the liberal state (Luxemburg, 1899, 1902; Kautsky, 1909, 2020; Macnair, 2015a, 2015b). Since the material and legal constraints that subordinate the liberal state to the rule of capital stand in contradiction to the emancipatory expectations of the supporters of these projects (however vague), disillusionment is unavoidable (be it in the short of medium term). The recent example of Syriza largely proves this point, which can be traced back to the first government of the pro-capitalist, Majority SPD in Germany. The Marxian alternative, as intimated in the second chapter, was to only assume office whenever the full minimal programme of the party, i.e., the overhaul of the existing state and the establishment of the rule of the majority, could be implemented (Macnair, 2015a). Until that moment, Marxist parties should remain parties of extreme opposition. This is a point that the contemporary left, which closely follows Bernstein's path of class compromise/coalitionism, has largely forgotten.

A further problem with Laclau and Mouffe's project which can also be traced in Left Populism *in toto* is its inevitable collusion with *nationalism*. The reason here is twofold. On the one hand, the idea of construing 'a people' in strictly non-class terms entails that at the end of the day *nationality* is what glues the people together. This stands in stark contrast with the idea of conquering hegemony through a working-class project since the latter has internationalism as one of its preconditions. A movement that is founded on working class independence is one that favors its loyalty to the international working

class over its national allegiances. On the contrary, a movement that is based on an abstract ‘people’ might have international sympathies, but inevitably subordinates them to their loyalty to their nation. The second side of the problem is that any project that simply intends to rule its own capitalist state ‘in favour of the people’ is forced to promote its state as a ‘firm’ competing with others in the world market (Merchant, 2018, 2023). Hereby the collusion of reformist forces with nationalism and imperialism (Parkinson, 2018). An example on this effect would be the increase in the military budget in the PSOE-Podemos government or its abandonment of calls for the self-determination of the Sahara, a historical banner of the Spanish Left.

I have argued that the emergence of something like ‘Left Populism’ was as inevitable as it was doomed to fail. This is not a legitimization of their strategic choices, but a way of framing them as a (mystified) subjective expression of objective limitations, much as ‘utopian socialism’, for instance, was seen by Marx and Engels as a failed initiative emerging out of the weaknesses of emancipatory projects before the full-blown development of the proletariat as a class (Engels, 2017). There was no ready-made mass socialist alternative to be immediately counterposed to the ‘left populist’ playbook, and its construction requires a time and strategic clarity that many sectors radicalized by the 2008 crisis lacked. The de-mobilisation of the working-class, the transformation of trade unions into tools of the state (plus their weakening), the hegemony of the middle-classes within protests movements, the retreat of socialist consciousness, the evisceration of party democracy and ‘civil society’ and the long withdrawal of mass politics (Jäger & Borrello, 2020, 2023) had created a context where mass discontent was doomed to be (at least to a great extent) capitalized by something like ‘left populism’: cross-class, reformist, top-down, heavily media-centered, unable to construct stable structures, etc.. The impoverished and radicalized progressive middle classes found in the latter their political expression (Evans, 2024). Laclau and Mouffe’s work provided this movement with a theory—which in economic terms was complemented with the neo-Keynesian proposals of Stiglitz, Krugman, Vincent Navarro, and the likes (Merchant, 2023b)—, much in the same way as Bernstein’s revisionism provided the one of the labour bureaucracies.

The underlying issue is that the middle class is caught in a contradictory position which any movement hegemonized by this class will inherit. On the one hand, it is being gradually erased by a declining and increasingly inegalitarian capitalism, and its interests are not properly accommodated within liberal-oligarchic political systems that are increasingly impervious to any pressure from below. On the other hand, is tied to its privileged position as a property-owning class (be it in the form of small businesses or rare skills which yield 'middle class jobs') and the aspirations associated with the latter. Thus, it cannot be consistently socialistic nor 'democratic' in a revolutionary sense—i.e., oriented at the full subordination of the state apparatus to the masses. It lacks a coherent 'civilizational alternative' that is proper to them, being confined to oscillate between the capitalist class and the working class. Movements led by it (and cross-class political commitments yield *middle-class leadership*) are forced to compromise with the bourgeoisie and its civilizational model. Their horizon lies in 'democratising' the capitalist state—constitutional loyalism being the hallmark of Syriza, Podemos, Corbyn, etc.—and reforming capitalism. The underlying problem, however, is that they lack the leverage to force the capitalist class to accept that programme, which would be extremely damaging for their interests in an era of low growth and low profit rates. Since do not posit a complete alternative to capitalist rule, which would require a densely organized movement, deeply rooted in the working class, they are not enough of a threat to be granted long-scale concessions, whilst being sufficiently threatening to command a hostile reaction from the establishment which proves extremely damaging in the face of their organizational weakness. Laclau and Mouffe provides a useful rationalization for that kind of politics insofar as it is structurally blind to these limitations.

Thus, Podemos followed Laclau and Mouffe's theory—and failed. But the theory itself provides no resources to explain why it did so, and no alternative but to keep following a false path. In the face of this, Mouffe has simply doubled down on the same self-defeating logic. Her latest book offers the same cocktail of "strategic populism, discursive ontology and *de facto* liberalism" (Toscano, 2007) than the previous one (Eagleton, 2023). Anyone taking her advice seriously could reasonably expect nothing but the same results.

In reviewing Mouffe's book, Oliver Eagleton has reached two conclusions that are fully in line with the thesis defended in this chapter. Mouffe (2023) calls for a 'Green Democratic revolution' that requires mobilizing existing 'affects' to create a left populist project that would constitute an alternative to managerial neoliberalism and the 'neo-authoritarianism' of the right. However, as Eagleton argues, her 'Democratic revolution' is not a revolution at all, but a project of reform that presupposes the general validity of the existing political and economic structures. In Mouffe, Eagleton explains:

> There is no account of how a bottom-up green transition could take place within the strictures of the neoliberal state, captive to financial markets and multilateral organisations. Without this, Mouffe's plea to defend "democratic values" sounds just as hollow as the Third Way pieties she rejects (Eagleton, 2023).

The underlying problem, according to Eagleton, is "the fundamental conservatism" of Mouffe's framework. The fixed idea whereby the people ought to be constituted by the manipulation of existing collective affairs implicitly accepts the latter as an unsurmountable horizon, thus refusing to build a project oriented at transforming them. Politically speaking, this condemns the Left to the role of the most radical wing of *liberalism*, focused on trying to rescue the latter from its alleged 'distortions'. On the contrary, Eagleton asserts:

> A more hopeful 21st-century politics would start from the premise that disillusionment with "liberal democratic discourse" […] allows the left to break with liberalism and reassert the separateness of socialism. This would mean substantiating the call for "green democracy" with proposals for entirely new institutions (2023).

That socialism ought to be neatly separated from liberalism and progressive bourgeois currents, and that the latter entails putting forward a proposal for a complete transformation of the political order, i.e., political revolution, is part of the argument of this thesis. I also agree with Eagleton in that this "overhaul of the State" rests on what he describes as "a prior democratization of civil society". In other words, it would require the construction of a vibrant revolutionary *movement*, which in turn demands:

A fine-grained analysis of class forces: assessing the industrial sectors in which militancy could be cultivated, the demands most likely to foster solidarity, the possibility of cross-class alliances and the fissures in the ruling bloc—none of which is possible within the idealist straitjacket of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Its conception of society as a set of linguistic constructions nullifies the basic work of political economy, leaving Mouffe unable to map the social terrain or identify sites where a viable coalition could be built.

Thus, Eagleton concludes that Mouffe's contribution is fatally weakened by the dogmas that provide its bedrock: "the dismissal of material conditions and the attachment to political liberalism" (2023).

Using the terminology of the second chapter, we could say that Laclau and Mouffe's response to the economic problem of emancipatory politics is flawed, since preserving the market entails preserving impersonal domination, exploitation, and class oppression. Regarding the political dimension of emancipatory politics, their response is equally flawed, since 'liberal democracy' is opposed to the genuine rule of the social majority, and left populism provides no convincing alternative to the established order.

7. Conclusion

Laclau and Mouffe tried to offer a solution to a real problem: how to do Left-wing politics in the absence of a powerful, organized working-class? But their solution is a false one, in the basic sense that it cannot make good on its emancipatory ambitions. In the introduction, I asserted that Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism rests on two swifts which constitute a unity, the substitution of materialism by political ontology and of socialism by 'radical democracy' being two sides of the same coin. The *idealism* of their theoretical framework is the reverse of their commitment to *liberalism*. I have argued that both points are equally *dogmatic*, in the strict sense that they fail the test of rational justification. There is an unsolvable internal contradiction both between the claims of Political Ontology and its actuality and between Laclau and Mouffe's commitment to liberalism and their emancipatory promises. The deficiencies of their theory makes them blind to the pitfall of their politics; whilst their commitment to those politics grounds their adherence to the theory. In this sense, they replicate the twin errors that I see as constitutive of post-Marxism in all its versions. Whether we will ever

get an apology from the famous proponents of a ‘post-Marxism without apologies’ is doubtful, but we surely deserve one.

Chapter 5

Idealist Communism: On Alain Badiou

1. Introduction: A Communist Philosopher-King

With his restless thirst for radical change, his hatred of the capitalist order and his undisguised admiration for Mao, Alain Badiou represents the hard revolutionist corner of the post-Marxist spectrum. From his Maoist youth he has preserved a combination of contempt for bourgeois society and a zeal for revolutionary action. From his philosophical training, both an acceptance of Heidegger's 'ontological turn' and an infatuation with the figure of Plato that are fused in his life-long attempt to build a (post-foundational) metaphysics on a bases provided by modern mathematics. This mixture has produced a comprehensive philosophical system oriented at grounding the ever-present possibility for radical, world-shattering, change. In Badiou's work, the central terms of the Western Philosophical tradition—Being, the Subject, Knowledge, Truth, even Philosophy itself—are given a new meaning within a framework which downplays 'normality' to better glorify ruptures. His is a politically oriented and politically motivated philosophy. He aims to de-substantialize an actuality he despises to focus on the radical transformation he yearns for.

Badiou abandons Marx's materialism in favor on a philosophy that takes pride in its a-historical nature. He also rejects Marxian politics in a search for a politics beyond the state, the party-form, and any intrinsic link with the worker's movement. Following an accusation that, according to Badiou himself, Toni Negri raised against him, we could describe Badiou as "A communist who is not a Marxist" (Badiou, 2011a: 18-19). He has also been one of the more prominent voices in the vindication for the need to return to philosophy, making the latter the core of any emancipatory thought (Badiou, 1992, 2011b). The formidable scope and sophistication of Badiou's project, along with its

unapologetic radicalism and air of philosophical *grandeur*, have made him one of the most prominent thinkers of our time.

In this chapter Badiou's philosophical system, both in its theoretical and political dimensions, will be analysed. First, I will reconstruct Badiou's metaphysics and his innovative rendering of the concepts of Event, Truth, and the Subject. Second, I will show how this metaphysics is ridden with contradictions and is rationally untenable. Third, I will proceed to examine Badiou's politics in three steps. On the one hand, I will demonstrate how Badiou's conception of politics leads to mystifications. On the other hand, I will prove how he is incapable of offering a rigorous alternative to that which he criticizes: capitalo-parliamentarism and classical Marxist politics. Finally, I will show how Badiou's politics is both unworkable and, despite his claims to novelty, a replication of old, flawed proposals. within the socialist movement. In other words, like in the previous chapters, I will show how 1) Badiou's philosophical system runs into contradictions that ultimately derive from his 'ontological' starting point; 2) Badiou's politics are incoherent, yet the deficiencies of his system blind him to this incoherence.

2. The number and the Void, or Badiou and Ontology

Like Plato, Badiou sees our contemporary intellectual landscape as marked by the tyranny of opinion and creeping sophistry. Moreover, he sees both as the theoretical counterpart to the despotism of money and political liberalism. Against the hegemony of the sophist, which embodies the victory of relativism, Badiou thus seeks to re-assert philosophy as an unapologetic—yet highly idiosyncratic—doctrine of 'Truth' which purportedly grounds a renovated communist politics. The latter requires, according to Badiou, working through the problem of Ontology.

Badiou accepts as his philosophical starting point Heidegger's thesis whereby overcoming traditional metaphysics passes through dealing with the 'ontological difference'. He is also on board with the idea that philosophy should be restored to its lost centrality. As he argues: "Along with Heidegger, it will be maintained that philosophy as such can only be re-assigned on the basis of the ontological question" (Badiou, 2005). This is what places him within the post-Heideggerian spectrum (Von

Heiden, 2014; Osborne, 2007; Merchant, 2007). However, Badiou is too much of a rationalist to rest content with Heidegger's answer to this problematic. Within Heidegger's framework, the sheer transcendence of Being relinquishes its conceptual apprehension. On the other hand, its 'intimacy' as the source of meaning commands a constant gesturing towards the ineffable. Thus, philosophy is condemned to the endless production of 'ontic' metaphors that would convey Dasein's relationship with a Being that ceaselessly withdraws. In Badiou's vocabulary, this entails tying philosophy to "the poem" (Badiou, 1992, 2005). Heidegger found the original sin of metaphysics in Plato's construction of Truth and Being as Form, i.e., intelligibility. This constituted a break with a pre-Socratic tradition that was 'poetic' insofar as it still treated Being as a mystery that could only be approached by means of literary figures. Poetry is a type of discourse that is resistant to rational articulation, and thus preserves a space for the ineffable and the mystical. In Heidegger's eyes, only by recovering this 'poetic' spirit can philosophy remain true to the 'ontological difference'. On the contrary, Plato's expulsion of the poets from the Republic marks the symbolic beginning of the 'oblivion of Being'.

As we will see, Badiou ultimately agrees with Heidegger in that 'Being' transcends the order of beings. But he strongly objects to the construction of 'Being' as the source of meaning and the ensuing focus on the question of the *meaning* of Being, which leads to the endless 'poetic' gesturing towards the ineffable we just examined. By tying itself to poetry, Badiou argues, philosophy betrays its very nature. This statement he grounds on a wider theory whereby philosophy has art, politics, and science, as its 'conditions', yet it must remain carefully separate from them. He sees the modern age, however, as defined by the constant temptation to "suture" philosophy to one of the latter, be it science (as in positivism), politics (as in Marxism), or poetry (Nietzsche and his heirs). In his eyes, any form of suture *deforms* philosophy—whose subject is none other than 'Truth'—and leads to relativism. Heidegger's *pathos* of the ineffable, which grounds his 'suture' of philosophy and poetry, is for Badiou a reactionary framework built on an equally reactionary nostalgia for a lost past (Badiou, 1992). As he sees contemporary (post-Heideggerian) philosophy as entangled with "the obscurity of the poem", Badiou seeks to repeat Plato's gesture: a de-mystification of 'the ontological question' grounded in the austere rationality of mathematics.

Badiou's point of departure in *Being and Event*, the cornerstone of his philosophical system, is the ancient problem explored in Plato's *Parmenides:* whether the One is or is not. In Badiou's eyes Plato's dizzying dialectical response offers no clear solution. Badiou wants to cut this Gordian knot through a 'decisionist' move: he *asserts* that "the One is not" and turns that into the axiom that constitutes the bedrock of his philosophy. Thus, ontological monism is to be relinquished. Being is irreducibly *plural,* or 'inconsistent multiplicity'. According to Badiou, this should lead to a second decision: the one that states that set theory, the branch of mathematics that explores plurality as such—a 'pure doctrine of the multiple'—*is* ontology.

It is important to recognize the radicality of Badiou's views on mathematics and its relationship to philosophy. He is not claiming that mathematics is 'useful' for metaphysics, in the sense that mathematical formulae could, as is common in Analytical philosophy, be deployed to formalize certain arguments. He claims that mathematics *is* Ontology. More precisely, he *decides* so, seeing this thesis as the most accurate response to the previous decision whereby the 'One is not'. On the other hand, we should also remember that Badiou's Ontology is *politically motivated*, even if not political *as such* (formally at least). Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, Badiou rejects the claim whereby Being is synonymous with 'struggle' and similar arguments. The latter are incompatible with the view of mathematics as ontology. But Badiou's philosophy remains politically motivated insofar as he sees it as means of proving the existence of *Events*, revolutionary ruptures that shatter the existing configuration of Being. This construes 'what is' as always-already amenable to radical transformation. It is thus a version of the argument for radical contingency that we find at the heart of any post-Heideggerian Ontology (Von Heiden, 2014).

Despite the forbidding complexity of Badiou's theoretical edifice, its basic rationale can be summarized as follows. 'What is' *is* an inconsistent multiplicity but one configured in different 'sets' or aggregations. Each set makes its elements 'count as one', giving a formal unity to what is essentially multiple and thus rendering it into a "consistent multiplicity". No pre-existing substance guarantees that unity, which is strictly formal or structural. An example could clarify this: the very term 'multiple'—as in the phrase 'multiple mistakes'—makes what is multiple count-as-one without making it less plural.

Badiou ascribes this form of reasoning to set theory, all whose elements are sets, and thus multiplicities consisting of multiplicities. It is not difficult to see why he takes this to be philosophically meaningful: philosophy had struggled for millennia with the puzzling fact whereby beings are plural (not-One), but their Being seems to be One. This allows for the construction of Being as *something*, which Badiou, like Heidegger, sees as oblivious to the 'ontological difference'. However, by conceptualizing 'oneness' as a purely formal procedure rather than as an expression of a substantial unity, set theory allegedly makes 'what is' thinkable *as* multiple rather than reducing it an underlying substance. Thus, Being is not some-thing, but what Badiou calls 'the void'—or, again, inconsistent multiplicity, which from the perspective of consistency is simply 'void', lacking any determinations. For Badiou, Being is properly thinkable as "the void set"—a set to which literally nothing belongs, whose mathematical sign is ∅. The void, Badiou argues, is thus "the proper name of Being". Since the void set is the universal subset of every set, Badiou asserts that it shares Being's basic determination in the philosophical tradition.

This argument, which construes Being as the void, is structurally analogous to Heidegger's conception of Being as a 'groundless ground', yet without its 'poetic' implications. The void is nothing and simultaneously the foundation of all things. But Being, understood as the void, is not the source of all meaning. In fact, it has no meaning, and it is thus impervious to 'poetic' approaches. It now becomes apparent why Badiou *believes* he has successfully de-mystified the question of Being—something I will contest later. At this point, it suffices to highlight that by identifying it with the void, the question of Being ceases to be the question of the *meaning* of Being—which is, in Badiou's eyes, what leads Heidegger into obscurantism. The other side of this coin is that Badiou's ontology has no truck with phenomenology or anything that would indicate a dependence on the human subject in the standard sense. At the same time, his arguments preserve the basic insight of Political Ontology whereby what exists is groundless, and thus open to (radical) transformation. In so doing, he displaces philosophy's attention to what he sees as genuinely relevant: Truth and the Event.

So far, however, Badiou has not proved how something like a 'rupture in Being' is possible. In his argument, 'what is' is always structured in given ways, through operations which make the multiple 'count-as-one', turning it into what he calls 'a

situation'. Anything concrete is thus a situation; and anything within a situation is 'presented', i.e., it possesses a certain recognizable identity. The general 'situation' that we would commonly understand as actuality Badiou calls 'the State' or 'the State of the Situation'. Within this framework, change in the banal sense is easily thinkable: since no element is substantially attached to any set, it could always become part of another one, much in the same way as any given set could be absorbed by a bigger one, etc. For example, if Andorra joins the European Union, the set named 'Andorra' will now count as part of that bigger set called 'The EU'. But an Event is no such banal re-ordering, but the emergence of *absolute novelty*: something that literally did not exist before within the 'State', not even as a possibility harbored within its actuality. Badiou feels entitled to the claim that radical novelty is possible because the relinquishment of ontological monism entails that being, as 'inconsistent multiplicity', is always in 'excess' to the operations that make it 'count-as-one'. Most importantly, this excess cannot be measured: we know that the parts are more numerous than what now counts as members (of a given set)—an argument Badiou (1992: 80) grounds in Cantor's Theorem—but no measure of this 'more' can be established. Thus, there can be something outside the determinants of real being as such: pure novelty—a break in being—is possible. In other words, 'what is' is not all it *could be*, and what could be does not have to be construed at all as a function of *what is*. This is Badiou's version of the standard 'ontological' argument that places the source of change in something beyond determinate being whilst construing this beyond as impervious to conceptual apprehension. The Event is therefore an index of radical contingency/novelty.

In short, Badiou believes he has found a mathematical-metaphysical justification for the existence of 'Events'. The latter are radically novel insofar as they are *completely* foreign to the existing forms of 'counting-as-one'. This makes them "unnameable" within the existing vocabulary, and unnaccesible from the perspective of knowledge. It is important to highlight how radical this thesis is. As Peter Osborne glosses it:

> The everyday meaning of 'event' (something that brings about a change, mediating a 'before' and an 'after' […]) is both temporal and narrative. But while Badiou's 'event' is indeed a moment of change—fundamental change—the change that it represents is understood to have no relation to the situation in which it occurs. It is conceived not as a link in a narrative chain, but as absolute novelty, a pure beginning, which is literally 'unnameable' in the language of the situation […] Events do not occur within being. Events are subtracted from being. Events have situations as their 'sites', since

there must always be a specific situation in which an event occurs, in order that it surpass it. However, even though the event 'belongs' to that situation, it is not 'included' in it. The event thus has the 'being of non-being'—not because it 'transcends' being qua being, but rather precisely the opposite, because of its proximity to it. (Being qua being—inconsistency multiplicity/pure presentation—it should be remembered, is the void.) (Osborne, 2007: 25).

Thus, much like Being, as the Void, is subtracted from 'presentation' (it can never appear as such within a situation, and thus it cannot be conceptually grasped), the Event is subtracted from the determinations of the situation. It literally emerges, as it were, *out of the void*. This is an idiosyncratic rendering of Heidegger's framework, which sees the Event as the self-disclosure of Being (and not as the actualization of a pre-existing material possibility). However, within Badiou's system, the question of wherever something is an Event or not leads beyond the domain of Ontology—which is why the Event is "that which is not being *qua* being". Events, for Badiou, are subject-dependent—yet in a very specific sense. Badiou's subject is neither's Descartes' *cogito*, Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, or Hegel's Spirit. It is not the individual of liberalism either, or Lukács' proletariat. For Badiou, the Subject and the Event belong together insofar as the subject is *produced* by what he calls 'fidelity' to an Event. Whether something is an Event or not depends on a *decision*. This decision *constitutes* the subject. In other words, subjectivity is for Badiou the agential correlate of Truth.

In normal situations, I am just an ordinary individual: a mortal animal marked by the finitude of his flesh, concerned by his daily problems, etc. But in recognizing something as an Event I become something else: a Subject. Unlike the individual, the Subject is 'infinite' and impersonal. As such, he is unconcerned by the minor miseries of life and petty calculations in terms of self-interest. He is willing to sacrifice everything for his fidelity to the Event. What this fidelity demands on each occasion is always the main question to raise and the sole criteria to judge and orient his action (Badiou, 2001). Thus, Galileo willingness to sacrifice his life for being faithful to his discoveries, or Che Guevara's stubborn refusal to leave Bolivia, etc.

At this point, we can finally introduce the all-important category of Truth. For Badiou, Truth is neither maximally justifiable assertion nor resemblance between the mind and things. It has nothing to do with the adequation of knowledge to its object of the reconstruction of the object's intelligibility. In fact, it has nothing to do with knowledge

as such. Truths are not *known*, they are *produced*, as the result of the subject deciding that something is an Event. This is why Badiou believes that a Truth creates a *hole* in being, producing something radically new. On the contrary, knowledge, for Badiou, is tied to the 'State of the situation'. Attaining 'full' knowledge would imply grasping everything that it is under a specific order. Thus, knowledge constitutively misses the 'excess' to that order from which the Event emerges, and the Event as such. As opposed to knowledge, Truth is tied to an Event and is solely produced by the *activity* of those who are faithful to the Event (Badiou, 1992: 81).

Thus, we get the following sequence: excess/decision (1)—Event/constitution of the subject (2)—subjective fidelity (3)—production of Truths (4). Why, however, does Badiou feel entitled to use the concept of Truth is such idiosyncratic way? The reason is not purely analogical. Badiou believes that what he calls 'Truth' shares essential features with the concept of Truth as found in classical metaphysics. This is so because Badiou's 'Truths' may be detached from knowledge, yet are allegedly both universal, absolute (non-relative), and beyond mere 'opinion'. Think of May 68: the 'Event' that constituted Badiou *as Badiou*. May 68 carried a promise of emancipation that is open to anyone, and thus universal—or 'generic', which is an important term for Badiou. Second, it is said to be *absolute* for those who are faithful to it, in the sense that it transcends individual motivations. No militant would describe his fidelity to the Event as deriving from his irreducibly particular tastes or inclinations: they necessarily see it as something that exists *beyond* that—and thus 'in and for itself'. Finally, it is impervious to 'opinion'/knowledge. One could accept that *at the empirical level* May 68 was nothing but as a petty-bourgeois fake revolt and still cling to its emancipatory promise. This is why the production of the Truth related to May 68 will remain an ongoing process insofar as anyone faithful to it remains alive. Finally, and for the same reasons, truths are *infinite*: they have no pre-determined limits since they unfold in and through the open-ended actions of the faithful.

What Badiou hates the most, in intellectual terms, is the relativist who believes that we are nothing but finite, particular beings whose perspective is inevitably tied to the context of each. He considers that position politically destructive and philosophically corrosive, in the same way that Plato viewed the Sophists as undermining philosophy. We now see why Badiou, the anti-relativist, believes that his concept of Truth as

detached from knowledge preserves what was most precious about the classical one (infinity, absoluteness, etc.) without the untenable assumptions that grounded it within traditional metaphysics—such as the existence of God.

Throughout his work, Badiou adds much nuance and sophistication to this theoretical skeleton. *Logics of Worlds,* for instance, provides a highly complex discussion of how being appears in the form of 'worlds'—totalizing situations of sorts—, each ordered by a particular normative framework (of 'logic') and how Events emerge within the latter. *The Immanence of Truths*, which completes his *Being and Event* trilogy, deepens his conception of Truth to explain why the latter are both immanent (since they exist in this world rather than in a transcendent beyond) yet eternal (since fidelity to the Event relinquishes finitude).

Nonetheless, the basics of his philosophical framework correspond to what we have already sketched. Badiou, who is unincumbered by modesty, takes it to be a philosophical achievement of the greatest kind—he compares it to the ones of Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, and Hegel (Badiou, 2005: xiv)—and a new foundation for emancipatory thought. In what follows, I will raise four objections to such claims. First, I will argue that Badiou's system is theoretically flawed, because it cannot properly justify its main theses. Second, I will reproduce the arguments of several mathematicians who have proved that Badiou's use of mathematics is defective, and that set theory cannot provide a framework that could make sense of sociohistorical reality. Third, I will argue that because of the latter Badiou's ontology remains a purely mental construct without any grip on actuality—something Badiou tries to conceal through fallacious form of anagogical reasoning. Fourth, I will argue that his framework *weakens* emancipatory thought. In so doing, I will try to demonstrate that Badiou's work reproduces the combination of theoretical inconsistency and political incoherence that is constitutive of post-Marxism.

3. Castles in the air

We have seen how Badiou's philosophy is built on a series of "decisions'. Very simply, 'decisions' are moments wherein, in the development of the theory, rational argumentation is substituted by sheer assertion. Thus, Badiou departs from the decision whereby the 'One is Not' and mathematics is ontology, the unity of these two theses

providing the bedrock of his thought. Moreover, 'decisions' are present all over his system, sometimes openly and sometimes in disguise.

This procedure, however, raises a serious problem of justification. The issue is a simple one: why should we believe Badiou? Why accept the validity of his main philosophical thesis? How can they be *true* if they derive out of a decisionistic procedure whose performative effects cannot ground its truthfulness?[6]

Oliver Feltham (2020) has provided a useful—and sympathetic—reconstruction of the several argumentative strategies deployed by Badiou to give his foundational 'decisions' a certain justification. The first route proceeds *via negativa*, and it intends to show how some of the most renowned ontologies that were committed to the being of the One—such as Aristotle's—run into contradictions of various sorts. The problem, however, is that this is insufficient: whether true or not, the fact that some or even all monistic ontologies of the past run into contradictions is not sufficient reason to claim that any future monistic ontology will necessarily do so, unless a specific argument for this is construed (Badiou does not). The second route Feltham calls 'historial': Badiou often asserts that the 'Death of God' that became apparent in the 19th century, entails the dead of the One. But, Feltham argues, there is a circularity in this argument, since departing from the separation between ontology and history, while pretending that history validates certain ontological discourses, constitutes a question begging project, insofar as it presupposes their validity rather than proving it—for reasons that have been explored at length in our chapter in Laclau and Mouffe. Thus, none of these paths seems satisfactory. A third option would be to present Badiou's decisions as the result of his own fidelity to a scientific Event: what he calls the 'Cantor-Event' or Cantor's intervention in set theory. But this does not provide a justification at all, because it removes none of the arbitrariness. Cantor's intervention has nothing to do with the thesis 'Ontology=mathematics', and thus the task of justification cannot fall on his theory. Moreover, 'fidelity' cannot be invoked to circumvent rational argumentation. Thus, this option also fails. There is a fourth one, however, that Feltham calls 'pragmatic'. The latter would justify its starting point by pointing at the strength of its results. But since the meaning of Badiou's results depend on his chosen starting point,

[6] We should bear in mind that unlike classic examples of performative statements –saying 'Yes' in a wedding, etc.– 'deciding' that 'the One is not' doesn't, by itself, provide reasons to believe that this is the case.

vicious circularity ensues. After weighting all these argumentative strategies, even a reader as sympathetic as Feltham must conclude that Badiou's decision contains an irreducible core of arbitrariness or "insufficient justification" (Feltham, 2020: 52). The fact that he tries to embellish this by arguing that "the insufficient justification is transformed into the contingency of a decision" (Feltham, 2020: 52) leaves it inconsistency intact.

Instead, I claim that the basic problem is that Badiou 'decisionistic' procedure is methodologically defective. Decisions, in Badiou's sense, carry a dimension of arbitrariness at their heart: they eschew rational justification. But this means that Badiou cannot properly ground his system. Why should we accept that mathematics is ontology? Badiou simply cannot offer a systematic answer, a *justification* in the stronger sense. This means that from a rational standpoint his system is in an important sense *groundless*: pure will is foundational to it.

The strongest implication of the latter is that despite its intricacy and sophistication, its formidable range and ambition, Badiou's system is essentially a castle built in the air. Thus, for instance, the mathematized theory of the Event depends, for its cogency, in the acceptance of the validity of the ontology=mathematics thesis, which Badiou does not and cannot properly justify. This kernel of irrationalism condemns the whole project by vitiating its very core. Thus, Badiou pretends that his mathematical 'demonstration' for the possibility of Events, i.e., the emergence of radical novelty, suffices to prove its possibility in the real world, and demonstrating that his belief in absolute novelty is not simply a piece of religious thinking. But as Peter Osborne explains:

> The argument seems to be that since there is a 'place' for such an irruption within the set-theoretical count, this counters any possible accusations of arbitrariness or mysticism. However, this is not so clear, given that the demonstration [of the theory of the Event] is the result of a series of prior philosophical decisions (the mathematical restriction on the concept of being, de-temporalization, and the absolutization of novelty), which produced the 'extraordinary' status of the event in the first place […] Belief—sheer belief—is nonetheless at the heart of Badiou's philosophy. (2007: 25).

Thus, the basic mechanism underlying Badiou's philosophical edifice is methodologically flawed. Through an ultimately irrational decision we are compelled to

leave material reality and history aside, along with phenomenology, to migrate to a purely abstract realm of mathematical reflections which is nonetheless supposed to grasp the underlying metaphysical structure of all the latter. But this pretension rings hollow due to the arbitrariness of the starting point. Most interestingly, this problem is intrinsic to the hypostatization of 'Being' which is the common ground of all Political ontologists. Badiou, in this sense, simply lays bare the irrationalism of this move—which is even more foundational than the 'mathematics=ontology' thesis. As Ray Brassier (2022) wonders: why accept Heidegger's thesis whereby Being withdraws? If Badiou's position provokes a more generalized rejection is arguably because his specific form of dealing with this question—the mathematization of Being—is particularly restrictive, but at his core his problem is shared by all post-Heideggerians.

This far we have seen how *dogmatic*, a priori truths constitute the basis of Badiou's system. The latter already provides enough reasons to not accept it. But we need to explore its problems further, moving to his use of mathematics. For Badiou, mathematics *is* ontology, but it is so immanently rather than discursively. In other words, it is structurally unconscious of that fact, which is only accessible from the meta-ontological standpoint of philosophy. In his terms, mathematics as ontology "is 'commanded by philosophical rules, and not by those of contemporary mathematics" (Badiou, 2005: 13). This means that mathematical reasoning cannot, by itself, extract the ontological implications of its arguments, let alone prove the correctness of the thesis whereby 'ontology is mathematics'. But this does not mean that Badiou's system could be indifferent to getting his mathematics wrong, since the rigor of mathematical demonstration is, by his own lights, what grounds Badiou's whole theory of Being and Event.

This picture is complicated however because several mathematicians have argued that Badiou's philosophical use of set theory is seriously defective. Maciej Malicki (2014), for instance, takes issue with how Badiou's central concepts are mathematically ill-defined. In fact, he asserts that his pretension to mathematical rigor is undermined by the bias inherent in his method of conceptual construction. A convenient example is the notion of the 'indiscernible', which is key to the logical grounding of the concept of the Event. If Events and Truths were not *fully* indiscernible within the categories of the

situation, they would not incarnate the absolute novelty Badiou sees as their essential property. But, Malecki argues, Badiou construes his concept of 'the indiscernible' out of three different notions that he takes to be equivalent, when they are not (Malecki, 2014: 11). Moreover, when he tries to prove the indiscernibility of Truth he makes a basic mistake, wrongly assuming "that an element defined by a formula with parameters in the ground model must be an element of the ground model as well" (Malecki, 2014: 11). This is nothing but an example of how Badiou system does not stay true to its basic axiom whereby ontology=mathematics if the latter is to be rigorously interpreted.

The critique elaborated by David and Ricardo Niremberg (2011, 2012) is even more interesting, because it strikes at the very core of Badiou's mode of reasoning. Their original objection is twofold. First, they claim that "Badiou's set-theoretical models for ontology are at best a priori commitments rather than necessary truths of the set theory within which they are made" (Niremberg & Niremberg, 2011: 585). Second, they argue that Badiou confuses contingent attributes of the models he discusses with necessary consequences of the axioms—a mistake they call "Pythagorean snare". Thus, "the politico-philosophical claims that result have no grounding in the set theory that is deployed to justify them" (Niremberg & Niremberg, 2011). Take, for instance, Badiou's description of the Event, with the French Revolution as its example, as an "infinite multiple" (2011: 180). The basic problem here is that the notion of infinity, if it is to preserve its mathematical rigor, simply cannot be applied to human history—which might be forbiddingly complex, but it is also finite from a mathematical perspective. In other words, Badiou is simply using the notion of infinity *metaphorically* whilst pretending that he is using it *mathematically*. It follows that his theory of the Event has no real ground in mathematics. This is also supported, as the Nirembergs argue, by the fact that his 'matheme of the Event' contains what is to be defined within the defining terms, something that mathematicians calls a "not-well founded set" (Kunen, 1992: 94-95).

However, the Nirembergs (2011: 608-609) add a second and equally relevant objection to Badiou's system, which also strikes at its very core. The problem this time lies in the implications of trying to build a general ontology by means of set theory. This, we should remember, is the immediate meaning of Badiou's ontology=mathematics thesis.

The issue, however, is that set theory places very strict limits on the kind of objects it can and cannot be applied to. More precisely, set theory stipulates that its objects must be *apathic*, which means that the identity of the elements of each set should remain the same if we bring them together with the elements of other set. It is easy to see why this entails that Badiou's set-theoretical constructs could never be applied to physical-historical reality or pretend to capture its ontological underpinnings. If the whole population of London would be immediately moved to Uganda, both Uganda and the Londoners would change. Physical and historical objects are not apathic: they are affected by interaction. Badiou would surely retort that this is immaterial since his ontology moves at a higher level of abstraction. Yet, given the groundlessness of its starting point, one might ask why bother to 'decide' that set theory is ontology if the latter yields nothing but a set of abstract formulae with no link to actuality. It follows that Badiou's project is doubly untenable: the defectiveness of the original decision is complemented by the inaccuracy of the choice it leads to, all of it being construed through a set of logical and mathematical mistakes. In other words, the hypostatization of Being already leads to construing castles in the air, whose relation to reality is only metaphorical. But, deepening the existing problem, the procedure Badiou chooses to build his castle is, by its own internal standards, contrary to the pretension of grasping the inner structure of reality. As Malicki argues:

> One has to conclude that "Being and Event" provides no grounding for a deep ontological structure behind the realms of science, art, love and politics, and that the mathematical formulation of the theory of event has no positive content. (2014: 14).

Badiou's rhetoric seems designed to conceal all the latter. He construes a personal philosophical vocabulary through a constant use of stipulative definitions, which give new 'Badiouvian' meanings to every term. But the terms Badiou chooses and redefines often have a definite meaning beyond the domain of ontology (like in the case of the term 'State'). This far—accepting, for the sake of the argument, the rational soundness of the project—, one could complain about the unnecessary promotion of potential misunderstandings, but there is nothing philosophically fatal in the latter. The problem, which is not rhetorical but *logical*, comes when Badiou assumes that his re-definition of a certain term for his ontological investigations has implications for the entity the term

denotes *in its standard usage*, which belongs a different field.[7] This is a category mistake of a particularly coarse kind. We could raise some objections to a philosopher who decides to define 'cup' as 'any four-legged animal'. But if he afterwards felt entitled to pour coffee in the head of a tiger, our objections should become maximal.

An example from *Being and Event* should clarify this point. First, Badiou announces that he will use the term "State" to name an ontological meta-structure which grounds existing situations, justifying this choice by appealing to "a metaphorical affinity with politics" (Badiou, 2005: 95). However, after a long reflection on the 'State' *in his sense of the term* Badiou claims that:

> At base, the classical Marxist description of the State is formally correct, but not its general dialectic. The two major parameters of the state of a situation -the unpresentable errancy of the void, and the irremediable excess of inclusion over belonging, which necessitate the re-securing of the one and the structuring of structure- are held by Engels to be particularities of presentation, and of what is numbered therein. The void is reduced to the non-representation of the proletariat, thus, unpresentability is reduced to a modality of non-representation; the separate count of parts is reduced to the non-universality of bourgeois interests, to the presentative split between normality and singularity; and, finally, he reduces the machinery of the count-as-one to an excrescence because he does not understand that the excess which it treats is ineluctable, for it is a theorem of being (2005: 109-110).

This is structurally equivalent to complaining that the tiger you chose to call 'cup' has attacked you after pouring coffee on its head—a form of argument which Alex Callinicos, pointing out the obvious category mistake, politely describes as "slightly ridiculous" (Callinicos, 2006: 108). Through a sleight of hand, Badiou has turned a mere 'metaphorical affinity' into an internal relationship. But it is one thing to talk about the 'mouth' of the Thames River and a very different one to pretend that dentists should examine it. Adding insult to injury, by defining the state as a universal property of Being and claiming that this definition encompasses the state *as a political structure*, Badiou's argument *naturalizes* the political state he so staunchly opposes. As Callinicos (2006: 108) also notes, this kind of naturalization of specific features of class society by presenting a historical antagonism as somehow inscribed in 'Being' is the hallmark of bourgeois ideology. Moreover, we should also note that this kind of unmediated

[7] I would like to thank Mireia Bedmar for pointing this out.

application of metaphysical constructs to socio-historical reality belongs within the boundaries of *dogmatic* metaphysics.

Most importantly, this is nothing but an example of a feature that is part and parcel of Badiou's philosophical system, which *constantly* equivocates between the standard meanings of the terms and the meanings he ascribes to them (Niremberg & Niremberg, 2011). He never establishes a justified link between the two, as if the mere nominal coincidence could testify to an essential identity. I argue that Badiou is forced to fall into this structural category mistake because of the intrinsic flaws of his project. In other words, Badiou *needs* these equivocal forms of reasoning because without them the practical uselessness of his mathematized ontology would be even more apparent. But this line of argument would bring to light the need for abandoning the abstraction of philosophy in favor of the kind of socio-historical theorizing he emphatically rejects.

As Mathew Macmanus argues:

> Badiou believes that human history operates according to the logic of fundamental ontology, with the multiplicity of Being resulting in the destabilization of all human hierarchies etc. […] Badiou never establishes why or how this is so in a theoretically robust way. When one carefully examines his extensive oeuvre, one sees that his arguments about history are mainly assertions whose tenability flows from accepting the underpinning framework. Put another way, Badiou simply assumes that human history operates according to the same laws of fundamental ontology […] This is a highly suspicious gesture, and not at all adequate to support the radical conclusions Badiou proposes as self-evident. Seen in this light, Badiou's theory of history and politics seems more like an extension of its author's preferences rather than a deeply considered framework which can be useful to those looking to realize social change (2017).

We, however, should go further than Macmanus and argue that this problem derives inevitably out of the flaws of Badiou's ontological approach. In other words, Badiou's system suffers from an unavoidable lack of mediation, which derives from the deficiency of its starting point and the contradictoriness of its nature. The task of negotiating the grip on actuality of such theoretical edifice is doomed to fail, and this is something that any number of metaphors cannot really hide. Like in the case of Agamben and Laclau & Mouffe, Badiou's concepts are empty universals, pure mental constructs that fail to grasp the real. Thus, Badiou's thought is forced to oscillate

between embellishing a system which is as much of a phantasy as those of medieval theologians and resorting to all kinds of metaphors, analogies, and category mistakes to promote the illusion whereby this system can say something meaningful about the real world. Arbitrariness is what unites both poles, sheer belief revealing itself as the genuine foundation of his philosophy.

In sum, the problem with Badiou's system is threefold. First, the starting point is already defective, and it leads to an ethereal realm with no grip of reality. Second, the architecture of this realm is ill-conceived, because its process of production derives from a misguided premise: that 'fundamental ontology' thus construed could say anything meaningful about reality. Third, that construct is 'applied' to reality through fallacious forms of reasoning.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion whereby, despite its intentions, at the end of the day Badiou reveals himself as just another Sophist. This can be supported by the findings of Eylem Yenisoy's systematic study of his theory of truth, which concludes that:

> Though Badiou's main endeavor is to falsify the idea that truths are relative, I argue that he also produces a relativist theory of truth. There are no objective criteria to distinguish truth from non-truth, but only a kind of subjective reliance to an evental occurrence, or subjective fidelity to the consequences or prescription of a truth procedure (Yenisoy, 2024: 181).

In the final analysis, Badiou intends to defeat the relativist by appealing to the will—or, as Terry Eagleton put it in his critique of Badiou's ethics, by resorting to "fideism" (Eagleton, 2001). But as Hegel argued in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2018), dogmatic attempts to refute skepticism are inherently self-defeating. The more the dogmatist argues 'This is the case because I say so', the more he concedes to the skeptic.

Badiou is an immensely talented philosopher, equipped with a profound knowledge of the philosophical tradition, and an ethos of *grandeur* that contrasts positively with the Post-modern idolization of finitude. However, the essential mistakes of his framework have led him to build an incoherent system. To conclude we should note that this system was construed in stark opposition to 'scientific socialism'. The latter has historical reality as its main object and sees change as emerging out of his contradictions and tendencies. This means that the orientation of change can be

anticipated, which requires knowing the reality out of which the latter emerges. As a result, political practice can be grounded not just in moral ideas or mere intuitions, but on real tendencies. Badiou, however, wants to leave all the latter aside. History and knowledge, and thus *knowledge of history*, become irrelevant for emancipatory thought, at least at the level of its foundation. What he offers in exchange is a system that, as we have seen, cannot be rationally grounded. This philosophical construction, in turn, is designed to promote a view of emancipatory politics as irrational fidelity. Peter Osborne summarized it nicely: "Being and Event provides the onto-theology for a religious conception of political practice" (2007: 26).

Badiou takes himself to be a materialist because he identifies the latter with philosophical pluralism (the negation of the One); conversely seeing idealism as synonymous with monism (Ruda, 2015) But idealism, from a Marxist perspective, is not philosophical monism, but the primacy of pure concepts. In these terms, Badiou's system is strictly idealistic: it creates a framework where material processes vanish in the movement of ideal constructs, all the latter leading to a voluntaristic notion of practice which is stripped of its social determinations (Lotz, 2021). This is hardly avoidable since the political counterpart of a pure philosophy that proceeds through mathematical reflections is, due to its inability to construct correct sociohistorical mediations, pure voluntarism. Since metaphysical reasoning says nothing about real social forces, the bridge between theory and practice can only be crossed by appealing to the will. As a result, all the nuances of *real* agency are left aside,[8] accounts of the latter being reduced to the abstract 'fidelity' of an equally abstract 'Subject' which has been separated from its material determinations. That this cannot but weaken emancipatory thought should by now be clear. However, to explore this point in all the necessary depth we must now turn to Badiou's politics. Doing so will demonstrate how, like in other post-Marxist authors, in Badiou theoretical incoherence dovetails with a misguided political approach.

4. 'Mao-spontaneism', or Badiou and politics

[8] I would like to thank Ani Pérez for making me see this point through a critique of Badiou's account of love.

Badiou first engaged in politics during the tumultuous events of May 68, when he became a Maoist militant. This experience left a profound mark on him: whilst his transition to post-Marxism was accompanied by a transition to Post-*Maoism*, the latter has remained a lasting influence in his thought. Thus, a brief detour thought Maoism should be the starting point of our analysis of Badiou's politics.

Maoism is essentially a variant of 'official communism' as promoted from Moscow—under the name 'Marxism-Leninism'—from the mid-20s onwards, coinciding with Stalin's takeover—and thus often succinctly described as 'Stalinism'. At its most basic, this 'official communism' is defined by three distinct features (Macnair, 2008):

1. A bureaucratic-centralist conception of the proletarian Party.
2. An equally bureaucratic conception of the Socialist state, to be ruled by the Party.
3. The 'national roads towards socialism' as a strategy, implying that socialism can be built on a single country after a national revolution.

After the 7th Congress of the Comintern, Popular Frontism, i.e., forming political blocks with the 'progressive' bourgeoisie, was added to the menu (Martins, 2024). A very similar logic, it must be noted, was already present in Stalin's interpretation of the 'Anti-imperialist Front', embraced by Mao (Albamonte & Maiello, 2017). To this mix, however, Mao appended a few innovations. First, the worker-peasant alliance of the Stalinists received a twist, positing the peasantry as the key revolutionary agent in Third World countries. Second, this peasant-based revolution was conceptualized in terms of a 'Protracted People's War', whereby the peasantry, led by a Communist Party that would promote an anti-feudal programme of land redistribution, would gradually take territory from the existing state, 'surround the cities' and eventually destroy the regime (Mao, 1938). This he applied successfully in China, after an erratic policy of alliances with the nationalist bourgeoisie finally gave rise to a victory against Chiang-Kai-shek's army and a communist seizure of power (against Stalin's will). Mao had originally theorized that victory in a 'People's War' would give rise to a 'New Democracy', a regime reconciling the goals of the 'four revolutionary classes': the peasantry, the proletariat, the petty-bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie (Mao, 1940). The latter was posited

as an “intermediate stage” between semi-feudal autocracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Nonetheless, after seizing power Mao soon implemented a system that was basically identical to the one existing in the Soviet Union (Macfarqhar & Schoenhals, 2010). A few years after Stalin’s death, however, the relationship between Maoist China and Krutchev’s Soviet Union entered a crisis that would eventually turn into a full-blown split. During the period, Mao became a harsh critic of Krutchev’s ‘revisionism’, and a ‘left’ critic of the Soviet Union, giving his thought an anti-bureaucratic twist, and denouncing that ‘socialist’ (meaning Soviet-like) societies still preserve class contradictions that the Soviet bureaucracy obscured by deeming them non-existent. When the latter was combined by a relative weakening of his position within the Chinese Communist Party, Mao concluded that a ‘cultural revolution’ was needed even after the Communist Party has seized power, to cleanse society from the corrupting heritage of class-division, the latter explaining the bureaucratic deviations that both the Soviet Union and China suffered even under the rule of the Communists. Moreover, Mao and his followers expanded Lenin’s theory of the labour aristocracy to extend it to the Western worker’s movement as a whole. Thus, following Mao’s early displacement of the working class by the peasantry as the key revolutionary agent, workers were *de facto* dethroned from their role as the central subject of the revolution. The result was either full-blown ‘Third-worldism’, whereby the class struggle was displaced by the struggle between oppressed and imperialist nations, or the positing of ‘the oppressed’ (peasants, racialized minorities, women, the most wretched sectors of the proletariat, etc.) as the new revolutionary agents—and often a combination of the two.

It is this ‘leftist’ side of Mao’s thinking that some Western radicals—mostly radicalized students—found appealing (Wolin, 2012). Maoism seemed an alternative to Soviet bureaucratism and the all-too-obvious reformism of Western Communist Parties. It also provided a sweeping explanation for the quietism of the organized worker’s movement in the last decades, plus a useful rationalization of the separation between radicalized activists and the organized working class. Moreover, it gave pride of place to anti-colonial struggles, which were very prominent in the 60s, and contained a ‘populist’ vocabulary—‘serving the people’, etc.—that resonated well with the egalitarian commitments of the new militant generations. In truth, Mao essentially remained a hard-nosed ‘official communist’ both in theory and practice—but this was largely irrelevant

for his early Western followers, who wanted to see China as “a vibrant socialist society that compared favorably to the glacial bureaucratism of the USSR” (Boncardo & Cooke, 2017: 69).

However, the translation of Mao’s thought—deeply rooted in the tradition of Stalin’s Comintern and the concrete conditions of China as a Third World country—to the developed West involved some mutations. The most common Western translation of Mao’s thought was what has been called “Mao-spontaneism” or even “soft Maoism” (Macnair, 2006). The latter downplays the role of the party to give pride of place to the spontaneous activity of the masses and the creative potentials of collective action. Loosely following Mao’s dictum whereby “Marxism comprises many principles, but in the final analysis they can all be brought back to a single sentence: it is right to rebel” (Mao, 1939), ‘rebellion’ was celebrated as good in itself, the self-authenticating powers of the experiences of the oppressed were hyperbolically eulogized, and ‘the party’ was either reduced to a small group working within the broad mass movement or depicted as a tool to be built in a distant future.

In this sense, the ‘softest’ version of Maoism, in which organized political action is completely displaced in favor of spontaneous rebelliousness, comes quite close to Bakuninism. Versions which still preserve a more central role to political organisation, on the other hand, become variants of Blanquism—promoting conspiracism, strict secrecy, and the likes in the face of the coming spontaneous insurrection that would put them in power.

Alain Badiou’s “(Post)Maoism” (Bosteels, 2011) derives from this ‘soft Maoism’. The Union of Communists of France Marxist-Leninist (UCFML), the Maoist organisation he contributed to found in the late 60s, “was never slavish in its attitude to the 'official' Maoism of the Chinese Communist Party and it was skeptical about the possibility of building the Party at that time in France, making it an unusual far left formation” (Noys, 2008: 109). Moreover, the prestige of Maoism as a tradition of unsullied revolutionary credentials had already collapsed before Mao’s death due to his agreement with Nixon and the Chinese support to Pinochet’s regime. Thus, the ‘Organisation Politique’, founded in 1985 after the dissolution of the UFCML, which Badiou co-founded—to

only abandon it at the time of its dissolution, in 2007—, was already post-Maoist, and "defined itself more firmly as a post-party formation" (Noys, 2008: 109).

Badiou is a post-Marxist insofar as he preserves an ideological commitment to emancipation—which he unapologetically describes in terms of 'communism'—whilst rejecting Marxian materialism and class-based political action—i.e., partyism. But he is also a post-Maoist insofar as his practical orientation reproduces, under a different political and theoretical cover, key aspects of the 'Mao-spontaneism' that emerged in the 1960s. To this we should add that he also abandons most of the 'Stalinist' core of Maoism: he formally despises bureaucratism, seems unconvinced by the idea that socialism could be built in a single country, and rejects any form of nationalism in favor of an intransigent universalism. What he retains of Maoism is a deep hatred for liberal democracy and capitalism, a communist orientation, a special focus on the most oppressed sections of the population, and a belief on the unlimited potentials of rebellion and collective action—all the latter coalescing in an unrepentant, even if abstract, revolutionism. In the next section we will examine how this is cashed out in political terms, arguing that the political project that results from it is incoherent, trumping its emancipatory ambitions.

5. *Novelty as ideology*

Badiou's political views crystallize in what he calls 'The Communist Hypothesis'. For Badiou, 'communism' is neither a programme nor a 'real movement' but an Idea—a 'pure Idea of Equality'—in the Kantian sense: a regulating principle pointing at a classless and stateless society. Communism thus understood would be, in his eyes, as old as class society itself. Sparks of the 'communist hypothesis' can be found in any popular movement revolting against injustice, from Spartacus' slave revolt to Thomas Müntzer's peasant wars. Badiou further argues that in its modern form, the Communist hypothesis emerged with the French revolution. He later periodizes its history in the following way: we first have a sequence going from 1789 to 1871, wherein the working class comes to dominate a popular movement that was originally composed of "townsfolk, artisans, and students", oriented at the seizure of power through an armed insurrection. This first sequence culminates in the "striking novelty—and radical

defeat" of the Paris Commune in 1871. The next one runs from 1917 to 1969 and is dominated by the question: how to win? In other words: how to avoid the tragic fate of the Paris Commune? What the previous revolutionaries had dreamt was now to be realized. This "obsession with victory" was crystallized in the "iron discipline" of the Communist Party, which Badiou describes as "the characteristic construction of the second sequence of the hypothesis". This construction, he argues, partially answered the question of how to win, securing seizures of power in Russia, China, Vietnam, etc., but it:

> Created a further problem, which it could not solve using the methods it had developed in response to the problems of the first. The party had been an appropriate tool for the overthrow of weakened reactionary regimes, but it proved ill-adapted for the construction of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the sense that Marx had intended—that is, a temporary state, organizing the transition to the non-state: its dialectical 'withering away'. Instead, the party-state developed into a new form of authoritarianism […] the last great convulsions of the second sequence—the Cultural Revolution and May 68, in its broadest sense—can be understood as attempts to deal with the inadequacy of the party. (Badiou, 2008: 36).

Badiou argues that this second sequence belongs to the past, and that we are now forced to reinvent the communist hypothesis from scratch. He goes as far as to affirm:

> Marxism, the workers' movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the party of the proletariat, the socialist state—all the inventions of the 20th century—are not really useful to us anymore. At the theoretical level they certainly deserve further study and consideration; but at the level of practical politics, they have become unworkable. The second sequence is over and it is pointless to try to restore it (2008: 37).

This is an astonishing passage. Without any elaborated justification, the core of modern socialism is declared dead and gone. A crude *non sequitur* whereby the failure of 20th century socialism relegates all its elements to the dustbin of history is used to ground the idea that in the present everything about communist politics must be invented anew. In theoretical terms, the underlying problem is that Badiou's obsession of radical novelty is a mystification which unsurprisingly

grounds an equally mystified approach to history. This should come as no surprise, since in the previous chapters we have repeatedly demonstrated that ontological approaches yield an ahistorical view of history, detached from its concrete materiality as the 'real activity of real beings'. Thus, for instance, Badiou describes the period ranging from his first sequence (ending in 1871) to the beginning of the second one (1917) as "a forty-year interval during which the communist hypothesis was declared to be untenable: the decades from 1871 to 1914 saw imperialism triumphant across the globe" (Badiou, 2008). The period where socialism became a mass force in all industrialized countries, where mass workers parties that explicitly called for the seizure of power by the proletariat and the construction of socialism were created (Taber, 2022) is described by Badiou as a purely reactionary interval! How could it be the case that the point where more people than ever before in history came to accept the fundamentals of the 'communist hypothesis' is described as one wherein the latter was deemed 'untenable'? This blanket dismissal testifies to the weakness of two elements that are integral to Badiou's 'evental' philosophy: the ideology of absolute novelty, which occludes the presence of old in the new, and the one-sided focus in 'breaks', which obscures historical continuity. There would have been no 1917-1921 without the long preparatory work of the working class in the years ranging from 1871 to 1917 (Macnair, 2013), and there would have been no such preparatory work if it was not for the previous experience of 1789 to 1871. In fact, Marxism was created in 1848, expanded with the First International, achieved its centrality within the Second, and constituted the banner of the Third, which split from the opportunistic wing that betrayed it (Lih, 2020). Its continuity within the two sequences proves the illegitimacy of Badiou's attempt to declare it dead just because a 'third' sequence is now to begin. On the other hand, 1871-1914 was also the period of development of a strong class-collaborationist wing of the workers' movement, loyal to its capitalist state. The defeat of the 'communist hypothesis' in the 20th century can hardly be comprehended without analyzing its role. Most importantly, the legitimacy amongst the working class that allowed this wing to play a successful counter-revolutionary role was a function of its appropriation of the working-class institutions developed within the previous

decades. The ideology of absolute novelty obscures this, providing further proof of its impoverishing effects when it comes to think politically.

In what follows I will try to reconstruct Badiou's argument in a way that hopefully illuminates its arbitrariness, while remaining faithful—if not to his exact words—to the nature of his proposal. Accordingly, I have composed the following paragraph in an attempt to paraphrase Badiou and to present his argument as clearly as possible.

"Modern communism evolved with the development of the working class. In this development, the workers freed themselves from the political grip of the bourgeoisie, rejecting philanthropists, liberals, and doctrinaires, and learning that only them could bring about their emancipation. They realized that their needed independent political action, that the seizure of political power was a necessary condition for their liberation, and that the latter could only be achieved if the means of production were held in common. They created a whole organized movement where independent worker's parties were accompanied by mass unions and an ample set of institutions where they could give expression to their material and spiritual needs. Moreover, they learned to think scientifically, carefully examining material conditions and the complex matrix of class forces and informing their action with that knowledge. However, powerful anti-communist currents also grew within the movement. This eventually led to the split between revolutionaries and reformists, the latter becoming a pillar of capitalist power. Revolutionaries managed to seize power in some backward isolated countries, but this very isolation, accompanied by the restless pressure of imperialism, led to the degeneration of revolutionary forces, the construction of new bureaucratic regimes rather than dictatorships of the proletariat, and their eventual bankruptcy. For this reason [here comes Badiou's *non-sequitur*], we must abandon *all the latter*: no more parties, no more workers movement, no more attempts at grounding the socialist project in scientific knowledge. Everything must be reinvented anew, with a philosophy that proves that radical novelty is possible and preaches fidelity, universalism, and egalitarianism in the abstract as our main intellectual banner".

This is both theoretically unsound and practically unconvincing. The tradeoff whereby everything that made communism a mass force must be exchanged by nothing but an ahistorical philosophy of the Event is not only doubtful by any lights, but also arbitrary. The world was simply not born anew in 1970. When workers want to combat their daily exploitation, they still join or form unions. Politics is still channeled through political parties. The state remains the bulwark of capitalist power, and knowing whether the following years will be marked by increasing militarism and austerity or not is still more useful than Philosophical ruminations on the 'proper name of Being'. In sum, Badiou offers no genuine justification for abandoning all the latter.

A further—and related—problem of Badiou's approach is that his reduction of communism to a transhistorical egalitarian hypothesis erases what was key for scientific socialism: the issue of its historical feasibility. This path leads *before* Marx, and it inevitably flows from Badiou's disregard for the materiality of human life processes. The outcome is an abstract and utopian politics, divorced from its real determinations (Lotz, 2021). Marx and Engels had argued that communism had ceased to be a mere idea to become a real movement, a thus a real historical potency, because of 1) the capitalist development of the forces of production, which unite the whole world within a single material process, and is immanently linked to the development of the proletariat, 2) The unity of the tendency of capitalism to decline and the tendency of the workers' movement to grow. By completely sidestepping this, Badiou reinstates communism as a materially groundless *idea*.

However, Badiou may ignore the question of whether communism is materially possible, but he is still confronted with the issue of why we should fight for it. His system not only eschews Marxist materialism: it also forbids forms of moralistic reasoning of any kind, religious dogmatism, and idle utopian speculation. Thus, communism cannot be justified as morally superior, 'true in itself' or a carefully crafted blueprint which favorably compares to the present. The mere empirical recurrence of 'the Communist Hypothesis' in history does not offer a *justification*

for it either (many nauseating things do recur in history). Therefore, it seems that Badiou is pushed towards a strictly irrationalist subjectivism, whereby the superiority of communism is grounded on his sheer will. His way of avoiding this unpalatable alternative is to *derive* communism out of his ontological framework. But this is a leap out of the frying pan into the fire. Universalism, egalitarianism, and the hatred of the state cannot be derived from the structure of 'Being qua Being'. The use of dubious forms of analogical reasoning and linguistic equivocations do not suffice to conceal the obvious *non-sequitur* at work in this line of argument. Moreover, this reveals that Badiou is at his core, contrary to his own stated pretensions (whereby Ontology cannot be political, etc.), yet another Political ontologist, guilty of the same sin than the others: the attempt to derive politics from ontological postulations (Macmanus, 2017). The conclusion is that Badiou offers no rigorous reason to believe in the communist hypothesis, neither in terms of its necessity or its feasibility.

In the next section we will complete our examination of the weaknesses of Badiou's politics by focusing on two inter-related issues: his critique of liberal democracy and the alternative he puts forwards, and his proposals for a politics in the here and now which could lead to those emancipatory goals. This will serve as further proof of one of the recurring claims of this thesis: 'ontological' approaches produce ideological modes of reasoning that are incapable of yielding realistically grounded proposals.

6. Liberal democracy and the utopian commune

As we have seen, Badiou has remained a bitter critic of liberal democracy, resisting facile 'end of history' narratives and liberal apologetics. Two very different theoretical sources are mingled in Badiou's critique of liberal democracy. On the one hand, resonating on its description as "capitalo-parlamentarism"—a more accurate name for parliamentary oligarchic systems with some limited democratic elements—he is inspired by the Marxist tradition, with its classical denunciation of the latter as a form of the political rule of the bourgeoisie. This is a critique that emerged out of a democratic-revolutionary standpoint, castigating the *falsely democratic* character of liberal regimes

in the name of the proletariat's "right to revolution" (Engels, 1895). On the other hand, Badiou also draws on Plato's *aristocratic* critique of democracy as a realm of relativism and corruption. This is an uneasy mixture, which hardly avoids theoretical incoherence. Badiou's attempt to portray Plato as *more egalitarian* than Athenian democrats—which after all excluded slaves, women, and foreigners from political power—is historically unconvincing (Meiksins Wood, 2011), and scarcely constitutes a bridge between the radical-democratic tradition of the lower classes and the aristocratic contempt for mass power of privileged minorities.

Since Badiou does not provide anything like a detailed theory of liberal democracy, the inconsistencies at the heart of his approach are mostly felt in the poverty of the alternative he offers. This is further aggravated by the specifically *Maoist* inspiration of Badiou's 'Marxist' arguments. As a variant of Stalinism, Maoism emerged at a time where the dictatorship of the proletariat had been identified with a bureaucratic state led by a monolithic Party. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution showed that Mao's attempt to balance the most unpalatable consequences of this state-form by celebrating the 'purifying' potential of mass action offers no genuine solution. Badiou sometimes reflects about these issues (Badiou, 2008) and is adamant in his condemnation of bureaucratism, but he does not offer a convincing answer. In fact, his solution seems to aggravate Mao's activist "solutionism" by simply asserting one of the poles of Mao's three-sided picture—1) need for the Party/State—2) bureaucratic tendencies—3) mass action/cultural revolution as a response. As I argued above, the experience of the Cultural Revolution proves that Mao's framework is unworkable. However, Badiou worsens it by aggrandizing its utopian dimension, erasing the most realistic parts of Mao's picture and betting everything on the potentials of mass action, i.e., spontaneity. This is one of the points where the impoverishing effects of Badiou's theoretical commitments are most acutely felt. Forced to inscribe every historical process within the straitjacket of his system, he reduces politics to an abstract struggle between philosophical categories—a mistake we have already found in Laclau, Mouffe, and Agamben. This should be linked to the general point against philosophy developed in the first chapter: instead of unfolding the determinations of reality, post-Marxists impose an ideal logic upon the latter. Badiou's contempt for the state, for instance, might *empirically* derive from a distaste for existing bureaucratic machineries, but is

theoretically grounded in an abstract philosophy. In this sense, he reproduces the kind of idealistic reasoning that Marx and Engels found in Bakunin, with his sweeping condemnation of "authority" (Draper, 1990). The outcome is a structural inability to think through the *institutional* dilemmas of revolutionary politics.

Let me present the underlying problem in a clearer way. Any radical critique of (liberal) democracy raises the question of which political order should substitute the latter. Condemning *Athenian* democracy, Plato proposed a Republic where each citizen would be given a place within a three-caste system of producers, warriors/guardians, and ruling philosophers. Badiou is too much of a radical egalitarian to buy Plato's whole proposal —although, as we will see, his views on an emancipated future arguably owe more to Plato than to Marx. On the contrary, the Marxist alternative is the Commune-State—the dictatorship of the proletariat as the rule of the majority, i.e., a democratic social republic (Marx, 1871b; Engels, 1891; Draper, 1986; Leipold, 2024). Early Bolsheviks saw the soviet system as a proper embodiment of the latter, and thus they contrasted a state-form grounded on the mass democratic institutions of workers, peasants and soldiers with both tsarist despotism and the bureaucratic-oligarchic alternative offered by liberal constitutionalism. However, the soviet system itself degenerated into bureaucratism, substituting worker's power with the power of an elite (Bettelheim, 1976, 1977). Thus, the task of providing a convincing alternative to the capitalist state inspired by the Marxist tradition requires an account of *why* the soviet system failed. Without the latter, any proposal would be torn between abstractionism and the irrationality of 'do the same thing, expect different results'.

Badiou has repeatedly argued that 'the commune' is his favored alternative to the capitalist state, and he does link the failures of 20th century socialism to the bureaucratization of the party and the state yielding new forms of authoritarianism (Badiou, 2012). But the *content* he gives to these discrete points is damaged by the deficiencies of his overall system. In fact, in my view, Badiou's response to this problem combines abstractionism, the reproduction of all errors, and false conclusions which aggravate the issue rather than solving it. First, abstractionism is the unavoidable result of Badiou's methodological commitments. Thus, his political writings are full of invocations of 'universalism', 'truth', 'fidelity', etc., marred with his insistence that

politics, by definition, is something taking place beyond the state. But he remains silent on the issue of which basic *institutional forms* could provide a framework for these egalitarian-universalist principles. This is both a problem of which alternative to the capitalist state communists should put forward and a problem of how the movement struggling for the latter ought to be organized. In both cases, Badiou offers no real solution. More damagingly, he complicates the task of offering one by adding arbitrary limits such as the obsolescence of the party-form. Finally, Badiou reproduces a problem that was present in classical anarchism and later expanded to most of the far left (including the Western Maoism that inspired Badiou): the 'spontaneist' celebration of mass action, which becomes a means to circumvent all the most burning dilemmas of revolutionary practice: how to gain a majority for revolutionary change, which kind of movement could accomplish this task, what institutional order could substitute the bourgeois political order, how is that linked to the process of economic socialization, etc. Badiou's theoretical apparatus cannot but reinforce this bias: the stark dualism between 'Being' and 'the Event' creates a gulf between any form of order—which is abstractly condemned—and the process of militant fidelity—which is uncritically celebrated.

There is, however, a work wherein Badiou comes close to elaborating what he sees as a desirable alternative to liberal democracy, i.e., his version of 'the commune': none other than his rewriting of Plato's Republic (Badiou, 2015). As we mentioned, Badiou rejects Plato's three-caste system. However, there is much in *The Republic* he sees as desirable. Thus, he proposes a "communist republic" without private property, social hierarchies, and the family-form. This Republic would be guided by the high ideals of Justice and Truth, rejecting oligarchic parliamentarism and 'democracy', which he sees as a (relativist) free market of opinions. In other words, in Badiou's Republic everyone would be a Philosopher. The difference, however, is that in his framework 'Truth' is not something to be found and imposed, but a generalized fidelity to universalist principles.

A few criticisms to this perspective must be raised. The first is that his jump to the future—beyond Marxism—falls in the past: the lack of any convincing link between current reality and his envisaged republic places it within the domain of utopian socialism. In other words, this is another form of reproducing old errors. In fact,

Badiou's *classless* republic circumvents the key problem that the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat is meant to solve: the need for a period of transition from the class-divided present to the emancipated future. The socialization of private property is a long and protracted process which, according to the Marxist tradition, can only be carried through under the rule of the proletariat, which is necessarily organized along democratic-republican lines (Leipold, 2024). This need for *democratic republicanism* is absent from Badiou's perspective, in what can be seen as a product of both his Platonic and his Maoist heritage. However, it is hardly disputable that the egalitarian and universalist principles he favors would turn into their opposite without democracy understood as mass decision-making. Were he to follow the implications of his own notion of truth as a process, he would face the following problem: if what counts as 'fidelity' to the emancipatory event is not given but *decided*, which decision-making mechanisms ought the faithful to institute to adjudicate which path is to be followed? If some form of democracy is not the answer, we would be forced to place our trust in an enlightened elite. However, this goes against the open-ended notion of the Truth process as something that can be *betrayed*, which precisely calls for democratic republicanism to preserve both the possibility of dissent and control of any 'elite'. To the latter we should add that Badiou's distaste for representation in all its forms introduces a new layer of irrealism in his proposal: how could decisions be made *at the national, continental, or global level* without representation and centralized forms of authority? It is the need for representation which makes democratic and republican principles—which allow for popular control of representatives—even more necessary. Finally, Badiou's egalitarian rejection of Plato's three-caste system create a problem for his 'republic of Philosophers' which is obscured by Badiou's personal contempt for political economy in all its forms: who does the work? How is production organized? Again, Badiou offers no solution to this burning issue. In fact, he systematically ignores it, reproducing an "ontologized" version of politicism (Toscano, 2004; Callinicos, 2008) which ignores that the "set of constraints that limits the possibility of possibilities" is not only the "State"—which he describes that way—but material reality as such (Macnair, 2006). In sum, Badiou's alternative to the capitalist state is simply too weak to serve as the theoretical base of an emancipatory programme.

Now that the deficiencies of Badiou's alternatives to the existing order have been examined, the next and final section will focus in more detail in his practical politics. I show how despite the claims to novelty, his proposals constitute a rebranding of old anti-Marxist ideas which lead to incoherent and unfeasible outcomes. More precisely, I will argue that Badiou's politics can be seen as a contemporary version of Bakunin, sharing the same weaknesses: an abstract refusal of reality that dovetails with a fetishization of mass action, both leading to an incapability to carry out the patient work of changing reality by building a revolutionary political movement capable of seizing power.

7. Same old, same old: On Badiou's 'new' politics

The stereotype whereby Badiou's politics reduces to a passive waiting for the miraculous Event does not withstand serious scrutiny (see Bosteels, 2011). In fact, through the years Badiou has repeatedly called for a 'new politics' that would allegedly overcome the shortcomings of the communist tradition. In his mind, the first stones of this 'new politics' can be placed in the here and now, without the need for a world-shattering change. This reflects one of the paradoxes at work in his highly voluntaristic notion of Event: there is really no need to 'wait' since Events depend on subjective recognition through and through, and thus if enough people decided to implement these new politics, the occurrence of an Event can be presupposed. Unlike the Marxist notion of crisis, which is a material phenomenon that triggers subjective effects, Badiou's Event is purely formal-ontological and subjective: the existence of an Event can be taken for granted at any point in which militant masses adopt a radically new political orientation. Beyond these philosophical niceties, however, two questions must be raised about Badiou's politics. The first, and most superficial one, interrogates whether they are really new. The second, and most substantial one, examines whether they are *right*. In what follows, I will argue that the answer to both questions is *no*, for reasons that have already been sketched in the second chapter.

Badiou offers several descriptions of the 'new politics' he calls for. At its most basic, it is a politics beyond the state and the Party-form (Bensaid, 2004), built around disciplined egalitarian commitments and mass action and pointing toward a communist

society. Thus, he describes it as "a radical rupture with capitalo-parliamentarism, a politics invented at the grassroots level of the popular real, and the sovereignty of the idea" (Badiou, 2010: 100), or a "reformulation of the communist hypothesis" (2010: 66). He also clarifies that "Today the classical Party form is doomed because it has defined itself not by its capacity to do […] mass work, but by its purported pretense to "represent" the working class, or the proletariat […] We must break with the logic of representation in all its forms" (Badiou, 2023: 19-20). Moreover, he sees "a constant submission under the fallacious name "democracy" to the electoral ritual" (2023: 15) as the main weakness of contemporary protest movements.

No one would doubt that the highly idiosyncratic vocabulary that encapsulates Badiou's proposals is new. But the novelty of his 'new politics' begins and ends in its rhetorical envelope: there is nothing genuinely new in an anti-state, anti-representation, anti-parliamentary, and anti-Partyst politics that praises the unlimited potentials of mass action and enshrines abstract 'Ideas' instead of concrete programmes. In fact, as Mike Macnair has argued,

> Disregarding the neo-Platonist philosophical machinery […] this is not a new politics at all. The case was in fact better argued without the Maoist impedimenta by John Holloway's 2002 *Change the world without taking power*. It is, in reality, merely the anti-parliamentarist political abstentionism of the 1960s-70s 'New Left', deprived of the 'wildcat strike' phenomenon which gave that politics its temporary plausibility. Behind this in turn lie the ideas of the 'left' and 'council' communists of the 1920s. Behind those are Georges Sorel and the pre-World War I syndicalists. And behind them is Bakunin's original critique of Marx and the 'Marxists', and their argument for working class political action (Macnair, 2006).

In other words, Badiou is an epigone of an old political tradition whose most classical representative is none other than Bakunin. His post-Marxism offers, in the political arena, a post-modern version of Bakunin's arguments in *State and Anarchy*. The fact that Badiou routinely castigates anarchism (Noys, 2008) changes nothing: his superficial criticisms pale in comparison with the substantial identity in terms of political orientation between his work and Bakunin's. Already in the 1870s Bakunin had argued that partyism was a mistake, electoral work a betrayal, and seizing political power a sure road to bureaucratism. He saw mass action as a means to circumvent all

the problems related to the latter and placed the fidelity to the 'idea of freedom' and the likes at the heart of his thought. As we saw in the second chapter, Marxism, with its defence of *political* action (rather than pure direct mass action), was built in antagonism with such alternatives.

Is this form of Bakuninism a solution to the dilemmas of emancipatory politics? I will argue that it is not. First, once we have established that is nothing but an old story in a new package, we can start by measuring it against its historical success, which is close to zero (Draper, 1990; Blackledge, 2010). But there are basic theoretical reasons for this. The most immediate one is that, as Macnair again notes, the masses

> Cannot be permanently on strike, on the streets, or occupying government offices. The reason is that if we were no-one would be producing food and other material goods which we need to survive. So the revolutionary 'event', in the sense of a very intense period of mass political mobilisation, cannot but come to an end (Macnair, 2006).

A politics that bets everything on mobilization is thus, by principle, one-sided. But the same problem extends to the revolutionary model that flows from the latter: the purely spontaneous upsurge of the masses. As explained in the second chapter, if genuinely massive and sustained in time, such form of mobilization would immediately disrupt production, throwing social life into chaos and raising the question of political authority: who can restore social (re)production? This, in other words, creates the opportunity for *seizing power*. But unless an institution that is specifically designed to do so—insofar as it argues for and embodies a concrete *political alternative* to the existing order—exists (that is, a political party) the masses would be uncapable of turning their revolt into a successful revolution. The party, in this sense, is the necessary link between the revolutionary crisis and the construction of a new political order, sanctioning the destruction of the old. It is the tool that could gather majority support for a concrete change in the state form, in the manner of the Bolshevik 'All Power to the Soviets!'. Without the latter, the disruptions caused in social life by the revolt would push the masses, and especially the most backward elements of the latter, into the hands of figures that represent the old order, which they would eventually restore.

But an alternative center of political authority is something whose construction must start way before the revolutionary upsurge. The masses must be patiently won for a revolutionary programme. This guarantees that, at revolutionary moments, significant sections of the latter are already organized around a concrete view of change. A "pure Idea of Equality" is not enough: a concrete political and economic alternative to the existing order is needed. In this sense, Badiou's fixation on revolts and eruptions is the reverse of its anti-partyism, both testifying to his incapability to think other two sides of one coin: political action and the necessary preparatory work required by any revolutionary change.

This is linked to the problem explored in the last section: the weakness of Badiou's alternatives. Since he fetishizes mass action, he does not only miss the need to think which institutions could guarantee the subordination of the decision-makers to the working masses. He also obscures the practical necessity of a constant process of de-legitimisation of the institutions of capitalo-parlamentarism which puts forward a political alternative to them rather than simply denouncing its effects. Again, this is the task of a political party (and any institution which takes up this role would be a party, regardless of whether it calls itself as such). It is also one that inevitably involves representation since the masses cannot be *constantly* mobilized. A politics built on the idea of 'breaking with the logic of representation in all its forms', as Badiou demands, would inevitably be confined to impotent small-scale experiences of 'direct democracy' or to ephemeral moments of mobilization. Beyond that, the need for representation follows from the simple fact that everyone cannot be present at every process of decision. By identifying, in an anarchistic way, the failures of the oligarchic model of representation of 'liberal democracies' (where representatives are largely unaccountable and 'the people' is reduced to atomized passivity) and labour bureaucracies with representation *as such*, Badiou falls into utopianism. More damagingly, this creed obscures the genuinely pressing question that flows from the recognition of the inescapability of some form of representation in any large-scale human group: how representatives—both in the revolutionary *movement* and the revolutionary *government*—could be made accountable to the working masses. This dogmatic position cannot, by the force of its immaterial convictions, remove the need for political institutions, representation, etc., and thus it can only force the masses to the fruitless chaos of the

"tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, 1970) or push them to become the tail of an external, *organized* political force (Macnair, 2006).

The latter is connected to Badiou's disregard for material constraints: the purely political criticism of 20th century socialism, which concedes no explanatory role to the economic backwardness of all the countries where the communists seized power (Martins, 2005), inevitably leads, in its one-sidedness, to the condemnation of the party-form and the transitional state *as such*, rather than working through the deforming tendencies created by economic underdevelopment and isolation. Again, this simply reproduces the flawed logic of Bakunin's arguments against political action in *Statism and Anarchy*.

Some of Badiou's concrete political interventions, and especially the ones on French politics, have been courageous and profoundly inspiring from a communist perspective (see Badiou, 2015). When he leaves his philosophical machinery aside, he provides lucid and principled views on issues like the bourgeois and nationalist character of French 'republicanism' or the need for internationalism. This chapter has tried to prove that the emancipatory content of those interventions, and Badiou's communists beliefs more generally, should be put on a firmer theoretical and political ground, rejecting the mystifications of ontology and Bakuninism.

Retrieving the terminology of the second chapter, we could say that Badiou's response to the economic problem of emancipatory politics is virtually non-existent, since his vindication of communism, i.e., the abolition of private property, is undermined by his disregard for social labour and the materiality of the human life-process more generally. Regarding the political problem, we could say that his response is also erroneous, since the fetishization of mass action and the abstraction of his alternative to "capitalo-parlamentarism" fatally undermine his emancipatory ambitions. In sum, Badiou's 'new politics' reproduces the weaknesses and antinomies of older proposals. The rational kernel of the misguided criticism according to which all Badiou offers is a call for waiting is that one would have to wait forever before a politics like the one he proposes could work.

8. Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined Alain Badiou's theory and politics. First, I have argued that his philosophical system is ridden with contradictions and an inability to justify its main theses. Second, I have shown how the latter pushes Badiou to different forms of fallacious reasoning. Third, I have demonstrated that this philosophical framework yields a mystified approach to politics. Fourth, I have argued that this is reflected in the unconvincing character of Badiou's alternatives to the contemporary institutions he despises. Finally, I have shown how Badiou's practical politics do not offer a coherent path for emancipation and reproduce old errors in new clothes.

Chapter 6

For a Critique of ‘Ontology’

1. The Legend of Being beyond all beings

With the critique of Badiou we have completed our detour through the works of the authors that can be said to exhaust the ‘corners’ of the post-Marxist spectrum. As a means of tying together the theoretical points of the previous discussion, in this chapter I will trying to synthetically present the crux of my theoretical critique of ontology whilst showing how once rigorously pursued, the critique of ontology leads to Marx’s starting point.

If the nucleus of ‘ontology’ in the way we have used the term throughout this work—that is, as *(Post)Heideggerian* ontology—is to be attacked, we should take a brief detour through certain essential theoretical questions. A structural criticism of this outlook requires confronting the common base that all its practitioners share, that which is most specific about their project and is preserved, in many guises, in all their systems: Heidegger’s ‘ontological difference’, or, as Adorno (1973) put it, Heidegger’s invocation of “the Legend of Being beyond all beings”. Despite their dissimilarities, all the authors that we have labelled under the term ‘post-Marxism’ ultimately argue that Marx’s materialism should be abandoned because it cannot account for the latter: it lacks a proper comprehension of ‘Being’. In the previous chapters, I have tried to demonstrate how the assumptions that underlie this objection are untenable, and that sticking to them yields incoherent results and a generalized theoretical impoverishment. In turn, he goal of this brief chapter is to flesh out my central theoretical argument against ‘ontology’; that is, the basic conceptual bedrock of the various critiques I have developed throughout this work. The reverse of the latter is to provide a positive alternative. In this regard, I would like to argue that at least certain aspects of Hegel’s

conceptualization of Being cleared the path for Marx's theoretical intervention, whilst providing the fulcrum for a criticism of 'ontology'.

As we briefly mentioned in the first chapter, Hegel's *Science of Logic* (2010) begins with the most abstract of categories: "Being, pure being, without further determination" (Houlgate, 2006, 2023a, 2023b; Pippin, 2018). Once placed under examination, 'Being, pure Being' proves to be identical with Nothing, since its lacks any determinations. What is meritorious about this move, theoretically speaking, is that is demystifies the question of 'pure' Being, pushing thought towards more promising territories. 'Being, pure Being' is simply *nothing*, a pure nothingness which, unlike Badiou's Void, is not an index for the possibility of world-shattering change, because it is *really* nothing. It does not present itself, nor does it withdraw, and thus cannot be construed as a source of potentiality or meaning.

One does not have to follow Hegel into the rabbit hole of absolute idealism to benefit from this insight. As Ray Brassier puts it:

> In the final analysis, Hegel's logical determination of being as a nothing that neither presents nor withdraws itself extirpates ontological transcendence and delivers us from the temptation to endow being with a voice that could compel us to listen to its meaning. The meaninglessness of "being, pure being, without further determination," prevents transcendence from being reconstituted as the internal limit of immanence. (Brassier, Forthcoming).

This extirpation of transcendence as pure alterity furnishes the possibility of the transformation of philosophy into science, knowledge of the actual world, which cleared the path for Marx's theoretical intervention. By demystifying 'pure Being'—the sheer fact that things 'are', or their 'thatness'—as theoretically meaningless, thought is pushed towards being as a determinate "whatness", i.e., an intelligible unity of form and content (or essence and appearance) that thinking can anatomize. The emancipatory implications of this move are self-evident: since we can *know* reality (there is no 'beyond' that forever transcends reason or conceptualization), we could consciously change it.

On the contrary, (post-)Heideggerian ontology reinstates transcendence and puts thought back in front of an unknowable alterity. It does so in the very act of positing a

gulf between what is apparent (the ontic, or *beings*) and its appearing (the ontological, or Being), whilst construing the latter as a mystery that evades conceptual mediation. Knowledge of what is apparent—or 'present'—can never account, Heidegger argues, for its sheer 'thatness'—or 'presence'. Presence can be said to 'withdraw' because even the best account of the 'whatness' of things leaves the mystery of their 'thatness' untouched. Being thus forever transcends beings yet is also in all of them as their 'groundless ground': the source them 'being' at all.

The problematic nature of this move should by now be clear. Pure Being, which reason can unveil as *nothing*, is elevated—by means of hypostasis, as Habermas (1990) argued—to the category of a riddle that forever escapes rational apprehension; whilst this mystery is turned into the foundation of real beings. This is the mystical cornerstone of (post)Heideggerian ontology. It leads thought astray by placing it in front of a nothingness that the thinker himself has construed as both relevant—having real effects—and impenetrable: thus Laclau's 'pure negativity' or Badiou's 'Void'. Its real enemy is the rationalist idea whereby being is *intelligible*: that there is nothing that cannot be known *in principle*. By enshrining an alterity that transcends reason, thought is driven towards indeterminacy—a constant gesturing towards that which cannot be represented, which can be called 'Antagonism', 'the Void', etc.—, and the patient search for *determinate* knowledge of historical reality is demoted. Social and historical knowledge becomes derivative; whilst the alterity of 'Being' becomes primordial. This is how Heidegger resurrected under a new guise what Marx had castigated as 'self-sufficient philosophy': an otherworldly, self-enclosed business that fails to actualize itself as real knowledge of reality (Schuringa, 2025). The fact that in this new version groundlessness, and contingency take the place of necessity, God, etc., does not alter this fact. It follows that the 'disappearance of the social', whereby the basis of society is placed beyond society itself (Lotz, 2018) is implicit in Heidegger's 'ontological turn'. As Ray Brassier argues:

> Heidegger ontologizes practical comportment and readiness-to-hand by abstracting from the social form determinations anatomized by Marx. Instead of dialectically articulating subjectivity and objectivity through these mediating social forms, he conjures a 'primordial' unity, being-in-the-world, more 'originary' than the division into subject and object, whose differentiation into distinct 'existentials' (being-in, being-with, theyness, being-unto-death, etc.) is unaffected by

social form. The ontological contrast between readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand, practical and theoretical comportment, presupposes a relation to being—-"the worlding of the world"—prior to any social mediation (2025).

The primacy of ontology is thus the primacy of Being understood as pre-conceptual indeterminacy, which is precisely what Hegel rationally nullified as pure nothingness. Its reverse is the act of positing a 'primordial unity' between man (Dasein) and being that is prior to social relations. Thus, Heidegger's move—which provides the conceptual bedrock of any post-Heideggerian Ontology—is in fact doubly mystifying. First, it turns this empty nothingness (Being) into the source of meaning and potentiality. Second, it invokes an equally mystical figure, the 'Dasein', whose relation to being allegedly comes before any social mediation. This entails downplaying determinate being (i.e., social forms and their material content), which is always seen as derivative. But what is allegedly primordial is in both cases an illusory construct: the empty positing of something that transcends determinacy/mediation. This move yields nothing but an empty Being and an empty 'being in the world', since they are both artificially separated from their determinate reality—as if 'Being' and the human were something concrete beyond their different social, physical, and historical shapes.

Within the framework of Heidegger and his followers, "the ultimate source of potentiality is not being as whatness or quiddity [*determinate* being] but being as self-disclosive-withholding event or happening [being as *indeterminacy* or sheer transcendence, i.e., the Event]" (Brassier, 2025). Throughout this thesis, we have seen how post-Marxist thinkers follow this path, trying to find the source of emancipatory change in something other than society itself. In other words, they try to find a source of change beyond determinate being. But this source is a mystification, an empty product of thought. It is literally *nothing*. Herein lies the fatal theoretical flaw of post-Marxism. It abandons *determinate* reality to ground the perspectives of its transformation into a 'beyond' that, once placed under examination, proves to be a conceptual fiction. Agamben's Impotentiality, Laclau & Mouffe's Antagonism, Badiou's Void… they are all concepts that try to invest this nothingness with a potential for change, in a move which inevitably leads thought astray by pushing it towards a realm beyond mediations —and, simultaneously, away from the *real* sources of historical change—whilst it is pretended that humans have a proprietary relation to this 'beyond' that is prior to

sociality. Within this framework, society and real individuals inevitably become secondary. On the contrary, once we accept that nothing transcends social forms, we are forced to ground the possibilities for their transformation within those forms themselves, in their contradictions and antagonisms.

Pure being neither withdraws nor presents itself: it is a pure nothingness. Real being only exists in determinate forms, each invested with different potentials for transformation. This insight frees thought from the mystifying urge to find the basis of society in something other than the real activity of real beings. The religious gesturing towards transcendence is relinquished by the scientific focus in determinate reality, which can and should be known if it is to be consciously transformed. This form of thinking enables a rational assessment of different political strategies and tactics, helping us distinguish those genuinely grounded in historical reality from those that are not. If emancipation is to be a real project rather than an empty name for the expectation of a miraculous, otherworldly salvation, it becomes apparent why this approach should be favored over post-Heideggerian ontology. Social transformation does not take place because abstract humans come to terms with "the void" of the situation (Badiou), its "constitutive outside" (Laclau & Mouffe) or their own "impotentiality" (Agamben). It does so because *real* individuals, organized within *real* collectivities, come to terms with the *determinate* possibility of changing reality in *determinate* ways.

As a subset of 'self-sufficient philosophy', post-Heideggerian ontology can be described, following the young Marx, as *alienated thought*. It puts the world upside down, reproducing a mystification whereby what is a *result* is posited as originary. The understanding of the kind of things that could appear in the world is a product of certain social relations that are often not transparent to consciousness. However, post-Heideggerian ontology has it backwards, presenting those social relations as derivate with regard of the different ways in which 'Being' appears. By departing from this inverted perspective, the conceptual frameworks they build are sets of empty universals with no grip on actuality. As Jameson concludes:

> What is concrete is the social, the mode of production, the humanly produced, and historical; metaphysical conceptions such as those involving nature or death are ideological derivations of that more basic reality (2014: 125).

2. Ontology as ideology

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to examine how their inverted perspective, internally linked to the emptiness of the 'beyond' where post-Marxist authors try to find the source of change, leads them to contradictions and inconsistencies. The 'search for the Political' (McNay, 2014) was inevitably misguided because it was built upon Heidegger's misguided 'search for Being'. At the end of the day, neither Heidegger nor his disciples can answer the simple question: why accept that Being withdraws? In the next section I will argue that this idea is built on a false inference. For now, it suffices to say that as we explored in the previous chapters, the latter entails that neither Badiou nor Agamben or Laclau and Mouffe can properly justify their theoretical systems. When they try to do so, they must either appeal to sheer will (Badiou), dogmatically reinstate their commitments (Agamben) or acknowledge what they would like to deny (Laclau & Mouffe) In other words, Political Ontology reveals itself as a self-contradictory endeavor: once pushed to the end, it leads to its own self-abolition. Only its own lack of reflexivity blinds it to that. Thus, it can only subsist as *ideology*. It should then come as no surprise that arguments between proponents of different political ontologies, such as the Laclau-Negri debate (Laclau, 2001; Negri and Casarino, 2008), have proved intellectually sterile (Rekret, 2016). This is not necessarily function of the stubbornness of the participants: rather it follows from the theoretical status of post-Heideggerian ontologies. First, there can be no such thing as a meta-ontology that could adjudicate between competing ontological claims, since that, as we have seen, would either replicate foundationalism or lead to an infinite regress. But History cannot be the absolute judge either because that would negate the primacy of ontology. So Laclau and Negri see recent historical developments disclosing different ontological axioms: where the former sees 'pure negativity', incompleteness, and lack, the latter seems plenitude, immanence, and endless creativity. However, the analysis of those developments cannot really disprove those axioms because that would imply recognizing the primacy of History, thus depriving them of their 'ontological' status—i.e., their claims to be originary. The latter means that different ontological axioms are incommensurable. As a result, rationally adjudicating between competing versions of political ontology is simply impossible (Rekret, 2012; 2016). Once we remain within its realm, we are caught in an impasse. Radical Negativity (Laclau & Mouffe) or Pure Affirmation (Negri)? The Void (Badiou) or Immanence (Agamben)? The only answer is: who

knows? At the end of the day whether we opt for one or another option in the variated menu of post-Heideggerian ontologies (see Marchart, 2005; Strathausen, 2009) becomes a matter of taste or opinion, dependent on our inclinations rather than on rational principles. They are just different—and, in the last instance, incommensurable—*interpretations* of the world, i.e., purely subjective, and thus arbitrary, doctrines, or, in other words, self-enclosed and self-perpetuating paradigms.

Thus, within the domain of ontology only pure oppositions—counterposing your favored version to alternative ones—or internal (rather than immanent) criticisms—pointing out internal inconsistencies, highlighting argumentative mistakes (Marchart, 2007; Prozorov, 2013; Paipais, 2017), etc.—are available: that is, those criticisms that *dogmatically* accept its validity from the outset. This is always the case with ideologies: David Ricardo could well criticize the inconsistencies of Adam Smith's Political Economy, but only to the extent that he accepted its ideological premises—the natural character of capitalist production (Clarke, 1982: 44-48). Breaking with the latter entails a break with Political Economy as a whole—i.e., the transition to a *critique* of Political Economy (Clarke, 1982, 1991; Marx, 2013). *Mutatis mutandis*, since, as we have seen, ontology's antinomies derive from its self-conception as a separate realm, divorced from determinate being, i.e., practice, we need to place the latter as the starting point of thought, overcoming the inversion that is intrinsic in ontological approaches. As I argued, critique does not need to depart from a pre-given conceptual framework or a set of dogmatic assumptions. It does not presuppose that social analysis ought to have priority over ontological theorizing: it *demonstrates* it by immanently following ontology's own movement, which shows how the priority of ontological concepts—i.e., the separation between ontology and history commanded by the 'ontological difference'—leads to self-contradictions that can only be sublated through its negation. In other words, an immanent critique of ontologies proves how Marx's materialist and scientific starting point is the genuinely rigorous one.

3. Real beings

In one way or another, all post-Marxist authors identify Being with 'contingency' (Van der Heiden, 2014), arguing that reality itself is 'incomplete', 'groundless', etc. This argument extracts its plausibility from two different sources: on the one hand, it derives

from the negation of the idea of a God-given order which unfolds with blind necessity. On the other hand, it follows from a second inference: the world, i.e., social and political life, *does seem* contingent and haphazard. From here, (Post-)Heideggerian jump to argue that this is because reality is founded on a 'groundless ground'. In the parlance of Political Ontology this is cashed out by asserting that 'politics' is founded on 'the Political' *qua* contingency, antagonism, etc. The unity of these two arguments furnishes the central idea whereby theory should depart from acknowledging that reality has a 'negative' foundation, i.e., Antagonism, etc. However, I think that in both cases we are dealing with a false inference. In criticizing Laclau and Mouffe, I have argued for the existence of a form of necessity that is social and historical rather than God-given. By remaining trapped within philosophy, post-Marxist authors miss the latter: all they can do is to write 'contingency' where classical metaphysicians wrote 'necessity', to demote actuality to glorify potentiality, etc. But, as I have argued, this framework remains all too abstract: it is one that has failed to actualize itself into knowledge of the real world. It misses the complex forms of necessity that arise out of the relations in which human beings, as natural, corporal beings, enter with each other and with the planet. Social practice is bound by nature, and it creates forms of historical necessity that are equally binding. None of them are God-given, but that does not make them any less actual. The point is simple enough, yet it allows for dispensing with the 'metaphysics of contingency': given certain state of development of human societies, certain institutions and practices are historically necessary. On the other hand, post-Heideggerians try to avoid one-sidedly emphasizing contingency by insisting that despite its 'groundlessness' Being nonetheless *grounds*: it simultaneously provides instability *and stability*. This argument allegedly suffices to shield them from the accusation of advancing a wholly unconvincing worldview, insofar as it allows them to claim that whilst change is always possible, not every change is always attainable. But it remains unconvincing, for at least two (interrelated) reasons. The first is that it still distracts our view from the sources of real change. The second is that its theoretical validity depends on the second of the aforementioned sources, i.e., their basic argument for the ontological/political difference, which is equally rejectable. The inference that moves from the seeming contingency of political events to establishing 'contingency' as a metaphysical foundation is a false one (Kowalewski, 2022). It derives the 'absence' of ground from our daily experience of 'negativity' in the form of the finitude and

fallibility of our knowledge, the inadequacies of perception, the way in which the social world appears chaotic, etc. But this is an illegitimate jump from phenomenological to metaphysical negativity, i.e., from the appearance of contingency to its ontologisation.[9] That my experience of an object seems 'incomplete' to the point that I can doubt its very existence does not mean that the object itself is contingent, groundless, etc. Expanding the argument, we could say that the fact that our knowledge of reality is incomplete, or that we experience reality as contingent does not mean that *reality itself* is incomplete or contingent. Even more to the point, the fact that some events seem to shatter reality as we know it does not mean that they emerge 'out of nothing'. An example could clarify this. If I wake up one morning and I realize that I have been fired from my job for no reason I would surely experience 'negativity' in the form of anguish, bewilderment, etc. But this experience of negativity does not derive from the 'groundlessness' of Being. On the contrary, it is a function of *positive, objective processes*: the workings of the capitalist economy, and the way the necessities it imposes are actualized through the practices of agents like my boss. It follows that moving from the experience of negativity to identifying 'negativity' as the ground of experience is a flawed inference. This falsifies the idea whereby Being withdraws. The key to post-Heideggerian ontologies lies precisely in this illegitimate jump (or hypostatization) from certain experiential traits to metaphysics, i.e., from real being to the 'groundlessness' of Being. This is why I have argued that the 'Being' of the post-Heideggerians is an empty projection. On the contrary, a materialist perspective allows for overcoming this mistake. Instead of turning our subjective limitations into features of Being itself (the crux of Heidegger's ontologization of finitude), it demonstrates how the flaws in our perception and our experience of negativity more broadly derive from *objective* social and physical features, i.e., real beings. In other words, overcoming Heidegger's inversion requires understanding that the relation between what is shown (the phenomenon, or appearances) and what shows itself, which in Heidegger is construed as the 'ontological difference' between the ontic and an eternally elusive (and thus inapprehensible) Being, is in truth the relation between essence and appearance, which can be consciously apprehended. As argued in the first chapter, in *Capital* Marx exposed how the ideological phantasies that constitute 'the religion of everyday life', to which Political Economy falls prey, derive from objective traits of the capitalist

[9] Due to his anti-phenomenological commitments, Badiou does not resort to this argument. However, we have seen that the route he uses to reach the same point –his 'decisions'– is also illegitimate.

economic system. This entails linking appearances to the essential relations that underlie them, grasping the former as the necessary mode of expression of the latter. On the other hand, this approach also demonstrates that we do not need a separate 'metatheory' that deals with questions like 'contingency' or 'necessity' in the abstract, to later inform empirical approaches. Materialist analysis can prove whether something is necessary by cautiously exposing its determinations and simultaneously reflect on the category of necessity (and how our understanding of the latter is shaped by existing social arrangements), thus integrating the theoretical and metatheoretical levels.

I have argued that the perspective of the post-Heideggerians fails to interrogate the forms of social and historical necessity that act behind the seeming contingency of everyday political life, i.e., how political life is part of objective processes. This is precisely the task of science. On the contrary, the jump from the semblance of contingency to its metaphysical enshrinement is one that remains within the realm of appearances. In terms of knowledge, the outcome is inevitably impoverishing. In some sense, it replicates Hegel's combination of an 'uncritical idealism' with an 'uncritical positivism': approaches that subsume reality under pure concepts rather than interrogating 'the real logic of the real object' are impotent in regard of the project of changing reality, and thus they leave it as it is. This is most acutely felt in relation to the notion of the Event, central to post-Heideggerian ontologies. A materialistic perspective should interrogate the social and political processes which underlie the semblance of absolute novelty of the Event, and the actual potencies out of which an 'Event', i.e., a great social transformation, could emerge in the future. Instead of pretending that the Event emerged 'out of the Void', that we are dealing with Being disclosing itself in an unprecedented way, etc. this perspective allows for tracing the roots of change in the same context that has been, or will eventually be, shattered by it. The October Revolution, for instance, was preceded by a vast amount of Marxist literature that established how the European revolution could start in Russia, how the proletariat would be the leader of the revolution, in alliance with the peasantry, how a war would put revolution on the agenda, etc. (Lenin, 1965; Gaido & Day, 2009). Our empirical knowledge might always be limited, but there is nothing that could escape science and its predictive powers by principle. As Marx argued: "There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits" (2013: 16).

Chapter 7

Beyond Post-Marxism

1. Introduction: We need an alternative

Political Ontology is not in a particularly good shape. The last of its exponents are far from the apex of their popularity, most of its main figures are gone, and the enthusiasm it used to rouse is waning. Moreover, there appears to be no emerging generation prepared to take up the mantle. One could argue that Political Ontology has crumbled under its theoretical inconsistence, as synthetically fleshed out in the previous chapter. But this is compatible with arguing that the historical conditions that once enabled its emergence are gradually dissolving. Both the present and the foreseeable future, it might be said, have become too unsettling to permit the kind of resolutely abstract theorizing that I have been criticizing. Few would dispute that we are living through a period of epochal transformation: expanding militarism, creeping authoritarianism, the global ascendance of the far right, economic stagnation, the ongoing genocide in Palestine, and more. It is not necessary to idealize the liberal world order in the least to understand that it is in the process of being replaced by something worse and more terrifying. All the latter poses immense challenges to emancipatory thought—challenges which, I will argue, post-Marxist cannot live up to. Although it is yet to prove that it could coalesce again into a mass political movement, the much vaunted 'return of Marxism' after the 2008 crisis should be read through these lenses.

Historicizing both the origins and current state of post-Marxist theory is a necessary part of its critique. It allows us to understand it as a defective subjective response arising from objective difficulties and shortcomings. The reverse of the latter is the task of putting forward a better alternative. Thus, in this chapter I will try to describe some main features of our contemporary historical predicament, beginning with the question

of how we got here. The latter will offer the fulcrum for both an analysis of the current state of post-Marxism and left theory, and, finally, for a general judgement of post-Marxism. It will also serve to point out some of the key challenges that humanity faces. This will be followed by an analysis of the forms of theory and practice that could live up to these challenges.

The thesis I defend is that, on the one hand, we urgently need to move beyond post-Marxism and turn its agony into its *definitive* demise. Even if its current state displays many signs of exhaustion, nothing has properly replaced the void it leaves. For this reason, its influence could still play a negative role, promoting confusion and hindering the (re)emergence of a better alternative. Even the possibility of it experiencing a certain comeback, implausible as it is, cannot be ruled out. This furnishes the *urgency* of the argument I am putting forward. On the other hand, I have also argued that a return to Marxism should be the answer to the contemporary dilemmas of the left. As William Clare Roberts puts it:

> The political and economic organizations of the Left are in shambles, and there is no theoretical or tactical center of gravity. I think this is precisely the moment to reread the history of socialist theory, to return to and rework first principles. No one is more important, in this respect, than Marx (2017b).

This chapter will be structured in the following way. First, I will expand on some historical points made in the first chapter whilst emphasizing their link with the emergence of post-Marxism. Second, I will put forward a picture of the present informed by contemporary Marxist scholarship and argue that post-Marxism is theoretically uncapable of grasping these tendencies and dynamics. Third, I will argue that post-Marxism is also uncapable of providing a convincing political answer to those challenges. fourth, I will summarize the basic points of a Marxist alternative to the various political pitfalls of post-Marxism.

2. The crisis of capitalism

In his poignant *Vanguard of Retrogression* (2011), Loren Goldner linked the post-modern—and post-marxist—theoretical ‘dissolution of the social’ to the process of de-industrialization and financialization that the West experienced from the 1970 onwards.

Present as it was in Heidegger's project, the intellectual notoriety it acquired after the 1970s testifies to its social rootedness as a subjective response to the objective challenges posed by the grand-scale transformations than commenced in that decade. As we saw in the first chapter, this process entailed a profound transformation of the working-class, with the industrial proletariat losing ground to the service worker, whilst also decimating its organisations and communities. Unable to assert its interests due to the weakening of its capacity for collective action, an increasingly atomised proletariat was severely demoted as a political force, pushed to oscillate between the slippery ladder of economic integration and the abyss of rising precarity and unemployment. The thick net of institutions that had once accompanied the development of the working classes were unevenly dismantled, leading to a reconfiguration of 'the social' as it had been understood for almost 100 years. At the same time, cheap credit, the constant rise of housing prices and the expansion of university degrees extended the middle class in a process that was accompanied by a triumphalist liberal discourse that marred individualism with de-politisation (Evans, 2024; Rodríguez, 2022). These re-shaped middle classes provided the mass ground for the vehemently pro-market consensus of the following decades (Rodríguez, 2022; Evans, 2024), to which social-democratic forces jumped rather joyfully (Gray, 1998; Sassoon, 2010; Schulman, 2015). With post-war regulated capitalism giving place to the neoliberal counterrevolution, the institutions of the welfare state—standardized forms of collective bargaining, etc.—where gradually (albeit unevenly) disassembled (Clarke, 1988). Discontent was channeled through loose 'social movements' that were not organized along class lines (Clarke, 2021). All the latter provided the bedrock for the discourse of the 'disappearance of the social': without thriving mass collective institutions, the idea that 'there are only individuals and families' seems at least superficially creditable.

The 'disappearance of the social', in other words, is nothing but a catchword for the unprecedented weakening of *class struggle from below*. Post-modern and post-marxist discourses reify this phenomenon by turning it into metaphysics. All its discourse can be seen as an *ideological illusion* stemming from a particular socio-historical predicament which proved ephemeral (Wood, 1999).

The paradox is that the latter was accompanied by the intensification of the *class struggle from above*. In the first chapter we saw how what came to be known as

‘neoliberalism’ was a multilayered class offensive of the capitalist class in the face of the deep economic and political problems underlying the crisis of the 70s (Harvey, 2005; Ruiz, 2024). Post-war regulated capitalism had drove the working class out of the revolutionary path in exchange for certain political rights and unprecedented economic concessions. But the revolts of the 60s and the crisis of the 70s marked the end of this era. The Keynesian illusion of a capitalism without crisis (Mattick, 1971) imploded, and the context of overproduction, stagnation, decays in profitability and generalized working class militancy testified to the need for deep changes if the capitalist order was to be preserved.

Five closely interrelated economic dimensions of the neoliberal offensive could be sketched out. First, ‘globalization’, understood as the de-regulation of trade and capital flows, and the transfer of great parts of industrial production from the imperialist center to the global south (Smith, 2009). Second, financialization, understood as the de-regulation of financial markets, the massive transfer of capital to the financial sphere, and the expansion of both private and public debt (Copley, 2021). Crucially, the latter entailed that wage increases, loosely tied to productivity gains, were substituted by cheap credit as the main means to guarantee rising living standards to the working and middle classes (Domènech, 2008; Rodríguez, 2022). Third, privatization, transferring to private capital formerly public or communal industries and services. Fourth, a shift in the main macroeconomic goals of Central Banks: from achieving full employment to containing inflation, i.e., restraining wage growth (Clarke, 1988). Fifth, the dismantling of the ‘welfarist consensus’ through the de-regulation of labour markets, the weakening of collective bargaining and the role of unions, the decimation of public services, etc. In political terms, the latter was accompanied by a wave of constitutional reforms oriented at weakening the people’s ability to exert pressure on the state, further insulating the main political and economic decisions from the needs of the masses (Bonefeld, 2017).

One of the most telling consequences of the latter was what the Catalan philosopher Antoni Domènech called a “generalization of idiocy” (2007), understood in the classical sense of an individualistic abstention from political participation. Domenech’s concept dovetails with Peter Mair’s insightful critique of the ‘hollowing out’ of liberal democracies (2013). Idiocy, in this sense of the term, is not a personal flaw but a structural condition to which vast sections of the masses were thrown. Detailed

empirical studies have flashed out this process, whereby the weakening of working-class institutions and the hegemony of third-sector activists in popular movements—with, for instance, the largely proletarian civil rights movement in the US being substituted by a network of non-profit institutions—, pushed wage workers towards political abstentionism (Radcliff & Davis, 2000; Michelat & Simon, 2004; Skocpol, 2004). However, it should be noted that contrary to some empirically vacuous post-Marxist claims, the working class has continued to exist and *resist* this new reality. From China to Berlin, workers have remained the backbone of resistance movements against cuts in wages, growing precarity, austerity policies and rising authoritarianism (Davis, 2018). But from the time being their *agency* has been demoted, none of those movements crystallizing in an actual and strongly organized revolutionary threat to the establishment.

It is not difficult to see how the post-Marxist theories we have examined fit into this picture. Badiou's fetishization of mass action and Events reflect a context where day-to-day politics stands strictly above the masses. Laclau and Mouffe's stress on the pure contingency of hegemonic articulations mirrors the weakening of class identification, communal bonds, and mass institutions. Agamben's esoteric politics were born in a moment where a turn towards inwardness seemed an apt response to a scenario of de-mobilization and lack of alternatives.

But the material ground that saw these theories emerge is vanishing. The 2008 crisis triggered the implosion of the economic compact that had provided Western neoliberalism with its fleeting stability. The unity of financialized growth and an eviscerated liberal democracy which created the peculiar 'post-political' scenario of the 'End of History' was torn asunder with the breakdown of its economic pillars. It suddenly became apparent that the link between prosperity and cheap credit, divorced from real wage and productivity gains, was essentially an illusion. More generally, the (neo)liberal dream of 'globalization' as a force which, its unpalatable 'side effects' notwithstanding, would fuel global growth and lead to a situation of generalized prosperity abruptly came to an end (Merchant, 2024). The latter has furnished a political crisis which seems to point towards the demise of the same liberal democracy whose absolute victory Fukuyama had proclaimed only twenty years ago (Nayar, 2023).

A deep structural crisis of capitalism underlies all these phenomena. As a system marked by an irresistible tendency to expand the forces of production beyond the limits of valorization, capitalism carries at its core a tendency towards decline and crisis (Marx, 1993). This tendency is properly historical, relinquishing naive pictures of an 'eternal' capitalism which endlessly dwells in a closed spiral of booms and crisis, each breakdown seeing it emerge from the ashes with fully renovated energies. In truth, the displacement of living labour, the sole source of new value, by machinery which derives from the inner dynamics of capital and its constant need for rising productivity, creates a tendency towards decline which, its many countertendencies notwithstanding, points towards the historical supersession of the system, to be actualized through the revolutionary action of the masses (Marx, 2013; Merchant, 2024). Capitalism, in other words, tends to the supersession of its historical rationality, which is not a supra-historical 'mission' but the inner logic which made it expand, endure, and conquer the globe whilst exponentially expanding the productive powers of humanity. It does so by draining its lifeblood, surplus value, leading to depressed profit and growth rates. This is its most basic contradiction: it inevitably tends to develop the productive forces beyond the limits of valorisation, i.e., profitability, generating increasingly damaging forms of overproduction/ overaccumulation and depressed profit rates. The latter underlies both singular crisis/recessions and the general tendency towards decline. Growing overproduction strains the system, depriving the 'virtuous' dynamic of investment, production, sale, and new investments of its impulse. Once economic growth is challenged, capitalism turn into a zero-sum game, with the capitalist class expanding its profits only at the expense of the impoverishment of the working masses and each capitalist country fiercely trying to appropriate the largest possible share of an extant reserve of surplus value. In this context, forces of production tend to become *forces of destruction* (Clarke, 1994), ushering into a new era of wars and catastrophes of which the war in Ukraine and the Palestinian genocide are two horrific examples.

The last four decades have witnessed a constant reduction of global growth rates, the spectacular rise of China notwithstanding (Reese, 2019). Neoliberal globalization has been successful in yielding massive gains for the global oligarchy but is has clearly failed to rescue capitalism from decline. As many authors argue, the reason is that the current crisis is structural in a strong sense, indicating the historical decadence of capitalism (Vela, 2018, Reese, 2019; Smith & Butovski & Watterton, 2021; Piqueras,

2022; Copley & Moraitis, 2022; Smith, 2022, 2025, Merchant, 2024; Robinson, 2025; Rodríguez, 2025; Moraitis, 2022, 2025).

Moreover, the latter is aggravated by the fact that the contemporary crisis is both economic and ecological. Several interrelated tendencies derive from this structural condition. They will be explored in detail, since they are crucial for anchoring this thesis and its argument within their concrete historical context. The first one is a polarization of class antagonisms that yields a *process of proletarianization* (Davis, 2018), understood as the expansion and deepening of the proletarian condition of dispossession. In the West, this is reflected both in the gradual decomposition of the middle-classes that once furnished the stability of the system and in the general impoverishment and precarization of the working class. The imperialist position of the West, tied to its technological dominance, had made possible to guarantee the loyalty of large segments of its population to their capitalist state by granting certain economic stability and the prospect of a constant bettering of their living standards. The latter was tied to the partial or total (in the case of the petty-bourgeoisie, often artificially kept alive through public policies) de-proletarianisation of parts of the population, which were momentarily risen above the proletarian condition of existential dispossession. Welfare institutions; access to property, financial assets, and university education; generous state subsidies for small businesses and agriculture; and the availability of *white-collar*, high-salary employment in industry, the state bureaucracy, and the service sector—these were all mechanisms that lifted significant segments of Western populations above the structural precarity characteristic of the proletariat. Most if not all of them are now in marked decline (Roberts, 2016; Rodríguez, 2022, 2025). As a result, the ability of states to integrate the working masses has been severely weakened, leading to a protracted tendency to political instability (Rodríguez, 2022).

Moreover, a key feature of this process of proletarianization is an increasing inability of the capitalist system to profitably employ vast masses of workers, which is a function of its tendency to expel living labour from production processes (Marx, 2013). Large segments of the global proletariat now compose an expanding ‘surplus population’ whose relationship with wage-labour is highly unstable (Davis, 2018; Claro Roberts, 2025). This is a global phenomenon which is particularly prominent in the Global South, where the contemporary crisis is expressed in the bleakest terms. Whilst

booming capitalism tied proletarianization with productive wage labour, often concentrated in industry (Neel, 2025), decaying capitalism manifests a weakening of this bond, producing growing numbers of people for which capital has no profitable use. The population of the 'Planet of Slums' masterfully analyzed by Mike Davis (2007) is largely composed of this category of people: a massive 'surplus' proletariat that cannot be permanently employed, oscillating between precarious work, self-employment, and chronic unemployment. The unity of this phenomenon with the harsh effects of the turn of the great imperial powers towards economic nationalism in the neo-colonial economic structure of the Global South—Africa in particular—, highly dependent on the export of cheap commodities and raw materials—a turn whose result is a generalized impoverishment of the popular masses—, the increasingly devastating effects of climate change, and the hardening of imperialist interventionism creates the perfect context for mass migrations.

The observe of this process of proletarianization—and simultaneously one of its causes—is the multi-layered *class offensive* of the bourgeois capitalist class in the face of declining profitability (Ruiz, 2023; 2024). Economically, the latter entails an assault against the living conditions of the global working class. In conditions of stagnation, profits can only keep expanding at the expense of wages, understood as the share of total wealth that accrues to the working class (Clarke, 1994). In fact, in most Western countries the last decades have witnessed a constant reduction of the share of wages in the National Product, accompanied by the increasing precarization of labour, attacks on the Welfare State, and the massive enlargement of inequality. This is key to understand the growing class polarisation. But it also provides the clue to the *political* dimension of this offensive: an authoritarian turn that points beyond liberal democracy (Crouch, 2004, 2020; Robinson, 2020). In short, the capitalist state is adapting to a context of growing class polarization by becoming more authoritarian. This started from the 1970s onwards, as an attempt to further shield major economic and political decisions from any form of popular pressure (Ruiz, 2025), which required the dismantlement or deactivation of the most 'democratic' features of the post-war liberal state. The empowerment of the Executive dovetails with the strengthening of private corporations and political institutions that are structurally protected from mass pressures (i.e., Central Banks, the IMF, etc.), to which the rise of forms of 'economic constitutionalism' that further shield private property from even mild forms of political intervention (Bonefeld,

2017) should be added. The latter is accompanied by a massive expansion of the repressive capacities of the state, in what Robinson (2020) has called a global turn toward “The police state”. New repressive laws, regressive reforms of the Criminal Code (Wacquant, 1999, 2009; González, 2022; Jugo, 2025; Villegas, 2025), soaring police budgets, the militarization of policing and the transfer of new discretionary powers to police forces (Noucleous, 2021), the accompanying militarization of borders, and the expansion of new and more encompassing forms of surveillance are part of this tendency. Hal Draper neatly captured the logic underlying these phenomena:

> Whenever democratic forms become inconvenient for ruling-class hegemony, making the state institutions of the status quo precarious, there is a tendency for the ruling class to sanction a shift to more authoritarian and despotic forms. The film of bourgeois development unwinds in a reverse direction: the freedoms that the liberal bourgeoisie once demanded are cut back; popular institutions are doctored so as to interpose a maximum of impediments between the institutions and popular pressures from below. Democracy so-called becomes … more and more a complex of sifting-screens to filter out popular elements and substitute devices of control from above; until, finally, if the term democracy is retained at all, popular elements are redefined out of it, and it is converted into a technical term for an authoritarianism purporting to serve the people whether they wish to be served up or not (Draper, 1977: 311).

Capital’s crisis also underlies three other decisive tendencies of the present: the turn towards economic nationalism, the return of militarism, and increasing government intervention to sustain profits (Merchant, 2024). The logic of the latter has been present throughout the neoliberal era, but received an impulse after the 2008 crisis, when massive public bailouts were needed to rescue the financial system from complete breakdown. The same applies to the answer to the COVID-19 crisis and the expansive monetary policies of the last decade, both of which incurred into massive transfers of wealth to the financial oligarchy. In general terms, the growing role of the state in the economy is a further sign of the decline of capitalism, increasingly incapable of functioning through the mechanisms of the private market. Not that the market has ever been truly independent of state activities, as the most deluded liberals would have it. But the fact that states are responsible of 40 or 60% of the national product, as it is the case in contemporary Western countries, is an index of the diminishing dynamism of the private market (Merchant, 2024, 2025). In what is part and parcel of the offensive against the working classes, public resources and policies are nowadays increasingly

channeled to sustaining private profits. This is linked to the return of economic nationalism, which is equally a response to the crisis of the global market. The most powerful states see the contemporary economy as a zero-sum game wherein their national capitals must be aggressively protected and promoted at the expense of others (Merchant, 2024). Understandably, this recrudescent economic competition is expressed as increasing *military* competition, with military budgets soaring all over the world and the West embarking itself into a dynamic of renovated militarism which is nothing but the ground of its increasing imperialist bellicosity (Miasni, 2025), whilst also pointing to a future of mass conscriptions, welfare cuts, and new onslaughts against political rights, all enveloped in a rhetoric of 'national unity'.

The contemporary rise of the far-right should be understood within this frame. The material link between capitalist crisis, austerity policies designed to benefit the capitalist class at the expense of the social majority and the upsurge of fascism is well empirically established (Mattei, 2022; Galofré Vila, Meissner, McKee & Stuckler, 2017). Economic insecurity and rapid downward mobility push the middle classes towards radical nativist, neo-fascist alternatives which count with the backing of those sectors of the oligarchy that see in them an opportunity for expeditious anti-worker reforms. The implementation of a highly unpopular political, social, and economic agenda erodes the legitimacy of conservative, liberal, and social-democratic forces, cleaning the floor for the neo-fascist upsurge—which the oligarchy happily endorses once it proves to be the more workable path, as Trump's case and the recent honeymoon between Le Pen's RN and the French business class clearly prove (Godin, 2024; Merchant, 2025). To put it succinctly, the neo-fascist right is eventually seen as the most capable executioner of the oligarchic agenda of offensive to which all pro-capitalist forces submit in different ways. In fact, in the last few years the political center has shifted from a cosmopolitan, inclusive liberalism of sorts to a creed of national chauvinism and broader political reaction. The latter further erodes liberal democracies, threatening to turn their gradual descent to a more authoritarian framework into a full-blown, rapid slump towards a far-right open dictatorship (Nayar, 2023).

Finally, all the latter dovetails with the growing ecological crisis, in the form of increased global warming, the systematic destruction of ecosystems, and the upsurge in ecological catastrophes (fires, floods, droughts…). The ultimate source of this crisis is

an economic system which “develops only by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker” (Marx, 2013: 334). The subordination of social processes to the self-expansion of capital that is intrinsic to the capitalism mode of production makes the latter incapable of dealing with the ecological crisis, which calls for conscious planification at both a local and global scale (Gallardo, 2024). More damagingly, the contemporary crisis of profitability and the ensuing recrudescence of international competition rules out even mildly ambitious forms of ‘green policy’ within the capitalist framework (Smith, 2022; Merchant, 2023). Unwilling to incur even into minimal sacrifices, the global superpowers have systematically failed to meet their agreed ‘transitional’ goals, or simply refused to acknowledge them. Under these circumstances, a rapid transition away from fossil fuels is just utopian (Rodríguez, 2025), and every ‘green policy’ is dwarfed by its subordination to the profit motive and imperialist interests. The seemingly unavoidable outcome, *ceteris paribus*, is a catastrophic worsening of the ecological crisis in the following decades (Moore, 2015; Malm, 2016, 2025; Saito, 2017, 2023). Moreover, since capitalism’s ability to grant certain material comforts to the mass of wage-workers was predicated on unsustainable forms of plunder of natural resources— “cheap nature” (Moore, 2015) being an essential component of the cheap commodities that could partially counterbalance the limitations of wage growth—the exhaustion of those resources will only aggravate the process of proletarianisation (Rodríguez, 2022; 2025). The other side of this coin is the intensification of the imperialist struggle for resources, which fuels the escalating military bellicosity.

Anyone trying to understand these dynamics would find little help in post-Marxist theory. As we have been arguing throughout this work, ‘social weightlessness’ is just social *myopia:* an inability to conceptualize reality as it is. Deprived of the ground that Marxist theory used to provide, and divorced from materialist theorizing as such, the post-Marxist left proves incapable of explaining our current predicament.

‘The social’ in the modern sense has been inextricably tied to ‘the social question’: the problems associated with the situation of the working classes, the dispossessed majority under capitalist economies. Thus, the 2008 crisis and its long aftermath have fueled a *return of the social* which unveils the narratives of its disappearance as ideological phantasies. Class struggle remains the guiding principle of social development—as none

other than Warren Buffet acknowledged (D'Eramo, 2020)—, and the latter calls, as Marx understood, for class *analysis* and class *politics.*

This insight inevitably leads beyond post-Marxism. If an increasingly decadent capitalism is to be combatted, the Left needs to put the class struggle back in the core of its project and recover socialism as its horizon. Already in 1995, Eric Hobsbawm noted that the Left was haunted by a problem of agency (Hobsbawm, 1995). Expanding on that remark, Mike Davis (2018) forcefully argued that the key problem of the present from an emancipatory perspective is that of *proletarian agency*, understood as a unity of structural power, organizational capacity, and hegemonic politics. According to the Marxist logic exposed by Davis, the question of whether capitalism would bury humanity in a horizon of world wars and ecologic catastrophes, or it could be superseded by a superior system passes through the question of whether the currently existing proletariat could become again a mass social and political force carrying the project of a new society.

The period of mass protests that followed the 2008 crisis has failed to achieve significant popular gains. It was probably the most massive and global protest movement in human history, insurgent forces extending from New York to Lagos, and from Brazil to Yakarta (Bevins, 2023). However, it carried the strains of a long period of de-composition of class and revolutionary forces. It was organizationally weak and politically eclectic, mass movements often failing to coalesce into institutionally strong forces and the couple between political abstentionism and 'horizontality' rapidly giving way to the pro-capitalist political action and the bureaucratic top-down structures of left reformism (Bevins, 2023). It was also cross-class, and notoriously lead by sections of the impoverished middle classes which had yet failed to abandon their confidence in the path of gradual 'humanization' of capitalism through gaining positions within the capitalist state (Rodríguez, 2016). As such, it confronted a paradox: in an era of decaying capitalism, where the bourgeoisie is hegemonic in every corner of the world, democratic-bourgeois oppositional forces—that is, forces which fail to put forward a socialist alternative to the existing order, and thus face the need to find a compromise with the capitalist class—are doomed to see their expectations of systemic change collapse. This applies both to the Arab Spring, the Latin American 'pink wave' and left populist projects in the Western hemisphere (Aguiriano, 2025). Within that framework,

partial democratizations and progressive reforms *can* be achieved; oppressive regimes can be toppled. But full-blown structural change is inconceivable, insofar as they remain within the framework of the capitalist state and the capitalist economy, which are now hegemonic worldwide (there are no *feudal* states left that could be progressively substituted with a *bourgeois* state). More damagingly, even *minor* progressive changes are increasingly ruled out by a ruling class that knows that the system it administers is in decay and would not withstand a spiral of popular concessions (Piqueras, 2022; Smith, 2022; Rodríguez, 2025).

The shortcomings of the mass protest movements of the last decade are all too understandable approached from a historical perspective. But they gave a clear sign of the widespread need for an alternative to the existing order. However, it is also clear that any movement willing to respond to the challenges humanity is facing should do better. Could the mass protest movements of 2008-2020 be seen in analogy with those of the 1830s, wherein a still weak proletariat mostly failed to appear as an independent actor, yet it was in the process of becoming one (Maiello & Albamonte, 2024)? The growing popularity of the concept of socialism and the political forces which invoke it (no matter how misguidedly), the new wave of revolts and general strikes from Italy to India, and the still embryonic yet hopeful recomposition of “class struggle unionism” (Burns, 2022; Blanc, 2025) in countries like the US could be seen as indexes of an affirmative answer to the question.

No one could doubt that a renovated socialist worker’s movement would be different in many senses from that of the 1930s. But the latter was also very different from that of the 1860s. In our current scenario, the unity between de-industrialisation, understood as the diminishing role of industry in the global product and the reduction of the weight of the industrial workforce *vis a vis* the body of wage workers (Benavav, 2020), and the global segmentation of industrial production has demoted the quantitative and qualitative powers of the industrial working class, whilst the third sector remains hostile to mass organization (Clare Roberts, 2025). It is hard to doubt, for instance, that in such context the link between organization at the level of the workplace and territorial organization would have to be established in ways that are different from those of the 1950s (Macnair, 2008). The latter is only one prominent example amongst the many obstacles such process would have to face, which also include thorny issues like the

integration of labour bureaucracies and social provision in the state, which imposes strong handicaps on proletarian self-organisation. However, obstacles should not be confused with unsurmountable barriers: the workers movement was born in Europe in a context where small companies were dominant, repression ubiquitous, and means of communication scarce. Narratives of the 'end of the working class' and its attempted substitution with amorphous notions like 'the multitude' or 'the people' unilaterally cling to a false, ahistorical identification of the worker's movement with its Fordist shape whilst promoting illusory alternatives. As Mike Davis argues,

> Imprudent coronations of abstractions like "the multitude" as historical subjects simply dramatize a poverty of empirical research. Contemporary Marxism must be able to scan the future from the simultaneous perspectives of Shenzhen, Los Angeles, and Lagos if it wants to solve the puzzle of how heterodox social categories might be fitted together in a single resistance to capitalism (2018: 21).

Thus, we are confronted again with the question of proletarian agency, departing from a position of weakness which is nonetheless fused with two interrelated convictions: that the contemporary dynamics of a declining capitalism would furnish the objective conditions for the emergence of new forms of proletarian class politics (1), that the latter would be the only way to construe an alternative to an increasingly barbaric capitalist mode of production (2). In other words, the contemporary 'polycrisis' ensures that the number of people with an objective interest in overcoming capitalism will grow, enhancing the possibilities of achieving the 'merger of socialism and the worker's movement', i.e., reconstruing a socialist class movement on an international scale.

3. *The merger of socialism and the worker's movement*

Such reconstruction requires certain objective preconditions, but also political and ideological clarity. Again, this is something that cannot be found in the realm of post-Marxist theory. Agamben's politics of impotentiality can barely be seen as an actual form of politics, being intrinsically refractory to organization, strategy, and tactics. As such, they yield an individualistic and otherworldly framework which promotes nothing but abstract refusals and messianic hopes that can barely disguise their religious scent. On the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe's left populism is fatally undermined by its lack of class perspectives and its implicit acceptance of the capitalist state and economy as

an unsurpassable horizon. Finally, Badiou's politics reproduce a one-sided fixation on mass upheavals that is structurally uncapable of providing an answer to the need for slow and patient organizational construction.

Something similar can be applied to other post-Marxist theorists. As Terry Eagleton (1999) poignantly argued, Derrida's Marxism without classes, parties and revolution boils down to gesturing towards a salvific alterity that he capriciously linked to the name—or, more precisely, the 'ghost'—of Marx. Ray Brassier (2022) has convincingly shown how Deleuze and Guattari's substitution of the Marxian critique of political economy with a metaphysics of flows unwittingly naturalizes capitalism, turns the bourgeoisie into the sole authentic revolutionary class, and substitutes class antagonism between capitalists and proletarians with the ontological scission between social and desiring machines, furnishing an 'schizoid' anarchistic politics that inherits all the problems of the latter with few of its virtues. *Mutatis mutandis*, authors like Mackenzie Warke (2017), Simon Tomey (2017), and Santiago Castro Gómez (2017) have argued that Zizek's theoretical positions are strictly un-Marxist, and that his politics combines a staunch pessimism, which commends to the Left to find a compromise with liberals, with empty appeals to class struggle or revolution, concepts he deprives of any determinate meaning. In sum, post-Marxism oscillates between accommodation with the existing order and vague, almost transcendent revolutionism, all the latter grounded in a theoretical bedrock which blocks a proper understanding of historical dynamics.

Thus, both a new theoretical base and a new strategic orientation are needed. Throughout this work, I have presented a case for why Marxism provides a plausible response to this need. I have also tried to show how both the classless perspective of the post-Marxists and their swing between political abstentionism and reformist politics yield incoherent and unworkable strategic results. Finally, I have argued that the strategy of classical Marxism provides a plausible answer to the contemporary dilemmas of emancipatory politics.

My argument, however, has been mounted in very general terms because these are appropriate to general strategic questions. First and foremost, I have argued for the need for *independent working-class political action*—the political cornerstone of Marxism and all the three workers' Internationals. In criticizing Badiou and Agamben's

fetishization of direct action—or direct *inaction*, in Agamben's case—I have tried to demonstrate that revolutionary change requires the patient construction of a movement with a party in its center, capable of proposing a concrete programme for systemic change, accumulating forces around the latter in non-revolutionary times, and seizing the opportunity where the possibility of gaining power is on the table. Three interrelated theoretical points ground this necessity. The first one is that class struggle takes political forms—as a struggle for power or the possession of the general means of coercion—, and politics are conducted by parties. The second one is that any revolutionary movement must coalesce around a *center of authority* alternative to that of the existing state, and thus capable of substituting the latter in times of revolutionary crisis ('alternative' because it is built around a political programme and a set of principles, both political and practical, that are opposed to, and incompatible with, the form of order represented by the capitalist state). The third one is that such center of authority must be construed and conquer the support of the working class during non-revolutionary times. Otherwise, when a revolutionary crisis arrives it would simply lack the authority to contest for power (Volodia, 2025a). The experience of revolutionary movements over the last two centuries provides ample evidence for these claims (Macnair, 2008). On the contrary, the pervasive anti-partyism that many authors interiorized as a response to the bankruptcy of 20th century socialism constitutes a dead-end, since it throws the baby of revolutionary political action along with the bathwater of bureaucratism. In other words, these authors ended up siding with Marx's anarchistic opponents whilst failing to construe a convincing answer to Marx's criticisms of them and the mounting historical evidence of the pitfalls of direct-actionism and anti-political strategic orientations. Theirs is a project of impatience that bets everything on an abstract idea of radical change whilst failing to work through the prerequisites of *real* radical change. Its reverse is the inability to offer a concrete alternative to the existing order.

Mutatis mutandis, in criticizing Laclau and Mouffe's call for class-collaborationist, reformist political action I have tried to demonstrate the need for class-based, revolutionary socialist parties. As argued in the second chapter, a class-based independent party is not one that is solely composed of the members of one class. Class politics is not about sociological isolationism. A working-class party in the Marxist sense is simply a party whose members are disciplined around a project that represents

the independent interests of the working class, serving as a tool for its self-emancipation. Moreover, it is construed around the idea whereby the emancipation of the working class yields the emancipation of humanity from class divisions and all the forms of oppression that derive from it. As such, it eschews 'economism' as a matter of principle. Laclau and Mouffe rightly castigate this kind of worker-corporatist politics, but they err in identifying the latter with Marxism, and substituting the politics of class independence, which fuses the self-emancipation of the proletariat with that of all the oppressed, with those of class-collaboration.

The problem with the kind of class-collaborationist politics that Laclau and Mouffe advocate is that it is built around *contradictory*—and not simply heterogenous—interests. The Marxist politics of 'hegemony' contemplates *partial* alliances with other classes, without compromising the emancipatory goals of the proletariat; on the contrary, the reformist politics of class collaboration is based on *substantial* alliances. As a result, it can only give itself a concrete programme by downplaying the interests of some of its components, in a move that inevitably benefits those sectors whose interests are more aligned with the existing order, i.e., property owners. The reason for that is simple: the most privileged sectors of the 'popular' coalition will refuse to join unless their privileges are secured, whilst securing them requires moderating the demands and ambitions of the non-privileged groups, i.e., circumscribing them to the existing order. Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe's explicit commitment to political liberalism entails that the projects they favor are condemned to remain confined with the limits set by the *capitalist* class. In other words, this kind of political project is enclosed in the role of the most radical wing of the existing political consensus, rather than proposing an alternative to the latter. Trapped within the limits of the capitalist state and economy in an era of decay, it does not only fail to offer a possibility of systemic change: it also generally fails to pull significant reforms from the ruling class. Within that framework, the systemic roots of oppression and exploitation inevitably remain untouched, and even their alleviation is complicated by the loyalty of the project to the capitalist order.

The previous chapters have been guided by the assumption whereby human emancipation is incompatible with the capitalist political and economic order. Once linked to the previous points on partyism, this grounds the need for a *revolutionary socialist* party. Revolutionary, because it intends to overthrow the existing political and

economic order, whose essential features are unreformable. Socialist, because it understands the latter as a means to transitioning from capitalism towards a classless society of freely associated producers, where humans could consciously regulate their metabolism with nature.

My vindication of internationalism has received a less extensive treatment, mostly because amongst the authors I analyzed only Laclau and Mouffe's politics can be said to be tainted by nationalism. On the contrary, both Badiou and Agamben are, although in different ways, staunch universalists. In fact, the main criticism that could be raised against them in this regard is to do with the abstractness of their universalism, which even in Badiou's case is only tangentially tied to a particular class, and which is generally too abstract to properly account for national particularities—as any concrete internationalist politics should be able to do.

The level of abstraction of my argument forbids attempts to provide concrete answers to some of the most burning dilemmas that any contemporary Marxist politics would have to face. How to build a revolutionary party in non-revolutionary times? How exactly could that party accumulate the forces it would need? How exactly could the broader worker's movement be rebuilt and reorganized given the current class composition? How could a worker's international be founded again? What should be the concrete shape of a transitional, post-revolutionary state? How could economic planning be established on a global scale? How to assure universal well-being whilst forcefully addressing the ecological crisis? These crucial questions and many others lie beyond the scope of this work.

There is, however, a point that is implicit in my argument that has immediate political implications. I have repeatedly argued for the necessity of class *politics*; something which, in the absence of working-class mass parties, translates into the need for party-building. I see this as an ineludible part of the (re)construction of a broader independent class movement, not as an appendix that should be added at some distant point in the future. Thus, the political side of my argument entails a rejection of the kind of perspective put forward by the Communist Caucus of the DSA (2020), whereby the main—and almost *sole*—task of contemporary socialists lies in reinvigorating non-partyist forms of organization like unions, assemblies, community centers, etc. This is a

crucial task, no doubt. But I fully agree with Mike Macnair (2020, see also Wagner, Eger & Hamann, 2023) in that:

> Without the commitments to independent class politics and socialism, meaning the overthrow of the capitalist class regime, the process of actually rebuilding the workers' movement at the base cannot begin […] The movement has to be built under capitalism, not just by a succession of street protests and strikes; but *in antagonism to* the capitalist state, the capitalist parties and the capitalist media. And that means that the movement needs at its core a party which constantly challenges and seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the constitutional order, and which poses the alternative of socialism (Macnair, 2020).

The contemporary Left is in the process of finding an alternative to the pitfalls of both direct actionist horizontalism and left populism. Like the recent 'boom' in Marxist theorising shows, it is also looking for a theoretical alternative to Post-Modernism, Post-structuralism, and post-Marxism that also supersedes the limits of bourgeois social theory. Both currents are fused in an increasing attention to class issues, the concept of socialism and the history of the socialist workers movement. This is a highly promising development, and this work would like to place itself within this tendency. As part of the latter, I would like to argue for the need of recovering Marxism both theoretically and politically, i.e., as a call for independent working-class political action. But Marxism should be cleansed of its sectarian and bureaucratic deformations, recovering its scientific and critical spirit.

This work strongly rejects the complacent narrative whereby it was post-Modernism, post-Marxism or any other theoretical current what brought about the 'crisis of Marxism'. The truth is that Marxism's own degeneration was largely responsible of that crisis (Haider, 2022). It was neither Negri not Agamben who disarmed Italian partisans, swore loyalty to the bourgeois republic, tried to create a coalition with the oligarchic and corrupt Christian Democracy and later dissolved itself: it was the Italian Communist Party. Badiou was not the Defence Minister when the colonial war against the Vietnamese national liberation started, neither was he the one who disarmed French workers, disbanded revolutionary committees, turned 'One State, one Army, One Policy' into his motto and decide that the only struggle the workers should engage in was the struggle for producing more for the sake of French capitalist economy: members of the French Communist Party did. Derrida did not liquidate the Old

Bolshevik guard, nor did Deleuze govern over a bureaucratic police state: those dubious feats are on Stalin's record. Mao, not Zizek or Laclau, crushed the Shangai Commune. These are just a few examples extracted from the tragic development of Marxism politics during the last century. It incorporated an increasing collusion with nationalism, class-collaboration, and despotism. The Third International collapsed politically (Claudín, 1977), as did the Second, although its collapse was briefly depicted as a victory. The spirit of the same 'State Socialism' which Marx had criticized so harshly for substituting the self-emancipation of the working classes by the benefits of bureaucratic management eventually poisoned the spirit of 'official communism'.

However, we should be cautious not to throw the baby with the bathwater, reducing the complex and often heroic history of 20th century socialism to a one-sided picture of bankruptcy. Totalizing negativism is not the negation of unbridled positivity, just its reverse—sharing all its one-sidedness. Not only did socialist revolutions overthrow deeply oppressive regimes. As a world-historical force, 20th century socialism can be credited with wiping the *Ancien Regime* out of history, defeating the fascist monster, fueling the death of the colonial order, forcing capitalism to reform, and granting food, shelter, education, and health care to vast masses than had never heard of some of the latter. Despite its undoubtable distortions, under socialist regimes unemployment was virtually eliminated, impressive scientific breakthroughs were made, and minimal levels of welfare were extended to billions. Deep imbalances in terms of power existed, and the proletariat was definitely not in charge of the state, yet no other modern regime has witnessed such levels of egalitarianism. That this was accomplished departing from conditions of profound economic underdevelopment is an index of the potentials of economic planning and the socialist project more generally. Finally, our contemporary predicament leaves clear something that bourgeois ideologists desperately tried to hide (Nayar, 2023): that socialism was largely responsible of the political and economic rights that the working classes of the capitalist countries achieved during the 20th century (Albuquerque, 2015; Rassmussen & Knutsen, 2022; Nayar, 2023). Left reformists parasitized revolutionary movements by using the fear caused by them to show the ruling class that their path of compromise was preferable. As the last decades largely prove, once this threat disappears, the ability of the reformists to extract concessions vanishes too, amidst a generalized 'rollback' of those political and economic rights.

But it remains a fact that during the 20th century socialism developed structural flaws which notoriously distance it from its original emancipatory spirit. And we are not discussing a 'spirit' in the abstract, but certain traits that can be theoretically proven as key to any process of universal emancipation—such as the 'Commune' form of the state, i.e., the democratic nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the rule of the working majority (Aguiriano, 2025). When observed in retrospect, 'really existing socialism' eventually appears as a detour leading to the reassertion of private market capitalism. If socialism is to have a future, its rational, emancipatory shell must be freed from the oppressive kernel of 'State socialism' and the petty miseries of sectarianism.

In sum, widespread suspicion towards concepts like 'The Party', 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' or even 'socialism' is largely understandable given the meaning that those concepts eventually took, and even more so given the willingness of some contemporary self-avowed Marxists to reproduce old errors whilst enshrining them as the greater of feats. But suspicion should not block rational assessment, which can prove that in their original meaning, those concepts remain necessary for a genuine emancipatory project. Political action requires a party, and those who are unwilling to come to terms with this fact are forced to oscillate between the impotence of 'movementism' and tailing another political force. *Mutatis mutandis*, transforming the economic basis of society requires taking political power, i.e., the generalized means of coercion, away from the hands of the capitalist class, placing it in those of the working majority. The idea whereby the state, along with money, the wage, and other capitalist mediations could be abolished at one stroke is utopian and has dire consequences. The idea that the rule of the proletariat is to be substituted by the rule of the bureaucracy is nothing but its equally one-sided reverse. Finally, socialism, understood as the collective appropriation of the means of production, remains necessary if humanity is to free itself from the yoke of class divisions, exploitation, and the capitalist tendency to turn productive forces into destructive ones. A return to small-scale production, tied to a redistribution of property rather than its socialization, remains a utopian dream that would inevitably re-assert class domination whilst being unable to address climate change and other pressing issues that call for forms of centralized planning on a global scale.

These basic points could provide the fulcrum for a reconstitution of Marxist emancipatory politics. Such process would require vast amounts of energy and intelligence, and also adequate objective preconditions. It also demands coming to terms, equipped with a critical, scientific spirit, with the virtues and flaws of the Three Internationals and the whole history of the socialism movement. The theoretical and practical dimension of this process constitute a dynamic unity, one whose first steps we are hopefully witnessing amid our otherwise terrifying historical predicament.

Chapter 8

Conclusion: The Adventure of Orthodoxy

I.

In a colorful little essay from 1908, G.K. Chesterton gave a dialectical twist to the standard view on ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heterodoxy’. Popular knowledge tends to depict orthodoxy as rigid, leaden, and dogmatic, i.e., a figure of unfreedom and conservatism. On the contrary, heterodoxy is seen as free, audacious, and exciting, i.e., a figure of revolution and progress. But, Chesterton argues, a closer look at the issue yields the opposite picture. Once placed under examination, the virtues of heterodoxy are unveiled as a mere appearance. What seemed audacious is revealed to be trivial, insofar as the abandonment of a path poses no intrinsic difficulty and remains possible at any point. In fact, the complexity of the latter pales in comparison to its contrary: the challenge of firmly pursuing a path, no matter how hard it becomes and how adverse the circumstances. This is the subversive core of orthodoxy.

It might be surprising that only a few years earlier Lenin, who had no truck with religiousness of any kind, deployed a similar argument in his polemics with revisionism. Lenin allegorically represents Marxist politics as a tortuous path with ‘a marsh’ on its side. The marsh, fetid as it might be, possesses a certain attractiveness since it symbolizes the comfort of giving up on a difficult task. It is populated by those who have refused to take the path of struggle, whose siren songs calling for conciliation tempt those in the path at every step. In his words,

We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire. We have combined, by a freely adopted decision, for the purpose of

fighting the enemy, and not of retreating into the neighbouring marsh, the inhabitants of which, from the very outset, have reproached us with having separated ourselves into an exclusive group and with having chosen the path of struggle instead of the path of conciliation (1988: 54).

Lenin is taking issue with those who were justifying their betrayal of revolutionary politics in the name of their 'freedom of criticism'. His argument is also dialectical in the sense that it implodes the facile dualism between the 'unfreedom' of orthodoxy and the 'freedom' of revisionism. Once examined rigorously, what the revisionist depicts as a sign of unfreedom is an embodiment of the freedom of associating with others for a shared goal. The revisionists, on the contrary, posit a 'boundless' freedom that renders the latter meaningless by detaching it from the observance of *freely adopted* norms and compromises. Their position was ridden by a self-defeating contradiction: they were arguing, in the name of freedom, for their right to remain in the organization whilst departing from the norms and goals around which the latter was freely constituted.

Nowadays, the concept of orthodoxy has even a worse reputation that in the early 20th century. The contemporary intellectual landscape idolizes the superficial adventurousness of heterodoxy causticized by Chesterton as much as it celebrates the self-defeating 'freedom' of the revisionists criticized by Lenin. From that perspective, my argument could probably look too orthodox, i.e., dogmatic, leaden, and old-fashioned. Seen under that light, calling for a return to Marxism seems an index of intellectual conformity that leaves much to be desired when compared with the exciting post-Marxist invitation to construe an entirely new theory and politics. However, I have tried to show that the post-Marxist infatuation with novelty is just a rhetorical envelope for the reproduction of old errors. In fact, their departure from Marxism is marked by similar vices to the ones that both Chesterton and Lenin found in the champions of heterodoxy. First, it is not grounded in a rigorous assessment of Marxism as such, neither theoretically nor politically, confirming Chesterton's insight on the triviality of abandoning a path: it does not even require to properly assess where it leads to. Second, it does not yield a workable alternative to the latter. In fact, it can be said to constitute as much of a dead end as Lenin's 'marsh'.

By building a Marxist critique of post-Marxism I have hopefully demonstrated that the path of orthodoxy is superior, and the adventure of orthodoxy more promising, than

dwelling on the post-Marxist ‘marsh’. First, I have systematically argued for the theoretical superiority of Marxism over post-Marxism by demonstrating how the starting point of ‘ontology’ is a mystification, whilst Marxian materialism retains its capacity of grasping reality as part of the process of changing it. Second, I have extensively argued for the political superiority of Marxism the alternative approached favored by his opponents, i.e., anarchism and left reformism.

My defence of Marxist orthodoxy, however, has no truck with dogmatism. Unlike Chesterton, Lenin vindicated Marxism because he took it to be a genuine scientific breakthrough, not a theological revelation. I take Marxism to be inestimable because it offers the best means I have found, but politically and theoretically, to approach reality from an emancipatory perspective. If the etiquette ‘Marxism’ is valuable is not essentially because of its link to a particular individual, brilliant as Marx was, but because it serves to designate an emancipatory theory and political orientation that has guided the most massive revolutionary movement the world has ever seen. In fact, the label ‘scientific socialism’, now largely seen as anachronistic, can be said to be the genuinely precise one. It captures the critical and impersonal nature of a project that should eschew doctrinarism on principle. As ‘the theory and practice of proletarian revolution’, Marxism is essentially a guide to revolutionary action. Throughout this work, I have tried to show the superiority of this approach through a sustained polemic with post-Marxist authors. One of its implications of my argument is that not only the content, but also the *form* of post-Marxist theorising should be superseded. Against the individual, subjective doctrines which derive from the latter, we should recover ‘science’ as an impersonal project that yields results than can be universally grasped, criticized, and tested in practice. Blaming post-Marxism of the current weakness of emancipatory forces would be the kind of idealistic take that Marxist theorizing disavows. Revolutionary potentialities lie in the masses and the development of the mode of production that constitutes them, not in isolated intellectuals or abstract ideas. But it follows that only a theory that illuminates the conditions and goals of the masses’ struggle against exploitation and oppression deserves to be called a *revolutionary* theory.

If I had to explain the practical purpose to which this thesis would like to contribute, I would summarize it in a simple message: the contemporary Left should definitely abandon post-Marxism and return to the tortuous path described by Lenin: the path of socialist politics, that of Marxism and the class struggle.

But, paraphrasing Marx, we could say that a thesis only preserves its rigor when it is conscious of its limits. I have not, for one thing, *systematically* argued for the superiority of Marxism over every form of 'bourgeois' theory. Others have done so in ways that I find persuasive (see especially Clarke, 1982), and scattered arguments that could contribute to justifying that thesis can be found in the previous chapters, but such task remains beyond the scope of this work. Thus, I assume that some readers could accept my arguments against 'ontology' and the superiority of Marxism over post-Marxism whilst nonetheless refusing to endorse the Marxist alternative I tried to put forward. Responding to each of the theoretical and practical challenges that have been posed to Marxism during the last two centuries—both 'from the outside' and, often more damagingly, *from the inside*—is a herculean task that this work did not intend to accomplish. This, in other words, is a limitation I see as unavoidable given the nature of this project. Moreover, I have also approached Marxist theory at a high level of abstraction, necessarily leaving aside many important theoretical debates that are internal to it. I do not pretend to have a comprehensive solution to all the dilemmas of Marxist theory, nor a worked-out position for all its internal debates. However, I believe that this is secondary for the purposes of this thesis, which is solely concerned, on its theoretical dimension, with establishing the general superiority of the Marxist engagement with determinate reality over the post-Marxist engagement with philosophical abstraction. Something similar can be said of my approach to Marxist politics, where my argument has moved in a very general level. The reason is that I believe that this was the level appropriate for the strategic polemics with post-Marxism. As noted in the last chapter, however, I have also left aside many burning issues that haunt contemporary Marxist politics. Again, I do not pretend to have a clear-cut solution for each of them, nor do I think this is necessary to establish the general superiority of Marxist politics, from an emancipatory perspective, over anarchism and social democracy. On the other hand, I have tried to demonstrate why my most general points, both theoretical and political, apply to all post-Marxist authors. However, a full-

blown criticism of Zizek, Derrida or Negri should contain at least the level of detail that can be found in the critiques of Agamben, Laclau and Mouffe, and Alain Badiou. Finally, my analysis of our present historical conjuncture and its tendencies has been highly synthetic, trying to capture in only a few pages issues that would merit tons of ink. However, in my view even this brief exposition contrasts positively with the ominous incapability of post-Marxist thinkers to provide a minimally detailed and theoretically robust account of the present. Thus, despite its limitations, it can be seen as an index of what a Marxist approach could provide if pursued systematically.

In sum, I know that I leave many important questions unanswered, but I think that we would have a better chance of answering them both theoretically and practically if new generations of militants consign post-Marxism to the dustbin of history and decide to follow this path. After all, as Lenin clarifies, the only way of pursuing it is by holding each other's hand.

II.

My assessment of post-Marxism has been overwhelmingly negative. I have tried to demonstrate why the shift from 1) the tradition of 'scientific socialism' towards post-Heideggerian ontology and 2) Marxist politics towards a barely renovated version of the politics of some of his adversaries should be considered a mistake pure and simple, leading to both theoretical and political incoherence. None of the latter means that nothing positive could be said of the contributions of the authors I have analyzed. Most post-Marxist thinkers have at least preserved, in however distorted or misguided a form, a commitment to emancipation and a certain critical spirit which contrasts positively with the myopic liberal triumphalism or the reactionary fixations of many of their contemporaries. It goes without saying that they are all talented and possess ample erudition. More importantly, they all worked in a historical period where great emancipatory change seemed distant at best, if not almost impossible. Their theorizing carries, both in form and content, the strains of such epochal obstacles. I have tried to argue, however, that the rational core of their emancipatory commitments should be rescued from the mystical shell of post-Heideggerian ontology and anarchistic/reformist politics if it is to have a purchase on reality.

A familiar pattern can be found in the work of each of the theorists we have analyzed. The hypostatization of 'Being' and its construction as a 'groundless ground'— 'Pure negativity', 'the Void', etc.—is the starting point around which an intricate philosophical system is built. This is a move whose origins I traced in Heidegger's philosophical intervention, which intended to restore philosophy to its lost centrality. In turn, this point of departure grounds their criticisms of Marxism and other theories that are allegedly blind to 'the ontological difference', including the post-political predicament of contemporary liberalism that they all see as pernicious. At the same time, it also grounds their perspectives on political change, which is construed as having 'Being' as its ultimate source. Their different accounts of 'Being' reflect their divergent political orientations. Badiou's doublet of the Void and the Event intends to ground the possibility of world-shattering change, providing a philosophical base for his revolutionary ambitions. On the contrary, Laclau and Mouffe's ineliminable 'Antagonism' is designed to justify their reformist politics of gradual change, built around the assumption whereby anything more radical would be fatally 'totalitarian'. Finally, Agamben's Being as 'rhythm' dovetails with his messianic politics of refusal and worklessness. However, in each case the basis of society is located beyond society itself, and the possibilities for political change are grounded in something that transcends social determinations. Once placed under examination, this 'beyond' is unveiled as an empty product of thought, which condemns systems built around the latter—the 'ontological difference'—to an inability to ground their claims, and inevitably produces a blindness towards material reality that facilitates the adoption of misguided political projects and, simultaneously, blocks the development of rigorous ones. Its starting point is thus an inversion that furnishes mystified results, since the refusal to account for the material conditions of agency necessarily yields a voluntaristic, abstract picture of the latter. This is the crux of post-Heideggerian ontology, and the basic reason why it should be abandoned.

I have argued that the Marxist tradition provides a positive alternative to the latter. Marx's key insight has been sardonically summarized by Peter A. Neel in the simple dictum "We live in a Society" (2025: 29). In some sense, Marxism could be seen as an attempt of drawing all the implications of this simple notion. Applied to our context, it should read: *We live in a class society, whose name is capitalism, and which could be*

superseded in a classless society whose name is communism. We have examined how from his early years onwards, Marx understood that philosophy in its abstract form had to be superseded into science, i.e., actual knowledge. Thought does not have to negotiate its grip on actuality before analyzing it, nor must it lose time reflecting about 'pure Being', since the latter is essentially nothing. It does not have any pre-determined object either since any object could fall under its view. Thus, thought can simply reproduce concrete reality, understood as a unity of many determinations, integrating as part of the same move second-order questions about the nature of knowledge and first-order questions about the features of its objects. Marx became a materialist not by idolizing 'matter', but by understanding that the key to genuine knowledge lied in analyzing the *real* activity of *real* beings. When analyzing *human* reality, this entails departing from the analysis of how social practices unfold within the natural world, shape it, and transform themselves, i.e., history. The basis of society, or human practice, should not be found beyond society itself, but in its basic forms of organisation. As material beings, the most decisive form of practice in which we engage is that which guarantees our material reproduction, which Marx called our "metabolism". Our subjectivity, embodied existence and agency, is marked by its social and *productive* character: we produce ourselves by reproducing our material lives in different ways through our relationships with others. Every form of human activity, from architecture to art, is ultimately dependent on this (re)productive activity and the different shapes it takes during history. Whenever this activity is organized around the basic relationship between an exploited group and an exploitative one, we are facing a class society. The conflict of interests between these groups is then inscribed in the dynamics that shape the transition from one form of production to another.

This set of assumptions provide the fulcrum for a fully-fledged theory of the historical reality we face (the capitalist mode of production), one that accounts for the dynamic relationship between the social forms and material contents that determine human practice. As part of the same move, the latter can provide concrete answers to the questions of whether reality could be changed, and how—the historical transience of capitalism—, thus being at the same time a *theory of revolution*. It supersedes philosophical ruminations on 'possibility' in the abstract to focus on *real* possibilities; inscribed within an actuality that can and should be known. By establishing the real

historical possibility of socialism as the only way in which capitalism could be superseded into a higher form of social organization and grasping the proletariat as the agent of such transformation, the project of emancipation is finally placed on a firm ground.

This summary of the basics of Marxism is admittedly synthetic—and arguably simplistic—, yet it serves to capture what it makes it superior to 'ontological' approaches. The latter, it could be said, are built on a structural dismissal of the basic fact whereby 'we live in a society'. Not that they deny it, but they see it as derivative, secondary when compared with a more fundamental dimension: Being as such—a move whose rational unsoundness we have repeatedly demonstrated. The truth is that emancipatory projects should be grounded *historically*, not metaphysically. 'Ontological' approaches reproduce a topsy-turvy world: one where pure mental constructs take precedence over determinate being. In so doing, they retrace Marx's steps, regressing from science towards abstract philosophy. In fact, given their inability for self-justification, I have concluded that post-Heideggerian ontologies should be seen as *ideology*. Obscuring reality is part of their concept.

Against both Laclau and Mouffe's left reformism and Badiou and Agamben's variants of anarchism, I have argued for the need to retrieve the basics of Marx's revolutionary politics. The later entails recovering *class* politics, i.e., a politics of the class struggle, built around the consciousness of the antagonism of interest between classes, and the coincidence between the self-emancipation of the proletariat and the emancipation of humanity. But recovering class *politics* implies construing class *parties*. As Marx himself argued:

> Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power, i.e., the political power of the ruling classes, it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against and a hostile attitude towards the policy of the ruling classes. Otherwise, it will remain a plaything in their hands (Marx, 1871, para. 19).

My previous vindication of 'orthodoxy' should also be read as a call for recovering some basics of Marxism that have been distorted, sometimes fatally, by the self-

avowedly Marxist tradition. Although intra-Marxist polemics are largely foreign to this work, my defence of Marxism is nonetheless tied to the vindication of some points that were largely perverted during the last century. First, parties should not be confused with *sects*, each claiming to be the sole bearer of truth amidst isolation. A Party is built around a political programme, not around closed individual doctrines—be it Trotsky's, Bordiga's, etc. It should be centralized, disciplined, and as democratic as the political conditions allow, not the private property of a self-reproducing apparatus. Second, revolutionary parties do not intend to rule the capitalist state, which entails subordination to capital, but to replace it, as bureaucratic-military apparatus standing over society, with the self-government of the working masses. Third, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is the democratic rule of the proletarian majority, to which the state should be subordinated, not a bureaucratic police regime standing over workers. In sum, the version of Marxist politics I defend, which I take to be faithful to classical Marxism, rejects the 'rightist' currents which advocates alliances with their national bourgeoisie and identifies socialism with bureaucratic rule, thus failing to remain true to the project of the self-emancipation of the working class. I have argued that this project should be seen as a variant of the line defended by the State Socialists and Eduard Bernstein. On the other hand, my approach also rejects (ultra)leftist versions of 'Marxism' which despise or downplay political action and the hard labour of gaining a majority due to their one-sided focus on direct action. In this case, we are dealing with a variation of Bakunin's politics, sharing all his errors.

The past weights as a nightmare on the brain of the living Marxists. We are heirs of crushing defeats, some of them insidiously disguised as victories. We are haunted by the myths that our very tradition construe; myths which still pose decisive obstacles to a coherent assessment of the later. We are not only divided by substantive theoretical and political disagreements, which is natural, but also by sectarian infighting, useless dogmas, and irrational emotional attachments. The scientific spirit of Marx and his real politics are in fact largely foreign to a lot of what nowadays disguises as Marxism. But there is hope, too. It is embodied in the large number of comrades, from Los Angeles to Lagos, that remain 'vanguard fighters' of the working class. It can be traced in the growing interest of the coming generations for socialism, and in all the worldwide

examples of resistance, and organization which prove that the proletariat will not give up the fight.

III.

My criticisms of the theories of Laclau, Mouffe, Agamben and Badiou can be *analytically* separated from the criticisms of their politics, because, as I have also shown, politics that are essentially identical to theirs could be grounded on a different conceptual base. Bakunin, for instance, built a politics that is substantively like Badiou's on an uneasy mixture of Left Hegelianism, bits of Marx's critique of Political Economy, and romanticism. Bernstein construed his, whose underlying identity with Laclau and Mouffe we have demonstrated, on a combination of philosophical Kantianism with elements of Political Economy. More examples could be offered. Someone as down to earth as Erik Olin Wright, that would surely have had little patience for Political Ontology, did argue for Left Populism. In sum, my political and theoretical criticisms can be to some extent seen as mutually independent, in the sense that my criticism of Left Populism, Anarchism, etc., stands of falls on its own, and the same applies to my theoretical critique of Political Ontology. However, the possibility of establishing this analytical separation should not obscure two important points. First, the theoretical and political dimensions *of my own argument* cannot be separated in the same way, since trying to ground politics on a robust theory belongs to the essence of the alternative to Post-Marxism I tried to flesh out. This is linked to the level of generality of my argument: important theoretical divergences can emerge within the field of Marxism but abandoning the most general theses I have put forward—on the centrality of class struggle, the nature of the capitalist state, the need for political action, etc.—would inevitably mean abandoning Marxism *as such*. Second, the political orientations of the post-Marxists could be based on a different theory, but their attempt at grounding them in their 'ontological' systems is particularly damaging, since it makes them blind to their deficiencies. Within the sociologically minded framework of someone like Erik Olin Wright, analyzing the historical-material shortcomings of Left Populism would be generally feasible. But the same cannot be said of Laclau and Mouffe (or Agamben and Badiou, regarding their own politics). On the contrary, their 'ontological' approach to politics makes them structurally blind to those limitations.

IV.

On the other hand, I have also tried to provide a unitary criticism of the theorists I analyzed whilst being mindful to their *differences*—differences that entail divergent assessments. For instance, Laclau and Mouffe's focus on real politics contrasts positively with the otherworldliness of Agamben's approach and the one-sidedness of Badiou's. On the other hand, Badiou's radicality is accompanied by a valuable refusal to reconcile with oppressive narratives and institutions to whose ideological self-legitimating discourse Laclau and Mouffe largely succumbed. Despite its insufficiencies, his defence of 'communism' has thrown some fresh air to a context marked by the There Is No Alternative dogma which underlies "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2017). Thus, it could be said that the Laclau & Mouffe / Badiou doublet represents an antinomy. Laclau and Mouffe possess a 'realistic' mindset that is absent in Badiou, yet their 'realism' becomes highly unrealistic due to their theoretical-political commitments. Alternatively, Badiou possesses a revolutionary will that is missing in Laclau and Mouffe, yet his revolutionism is emptied of determinate content due to his basic theoretical and political assumptions. Marx and Engels's 'revolutionary realpolitik' (Bebel, 1928: 64; Rosenberg, 1939) can be seen as a way out of this antinomy, incorporating what its best of each whilst avoiding their main deficiencies.

Fewer virtues can be found in Agamben's approach. As the most resolute 'ontologist' of the four, the one that never abandons the ontological register, he is also the most mystical and otherworldly. For the same reason, he is also the most *reactionary* of the authors we have examined, sharing Heidegger's longing for a lost past marked by an 'authentic' relationship with Being. The fact that he substitutes Heidegger's 'blood and soil' fixations with a slightly more palatable focus on the monastic harmony he sees embodied in the figure of St. Francis (Chiesa, 2000) does not make him less reactionary in the strict sense of the term. When confronted with the COVID-19 crisis, Agamben laid bare the irrationalist implications of grounding one's critique of the modern world in the nostalgia for an idealized past. From a materialist, emancipatory perspective, there was much to criticize in the way the powers of the world responded to the pandemic, which displayed their subservience to capitalist interests whilst bringing to light the intrinsic deficiencies of the bureaucratic-coercive state. Lockdowns and deaths

that could have been avoided with a faster response, massive transfers of wealth to the financial oligarchy, reckless disregard of human life by politicians and bussinessmen, or the fact that capitalist production, with its disregard natural limits, facilitates the emergence of pandemics (Davis, 2022). This is nothing but a brief list of remarkable issues that would have called for a bold theoretical intervention. But Agamben left all the latter aside, rather focusing on essentialist denounciations of the damaging implications of 'hiding our faces', a term he approaches ontologically rather than empirically— 'the face' becoming a symbolic expression of our humanity, etc. I see no reason for conceptualizing this move as a 'descent into madness'. In fact, this response was implicit in Agamben's theoretical framework, and it serves to illuminate the real standpoint that grounds his other criticisms of the modern world. Both unrealistic and counter-revolutionary, he shares none of the partial virtues that could be found in either Laclau/Mouffe or Badiou. Impressive as it is, his erudition is wasted in the fatally flawed framework that he has built throughout his career.

However, I have tried to avoid a one-sided fixation on the differences between these authors, since that would obscure what I consider most fundamental: their underlying unitary assumptions, which ground their departure from Marxism and their attempts at substituting the latter with a different form of theorising.

V.

I have tried to unfold both the historical conditions for the emergence of post-Marxism and the main features of our contemporary historical predicament. The former is crucial for understanding post-Marxism as a phenomenon; the latter is decisive to grasp both the challenges that emancipatory projects face and the inadequacy of post-Marxism in dealing with them both theoretically and practically. 'Immanent' critique, properly understood, should not see each theory as a self-enclosed object: approaching theories *internally* also requires fleshing out their historical determinations. Approaches that bracket those historical conditions or treat them as purely external to the theory are as one-sided as those that would dismiss a close engagement with the theoretical contents themselves, i.e., sociological reductionism. Moreover, my exposition of the main features of our historical predicament has a 'performative' dimension: instead of arguing for the superiority of Marxism solely on an abstract theoretical level, I have

tried to *show* how a Marxist analysis can achieve results whose concreteness contrast positively with the vagueness of post-Marxist approaches to the present.

In so doing, I have argued that post-Marxism should be seen as a defective subjective response to some objective transformations that took place form the mid-70s onwards. Their theoretical dissolution of the social dovetails with the weakening of class struggle from below and the demotion of the working class as an organized historical agent. However, I have also argued that the time of crisis we live in stresses the urgency of the kind of theorising championed by Marx. Our present is marked by a structural crisis of capitalist that is accompanied by class polarization, growing authoritarianism, creeping militarism, and an ecological crisis that threatens to make the planet hardly habitable. The future, in short, is full of terrors. But all the latter will also strengthen the objective conditions for an upsurge of the class struggle from below, opening new opportunities for the Marxist goal of merging socialism with the working class.

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