

**COMMUNITY AT
LOOSE ENDS**

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COMMUNITY

Laclau's and Mouffe's Secret Agent

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I want here to address some of the questions arising from Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). This book has, of course, been a central text for the discussions of community in the context of the conference to which this essay was originally a contribution. The book has also been of particular relevance to my own work on the categories of "subject" and "agent" in the human sciences, as well as constituting a major and controversial intervention into the political debate on the left in Europe and America. My discussion here will try to do two things in particular in relation to this book and the issues it has raised for theoretical work on the left. First, I want to emblemize my sense of the importance of Laclau's and Mouffe's work by offering some kind of defense of it, against some of the many questions it has provoked in various forums over the last several years. Specifically, many critics have seen Laclau's and Mouffe's work as departing so far from recognizable Marxist paradigms that it has landed up embracing some form of liberalism; this charge of liberalism is what I will want to question, as it were on their behalf.

I want also to stress, however, that this will be only a partial defense. Since the original composition of this essay, and thus since the date of the conference at which these issues arose, I think I have been able to see more nearly some of the problems with Laclau's and Mouffe's book. These problems were perhaps hidden in the first flush of my enthusiasm for a work that appeared to be a radical departure for leftist thinking. My second task, however, is to adumbrate what for me turned out to be the first signs of such problems, and to point to the area where I now feel a critique of Laclau and Mouffe must begin. That is, I want to

look at Laclau's and Mouffe's notion of the *subject* of radical democracy and suggest that this notion can be—indeed, needs to be—discerned further in order to locate an *agent* of radical democracy. My initial proposition is that Laclau's and Mouffe's agent of radical democracy is as yet a secret one, and that this is a problem arising from their stress on the destructuring, or decompositional, aspects of poststructuralism's theories of subjectivity. Despite their own caveat that "analysis [of the subject] cannot simply remain at the moment of dispersion" (*Hegemony*, 117), I think they have not yet sufficiently entertained the idea that, in order to give agency to the poststructuralist subject, it might well be necessary to pass beyond the very terms of the subjectivity debate as posed in poststructuralism.

While Laclau's and Mouffe's work obviously is heavily contingent upon the various modes of poststructuralist theory that they install at its surface, and while most commentary on it has been concerned to discuss its "post-Marxism," it might be useful to address it from another angle, or indeed from the perspective of an altogether different disciplinary field. That is, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* can perhaps be usefully considered as arising from a specific tradition in contemporary social theory itself. In particular, their work seems to me to contribute to the elaboration of that kind of social theory that has recently abandoned, or tried to abandon, all essentializing and totalizing notions of the social whole, along with the universalist tendencies of much of our thought inherited from the European Enlightenment. One of the authors of such social theory is Alain Touraine, and I will be referring quite often here to his most recently available work in English, *Return of the Actor* (1988). Part of the function of such work as his has been (contrary to the complaints of many of its detractors) not the purely negative function of dismissing Marxism, but the more positive function of engaging with the principles of energy in the social that have begun to find expression in what we now often call the new social movements. Notably, Touraine has had much to say about Solidarity in Poland, and about the nature of the social upheaval that has recently taken place in Eastern Europe. It seems to me that much of the change in Eastern Europe is indeed susceptible of explanation in terms of his analysis of Solidarity and his attempts to relate it and similar movements to what is variously called the postmodern era, the postindustrial age, or what Touraine himself has called "the programmed society."

I think it makes some sense to claim that the central moment in the elaboration of such nontotalizing social theory—and thus a basis for a theory of radical democracy such as Laclau's and Mouffe's—is the decision to privilege politics itself, if not as a wholly autonomous realm, then at least as unleashed from primary determination by, and relieved of merely secondary status in relation to, the categories of the economic and the ideological. This is, of course, precisely the move that makes many of the critics of their work so hostile and nervous. Under the guise of, as it were, protecting or revindicating various aspects of Marxist

thought, these critics might well be simply refusing the task that Laclau's and Mouffe's work demands—the promotion of politics to the everyday and center stage, the consideration of politics as primary. There is probably little need to reiterate here Laclau's and Mouffe's argument for this primacy, except to point out that in a very real sense it is derived from Marx himself. Laclau in an earlier work has reminded us that for Marx “class struggle is only that which constitutes classes as such” (*Politics and Ideology*, 106). In other words, what are often thought of as presignified social positions are the result of, and not the prerequisite to, political struggle and the negotiation of interests.

Laclau and Mouffe will eventually carry that early insistence much further, to the point of arguing that “the economic space itself is structured as a political space” first and foremost (“Post-Marxism,” 94). In that emphasis, they agree with Touraine, whose similar kinds of theories of radical democracy actually tend to devolve upon his definition of the economic as only “the object of intervention of society upon itself,” and thus as not the primary determinant of the social (*Return*, 104).

But in itself, proposing the primacy of politics in the place of theories of determinism might also appear as exactly an embracing of the liberal tradition as we have known it since the Enlightenment; and this is where Laclau and Mouffe sometimes seem vulnerable—here, rather than in relation to the more simplistic charge that they have abandoned Marxism (a charge that seems especially useless when most of their critics on that score appear to be able to give no pressing reasons why Marxism should be preserved except for its own sake, through a kind of faith in its theoretical purity). The sense we generally have of liberalism is tied exactly to its origins in Enlightenment thought and to the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century. And so, when they insist on the importance of that history in their championing of the traditions and discourses of egalitarianism, Laclau and Mouffe open themselves to the interpretation that they have simply assimilated themselves into the tradition that we now call liberalism.

However, if we come at their work as I suggested before (through its relation to social and political theory), I think its distance from liberalism can be demonstrated quite easily. It is possible to analyze, for the sake of argument, the whole field of the liberal tradition by reference to Isaiah Berlin's well-known characterization. Liberalism is basically constituted in two huge strands of thinking, which are both internally contested and which contest with each other. Indeed, their contestation in both these senses defines political debate, not just on the terrain of social theory, but in the political institutions of our Euro-American tradition. Berlin (*Four Essays on Liberty*) identifies these strands as supporting notions either of positive liberty or of negative liberty. Negative liberty does not construe any set of objective or teleological notions of the good and instead depends, after Hobbes, on the ideal of unimpeded motion for the individual subject. Positive liberty on the other hand proposes a codified or rule-bound ideal by which the subject's rights and responsibilities are civically defined and indeed

circumscribed. It is the place or the definition of the subject that is of interest here when considering Laclau's and Mouffe's departure from the liberal tradition. They subscribe to neither of the two ideologies of the subject available in liberalism. In the first, the subject is as it were a "natural" subject whose freedom is the absence of civic or institutional impediment. In the second, the subject is a "civic" subject whose freedom is willfully realized in civic institutions. In both these humanist versions, however, the subject is assumed either to be motivated primarily by self-interest or to be primarily definable in terms of a relationship to civic institutions. For Laclau and Mouffe, the definition of the subject in these alternative, but complementary, ways—in terms of either a positive or a negative liberty—is not only proper to liberalism but is also its very problematic. Their work seems to me to have been predicated upon a refusal of those notions of subjectivity without which liberalism does not exist.

To reject or redefine the traditional humanist subject of liberalism necessitates a rethinking of the notions of liberty and freedom for which that subject has been made the support or bearer. For liberalism, the subject's freedom is defined relative to the progressive or evolutionary establishment of universal norms, ideas of the good, the totality of the social, and so on. There has been in social theory, however, a line of thought that abandons the belief in the possibility either of constructing a typology of the social, or of pursuing any sense of the evolutionary progress of the social. Rather, this tradition says, the social should be analyzed exclusively from the point of view of change. This claim can in fact take a liberalist tinge when it silently advocates a simple evolutionary passage from societies of control to societies of individual freedom. But a less committedly liberal version would see the need to analyze the social as the self-sufficient network of its processes captured in overdetermined social relations; that is, the place of the production of power is the social itself, and its measure is the diachronic insistence, or preeminence, of social relations themselves over institutions, whether they are political, economic, or whatever.

Laclau and Mouffe seem to me to belong clearly to this latter, antiliberal tendency. Often the insights that arise from this way of thinking depend, in the same way as Laclau himself depends in his earlier work (*Politics and Ideology*), upon a critique of the ideological nature of any appeal to progress-as-norm. Such critiques themselves often arise, not by a direct critique of the Enlightenment, for example, but rather through the lessons of alternative or oppositional nationalisms, which in the twentieth century have regularly opposed the universalist values of the North and put forward very specific claims for self-determination that fundamentally challenge and struggle with the enforcement of the liberal progress-as-norm.

Even at home, liberalism has been undermined by the increasing instability of one of its underlying assumptions: the assumption of indefinite growth in production. Optimistically (and crudely), one might think of the Thatcher/Kohl/

Reagan years as the final huge effort to reinstall faith in that ideology. But faced with ever more discernible limits to growth and with the ever more regular effects of depredations produced by the North's insistence that it still can happen, we are at a historical point where ideologies of norms, progress, and growth are not only compromised by their own contradictions, but increasingly often understood to be so compromised. The recent marked increase in the attention paid to ecological concerns by the agents of capital themselves is perhaps the most overt signal of this.

The rejection of the subject of liberalism is perhaps an inevitable corollary of the exposure of the increasing inadequacy of some of the Enlightenment ideologies that have traditionally underpinned capitalism. If we can define liberalism as having established within politics the supposed self-grounding of a subject that will pursue its own interests, and that these interests are themselves posited as essentially in the service of progress toward the universal norm or the universal good, this conception of the political begins to unravel with the removal of its founding subject. The political comes to be defined in a way much closer to what Touraine suggests when he claims that now,

instead of looking at ourselves as lords and masters of nature and the world, we feel that we face choices that are not reducible to quantitative transformations but rather are concerned with elaborating different relations between human beings and their environment as well as among human beings themselves. We are replacing the idea of indefinite progress with that of a choice, by particular collectivities, of equally particular life-styles and social organization (*Return*, 114).

This kind of perspective, which Laclau and Mouffe would appear to share, takes up a huge distance from the liberal tradition even when what is at stake is the notion of democracy itself. The kind of perspective that they and Touraine put forward has virtually nothing in common with contemporary liberalist views of democracy, from Benjamin Barber's Rousseauian argument in *Strong Democracy* (1984) for the strengthening of democracy by a massive extension of political machinery, through to Norberto Bobbio's version of representationalism in *The Future of Democracy* (1987)—which looks more to me like a covert defense of Montesquieu's ideal monarchy than anything else.

There are, however, some important differences between Laclau and Mouffe and Touraine. Not the least of these is Laclau's and Mouffe's insistence that all social argumentation must be groundless, that there are no essential categories in politics. For their version of radical democracy, political argument itself must increase in importance, since political argument is what actually constructs social relations and thus political reality. However, for them this argumentation is necessarily deprived of decidability even as it becomes a more and more crucial component of political action. Obviously, Laclau's and Mouffe's embracing of

this epistemological groundlessness can easily be understood as pointing toward an impossibility of social and political action, or to what used to be called quietism. I think this is what happens in the work of some others influenced by Laclau and Mouffe: for example, a lot of the writing in cultural studies on post-modernism in the United States or, in a very different mode and with a more ambivalent relation to Laclau and Mouffe, the journal *Marxism Today* in Britain.

In light of the threat of political undecidability that is always a specter for me in reading Laclau and Mouffe, I would want to add a different kind of emphasis, one that can be found in Touraine's discussions of the same kinds of problem. For Touraine, there are always specific material stakes, definable referents, in political argumentation. He agrees that these stakes do not constitute power as such but rather are matters of self-determination, an energy or a movement, a turning of energy around the attempt to orientate what he calls "historicity." By "historicity" he means the actual enactment of political processes whereby a lived culture comes to be meaningful for the agent—culture seen there as "a set of resources and models that social actors seek to manage and to control" (*Return*, 8). Touraine's careful consideration and definition of historicity seems to me to have the advantage of turning immediately to a materialist and institutional notion of culture, and even allows that new hegemonic blocs will eventually find themselves having to confront the question of the state. In this I think Touraine differs radically from Laclau and Mouffe, and I'll return to the issue a little later.

For now, if the distance from liberalism in Laclau and Mouffe can be measured in part around their conception of the subject, it is to that conception that I want to turn since, as was obviously to be expected, the distancing itself brings up many other problems, especially around the explanation of how situations of subordination are turned to antagonism and hegemonic articulation. The subject is crucially involved there, and in some ways the questions one must ask about its role are little different from the ones that need to be asked about the by now classic dilemmas of social theory when it poses the problem of how, by what mechanisms and logics, subject and structure meet.

Laclau and Mouffe attempt to explain the articulation of subject and structure through the Lacanian view of the construction of the subject in language; specifically, they deploy a version of subjectivity derived from Lacan's description of how linguistic meaning is anchored at *points de capiton* in the midst of the free flow of signifiers. The image of the *point de capiton* refers to the moment of condensation whereby, as Lacan puts it, signifiers fall to the rank of the signified. It seems to me somewhat problematic that Laclau and Mouffe should use this image to describe a provisional halting of the very indeterminacy that is crucial to their account of the social; that is, having claimed that they see the social as having no fixed ground, here they deploy a Lacanian account of how social fixity actually takes hold. In their view, the *point de capiton* halts indeterminacy and permits the subject to partake in political choice and activity by articulating itself

around what they call the empty signifier of "rights" or "democracy." But we might recall that for Lacan this is the moment of the imposition of the law of culture, and thus if the notion of rights or democracy or whatever is constituted at a *point de capiton*, then it is in fact not a signifier, still less an empty signifier, but a *signified*, fully implicated into the ideological and historical discourses of a particular culture.

Quite apart from the fact that this Lacanian model introduces some theoretical contradiction for the indeterminacy thesis that has underpinned much of their work, there is perhaps a more serious problem that Laclau and Mouffe overlook here. That is, they seem to assume that the Lacanian explanation of subjective captation into the symbolic can equally act as an explanation of the articulation of social blocs; or in other words, *they appear to take for granted that the construction of the subject is in some way the same as the construction of a social/political discourse*. Here we have a rather too hasty projection of the Lacanian theory of the subject's construction onto what I would claim is the altogether different issue of collective articulation and agency around particular discourses (rights, etc.). It is a startling lapse, in my view, for theorists so sophisticated as Laclau and Mouffe to blithely draw a direct analogy between the construction of these two orders.

Those two criticisms arising from Laclau's and Mouffe's use of a Lacanian model might provide the starting point for a reexamination of their notion of subjectivity. As I have suggested, the difficulties that arise from their use of this model have something to do with their apparent confusion between signifiers and signifieds in the Lacanian schema, and this confusion has certain other consequences through which it might be possible to reexamine some of the conclusions of their work. In particular, if subjects articulate themselves or are articulated around particular signifiers that are empty, it would be incumbent upon any theorist of hegemonic formation to present some account of why and how particular discourses are foregrounded or found appropriate. In other words, a historical characterization and genealogy of such discourses would be necessary. Laclau's and Mouffe's theory at this point does not provide such accounts. The reason for this is in part indicated by Laclau's article "Metaphor and Social Antagonisms" (1988) and his apparent view of the relation of history to discursive formations. There Laclau separates out the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of discourse, suggesting that "if difference exists only in the diachronic succession of the syntagmatic pole, equivalence exists at the paradigmatic pole" ("Metaphor," 256). It is, I think, an elementary structuralist error to assign difference and diachrony to one discursive pole, the syntagmatic, but not to the other, the paradigmatic. I would suggest instead that the paradigmatic axis never contains a series of atemporal or ahistorical equivalencies, as Laclau claims, but rather is made up of differentiated elements all with precisely a different *history* that will constrain their attachment to given signifiers. Thus the historicity of discourse is not a function

of merely the temporal movement of the syntagmatic. In other words, discourse is not ahistorical, however you cut it.

The problems I am sketching out here are threefold and are far from a mere quibbling over theoretical models. First, Laclau and Mouffe appear to understand the subject's construction in language as a generalizable affair, appropriate as a description of whole social formations. Second, the theoretical models they use seem to compromise their own claims for indeterminacy in the social and lead to a sleight of hand by which a Lacanian moment of *subject*-ion is blurred as a Laclau/Mouffian moment of radical agency. Third, they seem to be able to offer no reason(ing) for the subject's articulation with or within particular discourses and this inability is related to their mistaking of the historical nature of discourse itself. In short, I am suggesting that there is something problematic about Laclau's and Mouffe's dealings with the subject at the level of its intersection with the discursive formations that preexist it. I am not even so much bothered, as someone like Norman Geras (1987) is, by the obvious fact that their much-vaunted indeterminacy thesis is somewhat compromised by the theoretical models they choose at this point (though I happen to think that is right). Rather, I simply want to throw into the argument some different emphases which, I think, ought to have different consequences for the kinds of politics Laclau and Mouffe claim to have elaborated, while still staying very much within their general orbit. Specifically, I want to make a couple of suggestions.

It seems crucial to me that the notion of radical democracy furnish itself with a theory that will take into account the fact that the agent of radical democracy will not automatically emerge from even the most correct forms of discourse theory. (Ironically, I have heard Laclau warn us on several occasions that it is a mistake to assume that the logic of concepts can be transferred directly to the world.) Rather, we need to recognize and help produce the *reason*, or *reason(ing)*, for the agent. In order that the subject of discourses, in Laclau's and Mouffe's sense, might be seen as the active agent of antagonism and thence of hegemony, it must find some *reason* to articulate itself with the social discourses that preexist it or that constitute its history.

My first suggestion toward that end, then, is that the theory of radical democracy needs to consider much more fully the historical dimensions of discourse, and to stress the historical reasons for the centrality of particular discourses such as the discourse of rights, or that of privacy, and so on. I am well aware, of course, that my suggestion here appears to ignore the way in which Mouffe in particular has tried to locate the importance of discourses of egalitarianism within the history of our post-Enlightenment tradition. Hers is a project that one can only endorse. At the same time it is necessary to ask what the theoretical connection is between that historical work and the models of subjectivity and discourse deployed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In other words, what can the relationship be between a theory of indeterminacy and the work of historical

specificity? Perhaps my problem here is simply a wariness produced by the fact that in our time theses of indeterminacy tend to be somewhat selective, not to say gingerly, about their use of history.

My second suggestion concerns the mechanism by which the mass of overlapping subject positions in which we consist can be described in a way that will avoid reducing subject positions to mere effects of the signified set into relations of equivalency one with the other. I have argued at length in *Discerning the Subject* for what I think such a mechanism might be,¹ under the broad heading of the notion of negativity produced by the contradictions and antagonistic impulses derived from the multiple aims of interpellation (see especially chapter 8). Subject positions seen in this way help provide the clue to how the "subject" articulates with, or invests in, the particular kinds of discursive structures and meanings that preexist it in the social, and help, I think, to conceptualize the "subject's" becoming agent.

I want also to argue that one of the questions around the notion of subjectivity that might benefit from the kinds of amendments I have suggested to Laclau's and Mouffe's theory would be the somewhat vexed question of essentialist subject positions, and/or the whole question of identity. Laclau and Mouffe are, I would say, quite ruthless in their rejection of the principle of identity in politics, and I think this is a mistake, both historically and theoretically. The appeal to identity is in many actually existing contexts and instances a crucial moment in the production of what Laclau and Mouffe want to see as the movement from subordination to antagonism to hegemonic articulation, and yet they appear to reject it utterly. But I think it is true that, even empirically, almost any of the new forms of agency that we might look to in the social fields around us confirms the necessity—and indeed the efficacy—of appeals to identity in both the passage from subordination to antagonism and, to a degree, in the project of hegemonic articulation. We are familiar with the issue perhaps from feminism, or from some parts of green politics—the one with an appeal to the identity and specificity of the feminine, the other with its appeal to the specificity of the natural. In this context, even recourse to notions of class identity should not be ruled out of court *prima facie*, since the discourse of class is still—that is, historically—an important available discourse in the political field and is thus still an element of our historicity. As Touraine points out, such "appeal[s] to identity [are] first of all a rejection of social roles, a refusal of the social definition of the roles that must be played by the social actor" (*Return*, 75). Such rejections can be explained in my terms as the results of the production of negativity in and by subject positions in the ways that I've mentioned before, and the aspiration to identity is almost always a matter of taking advantage of historically available, and historically laden, *signifieds*. Again quoting Touraine, the appeal to "identity [is] no longer an appeal to a mode of being [as such] but the claim to a specific capacity for action and change" (81).

Touraine of course also quickly concedes the perhaps rather defensive character of this strategy and suggests that identity has an ambiguity: “It can both restore life to collective action *and* lock it up behind the walls of sectarianism” (82). In his view, movements originally based on identity stand little chance of becoming empowered unless articulated with or within what he calls a counter-offensive moment. The process whereby such an articulation might occur is a social and political one, open to strategizing at the level of conscious decision. But the important point, I think, is to learn from the actual internal constitution of the new social agents and their political space; to learn, indeed, that the appeal to identity is often a crucial step in the production of antagonism.

In many ways it seems to me incumbent on Laclau and Mouffe to champion this kind of approach. Indeed, their book’s insistent attacks on class and other kinds of identities are actually considerably mollified by Mouffe’s comment in another context that “it would, in fact, be wrong to oppose radically the struggles of workers to the struggles of the new social movements, both are efforts to obtain new rights or defend endangered ones. Their common element is thus a fundamental one” (“Hegemony and New Political Subjects,” 96). I would agree, and would extend the point, so as to claim that it is necessary to recognize the appeal to the essential, the natural, and so on, as again historically available components of the discourses around which the potential agent might be mobilized. These moments, to quote Touraine once more, are those where “subjects come to an awareness not of their works but of the distance that separates them from a hostile or meaningless order of things, in their desire for freedom and creation” (*Return*, 160).

This brings me to my final point, where I would like to propose that as political “subjects,” separated from a hostile or meaningless order of things, we of necessity construct for ourselves some kind of relationship to the representative institution of that order—in particular, the state. Laclau’s and Mouffe’s work is largely silent about such a relationship except tentatively to suggest that new articulations and blocs and the proliferation of new political spaces will lead to reform in the state as well as civil society. It is true that in their response to Norman Geras they talk of the “consolidation and democratic reform of the liberal State” (“Post-Marxism,” 105). But I get the sense that even this is a concession on an issue that they don’t really want to talk about. With that in mind, I want quickly, through the work of one of the thinkers behind *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*—namely, Gramsci—to throw out a couple of questions about that issue of the state.

If, roughly speaking, the principles of hegemony are consent, negotiation, and articulation, then Gramsci is quite right when he recognizes that political power within modernity and its firmly entrenched culture of liberalism could never simply be *seized*, but would rather have to be *built*—pieced together through the transformation of aspirations, values, and practices from a broadly

conceived social ground. But it can also be said of Gramsci that his understanding of modernity also relies heavily upon Machiavelli, who claims that the collapse of the medieval world ushers in among other things the necessity of a primarily *pragmatic politics*. In other words, what characterizes modernity is not simply the legitimated existence of plural society but concomitantly the advent of enormous and ruthless structures of power—institutions with which any new hegemonic bloc would eventually have to reckon. Thus while Laclau and Mouffe are perhaps right to argue that Gramsci's predilections for unity and the party are in no way logically necessary and indeed might bear a residue of essentialism, this doesn't necessarily demand the rejection of the idea of the party, an organization of power equipped to counter capital and the state, which represents Gramsci's answer to a question that Laclau's and Mouffe's strategy of hegemony never even addresses: what can be said or done about precisely the superhuman *scale* of the organizations where political power currently resides? And the concomitant question: can conceptions of struggle and power that rely upon the logic of non-necessity and contingency do anything to counter these organizations? For Gramsci (and, I would argue, for us right now) the problem is that while the Western left worries over democracy and allows us rather too easily to imagine that we can after all still do politics and still resist, capitalism and the state become increasingly less democratic, and this raises the question of whether the left's weapons could ever be able to make a dent against the right's fortresses. Gramsci recognizes that the extent and scale of state power (its sheer *force*) would necessitate not only the simultaneous formation of organic hegemonic blocs and an increase in the degree of social democratization at all levels, but also the formation and exercise of an organizational base proportionate in scale to state power and which could directly contend with the state itself. Hence the party, Gramsci's concession to *politics*, a politics that is not just elevated to a prime theoretical position, but that is also seen as a pragmatic issue.

Laclau's and Mouffe's unwillingness to entertain such a compromise, and what is all too readable as their general antipathy to the idea of a party, could be thought of as exaggerated because it too arises from a conflation of ideas that itself is not necessary. They seem to imagine that, because the party has so often been located by most Marxisms at one level or another as the instrument of pre-signified class unity, it can be conceived of *only* as such. Their general hostility to the notion of class as a subject position directly tied to the relations of production entails, therefore, that they reject partyism out of hand. They are in one sense as extreme as their opponents. Where an apologist for Marxism like Ellen Wood assumes that a party is necessary to act for a class, Laclau and Mouffe make the same assumption and then resist it. I should like to ask whether it's not still possible to conceive of a party—as Eduard Bernstein in fact did—as something other than simply the organ of the proletariat and use it to carry out the necessary political tasks to which Gramsci himself had assigned it? Is it not still

necessary to entertain such notions in the context where Laclau's and Mouffe's radical democracy promises only a gradualist reform and indeed even a strengthening of state apparatuses (the "consolidation . . . of the liberal State" ["Post-Marxism," 105])?

I end on a question, wanting indeed to stress that the series of questions that this essay has tried to pose are fundamentally friendly ones in that they have assumed a lot of the same ground as, and share certain ambitions with, Laclau's and Mouffe's book. My suggestions and questions have, however, tried to cast some doubt on some of the terms of their view of subjectivity; and, perhaps on a grander scale, I've intimated that the terms of the poststructuralist accounts of the "subject" will have to be surpassed if we are to reach an adequate notion of, or explanation for, the place of the agent in relation to the manifold and variegated structures of power and resistance that we live in. The agent still needs to be flushed out into the open and I suspect will turn out, as in any good espionage story, to be a double agent—in the sense that its construction takes place not only in the new multiplicity of political spaces but also in the historical realm of discourses and institutions: the agent is not a theoretical "subject" but an active actor, and crucially a historical entity among historically laden discourses.²

Notes

1. After my practice in that book, I put quotation marks around "subject" in order to signal the project of problematizing that concept on the way to a theory of agency.

2. I'm grateful to Lisa Frank for sharing her extensive knowledge of the texts mentioned here (and of many others).