The Problem of Post-Marxism: Radical Democracy and Class Struggle

JOHN TRIMBUR

The post-Cold War period is a strange time to be a Marxist. The old dangers of anti-communism—witchhunts, blacklist, jail, FBI files, calls to employers and landlords, social ostracism—are considerably reduced. Marxists, after all, hardly seem much of a threat these days to the ruling powers. More likely, they are simply ignored as unfashionable vestiges of an outmoded and theoretically depleted politics or, at best, regarded with a vague nostalgia for the radicalism of the 1930s—the era of the united front against fascism, the city-wide general strikes of 1934 (in Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco), the CIO organizing drives, and the Spanish Civil War. Along with the Berlin Wall and the Stalinized states of Russia and eastern Europe, Marxism appears to have collapsed under its own weight, assigned to the dustbin of its own history.

For the academic left in North America, the rise of post-Marxism offers a particular kind of settlement with Marxism’s apparent loss of authority and credibility, a felt sense predating the events of 1989, to be sure, that Marxism’s modernist baggage and old-fashioned language of class struggle make it not so much wrong as irrelevant or just plain corny. In this intellectual climate, Ernesto Laclau’s political philosophy of radical democracy provides one of the leading and most persuasive accounts of how to come to terms with Marxism—and how to get some use out of it. As Laclau says, “I’ve never tried to simply put aside Marxism as something that had to be abandoned. What I tried to do is to operate deconstructively within Marxian categories in order to present a discourse which certainly goes beyond Marxism but which nourished itself from Marxism as one of its roots.”

Laclau’s residual allegiances and his ratification of the “best fragments of Marxist theory” distinguish his response to the present crisis of Marxism from that of postmodern theorists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard, who, while not
exactly hostile to Marxism, have pretty thoroughly adjusted themselves to life in a world without it (to the point, one might add, you could call them, in the old Leninist style, "renegades"). This is not to say that drawing on Marx as an indispensable intellectual source, as Laclau does, is the same thing as aligning his project for radical democracy with the old story of the proletariat and its political vanguard. There is the sense, even in the most sympathetic post-theorists like Laclau, of having thought through Marxism and assimilated it so completely that what remains are the critical "fragments," precipitated out through the application of deconstructive intellectual pressure.

This ambivalent, negative/positive stance, indebted to and distanced from Marxism, is characteristic of a good deal of current radical theorizing. This sensibility distinguishes the post-Marxist moment from earlier periods on the left, certainly the 1930s but also the late 1960s and early 1970s in sectors of the New Left, when the burning issue was not so much whether Marxism is relevant but rather what kind of Marxist you should be (Progressive Labor or Weatherpeople, Stalinist or Trotskyist, Maoist or Guevarist, socialist humanist like E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, Frankfurt-style like Marcuse, orthodox like Georg Lukacs, or sternly structuralist like Althusser). These declared affiliations and the political implications that follow may well seem antiquarian to many, just another reminder that Marxism no longer offers radical intellectuals a living body of theory and accumulated experience.

Now in saying all this, I feel I'm on the verge of casting myself as the Last Marxist who appears from time to time in Katha Pollit's regular column in The Nation, "Subject to Debate." So I want to back off for a moment. Yes, I do think capitalism and its social relations are bad and need to be replaced by a workers' commonwealth and production for social needs. And it is certainly worth noting that the death of the irreplaceable James Berlin and the retirement of Richard Ohmann, though he remains politically and intellectually active, may reduce even further the little Marxist theorizing that has gone on in rhetoric and composition. But these are just the facts of life. The issue, as I would want to press it, concerns Laclau's post-Marxism, what it offers radical intellectuals and how to come to grips with it, especially in relation to the revolutionary claims of the Marxist tradition.

The Promise of Post-Marxism
First of all, it is important to acknowledge that Laclau's vision of radical democracy extends and deepens Gramsci's notion of hegemony—its nature and logics. Laclau situates the struggle for hegemony in part as a struggle against classical liberalism's notion of a democracy limited to the "sphere of citizenship," with the private sphere off limits, as it were, to democratic theorizing and a discourse of equality. This line of argument holds special interest for rhetoric and composition, particularly at a time when there is such a widespread discussion of public writing and civic rhetoric. If anything, Laclau can help clarify the limits and pressures of the resurgent interest in rhetoric's ancient role as training for citizenship.
It can help, for example, to see that current calls for strengthening civil society—in terms of voluntarism (like Robert Putnam's bowling leagues) and community service, a return to civility in manners and discourse, a national "conversation" about race—typically rely on the polarization of rhetoric and force. Now it is certainly true, as the advocates of communitarianism and civil society assert, that public discourse has been degraded in an era of sound bites and photo-ops, negative political campaigning, tabloids and talk shows. Nonetheless, as Laclau claims, even the most thoughtful manifestations of the current mood, such as the "liberal utopia" of Rortyian "conversation," cannot bring about the substitution of persuasion for force in the agreements people reach but instead amount to an evasion of the role persuasion inevitably and actually plays in the prevailing relation of forces.

To separate the two—and then to privilege persuasion over force—idealizes "conversation" as the opposite of violence and irrationality and obscures the force it exerts identifying and dividing, not by outright physical force but by the very discourse in which it takes place. By the same token, Laclau's deconstruction of persuasion and force counters the classically liberal objection to the direct actions of the oppressed and exploited (strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, sabotage, civil disobedience, terrorism, and so on) as "violent" events that take place outside rhetoric and thereby mark the failure of a "rational type of demonstration." In this sense, Laclau importantly notes that force cannot be isolated conceptually as though it were an outburst from the norm that needs to be explained—a deviance figured, say, in the moment the picket line goes up or peasants turn to armed struggle. What appears for liberals to be something separate, apart from and based on the breakdown of reason, is in fact inescapably a part of the available means of communication—forms of actual and symbolically rhetorical action.

Laclau's rhetoric is a radically democratic subject in the era of multiculturalism and identity politics, who extends (and complicates) the notion of citizenship in the post-Cold War period. Laclau's discussion of cultural difference and the politics of citizenship leads him to one of the key breaking points with Marxism, where Laclau distinguishes his version of radical democracy from the Marxist tradition. The crux for Laclau is the tendency in Marxist theory, following the "universalism" of the French Revolution, to homogenize social structure and "move toward a discourse of universality that was incompatible with difference, which in fact eliminated differences."

Again, Laclau's observations on the struggle for hegemony are useful, in part because they recognize the ways in which even the most radical notions of citizenship—beginning with \textit{le peuple} of the French Revolution—have difficulty accommodating "a multiplicity of cultures, demands, interests, and so on." In the late twentieth century, with the global disruptions and diasporas of an unchecked and virtually unopposed world capitalist system, these difficulties have only intensified. The citizen can no longer be represented simply and univocally as the universal subject of the polis, warranted by the moment of
mutual recognition in the French Revolution when the masses swarmed onto the stage of history to speak in their own name and to take things into their own hands. The notion of the *citoyen* not only consolidates and institutionalizes this popular force. The term itself is contained within national borders that entail a notion of the non-citizen—the alien, foreigners, the undocumented, refugees, illegal immigrants. The task of radical democracy, in Laclau’s view, is to deconstruct the figure of the citizen in the polis, so central to the discourse of rights in the democratic revolution, in order to disclose the hybrid identities in the metropoles of the new world order.

There is an interesting and important balancing act taking place. On one hand, Laclau’s notion of hybridity resists enclosure in the “pure identity of the oppressed”—the kind of identity politics he calls the “route to self-apartheid.” On the other hand, the problem of avoiding a “pure particularism” that segregates the oppressed, quarantining them from rhetorical engagement with the dominant order, only leads to the further problem of developing forms of struggle that do not dissolve into the institutional structures within which the oppressed must necessarily advance their demands. Laclau’s strategy is “to rescue a notion of universality which is not restricted to an a priori given content and which is given by the notion of hegemony.”

To put it another way, as particular popular forces struggle to assume the function of representation—of speaking on behalf and in the interests of themselves—they are engaged (necessarily and impossibly, in Laclau’s view) in “a relative universalization of value,” where their discourse of rights enters into a “logic of equivalence” with the struggles of other people. Without such a notion of universality, Laclau argues (correctly, I believe), that there can be no dialogical process. At the same time, for Laclau, the “moment of universality” must be “deprived of any kind of positive content” that decides things from the beginning, outside of the struggle for hegemony. In Laclau’s view, it is only when political content emerges in transient ways from within the dialectic of hegemony that the possibilities of rearticulation and democratic exchange remain open.

Laclau’s project is one of deepening the democratic revolution—of expanding the “logic of equality from the public sphere of citizenship to different spheres—for instance, in socialist discourses in the nineteenth century to the economic sphere, and in this century to the equality between sexes, people of different sexual orientations, races, ethnic groups, and so on.” To my mind, this is an exhilarating vision, where “the expansion of rhetoric and rhetorical argumentation” and a “proliferation of the places of enunciation” are central to the development of radical democracy and point to the work of radical intellectuals not only in “high theory” but also in the “intermediate areas” of journalism and “other forms of the circulation of ideas.”

At the same time, I find it maddening that Laclau’s representation of “socialist discourse” ties it to a nineteenth-century essence that restricts its meaning to the economic sphere. The post-part of Laclau’s post-Marxism accents the sentence in ways that have become familiar on the academic left—
and that create an ironic and knowing distance from the imputed economism and narrow class interests of Marxism. As I have tried to suggest, there is much that is useful in the way Laclau differentiates his vision of radical democracy from classical liberalism. But there are questions that remain to be asked concerning the politics of Laclau’s project and whether his goal of radicalizing “liberalism beyond the limits which were established by classical liberalism” is a viable one.

There are, as Laclau himself recognizes, important questions about the alliances that the popular democratic forces will invariably enter into as they operate within liberal institutions. Laclau makes a persuasive case that the content of these politics can’t be determined in advance and then imposed, ready-made, on a given situation. But to say as much, to hold that the political content is given through a process of struggle, should not be taken to mean that the content is unimportant or in some sense secondary to the rhetorical engagements of persuasion and force. In other words, there is the danger that the perfectly reasonable reaction on the part of the post-discourses to the untenable self-confidence of the modernisms in their programs and social planning will give way to the accomplished fact and the spontaneity of events—and that radical politics will simply be a way of coping or making it up as you go along. Laclau deepens our understanding of how rhetorical engagement figures in the struggle for hegemony. One worries, however, that his discourse of “radicalizing liberalism” could proliferate indefinitely. Or, at least, this is what Marxists might say: that the way to deal with liberals is to abolish class society.

The Problem of Post-Marxism
The question I want to end with concerns the relation between Laclau’s democratic revolution and the older Marxian notion of class struggle. Admittedly, this relationship has been skewed by the totalitarianism and unfreedom of the Stalinized workers’ state. But it’s not just the Stalinists. Eugene Debs’s famous statement that the American Socialist Party had nothing special to offer African Americans by way of democratic rights and the extension of citizenship is a prime example of how democratic struggles can get subordinated to class in the Marxist movement. In economist versions of Marxism, there has certainly been a tendency to reduce the problem of democracy to an epiphenomenon of—and in some versions a distraction from—the underlying struggle at the point of production. And to add to the confusion, ultra-left tendencies, largely out of fear of their own opportunism, have eliminated in advance any possibility of a principled alliance with liberals on democratic issues.

To my way of thinking, the issue of the relation between radical democracy and class struggle can usefully be approached via Raymond Williams’s well known observation that the democratic revolution is, in many respects, still in its early stages. This perspective is especially helpful at moments such as the present, when a hiatus of social movements, the absence of a left party, and the general quiescence of popular forces seem to endow the available dispensation of democracy with a kind of inevitability and permanence. By emphasizing the
"long revolution," Williams enables radical intellectuals to link their work in the present to the accumulated experience of popular struggles for self-management and self-government in the past.

One of the key differences between Williams and a post-Marxist politics without content is that he not only calls for a "proliferation of discourses," as Laclau and other post-theorists do. Williams also invests the call with programmatic content, offering a model of democratic communication independent of both public monopoly and the commercialized market. In order for the left to acquire rhetorical authority in the struggle for hegemony, Williams implies, it will take the formation of public forums—that is, new means of popular education and participation that offer alternatives to the bureaucratic provision of social services, on one side, and the profit motive of the market, on the other. In this sense, for Williams, radical democracy is directly linked to—in fact, is inseparable from—the class struggle to develop forms of self-management and workers' control of the means of production and communication.

The insight of articulation theory that ideas, cultural practices, and social movements have no necessary class content or class belongingness predetermined in advance by the "laws of history" doesn't mean that there are no class forces at all. For revolutionary Marxists, the project of "radicalizing liberalism" is off the mark, not because there should be no alliances with liberals (the terms are tactical matters) but because liberalism is unable to extend the work of the democratic revolution. According to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution—in many respects, the classic instance of an orthodox Marxian understanding of democracy and class struggle—liberalism has fossilized, in the era of imperialism, along with the once progressive energies of an emergent bourgeoisie, into social relations that ultimately inhibit the development of democracy. Democracy is linked to class struggle precisely because it can't be accomplished under the prevailing order.

And for this reason, in the revolutionary Marxist tradition, the struggle for hegemony is not, as it sometimes seems in Laclau's post-Marxism, an end in itself—an endless circulation of signifying practices. Instead, just as radical democracy is linked to class struggle, the struggle for hegemony is linked to the struggle for dual power. Post-Marxists too often forget that Gramsci's notion of the "war of positions" is a necessary strategy in a period of class peace, an adjustment called for by the setback of popular forces. Marxism is, in many respects, exactly the "analysis of the proliferation of the places of enunciation." Laclau endorses because the Marxist tradition amounts, finally, to a codification of the accumulated experience of the popular forces—in the streets in 1848, the Paris Commune, the soviets of 1905 and 1917, the workers councils in Spain in the 1930s and Hungary in 1956, the worker-student alliance in France in 1968. Marxism is a way of constituting and reading this history of popular attempts at self-organization, when working people try to seize the power to govern social life and to manage the means of production.
I think this perspective continues to be a useful one—not because I expect a resurgence any time soon of bolshevism or the left opposition but because this history of working-class self-government has for too long resided outside the rhetorical tradition, a type of popular learning inaccessible to rhetorical education. In rhetoric and composition, Berlin’s figure of the worker-citizen is undoubtedly the most radicalized version of ancient rhetoric we have available, a democratic socialist rendition of the citizen in the polis. But even this radical figure can be amplified by revolutionary Marxism, for Berlin’s citizen is contained within the geography of the polis and its national borders. If we replace the polis with the soviet, the radical rhetor may be refigured, in a forum that is based not on the geopolitics of the nation-state but on the workplace and the way people make their livings in an international division of labor. At a moment in history when the bosses seem to be winning on a global scale, the internationalism of the proletariat as a class—the fact that working people, in the Marxist tradition, have no fatherland—remains a critical allegiance and point of departure.

What divides Laclau and other post-Marxists from the revolutionary internationalism of the Marxist tradition may have less to do with theory and depend more on conditions of belief. Laclau’s project for radical democracy shows clearly, I think, that the condition of disbelief characteristic of the post-discourses, the postmodern incredulity in the face of metanarrative, need not result in political quietism. But just as post-Marxism applies a deconstructive pressure to Marxism, it simultaneously locates its limit: namely, if its disbelief is not necessarily politically debilitating, it nonetheless cordons off a structure of feeling that has long animated the Marxist tradition—a sense of allegiance with the struggles for working-class power and a sense of responsibility to keep past struggles relevant in the present.

Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Worcester, Massachusetts