

Marxism and Beyond
Materialism and the Construction of Political Subjectivity

by

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Introduction

The “Left” as a Friend of Capitalism

It has been a long time since “class” and “labor” were marginalized from the vocabulary of the Left. Despite Marx and Engels’ anticipation that the “fall [of the bourgeoisie] and the victory of the proletariat are equally *inevitable*,”¹ capitalism still confronts us today as the horizon of our thought. The Left utopian energy of communism is irretrievably gone after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., and capitalism presents itself as the historical necessity, as is characterized by Fukuyama’s proclamation of the “end of history.”² Of course, his quasi-Hegelian belief in capitalism and its liberal democracy as the highest stage of human history is a myth. The hegemony of neoliberal globalism in the post-1989 world is being contested by the emergence of social movements against multinational corporations, and the problems of market fundamentalism are becoming evident in today’s economic crisis. Yet the crisis failed to produce a popular demand for alternatives to capitalism, and people’s desire for a better life and society have been sublimated into fervent support for Obama and his “socialist” program to recover the American hegemony and capitalism. In other words, even though the ideology of the omnipotence of free market has lost its power, capitalism has not been put into question.

¹ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 233.

² Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

This absence of a social critique of capitalism signifies the impotence of the Left to challenge capitalism as a cause of injustice and oppression, which can be traced back to the delegitimation of socialist project in the 1980s, as seen in the withering of the Keynesian welfare state in the West and the failure of socialism in the East. Confronting the emergence of new social movements and the delegitimation of the socialist utopia, the Left abandoned class struggle and bracketed the question of political economy. The Left replaced the politics of equality with the *politics of recognition*. The politics of recognition and its discourses about tolerance prevail in the forms of liberalism, feminism, identity politics and multiculturalism. Those contemporary discussions on the Left have lost interest in criticizing capitalism and even take it for granted. Identity politics only emphasizes the recognition of difference and interests of individuals and small groups. The chief concern of the Left has shifted to tolerance or acceptance of others, and any position that advocates a universal dimension to justice is accused of totalitarianism and dogmatism. The natural consequence of identity politics is the dominance of particularism and the fragmentation of political groups and struggles. We are living in what Nancy Fraser calls the “postsocialist condition”³ where there is no credible alternative vision to capitalism and in which the prevalence of the politics of recognition appears as a symptom of the repression of the critique of political economy.

Wendy Brown rightly questions this left-wing fetishism of identity politics, observing that the “Marxist project of illuminating the place of capitalism in political and social life has pretty much vanished from the orbit of political theory.”⁴ As a

³ Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, 2.

⁴ Brown, *Edgework*, 68.

result of the loss of the socialist alternative, the Left stopped dealing with capitalism as its object of critique and started building theory within the paradigm of capitalism. Despite the need to learn from thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, Weber, Foucault and Deleuze that capital is not the only social power, I argue that Marx can still give us a deep insight into “capital’s awesome power,” which forms “both human history and agentic possibility.”⁵ It is undeniable that capitalism is still one of the most powerful determinants of the thoughts and actions of individuals, despite its rare theorization in the contemporary Left discussion of race, class and gender.

Adequate understanding of current problems of social pathology cannot be achieved without seriously taking account of capitalism as a cause of those pathologies. It is even necessary to think beyond capitalism as long as it inevitably creates forms of inequality and unfreedom by limiting access to material, social and cultural resources. Against the ideological grain of the politics of difference, the Left should revive the critique of political economy and rethink the importance of a politics of redistribution.⁶ In other words, instead of merely emphasizing tolerance and acceptance of others or accepting neoliberal discourses on individual’s “freedom” and “equality,” the Left is responsible for critiquing political economy and constructing a popular movement against various inequalities in capitalism.

How can we think of the construction of a popular demand for the transformation of the economic system today? The task is difficult because, in spite of the proliferation of progressive movements against social injustice and oppression, today’s social movement is marked by the plurality of particular demands which can

⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁶ See Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition?,” *Justice Interruptus*, 11-39.

remain isolated and even conflict with each other. However, the problem of the plurality is an old problem in the history of Marxist thought. Marxists were always required to explain how a popular demand for socialism emerges, namely, how a collective political subject for socialist revolution can be constructed.

As a prolegomena to a more concrete theory of resistance to neoliberal capitalism, my thesis is an attempt to provide a coherent account of the Marxist theory of *materialism* which explains the ontology of how the political subject is constituted in and through objective structures. The genealogy of materialism reveals how different Marxists provided various theories of the construction of political subjectivity. They all agree that individuals are conditioned by external structures, but differ greatly in terms of explaining how we are conditioned and how the revolutionary political subjectivity can be constructed. Avoiding both subjective voluntarism and objective determinism, Marxist materialism aims to grasp the tension between the subject and object, namely, how the agent conditioned by the external structure can transform the very structure.

My focus on materialism does not mean that I endorse the traditional Marxist discourse and insist on the urgency of “permanent struggle” against capitalism for the sake of the establishment of communism as a goal of history. If one is to employ Marxism as a tool for a critique of society today, it is absolutely necessary to conduct a ruthless critique of Marxism, instead of saving the “real” Marx from vulgar interpretations. Slavoj Žižek expresses the same attitude when he writes, “Even if — or, rather, especially if — one submits the Marxist past to a ruthless critique, one has first to acknowledge [the moment of Fall] as ‘*one’s own*’, taking full responsibility

for it, not to comfortably get rid of the "bad" turn of the things by way of attributing it to a foreign intruder.”⁷ Thus, through the chronological examination of the Marxist theories, their internal contradictions and limitations must be fully shown.

Chapter 1, “The Limitations of the Orthodox Marxism,” discusses how the Orthodox Marxist thinkers (Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg and Lukács) attempted to explain the constitution of a unified political subject. There are significant differences among their theories of revolution, but they share the belief that the economy determines *a priori* the proletariat as the revolutionary subject due to the Law of History. For the Orthodox Marxists, the proletariat is the universal subject of history which can liberate humans from all forms of oppression. It will be shown how each thinker subordinates non-economic elements, what they call the superstructure, to the economy, which is their base. Even if some elements are given a limited autonomy, “determination in the last instance by the economy” is never doubted. As long as this Law of History is maintained, it is impossible to fully escape the criticism that Marxism is merely a form of economic determinism. It is obvious that we can no longer employ the traditional Marxist discourses to form a unified political subject after the emergence of new social struggles over gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, and human rights. Those new movements are correct to criticize orthodox Marxism for its adherence to economic determinism, thereby reducing the heterogeneity of particular demands to the “objective interests” of the working class.

Chapter 2, “Saving the ‘Authentic Marx?,” assesses how Marxist humanism and Althusser’s scientific Marxism tried to overcome the limitation of Orthodox Marxism. The limitation of the Orthodox Marxism was clearly felt even among

⁷ Žižek, Introduction to *On Practice and Contradiction*, 1, emphasis added.

Marxists in the 1960s, not only because of the emergence of the new social movements after the events in 1968 but also because of the totalitarian character of the U.S.S.R. In this context, there emerged two major movements to save the “authentic” Marx from the dogmatism of the CPSU and reestablish Marxism as the foundation for diverse political struggles. Mihailo Marković, a leading humanist Marxist from the Praxis School, believed in the ability of philosophy to provide a universal truth, which transcends the plurality of social interests. He aims to overcome the plurality and heterogeneity of subjects by providing the optimal possibility available. But Marković’s account suppresses the heterogeneity of particularities by dissolving difference in the affirmation of universality. Consequently, the real dynamics of political struggles, each claiming its own perspective as truth, is lost in his account of politics. On the contrary, Louis Althusser criticizes humanist Marxism for its implicit assumption of the *telos* of history and emphasizes the *overdetermined* and contingent character of contradictions in reality. He claims that there is a plurality of contradictions which necessitates the condensation of these contradictions around a single point, i.e., the economy. Althusser cannot abandon the Marxist notion of “determination in the last instance by the economy” and, when he finally does so in his late years, his *aleatory materialism* is trapped in the radical indeterminism and loses all critical aspects of Marx’s materialism.

The attempts to reformulate Marxism by Marković and Althusser failed, as they were ultimately founded on the paradigm of modern philosophy and traditional Marxism. As a result, their theories were unable to embrace the new paradigm which

was opened up by post-Fordism, French post-structuralism and the new social movements. These theoretical and practical challenges and criticisms to Marxism forced some Marxists to take plurality and contingency of politics more seriously, and reread Marx through a postmodern lens. These post-Marxists abandon some of Marxist concepts as out-dated dogmatic concepts and openly accept that the working class no longer occupies a privileged position in political struggle. From a harsh criticism of their own tradition, they seek to find a way to constitute the new form of political subjectivity from a Marxist perspective.

As an example of such a post-Marxist turn, chapter 3, “The politics of the Multitude without the Political,” examines the new “materialist *telos*” of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*. Grasping the important changes in the era of globalization and post-Fordism, Hardt and Negri suggest a new subject of revolution, *the multitude*. The category of the proletariat is extended to include everyone, according to their analysis that life itself has become the object of exploitation in a productive process in today’s Empire. Hardt and Negri argue that the heterogeneous desire of the multitude will constitute absolute democracy, but I will demonstrate that what is hidden under the postmodern discourse of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* is the old Second Internationalist determinism of history. The multitude is automatically constituted as the political subject through its inclusion to the new productive force, i.e., *biopower*, but their determinism cannot provide any concrete vision of political struggle.

Chapter 4, “Post-Socialist Politics and Radical Democracy,” seeks to demonstrate that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *neo*-Gramscian theory of

hegemony elaborates a new materialist theory of political subjectivity which provides an understanding of today's political struggles. The privilege given to the working class and the economy is absent in their post-Marxist account of political struggle in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and Laclau and Mouffe's *radical democracy* opens up a new materialist theory of social change based on the heterogeneity of social demands. However, Laclau and Mouffe simplify Marx's materialism too much. I will show that contrary to their claim, Marx's materialism is compatible with their materialism. Without reverting to the Marxist myth that the revolution is necessary and inevitable, Laclau and Mouffe's materialism, in accordance with Marx's, provides a materialistic understanding of political subjectivity which affirms both that the subject is inevitably conditioned by the objective material and social relations, and that there is nevertheless scope for agency. In other words, materialism for Marx, Laclau and Mouffe avoids both economic determinism and subjective voluntarism. Consciousness of the subject is always-already conditioned by the objective social relations, but that objectivity does not destroy agency. Marx's materialism reveals how the political subject can transform the objective structures that are constitutive of the subject herself.

1

The Limitation of the Orthodox Marxism

The Privilege of the Proletariat and the Economy

A traditional Marxist theory of revolution claims that the crisis of capitalism and the uprising of the proletariat in the course of the development of capitalism are inevitable. In other words, capitalism inevitably collapses “without will” due to the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces. This type of historical materialism was first suggested by Friedrich Engels and soon became dominant among the Second International theorists. This objectivism which denies the agency of the subject was soon criticized by V.I. Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Despite the significant differences among their visions of revolution, both of them claim that the contradiction of capitalism is insufficient to bring about revolution, and revolution necessitates the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat. This is a great advance from Messianism and the mechanism of Engels and the Second International theorists because Lenin and Luxemburg are seriously concerned with the difficulty to cause a revolution due to the plural antagonisms and the overdetermined character of the revolutionary processes. Yet the precise limitation of Lenin and Luxemburg’s theory is the *a priori* privilege of the proletariat and the economy despite the recognition of the plural and overdetermined character

of the real social struggle. Due to their assumptions, their theories either resort to the Messianism of the Second International theorists or perpetuate the totalitarian character of the Communist Party. In the last section, I argue Lukács' attempt to reconcile Lenin and Luxemburg through Hegel, but his theory also clearly maintains the same privilege of the proletariat and the economic contradiction.

Engels' Law of History as Economic Determinism

By taking advantage of his close connection with Marx, Engels simplified Marx's thoughts so that his doctrine could contribute to the communist movement in the form of "Marxism."¹ Engels succeeded and his claim of the inevitability of revolution as dictated by the Law of History became the "standard" understanding of Marx's historical materialism. However, this understanding is merely a form of economic determinism that deprives the subject of its agency and turns human beings into objects. Objectivism of economic relations is unable to grasp the logic of the constitution of political subjectivity; thus, there is no politics in the determinism of Engels and Second International theorists. Moreover, the metaphysical belief in the progressive Law of History that is inherent in determinism neglects various social demands of different groups by reducing complex social antagonisms to the contestation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The tendency of Engels to reduce Marx's materialism to the scientific law of history was already prevalent shortly after Marx's death. At the funeral of Marx in

¹ There are number of books which show how Engels simplified and reduced Marx's philosophy to an iron Law of History. See Carver, *Marx and Engels, the Intellectual Relationship* and Levine, *The Tragic Deception: Marx contra Engels*.

1883, Engels said, “Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.”² Building on this interpretation of Marx’s philosophy, later Marxists among the Second International such as Dietzgen, Bebel and Kautsky, conceived of the natural evolution of human history in a Darwinist way.³ Yet Engels still maintained an attitude that Marx’s materialism is not the Truth of History, but a method to analyze social reality in economic terms. In fact, in the Speech, he continued to explain the content of Marx’s materialism as:

the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means of subsistence and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conception, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of *vice versa*, as had hitherto been the case.⁴

Even though the content of Marx’s materialism is simplified to the analysis of material conditions which are linked to “the degree of economic development,” Engels still utilizes the methodological emphasis of Marx’s materialism to conduct the analysis based on the fact that concrete individuals are conditioned by definite material relations. In fact, it is possible to find a similar emphasis in Marx’s own texts on the concrete analysis of material conditions in explaining historical change. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels write: “[the premise] are the real individuals,

² Engels, “Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx,” 681.

³ The Darwinist law of history does not guarantee the necessity of revolution, as the law is precisely based on the “natural selection” which is purely contingent. This is why these Second International Marxists also employed Hegel’s dialectic in order to assert the necessity of revolution. The evolutionist view of history can be even found in Bernstein who is denounced as a revisionist. In fact, Bernstein rejects various Marx’s important theories, but it is ironic that even he advocates an evolutionist view of history. See his *Evolutionary Socialism*. For a succinct critique of Bernstein and other Second International Marxists, see Colletti, “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International.”

⁴ Engels, “Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx,” 681.

their activity and material conditions of their life The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals.”⁵ Engels maintains this “premise” of the human history in 1883. At this point, he still seems to adhere to Marx’s materialistic method, which is clear in Engels’ analysis of ideology. Instead of simply accusing ideology as being the “false consciousness,”⁶ Engels recognizes that the concrete analysis of a particular form of ideology such as, “state institutions, the legal conception, art, and even the ideas on religion,” must be explained on the basis of material conditions (such as to “eat, drink, have shelter and clothing”). Engels does not claim that the economic base *determines* a certain phenomenon of the superstructure. Rather, he seems to believe that Marx’s materialism is a method to provide an understanding of how the transformation of the economic base affects the components of the superstructure. Instead of the absolute causality between the base and the superstructure, Engels’ interpretation of Marx’s materialism is a theoretical method used to explain particular phenomena which require explanation.

However, Engels’ understanding of historical materialism shifted from a *method* of concrete analysis to a scientific *law* after Marx’s death. As materialism came to be understood as the universalizable law of science, a particular explanation of each phenomenon became unnecessary, and Engels focused on the justification of this Marxist discovery of the motion of history. This shift is very clear from his modified interpretation of Marx’s *18th Brumaire*.⁷ In 1865 when Engels describes the meaning of *The 18th Brumaire* for the first time in *The Prussian Military Question*

⁵ Engels and Marx, “The German Ideology,” 31.

⁶ Engels, “Letter to Franz Mehring,” 766.

⁷ The understanding of Engels’s interpretation of 18th Brumaire here is borrowed from Uematsu’s *Marx wo Yomu* [Reading Marx], Chapter 1.

and the German Workers' Party, he writes that "Bonapartism is the necessary form of state in a country where the working class, at a high level of its development in the towns but numerically inferior to the small peasants in rural areas, has been defeated in a great revolutionary struggle by the capitalist class, the petty bourgeoisie and the army."⁸ Here Engels explains that the bourgeoisie in France was "too weak to govern" after the struggle in 1848 and that "military despotism" was established in order to sustain social stability.⁹ In this text Engels interprets *The 18th Brumaire* as an example of Marx's concrete analysis of a particular historical event. According to Engels in 1865, the meaning of *The 18th Brumaire* lies in Marx's explanation of the establishment of the Second Empire in terms of class struggle.

However, Engels gives a different meaning to *The 18th Brumaire* two decades later. In the preface to *The 18th Brumaire* written in 1885, he defines the meaning of the text thirty-three years after its original publication as follows:

It was precisely Marx who had first discovered *the great law of motion of history*, the law according to which all historical struggles ... are in fact only the more or less clear expression of struggles of social classes, and that the existence and thereby the collisions, too, between these classes are in turn conditioned by the degree of development of their economic position, by the mode of their production and of their exchange determined by it.... *He puts his law to the test on these historical events*, and even after thirty-years we must still say that it has stood the test brilliantly.¹⁰

The difference of Engels' account between 1865 and 1885 is clear: Engels now regards *The 18th Brumaire* as an application of the "Law of History," which he praises as Marx's great discovery. Engels transforms Marx's method of analysis into an invariant historical law. Without the concrete analysis of ongoing transformations of ideology and class struggle, Engels only emphasizes the universality of Marx's iron

⁸ Engels, "The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party," 72.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Engels, preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 14, emphasis added.

Law of History which penetrates all historical events. According to this interpretation of Marx's materialism, the uniqueness of the event of Bonapartism is lost because it is only an "exceptional historical phrase" in which "the warring classes are so nearly equal in forces that the state power, as apparent mediator, acquires for the moment a certain independence in relation to both."¹¹ One may think that the existence of the exceptional case challenges the universality of the Law of History, but Engels makes sure that the exceptional historical phrase only occurs within the boundaries of the "Law." According to Engels, however, the concept of "relative autonomy" of the superstructure explains the exceptional case, for the relative autonomy means that the elements of the superstructure are ultimately subordinated to the "determination in the last instance by the economy" according to the Law of History.

Typical criticism against Marx's *18th Brumaire* is not significant for Engels. One may claim that the emergence of the dictatorship of the Second French Empire forced Marx a reformulation of his reductionistic view in the *Communist Manifesto* that the state is a tool of the ruling class and that the course of the history is determined by class struggle.¹² However, Engels claims that the causality between the superstructure and the base is still unquestionable truth. As Engels demands Joseph Bloch to look at Bonapartism as an example of the relative autonomy of the state and the determination in the last instance by the economy, the relative autonomy of the state does not challenge the economy as the "ultimately determining element in

¹¹ Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 231.

¹² According to Uemura, such criticism is raised by Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition* and LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*.

history.”¹³ Engels came to view Marx’s materialism as the universal Law of History, and he stops analyzing the concrete situation.

As a result, Engels reduces materialism to a mere objectivism. Political subjectivity is determined by the economy in the last instance, when the economy ultimately proves its necessity and subordinates all other spheres. Similar to Marx,¹⁴ Engels writes that “men make their history themselves,” as if human agency creates history, but he adds to this sentence: “All such societies are governed by necessity The necessity which here asserts itself athwart all accident is again ultimately economic necessity.”¹⁵ Whether man is conscious of it or not, the Law of History must realize itself as it functions in the same manner as the scientific “law of the transformation of energy.”¹⁶ To be sure, Engels denounces the view that the “economic element is the only determining one” because it renders historical materialism a “meaningless” and “abstract phrase.”¹⁷ He even insists that diverse elements of the superstructure affect the progress of history. Indeed, he adds that there are infinite forces produced by many individual wills, which can conflict with each other. Despite all these remarks, Engels concludes that these forces and elements converge into “the resultant” in such a way that “the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary” in the last instance.¹⁸ The sum of these multiple forces and elements always contribute to the “resultant” for which the economy is the ultimately decisive factor. The economic law of history penetrates human activity, and the

¹³ Engels, “Letter to Joseph Bloch,” 760.

¹⁴ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 15.

¹⁵ Engels, “Letter to H. Starkenburg,” 767.

¹⁶ Engels, preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 14.

¹⁷ Engels, “Letter to Joseph Bloch,” 760.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 760-1.

economic relation will assert itself as necessary, inevitably bringing about revolution: “The fall [of the bourgeoisie] and the victory of the proletariat are equally *inevitable*.”¹⁹

Engels’ objectivism, though constituting the foundation of traditional Marxism, is hardly acceptable today not only because of its metaphysics but also because of the impossibility of politics within objectivism. His historical materialism which regards the economic factor as the *causa prima* of history has no theoretical and empirical foundation. Engels’ view is no different from the metaphysical belief that God directs the course of history unless he is able to prove the decisive quality of the economic factor in spite of the existence of multiple forces that affect the course of history. According to this metaphysical belief, the proletariat would only have to wait until the time for revolution ripens. Such a Messianic claim ignores and perpetuates the sufferings of actual individuals by postponing the solution of the problem until an unknown day when the economy asserts its preeminence in the form of revolution.²⁰

Furthermore, in this mechanistic and deterministic understanding of history, political and social struggles are an impossible element. There is only the objective development of the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces. Since the economy determines the form of political subjectivity

¹⁹ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 233, emphasis in original. Referring to this sentence, one may argue that Marx also believed in the necessity of revolution. However, considering the fact that this is a phrase from a manifesto written for the agitation for the proletarian masses, it is necessary to examine Marx’s philosophical writings to decide if Marx was a determinist. As I argue in Chapter 4, Marx’s materialism is clearly distinguished from any determinism.

²⁰ Though I cannot analyze in depth, August Bebel’s remark at the Erfurt Congress represents well the general tendency of the Marxism of the Second International: “The capitalist society itself is preparing the ground for its own ruin at full speed and we have only to wait for the moment when power will slip from their hands” (Cited in Mathias, “The Social Democratic Working-Class Movement and the German National State up to the End of World War I,” 178).

and the possibility of human emancipation, the proletariat naturally occupies the privileged position within political struggle. As a result, Engels' theory of political subjectivity subordinates other forms of political struggles (e.g., anti-sexism and anti-racism) to class struggle. Yet the problem which the Left faces today is the proliferation of different political and social movements that cannot be simply explained by the economy. Yet the metaphysical belief in "determination in the last instance by economy" will only be accused by these movements as economic determinism, so the constitution of unified political subjectivity by Engels' objectivism is unlikely to occur. His belief in the Law of History must be rejected if one is to build a theory of political subjectivity in the post-socialist condition.

In this context, Lenin and Luxemburg seem to go beyond the limitation of Engels' objectivism. Both of them reject the deterministic view of history and insist upon the necessity of the conscious act of the constitution of the subject. They emphasize the important aspects of political struggle which cannot be simply reduced to economic relations. In other words, Lenin and Luxemburg recognize the overdeterministic character and plurality of social antagonisms. Despite their limitation inherent in the privileged position of the proletariat as the subject of political struggle, this advancement of Marxist theory regarding political subjectivity provides a more clear indication of the feasibility of post-Marxist politics.

The Vanguard Party or Spontaneous Revolution?

Criticizing “opportunists” and “revisionists” who were afraid of taking any revolutionary action because the objective conditions were not ripe, V.I. Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg claimed that revolutionary subjectivity does not appear simply because the objective conditions have matured; on the contrary, proletarian consciousness must be *constituted* and *developed* through revolutionary activity. This subjective dimension, which is essential for revolution, is theorized and conceptualized as the *class consciousness* of the proletariat. However, Lenin and Luxemburg disagree with each other in terms of how to foster the class consciousness of the proletariat. Lenin asserts that the strong political leadership of the vanguard party is essential for the masses to avoid domination by bourgeois ideology, and to sustain a revolutionary attitude during the long years of the revolutionary period. Luxemburg criticizes the non-democratic aspect of the vanguard party and argues that the workers can and should develop their own class consciousness through the experience of class struggle. Moreover, she claims that it is impossible for the party to determine when a revolution is possible due to the overdetermined social relations. Thus, the party should not aim for total control over the activity of the masses and should instead support their movement from behind.

Lenin’s theory of the constitution of political subjectivity is set out in *What Is To Be Done?*. In this text, he reformulates the Marxist theory of political subjectivity by insisting upon the necessity of the *vanguard party*, a secret community of selected professional revolutionaries. He assigns the party the task of the formation of *the*

political class consciousness of the working class. The necessity of political transformation must be understood by the proletarian masses in order to achieve true liberation; otherwise the proletarian masses will remain subordinated to bourgeois ideology and will not engage in any revolutionary activities. Even in the circumstance of some spontaneous rebellions against the capitalists, the natural demands of the workers do not go beyond the purely *economic* realm, i.e., the satisfaction of immediate needs. In order to conduct the transformation of social structures, economic struggle must be transformed into political struggle. Lenin keenly recognizes the difficulty of this transformation, as it is natural that the poor workers are more concerned with their own daily needs, rather than the establishment of socialism without any guarantee of success. In order to avoid losing the revolutionary character of the movement, the political class consciousness of the masses must be cultivated by the vanguard. The local and particular interests of the workers must be overcome and transformed into the general interests of the working class which are directed to socialist revolution. The task of the party is to educate the masses to understand that social transformation is absolutely necessary to fully realize their demands.

Contrary to determinists, Lenin does not believe that revolution occurs automatically or spontaneously. Rather, the conscious activity of professional revolutionaries is the key to developing class consciousness, as Lenin writes, “The systematic strike marked the awakening antagonisms between workers and employers; but the workers were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and

social system, i.e., theirs was not yet Social-Democratic Consciousness.... It would have to be brought to them from without.”²¹ Lenin makes it clear that the political class consciousness of the proletariat must be introduced to them “from without,” by the vanguard party. Only the vanguard, trained both theoretically and practically through active engagement in the revolutionary activity, can correctly analyze the changing situation and foresee the necessary course of action. The masses are short sighted and view their main interest as the improvement of the general quality of life. Only the vanguard party is conscious of the underlying movement of history, and so only it can unite local and particular demands to generate a unified power to realize Social Democracy.

It is evident how Lenin gives a different answer from Engels to the problem of how the masses can be constituted as a unified political subject. Contrary to determinists who believe that the maturity of the objective condition automatically constitutes the revolutionary subject, Lenin insists that spontaneous revolution is impossible when the masses are subordinated to bourgeois ideology. The masses will not fully shed bourgeois ideology as they have internalized bourgeois ideology, which is produced and reproduced in daily life by political apparatuses such as school, media, police and church. Thus, Lenin advocates using ideology, more precisely the “socialist ideology,” to mobilize the masses.²² Since they cannot recognize the ultimate political goal, he admits that the political class consciousness of the

²¹ Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, 31. This view that the class consciousness must be “brought to the workers from without” is not original to Lenin. In fact, Lenin mentions that he has borrowed it from Kautsky who writes, “Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without [von Aussen Hineingetragenes] and not something that arose within it spontaneously [urwüchsig]” (Ibid., 40). However, Lenin deepens the theory of class consciousness because Kautsky still believes in a natural progress of history.

²² Ibid., 41.

proletariat must be spread as a form of ideology in order to lead the masses to revolutionary activity. The vanguard builds on the emergence of political consciousness expressed, e.g. in a strike, through fostering this embryo with political and ideological agitation. The significance of the vanguard party is based on its ability to act consciously in accordance with the “objective interests of class” when the masses are dominated by bourgeois ideology. Lenin does not hesitate to compare his own conception of the vanguard party to *Jacobinism*, i.e., a revolutionary group that can clearly tell the course of political struggle, as he writes that “a Jacobin who wholly identifies himself with the *organisation* of the proletariat—a proletariat *conscious* of its class interests—is a *revolutionary Social-Democrat*.”²³

Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg object that Lenin’s theory of the vanguard party is *Blanquist*, meaning that there is a danger that the movement will be a secretive conspiracy by a small group of revolutionaries.²⁴ Luxemburg, for example, writes in “Leninism or Marxism?”: “For Lenin, the difference between the Social Democracy and Blanquism is reduced to the observation that in place of a handful of conspirators we have a class-conscious proletariat. He forgets that this difference implies a complete revision of our ideas on organization and, therefore, an entirely different conception of centralism and the relations existing between the party and the struggle itself.”²⁵ In contrast to Lenin, Luxemburg believes in the primacy of the spontaneous action of the workers; the party should not lead, but support the workers.

²³ Lenin, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward*, 280, emphasis in original.

²⁴ For the discussion concerning the danger of the elitist and centralized party by Trotsky, see his *Our Political Tasks*.

²⁵ Luxemburg, “Leninism or Marxism?” 86.

Luxemburg is concerned that the centralization of power may lead to the dictatorship of the party and the suppression of political liberty.²⁶

Luxemburg emphasizes the workers' own ability to organize themselves and the impossibility of the party leading the revolution in contrast to Lenin's ideal of a centralized party. According to her dialectical theory, spontaneous resistance of the workers emerges from their unconscious act determined by the historical process: "The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of the historic process comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historic process."²⁷ This does not mean that she believes that revolutions happen automatically.²⁸ Contrary to revisionists, especially Eduard Bernstein, who are reluctant to advocate any revolutionary movement due to the fear that the objective situation is not ripe, she claims that the proletariat is inevitably required to stand up for revolution "too early."²⁹ Instead of the party disciplining and educating the masses and implanting political consciousness, she believes that the workers discipline themselves and develop their political agency through revolutionary activity: "The proletarian army is recruited and becomes aware of its objectives in the course of the struggle itself."³⁰ Since the workers start the movement "too early," the experience of "defeats" is inevitable in the process of revolution; however, this experience dialectically contributes to the development of political subjectivity and

²⁶ In fact, Lenin's view that the freedom of criticism must be restrained is hard to be accepted today, no matter what reason he has in mind. For Lenin's discussion of freedom of criticism, see chapter 1, "Dogmatism and 'Freedom of Criticism'" in *What Is To Be Done?*.

²⁷ Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism?," 93.

²⁸ For example, she clearly writes: "It is not true that socialism will arise automatically from the daily struggle of the working class. Socialism will be the consequence of (1) the growing contradictions of capitalist economy and (2) the comprehension by the working class of the unavailability of the suppression of these contradictions through a social transformation" ("Reform or Revolution," 68).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁰ Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism?," 88.

consciousness of the proletariat.³¹ The organization of the workers is not something that the party can intentionally teach and develop; on the contrary, the political leadership of the party is secondary and necessarily limited because of the complexity and uncertainty of actual events. The transparency of actual events is not available even to the vanguard, and thus it is necessary that the workers learn from their own revolutionary experience. The strong solidarity of workers and the development of class consciousness can be attained only through the actual revolutionary process, not from political agitation and the distribution of pamphlets by the vanguard.

The Limitation of the Vanguard Party

Here we are faced with two different theories of political subjectivity, the vanguard party and the spontaneous movement. There are limitless discussions about which theory is more effective and practical as a revolutionary theory. Even though traditional Marxists favor Lenin's revolutionary theory in order to justify the CPSU's power, the experience of the terror under Stalinism appears to support Luxemburg's critique of the authoritarian character of the Leninist theory of vanguard party.

In the 1960s when the terror of Stalinism became a main object of criticism even among Marxists, Ernest Mandel defended Lenin's theory of organization in *The Leninist Theory of Organization*. Mandel agrees with Luxemburg that it is possible for the centralized power of the party to attain autonomy as a political apparatus and develop authoritarian characteristics, as seen in the bureaucratization of the U.S.S.R. and Stalin's terror. Nonetheless, Mandel adopts a Leninist manner and argues that it

³¹ Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, 24.

is historically wrong to assume that the class consciousness of the proletariat can emerge automatically or spontaneously without the aid of the party. He claims that Luxemburg's position gives rise to a dilemma: reliance on the spontaneity of the masses will fail to realize revolution, while reliance on the vanguard party will bring about a revolution that gives rise to an authoritarian regime. To avoid totalitarianism, one is obliged to conclude that "the socialist emancipation of the working class and of humanity is impossible."³² Mandel rejects Luxemburg's critique of Lenin and claims that the authoritarian character of the party emerges only when the party stops following Lenin's actual doctrine. In a dialectical manner, Lenin insists that the masses be led by the party, but also that the party learn from the action of the masses. The political apparatuses become autonomous and authoritarian only when the party loses contact with the practical activity of revolution through bureaucratization. However, it can be avoided if the vanguard party is composed of true revolutionaries who are faithful to the dialectic suggested by Lenin.

According to Mandel's interpretation, the experience of Stalinism reflects a situation where the Leninist theory of the party is no longer being followed. From this observation, he concludes: "there is no contradiction whatever between the existence of a revolutionary organization of the Leninist type and genuine soviet democracy, or soviet power. On the contrary, without the systematic organizational work of a revolutionary vanguard, a soviet system will either be quickly throttled by reformist and semi-reformist bureaucracies ... or it loses its political effectiveness due to its inability to solve the central political tasks."³³ In Mandel's explanation, the terror

³² Mandel, "The Leninist Theory of Organization—Its Relevance for Today," 98.

³³ Ibid. 101.

under Stalinism is not a result of the nature of the vanguard party, but only occurs when the dialectical unity of the party and the masses stops functioning as a result of the party members' concentration in their own specialized interests. However, Mandel's defense of Lenin is insufficient. Luxemburg argues that the directive role of the party makes it incapable of learning from the masses precisely because its directive role is based upon the party's superior knowledge about revolution. If the party's authority is derived from the absolute superiority of knowledge over the masses, argues Luxemburg, there is no reason to believe that the party is oriented to learning from the masses. Stalinism is not an exceptional deviation from (true) Leninist theory, but an inherent danger of the Leninist theory of organization.³⁴

Here, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's critique of Lenin's theory of political subjectivity is particularly insightful in viewing how post-Marxists should appreciate Lenin's theory of organization. According to Laclau and Mouffe, "democratic" and "authoritarian" elements conflict in Lenin's theory of organization.³⁵ Lenin's theory indicates a democratic aspect when he suggests the necessity of *class alliance* for the sake of revolution. He recognizes the significance of political agitation with regard to "every concrete example of this oppression" in

³⁴ This does not mean that the Left should completely abandon the Leninist theory of organization. Such a claim can be found in Negri and Hardt's concept of the "multitude" which I will discuss in a later chapter as a contemporary reformulation of the Marxist subject of revolution. Their theory comes close to an anarchist one in that it denies any centralized power of organization of movement. However, as Alain Badiou criticizes, anarchism, similar to the Leninist vanguard party, does not produce any positive possibility of a new politics today: "We know today that all emancipatory politics must put an end to the model of the party, or of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics 'without party,' and yet at the same time without lapsing in the figure of anarchism, which has never been anything else than the vain critique, or the double, or the shadow, of the communist parties, just as the black flag is only the double or the shadow of the red flag" ("The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?," 507).

³⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 58-59.

order to create a mass struggle. However, this oppression is not merely economic, but much more pervasive throughout society:

Inasmuch as *this* oppression affects the most diverse classes of society, inasmuch as it manifests itself in the most varied spheres of life and activity—vocational, civic, personal, family, religious, scientific, etc., etc.—is it not evident that *we shall not be fulfilling our task* of developing the political consciousness of the workers if we do not *undertake* the organization of the political exposure of the autocracy *in all its aspects*?³⁶

In this passage, Lenin expresses the view that any sort of oppression regardless of class (vocational, civic, personal, family, religious, scientific, etc.) must be disclosed, and the Social Democratic movement must include all in order to create a bigger movement against the existing system. He recognizes a plurality of social antagonisms in society and insists on unifying it through social struggle. The task of the Socialist-Democratic theory is to examine a particular situation in order to find the sources of popular discontent. Lenin's awareness of the plurality of social antagonisms implies a great theoretical advance over that of the Second International, which only recognizes the economic antagonism of the working class from the perspective of the progressive Law of History. Lenin's theory of organization is potentially "democratic" in that mass struggle does not necessarily have a class character, as the revolutionary moment can only emerge through the integration of various antagonisms in society. Class interests need to be modified and transformed in relation to other demands so that "class alliance" can be widely and tightly formed.

Lenin seems to recognize that popular discontent is constructed not through the

³⁶ *What Is To Be Done?*, 57, emphasis in original. According to Lenin, *class alliance* lasts even after revolution until the transition from capitalism to communism, namely, the realization of classless society is completed. In fact, he explicitly mentions the term *class alliance*, as he writes: "The dictatorship of the proletariat is a specific form of *class alliance* between the proletariat, the vanguard of the working people, and the numerous non-proletarian strata of the working people (petty bourgeoisie, small proprietors, the peasantry, the intelligentsia, etc.)" ("Forward to 'Deception of the People with Slogans of Freedom and Equality'," 381, emphasis in original).

subordination of particular interests to the objective interests of the working class. Rather, particular demands form a mass struggle through the negation of the general crime of society for which the current system is responsible.

However, this potential for democratic practice is lost due to the authoritarian and vanguardist dimension of the Leninist tradition. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the reason is quite simple: in Lenin's account, "the ontological privilege granted to the working class by Marxism was transferred from the social base to the political leadership of the mass movement."³⁷ Lenin's theory of organization is authoritarian in that while the leading group can pursue its own objective without any alteration of its own identity as the proletariat, the other groups must subordinate their interests and change their identities in accordance with the objective of the party. It is predetermined that the objective interests of the class are fundamentally significant compared to other interests. In fact, Lenin writes that "everywhere the Social-Democrats are found in the forefront, rousing political discontent among *all classes*, rousing the sluggards, stimulating the laggards, and providing a wealth of material for the development of the political consciousness and the political activity of *the proletariat*."³⁸ This is the moment when the Leninist theory of organization reveals its own potential for the anti-democratic and manipulative character. Despite the necessity of "rousing political discontent among *all classes*," it only contributes to "the political activity of *the proletariat*." The discontent experienced by other groups is only exploited for the interests of the proletariat which are claimed to be objective and universal. A directive role of

³⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 56.

³⁸ *What Is To Be Done?*, 96, emphasis added.

political struggle is given to the working class, or rather to the vanguard party, because only it understands the Law of History. Thus, there is an insurmountable gap between “the class identity” and “the identity of the masses” and the latter must be subordinated to the former by the authoritarian force of the party.

When he claims that the vanguard party can fully represent the objective interests of the masses, Lenin assumes the vanguard’s ability to understand the real task of the proletariat *für sich*. This is why Lenin repeatedly denounces the “freedom of criticism.” Because the vanguard grasps the Law of History, the freedom of others to criticize the decisions of the party is unnecessary and counterproductive, since it undermines the vanguard’s authority and leads to policies that would retard the progress of Social Democracy. Those who doubt the vanguard’s ability to grasp the Law of History in a transcendent manner are accused by Lenin of being “revisionists” who obstruct the revolutionary path. Only by assuming the vanguard’s access to the transparent knowledge of the Law of History, can Lenin assert that the interests of the masses are always transparently and perfectly represented by the party. His belief in the absoluteness of the party is reminiscent of Žižek’s formula of “the totalitarian misrecognition of the performative dimension”: “The Party thinks that it is the Party because it represents the people’s real interests, because it is rooted in the People, expressing their will; but in reality the People are the People because — or, more precisely, in so far as — they are embodied in the Party.”³⁹ The definition of the Party is circular. Only those who believe that their interests are fully represented by the party are Social-Democrats. If you do not believe in it, you are a revisionist!

³⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 146.

Laclau and Mouffe offer an alternative to Lenin's theory of organization in order to maximize its potentials for a "democratic" politics.⁴⁰ They argue that it is necessary to abandon the hierarchical view that the class identity of the proletariat is given *a priori*, while other identities of the masses must be modified in accordance with that of the proletariat. There is no theoretical and practical necessity that the working class be always the leading group to which other classes and groups must be subordinated. Indeed such a belief is increasingly harder to accept today due to the emergence of new social movements. Since we recognize that there are no fixed laws of history, we cannot assume any ontologically privileged position regarding any group of people with a fixed identity. No ontological privilege of the proletariat exists, and there is no epistemological privilege of the party that can always derive the universal demand of social struggle from local and particular antagonisms. Rather, we need to emphasize Lenin's democratic aspect that mass struggle always emerges through the integration of various antagonisms peculiar to a definite historical and social situation. Therefore, in order to go beyond the economic determinism of the traditional Marxists, whether obvious or hidden, it is necessary to provide an understanding of this overdeterministic logic of the formation of popular struggle.

The firm determination to abandon all forms of economic determinism and the privileged subject position of the proletariat makes it easy to see the limitation of Luxemburg's theory of spontaneous revolution. She emphasizes the significance of the autonomy of the workers because the actual social struggle is too complex and fluctuating for any group of people to provide a complete understanding of the situation. In other words, she recognizes the overdeterministic character of the real

⁴⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 85-88.

social struggle which makes epistemological privilege impossible, but this affirmation of the complexity and indetermination of the social struggle leads to the important question of the constitution of political subjectivity. The limitation of Luxemburg's answer becomes apparent when political subjectivity is reduced to the discussion of a class unity. In *The Mass Strike*, she gives a concrete description of the First Russian Revolution, describing how spontaneous strikes in some factories coalesced into a mass strike and developed into a unified political struggle against Tsarist absolutism. Yet when she deals with the possibility of revolution in Germany, Luxemburg abstracts and universalizes the experience of the Russian Revolution and claims that spontaneous revolution will occur in Germany in the same manner because it is "the inevitable advent of this revolutionary period."⁴¹ The differences among particular situations and the overdetermined character of actual struggle are discarded due to her belief in the Law of History. Even though her spontaneism implies the impossibility of predicting the future path due to the complexity of social processes, the minimization of the differences between the Russian and the German situation hinders a full elaboration of the potential inherent in her theory.

Her belief in the Law is also manifested in her failure to posit a convincing reason why the unified struggle against Tsarist absolutism had to take the form of class struggle by the proletariat rather than any other modes. In other words, she is unable to prove why political subjectivity must always coincide with working class identity in spite of her claim of the inherent complexity and diversity of particular social demands. She is able to justify the necessary character of revolution with class unification only through her implicit Second Internationalist belief in the economic

⁴¹ "The Mass Strike," 161.

contradiction of capitalism which unavoidably results in the political contestation between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Consequently, she narrows the realm of politics into a predetermined sphere which limits the actors to only the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In such a narrow conception of politics, the complexity and diversity of reality disappears. Naturally, her classism is unable to account for the logic of political subjectivity based on the plurality of particular demands. As a result, once the consensus on the socialist utopia disappears, her belief in spontaneous movement founded on the interests of the working class loses its credibility. In fact, her theory cannot provide us with an understanding of how a global consciousness of the masses can be constructed today. Economic determinism still haunts Luxemburg, and her theory lacks the logic of identification of the masses with an intersubjective political identity. In order to avoid objectivism, contradiction of capitalism must not determine *a priori* the form of political contestation, and Lukács' theory of class consciousness elaborates on this point in an ambivalent manner.

Lukács' Idealism and Reification of History

György Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* develops another theory of class consciousness which cannot be reduced to Lenin's vanguardism or Luxemburg's spontaneism.⁴² In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács presents an original

⁴² I will only focus on *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács' interpretation of Lenin changes in the late 1920's when he writes *Lenin*, and he conducts a self-criticism in 1960's and abandons his own theory of reification and class consciousness in 1920's. See his "preface" (1967) written for volume 2 of *Lukács Collected Works* published by Luchterhand, the translation of which can be found in the Merlin Press edition of *History and Class Consciousness*. It should also be noted that *History and Class Consciousness* consists of essays written at different times without editing, and thus, the five essays in the book have some internal contradictions. Yet in this paper, I will only deal with the core

theory of class consciousness and reification [*Verdinglichung*] under the influence of Hegelian idealism which differentiates his theory from Lenin and Luxemburg's theories of class consciousness. Not only did Lukács' Hegelian interpretation of Marx have a significant impact on theorists from the Frankfurt School and Humanist Marxists, but his theory of reification also introduces a unique conception of political subjectivity. Lukács' theory of reification is a serious attempt to explain the difficulty of developing the unity of class consciousness due to the fragmentation of the working class. Against economic determinism, he claims that identification with the class consciousness of the proletariat is the key for the successful establishment of socialism. Despite his negation that the contradiction of capitalism determines class consciousness, Lukács' theory of class consciousness is still trapped in the *a priori* privilege of the proletariat and the economy. Consequently, his theory is hardly acceptable today, and the reconstruction of Marx's materialism and the theory of political subjectivity is impossible without abandoning this privilege.

Lukács perceives human history in a Hegelian manner. According to this conception, history is a process in which the unity of the subject and the object is actualized in the totality. Yet he also criticizes Hegel's idealism, which confines the process of the realization of the totality to a mere speculation of the philosopher, and agrees with Marx that the unity of the subject and the object must be realized through *practical activity*. Instead of the *Geist*, the Hegelian subject of history which does not have any concrete existence, Lukács finds in Marx's philosophy the possibility of reaching the final stage of history "where subject and object coincide, where they are

argument of Lukács' theory of class consciousness and reification, so I will ignore the small inconsistent points. Works I referred include Jay, "Georg Lukács and the Origin of the Western Marxist Paradigm" and Arato and Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origin of Western Marxism*.

identical” in revolution by the proletariat.⁴³ The proletariat, for Lukács, is the new subject of history that progresses toward the unification of subject and object.

Hidden under the positing of the proletariat as the subject of history is Lukács’ assumption that human beings are *homo faber*. The essential activity of human is labor, and the external world is produced through that labor. The unification is achieved when the Nature as the Object comes to fully coincide with the expression of the ideas and desires of the Human Subject.⁴⁴ The idea of human beings as *homo faber* asserts that the workers possess the ontological privilege because they are the creator of the world. Combined with a modern belief that the creator has epistemological privilege, this ontological privilege of the worker gives them epistemological privilege, namely, the recognition of the Law of History. For Lukács, it is when the proletariat becomes conscious of the Law and conduct a socialist revolution in accordance with the Law that the Subject and the Object (“thought” and “being” or mind and world) are unified, and the antinomy of freedom and necessity which modern philosophy could not solve is finally transcended in reality.⁴⁵

However, according to Lukács, this actualization of the totality is mystified due to reification, or more precisely “commodity fetishism,” for commodification of the product of labor gives the product the illusionary appearance of an existence independent of human activity. The worker is alienated from his own essential activity as *homo faber* when his product of labor confronts him as an independent

⁴³ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁴ It is worth noting that Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness* before the publication of Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* in 1932. Lukács’ theory of reification is largely based on his own interpretation of the chapter of “Commodity Fetishism” in *Capital*. However, after the discovery of the *1844 Manuscripts*, he started focusing more on the issue of labor, which is natural as he defines human beings as *homo faber*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4.

object, not as the expression of his essence. Furthermore, the subjective activity of the worker is objectified and quantified in capitalism. The quality of labor is abstracted and the uniqueness of individual activity is suppressed; as abstract labor comes to be measured by time, any qualitative differences of labor come to be ignored. The totality which is supposed to be found in the process where the creative activity of the worker transforms the world according to his ideas is suppressed under “false consciousness,” which is only concerned with the quantitative dimension of labor. As a result, the worker in capitalist society is unable to grasp the totality of universe, and cannot bring about a revolution.⁴⁶

Yet Lukács utilizes a Hegelian dialectical turn to transcend the reified consciousness of the proletariat. Even though the workers in the capitalist mode of production suffer from alienation, the possibility for association emerges from the very experience of alienation. Lukács writes: “On the one hand, this transformation of labour into a commodity removes every ‘human’ element from the immediate existence of the proletariat, on the other hand the same development progressively eliminates everything ‘organic’, every direct link with nature from the forms of society so that socialised man can stand revealed in an objectivity remote from or even opposed to humanity.”⁴⁷ Despite the fragmentation and atomization of individuals, the harsh experience of alienation dissolves the particular interests of the workers in such a way that the universal interest of the working class matches with the individual interests; the transcendence of alienation is at the same time the

⁴⁶ It should be noted that a more famous formulation of reification as the misrecognition of the “relations between men” as the “relations between things” is dependent on the quantification and atomization of individuals.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 176.

emancipation of the class and individuals, or even the entirety of humanity when the suffering from alienation is so great. Furthermore, though hidden under reification, the entire world of objects is already transformed into the products of human labor in the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism, as a universal system, prepares the ontological condition for the proletariat as the universal being. Thus, the proletariat is able to attain the unity of the subject and the object through a revolution by proving that the totality of the world is not the ensemble of commodities, but the expression of the human essence as *homo faber*.

Lukács' theory of reification shows how the proletariat can be the universal revolutionary subject despite the fragmentation and atomization in capitalism. However, similar to Lenin and Luxemburg, Lukács recognizes that the objective contradiction of capitalism is not sufficient for the establishment of socialism. Contrary to Gareth Jones who criticizes Lukács for employing "the problematic of the Second International belief in the final, cataclysmic economic collapse of capitalism,"⁴⁸ it seems that Lukács makes a break from the mechanism and determinism of the Second International thinkers. It is true that he believes in the inevitable collapse of capitalism, as he writes, "The natural laws of capitalism do indeed lead inevitably to *its* ultimate crisis but at the end of its road would be the destruction of all civilization and a new barbarism."⁴⁹ Lukács, like other Marxists at that time, thinks that the inevitable collapse of capitalism is determined by the economic contradiction. Yet, he adds that the successful establishment of socialism

⁴⁸ Jones, "The Marxism of the Early Lukács: an Evaluation," 50.

⁴⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 282, emphasis in original.

undetermined is by no means guaranteed, and there is the possibility of “a new barbarism” instead of the total emancipation of human beings.⁵⁰

As Marx argues, it is inevitable that capitalism must periodically go through an economic crisis because of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall over time. That capitalism is a necessarily unstable system due to its internal economic law is a type of determinism which seems to be acceptable even today, and this belief is expressed by Lukács as the insurmountable limitation of capitalism. Lukács distinguishes himself from the determinism of the Second International by problematizing the view that the growing contradiction in capitalism creates the possibility of the proletariat coming to understand the objective interests of the class and the necessity of socialist revolution. What is problematic for Lukács is the notion that contradiction in capitalism will automatically produce specific changes in the consciousness or the ways of thinking of specific groups or actors. There is no guarantee that economic crisis will necessarily lead to the formation of the proletarian class consciousness which understands the necessity of socialist revolution. In other words, the internal contradiction of capitalism does not necessarily result in a political contestation between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This is why Lukács claims that the possibility of “a new barbarism” after economic crises is ineradicable, and the identification of the workers with its class consciousness is required in order to prevent this barbarism and establish true socialism. Avoiding the objectivism that the consciousness is determined by the objective structures, Lukács recognizes the

⁵⁰ Among contemporary Marxists, Immanuel Wallerstein takes this view, as a result of which the theory of political subjectivity is subordinated to the economic law of capitalism, which provides an impression of apocalypticism. Cf. *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization*, 107. I will come back to this point in chapter 3.

necessity of the creation of class consciousness against capitalism, i.e., a universal form of social demand which necessitates the establishment of socialism.

It is natural to question how such a universal demand for socialism can be formed. However, the logic of the production of the universal demand for socialism is not developed by Lukács. Despite the recognition of the necessity to produce a global consciousness with which the masses can identify, its content and its accessibility are predetermined by the Law of History. In order to be a political subject, the masses must identify themselves with the proletarian class consciousness, and there are no other choices. However, access to the proletarian class consciousness is limited to the workers who are both ontologically and epistemologically privileged as the producer of the objective world. This *a priori* privileging of the worker results in Lukács' neglect of other forms of social antagonisms. For Lukács, there is only one possible form of political consciousness. He denies the efficacy of other forms of social struggle in favor of the proletarian class struggle: "We cannot really speak of class consciousness in the case of [other] classes (if, indeed, we can even speak of them as classes in the strict Marxist sense of the term): for a full consciousness of their situation would reveal to them the hopelessness of their particularist striving in the face of the inevitable course of events."⁵¹ Both the ontological and epistemological privileges are given to the proletariat, and so there is no possibility for the other groups to attain political subjectivity. Since political subjectivity is aprioristically limited to the proletariat by the Law of History, the potential forms of universal demand and global consciousness are also predetermined by the economy regardless of particular situations. Consequently, Lukács like other Orthodox Marxists

⁵¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 61.

subordinates the logic of political subjectivity to “determination in the last instance by the economy.”

Lukács’ privilege of the workers is derived from the idea of *homo faber*, but it is criticized for ignoring the importance of other human activities such as communicative action in politics and women’s caregiving.⁵² It is too much to say that the reified relationship has become a “second nature” even if capitalism becomes a universalized system.⁵³ The absence of the multiple dimensions of human activity directly results in the neglect of other forms of oppression and injustice outside economic relations. Lukács’ concept of class consciousness cannot respond to the diverse social demands raised by the new social movements. Lukácsian class consciousness can only claim its universality and demands different movements to identify with it in vain. Lukács assumes that there is the objective content of class consciousness which the Law of History determines independently of the particular historical situation, but he reifies class consciousness outside social practice in treating it as if it exists transcendentally waiting for everyone to identify with it.

Conclusion: The Departure from Economic Determinism

Through the critique of four Orthodox Marxists, I aim to show that all of them privilege the proletariat and the economy in the process of the formation of political subjectivity. As a result, moments of great theoretical advancement in the theory of political subjectivity are suppressed by economic determinism. The problem of

⁵² See Honneth, *Reification*, 21-28.

⁵³ *History and Class Consciousness*, 19.

economic determinism is that it posits the proletariat as the only form of political subjectivity and demands the subordination of other interests to the proletarian class consciousness, i.e., “the objective interests of the working class.” This *a priori* form of the proletarian political subjectivity derived from the economic base ignores the important differences of particular situations. However, as Lukács seems to have recognized, there is no guarantee that economic crisis due to the contradiction of capitalism will lead to the emergence of a universal demand for socialism. Contradiction between the relations of production and productive force may end up creating “a new barbarism” without producing an adequate form of the universal demand by which political struggle can be mobilized.

Contrary to Lukács’ belief, it is not necessary that a global consciousness always be the proletarian class consciousness. Luxemburg’s spontaneism precisely implies this overdeterministic character of revolution, which makes it impossible to determine the course of revolution in a transcendent manner because of the existence of various social elements which influence each other. Instead of limiting the possible form of political subjectivity to the proletariat, it is necessary to recognize the plurality of social antagonisms, and the materialist theory of political subjectivity must base itself on this plurality of subjects in reality. The absence of the recognition of a plurality of social antagonisms or its reduction to the economic antagonism of the proletariat will reveal the authoritarian and manipulative character of Leninist political organization. As long as the economy gives the privileged subject position to the proletariat, it is almost impossible to avoid the criticism that Marxism is merely economic determinism. After the emergence of new social movements, it is

reductionistic to claim that class as the fundamental antagonism mediates all other antagonisms and that socialist revolution will bring a total emancipation of all humans.

Thus, the reformulation of the Marxist theory of political subjectivity must abandon the *a priori* privilege of the proletariat and the conception of the economy as “the ultimately determining force.” Naturally, the reformulation includes the abandonment of the metaphysical belief in the Law of History, which all Orthodox Marxists believed in. The reductionistic tendency of Orthodox Marxism resulted in the crisis of Marxism in the 1960’s. Revolution anticipated by the Law did not occur, the Terror of Stalinism questioned the legitimacy of “actually existing socialism” and the CP’s dogmas, and a plurality of new social movements challenged the central position of the working class in the social movement. Confronting the crisis of Marxism, Marxist Humanists and Louis Althusser attempt to save Marx by presenting a more authentic understanding of his materialism. They criticize the naïve belief in the Law of History and reject the simple causal relation between politics as the superstructure and the economy as the base. They try to account for the possibility of socialism based on the recognition of the overdeterministic and contingent character of social formation.

2

Saving the “Authentic” Marx? *Humanist Controversy*

After Khrushchev’s “secret speech” at the twentieth Party Congress in 1956 which revealed Stalin’s terror and crimes, some Marxists started to question the legitimacy of the U.S.S.R. and the CPSU’s dogmatism. Though Khrushchev urged the necessity of de-Stalinization, his subsequent suppression of the democratic revolt in Hungary only increased the suspicion among intellectuals of the authority of the CPSU. Humanist Marxism and Althusser’s scientific Marxism were put forward to liberate Marx from the CPSU’s mechanistic interpretation.¹ Humanist Marxists challenged the CP’s dogmatism with a new interpretation of Marx’s theory of alienation found in his *1844 Manuscripts*. Criticizing the humanist concept of alienation for assuming a *telos* of history, Louis Althusser put forward the idea of Marx’s *epistemological break* in 1845. He argued that the correct interpretation of Marx can be found in his critique of political economy in *Capital*. A famous “humanist controversy” emerged from these two completely different interpretations of Marx. Despite their apparent differences, both humanism and anti-humanism

¹ The critique against the dogmatic understanding of Marx by the CP can be dated earlier. For example, in *Minima Moralia* published originally in German in 1951, Theodor W. Adorno argued that the traditional Marxist critique of ideology was itself “ideology.” According to him, the Marxist tendency to overemphasize the “almighty production process” and to reduce everything to its material origin is dogmatic. It is not materialist at all but ideological because Marxists only impose the method on particular situations and distort reality so that the method can perfectly explain it. See Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 43.

shared the motive to de-Stalinize Marx and save the “authentic” Marx from what they both regarded as the CPSU’s dogmatic understanding of Marx.

This chapter assesses how humanist Marxism or Althusser’s Marxism attempts to overcome the crisis of Marxism due to its economic and objective determinism. Because of the necessity to reject the CPSU’s dogmatism and to account for the diverse and plural demands of the new social movements after 1968, both humanists and Althusser emphasize the overdeterministic and contingent character of social practice. They recognize that the necessity of revolution cannot be simply justified by the Law of History because “determination in the last instance by the economy” cannot be naively claimed, if one takes the complexity of social relations seriously. Confronting the crisis of Marxism and socialist ideal, these new movements make a break from economic determinism and present a non-deterministic theory of political subjectivity.

Although humanist Marxism includes a wide range of theorists, I will discuss only Eric Fromm and Mihailo Marković, not because their theories are better than others, but because Fromm’s theory of alienation embodies the form of humanist Marxism that Althusser criticizes. I will show that Althusser’s criticism of humanist Marxism as determinism is insufficient, as it does not apply to other types of humanism besides Fromm’s. In fact, Marković avoids his criticism through his rejection of both determinism and radical indeterminism and aims to show how humans can adopt strategies which can lead to progress despite conditions imposed by given historical circumstances.

Marković focuses on how the political subject can choose the best strategy, but Althusser's anti-humanism denies possibility of such agency. He is more concerned with how the objective processes of social formation in capitalism results in a certain course of history. By adopting the concept of *overdetermination* and *aleatory materialism*, Althusser aims to determine the relationship between the heterogeneous and contingent social processes and the necessity of revolution. In spite of these great theoretical advances of Marxism, I will show that both Marković and Althusser fail to develop a new materialism which can adequately account for the plurality and contingency of social practices.

Religious Determinism of Fromm's Humanism

In *Marx's Concept of Man*, Fromm attempts to build a theory of Humanist Marxism based on Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*. He explicitly states his opposition to the CPSU's interpretation of Marx and writes that his aim is to understand "the real meaning of Marxist thought" and to "differentiate it from Russian and Chinese pseudo-Marxism."² Fromm argues that the true meaning of Marx's philosophy is "a protest against man's alienation," and thus its aim is to transcend this alienation of man and to empower him for the full actualization of his potentialities. This is a basic understanding of Marx among Marxist humanists, and their focus on man's creativity and potentiality is opposed to the mechanistic and evolutionist understanding of the CPSU's historical materialism which destroys human agency.

² Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, ix.

Fromm claims that in capitalist society “man” is alienated from his own essence because he is deprived of freedom of self-realization. Man is unable to realize his potentials, and his activity appears hostile to him, instead of providing a moment for self-realization. Fromm’s concept of alienation is borrowed from Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*. In the chapter entitled “Estranged Labour” in the “First Manuscript,” Marx develops his theory of the alienation of labor. He claims that the worker is alienated in at least three different ways: “alienation from his own products,” “alienation from his own labour” and “alienation from Man’s species being.”³ It will be helpful to see briefly how Marx defines the three types of alienation (*Entfremdung*) and estrangement (*Entäusserung*).⁴

According to Marx, under the private property system, “objectification appear[s] as loss of the object”⁵ and the worker is alienated from his own product because what the worker produces does not belong to him, but to the capitalist who owns the means of production. Marx argues that the worker is also alienated from himself and writes, “He does not affirm himself but denies himself.”⁶ His activity is hostile to him in the private property system because he works not for the sake to realize his potentialities but for his own physical subsistence: “His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour.”⁷ From these two forms of alienation

³ Marx mentions the fourth type of alienation, “alienation of man from man,” but I do not include it here because this kind of alienation is not elaborated in the section of “Estranged Labour.”

⁴ Marx gives the same meaning to those two words, so I do not distinguish them here. See Fujino, *Shitekiyuibutsuron to Rinrigaku* [Historical Materialism and the Ethics], 263-267.

⁵ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” 272.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁷ *Ibid.*

on an individual level, the third and a universal form of alienation, alienation from “man as a species-being,” occurs.⁸

Marx argues that man’s essential activity is labor because labor reveals man’s unique capacity: Man can objectify universality on both the theoretical and practical levels. Contrary to animals that are fully contained in the particularity of a given environment, the conscious life activity of man is not restricted to the particularity of a given situation to which one currently belongs; rather one can consciously and freely work on the external world and transform it in accordance with one’s desires. This universal dimension of labor is man’s unique characteristic as a “species-being,” and this is why Marx claims that labor is the “free activity” for man. Through labor, argues Marx, man can transform external nature into his “inorganic body” as he alters the world in accordance with his own ideals.⁹ However, in capitalist society, where individuals are alienated from their own labor and forced to work for mere physical subsistence, our activity as species-beings also comes to be alienated because “estranged labour makes man’s species-life a means to his physical existence.”¹⁰ The worker is trapped in poverty, and can only reproduce his bare life, a goal that totally lacks the universal dimension of labor. Consequently, our universality is dominated by the particular need of individual beings.

Fromm endorses Marx’s theory of alienation and writes: “Labour is the self-expression of man, an expression of his individual physical and material powers, In

⁸ This third type of alienation is extremely important for the Young Marx and the humanists because historically workers did not possess their own products under the slavery system and the feudal system. What makes capitalism a unique system is that humanity attains for the first time the possibility of realizing its universality through the transcendence of capitalism because it is the first universal system in history.

⁹ Ibid., 277.

¹⁰ Ibid.

this process of genuine activity man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end — the product — but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy; hence work is enjoyable.”¹¹ According to Fromm, the activity of labor must be a free activity, instead of the enslavement of the worker to the capitalist, each person should be able to express his or her own uniqueness and creativity in the activity of labor, so that the essence of man as a “species-being” can be realized. However, trapped in a structure of domination, man is unable to be self-realizing through labor. For humanists like Fromm, this alienation of labor must be transcended for the sake of the realization of one’s potentials; human history is a process in which we overcome alienation and finally regain our own universal essence as “a species-being,” which can be described in a Hegelian manner as the moment of the unification of the particular and the universal, ideal and the external world, and the Subject and the Object.

In Marx’s theory of alienation, the Young Hegelian influence, especially from Feuerbach, is easy to discern, and this means that Fromm’s humanist theory is tightly connected to the Feuerbachian problematic. In his *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach developed a critique of religion as a form of alienation.¹² According to Feuerbach, individuals suffer from believing in God because individuals who are finite beings express their powerlessness by imagining an infinite being, i.e., God. This religious alienation can be overcome when they recognize that the almighty God is actually nothing but a projection of the human capacity for freedom. In other words, God is a product of man’s imagination, which acquired an illusory independence, but the

¹¹ Fromm, *Marx’s concept of Man*, 40.

¹² See esp. Part 1.

creation of the illusion of the almighty God already implies the universal power of “Man as a species-being.” Even though individual beings are finite, “Man as a species-being” is unbounded and universal. Feuerbach claims that Man can regain his essence through the “intuition” of truth. The history of Man is completed when his existence is identified with his own alienated spiritual object, i.e., God.

Similarly, Fromm claims that human history is a process of overcoming alienation with our own power of labor. It is true that history for Fromm is a process of self-realization in a *real* activity of labor, not within consciousness as Feuerbach argues. But it is clear that Fromm’s interpretation of the *1844 Manuscripts* basically applies Feuerbach’s theory of religion to the economy. Individuals are alienated in labor, but history is a process in which Man as a “species-being” attains the unification of mind and world through the modification of nature. History reaches to the highest stage when the worker (Subject) freely expresses himself in his own products (Object). The conditions for this unification between Subject and Object are prepared, as humans objectify nature more and more universally through the development of capitalism.

We can recognize the great theoretical contribution Marx made in 1844, but must nonetheless reject Fromm’s uncritical use of Marx’s theory of alienation.¹³

Fromm’s clear limitation is his usage of the Messianic *telos* of human history which

¹³ The theoretical problems of the *1844 Manuscripts* have been demonstrated by various scholars, and Marx himself seems to be aware of these problems. In fact, Marx did not publish the *1844 Manuscripts* despite his initial plan, and more notably he came to harshly criticize Feuerbach’s problematic in his “Theses on Feuerbach.” As Althusser claims in “Humanist Controversy,” this implies that Marx also abandoned his own humanistic understanding of alienation after 1845. For the theoretical problems of the *1844 Manuscripts*, which I cannot discuss in details, see Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s conception of man in capitalist society* and Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 96-123. However, the most sophisticated versions of critique of alienation on which I employ are given in *Marx Kommentar*, vol. 2 [Commentary on Marx], and Hitomatsu, *Bussyoukaron no Kouzu* [The Schema of the Theory of Reification].

replaces the Marxist economic Law of History.¹⁴ As seen above, Fromm's conception of human history is a process of de-alienation. This process of "unification → alienation → reunification" requires a theoretical justification because it is not clear how reunification can be achieved after the stage of alienation. Though it is not necessarily wrong to imagine an ideal stage of history whose realization we should strive for, a non-utopian revolutionary theory must justify the possibility of its realization. Surprisingly, Fromm's justification is the religious *telos*. Comparing Marx's philosophy of history with "the Messianic hope of the Old Testament prophets,"¹⁵ Fromm reduces human history to the religious incarnation: "In this productive process, man realizes his own essence, he *returns to his own essence*, which in theological language is nothing other than *his return to God*."¹⁶ For Fromm, alienation is "sin."¹⁷ Fromm's historical process of de-alienation is a transformation of the old religious process of "God → Man (incarnation) → God," which simply assumes the necessity of the return to the original state. In this theological conception of alienation, it is sufficient for Fromm to point out the existence of the original utopia, the undifferentiated unity of the tribal society, and the current forms of alienation in capitalist society to justify his belief in a utopian future. Consequently, Fromm fails to explain *how* it is possible to overcome alienation in concrete terms. The workers are supposed to make a historical development by overcoming capitalism, but we cannot know from Fromm how they can actually overcome it

¹⁴ Furthermore, Fromm's conception of "man" is based on the notion of *homo faber*, and my criticism of *homo faber* against Lukács also applies to Fromm.

¹⁵ Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30, emphasize added.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

except that the predetermined *telos* of history supposedly proves the necessity of de-alienation.

Fromm's understanding of historical change makes a theoretical retreat even from the Young Hegelians. The religious model of history is precisely what the Young Marx and other Young Hegelians rejected when they were criticizing religion as an illusion. The task of the Young Hegelian movement was to discard the religious view of human history which was inscribed in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The Young Hegelians tried to demonstrate how alienation occurred in reality and what the conditions for its transcendence are. In other words, they aimed to explain the development of history with concrete reasons, as Marx conceived the capitalist mode of production to be both the cause of alienation and the conditions for its transcendence.¹⁸ However, once he succeeded in showing how the transcendence is possible in concrete terms, the religious conception of "unification → alienation → reunification" is no longer necessary in order to assert the necessity of de-alienation.¹⁹

Fromm also misunderstands Marx's notion of "species-being" as a kind of Platonic form or static "Essence" which exists independently of historical and social conditions. While Feuerbach's concept of Man as a species-being is static, Marx had already recognized in 1844 that there is no fixed human essence and defines the

¹⁸ In fact, the development of Marx's materialism led to his abandonment of the Feuerbachian schema of alienation which implicitly contains a religious implication, and Marx came to understand alienation in terms of reification as a restriction of the thought and action which is imposed upon a social being. For a detailed account of how Marx overcame the Feuerbachian problematic, see Hiromatsu, *Marukususyugi no Chihei* [The Horizon of Marxism].

¹⁹ Fromm's notion of the return to the original state is inadequate as an understanding of Marx's conception of history. The undifferentiated unity of the primitive society is based on the fact that we are not conscious of ourselves as distinct nature. Thus, humans are controlled by the force of nature and do not have freedom and power to alter nature in accordance of their ideas and desires. By overcoming class society, the higher type of the unity can be attained. Now we consciously separate ourselves from nature and objectify it. We can deliberately shape nature to our own ends and see the external world as the expression of human purpose.

essence of Man not on the basis of the abstract totality of Man, but on concrete individuals in reality and their activities. When Marx gives a concrete definition to the concept of a species-being as “social activity and social enjoyment,” he indicates that a species-being is a “relationship” between individuals established through social intercourses and exchanges as they mutually enjoy their activities and abilities. Marx continues that “men not as an abstraction, but as real, living, particular individuals, *are* this essence”²⁰ The essence of species-being as a capacity to universally shape the external world to our ends is a very product of historical development of capitalism as a universal system. For Marx, the human essence is defined by individuals’ activity under definite social and material relations.²¹

In sum, Fromm’s interpretation of Marx’s theory of alienation is a theological and idealist one which ignores the importance of the analysis of concrete situations and political struggles for the transcendence of alienation. Althusser’s critique of humanism can be applied to Fromm’s humanism. He mocks the humanist interpretation of Marx’s theory of alienation and writes:

History is the alienation and production of reason in unreason, of the true man in the alienated man. Without knowing it, man realizes the essence of man in the alienated products of his labour (commodities, State, religion). The loss of man that produces history and man must presuppose a definite pre-existing essence. At the end of history, this man, having become inhuman objectivity, has merely to re-grasp as subject his own essence alienated in property, religion and the State to become total man, true man.²²

²⁰ Marx, “Comments on James Mill,” 217.

²¹ The clearer version of Marx’s critique of static essence is found in his “Sixth Thesis”: “Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man [*menschliche Wesen* = ‘human essence’]. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations” (“Thesis on Feuerbach,” 4). Here Marx makes it extremely clear that “human essence” is a product of definite social and material relations.

²² Althusser, *For Marx*, 226. Althusser argues that Marx made an “epistemological break” in 1845 and completely abandoned the theory of alienation. Even if Marx underwent a significant change after *The German Ideology*, Althusser’s claims is insufficient at least for two reasons. First, Marx keeps employing the concept of alienation even after 1845, especially in the *Grundrisse*, but Althusser only

Althusser maintains that the concept of alienation presupposes the moment of de-alienation, and this logic of “the negation of the negation” is nothing but a *telos* of history, and thus deterministic. For Althusser, Fromm’s Messianic view of history is the other side of the coin of the CPSU’s mechanistic determinism. Both humanism and Stalinism believe that the Law of History is sufficient to bring out the transformation to socialism. The negation of the negation is presumed to happen, so there is no description of how *actual* individuals who are oppressed and marginalized in society form a social movement in order to realize their social demands. Despite Fromm’s intention to provide a new interpretation of Marx’s theory of social change, he and the CPSU ironically share the same deterministic view of historical progress. Althusser argues that the coincidence of humanism and Stalinism became more obvious because Stalinism itself took a humanist turn after Khrushchev’s “secret speech.” For Althusser, humanism is a type of “bourgeois ideology” which hinders revolution, and Marxism must be saved from its internal crisis.²³

Fromm’s deterministic view of history only worsens the crisis of Marxism, and is hardly acceptable today. However, the limitation of his humanism is not that of humanist Marxism as a whole. In this sense, Althusser’s critique of humanist Marxism is not sufficient to reject all humanist Marxist theories. Since he completely rejects the theoretical importance of the Marx’s texts before 1845 as ideological, he claims as if he can dismisses any humanist theory which employs these texts.

denounces it as a reminiscence of the Feuerbachian problematic without seriously considering why Marx maintained the concept of alienation despite his harsh criticism of Feuerbach after 1845. Secondly, it is hard to accept Althusser’s claim that any theory of alienation is a form of determinism. In fact, there are recent attempts to rethink Marx’s theory of alienation without assuming any *telos* of history. See Haber, *L’aliénation*.

²³ Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, 15.

Consequently, he neglects the significant differences among humanist Marxists, including Fromm, Sartre, Goldman, and Marković. Althusser's criticism of humanism is reductionistic. As an example, I will deal with Marković's humanism in the next section and show how he avoids Althusser's criticism and provides a non-deterministic model of humanist politics and a theory of social change.

The Dissolution of the Particularity and the Reduction of the Plurality

Mihailo Marković was a leading thinker of the Praxis School, a Marxist humanist movement in Yugoslavia in the 1960s and the 1970s. In *From Affluence to Praxis*, he provides a different understanding of human history from Fromm's determinism. Marković rejects both deterministic and indeterministic view of history. He rejects determinism because it reduces human beings to mere things and neglects the power of unpredictable human actions which can result from "sudden eruptive, qualitative changes of human habits," such as satiety, revolt and despair.²⁴ He also rejects radical indeterminism because it falsely assumes that all possibilities are open at all times. Humans are not free to act as they might wish, but are conditioned by various structural and historical elements, which impose certain limits upon human behavior. Rather, Marković claims that "there are *several possible futures* and one of them *has to be made*."²⁵ We are required to make a decision to realize one possibility from several possible futures in a given historical situation. An adequate decision may lead

²⁴ Marković, *From Affluence to Praxis*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, emphasis in original.

history toward an unfavorable direction, so it becomes crucial to choose “the optimal historical possibility.”²⁶

In order to discern the optimal possibility, philosophy plays an important role for Marković. The task of philosophy is to theoretically express “a global ideal of a whole historical epoch.”²⁷ Philosophy provides the critical awareness of the limitations inherent in the present situation and reveals the concrete possibilities to overcome them in order to realize human ideals. Marković agrees with Lukács that, in a modern capitalist society, individuals often behave as things due to reification, yet the power of reification does not reduce human subjectivity to a mere effect of the objective social structure. On the contrary, Marković claims that “the determining condition of many events is ... the awareness of a certain goal and an intention to realize that goal.”²⁸ Critical theory empowers us to “control our own powers, to reflect about them critically and rationally, and to improve our future ways of acting.”²⁹ Philosophy enables us to analyze the current situation and discern the best choice available for us. For Marković, “praxis” is this type of activity which allows us to realize the optimal possibility for humanity.

Marković distinguishes *praxis* from *labor* and *work*.³⁰ *Alienated labor* is a loss of freedom and power and the confinement in one-dimensional activity. Marković’s rejection of economic determinism can be seen in his claim that *homo*

²⁶ Ibid., 35.

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁸ Ibid., 18.

²⁹ Ibid., 23.

³⁰ This distinction of human activity seems better than Hannah Arendt’s. Marković avoids a hierarchy among human activities, while Arendt clearly favors “action,” a communicative action which is manifested in politics. However, Marković would criticize Arendt for restricting the sphere of free activity to politics and thus confines human to one-dimensional man, *homo politicus*. Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, chap 1.

faber is a form of alienated labor because it reduces the plural dimensions of human activity to a single activity of labor.³¹ *Work* is an activity which is required for human survival and development in any type of society. It is not necessarily degrading and oppressive, but it is a mere means for subsistence rather than expressive and self-realizing activities. Contrary to the other two types of activity, *praxis* is an “*end in itself*” and realizes “the *optimal* potentialities” of individuals.³² In alienated labor, one is not able to realize one’s own full potentialities and creativity, but only to use a certain skill which is needed for the given end. The professional division of work also forces the worker to remain within a narrow and one-sided activity. On the contrary, genuine *praxis* allows free expression of the creativity and rationality of individuals and furthermore builds mutual bonds among individuals and transforms them into social beings, i.e., *species-beings*. Instead of working for wage and success, which are particular and individualistic, we can recognize through *praxis* that our activities are enriching the lives of others and that each one is a part of the *universality* of entire humanity. Marković argues that *praxis* liberates the worker from the simple repetition of the same activity and provides the opportunity for the self-realization through his creative and multidimensional activities. Privileging of economic activity is an inadequate political choice for Marković, he claims that self-realization and freedom must be achieved through the liberation of the universal dimension of human activity.³³

³¹ Marković, *From Affluence to Praxis*, 63. Marković avoids Lukács and Fromm’s error of giving the proletariat ontological and epistemological privileges in an *a priori* manner.

³² *Ibid.*, 64 emphasis in original.

³³ Marković also avoids an economic determinist account of history. For Marković, there is no *telos* of history which guarantees that the economic contradiction of capitalism will establish socialism. There are always several possible futures and it is possible that “a new barbarism” (Lukács) can emerge by

Since praxis is concerned with the universal interest of humanity, the political subject who decides which possibility as optimal must not only be the workers. Even the objective interest of the working class is not universal enough for the general interest of humanity because a single class interest can only be fully universal if we ignore diverse human activities. The limits of society which prevent the self-realization of human life can be found not only in economic activity, but in various other activities as well. Different types of awareness of a limit must be integrated to an “ultimate revolutionary goal”³⁴ which constitutes the unity of the political subject that seeks to overcome an essential limit of society, namely revolution: “*The essential characteristic of revolution is a radical transcendence of the essential internal limit of a certain social formation.*”³⁵ There is no guarantee that the proletariat is the subject of revolution, for the essential limit of society hinders human praxis which includes various human activities. Marković’s theory of revolution recognizes the plurality of subjects who demand emancipation from different forms of alienation in the present society. He escapes the problem of privileging of the proletariat and the economy on which the Orthodox Marxists depended.

However, the question remains of how an “ultimate revolutionary goal” can be constructed, so that the masses can be unified. As seen above, Marković broadens the category of praxis to include a plurality of human activities other than “labor.” Since human activities are diverse and multi-dimensional, the experience of the

choosing an unfavorable possibility. This is why we must recognize the optimal possibility, but even then there is no guarantee that it will be realized in reality. The political subject must take “a risk”: “there is no certainty that our undertaking will not bring about a considerably different society from the one anticipated, or raise quite new and unsuspected problems, or eventually turn out to be a tragic defeat and the loss of noblest human energy” (ibid., 212). In this sentence, it is easy to see the break from the deterministic belief in the Law of History.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 191, emphasis in original.

limitation should differ significantly among individuals, depending on what kind of activities one is engaged in. Because the obstacles for the self-realization are diverse and plural, there will be a plurality of particular social demands. Marković claims that revolution cannot be achieved “by *ad hoc* efforts of individuals and small groups” but “only by a social movement, by a conscious and coordinated practical engagement of large social collectives.”³⁶ In order to produce a mass social movement, it is necessary to incorporate these diverse social demands to the universal goal of revolution.

According to Marković, it is philosophy that unifies diverse particular demands by providing a universal ideal, as he claims that “philosophy is a theoretical expression of a global human ideal of a whole historical epoch.”³⁷ He believes that philosophy can integrate different movements by providing an awareness both of the universal human ideal and of the essential limits of existing order of society. Philosophy is necessary because it is difficult for the masses to be aware of the optimal possibility by themselves: “All people, at least in some better moments of their life act in that way. However, for the vast majority of mankind those better moments are relatively rare.”³⁸ If the masses rarely gain the awareness of the universal ideal, then they must, presumably, be made aware of the ideal by the philosophers, and we have seen the dangers in that notion.

Even if highly abstract theory concerning a universal human ideal cannot be produced by the masses but only by intellectuals, the masses should be able to use the ideal adequately and to use it as a guide to attain freedom and self-realization.

³⁶ Ibid., 210.

³⁷ Ibid., 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 67.

However, Marković does not even consider the conditions necessary for the masses to understand a particular theory and adopt it to direct their actions and demands. His lack of any discussion concerning the equal and democratic relationship between the philosopher and the masses results in the possibility that the masses will be manipulated by the elite. Consequently and ironically, Marković's theory of organization leaves open the possibility of reproducing a kind of Leninism. In a worst case, the masses can be manipulated in a reactionary and particularistic way, since their lack of an adequate understanding of theory could result in their mobilization for an *ideological* totality, such as chauvinistic nationalism or religious fundamentalism.

This danger of elitism is rooted in Marković's modernist belief in the superiority of the universal over the particular. He emphasizes that the awareness of the universal ideal is extremely important in order to guide social practice in such a way that it will bring out a desirable consequence for humanity as a whole. Philosophy provides a universal ideal with which the masses, who are alienated, can identify. In other words, Marković thinks the collective social movement emerges when the particularities of social demand dissolve in front of the universal ideal. However, it is questionable if philosophy can provide such universality. In fact, Marković himself denies the possibility that philosophy provides "the totality of the universe" because it is always contaminated by subjective factors: "No matter how objective, philosophy is essentially human, it is a product of human practice and a phenomenon of human history."³⁹ Marković recognizes that philosophy is inevitably conditioned by a certain historical, social and cultural elements, as long as it is a product of human practice within a structural and historical context.

³⁹ Ibid., 2.

This rejection of the transcendent position of philosopher is close to Marx's materialist position which he expresses in the Third Thesis: "The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated."⁴⁰ Marx warns against Feuerbach that even the eyes of the philosopher are not free from the particularity in a sense that philosopher is situated within certain historical conditions. Thus, even "the educator" (the philosopher, i.e., Feuerbach) who desires to enlighten the masses with Truth is not in a transcendent position. Ahistorical objectivity and transcendent universality are not attainable even for philosophers as their consciousness is itself "a social product."⁴¹ Philosophical consciousness has no transcendence over social practice, but, on the contrary, it is a part of social practice. As a result, the ideal which philosopher presents can only be a *perspective* based on his or her position within social relations, not a Truth which exists independently of human practice. Grasping Marx's materialistic understanding of truth, Marković's materialist conception of truth does make a break from the idealism of Orthodox Marxism which assumes access to the Truth of the world, such as the Law of History or "determination in the last instance by the economy."

However, Marković does not maintain his own materialism in his discussion of politics. He recognizes that structural and historical contexts negate the possibility

⁴⁰ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 4. This thesis is a direct critique against Feuerbach who writes in *Principles of Philosophy of the Future*; "All is therefore capable of being perceived through the senses, even if only in a mediated and not immediate way, even if not with the help of crude and vulgar senses, but only through those that are cultivated; even if not with the eyes of the anatomist and the chemist, but only with those of the philosopher" (58). Feuerbach maintains that the sophisticated eyes of the philosopher can perceive the truth through "intuition," even if normal people are deceived by an illusion. See Sasaki, "Marx niokeru Houhou toshiteno Yuibutsuron" [Marx's Materialism as Method], 42-45. As I will show below, Marković's understanding of philosophy is closer to Feuerbach's.

⁴¹ Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 44.

of an ahistorical concept of the universal, and that philosophy is always conditioned by factors specific to each philosopher. Nonetheless, Marković assumes in philosophy the “tendency toward maximum objectivity.”⁴² *Within* a particular structural and historical context, he argues, philosophy can overcome particular and individualistic interests and so provide an objective form of universality. He confirms the superior power of philosophical knowledge which allows us to distinguish the universal ideal of humanity to which all the particularity surrenders. According to Marković, the plurality of social demands reflecting the many-sidedness of human needs and capacities can be incorporated into a humanist ideal within a particular context.

Marković’s account is, however, question-begging because he does not explain how the plurality of social demands can be integrated into a universal ideal. He simply assumes the existence of a universal ideal, rather than showing how it is possible. His belief in the ability of philosophy to offer a universal ideal is doubtful given the absence of such an ideal which can integrate the fragmentation of today’s social demands.⁴³ Unless he can concretely propose a universal ideal which actually integrates different groups, the philosopher’s transcendent position of providing the “maximum objectivity” remains a myth. Marković’s belief in the universality of truth seems idealist in the political sphere where today’s new social movements demand the recognition of “difference,” not a difference-blind universality.

⁴² Marković, *From Affluence to Praxis*, 36.

⁴³ Marković may object that he does not believe in the human universality which can actually contain the entire humanity and that his theory of “self-governance” recognizes the necessity of small community so that universal assent can be more easily attained. The problem is that even in a small community, the possibility of antagonism is irreducible. Secondly, due to globalization, there are issues that cannot be solved within a community, but only on the level of humanity as a whole. Thus, self-governance is insufficient to resolve the problems of contestation of different demands, which is inherent to politics. For the discussion of the self-governance by the Praxis School thinkers, see Marković et al., *The Self-Governing Socialism*.

Marković's humanism becomes abstract and idealist when he claims the transcendence of philosophical truth. Rather, materialistic understanding of the world requires a recognition of the impossibility of reaching a transcendent Truth. This materialist recognition of "fallibilism" has a political implication. If there is no ahistorical concept of the universal, any universal claim in politics will necessarily reflect particular interests and ideals, and thus imposed on others; hence the impossibility of the universal assent. There is no guarantee that a universal claim in politics can adequately incorporate all legitimate interests and demands, and so political program should be based on the expectation of social antagonism and ongoing contestation. Privileging the humanist form of the universal in *a priori* manner, Marković is unable to give an account of why the humanist vision of universality can incorporate all legitimate social demands. Consequently, he misses the real dynamics of the politics that the contestation among the different social demands is irreducible possibility.

Materialist politics should also recognize that, confronting fragmented social demands, the philosopher cannot simply *enlighten* the masses to change consciousness in accordance with a humanist ideal. Rather, particularity of interests and ideas can be unified only through practice, as Marx states in the Third Thesis: "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*."⁴⁴ Contrary to Marković and Feuerbach, identification with the universal ideal cannot be realized by philosophical Enlightenment. Political identity and demand must be constructed and negotiated through practice because what is optimal for people

⁴⁴ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 4.

cannot be determined in the abstract and then applied to practice, but it is formulated in and through practice.

Trapped in the modern belief of the superiority and power of the universal, Marković's theory of political subjectivity replaces Marx's emphasis on practice with the Feuerbachian Enlightenment of the masses by the philosopher. However, the plurality of today's social movements challenges Marković's belief that philosophy can provide an objective truth even within a particular circumstance. There is no guarantee that the universal political claim can include all legitimate demands because the transcendent universality is unreachable as Marx claims. Once this impossibility of pure objectivity and totality is accepted, the philosophical nostalgia for the unification of all the particularity by the transcendent universality must be abandoned. In other words, a post-Marxist theory of political subjectivity needs to found itself upon the recognition of the impossibility of the universal assent and the possibility of ongoing political contestation.

Philosophy of the Encounter: the Oscillation of Althusser's Materialism

If the theoretical difficulty of Marković's humanist Marxism is derived from his belief in the existence of the transcendent universality, Althusser's materialism focuses on the particular. As is clear from his harsh criticism that the humanist theory of alienation is deterministic, Althusser's philosophy aims to reject any form of determinism and to conceptualize the complexity and heterogeneity of the processes of social formation. His attempt to save the authentic Marx from the determinism of

both Stalinism and humanism is exemplified in his discussion of “overdetermination.”⁴⁵ Althusser argues that the Marxist concept of contradiction must be reexamined in order to overcome Hegelian idealism. Both Stalinism and humanist Marxism are Hegelian in that they assume a single contradiction in history, i.e., economic contradiction in one case and alienation in the other. However, Althusser claims that the concrete analysis of the particular situation requires a more sophisticated theory of contradiction.

In his essay, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” Althusser starts his analysis by asking, “How was this revolution *possible* in Russia, why was it *victorious* there?”⁴⁶ It is necessary for Marxists to explain why revolution did not happen in developed countries, contrary to Marx’s anticipation, but happened in the backward countries such as Russia and China. As Lenin’s concept of “weakest link” suggests, these historical examples prove that the main contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces is not sufficient to cause a “revolutionary situation.” Each particular historical situation has a different set of contradictions which influence each other, and even the main contradiction is “radically affected by [its formal conditions of existence], determining, but also determined in one and the same movement.”⁴⁷ Thus, the growth of the economic contradiction is also overdetermined by other historical contradictions, and there is no

⁴⁵ Despite his criticism of the CPSU’s determinism, Althusser always remained as a member of the PCF and supported it. His attempt to save Marx from the crisis is motivated by his hope to reestablish the Party for the sake of socialist revolution. His dual support of both PCF doctrines and Maoist movements was criticized by Rancière and Badiou, who held this that Althusser was only a theorist of the Party. See Rancière *La leçon d’Althusser*, and Badiou and Balmès, *De l’idéologie*. In English, Elliott, *Althusser: the Detour of Theory*.

⁴⁶ Althusser, *For Marx*, 95, emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

guarantee that a revolution will happen merely because of the development of the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces.

Althusser's concept of *overdetermination* emphasizes the complication and heterogeneity of historical processes. He argues that contradictions in society influence each other, and it is impossible to reduce the heterogeneity of social formation to a single Law of History. One may object that it is only common sense to suppose that a real historical process contains various contradictions. Althusser's concept of overdetermination goes beyond that objection because his emphasis is that social relations do not have the fixed nature. They cannot be described by any given "Law" and must be seen as precarious and unstable. It follows that a call for revolution must be formulated from the exceptional character of each situation, not from a general social theory: "An apparently single contradiction is *always* overdetermined. The exception thus discovers in itself the rule, the rule of the rule, and the old 'exceptions' must be regarded as methodologically simple examples of the *new rule*."⁴⁸ Althusser claims that the "exceptional" circumstances to the traditional Marxist conception of history are now the new rule.

One may object that on this account it would be impossible to understand any historical process. Althusser is aware of this criticism, and claims that the task is to understand the logic of overdetermination and elaborate its relation with the Marxist historical materialism. In other words, Althusser aims to prove that the economic contradiction in capitalism will necessarily lead to the establishment of socialism even when it is overdetermined by other social contradictions. Without demonstrating this "*necessary link*" between the logic of overdetermination and the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 106.

validity of the Marxist understanding of historical development, the category of overdetermination “will remain up in the air.”⁴⁹ However, if his concept of overdetermination is based on the recognition of the contingent character of social phenomena, he faces to an *aporia* to prove the universal validity of the Marxist Law of History from the contingency that is inherent in historical processes. In this essay written in 1962, he admits that the justification of the theory of overdetermination is a task for the future: “The relation between these accidents and this necessity is neither established nor made explicit.... We do not know whether this necessity is really the necessity of these accidents, and, if it is, why it is. *This question is left unanswered.*”⁵⁰

Althusser’s concept of overdetermination that emphasizes the contingent character of social phenomena sits uncomfortably with his belief in the Law of History. Laclau and Mouffe argue that Althusser is unable to abandon determinism: “If society has a last instance which determines its laws of motion, the relations between the overdetermined instances and the last instance must be conceived in terms of simple, one-directional determination by the latter.”⁵¹ Althusser still believes in the historical necessity of the transcendence of capitalism in “the last instance,” and the meaning of overdetermination is nullified because the economic contradiction suppresses all other contradictions. Althusser seems to be aware of this problem, and manages at least to criticize Engels’ notion of “determination in the last instance by the economy.” Althusser argues that Engels fails to provide a justification of why the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 119, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 118-119, emphasis added. Thus, the concept of overdetermination is only suggested without proof, and it can be better described as the expression of Althusser’s attitude to reject determinism. In fact, the subtitle for the essay is “Notes for an Investigation.”

⁵¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 99.

final resultant of multiple forces coincides with economic determination in the last instance, and writes, “From the first moment to the last, *the lonely hour* of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”⁵² According to Althusser, Engels’ belief in “the last instance” produces only an “epistemological void.”⁵³ Althusser’s task is to fill this void by showing how the moment of determination by the economy arrives even if the economic contradiction is overdetermined by other contradictions.

In 1972, Althusser tries to answer the problem of overdetermination by “topography,” i.e., the famous analogy of the base/superstructure: “By the use of his Topography, Marx introduces *real*, distinct spheres, which only fit together through the mediation of the *Aufhebung* : ‘below’ is the economic infrastructure, ‘above’ the superstructure, with its different determinations.... The *position* of the infrastructure designates an unavoidable reality: the determination in the last instance by the economic.”⁵⁴ Althusser explains that the determination of the superstructure occurs due to the position of the economy as the base. However, as Uematsu points out, Althusser’s topology simply returns to a deterministic view because his explanation only means that the base determines in the last instance *precisely because the superstructure is determined by the base*. This claim is a tautology, and real social processes cannot be explained from an analogy of architecture, for it is a mere metaphor.⁵⁵

Even though he stops employing the term “overdetermination” after “On Marx and Freud” written in 1976, Althusser’s attempt to theorize overdetermination

⁵² Althusser, *For Marx*, 113, emphasis added.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁴ Althusser, “Elements of Self-Criticism,” 140, emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ See Uematsu, *Marx no Actuality* [Actual Marx], 88-89.

can be found in his “materialism of the encounter,” or *aleatory materialism*. In “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter” written in 1982, Althusser criticizes Marxist materialism and writes that “this materialism is opposed, as a wholly different mode of thought, to the various materialisms on record, including that widely ascribed to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which, like every other materialism in the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is to say, a transformed, disguised form of idealism.”⁵⁶ In the history of materialism, materialism of the encounter has been always suppressed even by Marx.⁵⁷ For Althusser, any assumption of “necessity and teleology” excludes the “political void” where the contingency of historical processes is located. As soon as necessity is claimed, the political ontology based on the contingency is hidden under the idealism of necessity.

According to Althusser, historical processes are based on the encounter of elements that is purely contingent and aleatory: “No Cause that precedes its effects is to be found in it, no Principle of morality or theology.”⁵⁸ He continues: “Nothing determines, no principle of decision determines this alternative in advance.... A successful encounter, one that is not brief, but lasts, never guarantees that it will continue to last tomorrow rather than come undone.”⁵⁹ Althusser’s materialism of the

⁵⁶ Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” 167. After Althusser’s mental instability which led him to strangle his wife, H el ene, his late writings obviously lacks the preciseness and intellectual stimulation which his earlier writings provoked. Nonetheless, his materialism of the encounter tells us where he finally reached after years of deep theoretical and practical commitments to the socialist ideal.

⁵⁷ However, Althusser does not fully negate the meaning of Marx’s materialism. Commenting on *Capital*, he writes: “what is remarkable about the first conception, apart from the explicit theory of the encounter, is the idea that every mode of production comprises *elements that are independent of each other*, each resulting from its own specific history, in the absence of any organic, teleological relation between these diverse histories. This conception culminates in the theory of *primitive accumulation*, from which Marx, taking his inspiration from Engels, drew a magnificent chapter of *Capital*, the true heart of the book” (ibid., 199, emphasis in original).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 174.

encounter denies the “Law,” the “Reason” and the “End,” and emphasizes instead the impossibility of fixity of meanings and facts. The accomplished fact can never elude its revocation by another undecipherable fact. Philosophy can never grasp Truth, but it only “catches a moving train” of elements, i.e., an ongoing process of “becoming-accomplished.”⁶⁰ In a different manner from Marković, Althusser attempts to theorize the impossibility of attaining pure objectivity and transcendent universality by philosophy.

While Marković cannot fully endorse the impossibility of total objectivity and thus goes back to universalism, Althusser goes to another extreme, i.e., radical indeterminism and particularism. He argues that indeterminacy and contingency constantly produce new meanings and facts, which are themselves superseded by new meanings and facts. He admits that there are relatively stable facts and meanings which enable us to deduce certain “laws,” but he soon adds that “they can change at the drop of a hat, revealing the aleatory basis that sustains them.”⁶¹ For Althusser, it is impossible to know why certain meanings are fixed or how the fixed meanings can be challenged, for any fixity of meaning is based on the purely contingent encounter of the elements, which eludes our conceptualization. His project to determine the logic of overdetermination amounts to the confirmation of the impossibility of articulation.

Althusser’s materialism of the encounter does not provide an adequate way of thinking about politics because the contestation of meaning it puts forward takes place independently of human agency. Even if social demands seeks to challenge a certain norms and rules in society and call for a new set of values, Althusser’s theory

⁶⁰ Ibid., 174, 200.

⁶¹ Ibid., 195.

does not offer how any contestation of meaning can take place because we do not know the logic of articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations. He does not even tell us if political struggle has any significance at all, for example, if it could bring about the revocation of the accomplished facts. In reality, not all meanings and facts go through revocation by another “at the drop of a hat,” contrary to Althusser’s claim. Actual political and social struggles show how hard it is to change the meanings and facts that are fixed as institutional sets of laws, rules, values and norms. Althusser’s keen recognition of the contingent origin of the social should have been elaborated to ask why some encounters last a long time and why some meanings are relatively fixed and others do not. He appears to be afraid that such an account would reintroduce the determinist logic which he has finally abandoned. Althusser’s materialism is free from the notion of “determination in the last instance by the economy,” but it is only possible by denying any type of determination and fixation. In other words, his materialism of the encounter posits a pure contingency, and his negation of determinism and universality leads to radical indeterminism and particularism.

Althusser’s radical indeterminism is the other side of the coin of determinism. Though he criticized Engels’ belief in the arrival of the last instance for creating an “epistemological void,” Althusser’s materialism of the encounter produces an even more radical epistemological void. Althusser’s theory of overdetermination does not result in the elaboration of the logic of relational nature of the symbolic order in society that is overdetermined and contingent, but to the total denial of any rational accounts. Althusser’s materialism of the encounter simply gives up the possibility of

attaining any objectivity. As a result, we are left with an infinite set of particular elements which are impossible to articulate.

In order to save the authentic Marx from Stalinism and humanism, Althusser argues for the overdetermined character of social relations which cannot be reduced to *telos* or the Law of History. Nonetheless, as a communist, he is committed to the belief of the necessity of revolution. This *aporia* leads Althusser to radical indeterminism in his late years. Althusser's materialism recognizes that there is no privileged element which determines everything else, but all elements are relational and contingent. The economic relations do not exist transcendentally of other relations, but they are only a part of "the ensemble of the social relations." Though the result is unsatisfying, Althusser's materialism proceeds toward a right direction when it denies the existence the "Law" and builds itself upon the contingency in social practice. Without falling into the radical indeterminism, we need to continue Althusser's project to reformulate a theory of political subjectivity based on the contingent and overdetermined character of the social relations.

Conclusion: Beyond Universalism and Particularism

Both Marković and Althusser sought to reject the Marxian economic determinism. Their attempts succeeded in showing that "determination in the last instance by the economy" cannot grasp the heterogeneity and complexity of reality. They also showed that society is a complex structural whole which consists of multi-dimensional human activities and social relations, and there is no justification for the

belief that the working class is the political subject for total emancipation. The “objective interest” of the working class cannot represent the totality of the society, and so a plurality of social demands is inevitable. Furthermore, the rejection of the “Law of History” is supported by a new understanding of materialism, which holds that the pure objectivity of the universal is impossible to attain: the consciousness of the philosopher is also conditioned by his part of the objective circumstances. The overdeterministic character of social relations is too complicated to be transparently understood. Both Marković and Althusser deny the immediacy to the object and try to prevent the Marxist materialism from reverting to idealism.

However, neither Marxists could adequately develop the potentiality of his own philosophy. Confronting the plurality of social demands, which was actually manifested in the new social movements after 1968, Marković dissolves them into the humanist ideal of the universality. He does not explain how humanist universality can represent all social demands, given the fact that any form of the universal is affected by the particular view of the philosopher. Marković’s theory is still based on philosopher’s transcendent position to perceive a universal ideal, and leaves the danger of elitism and totalitarianism due to the imposition of the particular political decision under the name of the universality of humanism.

Similarly, Althusser rejects the “Law” and recognizes the heterogeneity and complexity of the processes of social formation. He argues that the social is contingent and precarious because of its overdetermined character. Nothing can exist independently of other elements, and the symbolic is always determined in a relational manner through the “encounter of elements.” However, Althusser denies

any possibility of rational conceptualization of the world. The fixation of meanings and facts becomes impossible, and Althusser does not explain why definite social relations attain stability. It is clear that in our society there are certain social relations that are more stable than others, and these relations can be the objects of contestation in social and political struggles. The purely contingent and aleatory nature of norms and values denies the meaning of political struggle because any agents could not know how to challenge the current social relations and install a new order.

Despite the great theoretical advancements made by Marković and Althusser, their materialism cannot give us a useful theory to formulate a new political subjectivity based on the plurality and overdetermination of the social. However, the emergence of the new social movements and the fragmentation of the Left precisely necessitate the theory of political subjectivity based on the plurality and contingency. Today's situation requires the Left to *aufheben* Marković's "universalism" and Althusser's "particularism." It is in this context that some Marxists make a *post-Marxist turn* for the reformulation of materialism, to which we turn now.

3

Politics of the Multitude without the Political

The Telos and Metaphysics of Postmodernism

One of most famous and controversial post-Marxist turns was made by Michel Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*. They suggest the necessity of a new revolutionary practice against the new global sovereignty, "Empire." According to the authors, Empire is emerging as a result of the new mode of production constituted by the development of informational technology and the expansion of global market. The establishment of Empire has been accompanied by a change in social organization from *disciplinary society* to *the society of control*. Hardt and Negri argue that the new mode of production in the society of control objectifies and exploits life itself through *biopower*. This new mode of production produces a new ontological condition, which traditional Marxism is unable to theorize. Hardt and Negri maintain that a new political subject, *the multitude*, can emerge within this condition in order to establish absolute democracy. Hardt and Negri's provocative arguments led Žižek to write a blurb on the hard cover edition of *Empire*, declaring the book to be "the rewriting of the *Communist Manifesto* for our time."¹ They are optimistic about the potentialities

¹ In America, Fredric Jameson praises *Empire* as "The first great new theoretical synthesis of the new millennium." In France, Etienne Balibar claims that Hardt and Negri's "hyper-Marxism" laid the

of the multitude's creativity, singularity, and desire which, they think, can forcefully opens up a new horizon beyond Empire. In fact, *Empire* became a popular book among the Left because, after the failure of socialism, the Left lacked a new "materialist teleology" promising an alternative society.

However, this does not mean that we can simply accept the argument of *Empire*. In fact, Žižek's praise quickly disappears from the paperback edition of *Empire*, and in his essay on *Empire*, he writes, "The lack of concrete insight is concealed in the Deleuzian jargon of multitude, deterritorialization, and so forth."² It is true that *Empire* lacks concrete insights, which Hardt himself admits in an interview,³ but Žižek's critique is not radical enough. The fundamental problem of *Empire* is that *there is no politics*. I argue that Hardt and Negri's description of the new society grasps some important structural changes of today's capitalism, and their analysis can provide a useful background for today's critical social theory. Yet when Hardt and Negri replace the empirical world with their ideal world, politics becomes unthinkable. There are two reasons for this fatal defect. Firstly, despite Hardt and Negri's rejection of the dialectic, the multitude as a revolutionary subject emerges in a dialectical manner, which is constructed through its inclusion into a new productive force of capitalism, namely, *biopower*. Consequently, Hardt and Negri's theory of political subjectivity tacitly embodies the determinism of the Second International. Secondly, *Empire* claims to be a radical attempt to reformulate Marxism in light of

foundation for "a new teleology of class struggles and militancy." (Both comments on *Empire* are quoted in Lotringer, "We, the Multitude," 9.)

² Žižek, "Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri Rewritten the Communist manifesto for the Twenty-First Century?," 192.

³ Hardt, "Sovereignty, Multitudes, Absolute Democracy." In the interview, Hardt says: "This may be relatively clear conceptually, but it is still not at all evident how to understand the multitude in social and sociological terms. This appears to us now as the most significant shortcoming of our book. After a theory of Empire, we now need to write a theory of the multitude" (173).

postmodernism, but the postmodernism that the authors of *Empire* employ does not save Marxism from its degradation as critical social theory. On the contrary, the Deleuzian metaphysics and vitalism in *Empire* hinder the critical analysis of reality. As a result, instead of the construction of a post-Marxist materialism, *Empire* only reinforces the difficulty of thinking of politics in the post-socialist condition.

Empire: The New Paradigm of Rule

Employing Foucault and Deleuze's analyses, Hardt and Negri examine "the material transformation of the paradigm of rule" in *Empire*.⁴ They claim that understanding this transformation is necessary in order to reject the old forms of social struggle and construct a new form of resistance. This historical transformation can be viewed as a passage from *disciplinary society* to *the society of control*.⁵ Disciplinary society is a society in which social control is maintained through state apparatuses that produce and reproduce the subject with a specific set of customs, habits, values and productive practices. Those apparatuses include the school, the church, the hospital, the prison, the factory and so on. Disciplinary society is characterized by the institutionalization of disciplinary mechanisms which guarantee social stability and the smooth accumulation of capital. Those disciplinary institutions function to distinguish the normal from the abnormal, deviant or dysfunctional and to sanction and normalize the deviant. Discipline ensures obedience to commands and reduces the possibility of noncompliance. However, according to Hardt and Negri, the crisis of capitalism of

⁴ *Empire*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Here Hardt and Negri follow Deleuze's interpretation of Foucault in "Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle."

the late 1960s and the 1970s was a general rebellion against disciplinary society.⁶ The general rejection of disciplinary society forced capitalism to adopt a new form of management. This withering of disciplinary regimes resulted in *the society of control* in which the art of governmentality is characterized by “its immanence to the population through a multiplicity of forms.”⁷

Contrary to disciplinary society, “we should understand the society of control ... as that society (which develops at the far edge of modernity and opens toward the postmodern) in which mechanisms of command become ever more ‘democratic,’ ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of citizens.”⁸ Hardt and Negri argue that social commands are even more generally extended throughout society and more internalized within the subjects. The special limits of the disciplinary institutions collapse, and the logic of social control pervades all forms of social production and reproduction throughout society. Instead of the institutionalization of disciplinary practices through state apparatuses, the society of control is characterized by a deterritorialized and diffused network of control which enables disciplinary practices to be pervasive throughout daily life. According to Hardt and Negri, the possibility of such internalization and generalization of discipline is opened up by a new paradigm of power, namely,

⁶ Both in Marković’s humanism and Althusser’s anti-humanism were directed against disciplinary society. Despite the incompatibility of their claims, both of them curiously shared a view that state apparatuses are a primary source of various oppressions. While the Praxis School suggested a more decentralized model of governance which was based on Yugoslavian model, Althusser’s famous essay on ideology concludes with the necessity of resistance against the state apparatuses which produce and reproduce subjects that are required for a smooth accumulation of capital. See, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Marković and Althusser’s dependence on the old paradigm partly explains why their theories rapidly disappeared from the Left discourse after the 1980s despite their popularity during the 1970s.

⁷ Hardt, “The Withering of Civil Society,” 32.

⁸ *Empire*, 23.

biopower. Following Foucault's claims that "life has now become ... an object of power,"⁹ the authors of *Empire* argue that, contrary to the modern sovereign power characterized by the sovereign's right to kill and the threat to life, biopower invests and fosters life in such a way that the control over the production and reproduction of social life becomes the main object of power. Through biopower, the entire life of the population comes to be managed from its interior. As a result, "power is thus expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population — and at the same time across the entirety of social relations."¹⁰ Biopolitical control pervades the whole social life of individuals. It is impossible to be free from biopower because it is constitutive of human subjectivity in Empire.

The Multitude: Resistance within Empire

Hardt and Negri's analysis is clearly a Marxist one in that they correlate the emergence of a new social structure and a new subjectivity with the transformation of the mode of production. They claim that the *real subsumption* of labor occurs through the biopower's inclusion of life itself in the realm of production. Today's real subsumption shifts the dominant form of productive labor from the material to the immaterial. Immaterial labor is distinguished from material labor in that it does not produce any material product, but involves the creation and manipulation of affect,

⁹ Foucault, "Les mailles du pouvoir," 194.

¹⁰ *Empire*, 24.

such as pleasure, satisfaction and excitement.¹¹ Instead of focusing on individuals' particular capacity and activity within the factory, immaterial labor objectifies life itself and produces surplus value from any activity when outside or inside the factory. As immaterial labor produces surplus value from the communicative and affective dimension of human activity, the broader range of human activity comes to be subsumed by the logic of capital. Because the production of service through immaterial labor involves a direct human interaction, whether virtual or actual, Hardt and Negri argue, "What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower."¹² Immaterial labor is not merely an economic relation between the labor force and capital, but a new social relationship among individuals within the logic of capital accumulation. This new social relationship spreads all over society in Empire because the society of control is sustained by the diffused network of biopower: "The relations of capitalist exploitation are expanding everywhere, not limited to the factory but tending to occupy the entire social terrain."¹³ According to Hardt and Negri, since the entire social terrain is now invested with capital, it becomes impossible to differentiate economic and social production. Hardt and Negri's provocative thesis is that all spheres of life are now subsumed in the productive process of capital accumulation. We can say that in Empire life has become a factory to produce value.

However, the emergence of Empire is not a depressing story, but on the contrary, "the passage to Empire and its processes of globalization offer new

¹¹ We can find examples of immaterial labor in what Hardt and Negri call "affective labor" in the field of health services and the entertainment industry. While affective labor is based on human contact and interaction, the entertainment industry is more apparently concerned with the manipulation of affects.

¹² *Ibid.*, 293.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 209.

possibilities to the forces of liberation.”¹⁴ Hardt and Negri claim that the new ontology of Empire provides a basis for the emergence of a new revolutionary subject, *the multitude*. Today’s new ontology is the non-existence of an “outside” in Empire that creates a “smooth world.”¹⁵ Contrary to modern sovereignty based on the fixed boundaries of the nation-state, Empire is characterized by a lack of fixed boundaries or barriers, and it “is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers.”¹⁶ Hardt and Negri argue that the spatial division of the North and South, the First World and the Third World, and the center and the periphery lose any meaning in front of a decentralized and deterritorializing network of global capital and information. It is possible to find the periphery within the center and vice versa, and the fundamental nature of big cities is becoming the same everywhere. Hardt and Negri claim that the Marxist theory of uneven development is obsolete today because the spatial division of the center and periphery emerges independently of fixed national and international lines. Since there is no center and periphery in Empire, there is no “weakest link” (Lenin) to which we must direct the forces of resistance. On the contrary, the possibility of effective resistance is derived from the very nature of Empire as a decentralized network. Hardt and Negri argue that because there is no center in the network of Empire, “the virtual center of Empire can be attacked from any point.”¹⁷ Resistance against sovereignty need no longer be directed at the state,

¹⁴ Ibid., xv.

¹⁵ Ibid., 332-6.

¹⁶ Ibid., xii.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59.

but various movements against Empire can conjoin from anywhere because they are all attacking “the virtual center of Empire.”

The reason Empire can be attacked from anywhere is that the biopower relations of Empire fully penetrate individuals and their communicative actions. The space of resistance emerges from the radical immanence of the constitutive power of Empire. Empire accumulates capital through the exploitation of surplus value from the affective dimensions of human activity, but it also means that Empire is fully dependent on communicative and affective labor through the cooperation of individuals. The developments of informational technology which are necessary for capital accumulation in Empire allow the workers to develop and appropriate the intellectual and communicative side of human activity, which Hardt and Negri call *general intellect*, as Marx suggests in the *Grundrisse*. The very processes of production exploit the affective, cooperative and communicative dimensions of the workers but dialectically cultivate the creativity and communicative skill of the multitude. This development of a global network of the multitude is inevitable, due to the internal tendency of capitalism to expand. Though Empire attempts to impose its order through the unification of social life, it cannot constrain the rapid development of the plurality and singularity of the multitude, as the accumulation of capital in Empire depends on the social activities of the multitude. And Hardt and Negri find the possibility of transcending Empire at this point; Empire must be overcome through the multitude’s full expression of the creativity and autonomy of life.

The emphasis on the heterogeneity and singularity of the multitude leads Hardt and Negri to its dependence on Deleuzian vitalism which claims the realization

of the potentiality of the multitude's desire is "beyond measure." Emphasizing "the fundamental productivity of being,"¹⁸ Hardt and Negri argue that labor, in post-Fordism, has become a social activity which provides the multitude with a moment of self-valorization. Thanks to the development of general intellect, the new proletariat is more likely to actualize a new form of life and desire, that is to say, new forms of being, through labor. Hardt and Negri argue that this *constituent power* of the multitude "is tied to the notion of democracy as absolute power."¹⁹ The constituent power continually creates and recreates a new value, which is uncontainable within Empire. The activity of labor is not only a negation of current values, but also a moment of "transvaluation" (Nietzsche). In the metaphysical vitalism of Hardt and Negri, the transcendence of Empire and the establishment of absolute democracy will occur through a full expression of the constituent power of the multitude.

Hardt and Negri's theory of political subjectivity clearly differentiates itself from traditional Marxists. They make a post-Marxist move through the rejection of the old idea of the industrial working class as the revolutionary class. Contrary to traditional Marxists, Hardt and Negri admit that the industrial working class is no longer the dominant social category and has lost a hegemonic position in the political struggle. The category of *the proletariat* must be expanded to include other activities of production outside the factory. The new productive process in *Empire* is no longer contained within the factory, and the entire process of social production and reproduction occurs in accordance with the logic of capitalism. In this sense, everyone is directly or indirectly "the proletariat": "In conceptual terms we

¹⁸ Ibid., 387.

¹⁹ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 10.

understand *proletariat* as a broad category that includes all those whose labor is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction.”²⁰

Hardt and Negri’s emphasis on the progressive aspects of Empire is unique. While traditional Marxists find the possibility of revolution in the homogenization process of the workers under capitalism, Hardt and Negri argue that Empire can be subverted by the multiplication and maximization of difference and singularity in the multitude. Where traditional Marxists, especially humanist Marxists, think that the workers’ capacities and potentialities are alienated in capitalist society, Empire is constituted through the expression of the multitude’s desire and autonomy. From the perspective of Hardt and Negri, the new rule in Empire is not necessarily negative and oppressive, but can be progressive and revolutionary. The actualization of potentialities and desires of the multitude is already appearing everywhere within Empire, and the Left needs to focus on maximizing this tendency.

Is Empire Chaos?: Wallerstein’s Theory of Systemic Crisis

One may think that Hardt and Negri’s theory of globalization is similar to Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory because both of them announce the inevitable limits of capitalist globalization and the emergence of new anti-capitalist movements. However, Hardt and Negri’s vision of revolution is incompatible with Wallerstein’s theory of world-systems and anti-systemic movement. For Wallerstein, the possibility of resistance in capitalism is founded on the Marxist economic theory that there is an

²⁰ *Empire*, 52, emphasis in original.

absolute limit to the space for capitalism's expansion, which necessarily causes an economic crisis due to overproduction. He assumes that the crisis of the old regime is followed by a period in which the strength of the anti-systemic movements determines whether a better or worse society can be established.²¹ Wallerstein argues that resistance is only possible at "the 'right' moment"; when "structures move very far from equilibrium, when they are on the edge of bifurcation ... small pushes in one direction or another can have an enormous impact."²² Wallerstein continues, "Our historical social system is in crisis," i.e., the moment of bifurcation.²³ According to Wallerstein, the current global order after the Gulf War characterized by the loss of American hegemony is a crisis of the modern world system of capitalism which has developed since the 16th century. For Wallerstein, "Empire" is nothing but chaos, since the world system can no longer sustain itself. This crisis of the modern world system is the reason why the anti-systemic movements have gained a strategic significance today, and offer the possibility of establishing socialism.

However, Hardt and Negri disagree with Wallerstein because in their view Empire is not a condition of chaos. Rather, there is a decentralized mode of social control in Empire, and "the new paradigm functions already in completely positive terms."²⁴ The analysis of this new form of sovereignty is significant for inventing a

²¹ A similar view was originally put forward by Lukács, as seen in chapter 1. More recently, such a view is proposed by Goto's analysis of the Japanese social transformation to neoliberalism. He argues that there is chance of left-wing mass movement because the collapse of the welfare state system creates an identity crisis of workers who identified themselves with a set of values in the welfare state. However, Hardt and Negri argue that the implementation of a new form of control and a set of values is completed in Empire. See Goto's *Syusyukusuru Nihongata Taisyushakai* [*Shrinking of the Japanese Model Mass Society*]. The difference between Goto and Hardt and Negri is clear from Goto's rejection of the characterization of today's mode of production as post-Fordism.

²² Wallerstein, "The Time of Space and the Space of Time: The Future of Social Science," 82.

²³ Ibid. For the decline of American hegemony, see his *After Liberalism*.

²⁴ *Empire*, 13.

new form of resistance. Hardt and Negri reject Wallerstein's model of historical, systemic crisis and anti-systemic movement because they claim that he assumes an "inverted homology" between the decline of the system and the anti-systemic movement.²⁵ Wallerstein's theory of resistance assumes that there must be a crisis of the system before the emergence of anti-systemic movement. On the contrary, Hardt and Negri argue that the autonomous resistance of the multitude by itself resulted in the collapse of the old regime and the birth of Empire. For Wallerstein, capitalism as an historical system is coming to an end due to limits on capital accumulation, and he offers the chaotic global order after the loss of American hegemony as proof. However, Hardt and Negri argue that today's precariousness and contingency, namely, "the unforeseeability of the *sequence of the events*," is not a sign of the systemic crisis, but a character of the new sovereignty, Empire.²⁶ Hardt and Negri's analysis seeks to understand the unique logic of social formation in Empire, so that effective resistance to the new sovereignty can be possible.

Hardt and Negri's understanding of the world seems to be more materialistic and revolutionary than Wallerstein's. Wallerstein's characterization of today's global order as a disordered universe prevents us from critically analyzing what this seemingly chaotic logic of social control is. Though he claims that anti-systemic movement has a strategic significance today, his claim that the world system is in a serious crisis fails to account for how anti-systemic movements can be constructed. In fact, we seldom find a global resistance movement against the world system, contrary

²⁵ Ibid., 428-9, n. 21.

²⁶ Ibid., 60-61.

to Wallerstein's claim. Confronting today's difficulty to construct a mass social struggle, "the problem is not why people rebel but why they do not."²⁷

In response to this concern, Hardt and Negri's analysis shows that it is a biopolitical form of social control that pervades throughout the social life and maintains social stability. Without identifying this new logic of domination and control in Empire, theory alone cannot provide an effective foundation for political struggle, even if there is a chance to overcome capitalism or construct a global anti-systemic movement. However, Wallerstein argues that his theory does not have to provide a concrete political strategy. Instead, his only theoretic concern is how to identify a moment of systemic crisis.²⁸ This lack of political subjectivity creates a theoretical void in Wallerstein's world-systems theory. As a result, his emphasis on the end of the modern system gives an impression of apocalypticism. On the contrary, elaborating the logic of exploitation, alienation and oppression in Empire, Hardt and Negri attempt to situate a concrete possibility of overcoming today's seemingly chaotic global system and a clear path to establish a new democracy.

The difference in the understanding of today's situation between Wallerstein, Hardt and Negri is derived from the latter's duo's unique understanding of historical processes. Contrary to Wallerstein and many other Marxists who consider history as "a process without a subject" (Althusser), Hardt and Negri reject such a traditional Marxist view of history based on the Law of Political Economy. Any sort of objectivism of history must be thoroughly abandoned as determinism, and Hardt and

²⁷ Ibid., 210.

²⁸ Wallerstein does not think that the task of theory is to determine an effective form of practice and writes, "Social science, if it has any function at all, must help us to recognize these moments [of the replacement of historical system]" ("The Time of Space and the Space of Time: The Future of Social Science," 82.)

Negri even criticize Marx for offering such an account. According to them, Marx's major late works, such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, highlight the objective necessity of the emergence of political subjectivity through his theory of political economy. This is because Marx aimed to avoid any utopian ideal of communism and to provide a solid foundation for constructing a revolutionary subjectivity. However, Hardt and Negri argue that his inclination toward objectivism results in "the paradox of confiding the liberation of the revolutionary subjectivity to a 'process without subject [sic]'."²⁹ They conclude that Marx's "natural history of capital," which objectively explains the birth and the development of the revolutionary subjectivity, must be rejected in order to avoid determinism.

Hardt and Negri's conception of history emphasizes the revolutionary subjectivity that is inherent in the multitude. They write, "The construction of Empire and its global networks is a response to various struggles against the modern machines of power, and specifically to the class struggle driven by the multitude's desire for liberation. The multitude called Empire into being."³⁰ For Hardt and Negri, this struggle is the real motor of history, as Marx claims in the *Communist Manifesto*,³¹ and it determines the form of social organization. Throughout the struggle of the proletariat, capitalism is forced to modify its social structures, but the result is unforeseeable and contingent; only the actual mass struggle determines the future path. There is no epistemologically privileged position from which to predict the course of history. For example, the movements in 1968 resulted in the society of

²⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Labor of Dionysus*, 12.

³⁰ *Empire*, 43.

³¹ Marx and Engels write. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (219).

control, and it created a new form of exploitation and alienation. Nonetheless, it is still the proletariat, or more precisely the multitude, that created Empire, and only the resistance by the multitude can transcend Empire and attain emancipation.

Is Empire a New Communist Manifesto?

Now that we have explained the general discussion of *Empire*, it is necessary to more critically engage with the text. It is undeniable that *Empire* provides a radical vision of resistance against neoliberal globalization. Hardt and Negri's optimistic answer makes a break from pessimism of the contemporary Left. In this sense, the book seems to suggest a new "materialist teleology" which allows us to think of an alternative form of social organization. However, it is another issue whether the theory of alternative society in *Empire* is a real possibility or a merely utopian ideal. Unfortunately, Hardt and Negri's project seems to be quite metaphysical and utopian in terms of concrete practice.

First of all, the empirical reality does not reflect Hardt and Negri's claim about the decline of the sovereignty of the nation-state. They assert that the sovereignty within the rigid territory of the state has been replaced by a deterritorialized global network of social control. However, the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11 obviously refutes Hardt and Negri's claim that the sovereignty of the state has diminished in Empire.³² Furthermore, the

³² Aside from the regulation of the global market, the monopolized violence of the state creates the dead and refugees all over the world. Hardt and Negri came to emphasize the "tendency" towards Empire in *Multitude*, which was written after the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, but they never put the tendency itself into question.

relation between the state and the market is not convincing, as Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, “The essence of globalization is not the declining capacity but the unique *ability* of nation-states to organize the world for global capital.”³³ Instead of declining, the state sovereignty plays a different but equally significant role to regulate and ensure the smooth flow of capital.³⁴ However, Hardt and Negri do not provide any concrete analysis of the role of the state within Empire.

Nor does Hardt and Negri’s idea of smooth space correspond with the real geographical order. Even if the emergence of the periphery can be observed in “global cities,” such as London, New York City, Los Angeles and Tokyo, we cannot draw the conclusion that “the geography of uneven development and the lines of division and hierarchy will no longer be found along stable national or international boundaries, but in fluid infra- and supranational borders.”³⁵ Even Hardt and Negri admit that the uneven development between the U.S or Japan, on the one hand, and areas of sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, are obvious.³⁶ There still exists a clear global hierarchy among states, and these inequalities must be analyzed more carefully, instead of blithely assuming a smooth global space. In terms of the analysis of globalization, Wallerstein’s World-Systems theory can provide a more critical understanding of how multinational corporations exploit geographical, national, and racial *differences*, rather than Hardt and Negri’s theory of global sameness.³⁷

³³ Wood, “A Manifesto for Global Capital?,” 65, emphasis in original.

³⁴ It is hard to guess why Hardt and Negri dismiss the problem of violence by the state. They recognize that the nation-state causes the various sufferings of the poor and the refugees by war and famine. However, when they talk about the possibility of resistance, they ignore the sufferings caused by violence of the state and claim that the nation-state is declining in the tendency toward Empire.

³⁵ *Empire*, 335.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

³⁷ See Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization*. Another great analysis of how the sovereign power of the state has been exercised after 9/11 is Butler’s “Indefinite Detention” in

Uneven development of capitalism and the persistence of the state system question Hardt and Negri's idea of the world as a "smooth space." This fact also challenges their blueprint of revolution by the multitude. According to Hardt and Negri, the resistance by the multitude can be founded on a purely individualistic or micro-political level (tattoos, piercings, transgender, etc).³⁸ It is hard to imagine that such a micro-political movement will subvert Empire, but Hardt and Negri seem to believe that micro-political movements of counter-Empire are connected on a global level. This claim requires a careful theoretical and empirical analysis, but Hardt and Negri's "proof" is only that Empire is a "smooth world" of the plane of immanence. It seems quite obvious that Hardt and Negri must account for how those plural points of resistance can be unified into a universal movement of the multitude. It is by no means clear how these different and singular movements can coexist let alone coalesce to subvert Empire.³⁹ Reality seems to show that different social demands can conflict with each other, and different groups can aim to exclude each other in order to realize their particular demands. We are actually witnessing the emergence of far-right movements, such as religious fundamentalism and xenophobic nationalism. These empirical examples show that the uniformity of the movements of the multitude cannot be taken for granted but must be actively constructed. However, because of their metaphysical belief that everyone is within the plane of immanence they simply assume the political unity of the multitude.

Precarious Life, and Agamben's famous essay, *State of Exception*. These essays show that the power of state sovereignty does exist even though it is now exercised in a fairly different manner.

³⁸ *Empire*, 216.

³⁹ For Žižek, the lack of a concrete description of the real movements of the multitude is the most damaging defect of Hardt and Negri's manifesto. See his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 147-149.

Empirical observation shows that the world is not one smooth universe which can provide the ground for the unity of the movements of the multitude, but on the contrary it is a *pluriverse*, as Chantal Mouffe says.⁴⁰ There are plural spaces which are organized differently in favor of global capital and multinational corporations. This is why the concrete analysis of particular situations is extremely important for building an effective political struggle against neoliberal globalization. However, Hardt and Negri's analysis of the world does not reflect reality and ends up imposing their own ideal universe upon it. Their metaphysical concept of the plane of immanence imposes a fantastic world of Oneness and ignores the multiplicity of antagonisms. Fascinated with a postmodern imaginary of immanence, *Empire* produces only an abstract theory of revolution. It would be a fatal mistake for the Left to depend on their concept of the multitude, because it does not give any strategic guidance to the actual practice and because its enemy, Empire, does not exist.

Metaphysics of Postmodernism and Idealism of *Empire*

After encountering the critique of their lack of political strategy, in their subsequent book *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri claim that the abstractness of their argument comes from the fact that theirs is “a philosophical book.” They tell the reader: “Do not expect our book to answer the question, What is to be done? or propose a concrete program of action.”⁴¹ However, this is a poor excuse because, in *Empire*, they write that their book is not a merely philosophical but rather an “interdisciplinary” one,

⁴⁰ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 115.

⁴¹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War, Democracy in the Age of Empire*, xvi.

which is “equally philosophical and historical, cultural and economic, political and anthropological.”⁴² The lack of a political strategy in both books indicates a profound theoretical problem in Hardt and Negri’s materialism, which results both from their dependence on postmodern metaphysics and from their Second Internationalist view of history. Hardt and Negri do reject some traditional Marxist concepts and to some extent offer a postmodernist Marxism, especially through Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. However, Hardt and Negri’s post-Marxist turn is not fully carried out through the *Aufhebung* of the traditional Marxism and postmodernism; rather, *Empire* is merely a philosophical amalgam of Marxist determinism and Deleuzian metaphysics, which contributes little to today’s reconstruction of the Left politics.

As Žižek points out, Hardt and Negri’s dependence on metaphysical jargon prevents them from seriously engaging in the concrete analysis of the current situation and offers only an idealist vision of the world. Reading *Empire*, one soon realizes that there is no concrete social and political analysis. In fact, Hardt and Negri merely assert the tendency towards the universalization of the multitude. Their idealist description of revolution is due to their dependence on Deleuzian vitalism. One can insist that the desire and singularity of the multitude will change the world only if one accepts this vitalism. Yet a serious political theory cannot depend on the abstract Deleuzian claim about the creativity and singularity of life. Talking about the abstract power and potentialities of life which cannot be articulated because it is “beyond measure” will only prevent us from thinking how political struggle can be constructed. Assuming the infinite power of life will also risk ignoring the sufferings

⁴² *Empire*, xvi.

of those who are oppressed and marginalized because vitalism assumes that they will automatically resist the oppression with Spinozain *conatus*, “the will to be against.”⁴³ According to Hardt and Negri, we do not need any political strategy and only have to wait because vitalism, like a gift from heaven, will one day bring about a revolution.

Their use of Deleuzian jargon further undermines the possibility of thinking politically. Hardt and Negri depend on a Deleuzian language, such as *deterritorialization* and *plane of immanence* which express the smooth world “free of the rigid striation of state boundaries.”⁴⁴ Such a metaphor may appear suitable for the description of the perpetual flow of capital and information. However, as Deleuzian jargon dominates the empirical analysis of the world, reality is superseded by those metaphors, which mask the lack of a political strategy, as Žižek points out. Hardt and Negri talk about the transformation of capitalism into Empire, how the *biopolitical* control over the population in the *society of control* created “*dividuals*” and inserted the life into the *plane of immanence*. Empire is a smooth and flexible space of with *modulated differences*, which must be overcome with the *rhizomatic* movement of the *multitude*. This jargon obscures concrete reality and prevents us from articulating an effective political strategy.

Incomplete Rejection of Dialectic: The Return of Determinism

The other limitation of *Empire* is rooted in Hardt and Negri’s maintenance of the dialectical logic. As an attempt to reformulate Marxism, Hardt and Negri assert that

⁴³ Ibid., 216.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 142.

they discard the dialectic of history, which assumes the *telos* of history. They reject any deterministic teleology when they write, “We are not repeating the schema of an ideal teleology that justifies any passage in the name of a promised end.”⁴⁵ Their theory claims to be “nondialectical,” meaning that, instead of the Hegelian *aufhebung* of paradox, which is predetermined to occur, their theory is based on the recognition that there is no predetermined *telos* of struggles: “There is nothing dialectical or teleological about this anticipation and prefiguration of capitalist development by the mass struggles.”⁴⁶ Hardt and Negri affirm the Marxist proposition that the class struggle is the motor of history, but they are aware that history is open to contingency of various sorts. Capitalism is not bound to collapse, but it has been able to absorb the demands for liberation raised by the proletariat and transform itself to a new form. In short, the class struggle of the multitude moves history, but the constitution of Empire was not predetermined, but rather a contingent result of multiple struggles carried out by the multitude, motivated by their desire for liberation. Thus, the *telos*, which Hardt and Negri describe as a materialist teleology, is distinguished from a deterministic teleology. The *telos* for Hardt and Negri is a political expression of the desire of the multitude. It is not utopian, however, because it is based on the potentialities of the multitude.

This methodological approach to history is described in *Empire* as “critical and deconstructive.” It aims to “subvert the hegemonic languages and social structures and thereby reveal an alternative ontological basis that resides in the

⁴⁵ *Empire*, 47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

creative and productive practices of the multitude.”⁴⁷ Disclosing the ideological nature of the current social structures and its hegemonic discourses, Hardt and Negri’s theory proposes the possibility of alternative social organizations and challenges the neoliberal teleology which claims the triumph of the free market marks “the end of history.” For Hardt and Negri, history has no end, and the dominant neoliberal discourse must be deconstructed. A key task of philosophy is to explain how the desire of the multitude can be fulfilled by creating absolute democracy. Here, Hardt and Negri connect this first methodological approach to the second one that philosophy is not an objective description of truth, but rather it is a “*constructive and ethico-political*” proposition, which is “subjective.”⁴⁸ Philosophy does not provide the Law of History or proclaim transcendent, ahistorical truth. Rather, philosophy expresses a subjective desire and ideal which is fully immanent to the experience in this world. In other words, philosophy arms the multitude by articulating the subjective desire of the multitude in light of possibilities of current reality.

However, Hardt and Negri’s understanding of history as a pure expression of the subjectivity of the multitude is quite problematic. Hardt and Negri’s theory of political subjectivity is actually trapped in a deterministic model of history, notably that of the Second International. They claim to abandon the idea of a dialectical development precisely because the moment of revolution is not predetermined and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 47, emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 47-48, emphasis in original. In “The Myth of the Multitude,” Kam Shapiro criticizes Hardt and Negri, arguing that their critical approach is contradictory because it is concerned with the concrete potentiality under the dominant discourses and structures, but also deals with “metaphysical” demands. However, this critique is not convincing, since Hardt and Negri aim to reveal a metaphysical potentiality which is “beyond measure.” In other words, the potentiality exists as a common ontological substrate but it is not yet actualized in reality, so philosophy seeks to show the concrete realm where such potentiality can be actualized effectively. In this sense, it is not a defect of their approach that it is at the same time “programmatically speculative” and “metaphysical exegesis.” (292).

only suggested as a possibility based on the desires of the multitude. However, it is easy to discern an old dialectical logic of the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity in their claim that the multitude becomes more and more revolutionary as Empire expands. In other words, as the enlargement of globalization leads to the more general real subsumption of social life itself, this process dialectically contributes to the construction of the multitude as a revolutionary subject. Ironically, this is the same logic as Marx's universalization of the proletariat through the expansion of the productive forces. As Rancière points out, the notorious Marxist concept of "productive forces," which is believed to bring the disruptive subversion "without will," has simply been expanded to include all social activities of the multitude.⁴⁹

It is true that Marx himself offers such a general account of history in *The German Ideology* and in *A Contribution*, but it serves only as a "guiding principle" of his concrete studies.⁵⁰ When this guiding principle acquires a reified independence and appears to perpetuate reality, we have the determinism of the Second International. Consequently, in Hardt and Negri's analysis, the economic fatalism of the traditional Marxism, the belief that "everything is economic," is replaced by a new belief that "everything is political." Similar to traditional Marxists who reduce all elements of the superstructure to the economic base, Hardt and Negri claim that all social spheres are subsumed to the biopolitical realm. Any activity of the multitude is political and can thus be revolutionary because every activity can be a point of resistance to biopolitical social control within Empire. However, the notion of Messianic revolution makes it impossible to provide a concrete political strategy. As

⁴⁹ Rancière, "Peuple ou multitudes?," 96.

⁵⁰ Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to Critique of Political Economy*, 20.

a result, the ontological condition of the multitude makes politics impossible because there is no necessity to engage in any particular political struggles but to wait until the day when Empire collapses.⁵¹ To sum up, “the Communist Manifesto for the twenty-first century” is haunted by the old-fashioned reification of the Law of History.

In light of the metaphysics and determinism of Hardt and Negri, Mouffe’s critique is compelling when she writes, “Far from empowering us, [*Empire*] contributes to reinforcing the current incapacity to think and act politically.”⁵² *Empire* claims in a provocative language that the multitude’s constituent power will overcome Empire, and globalized absolute democracy will be established one day. Hardt and Negri assert that there will be a radical discontinuity from the current paradigm of rule, and the new world order will be called into being. However, *Empire* says little about what kind of political action is required for the oppositional politics to establish such an absolute democracy. Despite the book’s claim that we have to “think globally and act globally,” and that Empire must be met with “counter-Empire,”⁵³ it is not possible to know what this means in terms of practice.

What becomes apparent through the critique of *Empire* is that the lack of concrete politics is not because the book is a manifesto or a philosophical work. Rather, it is due to the impossibility of politics given its metaphysics and determinism.

⁵¹The alternative view of politics which Rancière suggests is more useful in thinking of the possibility of politics today. He claims that the political must be a distinct sphere in which a disagreement of “un peuple contre un autre” is manifested. However, in *Empire*, there is no negativity, which is characterized by “against.” Rancière criticizes Hardt and Negri’s thought on the ground that it is based on the “metapolitical tradition,” meaning that the truth of immanent power guarantees the true community of individuals. As the Feuerbachian essence of Man guarantees the unity of “Man as a spies-being,” the total immanence of the multitude guarantees its Oneness as a whole. However, argues Rancière, what is constitutive of politics is the moment of negation and the rejection of the Oneness of the community. Rancière’s view of politics is similar to Laclau and Mouffe’s, whose argument we will more thoroughly discuss in the next chapter.

⁵² Mouffe, *On the Political*, 107.

⁵³ *Empire*, 207.

According to Hardt and Negri, the political sphere in *Empire* is no longer separated from economic and social spheres due to the real subsumption of life through biopower. They claim the unification of the social and the political because they follow the traditional Marxists in thinking that the productive forces produce political subjectivity. Since *Empire* is characterized by the total inclusion of life itself into the realm of the social, the separation between the social and political collapses, and everything becomes political. This is why Hardt and Negri only talk about the new ontology of the multitude based on the new mode of production, but never new *political* subjectivity *per se*. For them, such discussion is not necessary, for the new ontology of the multitude is directly connected to its political subjectivity within the plane of immanence. Yet to claim that “everything is political” is essentially to repeat the traditional Marxist claim that “everything is economic.” Hardt and Negri claim that everything is political in *Empire*, but obviously not to the same degree. This is why critique is crucial in order to know which struggles are more strategically important than others, but Hardt and Negri simply ignore the importance of political strategy.

Beyond *Empire*: Making a Real Post-Marxist Turn

After a long critique of *Empire*, we are in a better position to discuss what is required for a post-Marxist politics. In a word, it is necessary to *aufheben* both the traditional Marxism and postmodernism. Materialistic analysis of social and material relations must be reformulated through postmodernism. The key question is *how*. Hardt and

Negri grasp some important changes in our contemporary society more adequately than Wallerstein. They convincingly demonstrate how the development of informational technology has resulted in the real subsumption of life, and how the global market challenges the modern notion of the sovereignty. In this sense, *Empire* describes a *tendency* which we experience today.⁵⁴ The book's analysis can be truly materialistic when it shows how the new productive processes allow for new form of subjectivity while conditioning the way agency can be exercised today. However, this materialistic potentiality of *Empire* is lost when Hardt and Negri abandon concrete analysis because of their longing to find a new "materialist (but, in fact, idealist) teleology." Their theory of the new subjectivity ends up imposing their ideal history of the multitude upon the real world. This tendency is clear, for example, when they claim that the sovereignty of the nation-state is replaced by that of Empire which places the multitude in the smooth world of the plane of immanence. However, if we are loyal to Marx's "materialistic method," we are required to analyze what is happening due to the transformation of the state sovereignty and the mode of production. Confronting globalization and the development of informational technology, it is true that the old sovereignty of the state is challenged. However, instead of diminishing its importance, we must first recognize that the state still plays a significant role not only in terms of the regulation of global market, but also in terms of the protection of people's life. Thus, the state is still a crucial site for oppositional politics.

⁵⁴ In fact, in *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri emphasize that their explanation is about the *tendency* manifest in the world. They argue that Marx also described a tendency of capitalism when he wrote *Capital*. I agree with their emphasis on the tendency, but their analysis always ends up reifying this tendency as a Law of History. In fact, even after various criticisms against *Empire*, Hardt and Negri simply insist that Empire should be fully called into being soon.

Similarly, instead of simply emphasizing that the boundary of the factory collapses and that social life is fully invested by capital, we also need to analyze the condition of the workers *inside* the factory. The new mode of production characterized by immaterial labor incurs changes in the still existing old mode of production. The tendency to immaterial labor based on affect and communicative skills is apparent and contributed in some cases to the self-realization of the workers. However, the forms of labor in post-Fordism also destroyed the traditional forms of communication within the factory and reinforced control over workers. For example, temporary workers in the factory, who constantly change the place where they work, lack ties of communication with colleagues and labor unions because of their mobility, and they constantly suffer from the precarity of social and material life. Therefore, instead of overemphasizing the positive side of immaterial labor, the task of materialistic critique is to understand the emerging forms of suffering due to ongoing objective changes of economic, social and material relations.

In short, Hardt and Negri do not provide a necessary understanding of today's global order and oppositional politics due to their reductionistic approach. Thus, we must part from the idealist postmodernism of *Empire*. Post-Marxist materialism necessitates the rejection of any Law of History and the recognition of a plurality of social demands. Furthermore, the political sphere cannot be dissolved into social and economic spheres because the social or the economic by itself does not produce the political, contrary to traditional Marxists and Hardt and Negri. Both traditional Marxists and Hardt and Negri wrongly assume that the contradictions of capitalism will automatically lead to a unified political struggle. Confronting today's plurality of

social demands, the post-Marxist theory of political subjectivity requires the theory of political subjectivation (*assujettissement*), i.e., the logic of the construction of intersubjective political identity. For this aim, instead of the Deleuzian plane of immanence which automatically and aprioristically unifies the plurality, we need to know how different groups with diverse interests are integrated under a universal ideal in a revolutionary situation. In other words, it is necessary to understand how a group of “we” (*the people*) emerges in order to express a radical social antagonism against another group, “they.”

The theory of political subjectivity was not fully developed by Marxists. The Second Internationalist Messianic Law of History excludes the possibility of political subjectivity because of its fatalistic and deterministic belief in the power of the productive forces. Because the productive forces determine the political, there is no need to discuss the constitution of political subjectivity. The economic absorbs the political sphere, and the identity of the proletariat is predetermined by the relations of production. Lenin’s theory of organization develops the theory of subjectivation when he talks about the necessary construction of proletarian class consciousness. He also recognizes a plurality of social antagonisms which must be mobilized for revolution. However, his theory suffers from the danger of authoritarianism because it obliges the other groups to accept the proletarian identity, while the identity of the proletariat is fixed, thanks to the objectivity of relations of production. In the case of humanism, the assumption of “Man” as the political subject prevents us from grasping the dynamics of the constitution of political subjectivity, as the subject is again predetermined. Humanists do not ascribe political subjectivity to the workers, nor to

any other groups, but “Man” as the universal subject. Yet, confronting the plurality of social demands, they fail to show how the supposedly universal ideal for Man can actually dissolve these particular demands.

Hardt and Negri also fail to theorize the logic of constructing a collective movement from a plurality of social antagonisms by idealistically integrating the plurality merely on a metaphysical plane. In reality, social critiques come from various perspectives, and put forward different accounts of social justice. Any movement that seeks to realize of social equality and justice must attain agreement on the legitimacy of its own claim through the political contestation. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* grasps this antagonistic dynamics of real politics due to the plurality of social demands, and their theory of *hegemony* shows how a new mass struggle can emerge in the post-socialist condition.

4

Post-Socialist Politics and Radical Democracy

Laclau and Mouffe's Post-Marxist Materialism

Priviliging the proletariat as the universal revolutionary subject made it impossible to integrate the plurality and heterogeneity of social demands made by the new social movements which arose after 1968. The proliferation of progressive movements, such as feminism, environmentalism, peace activism, and gay and lesbian activism, obliges us to rethink the working-class-based political strategies of traditional Marxism. In the last two chapters I examined attempts to reformulate Marx's materialism and his theory of political subjectivity in order to incorporate this transformation of the nature of political struggles. We saw that Marković and Althusser were unable to build a new political theory based on the plurality and contingency of politics which they advocated. While Marković erases plurality in favor of the objective and universal truth which he thinks humanist philosophy can provide, Althusser denies any possibility of universality in favor of absolute contingency. By contrast, Hardt and Negri's postmodern theory of political subjectivity insists on radicalizing the singularity of each resistance movement as the foundation for revolution. However, they are incapable of showing how heterogeneous movements can be unified or at least connected as a movement against

Empire. Hardt and Negri's overemphasis on the singularity of social movements results in their neglect of political strategy in constructing a collective social movement.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe tackle the issue of the proliferation of progressive movements and address a new form of oppositional politics that can construct a unity among new social movements. For Laclau and Mouffe, a radical, post-Marxist turn is required to save Marxism from its crisis due to its failure to respond to the plurality of social demands. First of all, Laclau and Mouffe reject the proletariat as the universal revolutionary class and insist on the necessity of constructing a political subject through "discursive practice." And second, they abandon "determination in the last instance by the economy" and emphasize the overdetermined and contingent nature of politics. Introducing the neo-Gramscian concept of *hegemony*,¹ Laclau and Mouffe claim that today's politics must recognize a plurality of social antagonisms, even though Left politics also needs to seek to construct a universal with which diverse subjects can identify. However, the hegemonic universality can only emerge in and through political practice, and it is by no means ahistorical and transcendent. Laclau and Mouffe successfully overcome the either/or choice of economic determinism or absolute indeterminism and universalism or particularism, which trapped earlier Marxist thinkers. Despite their rejection of classical Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe's materialism has an affinity to Marx's own materialism, and this is why Laclau and Mouffe's theory of politics can reflect

¹ Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony is *neo*-Gramscian because Gramsci employed the concept without abandoning the notion of the proletariat as the privileged subject for revolution. For Gramsci, there is ultimately a single zero-sum game between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and thus, "the inner essentialist core" of Marxist determinism still persists. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (hereafter abbreviated to *HSS*), 65-71.

plurality in reality without falling into a postmodern politics of difference. Their materialism challenges the current pessimism of the Left and provides the foundation for thinking about politics today.

Laclau and Mouffe' Post-Marxism: Rejection of Classism

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe argue that classical Marxists had to confront on the one hand the persistence and resistance of capitalism, and on the other hand the fragmentation of the workers, both of which go against the Law of History that the transformation of capitalism into socialism is an inevitable historical development. Marxists tried to explain the apparent contingency of political life by introducing various notions of the autonomy of non-economic spheres, but they always defended “determination in the last instance by the economy” in order to claim the necessity of revolution. For the authors of *History and Socialist Strategy*, this Marxist belief that the economy is the base that determines politics is a myth and the fundamental limitation of Marxism.²

As long as the political sphere is conceived as the superstructure, the proletariat is the *a priori* political subject for Marxism. Laclau and Mouffe write, “For Marxism, the development of the productive forces plays the key role in the historical evolution towards socialism, given that ‘the past development of the productive forces makes socialism possible, and their future development makes

² For Laclau and Mouffe, the debates about the relative autonomy of the superstructure fail to grasp the real ontology of politics. As long as the “determination in the last instance by the economy” is assumed, the meaning of the relative autonomy is reduced to nothing, and the political is subordinated to the economy. *Ibid.*, 139-40.

socialism necessary’.”³ Laclau and Mouffe argue that the traditional notion of historical materialism is based on the supposition that the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces determines the future course of history by creating the unity of the proletariat through its impoverishment and homogenization. Laclau and Mouffe reject this historical materialism as a form of economism and reductionism. They maintain that there is no proof that economic processes in capitalism necessarily constitute the working class as the subject for revolution: “There is no logical connection whatsoever between positions in the relations of production and the mentality of producers. The workers’ resistance to certain form of domination will depend upon the position they occupy within *the ensemble of social relations*, and not only in those of production.”⁴ Contrary to the Marxist belief, there are no logical grounds to believe that exploitation, alienation, or other forms of subordination will necessarily lead to the revolutionary struggle for socialism by the working class. The Marxist Law of Political Economy claims that the indefinite expansion of the economic system is impossible due to the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces. For Laclau and Mouffe, such an economic contradiction does not *necessarily* mean that the collapse of the system must take form in the political confrontation between groups, let alone between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.⁵

Rejecting the essentialist identity theory of Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe argue that identities and demands of the actual working class do not merely reflect their position within economic relations. Referring to Marx’s “Sixth Thesis on

³ Ibid., 77.

⁴ Ibid., 85, emphasis added.

⁵ Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, 6.

Feuerbach,” they argue that the Marxist political subject was always exclusively constituted by the economic sphere, and that this view ignores the complexity of what Marx himself calls “the ensemble of social relations” and its effect upon the formation of political subjectivity. From Laclau and Mouffe’s perspective, the political identity and interest of the working class is not objectively determined by the workers’ structural position within economic relations, but rather is constructed through their identification with a certain political *discourse*. Even though structural factors do constrain choices, there are interpretive moments where individuals identify themselves through certain discourses. There can be no guarantee that the workers will become a revolutionary political subject through their identification with the socialist discourse, for it is possible that the workers might become reactionary through their identification with neo-conservatism or right-wing religious fundamentalism, for example.⁶ Contrary to Marxian economic objectivism,⁷ the plurality of possible forms of identity is derived from the fact that one’s structural position is much more complicated than Marxists imagine. The discursive totality for Laclau and Mouffe is “the ensemble of social relations” that includes the social, cultural, political and economic systems. In a particular context, “class” can become a compelling political discourse for the proletarian masses and thus a strategically important site of hegemonic intervention, but the problem is that Marxism ignores the

⁶ Le Pen’s 2002 shock in the French presidential election provides a good example. The National Front is mainly supported by lower and middle class workers who identified themselves with Le Pen’s political claim that their current economic status is deteriorated by massive immigrants and that its improvement can be conducted by recovering the purity of the French people.

⁷ Even today, for example, Alex Callinicos writes, “classes are conceived in Marxism precisely as groups of actors that shares interests determined by a common position in the relations of production.” (*Making History*, xix). However, the problem is that there are various identities to choose from in order to realize their interests, and there is no objective reason that the workers will choose the socialist identity over others.

contextual specificity of identity and interest and assumes the existence of transcendent, “true” interests of the working class that can be applied to any particular situation. On the contrary, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that social identity is constructed through the subject’s interpretation of a complex ensemble of class, race, gender, nation and other elements. Because of the heterogeneity and complexity of social relations and activities, there is a plurality of possible forms of identity.

For Laclau and Mouffe, discursive articulation is constitutive of all social identities, and this is why the hegemonic practice of articulation becomes crucial for politics to construct a mass struggle. Employing Derrida’s definition of discourse as a differential system in which the absence of a transcendental signified produces the infinite play of signification, Laclau and Mouffe maintain that discourse is a decentered structure in which meaning is endlessly negotiated and reconstructed.⁸ All social identities are open and overdetermined by their articulation in a chain of other elements, and it is not possible to determine their contents beforehand. For example, feminism as a social identity can be socialist, elitist or apolitical, depending on how its identity is connected to other ideological elements. Since this connection is by no means necessary but is a result of particular discursive articulation, there is always the possibility of the reconstruction and negotiation of identity. Social identity is defined by “the multitude of floating signifiers,” and it is impossible to attain an absolute fixity of social identity due to the impossible suture between signified and signifier.⁹

Contrary to Althusser’s *materialism of the encounter*, the undecidability of meaning does not lead Laclau and Mouffe to nihilistic particularism. From their

⁸ Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*, 40.

⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 87.

perspective, hegemonic struggle is a political attempt to temporarily fix the meaning of social identity, to arrest the free floating signifiers and construct a “center.” They call the privileged discursive point of this partial fixation *nodal points*: “*The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.*”¹⁰ Recognizing the impossibility of the absolute fixity of social identity, Laclau and Mouffe claim that hegemonic struggle is a political attempt to fix certain discourses as a discursive “center” in relation to which other meanings are defined. For example, if “communism” becomes a nodal point, “class struggle” provides a fixed signification to all other elements: to democracy (understood as “real democracy” as opposed to “bourgeois democracy,” which only justifies economic exploitation of the workers); to feminism and anti-racism (marginalization of women and certain races as a result of class-conditioned divisions of labor); to ecologism (the destruction of nature due to profit oriented mass production in capitalism) and so on.¹¹ Laclau and Mouffe’s politics of hegemony urges the construction of a new nodal point of the Left around which the demands of various different social movements can be defined.

It should be noted that identity cannot be constructed arbitrarily through discursive articulation. Laclau and Mouffe recognize that the individuals can choose their identities from infinite possibilities:

[The] internal ambiguities of the relation of representation, the undecidability between the various movements that are possible within it, transform [the relation of

¹⁰ HSS, 113, emphasis in original.

¹¹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 87-8.

representation] into the hegemonic battlefield between a plurality of possible decisions. This does not mean that any time everything that is logically possible becomes automatically an actual political possibility. There are inchoate possibilities which are going to be blocked, not because of any logical restriction, but as a result of the historical contexts in which the representative institutions operates.¹²

Individual subjects are always-already structurally located within a certain social, economic, political, and cultural system whose institutional set of norms, values, rules and customs limits beforehand the possible forms of credible discourse independently of individual's will. In other words, the available and compelling forms of political discourse are necessarily conditioned by a specific social structure. It is logically possible to articulate infinite numbers of identity, but there are only limited forms of credible and appealing discursive intervention in a particular historical circumstance. A new hegemonizing discourse must employ some elements of already normalized tradition and thus, will always be conditioned by the particular situation. For example, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 marks the first feminist discourse which displaced a democratic discourse of political equality of citizens to equality between sexes. Feminism first sought for access to political rights, which was later expanded to economic equality, and then finally to equality in the domain of sexuality in contemporary feminism. It is clear that the demands of contemporary feminism would have been unimaginable for women (and men) in the seventeenth century and would not have mobilized a large number of women. It is only through the continuous displacements of certain discourses that allowed for the expansion of a democratic principle over time. As a result, even though today's situation of women is much better compared to that of the seventeenth century, feminist discourses still

¹² Laclau, "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony," 50.

work towards the expansion of the democratic principles of liberty and equality into areas in which women have not yet gained equality.¹³

New Emancipatory Politics: Antagonism and Equivalential Chain

If the working class is no longer a privileged political subject, the Marxist conception of revolution must be reformulated. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the economic contradiction is not sufficient to bring about a revolution, and the emergence of political contestation necessitates the creation of *antagonism*.¹⁴ They write: “Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown Antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social.”¹⁵ Society is stable when individuals identify themselves with its existing hegemonic discourses. However, when a new set of political discourse articulates a definite identity and interest whose realization is hindered within the current order of society, an antagonistic relation develops. As individuals identify themselves with the new identity, they come to regard their potentials and self-realizations as prevented within the existing order of society. Individuals whose identity is not realized experience the absence of “fullness,” and this negative experience indicates the existence of fullness which must be attained for self-realization by overcoming a limit of the current objective structure.

Due to the complexity of discursive relations, there is a plurality of subjects and of social antagonisms. However, in order to produce a revolutionary situation, a

¹³ HSS, 154.

¹⁴ For the discussion of antagonism, I referred to Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe*.

¹⁵ HSS, 125.

collective social movement is vital, and this requires a unity of these differential identities. It is at the point where Laclau and Mouffe's concept of *chain of equivalence* obtains full significance. It is highly possible that diverse antagonisms remain differentiated and fragmented due to the plurality of particular demands, but Laclau and Mouffe maintain that in a revolutionary situation the differential character of social identities dissolves, as they are inscribed in a chain of equivalence that unifies them. This does not mean that there is an underlying essence among those different identities, a view that would face the same problem as essentialist identity theory. Rather, what is common among these social demands is their negation of the positivity of the current society: "Certain discursive forms, through equivalence, annul all positivity of the object and give a real existence to negativity as such."¹⁶ By ascribing various widespread experiences of identity crisis to the oppression by the dominant group, society comes to be divided into two camps between the dominant group and the rest of community. The positive differences between identities dissolve through the negation of the dominant group, and a wide chain of equivalence produces a clear-cut political frontier between "friend" and "enemy" or "we" and "they."

Take the example of the anti-imperialist movement in a colonized country. The presence of the dominant power is made evident every day through a variety of means. Imperialist exploitation and the predominance of brutal and authoritarian forms of domination by the colonizers are articulated as a notorious crime by the whole of society, and the oppressive regime comes to be seen as the obstacle to the

¹⁶ Ibid., 128-9.

full realization of interests and identities of everyone in the colonized society.¹⁷ This general experience of failure dissolves the differential character of each social demand of the colonized and forms an equivalential chain through a negative reference to the imperial domination. The colonizer is discursively constructed as the “anti-colonized,” and all the differences among the colonized dissolve in unity against the colonizer. Through the negation of the oppressive regime, a broad chain of equivalence produces a radical division of society between the oppressor and the oppressed. In this revolutionary moment, a collective political subjectivity, “the people,” is constructed through the negation of imperial domination, and *popular struggle* emerges from this radical antagonism.

Experience of the lack of fullness, shared by various sectors, produces solidarity among them. However, due to the difference of their particular demands, the bond between them remains relatively weak. In order to make a stronger bond, it is necessary that particular demands form an equivalential chain around “*a positive symbolic expression.*”¹⁸ In other words, the construction of the popular political subject requires a common denominator as a nodal point, such as independence, justice, freedom, socialism, etc: “The construction of the people will be the attempt to give a name to that absent fullness. Without this initial breakdown of something in

¹⁷ One may doubt if this example grasps the dynamics of the formation of popular struggle because the imperial power openly presents itself as a foreign and hostile group in relation to the colonized. However, prior to the formation of the anti-colonial movement, there was a period of stability in which large sectors of the population had come to identify with the colonial regime or at least had affirmed the identity without rebelling against the regime. For example, local elites and police were often indigenous people who actively identified themselves through the imperialist discourses. Once a clear-cut political frontier is formed against the imperial power, the anti-colonial struggle is directed not only against the foreign ruler, but also all those local elites and police who have come to make commitments to it. The division is not a simple binary between the foreign ruler and the indigenous people, but the division between “we” and “they” is constituted in and through the anti-colonial discourses.

¹⁸ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 82, emphasis in original.

the social order ... there is no possibility of antagonism, frontier, or, ultimately, 'people'." ¹⁹ Such a positive expression of fullness is what Laclau calls an *empty signifier*. ²⁰

Take another example: the struggle against Tsarist absolutism during the Russian Revolution. There was a plurality of social antagonisms prior to the Revolution. The traditional life of peasants was being destroyed by a rapid industrialization, the bourgeoisie and intellectuals desired more economic and political freedom, and workers and soldiers demanded the improvement of the general quality of living which deteriorated after WWI. When a chain of equivalence was formed among these social antagonisms through the negation of Tsarist absolutism, the Bolshevik and class struggle came to play a hegemonic role. "Socialism" became a nodal point to which all other struggles must refer to have a meaning. Consequently the meaning of each social demand by peasants, intellectuals, soldiers and workers are rearticulated in relation to class struggle, and the incorporation of the different demands occurs in their common reference to the socialist ideal.

Laclau argues that this reference of all particular demands to "socialism" as a nodal point is possible not because of a supreme density of its meaning, but because of its *emptiness*. "Socialism" is an empty signifier and does not have a formal positive content that everyone can fully endorse. In other words, the political claim for "socialism" has no formal conceptual determination because the socialist ideal is the mere positive reversal of a situation originally lived in negative terms: deprivation,

¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

²⁰ "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?," *Emancipation(s)*, 36-46.

dislocation, disorder, etc.²¹ Though there is no transcendent and ahistorical universality, the general negative experience of the masses produces a contextual and historical universal political claim as a nodal point around which differential social demands gain solidarity. This hegemonic universality constructs a mass struggle that unifies the plurality of demands in the common struggle for the full realization of identity.

However, Laclau and Mouffe recognize that radical antagonism which divides society into two camps is an exceptional case today. The clear-cut political frontiers are rare in those countries of advanced capitalism due to the emergence of “new social movements” and the disappearance of the old separation between Left and Right. Laclau and Mouffe seek to elaborate the new condition of a Left politics based on the heterogeneity of social demands: “What interests us here about these new social movements, then, is ... the *novel* role they play in articulating that rapid diffusion of social conflictuality to more and more numerous relations which is characteristic today of advanced industrial societies.”²² A series of changes which took place after WWII, such as Fordism, commodification of social life, the destruction of the environment, and the degradation of living quality due to rapid urbanization, created a series of new problems which provided conditions for the

²¹ Laclau recognizes that “empty signifier” is not completely “empty” as long as it has any meaning at all. There is a particular group that plays a more significant role and pushes its particular demand more effectively. Thus, Laclau argues that the universal is not only empty but also *contaminated* by the particular. However, even the demand of a hegemonic sector (the working class in the case of the Russian Revolution) cannot remain the same but must be negotiated and reformulated to be a universal demand around which a broad chain of equivalence can be constructed. Žižek summarizes Laclau’s point well: “The Universal is empty, yet precisely as such always-already filled in, that is, hegemonized by some contingent, particular content that acts as its stand-in – in short, each Universal is the battleground on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony.... All positive content of the Universal is the contingent result of hegemonic struggle – in itself, the Universal is absolutely empty.” *The Ticklish Subject*, 100-101.

²² *HSS*, 159-160, emphasis in original.

emergence of new political discourses other than socialist one. Also the establishment of the Keynesian welfare state as a result of the pressure from labor movements contributed to the multiplication of social movements. On the one hand, state intervention in the private life of the sick, the unemployed, the old and so on reinforced the state's disciplinary power and control, which intrigued resistance by the people. On the other hand, the welfare state developed "positive liberties," lending legitimacy to new demands for equality and insistence upon new social rights.²³

After these social transformations, the plurality of social demands is the starting point of today's political struggle. Today no one of these struggles provides absolute "Truth" or "Universality," but contends with each other from within their own perspectives. For Laclau and Mouffe, *radical democracy*, rather than socialism, provides a new nodal point for democracy and for democratic struggle. Today, all other particular social struggles (socialist, feminist, ecologist, etc) can be conceived as a gradual radicalization and expansion of this democratic project into various spheres. We must abandon the nostalgia for the old Marxian class struggle; today democratic struggle is the new form of struggle which is a referential point for all other particular struggles. For Laclau and Mouffe, political contestation does not have to be that between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, and the political demand is not necessarily a socialist one. Rather, a *radical democratic imaginary* replaces the socialist utopia, and *the people* are the new collective political subject instead of the proletariat.

²³ Ibid., 162-163.

The Politics of the People against the Politics of the Multitude

The difference between Laclau and Mouffe's *radical democracy* and Hardt and Negri's *absolute democracy* must be clarified. Hardt and Negri recognize the plurality and heterogeneity of subjects, and, instead of trying to homogenize it, they insist on the maximization of heterogeneity and singularity of each subject for the establishment of absolute democracy. In this sense, both Hardt and Negri, and Laclau and Mouffe mark breaks from traditional Marxists. Contrary to Marxists who try to find the "true" working class for whom socialism is their "objective interests," these post-Marxists accept the fragmentation of the working class as an inevitable historical event and even welcome the emergence of new social movements as a necessary condition for democracy. However, as shown in the last chapter, Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude dissolves the heterogeneity of real social movements into an abstract sphere of pure immanence. By aprioristically unifying different social movements in the plane of immanence, Hardt and Negri do not in the end take the plurality of those movements seriously. In accordance with the Spinozian *conatus*, the "will to be against," the multitude will instinctively resist Empire for the establishment of absolute democracy. Laclau criticizes this view: "People are never just 'against', but against some particular things and for others."²⁴ Laclau claims that the wider and broader chain of "against" must be *constructed* from the particular "agains" through the hegemonic practice of articulation. Without the articulation of democratic discourses of liberty and equality, social movements can be inscribed into the right-wing discourse, which is clearly demonstrated by the advances of the "new

²⁴ Ibid., 241.

right” in recent years; or they may simply end up reproducing the current hegemonic practice, instead of challenging it. The actual demands for radical democracy must be negotiated and rearticulated throughout the hegemonic struggle. Only the actual hegemonic struggle can decide what the future democracy will look like.

Furthermore, Laclau and Mouffe criticize Hardt and Negri’s emphasis on the singularity and difference of the multitude. According to Laclau and Mouffe, without constructing a broad chain of equivalence which provides a positive reconstruction of the social fabric from its various particularities, “the strategy is condemned to marginality.” The new political strategy of the Left “cannot consist of the affirmation ... of a set of anti-system demands; on the contrary it must base itself upon the search for a point of equilibrium between a maximum advance for the democratic revolution in a broad range of spheres, and the capacity for the hegemonic direction and positive reconstruction of these spheres on the part of subordinated groups.”²⁵ A collective social movement necessitates mass mobilization under a universal demand. Without a hegemonic articulation that expands an equivalential chain, a movement will remain marginalized, no matter how radical it may be. In this context, small movements are obliged to rearticulate their own particular demands so that their demands can be represented in a hegemonic universal demand. However, Hardt and Negri do not see this dynamics of the formation of political demand, and their emphasis on the singularity of each movement misses the significance of political strategy and, thus, will be marginalized in actual political struggles.

²⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, op. cit., 189.

Marxist Critique of Laclau and Mouffe's Theory of Discourse

It is easy to imagine Marxists raising copious objections against Laclau and Mouffe's replacement of the working class with *the people* and socialism with *radical democracy*. For Alex Callinicos, Laclau and Mouffe are typical postmodernists who are marked by political *pessimism* due to "the disillusioned aftermath of 1968."²⁶ Many Marxists argue that the abandonment of the primacy of class struggle and socialist politics is equivalent to the acceptance of capitalism and its liberal democracy.²⁷ Furthermore, they claim that Laclau and Mouffe's discursive turn is nothing but a regression to "ex-Marxism," i.e., idealism.²⁸ For example, calling Laclau and Mouffe's theory "another repetition of banal and hoary right-wing social-democratic nostrums,"²⁹ Ellen M. Wood criticizes Laclau's definition of class independent of the relations of production, in her view it means that ideology is given total autonomy. For Wood, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse is idealist, as it ignores the existing social relations and material interests of the working class. She argues that if the collective identity of a class emerges from discursive articulation, and not from the relations of production, it means that the class struggle is determined by the interpellation through autonomous ideological elements. Wood mocks Laclau

²⁶ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 7.

²⁷ It is curious, even a non-typical Marxist, Žižek criticizes Laclau and Mouffe on this point. Yet that criticism is not meaningful unless he specifies what he means by "anti-capitalist struggle" in today's world. He always remains quite vague about this point, but if he means anti-capitalist struggle in a traditional sense, it is clear that such a view is unacceptable, as it ignores the plurality of subjects. This debate between Laclau and Žižek is currently going on, and I do not have a space to introduce Žižek's insightful arguments. For Žižek's critique of Laclau, see "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!," and "Against the Populist Temptation." Laclau's replies can be found in *On Populist Reason*, 232-239, and "Why constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics."

²⁸ This expression was taken from Norman Geras, "Ex-Marxism Without Substance: Being a Real Reply to Laclau and Mouffe."

²⁹ Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, 7.

and Mouffe, claiming that “a caveman is as likely to become a socialist as is a proletarian — provided only that he comes within hailing distance of the appropriate discourse.”³⁰ She concludes that, if one follows Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse, material interests are dissolved into mere ideas, and the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat comes to be determined *outside class*, namely, by ideological manipulation of discourse by intellectuals. Wood claims that such arbitrary ideological manipulation denies any determinacy and causality in reality: the world would be a mere juxtaposition of arbitrary contingencies in which we do not know which discourse to choose over another.³¹ Furthermore, Wood continues that Laclau and Mouffe’s idea of radical democracy, without challenging capitalism, will automatically reproduce liberal democracy that is based on capitalism. Only by overcoming capitalism, argues Wood, is it possible to establish a new form of democracy. Wood concludes with a traditional Marxist statement: “The first principle of social organization must remain the essential correspondence between working-class interests and socialist politics. Unless class politics becomes the unifying force that binds together all emancipatory struggles, the ‘new social movements’ will remain on the margins of the existing social order.”³² Wood clearly thinks that class struggle has a transcendent power to integrate all other social movements.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 61.

³¹ Ibid., 61-2. See also Geras, “Ex-Marxism,” 52.

³² Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, 199.

³³ Though she still considers the discursive turn as a meaningless aversion from Marxism, Wood admits the importance of “extra-economic” factors in a recent book, and writes; “the socialist project of class emancipation always has been, or should have been, *a means* to a larger end of human emancipation” (*Democracy against Capitalism*, 264, emphasis added).

However, Wood's objection to Laclau and Mouffe distorts the latter's materialist project. First of all, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that antagonism does not simply exist within the relations of production, but *between* the relation of production and something external to it.³⁴ For example, class antagonism emerges when workers claim that a wage below a certain level cannot afford a decent way of life, such as sending kids to school, buying a car and having access to certain forms of recreation. The patterns and intensity of class antagonism largely depend on how the social agent is constituted outside the economic relations. The demands of the worker are based on how they perceive the world (e.g., what *decent* means to him/her), and this perception of the world is conditioned by available discourses of equality and liberty which generate an awareness of his/her own rights. As the availability of democratic-egalitarian discourses increases, the workers' demands for access to social and cultural goods become stronger. Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that "the possibility of deepening the anti-capitalist struggle itself depends on the extension of the democratic revolution. Even more: anti-capitalism is an internal moment of the democratic revolution."³⁵

Contrary to Wood's criticism, the creation of antagonism through discourse does not mean some arbitrary articulation of antagonism and manipulation of the masses by ideologies. Wood accuses Laclau and Mouffe of believing that intellectuals are free to create reality through the conscious manipulation of discourse.³⁶ However, Laclau and Mouffe recognize that individuals are always within definite social relations, and thus their thoughts and actions are inevitably conditioned by the current

³⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," 103.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, 63-64.

hegemonic social positivity independently of will. Naturally, political intervention by the Left's discourse is conditioned by the already normalized social relations. For example, for many proletarians in the nineteenth century who spent most of the day with many others in factory, their equalized health conditions, living standards, and housing situation gave credibility to the political claim that the improvement of their life was largely determined by the struggle at the level of production.³⁷ The overdetermination of various shared experience of the workers enabled "class" to be a nodal point for political struggle, and it produced a tight relation between the economic and political spheres. In this example, it is clear that potential types of hegemonic articulation are limited by the existing patterns of social relations. Laclau and Mouffe can easily explain why neolithic people will not be as easily attracted to socialism as modern workers were.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of political subjectivity goes beyond mere subjectivism. Social agents are conditioned by the sedimented social relations that limit available and credible forms of discourse. However, within these conditions, a political subject emerges through identification with a political discourse that demands overcoming the essential limits of the current social objectivity in order to realize one's own identity. Laclau and Mouffe's politics overcomes both subjectivism and objectivism by offering a dialectic of the subjective and the objective, namely, the possibility of agentic subversion of the objective structure by becoming subjected to the objective structure. Individuals are always-already subjected to a set of discursive totalities (e.g., norms, customs, rules and values), but the subject is able to dislocate meanings and facts, forming new forms of discourse. It is equally wrong to

³⁷ Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*, 42.

accuse Laclau and Mouffe of denying any determinacy and causality in the world. On the contrary, since in their view we are conditioned by sedimented social relations, it is possible to grasp “*verisimilitude* of the available alternatives.”³⁸ However, as the political struggle challenges these social relations, it is possible that struggle can bring about an unexpected result or a total failure. Contingency and openness are thus part of the nature of hegemonic political struggle.

The Marxist criticisms that Laclau and Mouffe accept capitalism are an attempt to discredit their materialism. Actually, they insist on abolishing capitalism, though they do not deny that radical democracy is a continuation of liberal democracy. They clearly insist on the necessity of transcending capitalism: “Every project for radical democracy necessarily includes, as we have said, the socialist dimension — that is to say, the abolition of capitalist relations of production; but it rejects the idea that from this abolition there necessarily follows the elimination of the other inequalities.”³⁹ Yet the transcendence of capitalism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the realization of radical and plural democracy precisely because changing economic relations is not sufficient for the transformation of the political

³⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Apologies,” 102, emphasis in original.

³⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 192. It is true that Laclau and Mouffe do not elaborate their own critique of political economy, as Wendy Brown points out: “While thinkers such as Bowles and Gintis, Laclau and Mouffe, and the analytical Marxism school are certainly critical of capitalism’s inequalities, they are less concerned with capitalism as a political economy of domination, exploitation, or alienation, precisely those terms by which the problem of freedom is foregrounded as a problem of social and economic power and not only a matter of political or legal statuses. It is as if the terrible unfreedom and indignities attendant upon ‘actually existing socialisms’ of the last half-century persuaded such thinkers that free enterprise really is freer than the alternatives, that alienation is inherent in all labour, and that freedom, finally, is a matter of consumption, choice, and expression: individual good rather than a social and political practice” (*States of Injury*, 13). Yet Laclau and Mouffe are certainly concerned with the actual “social and political practice” rather than “individual good” contrary to her belief. Brown’s criticism can be applied to herself, as she also does not offer a critique of political economy. Similar to Žižek, she criticizes the absence of critique of capitalism in post-Marxist theory, but such a critique can produce meaningful debates only when theorists such as Žižek and Brown actually explain how domination, exploitation, or alienation in capitalism should be overcome.

sphere. In fact, the socialist politics of economic equality do not necessarily recognize the plurality of social agents, as classism suppressed a plurality of social demands by assuming the objective interests of class. The history of socialism also questions the logical connection between socialism and democracy, as it shows that socialism can establish totalitarianism. Since the socialist politics do not guarantee the establishment of plural and radical democracy, Laclau and Mouffe claim that it is important to deepen and radicalize liberal democracy rather than simply rejecting it. The establishment of radical democracy is a political project which can be realized through a long complex process of countless negotiating and reformulating the conception of democracy.

After all, the belief that liberal democracy is a product of capitalism and that real democracy will be established under socialism only reflects the economic determinist belief that the political sphere is determined by the economy. Against liberals who confine the economic sphere to the private realm, Marxists revealed the political character of the economic activity. In the same manner, today we must expand the political sphere to all other spheres. This does not mean that all other spheres will have the same importance for political struggle, however, and this is why political strategy matters. For Laclau and Mouffe, class can still provide an important identity for social struggle, but it is by no means the only privileged site.

Idealism of Marxism and the Radicalization of Marx's Materialism

Marxists are worried that Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist turn abandons Marx completely, and this anxiety intensifies their tone of criticism. However, Marx's *materialism* is more sophisticated and radical than *historical materialism*, which claims the necessity of revolution. Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist turn is dreadful only to those traditional Marxists, but not necessarily to Marx himself who never used the term "historical materialism." This also means that Laclau and Mouffe are wrong in assuming that their rejection of the Law of History is equivalent to refuting Marx's own materialism.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, what really distinguishes idealism from materialism is the idealist affirmation that the innermost nature of external objects can be fully identical to thought. As Hegel is the acme of modern idealism, his absolute idealism seeks to the perfect unification of the subject (mind) and the object (world). It follows that "the true line of divide between idealism and materialism is, therefore, the affirmation or negation of the ultimate irreducibility of the real to the concept."⁴⁰ If this is so, many Marxists are idealists, for they reduce the real to the "Law" by affirming the "determination in the last instance by the economy." Here Laclau and Mouffe ask whether Marx is a materialist or idealist. Though their answer to this question is a little ambivalent,⁴¹ they attribute an idealist and essentialist character to Marx's materialism, based on their simplistic view that Marx's Law of History reduces reality to the concept. However, Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of Marx

⁴⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

is clearly reductionistic, as I will demonstrate that Marx's own materialism is actually anti-essentialist and anti-idealist.⁴²

Marx's materialism is concerned with how definite social relations are reified and come to determine the mode of behavior and consciousness of individuals.⁴³ Marx started this investigation from the critique of religion in his *Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and develops it further later on in terms of economic relations.⁴⁴ Marx's materialistic conception of the world is clearly expressed in his description of the method of political economy in the "Introduction" to the *Grundrisse*. In this section, he famously explains that the real "scientific method" is "the method of advancing" from a simple abstraction, such as labor, value or division of labor, to a more complicated, concrete object, such as the state, the population, or the world market. Criticizing Hegel's illusion that a specific mental idea produces the real, concrete object, Marx's scientific method instead maintains that even the simplest economic category, e.g. exchange value, cannot exist without "an already existing concrete living whole." Marx avoids the idealist illusion of the

⁴² The crude simplification of Marx's philosophy is the main problem of Laclau and Mouffe's arguments. They always attribute determinism to Marx, by asserting that he believes in the Law of History based on economic relations. The theoretical consequence seems to be grave. They do not elaborate the theory of ideology, alienation, reification, value-form and commodity fetishism, which are still useful analytical tools, even after abandoning historical materialism. For example, it seems that Laclau and Mouffe do not have any theoretical criteria to account for the ideological dimension of reality, as in their view all the symbolic is discursively constructed. Eagleton's *Ideology* touches on this issue of the absence of ideology in Laclau and Mouffe, but his hostile attitude toward post-Marxists reduces the theoretical depth of his criticism (215-20). Eagleton also assumes the objectivity of truth, which is rejected by Marx's materialism.

⁴³ The unique significance of Marx's theory of reification is lost if reification is not distinguished from alienation, a mistake made by Lukács, Mészáros, and the Frankfurt theorists. See, for example, Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* and Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For the importance of theory of reification, see Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*. However, Balibar's explanation is insufficient; it is regrettable that important theories of reification are unavailable except in Japanese. See Hiromatsu, *Bussyoukaron no Kouzu*.

⁴⁴ Since Marx writes in the Sixth Thesis that "the essence of man is the ensemble of the social relations," it seems possible to expand his theory of reification outside the economic sphere. In fact, such a turn was made by a Japanese philosopher, Wataru Hiromatsu, whom I cannot deal with here due to the limits of the space and the unavailability of the texts in English. See Hiromatsu's *Sonzai to Imi*.

creation of the world by consciousness, as he claims that the abstract category is based on concrete reality:

But as a category exchange value leads an antediluvian existence. Hence to the kind of consciousness — and philosophical consciousness is precisely of this kind — which regards the comprehending mind as the real man, and only the comprehended world as such as the real world — to this consciousness, therefore, the movement of categories appears as the real act of production — which unfortunately receives an impulse from outside — whose result is the world; and this ... is true in so far as the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental concretum, is IN FACT a product of thinking, of comprehension; yet it is by no means a product of the self-evolving concept whose thinking proceeds outside and above perception and conception, but of the assimilation and transformation of perceptions and images into concepts, The totality as a conceptual totality seen by the mind is a product of the thinking mind, which assimilates the world in the only way open to it, a way which differs from the artistic-, religious- and practical intellectual assimilation of this world. The real subject remains outside the mind and independent of it — that is to say, so long as the mind adopts a purely speculative, purely theoretical attitude. Hence the subject, society, must always be envisaged as the premiss of conception even when the theoretical method is employed.⁴⁵

According to Marx, it is wrong to believe that “a product of the thinking” enables us to understand the world in an ahistorical manner because the meaning of a category is always conditioned by social relations. Exchange value as such can only exist by assuming a certain population and a market operating within definite social relations, i.e., by viewing it as a historical concept based on concrete reality. However, once we have acquired exchange value as an abstract category, we can then apply it retrospectively to earlier times, in so far as exchanges occurred in these periods. Philosophical consciousness produces ideas and concepts to comprehend the world, and *our* world only exists in relationship to our consciousness. However, this “conceptual totality” must not be confused with the actual objectivity of the world, as the former is a “product of the thinking” of the philosopher whose consciousness is always-already conditioned by social relations. Forgetting this fact, idealists (and

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 38-39.

even Marxists) assume that the comprehended world is “self-evolving” as a result of pure thinking, when it is in fact the result of “the transformation of perceptions and images into concepts.” Real objects in the world *do* exist independently of the mind, and the mind does not create them, but the object can attain a meaning only in a relation to consciousness.⁴⁶ By remaining at a “purely speculative” level, idealism assimilates the real to a product of thinking, as if the mind is the creator of the world. On the contrary, Marx’s materialism recognizes that the real is only grasped by the mind of “the real man” which is always-already within definite social relations. Hence, his thinking is historically conditioned, as his perceptions and images are inevitably rooted in a definite historical circumstance.

In opposition to Hegel, for whom the idea and the real ultimately coincide, Marx claims that consciousness and society never completely match. As Marx had already noted in *The German Ideology*, there is no such thing as a “pure” consciousness, and consciousness is always “a social product” that is from the outset afflicted with the curse of being ‘burdened’ with matter.”⁴⁷ Even “philosophical consciousness” that conceptually grasps [*begreifen*] the human world is no exception. Marx recognizes the limitation of the objectivity of the world, claiming that even the consciousness of the philosopher is unable to transcend all social relations. He denies the possibility of universal objective truth because even the simple categories through which we are to express “truth” are conditioned by definite historical conditions. In

⁴⁶ Gera argues that Laclau and Mouffe’s discursive theory denies the existence of the world. However, this reality/idealist controversy is rejected by Laclau and Mouffe from the beginning. They never question the existence of the world of objects independent of discourse. However, the object possesses a meaning only through discourse. Marx’s point is similar. The object attains a *meaning* only in relationship to consciousness, but since consciousness is a “product of social relations,” the object can be only grasped in a partial and historical manner.

⁴⁷ Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 43-4.

other words, the categories through which we apprehend truth are limited by the fact that they are a product of socially conditioned consciousness. The real as such is never transparently accessible.

Thus, as even Laclau and Mouffe seem to admit, ideas, categories and concepts for Marx are not self-constituted identities, but rather can be seen as “differences” in the Saussurean sense.⁴⁸ The concept of labor is only established relationally with other differences such as the bourgeois society, productive force, relations of production, etc. By conceiving of social relations in this way, Marx’s materialist turn is based on the recognition that the signifying totalities are constituted in a wide range of social differences. This type of materialism does not assume the determination of the superstructure by the economic base in any straight forward way because the presence of relations of production requires the presence of other categories such as the state, labor, exchange value, etc. — just as the presence of “father” necessitates “son,” “mother,” “daughter” and so on. There is no simple causal relationship between the base and the super structure because the meaning of the base is conditioned by elements in the superstructure. In other words, the economic relations are no longer a “transcendent signifier” which determines the meaning of all other signifiers.

Laclau and Mouffe’s critique of Marx is that his “radical relationalism” returns to idealism when he regards “consciousness” as a separate entity exterior and transcendental to social existence.⁴⁹ For Laclau and Mouffe, Marx’s belief in the transcendence of consciousness is expressed when he writes in the “Preface” to *A*

⁴⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Apologies,” 90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

Contribution, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”⁵⁰ According to Laclau and Mouffe, in order for consciousness to be determined by social existence, it is necessary that it exist outside of social existence. But this critique of Marx is inadequate because the transcendence of consciousness is exactly what Marx criticizes Feuerbach for in his “Theses on Feuerbach.”⁵¹ For example, Marx writes about the problem of truth in the second thesis:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.⁵²

Marx rejects Feuerbach’s “intuition” that claims to attain the objectivity of reality because “thinking which is isolated from practice” does not exist. Marx clearly rejects the type of “materialism” which holds that the subject can objectively grasp and cognize the real object. On the contrary, thinking is not conducted in a transcendent manner, but rather always occurs within social practices. The recognition of the objective world is always conditioned by the world itself because the subject herself is a part of that world. Therefore, the question of truth can only be sought through social practice and not as an abstract epistemological problem of recognition of recognizing an objective fact.

In light of the radicalism of Marx’s materialistic method, Laclau and Mouffe’s critique of Marx is unconvincing. Ironically their *post-Marxist* turn is at the same time a form of *post-Marxism* in the sense that they grasp the hidden part of Marx’s

⁵⁰ Quoted from *ibid.*

⁵¹ Marx also writes in “The German Ideology,” that the starting point is “the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as *their* consciousness” (37, emphasis in original).

⁵² Marx, “Thesis on Feuerbach,” 3, emphasis in original.

materialism which had been suppressed by traditional Marxists. I am not claiming that Marx implicitly articulated Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse. However, emphasizing that human subjects are always-already within social practice, Marx's relationalism has an affinity with Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse. Marx's materialism rests on an ontology that locates concrete individuals within definite material and social relations. Though he mainly restricted his analysis to economic relations, his arguments can be applied to other social fields as well. Laclau and Mouffe's theory is, in this sense, an extension of Marx's materialistic method in that it conceives of "relations" as the ontology of all *beings*.

Marx's materialism and Laclau and Mouffe's materialism are close to Žižek's "universalized perspectivism" as the radical materialist position. Criticizing Lenin's idealist belief in the immediacy of the world, Žižek writes:

Universalized perspectivism rejects any such gaze. The point is not there is no reality outside our mind, the point is rather that there is no mind outside reality. This distortion of reality occurs precisely because our mind is part of reality.... What [Lenin] overlooks is that our distortions of reality occur precisely *because* we are part of reality and therefore do not have a neutral view of it: our perception distorts reality because the observer is part of the observed.⁵³

Ideas do not constitute a closed totality and cannot explain the innermost nature of the objects external to mind. The materialistic understanding of the world is that human beings construct their world through thinking, and it is through this construction that they give to a thing its *being*. The world can be perceived and conceptualized only through consciousness, but it is conditioned by different social and material relations; hence the understanding of the world is necessarily perspectival.

⁵³ Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, 97, emphasis in original. The similar point is also emphasized by a Japanese Marxist, Tabata. Cf. Tabata, *Marx to Tetsugaku* [Marx and Philosophy], 140.

With this understanding of Marx's materialism, we need to reformulate some concepts that Marx employs. For example, the category of labor changes in such a way as to include the immaterial labor of the service sector, as its relationship to the relations of production and other social differences are transformed over time.⁵⁴ Also for politics based on this materialism the reformulation of political strategy according to particular situations is more materialistic compared to the dogmatic assertion of some general theory of social development. Today, the working class is no longer the sole hegemonic force; a reformulation of political strategy is absolutely necessary for the efficacy of progressive political struggle.

The Politics of Negativity: Materialistic Theory of Political Subjectivity

Sharing similar view of materialism, it is not surprising that Marx and Laclau and Mouffe have similar views about political struggle. For Marx, actual individuals are conditioned by reified social relations, such as money, customs, norms, laws and the state. Within these social relations, our consciousness and our understanding of the world are conditioned by individuals' structural positions within society. This means that different individual's perspectives on the same society will differ, for example, depending on whether one is a capitalist, a worker or a peasant. There is no transcendental position from which one can grasp the objective truth of reality

⁵⁴ Marx seems to recognize the future necessity to reformulate the concept of "labor" as the social relations and the experience of the subject changes. If so, the transformation to the service sector from the industrial sector in the developed country is the moment to reconceptualize labor by incorporating "immaterial labor" in the post-Fordist mode of production. See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 40.

because there are only perspective truths.⁵⁵ This perspectivism explains why Marx endorses a performative dimension of truth in the “Second Thesis.” Different structural positions within social relations provide different perspectives, and the claim to truth must be realized through practice, which will inevitably incur certain contestations and exclusions.

How does a certain contestation emerge in a revolutionary manner? Similar to Laclau and Mouffe, the Young Marx explains that the drive to realize one’s own perspective is rooted in the negation of the present situation; “The criticism of religion ends ... with the *categorical imperative* to *overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being, relations which cannot be better described than by the exclamation of a Frenchman when it was planned to introduce a tax on dogs: Poor dogs! They want to treat you like human beings!”⁵⁶ Marx’s claim is clearly ethico-political when he advocates the necessity of a political-legal revolution in order to emancipate humans from the experience of suffering. The experience of suffering or alienation in general produces a political subjectivity by negating the whole of society. For Marx, the imperative of revolution is justified by the negative experience of debasement and contempt. The drive for revolution is not originally derived from a positive promise for a better society but from the desire to negate the experience of suffering.

⁵⁵ This view is not relativistic. It is true that there are plural perspectives and no Truth which transcends all perspectives, but this does not mean that choosing A or B is equivalent for individuals. Rather, choosing A or B does matter, and this is why political contestation occurs to determine which perspective is “true.” There are many “truths” that were accepted by the members of society for a long time but that proved to be false as a result of political struggle. For example, it was taken for granted that women and Blacks were inferior to men and Whites, but such a “truth” was contested and rejected by progressive social movements.

⁵⁶ Marx, “Contribution Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction,” 182.

Marx's materialistic method reveals the historical, contingent and constructed character of the reified social relations which alienate individuals from what they want to be. This sense of *alienation*, the lack of fullness, is derived from the concrete experience of abasement, enslavement and neglect. Marx believes that through consciousness one has the ability to reflect upon one's own situation and such reflexivity reveals one's alienation from one's own conscious action under a reified system. Marx's theoretical critique articulates and identifies how the full realization of the workers' identity is frustrated by oppression, enslavement, exploitation and alienation in capitalism. The idea of fullness is expressed as *communism*, and this is why the communist movement for Marx is not a mere transformation of economic relations, but the negation of the present as such: "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence."⁵⁷ Communism, for Marx, is a "movement" that incessantly negates the current limits of society.

The shortcoming of Marx's theory is his limited ability to give political subjectivity to the proletariat. In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of political subjectivity deepens Marx's materialistic project. Similar to Marx, the Laclauian subject exists only within relations, i.e., discursive relations, which form a historical block of sedimented social relations. Social antagonism emerges due to the limits of society that prevent the realization of one's identity. The discursive articulation of the experience of the absence of fullness, such as enslavement, injustice or oppression,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 49, emphasis in original.

constitutes political subjectivity. However, Laclau and Mouffe do not limit the field of construction of social antagonism in advance, contrary to Marx whose theory of alienation clearly assumes the emerging universality of *the working class*. Instead of narrowing the political subjectivity to the working class, Laclau and Mouffe insist upon the construction of a wide and broad chain of equivalence by articulating forms of oppression for which the current society is responsible.

Confronting the plurality of new social movements, the materialistic method should understand the historical conditions for the emergence of those heterogeneous movements, instead of dogmatically emphasizing the primacy of class struggle over other struggles.⁵⁸ There have been numerous historical changes since 1968 that warrant their reconsideration, including the structural transformations to post-Fordism resulting in the declining power of the industrial workers in post-industrial countries; the real subsumption of life into the capitalist relations of production, which caused various forms of new struggles — accompanied by the rejection of disciplinary society organized around the welfare state; and the collapse of “actually existing socialism” present in the U.S.S.R which allowed for the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal globalization, etc. These new struggles, challenges and dangers should put into question the outdated doctrine of “class struggle” and give us reason to reformulate the logic of political struggle. Imposing a dogmatic view of the world is itself ideological and idealist, as it assumes the existence of an ahistorical truth.

⁵⁸ Of course, this does not mean that the problems of class and labor can be neglected for oppositional politics. As long as a capitalist society persists, individuals are subject to the constraints imposed by the accumulation of capital and reified social relations, such as money and commodity, which condition the mode of behavior and thought.

It is more materialistic to recognize that the insistence upon the primacy of class struggle is futile. In our post-socialist era, the construction of a collective social movement requires developing a wide chain of equivalence based on the radical democratic imaginary: “these struggles do not spontaneously converge, and in order to establish democratic equivalences, a new ‘common sense’ is necessary, which would transform the identity of different groups so that the demands of each group could be articulated with those of others according to the principle of democratic equivalence.”⁵⁹ Instead of a politics of tolerance or recognition which seeks to relinquish social antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe’s democratic project claims the significance of creating social antagonism in striving for radical democracy. Today, due to a rapid globalization, we are witnessing the further multiplication of social movements and the emergence of new resistances to transnational corporations’ attempts to dominate our life. It is urgent to elaborate a credible idea of “what kind of society one wants to establish” so that a mass movement can be constructed. This task, assigned to the Left, is not easy, but Left politics cannot be reconstructed unless the Left concretely elaborates a new utopia. In my concluding remarks, I will indicate the direction the Left politics should take today.

⁵⁹ Mouffe, “Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern,” 42.

Concluding Remarks

Whither Marxism?

Hardt and Negri and Laclau and Mouffe both attempt to formulate how Marxism should respond to the emergence of new social movements and the decline of class struggle. Contrary to traditional Marxists, they argue that the plurality of subjects is not to be bemoaned as the end of the Marxist politics but rather provides the possibility of a more radical democracy. These post-Marxists are correct to point out that the fragmentation of the working class and the persistent power of capitalism are beyond Marx's anticipation, so the reformulation of the Marxist theory of political subjectivity is inevitable. However, post-Marxists are not justified to claim that there is nothing we can learn from Marx's materialism today. It is true that traditional Marxists appear dogmatic and idealist as long as they cling to the ideal of revolution by the working class without seeing the enormous transformations of capitalism after 1968, let alone 1883. But Laclau and Mouffe's accusation that Marx's materialism is a form of economic determinism is simply wrong. As seen in the last chapter, it is possible to provide a different understanding of Marx's materialism which can be compatible with Laclau and Mouffe's own materialism. The theory of materialism is only one of many ways to reread Marx. I believe that more new interpretations can be made today since the dogmatic understanding of traditional Marxism has withered

away. If Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the impossibility of the absolute fixity of meaning, they should not confine Marx's texts within the traditional Marxist determinism but rather a new meaning of Marx's texts should be opened up through the tenacious and careful rereading of the texts.

Reinterpretation of Marx is politically significant for the Left, as we still need to articulate alternatives to capitalism. As Laclau and Mouffe convincingly demonstrate, capitalism is no longer the single determinant of political struggle, but it is undeniable that capitalism is a significant force influencing human agency. In this sense, humanity cannot abandon a problem that it has not yet solved. As Laclau and Mouffe recognize, the task of the contemporary Left is the elaboration of a "credible alternative to the neoliberal order."¹ Or, as Badiou writes, the Left necessitates a new existence of *communist hypothesis*, a concrete "utopia" to go beyond capitalism: "We need to re-install the communist hypothesis — the proposition that the subordination of labour to the dominant class is not inevitable — within the ideological sphere."² Both Laclau and Mouffe, and Badiou are aware that as long as capitalism is a global system which produces economic inequality and unfreedom, anti-capitalist struggle is still an important site of the hegemonic intervention. Of course, the importance of hegemonizing anti-capitalist struggle does not mean that the old form of socialism must be reactivated or that anti-capitalist struggle is aprioristically the privileged form of struggle. It is necessary to develop a new form of radical politics which recognizes the significance of both "redistribution" and "recognition" as the condition

¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xvi.

² Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," 37.

of radical democracy.³ Confronting the prevalence of the politics of recognition, I argue that “class” and “labor” are strategically important sites of hegemonic intervention in order to reactivate the politics of redistribution.

Yet the emphasis on redistribution seems to be the opposite direction of the current Left trend of the “politics of difference.”⁴ “Politics of equality,” exemplified by the national-Keynesian welfare state and actual socialism which were dominant during the post-War period, was challenged and rejected by the emergence of heterogeneous struggles, and by the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Criticizing the failure of difference-blind economic egalitarianism to provide justice for minorities and women, these new movements claim misrecognition of their own status in society as oppression of their identity. They demand the transformation of the hegemonic cultural codes of evaluation which perpetuate the low status of the groups. Contrary to the politics of equality, the new social movements emphasize the importance of the difference-friendly politics of recognition. However, the excess of the politics of recognition is only reactionary to the politics of redistribution, and Fraser criticizes that the either/or choice between redistribution and recognition is inadequate. Rather, she argues, “Justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition.”⁵

³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xviii. Laclau and Mouffe are referring here to Nancy Fraser. In the following discussion, thus, I will employ her arguments in order to show the necessity to revive the politics of redistribution. See, Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Postsocialist’ Age,” and “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics.”

⁴ There are copious discussions about “identity politics” and “multiculturalism” in the Anglo-Saxon academic world. The politics of difference also includes “Hegelian theory of recognition” by Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor. For the problems of the Hegelian theory of recognition, see Ibid. A convincing critique of identity politics can be found in Brown’s *States of Injury*. *Contra* multiculturalism, see Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, esp. “2.4 Symptoms of Passage,” 137-159.

⁵ Ibid., 9. Laclau and Mouffe recognize the same point in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. According to them, the failure of the traditional politics of equality is due to the failure to recognize the plurality within democracy; the political space was limited by one single space of economic equality, and the politics of equality failed to consider the irreducibility of the plurality of demands. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe write that “the demand for equality is not sufficient, but needs to be balanced by the demand

As a reactionary movement to the politics of redistribution, today's focus on cultural dimensions by identity politics excludes the economy from the political sphere. In identity politics, capitalism is taken for granted, and the politics of recognition pretends as if the remedies for misrecognition will also cure the problem of maldistribution. Yet the marginalization of politics of redistribution and the acceptance of capitalism as a horizon of thought have a fatal consequence for the leftist politics: the unchallenged hegemony of neoliberal capitalism claims its historical necessity and economic equality is justified as a natural result of "free" and "equal" competition. As Marx revealed, "equality" and "freedom" are only abstracted categories among the exchangers. However, economic inequality in capitalism does limit the accessibility to material, social, political, and cultural resources of individuals outside the market, creating conditions of inequality and alienation. The politics of recognition is unable to solve injustice due to maldistribution because it cannot provide any theory of regulation and redistribution of capital. After various critiques from identity politics, it is impossible to ignore the significance of politics of recognition, but it is no less undeniable that capitalism still enforces one of the most determinant forces upon life of individuals. Following Fraser, it is possible to redefine the category of class: class is an order of "objective subordination derived from economic arrangements that deny some actors the means and resources they need for participatory parity."⁶

for liberty, which leads us to speak of a radical and plural democracy" (184). Reflecting on the lack of "liberty" as a form of misrecognition of differences, Laclau and Mouffe argue that radical democracy needs both economic redistribution and recognition of differences.

⁶ Ibid., 49.

In light of this new conception of class, class and labor are clearly sites of hegemonic intervention against maldistribution. Despite the wide range of variations among countries, the exacerbation of economic inequality and the marginalization of a large class of people in neoliberal capitalism are an evident tendency in developed countries. The one-dimensional politics of recognition only hides the significance of redistribution. For example, identity politics is unable to claim the necessity to regulate the increasing restructuring and outsourcing of labor force by companies. A mass of temporary and part-time workers are much more vulnerable to the interests of capital today. Their lives are becoming more and more precarious, but their precarious status is derived not from the lack of recognition as a cultural group, but from the lack of the security of their material life.⁷ As Hardt and Negri show, the emergence of the politics of difference resulted from the new logic of capital accumulation. Such a politics does not bring any liberation from the new forms of oppression and domination: “the global politics of difference established by the world market is defined not by free play and equality, but by the imposition of new hierarchies, or really by a constant process of hierarchization.”⁸ However, by excluding the economic sphere from the problem of recognition, identity politics gives up accounting for how to remedy increasing forms of inequality *precisely* because of economic relations.

⁷ Today’s precarious character of work and life is well elaborated in Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. Yet in France, the theorization of the new experience of workers is more active among the Left scholars. See Le Blanc, *vies ordinare, vies précaires*, and Clot, *La fonction psychologique du travail*. These studies show how there are a great class of worker suffer both from maldistribution and misrecognition. The recognition of their identity and status is not sufficient but they are also in a dire need of redistributive justice from social institutions.

⁸ Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, 154.

Despite the dominance of the politics of difference in the Left discourse, the importance of politics of equality has not disappeared at all, but class and labor are now becoming a strategically important site for hegemonic practice, due to the “new hierarchies” created by global capitalism. Even if redistribution is not a panacea for all forms of injustice, the politics of redistribution is indispensable. The increase of low-wage, temporary jobs, unemployment rates, and the working poor are all connected to the general status of precarious life without any guarantee of future. It is becoming more and more crucial to articulate the experience of those *precariat* (*precarious* and *proletariat*) who do not have stable jobs, money, and social security. The hegemony of neoliberal globalization which favors the interests of global capital and multinational corporations contest old social norms concerning labor, such as life-long full employment, steady increase of salary, and social welfare in the case of accidents. The withering of old social norms and values results in identity crises of a large class of people whose social status is rapidly diminishing and life becomes increasingly unpredictable. The hegemonic articulation of a social demand against this neoliberal order around class and labor becomes more probable because the neoliberal social reformation negates the egalitarian and democratic principles which have been built up through post-War politics of redistribution.

Today’s politics of redistribution must understand that the old paradigm of redistribution that was supported by the Keynesian welfare state and the socialist countries is no longer available today. The difference-blind ideals of the Keynesian welfare state can no longer unify progressive movements which demand recognition of difference. The failure of the socialist attempt to transform the relations of

production and regulate the market delegitimized economic egalitarianism. Furthermore, globalization challenges the nation-state as an adequate mediator for redistribution, as economic inequality is created beyond the national boundaries by multinational corporations.⁹ In today's post-socialist age, the nostalgia for the old paradigm must be completely abandoned, and an adequate form of redistribution must be reformulated by theory and practice.

Confronting these challenges to the Keynesian welfare state by the new social movements and globalization, the tendency of the Left is to denounce the imperfection of the state as an entity for redistribution. Cosmopolitans such as Fraser, Hardt and Negri and Benhabib argue that the state intervention in the age of globalization cannot guarantee redistributive justice due to the boundless and incessant flow of capital.¹⁰ Yet it seems that the regulation of global capital and the enrichment of social security programs need to be conducted at the level of the state at this point. As seen in chapter 3, the state power is not diminishing due to globalization, but rather it attains a new directive role to facilitate and ensure the smooth accumulation of capital in favor of multinational corporations. Thus, while regulating the damaging functions of the state by the pressures from social movements, it is still possible to depend on the state to construct a hegemonic block against neoliberal globalization. The rejection of the regulation by the state simply because it is by the state is invalid and ironically similar to neoliberal attitudes. The mere critique of imperfection of the state is unable to realize the ideal form of distribution in reality. In other words, the fact that the state is not a perfect mediator

⁹ See Fraser, *Scales of Justice*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24. See also Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, and Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*.

of redistribution does not demolish the state and replace it with another form of community. Materialistic methods should start not from the ideal form of redistributive justice but from the keen recognition of the significance of the state for social security and anti-neoliberal regulation.

In this sense, we might be able to say that “affirmative strategy” with a *non-reformist* attitude is required before “transformative strategy.”¹¹ As Fraser defines, while the affirmative strategies aim to correct injustice without challenging the social structures as its origin, the transformative strategies seek to change the root causes themselves. The regulation of global capital and the universal welfare program by the state will not overcome capitalism. However, it is possible that in the long run, the possibility exists to carry out a transformative act, as the balance of power between labor and capital shifts and a terrain to seek for a more radical change enlarges. Considering today’s inability to imagine a community without the state or an alternative economic system to capitalism, it is necessary to start using the state power against capitalism and the state itself in order to be able to think beyond the current horizon of the state and capitalism. In other words, abstract philosophical discussions do not get us beyond the current horizon of thought, as our consciousness is inevitably conditioned by the social relations. When emancipation seems impossible and unthinkable, practice is all the more required to provide an alternative vision to capitalism and the state. As an affirmative strategy against capitalism, redistribution already presupposes the capitalist mode of production in that the concept of *re*-distribution indicates the existing economic inequality. However, it can prepare conditions for a more fundamental shift toward equality in a long term.

¹¹ Fraser, “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics,” 74.

In the post-socialist era, the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal globalization has been unchallenged, and the present conjuncture as a result of definite power relations presents itself as a historical necessity. However, the current hegemony of “globalized world” is the conjunction of contingent power relations, and thus, it can and must be challenged and contested through the expansion of an equivalential chain against the neoliberal consensus. Laclau writes: “The task ahead is to expand those seeds of universality, so that we can have a full social imaginary, capable of competing with the neoliberal consensus which has been the hegemonic horizon of world politics for the last thirty years.... To do so is already to have won a first important battle.”¹² Against the difficulties and challenges raised by neoliberalism, post-communism and globalization, the Left should articulate more concretely the “radical and plural democracy” without abandoning class struggle. Even after the withering of Marxism, post-Marxists need to defend the strategic importance of class and labor, continue the critique of capitalism and provide a new “communist hypothesis,” as long as neoliberal capitalism operates in accordance with the interests of corporations and produces inequality and suffering of people.

¹² Laclau, “Constructing Universality,” 306.

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