

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Marx in Kansas: A Hegemonic Diagnosis of Conservatism's Contradictions

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4gd119vn>

Author

Mitchell, Mandy Erin

Publication Date

2010

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Marx in Kansas: A Hegemonic Diagnosis
of Conservatism's Contradictions

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Mandy Erin Mitchell

June 2010

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Georgia Warnke, Chairperson

Dr. Pierre Keller

Dr. Martin Schwab

Copyright by
Mandy Erin Mitchell
2010

The Dissertation of Mandy Erin Mitchell is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgments

There are a number of people who contributed to this project by providing intellectual stimulation, moral support, or both. Topping this list and firmly in the “both” category is Georgia Warnke. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work with Georgia throughout my time at UCR, in classes, reading groups, and one-on-one. She has also helped in material ways; she assisted me over many an administrative hurdle and provided me with work when it was needed. I have appreciated her patience and encouragement in times when I was not able to produce much, her willingness to accommodate this project in its various guises over the past few years, her impressive brainstorming abilities, her sense of humor, and the incredible speed with which she has always provided valuable feedback on my written work.

Larry and Gerry Wright have graciously hosted me *and* Drew for the Weekly Wittgenstein Club Meeting, for which I am very thankful. I’m not sure how many years we’ve been in attendance, but it’s been long enough that Drew has outgrown the toddler bed, and that I understand at least one of Wittgenstein’s cryptic remarks at least every other week. The Wittgenstein Group, more than anything else, has kept my love of philosophy alive in the face of the trials of grad school. The Group, and especially Larry, have transformed my understanding of reasoning and of philosophical inquiry and disagreement into something much more modest and nuanced. Larry’s compatibilism and charity are infectious (like the kind of diseases one *wants* to catch), and have been very encouraging when aimed in my direction. I am also grateful for the RA work he

provided me with, which gave me the opportunity to extend my education in new directions.

I must also thank Bill Bracken for his invaluable input on Chapters Two and Three. Bill was kind enough to accompany me through my second reading of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Our regular meetings helped me to grasp postmarxism's "big picture", after which I could make sense of the details. On a personal note, these meetings also provided a much-needed therapeutic outlet for me during my Mother's illness.

Rachel Stevens' level-headedness, sense of humor, culinary skills, and ease with Drew have been a substantial source of comfort throughout this process. Her radical politics, keen mind, love of debate, and fluency in "poststructuralism" have made for great conversation. She is, in short, the very best sort of friend and colleague.

Against all conventional wisdom, my parents discussed nothing but religion and politics as I was growing up; they deserve much credit (or blame) for the philosophical impulses that have guided this work. I also count myself fortunate to have had my Mother's example as I've weathered this program; she was a hardworking and tenacious woman. Finally, I have benefitted from the support and love of my extended family, who have stood in as my immediate family since my Mother's death. I am particularly thankful to Eric and Lisa for their hospitality and friendship, and to Auntie for her help with Drew, excellent cooking, and wisdom.

Dedication

To Drew, who made this project infinitely more urgent and meaningful,
and to Matt, who understands the Dialectic

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Marx in Kansas: A Hegemonic Diagnosis
of Conservatism's Contradictions

by

Mandy Erin Mitchell

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Philosophy
University of California, Riverside, June 2010
Dr. Georgia Warnke, Chairperson

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* identifies some of the more incoherent aspects of American political conservatism, which continues to cause puzzlement among thinkers on the Left. I argue that Frank and others on the Left are attempting to understand a complex movement in terms of a simplistic version of Marxism. I explicate a contemporary alternative to orthodox Marxism: the postmarxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the centerpiece of which is their theory of hegemony. I demonstrate the explanatory value of their theory by means of two applications: first, I describe Stuart Hall's hegemonic analysis of Thatcherism in Great

Britain; and second, I apply the theory to American conservatism—both to the phenomena that Frank describes, and to the recent health care debates.

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1. What’s the Matter with Marxism?	9
Kansan Castes	10
Marx in Kansas	22
Conservatism’s Contradictions	30
Chapter 2. A Genealogy of Orthodoxy	58
Orthodoxy and its Critics	61
Revolutionary Russia and the Problem of Hegemony	73
Determinism/Dualism	77
Deconstructing Economism	86
Chapter 3. Hegemony	92
Theoretical Debts	93
The Social Field	108
The Machinery of “the Political”	115
Chapter 4. Thatcherism	127
Hall and Hegemony	127
Historical Currents	134
Ideology	147
Leftist Missteps	164

Chapter 5. Back to Kansas	168
More than Rhetoric	168
Hegemonizing Wealth	189
Beyond Kansas	191
Conclusion	207
Bibliography	213

Introduction

Any project that aspires to comprehend social phenomena with a critical lens—that is, in the tradition of critical social theory—will take a certain sort of approach in diagnosing those phenomena. Because I take my project to lie within the tradition of critical theory, I would like to briefly discuss the nature of this approach.

The point of departure for critical social theory is a certain conception of social being, according to which the production and conceptualization of self, other, and world is inextricable from a particular shared way of life. It requires only a cursory glance along the historical axis to recognize that we have not always organized ourselves in the way we do now, that we have not always fed ourselves the way we do now, that we have not always known what we do now. It requires only a cursory glance across the borders of culture, gender, or nation to recognize that there exist a variety of ways that we relate to self, to other and to environment. The significance of particularity presents the social theorist with a unique descriptive task: to reveal the nature of a mode of knowing and being, namely, the one that is indexed to that shared way of life encompassed within her analytical focus. And the *critical* social theorist lays great emphasis on two implications of such a description: first, that there is a boundary that marks the limit to what we may know and become; and second, that that boundary is a *moving*, and thus, perhaps, *moveable* boundary. These implications have, of course, great potential for political exploitation, a point to which I will return shortly.

One of the recurring challenges to critical social theory arises from its claims concerning the conditioned nature of knowledge. According to this challenge, the theorist herself is hopelessly entangled with structures, practices, and beliefs in a way that precludes her offering an objective interpretation of them. The great insight of the German idealist tradition is that this entanglement is enabling, not simply a limiting condition for those who would articulate aspects of our being-in-the-world.¹ Only from a foundationalist perspective—from one, that is, that seeks a primitive upon which to found all thought—does our situatedness appear entirely negative, and its acceptance fatal to philosophical insight.

Even if the critical theorist has a legitimate place from which to speak, however, she cannot be released from the onus of mapping the geography within which she finds her orientation, nor can she depend on sure footing. On the contrary, speaking from an orientation coincides with responsibility for that orientation. But here the “geography” metaphor breaks down, and the passive characterization of “being” in a locality (one’s era, culture, profession, gender) becomes misleading. For these terms obscure the fact that that locality is collectively produced, and that the theorist’s attempts to shed light on social life are a contribution to that effort. Critique is defined by its attention to the significance of this conditioning, in both its passive and active aspects.

¹ Beginning with Kant, of course, and appropriated by Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Gadamer, *inter alia*.

The practice of critique is therefore both limiting and empowering. It is limiting in its acknowledgement of its own conditioned nature.² It is empowering insofar as the critic presumes a degree of mastery over her conditioning, at least to the extent that she can articulate something about the nature of that conditioning. This seemingly paradoxical position, that is, as simultaneously ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ vis-à-vis one’s conditioning, is constitutive of the critic’s stance toward her object, and colors the critical task. Most obviously, it endows critique with an internal tension. On the one hand, as “outsider”, the critic must assume responsibility for her analytic categories and her choice of object; therein lies the strategic character of critique.³ On the other hand, because she is an “insider”, it is always possible that the critic’s terms are an effect of forces beyond her control, and not an effect of the critique itself. This precarious position prompts the critic to account for the metaphysical status of her analytical tools and her authorship. This account signifies her ownership of those terms, and therefore promises that their selection and deployment is in some sense self-determined.⁴

This analysis brings us to a recognition of three senses in which critique is normative. First, and most broadly speaking, the conditioned aspect of critique lends it a normative quality. The theorist speaks from within a tradition and is tied to others by a number of commitments and institutions. Her formulations reinscribe this way of life, to

² I do not want to downplay this ‘acknowledgement’—it is possible for critique to be preoccupied in the main with elaborating upon its limiting conditions.

³ “Strategic” connotes voluntarism, but it is possible to offer either a “thin” or a “thick” account of strategy; only the former would imply voluntarism. Some versions of existentialism seem to slip into this interpretation of the choosing subject. These envision a chooser unmoored from the substantive aspects of her identity.

⁴ It is not my task here to inquire into the possibility of escaping wholesale determination by one’s conditioning, (whatever the nature of that conditioning may be) and thereby delve into the free will debate.

some extent. Critical theory is of course not unique in this; indeed, to ascribe normativity in this broad sense makes it an almost trivial quality. Critical theory is unique, though, both in its recognition of the social and historical nature of thought, and in its possession of philosophical resources with which to elaborate this nature.

Second, the strategic aspect of critique represents a normative element. The terms in which the critic describes social phenomena and his choice of object are to some extent determined by his purposes. He regards his goals as valuable, his object as worthy of scrutiny, and certain phenomena as relevant to his investigation. His work is, in other words, *selective*. Even supposing, then, that his task is not the explicit establishment or application of ethical norms, even supposing that his task is ‘purely descriptive’, his critique will be bounded by his values.⁵

The third and perhaps most significant sense in which critical theory is normative derives from the “ought not” directive that is always implied by critique, and frequently serves as its focus. In explicating society and its institutions, critique locates where these fail. The terms in which the analysis is carried out will also guide the diagnosis of these failures. Critique seeks and finds where our practices are inconsistent, unnecessary, or unsustainable. Implicit in this discovery is the suggestion that these practices are illegitimate. Critique may offer explicit recommendations, the purpose of which is better to facilitate our going on together. I should clarify here that critique differs from applied

⁵ The “thick” account of strategy would attend to the complexity of the critic’s values. To put it briefly, such an account would draw attention to those aspects of “his” values which cannot be easily changed or even recognized by him. For example, the value the critic places on freedom (and, consequently, on emancipation) might derive from his belonging to a society that trumpets the value of freedom.

ethics in its ambitious scope: even ethical norms may fall within the scope of critique.

This expansiveness earns it its “radical” moniker.

If the critical theorist is situated in the way I have described, we can understand why her task has been described as speaking at the limit—that is, the limit of what can be thought, said, or practiced. We can also understand the frequently political quality of critique. The limit from which the theorist speaks is not absolute; it is socially produced. Critique makes this collective responsibility visible and represents the critic’s assumption of her own portion of it. The force of critique might therefore be encapsulated as a call to action; the critic reveals the deep structures of our social practices in a way that highlights their contingencies and thus their susceptibility to change. The critic therefore enjoins her audience, if only implicitly, to think, speak, and act differently.

I would like to link up my rather abstract comments on the nature of critical theory to those in a more concrete vein, regarding the critical project at hand. My objective in the ensuing chapters is to provide a certain sort of critique of a persistent feature of American political life: the predominance of working-class conservatism. This critique, I hope, will accomplish two things: First, it will demonstrate the continuing relevance of Marxist-inspired social critique; second, it will provide insight into why a significant portion of the working-class in America identifies as Republican, in spite of the fact that that party does not provide them with the culture they want or the material benefits they need.

The variety of Marxism I will examine here is Laclau and Mouffe’s “postmarxism” as developed in their monograph, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. What might be

called the “negative” task of *Hegemony* involves a critical assessment of the theoretical and practical failures of orthodox Marxism, both in Western Europe and in Russia. Marxism, like other social movements, was inspired by what Laclau and Mouffe call the “democratic imaginary”. It sought to interpret “democracy” in terms of economic equality, so that *true* democracy, *true* equality, could only be achieved under communism. The problem, as Laclau and Mouffe show, was that in the foundationalist and economistic guise of orthodoxy, Marxism came to pose a threat to its own vision of social democracy. Orthodoxy in every formulation was not able to escape a fundamental theoretical incoherence (dualism), and its consequences for the emerging socialist political movement were quietism, in-fighting, and violence. Though it rejects orthodoxy, postmarxism remains within the Marxist paradigm insofar as it seeks to understand society’s agents and institutions in systematic terms “that can diagnose the tensions and contextualize the struggles of the present.”⁶

Laclau and Mouffe achieve this “positive” task by shifting their philosophical orientation from Hegel to Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan in response to what they perceive to be the primary threat to social democracy. The threat is not national socialism, capitalist exploitation, or the deleterious intrusion of markets and bureaucracy into our way of life. Rather, it is the problem of “diversity” in the wake of the disintegration of narratives that formerly provided social stability: religion, class, nation, race, and family. Where these univocal narratives once provided the basis for political movements and alliances, now divergent voices compete to have their interests heard and their claims

⁶ Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Recognition or Redistribution? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (New York: Verso, 2003), 4.

recognized. Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony locates a source of solidarity, even among a fragmented polity, in discursive articulations. The quality of that solidarity, moreover, poses no limit to the transformation of political identities. Laclau and Mouffe's discursive apparatus is thoroughly critical insofar as it explains the hegemonic form of politics in a way that conveys its contingency, as well as that of the analytical categories in terms of which they describe hegemony. In the manner of critique, then, their account peers beyond the apparent facticity of sociopolitical phenomena, emphasizing instead the conditioned nature of these phenomena.

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* provides the starting point for my description of the contradictory features of American working-class conservatism. In Chapter One of this dissertation, I explore Frank's claims that "working-class conservatism exists," and that "it is an important, if not the preeminent reason for the continuing electoral weakness of the Democratic Party." I argue that Frank's political commentary stands on the ground of a popular and simplistic Marxism that sees interests only as economic interests and the complexity of discursive framings only as ideological. To be sure, Frank's implicit Marxist orientation serves as a point of (otherwise unlikely) contact between him and Laclau and Mouffe, as Laclau and Mouffe devote two chapters of *Hegemony* to a demonstration that facile Marxism cannot explain the complexities of political identification.

A frequent criticism of Frank's analysis is that it misidentifies the working class and its voting behavior.⁷ Although Frank responds to such criticisms with a powerful

defense of his theses, I argue that his problem is the simplistic Marxist framework that requires an endless search for the “true” working class in the first place. The remedy to Frank’s orientation is not greater precision, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two in examining Laclau and Mouffe’s genealogy of Marxist orthodoxy. Rather, what is required is an alternative account of political identity and identification. I provide this in Chapter Three in my interpretation of the theory of hegemony.

It might seem that Frank’s argument is dated; after all, George Bush is no longer in office. However, working-class conservatism is a stable feature of modern democracies, though its strength has waxed and waned. Chapter Four examines a particularly potent form: Thatcherism in Great Britain. Here I rely on Stuart Hall’s discursive analysis of the phenomenon, which provides an illustration of hegemonic analysis. In Chapter Five, I return to Frank’s description of conservative Kansas, this time looking at it through a hegemonic lens. I conclude the chapter by addressing a more recent attempt on the part of Republicans to hegemonize the working class, this time in the post-Bush era: the battle over health care reform.

⁷ Jeffery Stonecash, “Scaring the Democrats: What’s the Matter with Thomas Frank’s Argument?,” *The Forum* 3, no. 3 (2005): Article 4; Larry Bartels, “What’s the Matter with What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington D.C, September 1-4, 2005).

Chapter One

What's the Matter with Marxism?

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* examines the political and social climate of Kansas, circa 2004.⁸ Frank's hypothesis extends beyond the geographical center of the country, however. Kansas functions as an ideal sample population in whose civic affairs we may easily recognize (Frank 2004) national trends. One of Frank's central claims concerns, in particular, the political behavior of lower-income Kansan voters: the poor and the working-class. He observes that working-class voters have distanced themselves from their traditional alignment with the Left, and have come to support such politicians as George W. Bush. *Kansas* is comprised of a number of vignettes that demonstrate this shift toward the hard right in American politics, and the path that shift has taken over the past thirty years—dating roughly back to the malaise of the Carter administration. On Frank's view, the policies that the Republican Party seeks to enact are harmful to working-class Americans, while the Democrats “are the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized.”⁹ These supporters of the Republican cause thus appear to be voting against their own best interests. The explanatory project of *Kansas* aims to answer two questions with regard to this seemingly paradoxical political phenomenon: (1) Why is it significant that this demographic has taken up the conservative Republican cause; and, (2) By what mechanisms, rhetorical,

⁸ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

economic, and otherwise, has it been facilitated? To preface Frank's formulation of the puzzle that drives his inquiry, I will begin by recounting his description of Kansan society, past and present.

Kansan Castes

Frank examines roughly four segments of a socioeconomically diverse Kansas: Johnson County is home to the upper-middle class white-collar workers of Kansas City; upper-class CEOs and investment-banker types own mansions in Mission Hills, the wealthiest district in Kansas City; Garden City and its environs at the western end of the state are inhabited by the cheap (often migrant) labor supply for the beef industry; Wichita's residents are employees of its aerospace industry; and the various smaller Kansan communities, formerly farm towns, suffer economic decline and dwindling populations.¹⁰

Johnson County, like many American communities, grew up in the years following WW II. Its most recent boom, "in the eighties and nineties, came when corporate Kansas City packed up and moved its operations out to...where its top executives already lived."¹¹ As a result, this suburb has come to rival its urban host, Kansas City, Missouri, in the availability of opportunities for work and play. Johnson County is packed with all varieties of professionals, most notably in the Telecom

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 36-66.

¹¹ Ibid., 48.

industries. In the 1990's, during the rise of those industries, the population of Johnson County grew from 355,000 to 451,000. The median household income in 1999 was \$61,455, a comfortable \$20,000 above the national figure.¹² The Mission Hills homes antedate their neighbors in Johnson County by at least a generation. Mission Hills began on the Missouri side of Kansas City as part of an upscale housing development—the “Country Club District”. By the 1920s, it had drifted across the state line.¹³ As of 2000, the median household income of its denizens—including “the owners of H&R Block, Hallmark, and Marion Merrell Dow”— was \$188, 821.¹⁴

At the Western end of the state, Garden City is a thriving center for the meat-packing industry. The productivity of Garden City is such that, together with the nearby towns of Liberal and Dodge City, it has made Kansas “the biggest beef-packing state in the country through most of the last decade.”¹⁵ Frank’s portrait of Garden City is bleak; it is a victim of the food industrialists, such as Tyson, ConAgra, Cargill, who have intentionally chosen Nowhere, Kansas as the perfect location to conduct business. “On the High Plains, the packers are just about the only game in town. And they use their power accordingly. They threaten to close down a plant if they don’t get their way on some issue or other.”¹⁶ Here, these corporations have the relative freedom to increase

¹² U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.), “Fact Sheet for Johnson County,” <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed February 24 2008).

¹³ Frank, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42. Median income drawn from U.S. Census Bureau, “Fact Sheet for Mission Hills,” <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed February 24, 2008).

¹⁵ Frank, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

their profits in ways which would be difficult in urban areas: by deterring employees' unionization, by importing populations of workers "from Southeast Asia, Mexico, and points south," by bleeding the aquifer dry to grow feed corn.¹⁷ Workers themselves "receive mediocre wages for doing what is statistically the most dangerous work in industrial America."¹⁸ Garden City's median household income is \$37, 752, which may not seem so low, unless one understands it in light of both the financial success of Tyson et al, and their systematic externalization of the industry's social costs. These towns generate significant revenue for the state and the beef industries—they are commonly known as "rural boom towns". Regardless, the local communities must pick up the tab when it comes to medical care and retirement, among others. What Frank describes is, in essence, a domestic "race to the bottom": the corporate exploitation of a community's need for wages.

Sedgwick County's Wichita lies about halfway between Kansas City and Garden City. Wichita is Kansas' largest city, with a population estimated at 356,995.¹⁹ It is a Kansan blue-collar stronghold, "that is to civil aviation what Detroit used to be to automobiles."²⁰ Wichita has managed to remain a center for aircraft manufacture and design. Its top three employers—Cessna, Spirit Aerosystems, and Raytheon—employ a

¹⁷ Ibid, 52.

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹ Wichita's population is the second largest in the state; in first place is the greater metropolitan area of Kansas City. Wichita is the largest city proper.

²⁰ Ibid., 5.

total of 33,900.²¹ Despite the fact that it has not entirely lost its economic base, Frank claims that Wichita has suffered from the mass movement of manufacturing overseas.

The nineties were a bad decade for Wichita, just as they were for cities all over that still relied on manufacturing and skilled workers for their prosperity...companies like Boeing ...asked cities to bid against one another for new projects, they moved production overseas, and they picked fights with their unions.²²

It is certainly true that Wichita has suffered from global free trade, although it is notoriously difficult to trace job loss due to outsourcing.²³

Since the post-World War II era, U.S. international trade policy has, at minimum, sought to lower tariffs and quotas. Since the mid-1960s, multilateral and bilateral trade agreements “began to include both trade and investment provisions.”²⁴ This trend was facilitated by advances in communications and transportations technologies, which made overseas organization easier and shipping cheaper. Trade agreements such as NAFTA took the risk “out of foreign investment in countries which previously failed to provide the legal protections and due process rights corporations enjoyed in the U.S. and most other westernized countries.”²⁵ These agreements overwhelmingly benefit corporations at

²¹ Wichita Chamber of Commerce, “Business and Industry,” <http://www.wichitakansas.org/business> (accessed February 26, 2008).

²² Frank, 58.

²³ One reliable source of information is the Trade Adjustment Assistance program (TAA), established by Congress in 1962, which “provides us with information on firms and workers affected by job loss due to U.S. trade policy.” Judy Ancel, “Offshoring the Kansas Economy,” University of Missouri--Kansas City, 2005, <http://www.umkc.edu/labored/documents/OffshoringtheKansasEconomy> (accessed March 14, 2008).

²⁴ Ibid. These included the border industrialization project with Mexico in 1965 and NAFTA in 1994.

²⁵ Ibid.

the expense of overseas workers and communities in that most agreements do not extend labor rights, health and safety, and environmental protections. Of course, this is indirectly harmful to domestic workers: since the costs of labor rights and protections can be externalized outside of the U.S., corporations have even greater incentive to move overseas. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that Kansas lost 6,908 jobs between 1993 and 2002 due to NAFTA alone, and 5,454 jobs lost to China between 1989 and 2001.²⁶ For Wichita, the significance of this long-term trend lies in the movement of parts manufacturing overseas; its aerospace corporations have become the site for final assembly only. “Separating parts manufacture from final assembly...allows manufacturers to focus on the highest level of value-added work, and also allows them to purchase parts and subassemblies from vendors throughout the world, usually at far lower costs.”²⁷

Frank’s broad rhetorical sweeps do, however, tend to obscure unique features of the Wichita economy. The numbers in fact show steady growth in the manufacturing industry throughout the mid to late nineties. Compared to national rates of manufacturing growth, manufacturing and employment in Sedgwick County generally trailed behind, although not by a significant amount.²⁸ Between 1996 and 1998 alone, manufacturing

²⁶ Robert E. Scott, “The High Price of ‘Free’ Trade,” Economic Policy Institute, <http://www.epi.org> (accessed March 14, 2008); Robert E. Scott, “U.S.-China Trade 1989-2003,” Economic Policy Institute, http://www.epi.org/workingpapers/epi_wp270.pdf (accessed March 14, 2008).

²⁷ Steven Miller, “Kansas Aerospace Industry Forecast,” Center for Economic Development and Business Research, Wichita State University, <http://webs.wichita.edu/cedbr/KSaero.pdf> (accessed March 14, 2008).

²⁸ PNREAP, “Shift-Share Analysis of Employment Growth,” Kansas Regional Economic Analysis Project, <http://www.pnreap.org> (accessed March 7, 2008).

employment in Wichita rose by approximately 20,000 jobs.²⁹ In fact, Wichita's manufacturing sector did not experience anything approaching devastation until 2001, and this decline was a consequence of the 9/11 attacks. "Between 1999 and 2002, the main union representing Boeing workers nationally lost nearly a third of its membership to layoffs; in Wichita, the number was closer to half."³⁰ *Contra* Frank's implication, this was a market response to the attacks, rather than a direct result of laissez-faire economic policies; Americans stopped flying, airlines cut their budgets, Wichita factory orders were cut back dramatically, and there was a drop off in available work for factory employees.

We should note these details should in the interests of accuracy; however, they do not nullify the pertinent elements of Frank's argument. Frank is trying to establish that conservative economic policies are harmful to the working and lower classes. All that he needs to provide is some empirical data showing a correlation between said policies and said groups.³¹ As I described above, Republican support for "free trade" has had an impact on the U.S. economy since the 1940s, but has become particularly harmful to workers since the early 1990s, with the creation of NAFTA and the rise of the WTO.³² Frank relates an example of the impact that international trade agreements have had on

²⁹ Center for Economic Development and Business Research 1999, "City of Wichita," Profile of Wichita, <http://www.wichita.gov/NR/rdonlyres> (accessed March 7, 2008).

³⁰ Frank, 58.

³¹ A correlation which has no other obvious explanation, in contrast to the post-9/11 economic downturn.

³² NAFTA was written and signed during George H.W. Bush's presidency (in 1992). President Clinton prioritized passage of NAFTA in 1993 in accordance with his own economically centrist policies, and it was implemented beginning in 1994.

communities such as Wichita: “In 2003, [Boeing]...began taking applications from states to see which one would get to build its new 7E7 airliner.”³³ This reversal of the standard contracting process, in which companies like Boeing compete for government projects, is no longer uncommon. Wichita bid against Washington, Michigan, California, and Texas to provide Boeing with a business-friendly (cheap) production environment:

The winning community, Boeing announced, would furnish the company with quality schools, low absentee rates among its labor force, good services, low taxes, cheap land, and ‘local community and government support for manufacturing businesses’.³⁴

When Boeing demanded \$500 million from Kansas just so they could remain a bidding contender, Kansan legislators rushed to pass a bond measure to cover the cost. This was no ordinary bond measure, though. Not only was it passed in the face of a budget shortfall, it re-routed tax money from the general fund to the repayment of interest on the bond. Thus, although “Boeing would eventually have to reimburse the state for the principal, all interest on these bonds would come out of the state taxes of people working on the 7E7 project.”³⁵

Finally, Frank describes the most destitute of the lot: small-town Kansas. Towns such as Emporia and Hays, he claims, are “in the early stages of irreversible decay.”³⁶ Frank attributes this decay to two decades of deregulated capitalism, championed by the Republican Party. The winners under such an arrangement are quasi-monopolistic

³³ Frank, 86.

³⁴ Ibid., 87.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 59.

corporations such as Wal-Mart and agribusiness's ConAgra. The losers are local businesses and small farms. Emporia lies in Lyon County almost exactly half-way between Kansas City at the eastern end of the state and Wichita in the south-central. As of the 2000 census, Emporia's population was 26,760; six years later it had fallen by 500.³⁷ To place this in a broader context, Lyon County's population ranking has fallen from its high in the 1970s as 21st in the state to 47th at the most current measure.³⁸ Emporia's median household income in 2006 was estimated to be \$31,400. In 1994, eleven years after Wal-Mart came to town, Emporia was still home to many small businesses. It boasted 240 retail establishments, two-thirds of which had fewer than ten employees.³⁹ Ten years later, Emporia was reduced to 152 retail establishments. The number of small businesses (fewer than ten employees) was slightly above two-thirds, but a glaring addition to the picture is *one* retail employer of "250-499" employees, categorized as "Warehouse Clubs & Supercenters".⁴⁰ Currently, Wal-Mart is the sixth largest employer in Emporia; its employees number approximately 250. Hays, located just to the left of center-state, numbers 19,726, about 300 less than its 2000 census figure;

³⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population Estimates July 2006," American Fact Finder, <http://factfinder.census.gov> (accessed March 25, 2008).

³⁸ PNREAP, "Population Ranking by County," Kansas Regional Economic Analysis Project, <http://www.pnreap.org> (accessed March 7, 2008). Emporia contains 74% of Lyon County's total population.

³⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, "1994 Industry Code Summary," CenStats Databases, <http://censtats.census.gov> (accessed March 14, 2008).

⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, "2004 Industry Code Summary," CenStats Databases, <http://censtats.census.gov> (accessed March 13, 2008).

its (Ellis) county population ranking has fallen from 37th to 53rd since the 1970s.⁴¹ Like Emporia, Hays' retail sector has decreased: from 243 establishments in 1994 to 185 in 2005, with small businesses following the same pattern as Emporia's.⁴² Wal-Mart is the 4th largest employer in Ellis County with a total of 420 employees.

Frank identifies the second factor in small-town decline as the tendency of federal agricultural policy to favor corporate producers over smaller farm operations.

Historically, the westward expansion of the boundaries of the United States prompted government policy which encouraged small, independent farm operations.⁴³ These policies ranged from the federal sale of newly acquired territory in the early 1800s, for the purposes of increasing national income, to the wholesale giveaway of land by mid-century to promote the settlement and development of new territories. When Frank opines that "farming is a field uniquely unsuited to the freewheeling whirl of the open market", the farming he has in mind is our agrarian ideal of the small family farm, such as existed in the late 1800s.⁴⁴ The number and diversity of these entities called for some measure of 'top-down' organization, in chief to forestall over- and underproduction. In the 1890s, under the banner of the Populist movement, Kansan (small) farmers called for

national government control of an expanded money supply, government ownership of transportation (railroads) and communication (telegraph) systems, an income tax to replace high tariffs as a source of Federal

⁴¹ Ellis County's population is estimated at 26,926, 73% of which is concentrated in the city of Hays.

⁴² Small retail businesses constituted 63% of all retail establishments in 1994 and 71% in 2005.

⁴³ Anne B. Effland, "U.S. Farm Policy: The First 200 Years," *USDA Agricultural Outlook* (March 2000). <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/agoutlook/mar2000/ao269g.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2008).

⁴⁴ Frank, 63.

revenue, and continued government support for distribution of land to small, independent farmers.⁴⁵

Federal controls did not achieve a stronghold over agriculture until the New Deal era reforms. New Deal policy controlled production by stipulating the crops and acreage that could be planted. These programs were incentivized with price supports; participating farmers were guaranteed a basic price for certain commodities, regardless of market fluctuations—a minimum wage, as it were.⁴⁶ This standard—known as “parity”—was set according to the purchasing power of farm commodities during a particularly lucrative period for agriculture, just prior to World War I.⁴⁷ Since the 1930s, Republican administrations—specifically those of Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and Bush Sr.—have managed to significantly dismantle both aspects of federal intervention: parity payments were reduced and then finally replaced by direct income support (“deficiency” payments) by the Food and Agriculture Act of 1965.⁴⁸ Production controls were gradually lifted in the 1980s, and 90s, and deficiency payments reduced. This trend reached its most radical expression in the 1996 Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act, formulated by a newly Republican-controlled legislature. The so-called Freedom to Farm Act extended market-friendly farming policy which had been enacted in 1985 and 1990. Cutting costly regulation of the agricultural sector seemed like a promising way to reduce the federal deficit. The Act provided a six-year gradual phase out of deficiency payments, to ease

⁴⁵ Effland, 3.

⁴⁶ Bill Winders, “Sliding Toward the Free Market: Shifting Political Coalitions and U.S. Agricultural Policy, 1945-1975,” *Rural Sociology* 64.4 (2004): 467-489.

⁴⁷ Winders, 467.

⁴⁸ Effland, 4.

farming into the market. It also eliminated supply management programs for most crops.⁴⁹ The fallout from this was disastrous:

It launched the nation's remaining farmers into a desperate overproduction spiral, a frantic race to compete...failure was inevitable for everyone except the largest and most efficient farms. In fact, the crisis got so bad so fast that the federal government resumed making massive payouts to farmers in order to stop the bleeding...⁵⁰

How has all of this affected small-town Kansas? The marketization of federal policy has made it unprofitable for small farms to stay in business and impossible for them to compete domestically and internationally. A century ago, "one out of every three Americans lived on farms...At the century's end, the farm population stood at 2%, and even for those who remained in farming, almost 90% of household income came from nonfarm sources."⁵¹ Those who remain contract their land out to the agricultural giants, who provide seed, machinery, and product distribution. Those who fold find the food trust ready to absorb yet another share of the market; the trend in agriculture has been "the increase in size and number of large farms and decrease in number of smaller farms in the United States."⁵² Four of these corporations "process from 57 to 74 percent of the corn, wheat, and soybeans in the United States."⁵³ This mode of expansion, called

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Frank, 65.

⁵¹ Linda Lobao and Katherine Meyer, "The Great Agricultural Transition: Crisis, Change, and Social Consequences of Twentieth Century US Farming," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27.1 (2001):103-124.

⁵² Ibid., 109.

⁵³ William D. Heffernan, "Agriculture and Monopoly Capital," *Monthly Review* 50.3 (July-August 1998): 51.

horizontal integration, is characterized by the acquisition of an increasing share of one commodity. It can also include commodity diversification within the same sector—for example, expanding from corn-only production into corn and soybean production. To state the obvious, horizontal integration is a step along the route to monopoly. But it doesn't end there—food firms have also integrated vertically by gaining control over different stages of production in the same sector. Cargill, for example, “is one of the three major global traders of grain (the major ingredient in animal feed), the second largest animal feed producer, and one of the largest processors of hogs and beef.”⁵⁴

Tyson, ConAgra, ADM, and others in their cohort have gained a quasi-monopolistic hold on American agriculture. They also happen to be the beneficiaries of deregulation. In the first place, large firms are better able to survive the ups and downs of market dynamics. In the second place, competition amongst farmers translates to lower prices for these buyers. Since the legislature's 1996 failure to phase out subsidy payments, the federal government has continued to supplement farm income. Corporations can buy agricultural commodities more cheaply than ever before—for less, in fact, than it costs farmers to produce them—and let subsidies make up the difference. Not surprisingly, the savings are not passed on to consumers. For Kansans, these politico-corporate feats translate very simply into depressed local economies.

Despite the economic, geographic, and cultural diversity of the population of Kansas, its members manage to achieve a surprising political solidarity: “One thing unites all these different groups of Kansans, these millionaires and trailer-park dwellers,

⁵⁴ Ibid.

these farmers and thrift-store managers and slaughterhouse workers and utility executives: they are almost all Republicans.”⁵⁵ Frank is not surprised that the wealthy denizens of Mission Hills vote Republican, but he is surprised that those whom they employ also vote Republican. Expressing mystification over these strange bedfellows, Frank writes, “by all rights...these two groups—business and blue-collar—should be at each other’s throats.”⁵⁶ The economies of the Great Plains states—Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas—have suffered heavy losses under Republican leadership. In fact, as Frank observes, “the poorest county in America isn’t in Appalachia or the Deep South. It is on the Great Plains, a region of struggling ranchers and dying farm towns.”⁵⁷ Dispossessed Kansans would thus seem a likely source of support for the Democratic party. Yet “meatpacking Garden City voted for George W. Bush in even greater numbers than did affluent Johnson County.”⁵⁸ This is, as Frank concludes, “not just the mystery of Kansas; this is the mystery of America.”⁵⁹

Marx in Kansas

Frank presents a compelling case for our national pathology, yet lurking behind his colorful prose is another mystery: what is it that enables these phenomena to appear

⁵⁵ Frank, 67.

⁵⁶ Frank, 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1. That county is McPherson County, Nebraska.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

as bizarre? That is, against what set of assumptions does working-class support for free market ideology require explanation? It does not appear so to everyone; the Republican working class, for example, regards their own conservatism as the most natural thing in the world. I believe that Frank's query arises against a background of Marxist presuppositions. Briefly, he presumes that social and political attitudes and behaviors are explained by economic mechanisms. He writes,

none of what I have described here would make sense were it not for a critical rhetorical move: the systematic erasure of the economic...the great goal of the backlash is to nurture a cultural class war, and the first step in doing so, as we have seen, is to deny the economic basis of social class.⁶⁰

In short, the great movement to the Right would be impossible without the strategic concealment of what really divides us: our place in the economy. For this reason, Frank finds conservative diagnoses of social ills misguided and shallow, in ways that I will discuss in more detail below. In a passage that reveals even more explicitly his Marxist leanings, Frank remarks,

one problem the old Left didn't have was explaining how the world worked: class struggles, they thought, could pretty much account for everything. But drain economics out of the world, and you're left with few tools for explaining anything. Why is our culture the way it is? Why does TV get coarser with each passing year? What makes certain styles or words or ideas suddenly so visible and other disappear?⁶¹

His answer is even more telling: "The truth is that the culture that surrounds us...is largely the product of business rationality."⁶² He asks pointedly, "how can you lament

⁶⁰ Ibid., 127-8.

⁶¹ Ibid., 131.

⁶² Ibid., 132.

the shabby state of American life while absolving business of any responsibility for it? How can you complain so bitterly about culture and yet neglect to mention the main factor making culture what it is?”⁶³ In order to clarify how “business rationality” could determine culture, which seems to be of a different kind, as well as to indicate the ways in which Frank’s query is shaped by Marxism, I would like to turn now to a brief explication of some precepts of classical Marxism.

If we take seriously Marx’s doctrine of historical materialism, his structural understanding of society in terms of base and superstructure, and the picture of class identity and class relations that arises from these, then, like Frank, we would judge the behavior of working-class Kansans as misguided, even self-destructive. Historical materialism and base and superstructure represent society from different perspectives and for different purposes; together, these provide the means to explain human agency with all that that entails—identity, behavior, and knowledge of self and world. Historical materialism assumes a transhistorical perspective, identifying (in a word), *economy*—specifically, economy-based conflict—as the mechanism driving social change across the ages; I will return to social conflict below. The history of human society is, for Marx, about how human beings meet their material needs, how they manage to reproduce the populace, given limited and unevenly distributed resources.⁶⁴ He designates the way

⁶³ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁴ Implicit here is the Marxist conception of what it means to be a human being, of what distinguishes humans from Nature. The answer is, of course, labor. Human labor is of a different kind than animal labor insofar as it is (potentially) under our conscious control. According to Marx, when we work, we in a sense re-create ourselves. We create products in our own image, so to speak; these products reflect our skills, our interests, our personalities. The aggregate result of labor thus conceived is a human world;

societies met these needs their *mode of production*, analyzable, into two dimensions: as *forces of production* and *relations of production*. Forces of production are the raw materials, tools, machinery, and labor power. Relations of production include property, interpersonal relations in labor contexts, class relations in a society, and laws regulating all of these relations. A Marxist interpretation and schematization of a society's (or civilization's) history turns on its mode of production; this is what distinguishes one epoch from another.

If historical materialism takes, to borrow a term, a diachronic perspective, Marx's distinction between base and superstructure depicts social structures from a synchronic perspective. According to this depiction, a society's mode of production—its economic base—determines the shape assumed by the rest of the social apparatus—the superstructure. The base is defined by a society's present mode of production, while the superstructure is 'everything else'. It includes formal and informal organizations typical of civil society: those that provide leisure activities—chess clubs, for example; libraries; professional organizations such as the AMA; marriage and the family; sports organizations such as AYSO or the NBA; community service groups like the Rotary Club; political organizations such as MoveOn, or even political parties, and so on. The superstructure is also comprised of society's most complex institutions—most significantly, the state. Finally, superstructure includes a common human consciousness, shaped according to material relations. To clarify, a society's mode of production will

or, to put it another way, a *humanized* world. Marx explicitly develops these ideas in his early "humanist" writings.

determine, to some extent, the consciousness of the individual—what each person knows and perceives, and how she regards herself. Marx summarizes:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life in general.⁶⁵

One explanatory benefit of this classification of society into “economy” and “everything else” is the distinction of cause (economic base) from effect (superstructure). The base is taken to determine the morphology and boundaries of the superstructure. Thus we will find that a society that sustains itself by small-scale agriculture on cooperatively-owned land and by bartering will have a markedly different superstructure than that of an industrial society; *and*, more importantly, we can account for this difference in superstructures by the difference in bases. Thus, according to this picture, economic forces are determinant of every dimension of human social existence.⁶⁶

Just as superstructural elements of a society mirror its economic relations, so do the identities of its agents. Because economy is posited as a final cause, it is ultimately determinant of social identity—for Marx, *class identity*. The role that one plays in economic production determines one’s identity as, for example, hunter, peasant, priest, or

⁶⁵ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed., Robert C. Tucker, (London: Norton, 1978), 4.

⁶⁶ There is much debate over how to read Marx, and this thesis in particular—of ‘the economy, in the last instance determinant’—is contested, interpreted, and re-interpreted. I will return to this thesis in my exegesis of the revisionary Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe (Chapter Three). Here I simply want to sketch the basic tenets of orthodox Marxism in order to demonstrate Frank’s reliance on its principles.

aristocrat. These vocational labels are somewhat misleading, though, since identity is determined not by the performance of some set of tasks *per se*, but by the nature of one's access to society's resources. Particularly of interest to us here are the relations between economy and agent in a capitalist society: those who own the forces of production, who have the capital to purchase materials, tools, and labor-power, and who, consequently, own and sell the finished product, are the *bourgeois* class; those who own no such private property, who must sell their labor power for a wage in order to meet their material needs, and who, consequently, have no ownership over that which they labor to produce, comprise the *proletarian* class. In a capitalist mode of production, Marx theorizes, there is an increasing concentration of society's resources into the hands of the few and, correspondingly, increasing impoverishment of the many. This imbalance manifests in the relations of production as the increasing simplification of social strata into fewer and fewer classes. According to Marx and Engels, this process would terminate in the division of society into just two classes; as they proclaim in the *Communist Manifesto*: "society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat."⁶⁷ The increasing impoverishment of workers creates the impetus for struggle against the injustices of capitalism.

We can now understand the role that class conflict plays in dialectical materialism. The unequal distribution of resources creates inevitable conflict between the "haves" and the "have-nots". As Marx writes, "from forms of development of the

⁶⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (London: Penguin, 2002), 220.

productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.”⁶⁸ When a society’s economic and class divisions intensify to the point that that society is fundamentally internally divided, at war with itself, then it can no longer maintain a cohesive identity. It is defined, paradoxically, by contradiction. Marx theorizes that a society in this state must transform itself so as to resolve the contradiction. Deep contradictions in economic reproduction, then, issue in social evolution—a qualitative change from one way of life to another. If we return to capitalism, we can see how this developmental logic, together with the deterministic nature of the economy, enables theorists to unequivocally identify the interests of the proletariat. Given that the conflict between workers and capitalists manifests the internal and insoluble contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, it must be in the interest of the working-class to achieve freedom from the exploitation they experience at the hands of the capitalists. It is not entirely clear how this can be accomplished, but according to the metanarrative logic of social development, the ultimate consequence can only be a complete transformation of society; or, as Marx and Engels declare in a more inflammatory vocabulary, revolution.⁶⁹ We can at the very least be sure that, from a Marxist perspective, it is decidedly *not* in the interest of the working-class to support

⁶⁸ Marx, “Contribution,” 4.

⁶⁹ There has been much debate among followers of Marx how this transformation comes about—or, to frame it in a way that favors a different answer, how transformation is to be *brought* about. It would not be overstating the case to say that that is *the* central question for Marxism. Orthodox Marxism, for example, rejects any compromise between labor and State (along the lines of, say, Keynesian solutions), while other interpretations of Marx, such as revisionism, embrace gradual progress via political processes as legitimate. Chapter Two summarizes some of this debate.

and defend the wealthy (those for whom they work). To do so would essentially be to willingly participate in—even further—its own victimization.

To return to *Kansas*, we can now see why Frank is puzzled. The Kansan working class does not, as the Marxist would expect, look to the party that has traditionally supported them against those who would profit at their expense. Instead, and against all good (Marxist) sense, they turn “to the right, to the right, farther to the right.”⁷⁰ How are we to explain this? Frank identifies a number of factors that account for this blatant deviation from rational behavior: the “culture wars”; the crafting of a mythical conservative identity; the perceived threat to individual freedoms on the part of the welfare state and the correlated resurrection of *laissez-faire* economics; the spiritualization of social problems (and solutions); and, finally, the failure of the Left to articulate any real alternatives. With the exception of the last, Frank’s account amounts to a catalogue of so many rhetorical strategies that obscure the real cause of conservatives’ discontent. To put it briefly—and, perhaps, crudely—Frank’s chief contention is that the working class has been duped. I will return later in this chapter to his criticisms of Clintonian-era Democrats’ political strategy. For now, I want to describe in more detail the means by which this con was done, after which I will show this idea—that the working-class is deceived—is also a thoroughly Marxist one.

⁷⁰ Frank, 68.

Conservatism's Contradictions

The so-called “culture wars” might be described with less bellicosity as an ongoing public discussion about “the good life”, a discussion that gains its urgency from its intimate connection with our national identity. What kind of people are we? How should we conduct ourselves as citizens, and in the interest of achieving which goals? This is not a new discussion, nor a unique one, but since (approximately) the 1980s, it has become particularly virulent. There are myriad causes of this; it could be argued that some of those causes—Christian fundamentalism, for example—are as old as America itself. Proximate causes, however, include the following: newly institutionalized rights for minorities and women as a result of the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s; the increasing visibility of gay culture and the gay rights movement; the legalization of abortion with *Roe v. Wade*; the consolidation of the “religious right”; the increasing vulgarity of popular culture; the increasing plurality of religious practice; and heightened hostility between certain religious groups and science.⁷¹ Kansans’ enlistment in the culture wars, Frank recounts, has manifested in a number of ways; I would like to

⁷¹ With regard to the religious right: Christian fundamentalism antedates the culture wars, as do religiously-based political pressure groups. “What is novel,” as James Hunter observes, “is their growth in number, their increasing variety, and their rising political impact.” James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Perseus, 1991), 89. The number of these groups roughly doubled in the forty years following the second World War. Significant, also, was their changing composition: there have tended to be fewer groups tied to a particular denomination. Instead, these groups tend to align cross-denominationally along the (already-drawn) lines of conservative or liberal stances toward social issues; this has the effect of entrenching those camps more deeply into their own positions.

With regard to the increasing plurality of religious practice: a significant consequence of this has been that the Protestant Christian perspective (if such a unitary thing exists) can no longer be taken for granted. This has led to diverse public conflicts such as, for example, that over prayer in public schools, or the posting of the Ten Commandments in civic buildings.

mention two that are notable for their display of the fanaticism surrounding some of these issues. The first concerns the large-scale mobilization of the pro-life movement in the early nineties. Kansas would seem an unlikely place for the pro-life movement to gain ground—it was an early champion of women’s suffrage, and “in later years, the state’s largest city, Wichita, gained the dubious distinction of being the only place in the region where a woman could receive a late-term abortion.”⁷² However, in the summer of 1991, Operation Rescue saturated Wichita with its ranks in order to draw a line in the sand, challenging the moderate Republicans of Kansas to “choose up sides and join the fight”.⁷³ At the advice of local police, Wichita’s abortion clinics closed their doors for a week.

For once they had completely stopped what they called “the abortion industry” in its tracks. In July and August they descended on Wichita by the thousands, spreading out over the city, chaining themselves to fences, lying down beneath cars, filling the jails, and picketing the residences of abortion doctors and others they deemed complicit in the culture of death.⁷⁴

This so-called “Summer of Mercy” was eminently successful. Operation Rescue was able to polarize and simplify a complex issue, and to make visible the many local and state public servants who did not valorize making abortion illegal above all other objectives. In the next election, Kansans overwhelmingly chose conservative—that is, pro-life—Republicans over the institutionalized moderates.

The second and very highly-publicized issue that conservative Kansas united over was the teaching of evolution in its public schools. “The whole thing started,” Frank

⁷² Frank, 66.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

recounts, quoting a right-leaning Kansan paper, “with a humble ‘Prairie Village homemaker’, who decided to get involved in formulating the science standards by which the progress of the state’s public school students is evaluated.”⁷⁵ Thus the Citizen’s Writing Committee was formed in order to articulate an alternative set of standards— young Earth and creationist ones—for the state school board’s consideration. What followed was a very public debate, depicted by the media as “Rubes versus Reality”.⁷⁶ In a sense, their crusade was successful. The State Board of Education did in fact “delete references to macroevolution and the age of the earth from the state’s science standards.”⁷⁷ And insofar as students are not therefore assessed on their knowledge of macroevolution, and it is not therefore necessary for teachers to focus on it, it is possible that a Kansan high school graduate would be ignorant of evolutionary concepts. However, the new standards did *not* “outlaw evolution or mandate the teaching of creationism.”⁷⁸ Moreover, the standards that were altered applied only to high school. In this light, the “victory” was a very modest one.

The debate over evolution in the public schools has been an ongoing one in Kansas. The episode that Frank discusses took place in 1999. This was overturned in 2001, when the composition of the school board changed. The issue was raised again in 2005, when conservatives had a ten-seat majority. This time, the Board voted to change

⁷⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 206.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 207.

the definition of science so that it would not preclude supernatural explanations, and to emphasize that evolution is a theory.⁷⁹ These restrictions were overturned again in 2007.⁸⁰ The new standards had more of a science/evolution-critical stance rather than a wholesale curriculum conversion to intelligent design.

Frank's assessment of these controversies is twofold. In the first place, he observes that there is an economic basis to the debate. Socially "conservative" and "liberal" positions do not fall tidily along party lines; as described in connection with the anti-abortion rallies, there are conservative and liberal factions within the Republican party itself. The divide between conservative and moderate Republicans maps neatly on to the divide between working and upper-classes, respectively. In Kansas, as in many places, this also maps on to a geographic divide:

One Johnson County lives in landscaped cul-de-sac communities with statuary in the traffic islands and a swimming pool behind each house and a neighborhood golf course that you occasionally glimpse from between the three-car garages. In this Johnson County, all you see in election years are yard signs cheering for Team Mod. The other Johnson County is a place of peeling paint and cheap plywood construction and knee-high crabgrass and shrubbery dying in the intense heat and expired cars rotting by the curb. Drive through this Johnson County, and you read nothing but the battle cries of the Cons. The difference between the two Johnson Counties is a class difference.⁸¹

⁷⁹ MSNBC News, "Kansas Education Board Downplays Evolution," MSNBC Online, November 8. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9967813> (accessed July 29 2009).

⁸⁰ The Chronicle of Higher Education News, "Anti-Evolution Standards are Overturned by School Board in Kansas," February 14, 2007. <http://chronicle.com/article/Anti-Evolution-Standards-Are/38217> (accessed July 29, 2009). For reasons I will discuss below, it is relevant to Frank's analysis that both times that the Board voted to change the state standards, the changes were fairly measured.

⁸¹ Frank, 103.

Moderate Republicans, branded by Kansan conservatives as RINOs—Republicans in name only—are fiscally conservative, but tend to support public education, women’s rights, gay rights, gun control, and “they accept the separation of church and state.”⁸² Conservatives, however, identify as “pro-life, pro-gun, and anti-evolution.”⁸³

This brings us back to the heart of *Kansas*, and to the second aspect of Frank’s analysis of the culture wars. How has the working-class come to care so much about abortion and evolution that its members will identify as Republicans, thereby committing to fiscal conservatism and their own impoverishment? Frank argues that the Republican party platform deliberately emphasizes these divisive issues—or, to put it differently, raises these issues in a divisive manner—as a political maneuver. As I have said, the issues that comprise the culture wars are complex ones—they arise from and reflect a diversity of socioeconomic, historical, and political experiences and interests. The intensity of our national interest in these matters is evidence of their grounds in, to be brief, identity. Because these issues are so closely connected with who we are, where we come from, and where we wish to go, the temptation to caricature or accept a caricature is overwhelming. As Frank describes, the caricature manifests in the simplification of all possible interpretations of the issue into dichotomous ‘pro’ and ‘con’ positions, and in the uncharitable understanding of the opposition’s character and opinion. I address the latter below in connection with the conservative identity.

⁸² Frank, 105.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 103.

We take it as a commonplace that a politician should identify as pro-life or pro-abortion, as pro-gay rights or “pro-family”. Frank argues, however, that the prominence of these issues is not a natural phenomenon, but a political strategy designed to divide the populace.⁸⁴ He writes, “What [conservatives] are after is cultural turmoil, which serves mainly to solidify their base.” The Republican strategy is to rally people to the conservative cause by drawing attention to, say, gay marriage, while construing it as a yea-or-nay matter. Insofar as conservatives are first to define these issues in their current incarnation, they have what might be called a ‘home court advantage’. They choose the terms that frame the debate.⁸⁵ There are many who would not otherwise think about these issues. Others might have an inarticulate opinion, but would not regard these issues as significant enough to impact their voting behavior. But when conservatives zealously champion some cause or another, many are stirred to action—anger is a powerful motivator.

Frank provides further evidence that the culture wars are more distraction than debate by drawing attention to the quixotian character of the crusades against abortion and evolution. Concerning the pro-lifers, he writes that their “goal of stopping abortion is, almost by definition, beyond achieving.”⁸⁶ Likewise, as we saw in the evolution debacle, conservatives were committed to a cause that flies in the face of what most people take to be true: that evolution is a legitimate theory. The widespread acceptance

⁸⁴ Hence their designation as “wedge” issues.

⁸⁵ George Lakoff has written a number of books on the importance of “framing”. Particularly relevant here is: *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

⁸⁶ Frank, 96.

of evolution not only guaranteed that they would look very foolish in denying its validity; it also guaranteed the failure of their cause. Conservatives are, oddly enough, reconciled to this failure.

For them the importance of the evolution issue arose not so much from the possibilities it offered to change the way Americans thought as from the allegorical resonance of the gesture...The combat was purely symbolic.⁸⁷

For these crusaders, the battle with the elite and powerful, as they perceive the scientific community, represents their rejection of the values (or lack thereof) that have produced “sexually transmitted diseases, despair and suicide,...socialism, abortion, divorce, et cetera.”⁸⁸ What matters is not whether one wins, but that one has taken a stand. This variety of campaign, indifferent as it is to success, is ripe for political exploitation.

Wedge issues are played up by conservative politicians, Frank opines, “precisely because they are not capable of being resolved by the judicious application of state power...they stoke the anger, keep the pot simmering, but have little to do with the practical, day-to-day uses of government power.”⁸⁹ It might be described as a complex, though very mundane, deception, “designed to keep Kansas polarized, keep its outrage levels high and its Con pot boiling, while changing the way things are actually done not a bit.”⁹⁰ Real change, Frank indicates, would be economic in nature. The conservative attention to abortion, gay marriage, the demoralized state of pop culture, the ‘liberal’ media, and so

⁸⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 207.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 101.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 206.

on, serves as another distraction from the economic dimension of social ills, and also thereby precludes the implementation of policies which would address this dimension.

This becomes painfully clear as we step beyond Kansas; the culture wars have succeeded on a national scale:

Culture war most assuredly helped protect those who had much in 2004. On the morning after the election...according to exit polls, at least, 'moral values' outranked all other issues in determining voters' choices. Later on that same day, the reelected President Bush set out his legislative objectives for his second term. Making America a more moral country was not a priority. Instead, his goals were mainly economic: he would privatize Social Security once and for all and 'reform' the federal tax code...The stock market soared nearly 8 percent in the year's remaining weeks in giddy anticipation of the profitable things Republicans would do with their fresh political capital."⁹¹

Thus, Frank more pointedly argues, not only does talking ethically secure conservatives political leverage. That leverage is wielded by instituting economic policies that favor the wealthy and make the vulnerable more vulnerable, thereby harming the very ones who strengthen the Republican party with their votes.

A key element of the culture war deception is the crafting of a conservative identity, a theme to which Frank returns again and again, as Kansan conservatives exemplify that identity. The conservative persona is the means by which all the sound and fury of the culture wars is made meaningful. There are two sides to this identity. The more flattering side depicts conservatives as ordinary folk who make America strong. They are "the plain people, the grassroots Americans who [inhabit] the place we know as the 'heartland', a region of humility, guilelessness, and above all, stout yeoman

⁹¹ Ibid., 261.

righteousness.”⁹² These so-called “red-staters” live in flyover states, attend church, shop at Wal-Mart, make their own coffee, watch NASCAR, work with their hands, don’t look for praise or thanks, et cetera. Integral to this identity is that which conservatives define themselves *against*, “the stereotype of liberals that comes up so often in the backlash oeuvre: arrogant, rich, tasteful, fashionable, and all-powerful.”⁹³ This contrast was much-touted during the Bush presidency, particularly during and after election season. So-called “latte liberals”, inhabitants of any blue state you choose, identify themselves by where they live, and by what they “eat, drink, and drive...the Volvos, the imported cheese, and above all, the lattes.”⁹⁴

The second aspect to this persona is what Frank calls the “backlash mentality”. Conservatives perceive themselves as a minority voice opposing the juggernauts of secularization and public immorality. This leads to feelings of persecution, even victimization at the hands of a (supposedly) liberal majority, and causes them to assume a defensive, reactionary posture.

The backlash...provides a ready-made identity in which the glamour of authenticity, combined with the narcissism of victimhood, is available to almost anyone. *You’re the salt of the earth, the beating heart of America*, the backlash tells all those cranky suburbanites who tune in to Fox News; *and yet you are unfairly and outrageously persecuted.*⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 16.

⁹³ Ibid., 240.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 17

⁹⁵ Ibid., 158.

These two elements feed off of each other, as Frank captures so nicely here. That is, conservatives' conviction that they are the heart and soul of America, the audience for whom the Founding Fathers wrote, only heightens their sense of being wronged when they try (and fail) to uphold our national values. This distress in turn enhances the appeal of the self-aggrandizing red-stater narrative—a narrative that, of course, also rationalizes the failure and righteousness of the cause. Indeed, Frank shows the ways in which the perception of oneself as a suffering martyr is attractive to many conservative folk. Frank muses,

understanding themselves as victims besieged by a hateful world absolves conservatives of responsibility for what goes on around them. It excuses them for their failures; it justifies the most irresponsible rages; and it allows them, both in politics and in private life, to resolve disputes by pointing their fingers at the outside world and blaming it all on a depraved liberal elite.⁹⁶

This self-perception sometimes takes the extreme form of assimilation to the persecution of racial minorities, where conservatives liken their foes to “‘bigots’ or members of a ‘hate group’”.⁹⁷

If this is a deception, we might wonder, who is doing the deceiving? The answer is not simple. Frank indicates, as we have seen, that conservative politicians are key agents in that they lay great emphasis on the issues that define the culture wars. In taking a stand on these issues, they can appear to have conviction and character at virtually no cost to themselves, since abortion and the like are complex problems, and our debates about them intractable. He describes these sorts as

⁹⁶ Ibid., 159.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 181.

opportunists: professional politicians and lawyers and Harvard men who have discovered in the great right-wing groundswell an easy shortcut to realizing their ambitions...By mouthing some easily memorized God-talk and changing their position on abortion—as Brownback and other leading Cons have done—they could instantly have a *movement* at their back.⁹⁸

Frank also points the finger at our media, those many voices that shape our understanding of self and society, and public discussion thereupon. He focuses not only on the staunchly right-leaning elements—Bill O’Reilly, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, and the entire Fox News apparatus—but also on seemingly innocuous (if windbag) pundits such as Andrew Sullivan, or David Brooks, popularizer of the red state/blue state mythology. A third source of the deception is simply the conservatives themselves. It is too attractive to reject the heroic red-stater identity, even if it does come with the baggage of the backlash mentality. And when combined with the onslaught of political and media rhetoric, it would take a herculean effort to resist the conservative narrative. Each of these—politician, pundit, public—contributes to a common misperception, according to Frank; a national case of mistaken identity. And each element feeds off the others, collectively giving life to a myth that claims to be self-evident. Frank writes of this dynamic,

conservatism’s house intellectuals...[offer] an irresistible...way of framing our victimhood. They invite us to take our place among a humble middle-American *volk*, virtuous and yet suffering under the rule of a snobbish elite who press their alien philosophy down on the heartland.⁹⁹

It’s an offer Kansas just can’t refuse.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 227. Brownback is one of Kansas’ senators. I discuss Brownback (and other Kansan members of Congress) below in connection with laissez-faire economic policies.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 239.

Frank's purpose in highlighting this confusion is, of course, to reveal who conservative Kansans *really* are, and who their enemies *really* are. Here, again, he draws attention to the fundamentally economic nature of social identity and conflict. "At the center of it all is a way of thinking about class that both encourages class hostility of the kind we see in Kansas and simultaneously denies the economic basis of the grievance."¹⁰⁰ There is an aversion, Frank claims, to interpreting ourselves on the basis of income or occupation. The red state/blue state identities are not, purportedly, distinguished on any criteria other than what might be described as "consumer choices". What unite us into social classes are essentially matters of *taste*. According to this view, "class is about what one drives and where one shops and how one prays."¹⁰¹ This understanding of class enabled so many poor and working-class to identify with 'plain-talking' George W. Bush, whose Texan accent belies his upper-crust pedigree and life of privilege. Frank argues that the widespread acceptance of the red state/blue state rhetoric signifies the success of a corporate marketing campaign. Speaking of Kansas' moderate Republicans, Frank asserts that "such people aren't liberal," as the conservatives seem to think; "what they are is corporate."¹⁰² "Liberals" shop at Whole Foods, drive Volvos, vacation in France, and own pedigreed dogs not because they are inherently snooty, but because they can *afford* to do so, and because they are the target demographic for certain companies. Likewise, they can afford to support gay rights, abortion, and NPR as they please.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 108.

Indeed, in some cases, it is very lucrative to take the “liberal” side in the culture wars. I will discuss this in more detail below.

Class-as-taste rhetoric might be dismissed as a faddish media device, if it were not for the crippling economic consequences it has for many of those taken in by it. For, just as our consumer choices establish class solidarity, so they are also the source of our national conflicts. Frank remarks ironically, “what divides Americans is *authenticity*, not something hard and ugly like economics.”¹⁰³ And this means that working-class conservatives misunderstand who their enemies are—big business, and big-business-loving Republicans:

From Fox News and the Hoover Institute and every newspaper in the land they sing the praises of the working man’s red-state virtues even while they pummel the working man’s economic chances with outsourcing, new overtime rules, lousy health insurance, and coercive new management techniques.¹⁰⁴

This, Frank argues, is the true source of working-class conservatives’ victim mentality. Yet they mistake this economic victimization for cultural marginalization. “The state is up in arms,” Frank writes, “it’s just that the arms are all pointing away from the culprit.”¹⁰⁵ He then quotes Kansan senator Sam Brownback, a Republican, who declares confidently that “Kansans just don’t care about economic issues.”¹⁰⁶

Frank has glibly described these strategies for framing political issues and class conflict as the “erasure of the economic”. But elsewhere, he examines more carefully the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

ways in which Republicans do address economic issues, arguing that in so doing, they again mislead their constituency. For many years following the Great Depression, a laissez-faire approach to economics was not considered a serious option; indeed, many would have considered it a dangerous option, one that would lead to another market crash. Even Republican presidents such as Eisenhower and Nixon worked with economists to craft policies that protected markets with government planning.¹⁰⁷ This caution was cast aside when the stagflation of the 1970's made Reagan's promise of deep tax cuts and deregulation look pretty good—in effect, resurrecting a zombified laissez-faire for the post-capitalist era. Reaganomics has since come to be a defining feature of the Republican party platform.¹⁰⁸ No platform sells itself, of course, and Reagan was a champion salesman.

Events, for Reagan, arranged themselves unproblematically according to his heroic myths of American life. From his fixed ideas about rugged individualism and the venality of government no amount of fact or history could budge him.¹⁰⁹

For conservatives in Reagan's shadow, laissez-faire economics are of a piece with freedom, our chief national virtue. This is certainly the case in Kansas; Frank profiles three of Kansas' congressional leaders: Jim Ryun, a representative from central Kansas;

¹⁰⁷ Hugh S. Norton, *The Quest for Economic Stability: Roosevelt to Bush* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1977). Norton considers the transformation of the president's economic role from the Coolidge administration through George H.W. Bush's term; that is, from *laissez-faire* observer to active manager.

¹⁰⁸ Norton, 229-230. Many Republicans of the Reagan era, including the elder Bush, disagreed with Reagan's radicalism; it was one of Bush's own staff who coined the term "voodoo economics" in reference to Reagan's policies. The fact remains that the *rhetoric* of Reaganomics still has a grip on the Republican imagination and vocabulary. Talk of "open markets" and "free trade", not to mention a business-friendly demeanor and tax policy, is common coin.

¹⁰⁹ Frank, 144.

Todd Tiahrt, from Wichita; and senator Sam Brownback. Ryun notably cited big government as the source of California's electricity crisis of the late 1990s, contending that "the state's political establishment...interfered with the free market."¹¹⁰ Tiahart is deeply anti-government, of the variety the blames the poor for their troubles, would like to do away with welfare programs, and even "calls for the 'privatization of prisons'".¹¹¹ Brownback, meanwhile, made his way to the Senate in the wake of a lawsuit that ended his career as Kansas' secretary of agriculture. Some took issue with his appointment to that post "by the state's largest agricultural interests—by the heads of the very industry he was charged with overseeing."¹¹² These three, among others, have come to define the state's party objectives and ideals. Frank reports that the "manifesto of the Kansas conservative movement," a document crafted by the state's Republican party, "propounds a list of demands as friendly to plutocracy as anything ever dreamed up by Monsanto or Microsoft."¹¹³

Kansas conservatives, suffering from backlash mentality as described above, find such rhetoric very appealing. Conservatives embrace these policies because they see big government as a liberal creation that espouses liberal social policies. Conservatives experience these policies as so many constraints on their freedom, and this is anathema to what they understand America to be all about. The public school system, for example, is

¹¹⁰Ibid, 72. From Jim Ryun's *America Strong: George W. Bush's Plan*, 2002, 81.

¹¹¹ Ibid. From Laurie Kalmanson, "Abortion Question Divides GOP Hopefuls," *Wichita Eagle*, July 19, 1992.

¹¹²Ibid., 73.

¹¹³ Ibid., 75.

one sphere of conflict between conservatives and government: “School is where big government makes its most insidious moves into their private lives, teaching their kids that homosexuality is OK or showing them their way around a condom.”¹¹⁴

Conservatives’ perceived inability to practice their principles in the context of government institutions is precisely what makes Government so objectionable.

Conversely, the perceived value-neutrality of business, combined with images of wealth trickling down, unhindered, from above, is what makes laissez-faire economics so attractive. “When markets flex their muscles, it is productive, organic, democratic; when government know-it-alls take the wheel, power becomes destructive, top-down, arbitrary, and tyrannical.”¹¹⁵

Laissez-faire rhetoric appeals to what conservatives want—freedom. But like the culture wars and conservatives’ own self-understanding, it misdirects its adherents about how to achieve what they desire. This is because, Frank argues, laissez-faire economic policies are premised on a mistaken, or at least antiquated, understanding of how markets function. It is simply not true, Frank contends, that such policies benefit everyone. In fact, they benefit the wealthy (and harm the poor and working class) in a number of ways: by permitting the establishment of monopolies, which lead to higher prices; by permitting the exigencies of profit to determine wages, benefits, worker safety, and other matters; by directly (legislation) or indirectly (tax cuts) weakening or dismantling the public safety net; and the list goes on.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 204.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 165.

A state is spectacularly ill served by the Reagan-Bush stampede of deregulation, privatization, and laissez-faire. It sees its countryside depopulated, its towns disintegrate, its cities stagnate—and its wealthy enclaves sparkle, behind their remote-controlled security gates. The state erupts in revolt...But what do its rebels demand? More of the very measures that have brought ruination on them and their neighbors in the first place.¹¹⁶

Conservatives see themselves as “helpless pawns caught in a machine”.¹¹⁷ What they get wrong is what the machine is—again, they have mistaken corporatism for liberalism.

Even more powerfully deceptive—and destructive—than either the culture wars or laissez-faire rhetoric alone is the two working in tandem. This is the winning combination that has brought Republicans to power so many times in the past thirty years. It is not simply the combination of the two into one platform, though; this combination establishes a dynamic that keeps conservatives loyal to the cause. Frank describes this dynamic, in which conservatives are rallied against all things liberal, where “liberal” means “the opposition in the culture wars” *and* Big Government: “the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues...which it then marries to pro-business economic policies. Cultural anger is marshaled to achieve economic ends.”¹¹⁸

Frank has shown many of the economic consequences for the poor and working classes when business is permitted to do as it pleases. He has argued that these, in large part, drive these exploited groups back to a party that promises them moral righteousness, where they have abandoned all hope of economic stability. But Frank also demonstrates

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 76.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 5

that the *cultural* consequences of laissez-faire have a direct impact on the issues that conservatives care so deeply about. In fact, laissez-faire economics has precisely the *opposite* effect that conservatives want, and therein lies a significant paradox in the Republican party platform. It is not the government that makes our society more liberal, but business-friendly policies. “The truth is that the culture that surrounds us...is largely the product of business rationality.”¹¹⁹ Our media swings to the right or left depending on where money is to be made. Popular culture gets ever more outrageous because it sells well:

The Supreme Court doesn’t make American culture; neither does Planned Parenthood nor the ACLU. It is business that speaks to us over the TV set, always in the throbbing tones of cultural insurgency, forever shocking the squares, humiliating the pious, queering tradition, and crushing patriarchy. It is because of the market that our TV is such a sharp-tongued insulter of ‘family values’ and such a zealous promoter of every species of social deviance.¹²⁰

Frank admits that “ordinary working-class people are right to hate the culture we live in.”¹²¹ The entertainment industry endorses hedonism (in the form of the ubiquitous promotion of instant gratification) and caricatures the lifestyle of ‘middle America’ in none-too-flattering ways. This state of affairs is marshaled as evidence that liberals control the media—who else would depict conservatives so negatively? Who else would challenge conservative values so radically? And the liberal threat is reason to vote

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 132.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 133.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Republican. But this interpretation is possible, Frank contends, only because conservatives ignore a significant piece of evidence:

It is possible to understand popular culture as the product of liberalism only if you have blinded yourself to the most fundamental of economic realities, namely, that the networks and movie studios and advertising agencies and publishing houses and record labels are, in fact, *commercial enterprises*.¹²²

If our media pump out any message at all, it is not in the service of a purpose any higher than turning a profit—a purpose which the economic policies of the Republican party wholeheartedly endorses—sacrificing any sacred cow that happens to get in the way. Frank captures this relationship between corporatism and conservatism as “a kind of inverted symbiosis: one mocks the other, and the other heaps even more power on the one.”¹²³ Thus, alignment with the Republican party not only diminishes economic opportunity for many Americans; it also enables the spread of values they so vehemently oppose, and (they think) vote against. This is one more consequence, Frank argues, of conservatism’s failure to recognize the material basis of culture; it refuses, he writes, “to think about capitalism critically.”¹²⁴

As ever, Kansas is a prime example of these political, social, and economic forces. Kansas’ Sam Brownback was on a congressional committee in 2003 whose topic was the trend toward monopoly in the radio industry. This trend followed on the heels of the deregulation of that industry some years prior. Brownback, a pious Catholic and

¹²² Ibid., 129. My emphasis.

¹²³ Ibid., 249.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 242.

staunch social conservative, would have a likely interest in impeding the viral spread of what he regards as a significant source of social decay—the immoral messages which permeate the airwaves. Yet, Frank reports,

faced with a choice between protecting corporate profits and actually doing something about the open cultural sewer he has spent his career deploring, Brownback chose the former. Deregulation is always better, he insisted...The free-market system is inviolable, in other words, even when it's the branch of that system that you spend all your time campaigning against for coarsening our lives.¹²⁵

A final, and most effective, means of deception entwines religious belief with political aims. Kansas, Frank relates, “is a magnet for the preternaturally pious, for every stripe of Christian holy man from the hermetic to the prophetic to the theocratic.”¹²⁶ A minister in Topeka was the first to ask, “What would Jesus do?”, and the working-class segment of Johnson county “houses such a heavy concentration of fundamentalists, homeschoolers, and merchants of God-products that locals call it the ‘holy city’.”¹²⁷ The religiously eccentric also find a place here: St. Mary’s, Kansas, is home to a man who claims to be the rightful pope of the Catholic church. For the pious of Kansas, morality, politics, and religion are integrally related. These folks battle in the culture wars because they believe that our social problems are caused by, to quote Todd Tiahrt, “a crisis of the soul”.¹²⁸ Frank more pointedly accuses conservative leaders here than elsewhere of exploiting the faith of their constituency for their own political gain. These leaders, he

¹²⁵ Ibid., 75.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 215.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 216.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 69.

argues, opportunistically appeal to popular Christianity, which has the effect of directing public discourse away from the material and toward the otherworldly. Senator Sam Brownback, for example, “believes the cause of poverty is spiritual rather than ‘mechanistic’.”¹²⁹ And “on three separate occasions in 1998,” Frank relates, Congressman “Tiahrt admonished the nation from the floor of Congress for ‘losing its soul’ by turning its back on God and family values.”¹³⁰ Oddly enough, the solution is a political one, and the religious right conceives of its political mission as divinely sanctioned, even mandated.

Frank implies that, like the wedge issues that define the culture wars, appeals to religion serve as a distraction from the real, material forces that shape our lives. Religion therefore also prevents conservatives from discovering effective means by which they might build a more virtuous nation. Speaking of the would-be pope, Frank writes, “in tackling [the world’s sheer gone-to-hellness since the sixties] he does not turn to secular scholarship, to academic history or sociology or political economy. ...Instead, the answers must be sought exclusively among foundational church texts.”¹³¹ But religion of the variety that prevails in Kansas inhibits effective action in a way that the distractions of the culture wars do not; and inhibits in a way that is far more insidious. In devaluing ‘worldly’ goods, this religious outlook makes political success likewise unimportant. If your reward is in heaven, what matter if immorality and injustice persist on earth? Frank

¹²⁹ Ibid., 68.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 70.

¹³¹ Ibid., 223.

interviews Tim Golba, a leading Kansas pro-lifer and inhabitant of Olathe, the shabby suburb on the outskirts of Johnson County. Golba works in a bottling factory by day; in his spare time, he's "built his organization, Kansans for Life, into one of the most powerful political groups in the state."¹³² A self-described "born-again, Bible-believing Christian", Golba eschews economic matters: "You can't stir the general public up to get out to work for a candidate on taxes or the economy...But you can get people who are concerned about the moral decline in our nation."¹³³ Frank describes the tragedy of crusaders like Golba, who he likens to a "sort of upside-down Cesar Chavez":

Like that legendary union organizer, Golba is deeply religious, utterly dedicated to his task, toiling selflessly every day of the year—all to make the powerful more powerful. He travels about the state, agitating, educating, organizing, without any hope of material recompense...He denies himself so that others might luxuriate in fine mansions; he labors night and day so that others might enjoy their capital gains and never have to work at all. Humility in the service of its exact opposite; is there not something Christlike about it all?¹³⁴

Religious conservatives will always have the comfort of believing that their every political battle is a win insofar as it signifies their obedience to a God who sees all. Thus there is ever an incentive to continue to "fight the good fight", but on terms constructed by conservative politicians, pundits, and preachers; terms that include not even a whisper of financial matters.

¹³² Ibid., 167.

¹³³ Ibid., 168.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 169.

Frank suggests that so many rhetorical strategies might not have been so effective, had it not been for the total failure of the Left to provide any real alternative to what the right was offering. Given the realities of our two-party system, voting Democrat is the only other option for those who part ways with economic and social conservatism. In recent years, argues Frank, the platforms of the respective parties have become less distant from one another. Specifically, the Left has come to occupy ‘the Middle’. This rightward movement of the Democratic Party under the leadership of Clinton and the “New Left” served to erase important distinctions between Left and right, such that “both parties became vehicles for upper-middle-class interests.”¹³⁵ Here, as elsewhere, Frank’s analysis follows the money trail; he argues that the Democrats’ shift to the middle was geared toward courting the corporate element. The target constituency here is upper-class and upper-middle class professionals who lean to the left on social issues; this group has an obvious financial advantage over the working class, from which the Democratic party can benefit.

The way to collect the votes and—more important—the money of these coveted constituencies, ‘New Democrats’ thing, is to stand rock-solid on, say, the pro-choice position while making endless concessions on economic issues, on welfare, NAFTA, Social Security, labor law, privatization, deregulation, and the rest of it. Such Democrats explicitly rule out what they deride as ‘class warfare’ and take great pains to emphasize their friendliness to business interests.¹³⁶

However, the Left’s failure to distinguish their economic policies from those of the Republican Party has eroded their traditional base—the working class and the disenfranchised. Neither party offers these groups economic hope, but, Frank argues, the

¹³⁵ Ibid., 243.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Republican party has been so successful because it has adopted and adapted the language of class warfare for its own ends. As we have seen, Frank has shown that this amounts to the substitution of cultural conflict for economic. He argues here that the Left's abandonment of this rhetoric to the right has facilitated the large-scale rightward swing of the "have-nots".

The main thrust of Frank's diagnosis of Kansan working-class conservatism is that it is the outcome of a large-scale deception. Even this way of putting it, as I have tried to show, is somewhat misleading, since the mechanisms facilitating this deception, as Frank describes, interact with and reinforce each other in a complex dynamic, drawing on national myths, individual psychology, and regional identity. However, in Frank's final analysis, it is the usual suspects—money and power—that drive this deception, and Frank points the finger at many who benefit from the working-class Republican vote: the right-wing media; the unreflective, if not right-wing pundits; and, of course, the many Republican politicians at every level of government. Frank claims that these characters perpetuate—or, in the case of 'Third Way' Democrats, fail to challenge—a misleading narrative that disguises economic ills as cultural ones. And because our leaders are in a position to benefit from the acceptance of the narrative, there is no incentive to offer a true estimation of what ails us.

The notion that the masses are taken in by rhetoric that enslaves them to an unjust economic regime has its roots in a particular appropriation of Marxism—specifically, in the purportedly Marxist doctrines of *ideology* and *false consciousness*. In their popular Marxist use, ideology and false consciousness constitute the respective cause and effect

of deception on the scale that Frank has described. To recapitulate, according to Marx, the source of a society's intellectual productions—including individual consciousness—is the material base of that society. However, “ideology” is not just a complex ideational reflection of the capitalist mode of production; in its typical use, it is limited to describing the ideas and values of the *ruling* class—the bourgeoisie, in a capitalist society—and the function of those ideas and values. Because the bourgeoisie benefit from the unjust distribution of the capitalist economy, their values extol the supposed virtues of this system. This must be qualified with three remarks. First, this typically is not a conscious effort on the part of the bourgeoisie. The upper-class as much as any other class acquires an outlook on the world during the process of socialization; the process is largely unreflective, and the resultant outlook constitutes what may be taken for granted, in the very broadest sense. That said, as beneficiaries of capitalism, the upper-classes have no incentive to critique their beliefs. In fact, they have every reason to resist such critique, even if this resistance is unconscious. Second, then, ideology is expressed in a way that does not draw attention to the injustices of capitalism; indeed, ideology is expressed such that even those who suffer the greatest harm under the capitalist mode of production are convinced of its desirability.

Finally, “values of the bourgeoisie” should not be understood as consisting in all of those preferences and goals that distinguish the lifestyles of the upper-class from the less fortunate: excelling at tennis or polo, getting into an Ivy League school, wearing designer clothing and driving designer cars. Although the content of ideology can hold up such things as being worthy of imitation, it does not necessarily do so. Instead,

ideology consists in the invocation of abstract values such as “freedom” or “family”. Because these are broad terms—because, that is, they can accommodate a number of differences among people and ways of life—they have an appeal that extends beyond class boundaries. However, the meanings that restrict such terms serve to reinforce the capitalist mode of production. For example, many of us equate “freedom” with receiving a paycheck. We therefore tend to participate rather uncritically in the “job market” and likewise resent the taxes that remove a portion of what we’ve earned. These attitudes make it less likely that we would recognize that we are being systematically cheated in the course of employment, as a Marxist would hold, and more likely that we would oppose measures that are intended to mitigate that unjust state of affairs.

Because the status of these ideas as “truly Marxist” is contested, I would like to briefly trace these terms back to their origins in Marx’s writings. Marx regards his materialist conception of society as getting at the true source of social significance; indeed, the *only* source of significance, strictly speaking: humanity. The economy in whatever form it assumes is our means of creating and reproducing a human world. Therefore, that human world is best understood as a reflection of our interface with the natural world—as a reflection, that is, of the economy. Writing of this relation between material reproduction and all that the “human world” encompasses, Marx asserts that

the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their

productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms.¹³⁷

This passage and others similar to it have served as textual grounds for the notions of ideology and false consciousness. The former term does appear in Marx's writings, although his use of it does not exactly map on to its popular application. The latter does not appear in his writings at all. My concern here is not to delve into the intricacies of Marxist scholarship, but I do want to establish that the notions of ideology and false consciousness have some textual legitimacy, insofar as they can be extrapolated from Marx's depiction of the relationship between (material) base and superstructure.

It should be clear at this point that Frank implicitly relies on these popular Marxist notions of ideology and false consciousness in a number of ways. He contends that working-class Kansans have been fooled into voting Republican. They would not vote Republican if they had not been subject to, and had not bought into, the many misrepresentations of the American sociopolitical landscape. This is an extremely broad deception; Frank is claiming that the Kansan working class misunderstand themselves, their world, and their place in it. Their consciousness, in other words, is primarily characterized by a fundamental and permeating confusion. Moreover, the nature of this confusion is one that disguises the true, economic sources of the distress experienced by the working class. And this is precisely what is described by the notion of "false consciousness". The means by which this confusion is perpetuated are rhetorical ones. That is, they are selective interpretations, conceptual in nature, and conveyed by

¹³⁷ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology". In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (London: Norton, 1978), 154.

symbolic means. These interpretations are oriented not towards accuracy, but towards satisfying the interests and psychology of the audience; the question of the accuracy of the content is secondary. Most significantly, the content of the interpretation, if accepted, serves to benefit the economically privileged.

Frank's treatment of the conservative movement in Kansas, which he regards as a microcosm of the nation, makes manifest a set of behaviors which appear to be contradictory: the Republican upper class behaves in many of the same ways as the 'liberal elite'; religious fervor is marshaled in support of policies which are anything but godly; the Democratic party abandons its political base; and most significantly, the economically disadvantaged take political action that contributes to their own impoverishment and worsens the cultural state of affairs they find so objectionable. As I have shown, Frank's very recognition of these phenomena as contradictions, as well as his assertion they can only be comprehended as outgrowths of economic interests and mechanisms, arises against the background of garden-variety Marxism. In the ensuing chapters, I want to explore whether a more sophisticated Marxism might offer more insight into working-class conservatism. It is possible that, when viewed with a different theoretical lens, this conservatism might not appear so puzzling; that it might, in fact, operate according to its own distinctive logic. In turning to Chapters Two and Three, I will exploit a contemporary Marxist text in order to bring to light some of the problems with garden-variety Marxism (and with the attempts to patch it up), concluding with an exposition of a Marxist-inspired social theory.

Chapter Two

A Genealogy of Orthodoxy

Frank's pronouncement that working-class Kansans are duped may well be correct, but it is insufficiently subtle as a diagnosis. Frank cannot, for example, say why they are duped and he is not. And although he describes the means by which they are duped—the media and religion—he cannot describe to us in any depth how and why this has happened. Why are these folks so susceptible to what they hear on Fox news and from the pulpit? The investigation of *Kansas* suffices to call our attention to “this all-American pathology”, but without a more thorough analysis, we may arrive at conclusions that are far too simple: that working-class Kansans are gullible or unintelligent; that our news media are nothing more than a mouthpiece for political conservatism; that religion is indeed the opiate of the people; or that Frank and his ilk are condescending elitists. These conclusions stem in part from the genre in which Frank writes, which is journalistic rather than academic. I have tried to show, however, that even Frank's modest interpretation of matters depends on certain Marxist presuppositions. Moreover, these presuppositions collectively represent some basic tenets of what we might call ‘crude’ Marxism. This claim is not to find fault with his analysis—it is appropriate to the scope and genre of his project. Yet, it is unsurprising that this blunt tool would yield only a rough-and-ready explanation of its object. I would like to explore whether the remedy can be found in a more discriminating theoretical apparatus.

In Chapters Two and Three, then, I will examine one variety of contemporary social analysis which promises insight into the *Kansas* phenomena: the postmarxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Like Frank, Laclau and Mouffe are focused on the working class. They, too, seek to explain why the working class is behaving in a way contrary to all expectations and, indeed, to its own interests. As we shall see, these problems began very early on and first manifested as the difficulty in identifying the proletariat—what Laclau and Mouffe call the “crisis” of Marxism. This crisis, they argue, is indicative of the inadequacy of the orthodox interpretation of Marxist texts. They demonstrate that those theories that rely on orthodoxy are likewise inadequate and invariably try to ‘shore up’ orthodoxy in such a way that results in internal inconsistencies. Laclau and Mouffe grapple with the necessity of articulating a new understanding of Marxism in light of these theoretical inconsistencies and problems in applying orthodox Marxism.

Laclau and Mouffe’s revisionist Marxism is most thoroughly articulated in their monograph *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. *Hegemony* is historical in its backward glance at the ways in which Marxism has been politically appropriated, which it summarizes with a theoretical intent; it also represents a forward-looking contribution to political and social analysis, specifically, in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. Like the Marxist critique of political economy, the theory aims to illuminate the deeper structures of political alliances, social change, and the individual’s self-understanding. It is “post” Marxist, however, in two senses: first, and most obviously, it seeks to advance Marxism beyond theoretical dead ends. Indeed, we will see that in many ways the theory

departs radically from the tradition, seeming to retain only the minimalist Marxist insight that economy matters—though even “economy” has a different significance. The source of the distance between post-Marxism and the tradition lies in the distance between the respective theoretical groundings of each. Therein lies the second sense in which postmarxism departs from the Marxist tradition: its many theoretical points of departure are widely known (wrongly, as some contest) as “poststructuralist”. However, Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony extends more widely, incorporating elements from structuralism, psychoanalysis, and Wittgensteinian semantics. Because of this breadth, it is a challenge to offer even a faithful exposition of the theory. Laclau offers a summary of the complexity of their thought in the following excerpt:

In the first place, I see that we need to have some sort of combination of what I would call various branches, various kinds of poststructuralist theory—and not only poststructuralism; for instance, the Wittgensteinian approach is very important to this matter. Deconstruction provides us with a discourse concerning the deepening of the logic of undecidability, which [...] becomes central. Lacanian theory provides us with a logic of the lack, the logic of the signifier, which is also a discourse of enormous importance...And I think that the whole conception of a microphysics of power can be complementary to this effort. One should not dismiss the work of Foucault (or, for the matter, of Deleuze and Guattari) too easily, as some people tend to do. So what we have is a very complicated discourse which has to combine traditions of thought that begin from different starting points but that are all converging on a political analysis.¹³⁸

It is clear at the outset, then, that the theory of hegemony relies on a wealth of philosophical resources. This seems to promise more delicate analytical instruments with which to examine the working-class conservatism of *Kansas*. In this chapter, I focus on

¹³⁸ Interview with Ernesto Laclau in L. Worsham and G.A. Olson (eds), “Hegemony and the Future of Democracy” in *Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial*, Albany 1999.

Laclau and Mouffe's account of Marxist orthodoxy and the historical context that provided the setting for its development in Western Europe. I will follow Laclau and Mouffe in tracing the adoption and modification of orthodoxy by Western European theorists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, and Russian theorists such as Lenin and Trotsky. This history amounts to a demonstration of the exhaustion of the orthodox paradigm. I conclude by summarizing their objections to the metaphysical commitment underlying orthodoxy, that is, economism.

Orthodoxy and its Critics

Laclau and Mouffe unfold the meaning of hegemony genealogically, beginning with the period of the Second International. The International was an alliance of second-generation followers of Marx, comprised of Social Democratic parties, trade unions, Bolsheviks, and communists. Its understanding of Marxism, so-called orthodox Marxism, is encapsulated by Karl Kautsky in *The Class Struggle*, written in 1892. Karl Kautsky was a prominent Austro-Hungarian theorist and party leader during this era. *Class Struggle* takes as its starting point a particular strand of Marxist theory: historical materialism, which attempts to explain the progress of human society in stages that are in turn defined by the way of society meets its material needs—its mode of production. For many theorists, Kautsky included, this interpretation of the history and future of human society was necessarily true. Indeed, orthodox Marxism claimed for itself an understanding of history and society that offered the same insight as science offers into

the natural world. As Laclau and Mouffe observe, for Kautsky, the “science of Marxism” offered “a theory of the increasing *simplification* of the social structure and the antagonisms within it.”¹³⁹ This simplification would involve the increasing division of society into two camps (proletariat and bourgeoisie), the increasing accumulation of goods in the hands of the bourgeoisie and corresponding impoverishment of the proletariat, the necessity that the proletariat seize political power, and the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Laclau and Mouffe point out that contemporary social conditions in Germany had lent an initial plausibility to his analysis, which was more descriptive than predictive in emphasis. Accordingly, Kautsky’s claims regarding what will “necessarily” take place do not serve “to guarantee a meaning beyond experience”, but rather “to systematize experience itself.”¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, shortly after its publication, near the turn of the century, Kautskian optimism gave way to widespread recognition of the “crisis of Marxism”—briefly, a difficulty in determining exactly who counted as working-class. Contrary to the tendency toward class simplification and unity presumed in *Class Struggle*, Laclau and Mouffe describe how the workers’ movement was characterized by an ever-increasing fragmentation, stemming from factors such as, in Germany and England,

the rise of a labour aristocracy; the opposition between unionized and non-unionized workers; the counterposed interests of different wage categories; the conscious policy of the bourgeoisie to divide the working class; the presence of masses of Catholic workers subjected to a church

¹³⁹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso 1985), 14.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

populism which distances them from the Social Democrats, and so forth.¹⁴¹

Likewise, they explain that in Austro-Hungary, the complexity of economic and social conditions testified against orthodoxy—in this case, the co-presence of different modes of production did not fit well with orthodox predictions, which posited them as successional.¹⁴² Neither economic patterns nor political alliances could secure a firm foundation—in the sense called for by orthodox Marxism—for the proletarian identity: “the economic base [was] incapable of assuring class unity *in the present*; while politics, the sole terrain where that present unity can be constructed, [was] unable convincingly to guarantee the *class* character of the unitary subjects.”¹⁴³ Economic change blurred class lines, prompting orthodox Marxists to reinterpret *Class Struggle* in a way that emphasized its predictive elements and identified the proletariat in terms of a promised future unity. In addition, as Laclau and Mouffe show, workers’ political parties posed a problem for Kautskian Marxism. Despite the fact that these parties secured a de facto unity in the name of the proletariat, they were increasingly joined and supported by a non-proletarian element, for example, university-educated intellectuals. The upshot was that working-class interests could no longer be identified and represented simply on the basis of economic station. The challenge facing Marxism, then, was to reformulate itself so as to permit the theorization of these ‘aberrations’, “and, at the same time, to find

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴² For example, feudal, industrial, and socialist modes of organized labor.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 37.

forms reconstituting the unity of scattered and heterogeneous elements.”¹⁴⁴ In other words, Marxism needed a way to ‘think’ the new economic developments as well and the class diversification of the Socialist party. It needed a model able to preserve the diversity of these phenomena and also able to manifest their coherence. Instead, the widening gap between theory (as presented in *Class Struggle*) and reality resulted in the solidification of the orthodox platform.

The tenets of Kautskian orthodoxy were intended to provide a foundation for Marxist theory and practice, but at best, this could only be a shaky foundation. *Class Struggle* might have once offered a timely description of economic and political trends bearing on proletarian interests, but it had outlived its own relevance. Its more dogmatic reinterpretation retained Kautsky’s account of social trends favorable to the rise of socialism, but took these ‘on faith’, as it were. In the absence of any empirical evidence for such trends, the predictive promises of historical materialism provided hope for the future of the workers’ movement, and this future was secured by a determinism characteristic of scientific law. Laclau and Mouffe conclude that “theory sets itself up as a guarantee that these tendencies will eventually coincide with the type of social articulation proposed by the Marxist paradigm.”¹⁴⁵ The ultimate practical effect of this turn to deterministic explanations was quietism; political action was no longer required to bridge the gap between present and future. But orthodoxy’s failure to offer what we might call a more immanent political guidance was unsatisfactory, to say the least. It

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

thus required a *supplement*, which Laclau and Mouffe show that Kautsky found in the figure of the intellectual—not surprisingly, the theorist himself.¹⁴⁶ His role is a supplement to orthodoxy in the sense that the intellectual has a freedom that is not strictly permitted in terms of the theory, a freedom afforded by his position outside the scope of history. Because the theorist is neither working class nor capitalist, he is not assigned a role in the orthodox narrative that must culminate in a final class conflict. The theorist’s perspective as outsider was supposed to give him privileged insight into the trajectory of this history—insight that neither workers nor capitalists, as mere participants, could hope to attain. The theorist’s analyses supplanted political action as the bridge between reality and revolution, and thus served as a nominal antidote to quietism. Kautsky’s introduction of the intellectual into the fabric of orthodox Marxism was not only immediately significant as a remedy for the weaknesses of the theory, however. As we shall see, on Laclau and Mouffe’s telling, this strategy of supplementation manifests in each attempt to overcome the limitations of orthodoxy.

If one is to follow Laclau and Mouffe’s account, then in Western Europe, generally speaking, responses to post-crisis orthodoxy and the quietism it entailed sought to carve out a space for autonomous political action. Although they see this cohesion as a de-emphasis of orthodoxy’s deterministic message, their analysis makes it clear that these responses reflected a widespread return to Kant, with many theorists either implicitly or explicitly adopting a Kantian dualism of some variety.¹⁴⁷ Kant’s transcendental idealism

¹⁴⁶ Since virtually all theorists were men (with the notable exception of Rosa Luxemburg), the sole use of the masculine pronoun is appropriate.

conceives of the person as both determined object and free subject. For Kant we are subordinate, as any entity in the natural world, to the intransigent laws of physics. At the same time, we must regard ourselves as operating under our own power, as something more than mere cogs in nature's machinery. Regarding ourselves in this way, as having the ability to act freely, is the enabling condition for human action, and, most importantly, for morality. Kant himself was seeking to reconcile the determinism inherent in Newtonian physics with our human intuition that we are the source of our own actions. Kantian metaphysics would thus seem an optimal basis for "crisis"-era Marxism. It promised the possibility of reconciliation between a deterministic historical materialism and free political action. As we shall see, orthodox theorists continued to hold on to the laws of history articulated in historical materialism. At the same time, an undetermined or self-determined human element now accompanied these laws, and supplanted them as the cause of progress toward revolution. Post-orthodox thinkers were, of course, more concerned with securing a theoretical basis for *recommending* collective action on the part of the proletariat, inexorable laws of history notwithstanding. They could thereby urge the proletariat to unite, to ally with bourgeois elements, to seek political power, to strike, without compromising their theoretical commitments. This shift to activism was in part forced by the crisis—socialist thinkers began to found cohesion at the political level because the movement could no longer be based on economic commonality alone.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

Laclau and Mouffe discuss several varieties of post-orthodox socialist theory that take this strategy. I look at four below: Austro-Marxism, and, in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg's spontaneism, Eduard Bernstein's revisionism, and Georges Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism.

Laclau and Mouffe see Austro-Marxism as arising out of the peculiar circumstances of the Austro-Hungarian economy which, like Russia, was characterized by "combined and uneven development". At the turn of the century, Austro-Hungary was a (dual) monarchist state, the economy of which included artisanal, agricultural, and industrial elements. Such diversity was resistant to an orthodox interpretation of identity as grounded in economic class. "In this mosaic of social and national situations, it was impossible to think of national identities as 'superstructural' or of class unity as a necessary consequence of the infrastructure."¹⁴⁸ Identity, as the basis of membership in the Austro-Marxist movement, *had* to be constructed at the so-called superstructural level. The theoretical resources for this move were found in neo-Kantian metaphysics and moral theory. A Kant-friendly reading of Marx offered a concept of the subject as free and also determined by the laws of nature. On this basis, one could accept the orthodox philosophy of history, which was understood as predictive in a "morphological" sense, and at the same time provide theoretical grounds for political action on the part of free subjects.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. Austro-Marxists accepted Engel's dialectical view of history, a view that included the future outcome of class struggle. They understood it, however, as providing a very general hypothesis about "certain fundamental tendencies", instead of as a means to make sense of immediate events.

Rosa Luxemburg likewise accepts the “necessary laws of capitalist development” and explains the fragmentation of the proletariat as, very simply, “a structural effect of the capitalist state.”¹⁵⁰ That is, the working class cannot but be fragmented in light of the economic supremacy of capitalism. Her views are in tune with orthodoxy in that, for Luxemburg, the proletariat must wait for the advent of the “revolutionary atmosphere” for political action (specifically, the mass strike) to carry a significant impact. Thus far, Luxemburg is in tune with orthodoxy. Her Kantian contribution comes in her identification of an element of unpredictability characteristic of workers’ demonstrations in such an atmosphere, which she designates “spontaneity”. According to Luxemburg, resistance efforts are neither self-contained, nor are their consequences predetermined and linear. Spontaneism, then, diverges from orthodoxy in that it interprets as unpredictable the form, direction, and consequences of workers’ demonstrations vis-à-vis the march toward revolution. It diverges in a more radical way, though. Luxemburg, like other ‘crisis’ theorists, was faced with the challenge of locating a basis of unity for a fragmented working class. Instead of defining class unity as analytically distinct from the process of the workers’ struggle, so that it is established on the basis of prior or future economic commonalities, she argues that class unity is symbolic, achieved when a local struggle takes on a larger meaning. Laclau and Mouffe write,

in a revolutionary situation, it is impossible to *fix the literal sense* of each isolated struggle, because each struggle overflows its own literality and comes to represent, in the consciousness of the masses, a simple moment of a more global struggle against the system.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 9.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 11.

Spontaneism, then, is implicitly dualistic insofar as it provides a supplement to the narrative of dialectical materialism. For Luxemburg, the general strike and other revolutionary activities function as a symbolic force and emerge in an unpredictable manner. Laclau and Mouffe show that her analysis was intended to provide an incentive for political action, as it is always possible the result will be widespread change. They argue that her attempt to provide this incentive is especially clear in her comparison between Russia and Germany, one that finds more similarities than differences between East and West. According to Luxemburg, Russia already manifests a “revolutionary atmosphere”, and Germany could not be far behind. Laclau and Mouffe relate her view that “in the repressive context of the Tsarist state, no movement for partial demands could remain confined within itself: it was inevitably transformed into an example and symbol of resistance, thus fuelling and giving birth to other movements.”¹⁵²

Laclau and Mouffe summarize Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism as a radical and forward-looking critique of classical Marxism. Indeed, Bernstein in some ways anticipates the work of the Frankfurt School. Bernstein argues that in response to fundamental changes in capitalism, the German Social Democratic party must alter its strategy and expectations. As monopoly capitalism replaced laissez-faire (private) capitalism, the state was positioned to prevent the crises and extreme class divisions predicted by orthodoxy. Consequently, Bernstein claims, “Sciences, arts, a whole series of social relations are today much less dependent on economics than formerly,” leaving

¹⁵² Ibid., 8.

“ideological and...ethical factors greater space for independent activity.”¹⁵³ Bernstein could thus explain the diversification of class identities as a phenomenon that would not necessarily be resolved according to orthodox predictions. At the same time, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, his analysis opened up new strategic possibilities for the socialist movement. Given the relative autonomy of ‘superstructure’ from ‘base’, unification could be effected simply as a political task, regardless of the economic *status quo*. The political party is the vehicle for class unity; as Bernstein writes, “in it, the special interest of the economic group is submerged in favour of the general interest of those who depend on income for their labour.”¹⁵⁴

Despite these advances, Laclau and Mouffe argue that revisionism is limited in its break with orthodoxy. In the first place, Bernstein does not offer a general critique of the concept of historical necessity integral to orthodoxy. Like Austro-Marxism, revisionism continues to accept the orthodox account of the relation between the political subject and the deterministic trajectory of the dialectical narrative. Bernstein accepts “the orthodox identification of objectivity and mechanical causality, he merely tries to limit its effects.”¹⁵⁵ Second, in his belief, as Laclau and Mouffe write, “that the State will become increasingly democratic as a necessary consequence of ‘historical evolution’,” Bernstein resorts to a totalizing concept of evolution that lies behind both the development of the

¹⁵³ Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation*, (New York: Schocken, 1961) 15-16.

¹⁵⁴ Eduard Bernstein, *Die heutige Sozialdemokratie in Theorie und Praxis*, 133. Quoted in Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx*, (London: Collier, 1962), 207.

¹⁵⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, 33.

autonomous subject and the progress of society toward ever more free modes of organization.¹⁵⁶ This theoretical commitment is not far removed from the orthodox philosophy of history in that both predetermine the meanings of historical events and subject identities *a priori*.

Georges Sorel likewise relies on a supplementary subjectivity—specifically, a Nietzschean-inspired concept of will—in his rethinking of socialism, according to Laclau and Mouffe. Even early on, Sorel distances himself from orthodoxy with the notion that the very expression of Marxism, the publicity of its concepts, affects the movement: “Marxism is not for him merely a scientific analysis of society; it is also the ideology uniting the proletariat and giving a sense of direction to its struggles.”¹⁵⁷ Sorel thus has a theoretical account of how Marxism serves to collect the members of the proletariat and enable them to identify themselves as a class, as if by magnetism. However, the mature Sorel’s thought departs more radically from orthodoxy insofar as he rejects the rationalist elements of orthodoxy—‘the social’ as a totality, class identity, and historical trajectory determined *a priori*. In other words, Sorel rejects the notion that society, class, and historical stages could be known prior to history, independently of immersion in history. *Contra* historical materialism, Sorel argues that there is no necessity that the working class exist, much less achieve its political goals. What functions, then, as the basis for the socialist movement? Here, Laclau and Mouffe claim, Sorel relies on and expands an earlier thought about the power of the symbol: “the level at which the forces in struggle

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

find their unity is that of an ensemble of images or ‘language figures’.”¹⁵⁸ Sorel’s revolutionary syndicalism designates the general strike as *the* image or myth able to unify the proletariat. This image is not, of course, a guarantee of class unity in the sense offered by orthodoxy. For Sorel, unity, if it exists, may exist only in the minds of the workers, and is produced by the idea of the general strike. Laclau and Mouffe summarize, “...it matters little whether or not the general strike can be realized: its role is that of a regulating principle, which allows the proletariat to think the *mélange* of social relations as organized around a clear line of demarcation.”¹⁵⁹ Further, they claim that this unity requires (class) antagonism for its definition, and that antagonism in turn must be maintained by violent struggle; Sorel holds that social formations are subject to their own kind of entropy. Power can only be achieved by the exercise of force.¹⁶⁰ However much he departs from orthodoxy, Sorel’s Marxism remains thoroughly traditional in its focus on the proletariat as the main character of history. In fact, he maintains this focus despite his claim that the unity and achievements of the working class are entirely contingent, a claim that would seem to undermine the theoretical grounds for privileging the proletariat. Thus, like other revisions we have considered, revolutionary syndicalism retains vestiges of dualism.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 41. Laclau and Mouffe note that this emphasis on myth, together with the affirmation of violence, helped to pave the way for fascism. Sorel’s assertion of the radical contingency of the proletarian identity discouraged his followers, who found “a substitute myth capable of assuring the struggle against bourgeois decadence...in nationalism.”

Revolutionary Russia and the Problem of Hegemony

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the persistence of feudalism and the irregular development of industrialization in Russia yielded a socioeconomic milieu markedly different from that of contemporary Western Europe. Revolutionary-era Russian society was predominantly peasant and agricultural in character, and thus lacked those features that, according to orthodoxy, enabled the formation and vitality of a workers' movement: industrialization, and, correspondingly, a controlling bourgeois class; urbanization, a strong civil society, and proletarian opposition to the bourgeoisie. These peculiarities—which were, of course, peculiar only in comparison to the orthodox paradigm—were reflected at a theoretical level in the writings of intellectuals at the forefront of the revolution, such as Trotsky and Lenin. For Russian socialism did exist—the question was how to understand it, given the dominance of orthodox thought. However, Laclau and Mouffe contend, even stranger than Russian socialism's mere deviation from the script, from an orthodox perspective, was the fact that this deviation was beneficial; it functioned as “the stepping-stone for the seizure of political power by the proletariat.”¹⁶¹ Specifically, they write, “the limits of an insufficiently developed bourgeois civilization forced the working class to come out of itself and to take on tasks that were not its own.”¹⁶² The presence of the Russian bourgeoisie was not sufficient, for example, to

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁶² Ibid.

establish political liberties and representation, to permit either the development of modern science, or the autonomization of religious institutions; to secure, in other words, the achievements of a post-feudal society.

The term “hegemony” emerges in the writings of Russian theorists Georgi Plekhanov and Pavel Axelrod to describe the anomalous assumption of bourgeois tasks on the part of the proletariat. “Hegemony” was intended to function as a link between theory and reality; it indicated an “on the ground” Marxism that had deviated from orthodoxy. Trotsky, for example, proposes that the proletariat establish a socialist form of government directly, which would necessitate that it assume—that is, “hegemonize”—properly bourgeois tasks.¹⁶³ Lenin likewise envisioned the hegemonization of tasks such as the securing of civil liberties, although this was to be accomplished not by the proletariat, but by a privileged party of activists. Lenin’s vanguard party, comprised by a class alliance, would function to represent working-class interests in a political capacity.¹⁶⁴ Laclau and Mouffe argue, however, that “hegemony” as it is used by Russian Marxists vacillates between assigning a *de facto* and a *de jure* significance to the relation between class identity and the hegemonized task performed by a class; between whether the proletarian assumption of bourgeois tasks should be understood as an anomaly, or as the rightful (and not simply factual) state of affairs. The first

¹⁶³ Leon Trotsky, “The Proletariat and the Russian Revolution,” 1905, The Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/ch24.htm> (accessed May 4 2010), Sec. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Vladimir Lenin, “What is to Be Done?,” *Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing, 1961), 347-530. See especially Ch. 3, “Trade-Unionist Politics and Social-Democratic Politics”. Orthodoxy’s ontological privileging of the working class easily translated to epistemological privilege for Leninism’s vanguard party. This served to legitimate the party’s purported knowledge of the objective interests of the working class; together with the actual gap between the vanguard party and the ‘masses’, it contributed to the inception of authoritarianism in Russia.

interpretation defines the terms and relations of hegemony according to the determinations of orthodoxy. That is, class identity and the ‘nature’ of a task are defined by relations of production, by economic criteria, which are known independently of the specificity of any particular context. On this view, history proceeds according to the dictates of dialectical materialism, and hegemony is a mere bump in the road—as Laclau and Mouffe put it, “‘normal’ forms of development dominate the course of history and the hegemonic moment occupies a clearly marginal place.”¹⁶⁵ Yet this first account left theorists with a difficult tension between the orthodox narrative of the “normal” path of socioeconomic evolution and the reality—hegemony—in Russia:

An opposition arose between a *necessary interior* (corresponding to the tasks of the class in a ‘normal’ development) and a *contingent exterior* (the ensemble of tasks alien to the class nature of the social agents which they had to assume at a given moment).¹⁶⁶

The solution to this tension, for some, was simply to adopt the second interpretation; to declare hegemony the norm, despite its deviation from orthodoxy. This account tried to *think* what was happening in Russia, to incorporate it into socialist theory such that, as Laclau and Mouffe write, “the hegemonic transference of tasks constitutes the very substance of revolution.”¹⁶⁷ Trotsky, for example, argued that revolution could not *but* happen by means of hegemony.¹⁶⁸ In light of the effects of imperialism, which brought

¹⁶⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, 52.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁶⁸ Leon Trotsky, “En Route: Thoughts on the Progress of the Proletarian Revolution,” The Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/ch07.htm> (accessed May 4,

into contact industrialized and undeveloped nations, he rejected the rigidity of the orthodox economic stages, which corresponded with readiness or unreadiness for revolution. Leninism offers a more complex interpretation of hegemony—hegemony does not simply describe the proletariat stepping into the shoes of the bourgeoisie. Rather, the bourgeoisie is replaced by a political alliance comprised of members of different class sectors—proletarian, peasant, and intellectuals, the last of which serve to mobilize an underdeveloped working class.¹⁶⁹ Despite these differences, both Trotsky and Lenin maintain the necessity of hegemony for the successful transition to socialism in Russia.

Despite distinguishing between *de jure* and *de facto* accounts of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe argue that these two interpretations are not in fact meaningfully distinct. The first, of course, explicitly upholds the teachings of orthodox Marxism. The second, more ambitious interpretation styles itself as a revision of orthodoxy, yet Laclau and Mouffe show that it also collapses into orthodoxy. For Trotsky and Lenin, the historical metanarrative of orthodoxy remains ascendant: the proletariat is still the main agent of revolution; class identity is determined in the second account just as in the first, by economic criteria; and, finally, the working class assumption of bourgeois tasks alters neither the identity of the working class, nor the identification of the tasks as “bourgeois”. Furthermore, just as for theorists in Western Europe, the explanatory failures of orthodoxy lead Russian theorists to posit a supplemental element—specifically,

2010). Trotsky argues here against the Menshevik commitments to gradual ‘revolution’, and makes a case for Russia’s unique conditions favoring revolution vis-à-vis Western Europe.

¹⁶⁹ Vladimir Lenin, First Letter in “Letters From Afar,” *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 297-308.

“hegemonic relations *supplement* class relations.”¹⁷⁰ The theories of Russian Social Democracy are thus dualistic in the same manner as spontaneism, revisionism, and the rest; only here, the hegemonic relation serves as the “other” of economy.

Determinism/Dualism

As we have seen, the historical events that contributed to the crisis of orthodoxy included the fragmentation of the working class in Western Europe, and (from the perspective of orthodox Marxism) the idiosyncratic nature of the inception of socialism in Russia. On Laclau and Mouffe’s interpretation, theorists responded to the former by expanding the range of what could be accomplished by the political activity of the proletariat, and responded to the latter by incorporating into theory an anomaly that cut across class divisions:

In Western Europe [the dislocation of the orthodox paradigm] involved a displacement of levels from the economic to the political within the same class...the displacement was much greater in Russia because it occurred between different classes.¹⁷¹

In both Western European and Russian contexts, these attempts to go beyond orthodoxy resulted in dualism. The theses of orthodoxy are interpreted in a deterministic fashion: economy is taken to be *the* ultimate causal mechanism vis-à-vis social events, configurations, and identities. As described above, theoreticians responded to orthodoxy’s failure to explain adequately and to predict social phenomena accurately by

¹⁷⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, 51.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 49.

positing a second causal mechanism. Laclau and Mouffe argue that these attempts to conceptualize social and political movements are insufficient, insofar as they fail to explain coherently the phenomena motivating the theorization. These dualisms are, in short, comprised of two theories, neither of which is independently plausible. On the one hand, the deterministic discourse of orthodox Marxism is inadequate to address historical specificity and to account for variations from the predicted path of the capitalist economy in a systematic fashion. This opens up, as Laclau and Mouffe put it, a “theoretical void”, which is supplemented by some contingent element. This latter takes the form of an autonomous or spontaneous—that is, undetermined—element, or else a qualification of orthodox determinism—designating it as deterministic in only a morphological sense, for example. On the other hand, that contingent element, whatever it may be, is unable to provide a comprehensible theorization of social phenomena, that is, to guarantee the identity or role of social agents, or to give an account of “the social” itself. Instead of developing a framework that can accommodate and explain deviations from orthodoxy, spontaneism and Russian theories of hegemony hypostatize “the indeterminate *qua* indeterminate.”¹⁷² They are thus also accompanied by a theoretical void, which is supplemented by the quasi-scientific declarations of orthodox Marxism. For Luxemburg, for example, social phenomena that cannot be explained by orthodoxy—that is, the ‘fragmentation’ of the proletariat which appears as fragmentation only from the standpoint of orthodoxy—are simply operating according to a different logic, the “logic

¹⁷² Ibid., 47.

of the symbol”, or overdetermination.¹⁷³ Luxemburg in effect posits two independent explanatory principles. On the one hand, orthodox determinism serves to establish the identity and destiny of the proletariat. On the other hand, overdetermination explains the unpredictable, fragmentary, and plural character of contemporary workers’ movements. Although these seem to function in a complementary way, each in fact interacts with the other only to limit its effects. Laclau and Mouffe designate this conglomerate a “double void”, as each principle is, taken in isolation, accompanied by a theoretical void that represents its explanatory failure.

We can understand the equivocation of Russian theorists with regard to the significance of “hegemony” in a similar way: The first account adheres to orthodoxy in claiming that the nature of a political task follows from the economically-defined nature of class agents. It is important to recognize, however, that this account *cannot permit* the displacements of stages and tasks that occurred in revolutionary era Russia. It simply does not have the resources to explain what was going on in Russia. The second account effects an apparent coherence between economically-defined social elements and the observable complexity of the Russian context. The second account, in other words, tries to incorporate the terms of the first account. However, just as in Luxemburg’s spontaneism, there is no real theoretical cohesion between the elements of the second account; the definition of the identities and activities of social agents is

¹⁷³ As I will discuss in Chapter Three, overdetermination is the notion that the meaning of an event, idea, or anything that might function as a symbol, overflows its immediate effects, literal meaning, or temporal significance. In other words, it has multiple meanings. This is taken to be the *modus operandi* of the symbol. Laclau and Mouffe are here reading Althusser (who imported overdetermination from psychoanalysis to social theory) into Luxemburg, as her writings pre-dated his by a generation.

determined independently of contingent social relations. Despite the illusion of a hegemonic link, Laclau and Mouffe insist that the elements in the theory of hegemony are exterior to each other. There is, consequently, no conceptual relation between the Russian proletariat and the bourgeois tasks they perform:

The agent does not, therefore, *identify* with the task undertaken...The splitting of the task is an empirical phenomenon that does not affect its nature; the agent's connection to the task is also empirical, and a permanent schism develops between an 'inside' and an 'outside' of the agent's identity.¹⁷⁴

The Russian theory of hegemony is thus internally inconsistent in that the agents' performance of certain tasks does not impact their orthodox definition in any way. This lack of impact is exactly what we would expect, since acceptance of the tenets of orthodoxy *precludes* the conceptualization of the hegemonic relation in its specificity. Indeed, the phenomenon cannot be conceptualized, because its existence undermines the theses of orthodoxy. To articulate hegemony, to explain what is happening in revolutionary Russia, would only bring this into sharper relief. Thus, according to Laclau and Mouffe, for Trotsky et al, the theory of hegemony is orthodoxy plus 'everything else', and the latter signifies the extent to which the hegemonic relation is developed.

They argue,

relation (a) and relation (b) cannot be conceptually articulated, simply because the latter has no positive conceptual specificity whatsoever, and is reduced to a contingently variant terrain of relations between agents constituted outside itself.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 51.

The supposedly complementary relationship between determinism and contingency in the Marxist theories that Laclau and Mouffe examine is “thought of as a confluence of two positive and different explanatory principles, each valid in its own area.”¹⁷⁶ What each principle is attempting to explain is, of course, the causal mechanism that effects social change. Characterizing determinism and contingency as complementary, though, obscures the illicit nature of the theoretical move that brings them together. This move is illicit insofar as it *appears* to produce a complementarity, when in fact the deterministic principle must function as the ground:

In order to affirm that something is *absolutely* determined and to establish a clear line separating it from the indeterminate, it is not sufficient to establish the *specificity* of the determination; its *necessary character* must also be asserted.¹⁷⁷

Necessity specifies that something must happen, must be so. Contingency at least signifies the absence of necessity; what happens is ‘undetermined’ or ‘random’ or ‘spontaneous’. It is, of course, possible to say something about how the contingent element operates, as Luxemburg does. It is clear, however, that mere elaboration cannot put the contingent on equal footing with the necessary. Laclau and Mouffe thus designate the metaphysical amalgam that serves as the foundation for so many post-orthodox theories a “spurious dualism”, insofar as the two poles of the “dualism” are not equal. Politico-economic determinism claims necessity for itself; the supplementary element of contingency (in whatever guise) does not. The deterministic discourse thus

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 47.

has metaphysical priority. Unlike true Kantian “dualism”, which finds its unity in the transcendental ego, the dualisms of post-orthodoxy lack theoretical coherence.

Laclau and Mouffe find an advance toward a coherent theory of hegemony in the work of Antonio Gramsci. Their interpretation of Gramsci is instructive in that it prefigures their own theory. Specifically, Gramsci’s treatment of the concept of ideology is a stepping-stone for their own concept of the discursive nature of political practice, which I discuss below. Gramsci, like Lenin, regards hegemony as the performance of properly bourgeois tasks by class alliances.¹⁷⁸ The political and economic dominance of the working class are thus achieved by means of cooperative action with other class agents:

The proletariat can become the leading and dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State.¹⁷⁹

Gramsci departs from Leninism, however, in his understanding of the significance of such an alliance, which he terms an “historical bloc”. Specifically, Gramsci has a different conception of the political subject, of the relation between the alliance and the subject, and of the means by which the alliance is achieved. For Lenin, intra-class alliances were founded on the basis of common political interests and goals. Agents

¹⁷⁸ Italy had been split into states by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, some of which were under the control of Austria or France. Italy’s states were subsequently unified by 1871 as the Kingdom of Italy, and the last territory joined Italy after World War 1. Gramsci writes in the 1920s, addressing issues similar to those faced by Russian theorists—namely, “combined and uneven development”, in this case, among the various regions of Italy.

¹⁷⁹ Antonio Gramsci, “Notes on the Southern Question”, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-26* (London: International, 1978), 443.

could therefore retain a strong, economically-based class identity despite a pragmatic cooperation across class lines. Gramsci's historical blocs, however, are constituted at an intellectual/moral level, in other words, at the level of "ideology", where ideology differs significantly from the traditionally Marxist notion. The latter identifies ideology as a system of ideas and institutional mechanisms that arise directly from the mode of production; they can be thought of, in fact, as the symbolic manifestations of the mode of production. Ideology functions to maintain the capitalist mode of production in two ways: it validates and reinforces that economy, for example, in the way that the school systems prepare students—both skills-wise and values-wise—to become workers; ideology also obscures the exploitative nature of capitalism. Ideology in this classical sense perpetuates a so-called false consciousness in the proletariat; thus, according to the traditional Marxist paradigm, any and every system of ideas is suspect in a capitalist economy. Gramsci, however, argues that ideology possesses a moral and intellectual appeal whereby it does and should cement alliances that can serve the interests of the working class. Thus for Gramsci, according to Laclau and Mouffe, ideology does not belong exclusively to capitalism's ruling class, but can be wielded by the proletariat: "Intellectual and moral leadership constitutes, according to Gramsci, a higher synthesis, a 'collective will', which, through ideology, becomes the organic cement unifying a 'historical bloc'."¹⁸⁰ Gramsci's notion of ideology, then, cuts through the distinctions of classical Marxism; ideology is no longer the ghostly counterpart of material processes, but "is instead an organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and

¹⁸⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, 67.

apparatuses... This precludes the possibility of a ‘superstructural’ reading of the ideological.”¹⁸¹ That is, these activities and institutions cannot be reduced to economic forces. This theoretical difference is also reflected in his concept of the political agent—for Gramsci, agency is no longer reducible to class. Political subjectivity is understood as a complex conglomerate which is susceptible to ideological forces of all types; Gramsci’s

organic ideology does not represent a purely classist and closed view of the world; it is formed instead through the articulation of elements which, considered in themselves, do not have any necessary class belonging.¹⁸²

For Gramsci, the historical bloc *is* the political agent. Given his interpretation of ideology, this agent is a new entity, formed by the collective assumption of a common political goal that is understood by participants as legitimate and normative. According to Gramsci, then, it is the task of the proletariat to articulate this foundation for political alliance. The unity achieved for the purposes of political action is not nominal, nor merely pragmatic. It is a real—though symbolically mediated—unity, forged on the basis of perceived common interests and goals.

The more radical implication of the Gramscian theory of hegemony is the reconceptualization of the foundations of political identity. Recall that, for orthodoxy, as Laclau and Mouffe put it,

the condition for the maintenance of working-class unity and identity on the terrain of economist stageism—the only terrain capable of constituting it as a ‘universal class’—was that the hegemonized tasks should not transform the identity of the hegemonic class, but enter into a merely external and factual relation with it.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 68.

The economic basis for political subjectivity and action persisted in Marxism in the interest of providing a theoretical basis for the identity and unity of the working class, as well as the necessity of this identity and the proletarian role in history. According to Gramsci, however, social agents do not maintain a pre-given class nature, but possess a dynamic nature that alters according to “their relation to the force hegemonizing them” or to their practice of hegemony: “the dominant sector modifies its very nature and identity through the practice of hegemony.”¹⁸⁴ Thus the alliances formed in this discursively-driven process assume a new identity which cannot simply be understood as the sum of its parts—those ‘parts’ being the fragments of economically-defined social classes. Furthermore, ideology, which for Gramsci has a legitimizing capacity, functions as the vehicle and cement for hegemonic alliances.

Despite these advances, however, Laclau and Mouffe argue that Gramsci is still caught in the dualism of orthodox Marxism. Gramsci diverges from orthodoxy in his claim that the unity of any hegemonic formation is not guaranteed in advance, but must be achieved by ideological means. However, it is the task of the proletariat to forge the alliance by these means, and the proletarian identity is defined by economic criteria, not ideological articulation. Again, we have a theory that privileges the working class and determines its nature outside of the flow of history, prior to its historical struggle that produces the hegemonic formation. Again, we are faced with dualism: the necessary

¹⁸³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 69.

element is, as ever, the identity of the working class and its role in history; the contingent element here is the successful formation of a hegemonic alliance.

Gramsci's theory, then, is in the company of post-orthodox Marxism in its dependence upon economically-defined class natures and relations, as well as in its dependence on the thesis that the economy itself exists in an a priori space:

To assert...that hegemony must always correspond to a fundamental economic class is not merely to reaffirm determination in the last instance by the economy; it is also to predicate that, insofar as the economy constitutes an insurmountable limit to society's potential for hegemonic recomposition, the constitutive logic of the economic space is not itself hegemonic.¹⁸⁵

Laclau and Mouffe designate this view "economism". Ultimately, Gramsci is committed to this picture of social dynamics, and this commitment precludes any real improvement on Kautsky or his interlocutors.

Deconstructing Economism

As my summary has made clear, Second International-era theories were committed to a dualism which, Laclau and Mouffe contend, was the unfortunate consequence of attempts to rescue economism. Economism, which posits a central concept from which all others derive their meaning and identity, can provide clear criteria for interpretation of social and historical phenomena, but cannot recognize multiple and conflicting meanings. But as we shall see, this is precisely the sort of theory Laclau and Mouffe aim to articulate—one that can accommodate plurality at the levels of theory and

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.

praxis. They begin their advance to this with a reasoned defeat of economism. In this way, they prepare the grounds for their presentation of the theory of hegemony.

Laclau and Mouffe summarize economism in three theses: “The thesis of the neutrality of productive forces,” is the claim that the economic sphere is defined in an *a priori* manner. Its identity is thus secured independent of the unpredictable trends of history.¹⁸⁶ This thesis likewise establishes the independence of the economy vis-à-vis political processes, which purportedly take place at the superstructural level. These processes have a derivative significance, serving only to perpetuate economic functions through ideological expression. The second thesis stipulates “the unity and homogeneity of social agents, constituted at the economic level.”¹⁸⁷ Economic functions are thus constitutive of social identities. The identifiability of the working class is, of course, of primary significance for these theorists. Finally, “the thesis that the working class has a fundamental interest in socialism,” implies the totalizing scope of the economic determination of the proletariat.¹⁸⁸ The actions, interests, and roles of the working class ultimately derive from and are meaningful only in reference to relations of production.

Laclau and Mouffe reject these theses and their implications on the following grounds: In response to the first, they argue that the economic sphere cannot be delineated rationalistically, due to the social character of labor. In order to theorize labor, Laclau and Mouffe contend, “Marxism had to resort to a fiction: it conceived of labour-

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 76.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 77.

power as a commodity.”¹⁸⁹ This permitted the quantification of labor; however, it obscures an important difference between labor and other commodities—the use-value of labor power is not immediately available upon purchase, but must be *extracted*. Thus Laclau and Mouffe observe that “a large part of the capitalist organization of labour can be understood only as a result of the necessity to extract labour from the labour-power purchased by the capitalist.”¹⁹⁰ The location where, and conditions under which this is attempted—that is, the workplace and working conditions—thus function as a site of struggle and offer workers opportunities for resistance. This potential of course undermines “the thesis that productive forces are neutral, and that their development can be conceived as natural and unilinear,” as well as the conception of the economy “as an autonomous and self-regulated universe.”¹⁹¹ Recognition of the problem (from management’s perspective) of extracting efficient labor from the worker, and, consequently, of the struggle between capitalist and worker *integral to the process of production* implies the political nature of production. Or, as Laclau and Mouffe would have it, this struggle implies that production processes are permeated by the political and not prior to it.¹⁹²

In response to the second thesis, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the fragmentation of the working class reflects political and not simply economic divisions. Their

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 78.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 78.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 80.

¹⁹² Ibid.

demonstration that political as well as material factors are constitutive of economies provides support for this claim. The fragmentation that so many post-orthodox theorists have tried to account for is no mere epiphenomenon, but reflects events and processes that have both a social and an economic (if we are to understand those terms in a ‘pure’ sense) dimension. It is, in other words, “real”. Fragmentation poses a theoretical hurdle to the identification of the working class, or, alternatively, for the analysis of social dynamics in terms of the “bourgeoisie-proletariat” paradigm. Fragmentation poses local hurdles to the unification of workers with conflicting, even contradictory, interests, desires, and beliefs—“a fragmentation of positions exists *within* the social agents themselves.”¹⁹³ This undermines the economistic claim that individual and class identity is secured solely by economic forces. As Laclau and Mouffe observe, if labor cannot be understood in purely economic terms, neither can the agents of labor be identified purely in those terms; “the economy could hardly constitute subjects unified by a single logic which it does not itself possess.”¹⁹⁴

Finally, Laclau and Mouffe address the implications of the fragmentation of the working class vis-à-vis the “objective” political interests of the working class. Because the identity of the working class is no longer clearly defined once and for all, the theoretical foundation for the “objective interests” (that is, in socialism) of the proletariat is lost. The third thesis of economism is thereby undermined. Laclau and Mouffe conclude that

¹⁹³ Ibid, 84.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 81. Laclau and Mouffe find other strategies for identifying the working class—on the basis of progressive deskilling, or on the basis of other narrower criteria for what counts as “true” working class, for example—to be unconvincing, ad hoc, and irrelevant.

it is not the case that the field of the economy is a self-regulated space subject to endogenous laws; nor does there exist a constitutive principle for social agents which can be fixed in an ultimate class core; nor are class positions the necessary location of historical interests.¹⁹⁵

Laclau and Mouffe's refutation of economism is a response to a specific body of literature and a specific theoretical formation. However, as we shall see in the subsequent chapter, in the company of other poststructuralists, Laclau and Mouffe have reason to reject economism because of the *type* of theory it is. In anticipation of my explication of the theory of hegemony, I want to describe here some features of economism at a more general level. As is evident from their line of reasoning, Laclau and Mouffe have rejected a specific understanding of "economy". According to this concept, it is possible to articulate the meaning of economy—how it functions, how it relates to other elements of society, its importance—independently of the variety and variability of particular social and economic configurations. This explains orthodoxy's recourse to metaphors of "containment" and "presence"; on this view, the significance of economy is "self-contained", or alternatively, economy is "self-present". That is, it is possible to indicate it, distinguish it independently of and prior to everything else. Self-presence is no arbitrary theoretical feature, though. This status is necessary if a foundational concept is to meet the demands the theory places on it. These demands are to: (a) give meaning to all other concepts; (b) set the benchmark against which the reality of all other entities is measured, and; (c) embody truth and thus serve as a guideline against which we may distinguish knowledge from error. Recall that Laclau and

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 85.

Mouffe's desideratum is for a theory that can model plurality. It is clear, then, why they are motivated to reject economism: it concentrates meaning, being, and truth in a singular source.

Relying on Laclau and Mouffe's genealogy, I have described the inadequacies of orthodox Marxism. This variety of Marxism held great appeal for workers and theorists, perhaps due to its promise of eventual overcoming, a promise that was held out during dark times. As I have recapitulated, it failed both in Russia and the West at the level of praxis; it failed to unite the working class, and it failed to establish (or witness) a victorious socialism. It failed also at the theoretical level; "economy" cannot serve as the primitive that orthodoxy requires. In Chapter Three, I turn to Laclau and Mouffe's alternative to economic foundationalism.

Chapter Three

Hegemony

Consistent with Laclau and Mouffe's rejection of foundationalist Marxism, their theory of hegemony does not proceed from a single idea, proof, or thinker. It is constituted instead by web of intersecting concepts drawn from diverse Marxist and poststructuralist sources. In this way, they build pluralism into the very structure of the theory. In this chapter, I reconstruct their theory, drawing out certain strands from among the complex of sources they use. In this analysis I move from Saussure to Derrida to Foucault; that is to say, from structuralism to deconstruction to discourse. I will then elucidate the core concepts of the theory of hegemony, attending to their relationship to this intellectual heritage, and to their function in the theory.

Before I address the substance of the theory, I would like to remark briefly on their general approach to social and political theory. I intend these remarks to serve as a guide to understanding the 'glue' that cements such an internally diverse theory. I would characterize their derivation of the tools for social critique as both *transcendental* and *strategic*. "Transcendental", because Laclau's and Mouffe's theorization begins with the conviction that "contingency and articulation are possible."¹⁹⁶ Indeed, in their estimation, orthodox Marxism fails not only because it holds dubious theoretical commitments but also because it fails to accommodate political agency and unpredictability. Their conviction of the reality of contingency and articulation provides the point of departure

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 106.

for their theory, and their standard for what counts as a viable explanation of social phenomena. The theory can be described as “strategic”, then, because these commitments provide criteria for what they select from the wealth of the philosophical tradition. Thus, the seeming patchwork of elements from which they construct their own theory is supposed to provide the best tools for an explanation of free political action and unpredictability in the political field.

Theoretical Debts

Structuralism, as the name suggests, conceives of its object as a structure or system; it prioritizes the whole, conceived as the sum of its constitutive rules, over the parts and sees the parts as generated by the whole. For example, a structuralist analysis of the game of chess would focus on the rules—the knight moves in this way, the queen in that way, castling is such-and-such, and so on. The rules take priority over *de facto* moves of the pieces because the rules are the enabling conditions of any one move. The analyst does not address the historical emergence of such rules, since history is not regarded as susceptible to systematic analysis. Instead, the analyst focuses exclusively on the present, or *synchronic*, aspect of the structure.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist inquiry focuses exclusively on linguistic components—those elements integral to signification (conceived as a system). This meant an exploration of the nature of the sign in its meaning-conveying capacity, which Saussure called “semiology”. Saussure accepts as given that language-speakers have

meaningful exchanges. It is his treatment of the units of linguistic communication that are so important for poststructuralist thought, for his account provides a unique account of how these units—signs—can be meaningful.¹⁹⁷ As Derrida describes it,

Saussure's analysis of language considered it as a system of differences without positive terms; the central concept was that of *value*, according to which the meaning of a term was purely relational and determined only by its opposition to all the others.¹⁹⁸

Saussure rejects reference theory, according to which a sign derives meaning from its indication toward a “real” referent. On this account, the sign “cat”, for example, has meaning in virtue of its indication of a meowing, fur-covered, four-legged being.

Saussure posits instead that a sign has a dual nature. It is comprised of the written or spoken symbolic component (the *signifier*) together with the concept it refers to (the *signified*). There are many ways to signify the meowing, fur-covered-four legged being: as *cat*, or *chat*, or *gato*. Thus there is no necessary, internal connection between signifier and signified; their relationship is purely conventional. The sign cannot, then, provide meaning from within itself. To return to spatial metaphors, we do not extract meaning from within a sign. A sign is not ‘full’ with meaning. Instead, that sign must reach outside of itself, referring to other signs for its meaning. As Derrida summarizes,

the system of signs is constituted solely by the differences in terms, and not by their plenitude. The elements of signification function not through the compact force of their nuclei but rather through the network of oppositions that distinguishes them and then relates them to one another.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ We shall see that Laclau and Mouffe embrace the structuralist doctrine of ‘meaning as difference’, though it is understood via Derrida’s reinterpretation, that is, *différance*.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 112-3.

The most transparent instance, used by Saussure himself, is the dictionary entry. An individual word is defined in terms located elsewhere throughout the dictionary; these terms in turn can be traced elsewhere. Ultimately, then, a word is defined by what it is not.

A generation after Saussure, theorists such as Claude Levi-Strauss (in anthropology), Jacques Lacan (in psychology) Roland Barthes (in cultural studies), and Roman Jakobson (literary criticism) greatly broadened the scope of semiology. They no longer limited the object of structural analysis to language, but generalized it to include any signifying system: the food system, the unconscious, or religious symbolism. The terms of a structure or system were likewise extended; a menu, a film scene, or a totemic representation counted as a legitimate object of study.²⁰⁰ This expansion made structuralism a viable tool for sociopolitical analysis. Applied in this way, structuralism interests Laclau and Mouffe because it offers an alternative understanding of political identities and alliances. The significance of an identity—whether of a political agent, a political class, or the social writ large—is not located within an entity, as liberal individualism would have it. Nor does the significance lie in some external referent, such as the economy, as orthodox Marxism would have it. Instead, significance arises from the total set of relationships among agents or groups within a given structure.

¹⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 63.

²⁰⁰ David Howarth, *Discourse* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), 25. See also Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

Still, Laclau and Mouffe observe that the nature of the relationship among the elements of any structure offers an easy step back into essentialism. The very concept of a system implies the “arrangement or conformity of parts in a structure that transcends and explains its elements. Everything is so *necessary* in it that modifications of the whole and of the details reciprocally condition each other.”²⁰¹ Though the elements of structures are relational and dynamic, this dynamism is constrained by a script. For example, if a couple is dancing the fox trot (or any ballroom dance), the moves of the lead elicit a response, a corresponding move, in the partner. So even though the essence that would guarantee the stability of meanings and identities would no longer be “an underlying intelligible principle” à la orthodox Marxism, it would be the essence typical of formalism, that is, the “regularity of a system of structural positions.”²⁰² This regularity means that the elements are *determined*; to accept structuralism is thus to commit again to a paradigm that is limited, as orthodox Marxism is, in what it can explain. The critical point for Laclau and Mouffe is that it would erase the possibility of acting otherwise; the possibilities for action would be defined and prescribed by internal relationships that, for structuralism, constitute the object and enable its elements to take on meanings themselves. Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of myth, for example, seems to conceptualize myth-making as an open-ended and contingent process. However, he also posits, but does not elaborate on, the human mind as a ‘deep structure’ constraining the production of myths, “a human mind that is able to generate and comprehend an endless

²⁰¹ Laclau and Mouffe, 106.

²⁰² Ibid., 106.

series of myths.”²⁰³ Thus, while Lévi-Strauss’ analysis manages to attend to “the richness and variety of empirical phenomena,” he reduces this to “a static and essential structure.”²⁰⁴ To return briefly to the chess example, if we conceive of chess in terms of its constitutive rules—its structure—we may yet recognize a variety of moves on the chess board. However, the rules themselves, including the identities of the chess pieces, are never altered.

In order to avoid this variety of systemization, Laclau and Mouffe need to be able to show the essential openness of systems and their vulnerability to mutation. Or, to put it in a way that better represents the political nature of their project: what must be demonstrated is systems’ and identities’ capacity for transformation. They need a set of analytical tools that permits the demonstration of, for example, the contingent nature of the rook’s movement. This is precisely what Derrida’s critique of structuralism provides.

Derrida asserts that we may understand the history of Western thought as successive systems: “It would be easy enough to show that the concept of structure and even the word ‘structure’ itself are as old as the *episteme*—that is to say, as old as western science and western philosophy.”²⁰⁵ His critique begins with the Heideggerian-inspired observation that these systems of thought—that is, structures—have always been constructed and interpreted such that every element in the system refers back to a “center”: being, reason, essence, or the like. Even in structuralism, according to which

²⁰³ Howarth, 33.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 351.

meaning is generated relationally, the sign is preferred above any other term. The center is, ultimately, the source of meaning for every element within the system; all meanings can be traced back to the center. And each system claims that its center is unique, “a point of presence, a fixed origin.”²⁰⁶ It follows from this characterization that the center cannot move; it cannot change in relation to other elements of the system, and thus *it escapes structuration*: “the center...constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality.”²⁰⁷ The center resists the relational determination that evidences structuration. Thus, the center, the foundational referent, is in fact absent. Although it is supposed to both provide the condition of existence for the system *and* be a member of the system, it exists outside of the system. “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*.”²⁰⁸ And if something—anything—exists outside of the system, then the system cannot in fact be totalizing. It is not a ‘closed’ system.

This establishes what a structure is *not*; in other words, it establishes the limits of structural determination. It is no longer possible to speak of “the nature” or “the meaning” of a structure, a system, an identity, a text. Or, to put it less forcefully, it is misleading, and not especially productive, to speak thus. Consequently, as Derrida observes, “henceforth, it was necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 352.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

center could not be thought in the form of a present-being.”²⁰⁹ Laclau and Mouffe echo this in their declaration that

the incomplete character of every totality necessarily leads us to abandon, as a terrain of analysis, the premise of ‘*society*’ as a sutured and self-defined totality. ‘Society’ is not a valid object of discourse. There is no single underlying principle fixing—and hence constituting—the whole field of differences.²¹⁰

Laclau and Mouffe have already established with their critique of economism that the significance of “society” cannot be explained by “economy”, as orthodox Marxism would have it. Now we can see that their acceptance of Derrida’s insights about the nature of a structure translate to their conviction there is no single term that could suffice to define society. There is no concept that is meaningful independent of every other concept, as a system’s center purports to be. There is thus no concept that can ‘fix the whole field of differences’—that can give stable, singular, and unchanging meanings to every element within the system, in this case, within society. Consequently, foundationalist theories of society are fundamentally flawed insofar as they always overreach themselves.

The resulting challenge for Laclau and Mouffe, *inter alia*, is to locate a framework for analysis that does not simply repeat and reinforce Western metaphysics (as described by Derrida). They find such a framework in a particular understanding of discourse that stems in part from Saussure’s understanding of language. The discursive paradigm goes far beyond Saussure, however, in its reliance on an analogy between the social and the symbol; in this, it follows the Lacanian strategy summarized by his dictum

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 353.

²¹⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, 111.

that “the unconscious is structured like a language”. “Discourse”, as it is employed by Laclau and Mouffe, is distinguished by the ontological privileging of language in its signifying function. Signification serves as a model according to which we may comprehend phenomena not strictly linguistic—the political, for Laclau and Mouffe.

Derrida’s elaboration of the self-undermining tendencies of systems of thought provides philosophical expression for Laclau and Mouffe’s antifoundationalism. But they rely just as heavily on Derrida’s notion of *différance*, which represents the undetermined character of a system’s constituents, such as individual words. According to this concept, determinate meaning is impossible due to the relational nature of signification; a word, phrase, or identity is dependent on other words and on a context for its meaningfulness. *Différance* provides “the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign”, as the propensity for movement, for play.²¹¹ This “neographism” brings together two features of signification.²¹² The first, *différance*, is derived from Saussure’s concept of linguistic value. Signs’ differences from each other enable their individuation and thus their capacity for meaning; Derrida refers to this as *spacing*. Derrida goes beyond Saussure, though, in understanding the differing elements as containing within themselves a *trace*, “the mark of the past element”, thereby “constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what is not.” The trace reintroduces a historical element into structuralism; “trace” implies that elements within systems of

²¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5.

²¹² Philosophy since Plato has preferred the spoken word as an origin, a primary, a presence; writing has been understood as a derivative. Derrida’s presentation of *différance* is a demonstration of the insufficiency of speech—a deconstruction of the primacy of speech—as the ear cannot detect which of “difference” or “différance” is meant by the speaker.

meaning have a history that exhibits change over time. This change is precisely due to their placement in different contexts. The second feature, *deferral*, captures signs' function vis-à-vis presence: "The sign, which defers presence, is conceivable only on the *basis* of the presence that it defers and *moving toward* the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate".²¹³ That is, the sign can be meaningful only insofar as it depends on some other meaning, one that promise self-sufficiency; that claims to transcend the interdependence relationships of the structure. Derrida refers to this feature as *temporization*.

Différance represents a reconceptualization of meaning and identity, one that is grounded in the play of meaning, the capacity for reconfigurations of meaning. In conceiving of "...*différance* as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, it inscribes instability into the very fiber of signification"²¹⁴ It is thereby resistant to the metaphysics of presence—to the fixation of meaning and identity by an original, self-sufficient being or concept. Howarth writes, "Derrida's concept of *différance* argues for the historicity and contingency of identity formation, as every affirmation of identity is also premised on the active deferring of certain possibilities."²¹⁵ Thus we can begin to understand the logic of the sign according to a discursive interpretation, and perhaps also to understand the logic of the social in the postmarxist sense. Both employ a notion of signification that

²¹³ Derrida, *Margins*, 5.

²¹⁴ Derrida, *Margins*, 19.

²¹⁵ Howarth, 41.

systematically emphasizes dubious nature of the would-be “real” element—the would-be center. In fact, what Derrida establishes is the paradoxical thesis that essence is inessential; a system is always lacking, always implicating its Other. Significantly, then, “...it is not because concepts have multiple and contradictory meanings that they are undecidable; rather, it is the way these words are arranged structurally that makes their meaning ambiguous.”²¹⁶ It is due, in other words, to the systematic arrangement that is itself necessary for meaning. Structuration both enables and undermines meaning, as the oppositions between words might be relatively invariable or highly variable. Consequently, seemingly stable systems of thought—or identities—are ultimately unstable. There is no one term that can give meaning to all of the others, that can *fix* the meaning of the others. The ‘nature’ of a system or identity will thus always be revisable.

Laclau and Mouffe’s reliance on Derrida permits them to incorporate Althusser’s notion of overdetermination into their account of “the social”. Althusser’s structuralist interpretation of Marxism rejects the division of society into base and superstructure, according to which the superstructure is merely a reflection of—and determined entirely by—economic mechanisms and processes. Althusser contends instead that society consists of the economic, the political and the ideological, each of which functions in ‘relative autonomy’ in maintaining and reproducing society. Thus social conflicts are not determined unidirectionally, according to the economic function, and the classical Marxist notion of contradiction is too simple. The singular contradiction prescribed by dialectical materialism

²¹⁶ Ibid.

cannot of its own simple, direct power induce a ‘revolutionary situation’, nor *a fortiori* a situation of revolutionary rupture and the triumph of the revolution. If this contradiction is to become ‘active’ in the strongest sense, to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of ‘circumstances’ and ‘currents’ so that whatever their origin and sense (and many of them will *necessarily* be paradoxically foreign to the revolution in origin and sense, or even its ‘direct opponents’), they ‘fuse’ into a *ruptural unity*.²¹⁷

If these contradictions truly merge as a result of their accumulation, he argues, the product is *overdetermined*—caused by a plurality events occurring at each level.

Although Althusser breaks with orthodox Marxism in his understanding of social conflict, he nonetheless remains wedded to the ultimate determination of all social phenomena by the economy—“determination in the last instance by the economic mode of production”.²¹⁸ This commitment runs counter to Laclau and Mouffe’s rejection of economism; still, they render Althusser’s notion of overdetermination useful by reactivating its Freudian origins. In a psychoanalytic context, overdetermination signifies “a very precise type of fusion entailing a symbolic dimension and a plurality of meanings”.²¹⁹ Freud uses the term in reference to the multiple meanings (“dream thoughts”) associated with a single dream element, a multiplicity that emerges over time as the result of “over-interpretation”—that is, repeated and revised interpretations of the dream.²²⁰ The (misleadingly singular) “meaning” of the dream elements is potentially

²¹⁷ Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 99.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²¹⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, 97.

²²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1998). See especially Book VI, “The Dream-Work”.

inexhaustible. Integrating Althusser's and Freud's development of the term thus yields a model for explaining social phenomena amenable to Derrida's insight that singular determination is an impossibility—or perhaps a sort of “dialectical illusion”. According to this conception, “the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order”.²²¹ If so, then analysis of the social should proceed along the lines of Freud's over-interpretation, and the objects of such analysis—social identities, relations, events, and alliances as they appear within discursive formations—

lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moment of an immanent law. There are not *two* planes, one of essences and the other of appearances, since there is no possibility of fixing an *ultimate* plane of signification. Society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order.²²²

Overdetermination, then, indicates the essential openness of the social field, providing the possibility for mutable identities and complex happenings.

The term *discourse* has a distinctly linguistic connotation and, inasmuch as it is traced it back to Saussure, history. This connotation necessitates some clarification as we move to Laclau and Mouffe's incorporation of the Foucaultian notion of discourse. Foucault distinguishes language from discourse in the following way: language is a system that functions according to a finite and potentially articulable set of rules—a grammar—that enables speakers to produce an infinite amount of statements. A discursive formation, on the other hand, is the accretion of (in part) those linguistic productions, or, as he puts it, “performances”. Thus, linguistic analysis asks, “according

²²¹ Laclau and Mouffe, 98.

²²² Ibid.

to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made?”, whereas discourse analysis asks, “how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?”²²³ As Saussure asserts, it is possible, given a grammar and a set of sounds, to produce an infinite number of meaningful statements—just as, given a set of rules and the proper board and pieces, it is possible to produce countless sequences of chess moves. Foucault’s understated observation is precisely that we do *not* produce a variety and number of sentences even approaching this potential; on the contrary, we produce a limited number of statements that we repeat. The analysis of discursive formations, then, takes in not only the linguistic component of discourse—what is said—but also identifies concepts, institutions, materials, and persons (roles) that constrain what is said. Laclau and Mouffe’s appropriation of Foucault thus expands the scope of discourse analysis beyond linguistic productions to include the material and institutional elements that make these productions intelligible.

Discourse analysis does not, therefore, recognize the traditional philosophical distinctions between “words and things”, which presumes “the *mental* character of every discursive structure.”²²⁴ This presumption in turn relies on “the very classical dichotomy between an objective field constituted outside of any discursive intervention, and a discourse consisting of the pure expression of thought.”²²⁵ We have already gone most of

²²³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 27.

²²⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, 108.

the way toward understanding Foucault's rejection of the word/thing distinction in understanding what sets discourse apart from language. Discourse is not merely a system of signification that operates according to grammatical rules. "Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things."²²⁶ A discursive structure is fundamentally *practical*—meaning and identities are produced and reproduced in a system of practices that have both material and linguistic elements.²²⁷ Foucault's characterization of discourse as "practical" undermines the word (or thought)/thing dichotomy by introducing a more fundamental category. Discourse is first and foremost *performed*—it is the kind of thing that exists by virtue of the coordinated performances of "actors". We must use that term lightly, though, since "actors" in the Foucaultian sense are largely performing according to script, and agency is conceived of as more effect than cause. Likewise, we should understand "practice" in its colloquial usage, as in "to practice piano", or "batting practice". These usages emphasize repetition and prescribed execution. Discursive formations, then, are constituted by a laundry list of objects, institutions, roles, locations, technologies, 'scripts', and so on. Foucault summarize clinical medicine, for example,

as the establishment of a relation, in medical discourse, between a number of distinct elements, some of which concerned the status of doctors, others

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Foucault, 49.

²²⁷ This is nascent in the Marxist notion of ideology, and is more fully developed in Althusser's expansion of ideology to include ideological state apparatuses. According to Althusser, ideology is not simply rhetorical, having a propositional nature, but is also constituted by the activities of institutions and by the organization of social and personal spaces. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*; Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

the institutional and technical site from which they spoke, others their position as subjects perceiving, observing, describing, teaching, etc.²²⁸

This diverse array of ‘things’ maintain their apparent distinctiveness in his analysis insofar as Foucault accepts our conventional understanding as a valid starting point. According to our ordinary understanding, for example, “people” and “places” are different things. According to a traditional philosophical understanding, “agents” and “objects” are ontologically different. For Foucault, however, these distinctions are not as fundamental as the discursive formation that unites people, places, social relations, roles, tasks, and sentences into a reliable pattern of scripted performances.

For Laclau and Mouffe, objects of knowledge and experience are and cannot but be discursively structured, in just this Foucaultian sense. “Every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence.”²²⁹ This is, on the one hand, a quasi-transcendental—and certainly ontological—claim about the nature of objects. Objects are those things that are meaningful to us; any object that is an object for us has some significance. On the other hand, this is a claim regarding the source of that significance, viz., discourse. Every meaning is enabled and limited by the discursive formation in which it arises. However, given Foucault’s goal of “de-centering” Western thought—that is, of thinking history apart from the Western subject—discursive analysis rejects conventional unities. It resists, that is, organizing interpretive concepts such as tradition, consciousness, evolution and development, “spirit”, or even accepted disciplinary boundaries. It does so

²²⁸ Foucault, 53.

²²⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, 107.

in two senses: (i) as features of the analytical apparatus, and; (ii) as substantive parts of the explanandum.²³⁰ With regard to the former, Foucault argues that the theorist's use of conventional unities produces an analysis marked by sameness and overriding unity.²³¹ According to Foucault, conventional strategies of analysis thus tend to conceal more than they reveal. Discourse analysis instead reveals discontinuities, limits, inconsistencies, and differences—in short, the radical contingencies—within a discursive formation, where these are present.²³² This is a social science that harmonizes well with Laclau and Mouffe's postmarxist aims in its rejection of essences and unities, its modeling of a stable but essentially dynamic field, and its emphasis on the historical and material conditions of meaning-making.

The Social Field

The commitment to a discursive paradigm provides the conceptual contours of Laclau and Mouffe's explanatory apparatus, but does not yet amount to a general theory of society. In order to describe the specific features of the social, they introduce a

²³⁰ Foucault explicitly declares that he is not a poststructuralist. And given that Derrida understands his own remarks on structure to be directed toward *every* system of Western thought (and not simply structuralism), Foucault's aversion to the conventional unifying concepts of philosophy can easily be interpreted more broadly than as a simply "poststructuralist" attitude—we might take him to be "post-Western", for example.

²³¹ Foucault, 21-2. Foucault clarifies in Chapter 7 that his intent is not to "deny all value to these unities or forbid their use; it was to show that they required, in order to be defined exactly, a theoretical elaboration (71). That is, Foucault's purpose is to give voice to what remains silent in our unreflective acceptance of these unities—what, exactly, we are committed to in our application of such unities.

²³² Foucault, 31.

number of analytic terms, which include: the field of overdetermination; articulation; elements and moments; the field of discursivity; and nodal points. This terminology is intended to depict the “nuts and bolts” of social life, to capture the conception of the social I have been describing. To recapitulate, Laclau and Mouffe posit that social identities, institutions, and other “stable” structures are ultimately indeterminable; that these same, “unified” features of social life are in fact internally different; and that their claims to self-presence are falsified by the supplementation they always require.²³³

I have above described the origins and significance of the concept of overdetermination. To reiterate briefly, the claim that the social field operates according to the logic of overdetermination indicates its affinity with symbolic representation. Of course, “representation” typically appears in tandem with a realism that posits an ontologically ultimate substratum—the “represented”, whatever it may be. I have described how this changes once the concept of overdetermination is incorporated into a poststructuralist-inspired discursive paradigm: symbolic representation is rendered multiple and limitless “through the critique of every type of fixity, through an affirmation of the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity”.²³⁴ Consequently, there can be no ultimate determination, no single meaning, that once and for all defines social objects, as the “economy” serves to do in orthodox Marxism. Laclau and Mouffe conclude that “this field of identities which never manage to be fully

²³³ As I will explain below, this supplementation is a fundamental requirement for the politics of hegemony.

²³⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, 104.

fixed, is the field of overdetermination.”²³⁵ This is simply what follows from the conceptualization of social processes as operating according to the logic of the symbol. The significance of overdetermination shifts once more against the background of a Foucaultian understanding of discourse. The meanings of identities and events are indexed to their involvement in multiple discursive formations (family, profession, religion, etc.). This provides a more concrete elaboration of the nature of determination, as well as lending it stability, since discursive formations tend to shift slowly. The resulting picture of political subjectivity is close to the experience of many—it is a subjectivity marked by conflicting demands and commitments.

Laclau and Mouffe call this intersection and interpenetration of discursive formations at certain points, *articulation*. Articulation names a connection that is flexible, as at bodily joints; an appropriate metaphor, as articulations link discourses that are not completely exclusive of each other. “Objects appear articulated not like pieces in a clockwork mechanism...because the presence of some in the others hinders the suturing of the identity of any of them.”²³⁶ There is thus no need to conceive of, for example, the working-class identity solely in terms of the economy. Workers’ identities may be determined by overlapping discourses within which they are meaningful. A working-class identity may be at the same time a Catholic identity, a socially conservative identity, a patriarchal identity. Compare this view to the economism of orthodox Marxism. Strictly speaking, economism dictates that the economy is the only discourse in town; it defines

²³⁵ Ibid., 111.

²³⁶ Ibid., 104.

the social and all elements within it. We saw, though, that applications of economism required a supplementary explanatory principle, resulting in a “spurious dualism”. The supplementary principle might explain workers’ religious or political commitments or activities; it explains, that is, any deviations from workers’ supposed economic interests. Aside from the incoherence of this approach, we saw that dualism is still not explanatorily rich enough to explain the intricacies of social dynamics and identities, nor does it satisfactorily escape determinism. Overdetermination and articulation, on the other hand, can convey the complex nature of political alliances, identities, and events, and at the same time provide for reconfigurations—in a word, change.

The concept of articulation requires a further qualification. It does not simply name a point or points of intersection; it is not a noun, but a verb. Like Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe make *practice* basic to social constellations of meaning. Articulation is thus defined as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice,” and *discourse* is “the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice.”²³⁷ This deviates in a significant way from the more heavily normative, “sedimented”, sort of practice basic to Foucault’s conception of discourse; change is built into the notion of articulatory practice.²³⁸ In articulation, the oppositional relationships that engender meaning are re-positioned. For example, in the

²³⁷ Ibid., 105.

²³⁸ Laclau and Mouffe say as much in their critical remarks regarding Foucault’s distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices, a distinction they regard as illegitimate. Foucault’s category of dispersion, they claim, cannot account for discursive change, and only maintains the illusion of doing so by excessive abstraction (see Laclau and Mouffe, 107). Laclau and Mouffe themselves opt for the Lacanian notion of *nodal points* (*points de captation*) to model the relative stability of a discursive formation—or, to put it differently, their resistance to change. I discuss this shortly.

early 1990s, Democrats in the United States (as well as Leftist parties in Western Europe) reinvented the Left under the banner of the “Third Way”.²³⁹ The Third Way is a centrist approach to government that tries to navigate between the more socialist elements of advanced capitalism (the so-called “welfare state”), and its free market aspirations. Prior to the Left’s Third Way identification, it had been defined as favoring big social programs that required government spending, typified by Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society project. The Reagan years, in emphasizing smaller government and decreasing expenditures on government programs, had consolidated the Left’s opposition to laissez-faire management. The Third Way ideology shifted oppositional relationships—and, consequently, identities—such that the Left was subsequently opposed to a massive welfare state, adopting instead a stance of fiscal conservatism. In particular, the New Left was open to the cooperation of the private sector and the public in approaching social issues. In this dimension they aligned with the thinking of some on the Right. The *articulation* of the Third Way, then, shifted political positions and alliances; in structuralist terms, the value of the identities “Left” and “Right”, “Democrat” and “Republican”, shifted as new differential relationships were established.

Laclau and Mouffe tend to focus on the indeterminate nature of meaning, on its potential for revision. This presupposes, as they recognize, that meaning must be at least provisionally determinate:

The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations—otherwise, the very flow of differences would be

²³⁹ The “Third Way” is not a new idea, of course, but a variant of Keynesianism.

impossible. Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be *a* meaning.²⁴⁰

This fixation of meaning is effected by discourse, and *moments* are those sub-structural bearers of meaning within a discourse that result from articulatory practices. Insofar as a moment's value is determinate in the resulting discourse, moments represent the defining—if not essentially so—features of the discourse. For example, a market-friendly stance is a moment within the discourse of the Third Way, as are those more traditionally Left positions—for example, the commitment to programs such as Social Security—that are together incorporated into the centrism of the Third Way.

There are certain moments within a discourse that act as an anchor, a sign that organizes others in relation to itself. Laclau and Mouffe designate these *nodal points*, “privileged discursive points of partial fixation”.²⁴¹ Nodal points have a peculiar nature; oddly enough, these most important points are also the emptiest, the most abstract. On the one hand, nodal points exert a stabilizing force on a discourse by “limit[ing] the productivity of a signifying chain”.²⁴² In fact, nodal points often occupy the provisional center of a discourse. On the other hand, they are themselves the most abstract terms in a discourse, and therefore the most flexible, the most open to multiple and novel assignments of meaning. “Democrat” is one such moment within the discourse of the Left; both Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton have identified as Democrat, though their

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 112.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

platforms are on many points divergent. “Democrat” is thus a central, if elastic, feature of leftist discourse in the United States.

As we have seen, the potential for the subversion of meaning derives from Laclau and Mouffe’s metaphysical commitments—in particular, their commitment to the thesis that the permanent fixation of meaning is impossible. The vulnerability of meaning to mutation is due to its relationship to an extra-discursive well of potential meanings—the *field of discursivity*. The field of discursivity is comprised by the surplus of meaning of a discourse—or more precisely, those meanings that the discourse excludes. This establishes both the boundaries of a discourse and that which would destabilize it. Howarth observes that “exactly because a discourse is always constituted in relation to an outside, it is always in danger of being undermined by it, that is, its unity of meaning is in danger of being disrupted by other ways of fixing the meaning of the signs.”²⁴³ The field of discursivity is populated by *elements*, “floating signifiers, incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain.”²⁴⁴ Recall that articulation produces new differential relationships, new moments within a discourse. Elements are potential moments, but they are not yet situated in relationship to other moments within the discourse. Their meaning is, in other words, indeterminate, incomplete. In the post-Clinton years, for example, Democrats were said to be undergoing an identity crisis. Those positions that had previously defined their platform were again only potential moments—they were, in

²⁴³ Howarth, 27.

²⁴⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, 113.

other words, elements. “Democrat” had become a thin notion, signifying little more than opposition to the Right.

The Machinery of “the Political”

We are now in a position to understand the theory of hegemony and the operations that typify hegemonic politics. Recall that Gramsci’s conception of political leadership serves as a template for Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. According to Gramsci, the working class could only achieve dominance by uniting with other segments of society. It is the quality of this alliance that is interesting to Laclau and Mouffe. Gramsci proposed that Italy’s proletariat would not simply ally with these groups, but would forge a common vision with them, engaging their intellectual and moral interests as well as economic interests. The resulting alliance, what Gramsci calls a “collective will”, integrates a collection of “diverse ‘elements’ or ‘tasks’ [that] no longer had any identity apart from their relation with the force hegemonizing them.”²⁴⁵ Their (former) identities and concomitant interests are thoroughly altered, in other words, by hegemonization. This goes also for the hegemonizing group: “the dominant sector modifies its very nature and identity through the practice of hegemony. For Gramsci a class does not *take State power*, it *becomes State*.”²⁴⁶ The possibility of this transformation inspires Laclau and Mouffe’s appropriation of Gramsci’s hegemony; they

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 67.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

aim to describe this political unity in terms of the poststructuralist ontology described above, which is able to capture the “complex dialectic between differentiability and contingency”.²⁴⁷

How, according to this picture, can one group identity come to represent the whole? How can a political movement bring together a number of discrete entities, each of which participates in discrete discourses (religion, economic, ethnic, gender); how, in other words, is hegemony possible? The execution of hegemony rests on the potential for a political discourse to both dominate and represent political interests beyond its own borders, transforming, in the process, its own identity and the identities of the hegemonized.²⁴⁸ This is precisely what happens when a group attains political power; it absorbs and claims to speak for an ever-larger segment of society. Laclau and Mouffe must describe, at a theoretical level, how the particular can represent—even *become*—totality.

Their argument begins by translating poststructuralist insights into their own vocabulary. A hegemonic political maneuver—that is, a political maneuver that attempts to absorb the interests of ever more of the citizenry—is above all an articulation. That is, hegemonic maneuvers reconfigure of relationships of difference, thereby attaching new significances to social entities and events. What is required for hegemonic articulations?

²⁴⁷ Ernesto Laclau, “Glimpsing the Future,” in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 235.

²⁴⁸ Anna Marie Smith clarifies that a political movement may exert power over/represent society to a greater or lesser extent; it need not dominate the entire field. Smith provides a helpful description of hegemonization as a process in her monograph, *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 167-8.

Reconfiguration requires both fixed meanings and unfixed meanings. Stable meanings, according to the structuralist understanding in play here, are established by the internal differences of a system. That system must, moreover, be closed (totalizing), “without which no difference could become actual.”²⁴⁹ That is, if the system is ‘open’, definition is not possible; yet a closed system precludes transformation, precludes the appearance of novel meanings. This is the determinism particular to structuralism, which, as we saw, was surmounted by Derrida’s demonstration that the structures that permit the emergence of meaning are themselves inherently unstable: any “closed” or “total” system must have a border, which in turn implies a “beyond”, a supplement.²⁵⁰ Every discourse or identity must have something to define itself against, and its meaning is therefore not sufficient unto itself.

While the deconstruction of structuration overcomes determinism, the resulting “open” character of discourses poses yet another obstacle to the practice of articulation. If systems of meaning—in Laclau and Mouffe’s term, discourses—are constitutionally open, if they require a supplemental discourse, then that supplement would be one more difference, “and the two formations would not, strictly speaking, be external to each other.”²⁵¹ That is, if what lies beyond my identity is different to my identity, then it is,

²⁴⁹ Laclau, “Future,” 235.

²⁵⁰ The findings of a critique of structuralism can be arrived at by several poststructuralist avenues. Laclau himself identifies three: Barthes’ work on connotation and denotation, Derrida’s concept of the supplement, and Lacan’s analysis of the logic of signification. I have above summarized the Derridean way in my elucidation of the philosophical sources for the basic ontological concepts of the theory of hegemony. Ernesto Laclau, “Philosophical Roots of Discourse Theory,” University of Essex, <http://www.essex.ac.uk/centres/TheoStud/onlinepapers.asp> (accessed March 12, 2009).

²⁵¹ Laclau and Mouffe, 135.

paradoxically, constitutive of my identity, according to a structuralist understanding of signification. The “logic of difference”, Laclau and Mouffe’s term for operations that make meaning by establishing differences between terms, is therefore insufficient for hegemony. It cannot establish the borders of an identity. What is needed is an account of *partial* determination. But, as we have seen, “partial determination” cannot be anything like Luxemburg’s spontaneism, which was in fact a dualism. The “fixity” that hegemonic operations both require and establish are made possible by Laclau and Mouffe’s account of the peculiar nature of the “supplemental” discourse.

Each moment within a discourse has what Laclau and Mouffe, following Saussure, call a “positive identity”. This just means that it is definable; its meaning is unambiguous. By contrast, the elements that lie beyond the limits of a discourse have what might be called a “negative identity” (*vis-à-vis* that discourse). Their identity is negative in the sense that, from the perspective of the (positively-defined) discourse, the elements lack definition. In Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology, they have the status of “floating signifiers”; they are not tied down to any signified, to any one concept. They have a merely nominal significance *vis-à-vis* the positive moments of the discourse they stand in relationship to. Because these terms do not amount to positive differences, they can provide the limits of social identities without being incorporated into those identities.

Articulations that include/exclude these ‘meaningless’ elements, effectively stabilizing identities and discourses, follow “the logic of equivalence”.²⁵² The

²⁵² Laclau and Mouffe’s distinction between the logics of difference and equivalence riffs on Saussure’s designation of two types of relations that can obtain among signs: syntagmatic and paradigmatic (or associative). The former are linear relations that link signs in a chain—the relations between signs in a sentence, for example. These arise as a matter of fact—you cannot pronounce two words simultaneously.

construction of chains of equivalence functions to ‘close the gap’ in an identity. They do so by incorporating floating signifiers that lie beyond a discourse in a particular way, so that those signifiers serve as “stand-ins” for positive differences. The status of these signifiers within the discourse is thereafter “not us”. By including what I am not as part of my identity, I establish the boundary to my identity, which provides the stability necessary for articulation. This means, however, that equivalence terms have a dubious status: they are both *internal* to an identity, in the sense that they are constitutive of the identity, and *external* to it, in the sense that they are “not-*x*”. Thus, the same articulatory maneuver that enables identity is also that which destabilizes it.

Vis-à-vis the excluded elements all identities antagonised by it are not merely differential but also equivalent, and equivalence is precisely what subverts difference. So that which makes difference possible is also what makes it impossible.²⁵³

That is, a discourse achieves its definition by means of its internal differences, but also in its distinction from what it is *not*. And the simplicity of the label “not-*x*” obscures—or, in Laclau and Mouffe’s term, *dissolves*—the ‘positive’ aspects to identity. The inclusion of what lies beyond my identity thus renders my identity particularly vulnerable to mutation.

The latter are relations of similarity; they subsist between terms that have a graphic or syntactic commonality—for example, the relation between “power” and “tower”, or between “power” and “force”. Poststructuralist thinkers beginning with Roman Jakobson extend these concepts beyond structural linguistics to characterize types of discourse. A discourse may be *metonymical* (corresponding to syntagmatic relations) or *metaphorical* (corresponding to paradigmatic relations). Briefly, metaphorical discourses establish similarities among their differences, which can lend itself to substitutions of differences. These relations predominate in richly symbolic texts.

²⁵³ Laclau, “Roots,” 5.

In naming what lies at the borders of significance, equivalence maneuvers concretize a ‘space’ that, Laclau and Mouffe maintain, is a basic feature of political agency. That ‘space’ is the sense of incompleteness that is endemic to identity or meaning. Equivalence relations are built around this space, and locate—or rather, *accuse*—a source of that felt incompleteness. That is, they give name and face to one that I will thereby come to view as my antagonist, who becomes the “enemy within”. The presence of this enemy poses a perennial threat to my identity, and precludes ‘wholeness’. I will elaborate on antagonism below, following an illustration of equivalence relations.

The definitive features, or positive moments, of American patriotic discourse may include members’ unquestioning support of the President and the “troops”, identification with the Republican party, (at least nominal) religious identification, the display of the American flag on clothing, driving an American car, the display of certain bumper stickers, and a whole array of consumer choices. These are the positive moments constitutive of this discourse, established by internal differences. Yet, as I explained above, these differences are not sufficient. Any identity also requires a constitutive ‘outside’: “not one more element, but one in an antagonistic relation to an ‘inside’ which is only constituted through the latter. In political terms, “an enemy which makes possible the unity of all the forces opposed to it.”²⁵⁴ This constitutive outside is established by the logic of equivalence, and that outside *only* has meaning in its negative relationship to the positive differences of patriotism. Equivalence relations provide the remainder of the

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

patriot's identity: she is not a bleeding-heart liberal, not a commie, not a hippie, not French. Those other identities lack any elaboration from within patriotic discourse. In their relation of equivalence to patriotic discourse, all of patriotism's definitive features are "equivalent to the others in terms of their common differentiation from" being French, or a communist.²⁵⁵ "The differences cancel each other out insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all."²⁵⁶ The excluded element, say, "French", "has come to be purely negative...it can only be represented indirectly."²⁵⁷ That is, what it is to be French has become a mere name that points to nothing, but serves the very important functions of demarcating the limits of our patriotic discourse *and* providing a unifying element for the moments within that discourse. Equivalence articulations are therefore indispensable for hegemony's gesture at universal inclusion—that is, the representation of the whole by the part—because they establish a commonality among different discourses. This commonality serves as the 'glue' that binds together divergent political projects; though those who identify as patriots may have deep differences, equivalence articulations enable them to come together in their opposition to a common antagonist.

Laclau and Mouffe's concept of antagonism provides an alternative to the orthodox Marxist notion of contradiction. The ontological terms of orthodoxy gave class conflict the significance of a contradiction internal to the capitalist mode of production,

²⁵⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, 127.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 128.

which was reflected at a superstructural level in social relations between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. Laclau and Mouffe, however, reject the modeling of social conflict on either a physical collision, according to which self-contained, fully constituted identities are opposed, or on a logical contradiction, according to which identities are conceptually mutually exclusive. They have demonstrated that no set of differences, no discursive formation or political identity, can ever be complete. In their discursive model, then, social conflict signifies the failure of objectivity. The enemy constructed by equivalence relations “is a symbol of my non-being...The presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution.”²⁵⁸ To put it simply, conflict is located wherever Discourse B—which from the perspective of Discourse A has the status of a floating element—threatens to undermine Discourse A. The Latte Liberal with his ever-ready critique of American imperialism, for example, prevents the patriot from successfully being her political self, prevents her from actualizing herself as a patriot. The workings of social antagonism, then, imply that the claim to objectivity, to definition, to invulnerability, is an empty one.²⁵⁹

The current debate in religious communities over the significance of faith vis-à-vis homosexuality provides yet another example of antagonism. Fundamentalist Christians understand Christianity as essentially intolerant of homosexual practices; many gay Christians disagree. Each contests the relationship of homosexual practice to

²⁵⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, 125.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 128.

other elements of the Christian faith; gay Christians understand it as compatible with the Christian faith as is eating meat or driving a car. It can, in other words, be represented in the discursive formation “Christianity”, according to gay Christians; in formal terms, it can be a difference, a moment within that formation. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, understand “homosexual practice” as “not Christian”. The meaning of homosexual practice is captured in purely negative terms by an articulation typical of the logic of equivalence—that is to say, it has no meaning. The impossibility of universally fixing the meaning of Christianity together with the articulation of equivalence relations *prevents* fundamentalists from attaining a complete identity; that is, the terms excluded by those equivalence relations *antagonize* the fundamentalist identity. Consequently, fundamentalist Christians experience the failure of their hegemonization (control over) the meaning of “Christianity”.

We have seen that hegemony operates on discursive identities that are both stable and incomplete; its wielders seek to acquire power by capitalizing on the incomplete nature of identities. This is accomplished by means of the articulation of multiple symbols and demands into a common discursive form, resulting in an alliance that claims to represent the entirety of the social. In other words, a hegemonizing political movement claims to speak and act for the people, to be the expression of the will of the people. The singularity of the hegemonic relation is that it subsists between “a particular difference” and “a totality with which it is incommensurable”, between a particular segment of the population and “society” as a whole.²⁶⁰ But due to the “unresolvable

²⁶⁰ Laclau, “Future,” 325.

tension between equivalence and difference”—that is, their mutually undermining character, which makes completely stable identities, meanings, and objects impossible— hegemonic politics can only produce a “distorted” representation of society.²⁶¹

It should be clear that hegemonic projects can only take place in certain political contexts; namely, where there is a contestation of identities, as there was in revolutionary Russia. Laclau and Mouffe do not claim to be identifying hegemony as the essence of society or politics—predictably, they reject the possibility of doing so. “Hegemony is, quite simply, a political *type of relation*, a *form*, if one so wishes, of politics. This relation requires, they argue, a social field that is characterized by “equivalence and frontier effects”, where a “frontier” is the provisional demarcation of an identity by differential positivities.²⁶² It can only occur in contexts where identities are relatively unstable, and where that instability has been revealed through articulations of equivalence that threaten the internal differences of an identity by locating a common foe. The reorganization of, for example, the Postal Service would not count as a hegemonization, though it would resemble articulatory practice in repatterning differential relationships. What is lacking in this case, of course, is antagonism.

Antagonism thus necessary, but not sufficient for hegemony, for there are political contexts marked by great antagonism, yet lacking in the potential for the transformation of identities. For example, “in a medieval peasant community the area open to differential articulations is minimal and, thus, there are no hegemonic forms of

²⁶¹ Laclau, “Roots,” 6.

²⁶² Laclau and Mouffe, 136. “Frontier effects” is a Gramscian term that Laclau and Mouffe reinterpret in poststructuralist terms.

articulation.”²⁶³ This is a highly stable society in which there is little possibility for social mobility—for shifting social identities and meanings. Howarth summarizes the conditions for hegemony in the following way:

Hegemonic practices presuppose a social field criss-crossed by antagonisms, and the presence of elements that can be articulated by opposed political projects. The major aim of hegemonic projects is to construct and stabilise the *nodal points* that form the basis of concrete social orders by articulating as many available elements—floating signifiers—as possible.²⁶⁴

In other words, hegemonic practices require a social field that is somewhat fluid *and* characterized by antagonism. In such a field, features of political identities are not fixed once and for all, but only provisionally; the Latino vote may go to the Democrats or the Republicans, and the evangelical Christians may become environmentalists.

Modern democracies in particular provide a social field amenable to a hegemonic form of politics. Its practice is therefore both local and recent. It can be found predominantly after the “democratic revolution”—the popularization of democratic ideals that began around the time of the French Revolution—and is facilitated by those defining features of modernity, such as industrialization, urbanization, and civil society, *inter alia*:

The hegemonic form of politics only becomes dominant at the beginning of modern times, when the reproduction of the different social areas takes place in permanently changing conditions which constantly require the construction of new systems of differences...Thus the conditions and the possibility of a pure fixing of differences recede; every social identity becomes the meeting point for a multiplicity of articulatory practices, many of them antagonistic.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ David Howarth, Aletta J. Norval, & Yanni Stavrakakis, *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 15.

²⁶⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, 138.

The emergence of democracy, of the myth of “the people” as the ultimate source of political legitimacy, “made it possible to propose the different forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression.”²⁶⁶

Democracy enables the proliferation of antagonisms, and thus (potentially), of hegemonic articulations. Political projects that articulate themselves as democratic struggles are able to challenge their inferior social status on the basis of the democratic myth—what Laclau and Mouffe call a “nodal point”—of equality for and among all. In the case of feminism, for example, what had been an acceptable subordination to men is transformed into an unacceptable oppression, where the oppressive element—patriarchy—is now perceived as an obstacle to identity as a woman.²⁶⁷

Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony pushes Marxism beyond its former constraints: determinism, economic foundationalism, and an inadequately theorized political subject. I have identified and given a brief explanation of the philosophical tools that facilitate this advance. I have described the analytical categories of hegemony, which are carefully elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe, and ultimately derive from a complex model of signification, what they call “discourse”. In Chapters Four and Five, I will explore their theory in greater depth through its application. In Chapter Four, I will consider Stuart Hall’s application of a version of hegemonic theory to British conservatism. In my concluding chapter, I will apply Laclau and Mouffe’s theory to the perplexing behavior of *Kansas*’ American conservatives.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 154.

²⁶⁷ Where, as some feminisms contend, “woman” entails equality with men.

Chapter Four

Thatcherism

In this chapter I look at Stuart Hall's examination of the phenomenon of "Thatcherism" in the United Kingdom, an examination of interest for two reasons: first, Hall relies on a Gramscian-inspired Marxism very similar to Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony; second, Hall's object of analysis bears a striking similarity to American conservatism.²⁶⁸ My purpose is to indicate the some of the ways in which discursive Marxism can advance our understanding of social and political phenomena beyond the type of analysis Frank offers in *Kansas*.

Hall and Hegemony

We should understand Hall's translation of Gramscian insights into recommendations for political strategy much as we should understand Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical contribution: as a self-conscious dissociation from certain elements of Marxism that, the authors argue, have led to dead ends. But while Laclau and Mouffe are occupied with a more comprehensive task—incorporating Gramscian Marxist concepts into a general political theory—Hall applies a selection of these concepts that are particularly relevant to understanding of a new era of Leftist failure. His historically

²⁶⁸Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988).

rich analysis makes use of the postmarxist rejection of economism as key to the reinterpretation of class identity, class conflict, and ideology.

Hall begins by echoing the claim Laclau and Mouffe make in *Hegemony*, namely, that the Marxist view according to which the political arena is dominated by two warring factions is considerably outdated. Laclau and Mouffe have made this point in both historical and theoretical terms. In the first place, they contend that Marx wrote at a unique moment in history: feudalism had produced a deep division between the people and the nobility, between the many and the few. This division deeply imprinted itself upon European consciousness, even as it lingered on in the Industrial Revolution. There was at this time more or less of a correspondence between, on the one hand, the empirical interests and identities of the masses and, on the other hand, Marx's theoretical description of them. Subsequently, the expansion and increasing strength of civil society, *inter alia*, yielded an increase in diversity of interests and identifications.

In the second place, Laclau and Mouffe offer a discursive interpretation of the claim that industrial societies are more complex: while there continues to be an increasing number of ways of understanding society—by attaching fundamental significance to, say, one's gender, or race, or profession, or sexual orientation—there is at the same time a declining ability to regiment these significances in a stable manner, to establish once and for all that one of these factors is *most* significant. Likewise, for Hall, complexity, not duality, is the hallmark of the political in a post-capitalist world; moreover, the Left's commitment to a classist conception of social dynamics has yielded

only parochialism, paralysis and loss of political power.²⁶⁹ Hall rejects, then, the traditional Leftist view that

there is a simple, irreversible correspondence between the economic and the political, or that classes, constituted as homogeneous entities at the economic or ‘mode of production’ level, are ever transposed in their already unified form onto the ‘theatre’ of political and ideological struggle.²⁷⁰

This view is, as we have seen, economism. According to Hall, a person’s position vis-à-vis the economy—that is, her class membership—cannot on its own provide us with insight into her values and voting habits.

Yet, echoing Laclau and Mouffe again, Hall does not reject Marxism *tout court*. Marx’s continuing contribution, he claims, lies “not in the religious expectation that every one of his specific prophecies of the nineteenth century could be true for the end of the twentieth,” but in his attention to the peculiar and particular social conditions of a given age.²⁷¹ Discourse analysis is compatible with this Marxism, then, in its attention to political trends that defy conventional taxonomies. As I explained in the previous chapter, the logic of “discourse” provides the parameters within which a hegemonic form of politics may be identified and comprehended. Hegemony is defined in part by antagonism, where this means the contestation of political identities; it is defined in part, that is, by conflict. This conflict is not restricted to class conflict, as orthodox Marxism dictates. It can and does occur “across a multiplicity of sites in social life, on many

²⁶⁹ Like Frank, Hall faults the Left for complicity—via negligence—in the rise of the right. Interestingly, his reasoning here is in direct opposition to Frank’s. I will return to this below.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

different fronts.”²⁷² A successful hegemonization has fixed the meanings of contested terms in a way that conforms to the agenda of a particular political project; as Laclau and Mouffe put it, the part comes to represent the whole. Along these lines, Hall describes the on-the-ground workings of “hegemony” as

the struggle to contest and dis-organize an existing political formation; the taking of the ‘leading position’ (on however minority a basis) over a number of different spheres of society at once—economy, civil society, intellectual and moral life, culture; the conduct of a wide and differentiated type of struggle; the winning of a strategic measure of popular consent; and, thus, the securing of a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historic project.²⁷³

A hegemonic project is always in process. It is secured through struggle and is ever vulnerable to contestation. This view of the political can, unlike orthodox Marxism, describe a process that is constitutive of identities and alliances, and need not assume that these are formed outside of and prior to political maneuvering.

As should be clear, one of the striking differences between a traditional materialist and a discursive understanding of social phenomena is that the latter regards the stuff of superstructure—ideas, values, and institutions—as real, every bit as real as economic relations.²⁷⁴ There is a corresponding reconceptualization of ideology; ideology is no longer the exclusive property of the bourgeoisie, reflecting economic inequalities, casting its spell over society and luring the working classes into

²⁷² Ibid., 231.

²⁷³ Ibid., 7.

²⁷⁴ This is one consequence of relying on a Foucaultian notion of “discourse”, which rejects an ontological distinction between “words and things”—or perhaps more accurately, regards this distinction as relatively insignificant in light of the roles that each plays in discursive formations.

misunderstanding themselves and their enemy. Ideology, like social and political identities, is unmoored from economic class, and is understood more generally as the symbolic means by which we comprehend ourselves and our world. It “provides the frameworks within which people define and interpret social existence.”²⁷⁵ Discourse theorists typically speak of ideology, rather metaphorically, as a construction; it is grounded in and built from the stable structures that characterize a way of life. “Construction” talk can lead us to believe that ideological statements are conspicuous, strategically produced, and under the control of their architects. Yet it would be misleading to conceive of the production of ideology in terms of a simplistic causal paradigm along the lines of Hume’s billiards. Rather, it is in reflexive and dynamic relationship to already existing constellations of meaning. This relationship is what has led some to describe ideology as an “effect”, rather than a “cause” in the purest sense of the word. It is not typically “constructed in a very learned or systematic way, but in terms of everyday, practical social reasoning, practical consciousness.”²⁷⁶ It is our very grip on the world that gives rise to ideological competence, and that grip on the world is, by and large, something inherited. This inheritance helps explain the power of ideology: the disambiguation of a plenitude of potential meanings is appealing, but ever more so when that disambiguation draws on familiar and deep-seated traditions, myths, metaphors, and icons, so that we are able to recognize ourselves in these articulations.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 188.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

We “make identifications symbolically: through social imagery, in [our] political imaginations.”²⁷⁷

Armed with this new understanding of ideology, discourse theory may give weight to the ideological in political struggles. “This is a struggle over a particular kind of power—cultural power: the power to define, to ‘make things mean’. The politics of signification.”²⁷⁸ Hall’s own analyses bear this emphasis:

The decision to focus on politics and ideology was the result of a deliberate strategy; if necessary, to ‘bend the stick’ in this direction, in order to make a more general point about the need to develop a theoretical and political language on the Left which rigorously avoids the temptations to economism, reductionism or teleological forms of argument.²⁷⁹

Thus, if Hall’s or Laclau’s and Mouffe’s attention to the rhetorical seems excessive, it is important to remember, first, that it is against the backdrop of an excessively materialist approach that has prevailed in political practice since the formulation of orthodox Marxism. Second, given the metaphysical groundings I described in Chapter 3, “ideology” should not be mistaken for a reduction of everything to the linguistic.²⁸⁰ As

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 261.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 188.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 3.

²⁸⁰ It would be odd indeed for Laclau and Mouffe to fall into this variety of reductionism, given their rejection of economic reductionism and their grasp of the theoretical inconsistencies that accompany it. Nevertheless, while Hall aligns himself with Laclau and Mouffe, he issues the caveat that their approach “[dissolves] everything into discourse”. (157) Hall’s comment might be interpreted as the claim that Laclau and Mouffe are too enamored of the discursive apparatus, too absorbed in a certain picture of the social, and that, however illuminating, the vocabulary of that picture can conceal important features of the social. I will return briefly to the theoretical differences between Hall and Laclau and Mouffe below.

Hall writes, “material interests matter profoundly. But they are always ideologically defined.”²⁸¹

The political shifts in Great Britain that Hall’s essays track bear a remarkable similarity to those Frank observes in Kansas. After Margaret Thatcher had been voted party leader for a third time, Hall recorded the following observation:

In the aftermath of the election, many people on the Left are arguing that Labour’s only hope lies in the working class. However, Thatcherism’s electoral hegemony continues to rest precisely on certain parts of the working-class vote.²⁸²

Although this puzzling behavior on the part of the working class is the very matter that preoccupies Frank, Hall’s subsequent assertion gives us a sense of the distance between their respective views: “Indeed, there is no such thing as ‘the’ working class vote any more. Divisions, not solidarities, of class identification are the rule.”²⁸³ The weight of Frank’s explanations rests on the presumption that the working class does indeed exist, and that it has be lured into bizarre and pathological behaviors. I have tried to show that this way of looking at things arises from (roughly) economistic sensibilities. Because Hall rejects economism and embraces discourse analysis, he is able to say quite a bit more than Frank can about the specific nature of “working class” support for the conservative cause, as well as how conservatism won that support. Hall indicates three factors in particular that have enabled the right to take—and keep hold of—sizeable political territory: (i) certain historical events and socioeconomic trends, both immediate

²⁸¹ Ibid., 261.

²⁸² Ibid., 266.

²⁸³ Ibid.

and long-term; these lent plausibility to (ii) a number of new articulations and ideological constructions on the part of the right; and none of this could have rooted so deeply in the public imagination without (iii) the unintended complicity of the Left. I will summarize each of these in turn below, noting the postmarxist elements of Hall's observations, and indicating where he diverges from orthodox Marxism.

Historical Currents

One of the most significant factors in setting the stage for Thatcher's election was the subtle and long-term transformation of British society from a liberal to an interventionist state between (roughly) 1880-1930.²⁸⁴ As Hall writes (with Bill Schwarz), by the middle of the 19th century, the liberal point of view occupied the privileged place of 'common sense'. As such, liberalism defined a whole constellation of socioeconomic relationships and identities. The ideal citizen, according to liberalism, was "the sovereign individual in civil society, with his right to property and to his liberties of action and movement."²⁸⁵ The freedom of this citizen was delimited by his possibilities for action in the marketplace, and these possibilities in turn were "sanctioned and protected by the rule of law."²⁸⁶ The role of the state was limited to the establishment of just these sorts of

²⁸⁴ "State and Society, 1880-1930", in *Road*, 95 ff.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

legal rights; other interventions were performed on a very small scale, and only in order to—somewhat paradoxically—ensure the “free play of the market”.²⁸⁷

According to Hall and Schwarz, the factors that began to undermine the hegemony of liberalism included the disintegration of the Liberal Party itself, economic decline, and the enfranchisement of a larger segment of the populace. By the late 19th century, the extent of capital accumulation had facilitated the growth of a new capitalist type: those who specialized in managing capital. This “new plutocracy—bankers, stockbrokers, investors and so on—who through their spectacular wealth commanded immense prestige in Edwardian society...gravitated to the Conservative Party, especially from the 1890s.”²⁸⁸ This fragmentation was aggravated by the Party’s internal division over the question of whether Ireland should be permitted “Home Rule”; the split turned out to be fatal.

There were larger forces that compromised Britain’s strength, however: British manufacturing faced increasing competition from Germany, Russia, Japan, and the USA, all of whom were industrializing rapidly. The consequence was a “sustained period of stagnation and paralysis in capital accumulation...which later came to be known as the Great Depression.”²⁸⁹ In tandem with economic decline arose “the pressure for mass democracy.”²⁹⁰ Numerous reforms in the mid-nineteenth century aimed to recognize and

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 101.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 102.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 109.

accommodate the newly emergent demands of the middle and working classes. However, even reformist liberals were very much concerned to protect the rights only of a certain sort of individual, to ensure, that is, “the continuance of government by men of property”.²⁹¹ The Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867—both landmark pieces of legislation in their extension of the franchise—made voting rights contingent on property ownership. Despite protracted struggle and much resistance on the part of an aristocratic parliament, in particular to women’s suffrage, the era of reform effectively “undermined the traditions of patronage and thereby broadened...the power centres of the state.”²⁹² Significant among these was the Representation of the People Act of 1918, which “enfranchised all male adults of twenty-one and over and all women aged thirty and over.”²⁹³ The extension of voting rights to so many had the predictable effect of unseating the narrowly-defined liberal citizen from his privileged place. More broadly, it introduced a new concept of citizenship, in which “the individual voting subject became the lynchpin within all official state discourses.”²⁹⁴ In a related move, the claims of labor were institutionalized as a constitutionally legitimate political party. The effect of this new political landscape was a “universalist” sensibility vis-à-vis “legal and social rights”.²⁹⁵

²⁹¹ Eric J. Evans, *The Great Reform Act of 1832* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 37.

²⁹² *Road*, 117.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

All of this tumult that marked the demise of liberalism also generated a new way of thinking about citizenship, the state, and the economy: collectivism.²⁹⁶ The unfettered market had proven to be an ineffective means of distributing resources, as manifest in declining profit margins. The expansion of the citizenry only intensified the perceived shortcomings of the market, insofar as the many who had not benefited from its *laissez-faire* management now had political voice and a vote; these were mobilized to place increasing demands on the state. Collectivism competed with and was combined with other ideologies that promised a way forward; its viability and staying power lay in the fact that the state, above all, seemed the only “force capable of intervening against the logic of the market and of individual interest in the cause of social reform, redistributive justice and the guarantee of social rights.”²⁹⁷ Despite general disagreement about the ways in which collectivism should be implemented, something resembling a consensus emerged regarding the belief in the benefits of an increase in state powers and responsibilities. Where liberalism had once represented (political) common sense, now collectivism had come to do so.

As collectivist sentiment has evolved into advanced capitalism, Hall and Schwarz explain, the state has taken on increasing roles. Perhaps the most significant among these, at least insofar as it provides a stark contrast with classical liberalism, is the management of the economy. Hall claims that the goal of “secur[ing] the conditions of

²⁹⁶ Hall and Schwarz characterize this era as an “organic crisis” in the sense that Gramsci uses the term. Very briefly, the liberal state could no longer sustain itself by means of those policies that liberalism prescribed.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

capitalist production and reproduction” dominates Britain’s domestic policies, which are accordingly focused around “crisis management and containment strategies.”²⁹⁸ But collectivism has manifested itself in another important and controversial form: as the “welfare state”. This aspect of the contemporary British state has developed in part from the universalist sentiment discussed above. It also derived from a particular branch of collectivism that emerged during crisis-era Britain, known as Fabianism.

Fabian socialism was the reformist, bureaucratic, anti-democratic and illiberal variety. Their dream was of a fully regulated, fully administered collectivist society...It was Fabianism which fashioned the ideology of rational efficiency and administrative neutrality which characterized welfarism in practice.²⁹⁹

From a contemporary perspective, the troubles that accompany bureaucratic excess—inefficiency, impersonality, and unreflective adherence to rules—have their source in the Fabian state. The experience of ill-treatment at the hands of the welfare state is, however unintentional, a common one. When bureaucratic virtues are ascendant, Hall claims, people are regarded as “the objects, not the subjects, of political practice”.³⁰⁰ One unfortunate consequence is increasing passivity on the part of the bureaucratic client. What “ill-treatment” amounts to, then, is a kind of dehumanization and a loss of individual and collective control.

A further problem that threatens the British government, Hall contends, is the sheer cost of the welfare state—or perhaps more precisely, the rising cost of the expanding welfare state:

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 43.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 112.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 248.

The more complex are the forms of social and industrial organization, the older the average age of the population, the greater the range of social needs we ought to care for and support, the greater is the scale of expansion envisaged.³⁰¹

Hall calls for acknowledging that capitalism has radically mutated, and, correspondingly, that the needs of citizens in an advanced capitalist society have changed. In addition, the public ethos has turned away from expansionism and toward sustainability, exhibiting a new consciousness of “the finite character of global resources”.³⁰² Thus, there is no longer an easy acceptance of economic policies that benefit Britons at the expense of the environment or of other peoples.

These are the very problems that have set the stage for the anti-statist strain in Thatcherist ideology. As Hall and Schwarz show, though, anti-statism is nothing new. It has been a persistent presence in the political arena since the inception of collectivism; at the start, it took the form of “neo-liberalism”. Neo-liberalism is not a return to classical liberalism, Hall claims. Where collectivism defines the status quo, as in Great Britain, there is already too significant a departure from liberalism to make such a return feasible.

On the contrary the project of neo-liberalism was systematically to contest and where possible to uproot the political conditions in which collectivism flourished. This called for a strong state...and a particular kind of interventionism which could enforce free-market relations.³⁰³

Like collectivism, classical liberalism *required* a robust state, one that was capable of managing the crises that inevitably arise in capitalist economies, and of instituting

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid., 249.

³⁰³ Ibid., 120.

measures that aim to prevent such crises. Liberalism, of course, put the state to very different work than collectivism. Hall argues that the persistence of liberal ideas and policies in the form of neo-liberalism indicates that the collectivist solution was only a partial one, its hegemonic project incomplete. This makes sense of the deep divide that marks British political culture: “social democracy was formed out of the crisis of liberalism between the 1880s and the 1920s. We are now living through its successor—the crisis of social democracy.”³⁰⁴

A second long-term transformation, this time of the British economy, has generated market relations that are radically different from those that Marx analyzed in *Capital*. Hall does not go into the emergence of these new market forms in detail, but only briefly discusses two developments: the decline of British manufacturing and the spread of global capitalism. The division of labor has been internationalized, with components produced here and assembled there. This global expansion of capital has been facilitated, in part, by the development of information technologies. Domestically, Hall observes, “the ‘globalization’ of capitalist production has produced mainly recession, deindustrialization and unemployment.”³⁰⁵ It has also undermined the autonomy of the British state. It is increasingly difficult for Britain to institute socialist values as its economic borders expand: “What hope is there for a ‘socialist Britain’ escaping the consequences of this global revolution of production, perched as it is on the

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 121.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 246.

outer edge of Western Europe and held at the centre of a worldwide financial network...?”³⁰⁶

All of these changes in state and economy have had an impact on the composition of Britain’s working class. The expansion of the welfare state means that increasing numbers of Britons are state employees, creating a unique set of labor conflicts, not least of which is a deep ambivalence about “sleeping with the enemy”; this ambivalence only reflects the general ambivalence that many—even those on the Left—already feel toward the welfare state. “The slogan which most accurately expresses our dilemma and captures this contradictory reality is ‘In And Against The State’. Increasing numbers of us are, regularly, both.”³⁰⁷ The internationalization of the labor force in its turn has resulted in an ever-greater fragmentation of labor. It has meant a ‘turnover’ in the nature of work, from manufacturing to service jobs, from full-time to part-time employment, from requiring a particular skills set to requiring multiple or flexible skills sets.

No one seriously concerned to analyse the nature of present class formations could fail to recognize the changing class composition of our society: the decline of certain traditional sectors and the growth of new sectors; the shift in patterns of skill; radical recomposition as a result of the new gender and ethnic character of labour; the new divisions of labour resulting from changing technologies, and so on³⁰⁸

It is consequently ever more difficult to identify *the* working class, as Hall’s rather hyperbolic proclamation that “there is no working class” attests. There is nothing fixing the meaning of the working class to a particular sector, to a particular conflict, to a

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 227.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 200.

particular politics. “The whole masculine imagery of the proletariat—the ‘vanguard class of production’—simply doesn’t make any sense, except as a historical recall.”³⁰⁹

I want to indicate some of the ways in which Hall’s contextualization of Thatcherism is both distinctive of discourse analysis and divergent from an orthodox Marxist analysis, first in a general way, and then more specifically related to the historical phenomena I’ve discussed above. Hall’s attention to historical detail already indicates a theoretical choice that may be summarized as “specificities matter”. They matter for discourse analysis, in the first place, because there is no singular element of a discursive formation that is presumed to be foundational, or more ‘real’, than any other. Put differently, discourse analysis does not conceive of its object in terms of one element: rationality, the working class, modes of production, institutions, or rituals. Consequently, we cannot understand Great Britain’s collectivist movement, for example, simply as a reflection of the logic of capital. Discourse analysis is resistant to the reduction of many specifics to one. Specificities matter, in the second place, because their patterned positioning is constitutive of what Hall has identified as “liberalism” or “collectivism”. We therefore should not allow the convenience of a label to mislead us into thinking that there is a “thing” called “liberalism” that exists independently of its constituents. “Liberalism” and “collectivism” are useful ways to describe a configuration of events, institutions, and practices, as Hall demonstrates. On a discursive understanding however, neither exists independently of their unique conditions of emergence, some of which are elided in their identification. Discourse analyses are self-conscious about this elision,

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 247.

which permits attention to phenomena that might otherwise go unnoticed. Specificities matter in a third sense because “times change” and language does not always track change well. The contexts that motivate theorization will open up certain interpretations, methods, strategies, and vocabulary as plausible for theorization. Interpretations, together with their terminologies, tend to outlast their own usefulness. Attention to the elements that constitute “liberalism”, or “the proletariat”—historical events, among other things—enables us to recognize when these labels are no longer meaningful.

As Hall’s genealogy demonstrates, the expanding state of advanced capitalism emerged from a reformist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The outcome of these varieties of collectivist reform, as we have seen, is a type of welfare state that Marx never envisioned, and the import of which the Left, in its reliance on orthodox script, fails to consider. In the first place, orthodoxy understands the state as an epiphenomenon vis-à-vis the economy—as the economy goes, so goes the state. On this view, “a social formation is a simple structure, in which economic conditions will be immediately, transparently and indifferently translated on to the political and ideological stage.”³¹⁰ The state therefore takes no unique forms, does not operate according to its own logic, does not make its own contribution, and need not be studied in itself. In the second place, orthodoxy understands the march of history teleologically; according to this story, the current incarnation of the British state—social democracy—precedes a final and inevitable transition to pure communism. Investigation into what is taken to be a transitory stage can therefore only be wasted effort.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

By contrast, discourse theory enables Hall to say quite a bit about Britain's social democratic state. Hall presumes at the outset that "there is no 'general theory' of the capitalist state, specifiable outside its specific national and historical conditions of existence."³¹¹ It is not possible to begin with economism and deduce the nature, development, and future of the state, as orthodoxy would have it. Hall explores the crisis of the British state because it has prepared the ground for the political successes of Thatcherism. The historical conditions of the existence of the state, then, indicate where sites of struggle will arise, which terms will be contested, which articulations will be available for hegemonic projects. As I have summarized, there is widespread discontent with certain aspects of the welfare state; this discontent is projected onto the Labor Party itself insofar as it is "wedded to a particular conception of socialism through state management."³¹² The recognition of this antagonistic relationship between state and citizenry would not be available from an orthodox perspective, which locates struggle between capitalist and worker. Hall shows, then, that the meaning of the state apparatus is not determined in advance, either by the economy or by a *telos*, but must be forged ideologically, articulated, and expanded.³¹³

Hall's remarks on the singularities of Britain's economy likewise indicate ways in which orthodoxy's theoretical commitments both preclude a nuanced analysis of

³¹¹ Ibid., 129.

³¹² Ibid., 222.

³¹³ Ibid., 96-7, 131. Hall relies here on Gramsci's concepts of an organic crisis that provides the opportunity for new articulations; in an organic crisis, formerly successful hegemonic projects are dissolved. Where this newly available territory is contested, we find sites of political struggle, what Gramsci calls a "war of position".

advanced capitalism and cripple the political viability of the traditional Left. First of all, orthodoxy takes 19th century capitalism, as anatomized by Marx, to be paradigmatic. Thus, the economy of the 1980s is shoehorned into the principles Marx developed in the 1880s. At the very least, this anachronistic schema blinds the Left to unique features of the contemporary economic landscape. The real consequence, however, is that the Left is unable to formulate a platform that addresses the real needs and experiences of the British people—a serious political handicap. It also leaves the Left open to blindsiding by political movements such as Thatcherism, which attend to and successfully exploit the distinctive morphology of advanced capitalism. Second, orthodoxy espouses a philosophy of history according to which those (19th century) contradictions of capitalism will set in motion a crisis resulting in its eventual collapse. Hall argues that this leads the Left to tacitly approve of worsening economic conditions in the belief that this prepares the grounds for socialist victory, all evidence to the contrary. “They forget how frequently in recent history the ‘sharpening of contradictions’ has led to settlements and solutions which favoured capital and the extreme right rather than the reverse.”³¹⁴

Discourse theory, of course, rejects orthodox claims to an unproblematic understanding of the present and future economy. Freed from this economistic vision of the necessary path of history, discourse theory may attend to the present movements of capital. Hall is therefore able to recognize that the “new industrial revolution” is, “in the usual uneven and contradictory way, in process and transforming everything in its

³¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

wake.”³¹⁵ This understanding has the potential to open up an entirely novel—and, Hall argues, effective—set of strategies in response to globalization, consumerism, and other aspects of the ‘new economy’ virtually ignored by the Left. This understanding is even more potent when given ideological expression, where ideology transcends a merely classist significance. Moreover, discourse theory’s conception of the contingency of historical developments lends urgency to the struggle for political territory, as opposed to the passivity engendered by orthodox Marxism.

On a strictly economic picture, the nature of the working class reflects the nature of material reproduction; transformations in the latter spell transformations in the former. Thus, orthodoxy’s inability to theorize new economic developments means that it also cannot theorize new relations of production. This is an especially serious deficiency, given the emancipatory aspirations of socialism. The Left, having lost its traditional base, can only wait for the tide to turn—that is, for economic conditions to polarize the classes such that the working class is again identifiable and ascendant. In the meantime, the impact of the “new industrial revolution” on workers goes largely unexamined.

The hegemonic model of politics, on the other hand, is able to capture contemporary shifts in identity and alliances. It can do so primarily because it does not presume that either political conflicts or movements align solely with to the economic stations of participants—especially not with economic stations conceived in 19th century terms. Hall insists that

³¹⁵ Ibid., 245.

there is not—and never has been—the given unity of *the* working class in Britain, which Labour could simply ‘reflect’ in its programmes. There have always been the divisions and fracturings we would expect under an advanced capitalist division of labour. Underlying these are certain shared conditions of exploitation and of social and community life which provide the contradictory raw materials from which the complex unity of a class could possibly be constructed; and out of which a socialist politics *could* be forged but of which there was never any guarantee.³¹⁶

The formation of political identity is passive only in the sense that the ‘march of history’ opens up different possibilities for what is ultimately an effortful task: framing an ideology under which disparate needs, interests, and views can be united. This articulation of socioeconomic realities to political aspirations to ethical sensibilities, *inter alia* is constitutive of “class identity”. Hegemonic politics, unlike orthodoxy, emphasizes class identity as a *product* that is forged through struggle—specifically, through a struggle that assumes symbolic form and operates according to certain rhetorical logics. To this aim, ideology “articulates into a configuration different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations. It does not reflect, it constructs a ‘unity’ out of difference.”³¹⁷

Ideology

This leads us to what Hall takes to be the most significant factor contributing to Thatcherism’s success: its ideological strategies. On a discourse-theoretical view, ideology’s power lay in its capacity to craft what comes to be known as “common sense”.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 201.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 166.

Successful ideologies make complex rhetorical productions appear natural and strategic interpretations organic. They do so, in large part, by drawing on already-existing patterns of meaning. Above, I discussed the way in which the history of a people, an institution, or a conflict can prepare the ground, so to speak, for present political conflicts: these provide the materials that, over time, are integrated into discursive formations.

Discursive formations then provide the ‘frame’ that imbues political claims, struggles, and strategies with significance. This frame is not neutral, however; given the patterns of the formation, certain claims will have more purchase than others, and certain productions will be more likely than others. Even ‘novel’ articulations are fresh cultivations of “already constituted social practices and lived ideologies.”³¹⁸ The most compelling ideological creations, then, are those that draw on the familiar, on “elements which have secured over time a traditional resonance and left their traces in popular inventories.”³¹⁹ Thatcherism, as I will show, exploits the logic of ideology in a way that appeals to the British ethos. “What Thatcherism as an ideology does, is to address the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people...It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the social imaginary.”³²⁰

Thatcherism’s re-imagining of the British identity performs the important function of sublating the fragmentary elements of that identity to an idealized national self-concept, a self-concept that looks back as much as it looks forward.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 56.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid., 167.

The point where the discourse-theoretical notion of ideology most radically departs from orthodoxy, though, is in its understanding of the ontology of ideological productions, and, consequently, their potential impact on the political field. Ideology cannot be reduced to its symbolic aspect, nor to its propositional content. Its effects are not restricted to the beliefs of its hearers—not, that is, restricted to deceiving agents whose essential being and interests remain unchanged. Central to the theory of hegemony is the insight that ideology is *constitutive* of its object; it has what might be called emergent material consequences. Orthodox Marxism cannot accommodate this view, since it conflicts with the doctrine that political interests and identities are determined solely by the economy, which alone can truly be called “real”. And for as long as the policies of the Left have prevailed in Britain—since the early 20th century—this way of thinking has defined the conventional political wisdom for Left and Right, Labor and Tory. It has been presumed that it is most effective to speak to *true* class interests. But given a discourse-theoretical concept of ideology, political strategy that is primarily focused on economic interests, or even primarily focused on diverting attention away from economic interests, is one-dimensional, incomplete. Thatcherism understood this, at least implicitly, and developed an innovative politics that organized “on a variety of social and cultural sites at once, both in society and in the state, on moral and cultural, as well as economic and political terrain.”³²¹ The Left continued to address the presumed *real* concerns of the working class, and on that basis, to expect working-class support.

³²¹ Ibid., 91.

The Right, however, recognized that it could win the working-class vote by appealing to its interests differently, in a way that could also transform those interests:

Since, in fact, the political character of our ideas cannot be guaranteed by our class position or by the ‘mode of production’, it is possible for the right to construct a politics which does speak to people’s experience, which does insert itself into what Gramsci called the necessarily fragmentary, contradictory nature of common sense, which does resonate with some of their ordinary aspirations, and which, in certain circumstances, can recoup them as subordinate subjects into a historical project which ‘hegemonises’ what we used—erroneously—to think of as their ‘necessary class interests’.³²²

Thatcherism, Hall observes, presumes that the interests of the working class do not organically align with Leftist policies, and (therefore) that it is in competition with the Left for the support of the working class. Moreover, this is a competition whose outcome is uncertain. If it was to win over a traditionally Leftist constituency, Thatcherism had to fight on all fronts. As I will discuss in more detail below, this entailed assigning new-yet-familiar significance to economic, social, and moral issues. The Thatcherist platform was calculated to appeal to already existing concerns, but also to define the terms of the debate, and so, in a sense, to constitute those concerns. This process of re-definition through a complex struggle, the outcome of which is an increase in political cache, just is hegemonization.

The reconstitution of political interests and identities is precisely what orthodoxy cannot explain by means of a realist, foundationalist notion of the economy; it is what discourse theory explains with recourse to a linguistic model of sociopolitical phenomena. According to this model, the logic of the symbol is key to understanding

³²² Ibid., 167.

ideology's capacity to unite seemingly contradictory interests. Symbols—words, slogans, identities—are characterized by a surplus of meaning. Likewise, "...the ideological sign is always multi-accentual, and Janus-faced—that is, it can be discursively rearticulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently."³²³ Thatcherist ideology availed itself of this overdetermination in order to accomplish what seems, *prima facie*, an impossible task: it formed a coalition that included both the working class and the very wealthy. In a word, it hegemonized these groups, at least to an extent sufficient to secure three terms for Margaret Thatcher. Instead of presuming that the working class identity has a "true" (economy-based) meaning, Thatcherism drew on other elements of the working class identity—its social conservatism, patriarchalism, racist tendencies, and educational ambitions. The significance of its economic position was 'collapsed' along with other aspects of its identity that might pose a threat to the administration's agenda. At the same time, the latent elements of its identity were brought to the fore, positioned in relationship to other interests and allies in a way supportive to the administration.

Ideology always consists, internally, of the articulation of different discursive elements; and externally that discursive articulations can position the same individuals or groups differently...This is why [Thatcherism] believes that the conceptions which organize the mass of the people are worth struggling over, and that social subjects *can* be 'won' to a new conception of themselves and society.³²⁴

Thatcherism, Hall contends, has been able to build a genuine populist support base, though it seems the unlikeliest party to be thus supported. It has hegemonized large areas

³²³ Ibid., 9.

³²⁴ Ibid., 10.

of political territory by addressing “real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions”, while representing them “within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the right.”³²⁵

Ideology avails itself of the logic of the symbol in two ways. The examples I have so far given illustrate what might be called “positive” articulations, which follow the logic of difference. These establish that “we stand for such-and-such”, and tend to provide the substance for a party platform or a political identity. On a discourse theoretical view these positive identifications are necessary, but not sufficient, for a group identity. Ideology makes its mark also by constructing a contrast, an “enemy” whose identity consists solely in its equivalence to “us”.³²⁶ Both “who we are” and “who we are not” articulations work in tandem to shape the political according to an agenda. The positive aspect of Thatcherist ideology, as we shall see, marries the neoliberal love of the free market to a conservative, even retrograde, social vision. The concepts of “freedom” and “choice” are conceived of as *economic* freedom of a certain variety. These concepts are an appealing centerpiece, particularly when coupled with a paternalistic call for a return to social stability. In this way, Thatcherism seems to offer both autonomy and benign rule; in Hall’s words, it “speaks in our ear with the voice of freewheeling, utilitarian, market-man, and in the other ear with the voice of respectable, bourgeois,

³²⁵ Ibid., 56.

³²⁶ Another way of putting this would be that in this mode, ideology offers an unfair caricature of its enemy, one that does not do it justice.

patriarchal man.”³²⁷ In addition to this message, Thatcherism secures its borders by opposing itself to other interests, movements, and institutions in the social field.

[Mrs. Thatcher] engineered the fatal coupling of the anti-Labourist, anti-statist, anti-equality, anti-welfare spirit with the revitalized gospel of the free market. Thus the relatively new and unstable combination of ‘Thatcherism’—organic national patriotism, religion of the free market, competitive individualism in economic matters, authoritarian state in social and political affairs—began to cohere as an alternative social philosophy.³²⁸

Thatcherism’s grab at hegemony has articulated certain features of its economic and social policies together with a rejection of Leftist policies, where these are understood in the condensed form of a chain of equivalences.³²⁹ I turn now to a closer examination of these operations of connection and contrast as they have figured in three key moments of Thatcherist ideology: (patriarchal) family values, economic liberalism, and anti-statism.

Social conservatism was perhaps the most potent message Thatcherism preached. The sense of “family values” ideology follows, again, the general logic of discourse: in the first place, it is articulated to already-existing structures of meaning, transforming them in the practice of articulation; in the second place, it opposes itself to its enemies—in this case, the morally permissive society, and the state. In defining itself as the champion of the patriarchal family, Thatcherism “has put down deep roots in the

³²⁷ Ibid., 165.

³²⁸ Ibid., 199.

³²⁹ One example of this is Thatcherism’s use of the epithet “the Loony Left”, which collapses a series of unflattering interpretations of the policies of the Left (“high rates and political extremism”) into an efficient label. *Road*, 262. This might pass as a simple case of name-calling, except for its effectiveness. This in turn requires quite a bit of ideological groundwork. Compare the devastating effect of labeling John Kerry as a “flip-flopper” in the United States’ 2004 presidential election. This label had punch because of already circulating interpretations of Kerry as a peacenik and a (weak, indecisive) intellectual, as well as well-engineered hysteria over national security issues.

traditional, conventional social culture of English society.”³³⁰ The ideal of the traditional family unit, it could be argued, reached its fullest expression during the Victorian era. The royal family itself promoted this ideal, presenting itself not in the regalia of monarchy, but in bourgeois garb. In fact, much of the impetus behind the social reforms enacted during the latter part of Victoria’s reign had to do with concern that the underclass could not achieve this ideal, as both parents (and children, in many cases) were forced to work.³³¹ One effect of reformism, then, was the extension of the bourgeois family values into working-class territory—or, in discursive terminology, the articulation of the two. This family-type thus has a particular place of importance in British culture, and even more so because of its association with increasing civilization (through peaceful social reform) and prosperity (at the height of imperialism). This is the Great Britain, and indeed, the Victorian era, that Thatcherism channels in its “themes of tradition, family, and nation, respectability, patriarchalism and order.”³³² These are united in a discourse whose appeal lay in its promise of a return to a mythical national greatness. Moreover, for the working class in particular, Hall argues, “family values” rhetoric awakens a latent conservatism grounded in the aspirations and achievements of the Victorian era:

Patriarchalism, the uncritical forms of the modern family, the patterns of sexual dominance, the disciplining of pleasure, the reinforcement of the habits of social conformity are some of the key ways in which the political

³³⁰ Ibid., 90.

³³¹ Thomas Laqueur, “Revolution and Reform, 1815-1851,” recording available at <http://itunes.Berkeley.edu> (lecture, UC Berkeley, History 5: European Civilization from the Renaissance to the Present, Fall 2007).

³³² Ibid., 2.

movements of the Left have remained deeply conservative and traditionalist at their cultural core. The tiny ‘family man’ is still hiding away in the heads of many of our most illustrious ‘street-fighting’ militants.³³³

It is therefore too quick to call working-class conservatism “backlash”, given that these values were formative of the modern British working class identity. In addition, the ‘action-reaction’ dynamic connoted by “backlash” cannot capture the generative process of ideological articulation. There is no discrete referent that is perfectly captured by “Victorianism” or “working class”; there is, rather, an object whose meaning is potentially multiple. Ideology selects one of these interpretations, grafts it into another, and the “working class” has a new significance. And that interpretation itself is internally diverse, combining a number of elements and images that may or may not ‘go together’ according to standards of logical consistency. Within the “moral discourses of Thatcherism...a whole range of other languages have been condensed.”³³⁴

Thatcherism establishes itself as the guardian of the family by aligning with a bright moment in the nation’s history, vowing to “make Britain ‘Great’ once more,”; at the same time, it defines these family values in greater relief by means of a set of oppositions.³³⁵ In opposing itself to certain enemies, Thatcherism focuses the diffused anxieties of the citizenry; it simplifies complex social problems into a slogan, representing a crisis, to which a return to traditional family values serves as the solution. Hall describes the effectiveness of this tactic as owing to its “displacement effect”, by

³³³ Ibid., 250.

³³⁴ Ibid., 91.

³³⁵ Ibid., 49.

which “the connection between the crisis and the way it is appropriated in the social experience of the majority—social anxiety—...finds a temporary respite in the projection of fears on to and into certain compellingly anxiety-laden themes.”³³⁶ These themes function as the defining contrasts for Thatcherist ideology: the ever-expanding welfare state and a host of social ills supposedly engendered by moral permissiveness.

Thatcherism’s anti-statism is multifaceted, worthy of analysis in its own right, but it intersects with the family values platform by establishing a particular boundary between public and private. This boundary would define the private sphere around the individual, as conceived in classical liberalism, and around the patriarchal family. Thatcher would be understood as *defending a natural* boundary from state interference, and the ‘naturalness’ of this boundary provides grounds for its moral and legal reinforcement. This obscures the significance of “Mrs. Thatcher’s assertion that ‘there is no ‘society’, only individuals and their families.’”³³⁷ What appears to be a description is in fact a selective interpretation of the state primarily as intrusive, and its strategic connection with the 19th century upper-class individual and family.

Hall traces in detail the “social history of social reaction” to which the “family values offensive” is the latest in a series of responses.³³⁸ The phenomena for which the offensive promises relief, Hall asserts, are not fabricated: “Society is more polarized...than it was in the 1950s. Conflicts, repressed and displaced at an earlier point

³³⁶ Ibid., 34.

³³⁷ Ibid., 12.

³³⁸ Ibid., 34.

in time, emerge into the open, and divide the nation.”³³⁹ The anxiety corralled by Thatcherist moral discourse is not without its objects. However, these “objects” are in part constituted by their ideological articulations. Discourse theory therefore regards as critical attention to

the distortions and inflections which are endemic to the ways in which the crisis...[is] ideologically perceived and represented by those in power, and how those misrecognitions come to form the basis for misconceptions of the crisis in popular consciousness.³⁴⁰

The targets of the Right are those familiar accompaniments of the “permissive society”: sexual promiscuity, drugs, pornography, homosexuality, the disappearance of the traditional family and coincident emergence of ‘unconventional’ family arrangements, abortion, sex education, feminism, and so on. From a discourse-theoretical perspective, these are evoked as a chain of equivalences. Each link in the chain has the potential to be a meaningful difference in and of itself, but to accord it this status would not serve the purposes of the Right. For example, to take feminism seriously, to truly consider the motivations, achievements, experiences, and challenges of the women’s movement, would be to give it significance according to the logic of difference. But this robust meaning would undercut the weight that Thatcherism wants to assign to the traditional family. This potential meaning of “feminism” must be subsumed under the label “permissive society”, thereby functioning solely to give definition to the ideal family; it is merely a term that “family values” is defined against. Whatever else feminism may be, in Thatcherist discourse, it has a merely negative identity—it is not respectable, not ideal,

³³⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

not womanly. Insofar as feminism takes on this meaning within family values ideology, it is identified as threat to the bourgeois family; in discursive terms, it is antagonistic to this family-type. Against this threat, Thatcherism asserts, “as a continuous subterranean theme, the restoration of the family, the bulwark of respectable society and conventional sexualities with its fulcrum in the traditional roles for women.”³⁴¹

Thatcher’s economic policy attempts a reversal of the Keynesian policies that have been a cornerstone of Britain’s social democratic state; it has done so, by and large, with the support of the working class. This speaks to the success of its economic ideology in hegemonizing working-class concerns. Clearly, the hardships of the 1970s together with an ever-present, if latent, liberal political contingency prepared the ground for alternative theories to be heard. But Thatcherist ideology sold its free market platform primarily by linking it to a certain conception of freedom, shoring up this message by invoking British moralism and national pride, and securing its impact by casting the state as its enemy. I will discuss these ideological productions in turn, but in regard to the last (anti-statism), my analysis will extend beyond its role in promoting neoliberal economic policies.

Perhaps the most potent piece of rhetoric in the Conservatives’ arsenal is their conception of “freedom”. Thatcherites seized on one use of freedom, signifying a lack of constraint, and, as I will discuss in more detail, identified the state as the would-be constraining power. This identification maps nearly precisely onto the classical liberal conception of freedom in the market, according to which the individual is free to buy and

³⁴¹ Ibid., 90.

sell, accumulate and invest as he pleases, without state interference. This use of “freedom” essentially derives from a defunct version of capitalism; moreover, even at the height of liberalism, the exercise of such freedom was only available to the few, the privileged, a point upon which Marx and Engels pointedly insist. The hegemonization of “freedom” in this way, which might seem bizarre *prima facie*, can be explained in part by the availability of the term for hegemonization. Hall observes that “‘freedom’ is one of the most powerful, but slippery ideas in the political vocabulary: it is a term which can be inserted into several different political discourses. The language of freedom is a rivetingly powerful one, but it contains many contradictory ideas.”³⁴² In Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology, “freedom” is an empty signifier that tends to serve as a nodal point in discourses. It is a term whose meaning fluctuates depending on which political project it is incorporated into. This can be seen if we contrast it with a term whose meaning is relatively fixed, such as “table”. As I noted above, however, the association of Thatcherist policies with select aspects of the Victorian way of life, selectively interpreted by the administration, is a powerful one. It is the carefully forged association with a limited narrative of liberalism that is relevant to the promotion of free market policies. That the exercise of that liberalism precipitated the Depression is forgotten in a haze of nostalgia for a golden age when “we” could do as “we” pleased.

Thatcherism’s manifest effort in garnering working-class support for free market policies was to offer a certain diagnosis of the nation’s economic difficulties, and a certain solution to them. Thatcherism’s assessment of Britain’s economic troubles lays

³⁴² Ibid., 190.

the blame on burgeoning state spending, and by extension, on left-voting citizens.

Although finding fault with voters may seem like a dicey strategy, given that they are the very voters Thatcher wanted to win over, it succeeded by its association with a liberal conception of freedom. At a time when many felt like state and economy were spinning out of control, Thatcherist ideology addressed them as responsible for the state of the nation, and as therefore *free* to move matters in a different direction. Thatcherites facilitated the public's choosing of the Right, though, by establishing an implicit connection between their policies and a set of cultural norms, adherence to which is regarded as integral to the British national identity. Second, Thatcher's message was communicated in working-class language; not in academic terms, but in metaphors familiar to the average citizen:

When the economy is not being represented in terms of the household budget ('you can't buy more at the shops this week than you have in the kitty'), then it is likened to the British weather. One good summer has to be paid for, in psychic currency, by at least five winters of discontent.³⁴³

These rhetorical maneuvers, following the logic of difference, established some of the 'positive' moments of Thatcherism—in particular, its nationalism and populism. At the same time, it addressed them as Britons, and, invoking an aspect of the British identity—what might be called self-discipline, or even asceticism—guided them in the direction of the policies of the Right.

The first point in the 'new realism' consists of convincing people that the nation has been living beyond its means, paying itself too much, expecting perks and benefits it can't afford, and indulging in all that consumption,

³⁴³ Ibid.

permissiveness, and pleasure. Very unBritish! Realities must be faced!
Expectations are out of control and must be lowered.³⁴⁴

Thatcher's solution to this supposed profligacy, including "the doctrine of tight money, cuts in public expenditure, and a return to the discipline of the free market", squeezed an already squeezed working class, but this was billed as a necessary measure, along the lines of 'taking one's medicine', or 'no pain, no gain'. Thatcher, in essence, asked voters to tighten their belts, and not in exchange for personal gain; compensation would come in the immediate form of pride accompanying fiscal responsibility, and in the future promise of the (supposedly) collective benefits of that responsibility. "The essence of the British people was once again identified with the restoration of competition and profitability; with tight money and sound finance ('You can't pay yourself more than you earn!!')."³⁴⁵ Here, Thatcherist ideology presumed to speak for all Britons; it has this in common with any effort to hegemonize. However, it is clear that its exhortations emanate from a middle-class experience; managing the household budget requires a steady income, even disposable income. But in generalizing this experience and identifying it with national virtue, Thatcherism expanded its audience. "In that campaign," as Hall colorfully puts it, "British masochism is a powerful ally."³⁴⁶ Thatcher's economic policy, radical as it was, was welcomed in part due to the ideology that tapped into British identity in this way, identifying itself as representative of the British character.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 206.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 46.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 206.

No attempt at hegemony can be complete without the operations of equivalence that sets a differentially defined identity against a faceless enemy—or, rather, an enemy that is defined only as ‘not-us’. For Thatcherism, this enemy was the welfare state. This is not the state that provides a safety net for society’s most vulnerable. It is not the state that provides substantive conditions for equality, seeking to achieve truly democratic conditions. It is not even the bureaucratic state that is badly in need of reform. The operation of equivalence does not offer a nuanced critique of its object, but instead reduces it to an opposition. Thatcherism’s treatment of the state, Hall argues,

was an attempt to penetrate to some of the core and root social ideas in the population. They seized on the notion of freedom. They market it off from equality. They contrasted it to a dim and dingy statism which they chained to the idea of social democracy in power.³⁴⁷

Statism is a threat to all that Thatcherism promises voters: family, responsibility, national pride, and, most significantly, freedom. The state threatens the boundaries of the family as Thatcherism defines it—the self-determining, heterosexual, nuclear family, understood as an extension of the self-determining individual. It does this by providing services such as welfare or childcare, formerly available only from one’s family, thereby undercutting the intradependency of families—in particular, women’s dependence on men or the extended family. It also intrudes in order to sanction neglect and abuse. The state threatens British responsibility and pride in its careless spending habits. Its debts and deficits are an embarrassment to middle-class respectability, which Thatcherism portrayed as *British* respectability, in the hopes of creating more widespread hostility toward the

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 190.

state. Finally, the state poses a threat to “freedom”, where this is defined according to the market values of “self-sufficiency, self-help, and rampant individualism”.³⁴⁸ This is most obviously because the state does indeed constrain the movement of capital with regulation and taxation. Again, Thatcherism generalized this experience of constraint on the part of the state; all citizens are invited to attribute their inability to behave as they please, to have sole control over their private property, to “creeping collectivism”.³⁴⁹

It is ‘the state’ which has overborrowed and overspent; fuelled inflation; fooled the people into thinking that there would always be more where the last handout came from; tried to assume the regulation of things like wages and prices which are best left to the hidden hand of market forces; above all, interfered, meddled, intervened, instructed, directed—against the essence, the Genius, of The British People.³⁵⁰

The state also impinges on freedom in a more personal sense when citizen becomes client, subject to the myriad regulations of the National Health System, or the “dole”. Thatcherism could appeal here to a genuinely broad base of experience to verify its claims. Hall acknowledges, “humane as the impulse behind the welfare state may have been...there is little doubt that the establishment of beneficent welfare bureaucracies has effectively demobilized popular power.”³⁵¹

In short, “the state” functioned in Thatcherist ideology as an empty representative of Thatcherism’s mirror opposite: anti-family, anti-British, anti-freedom. Discourse theory’s unique insight into the logic of signification is able to recognize and describe

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 218.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 142.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 52.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 248.

this phenomenon of “empty representation”, which might sound nonsensical from a realist perspective.

Leftist Missteps

Like Frank, Hall contends that the Right’s electoral and ideological triumph would not have been so complete had it not been for the Left’s unintended complicity, issuing foremost from its commitment to orthodox theory and strategy. This commitment led the Left to speak primarily to the interests of the working class, which it regarded as economic in nature. Yet even this “narrow, corporate and electoralist conception of politics” does not guarantee that Labor receives the working-class vote, as the Thatcher phenomenon evinces.³⁵² Labor’s failure and Thatcher’s success did not, as one might think, motivate the Left to change course, for orthodoxy comes equipped with an interpretation of the proletariat’s tendency to vote against its own interests: first, it is the work of ideology, and a manifestation of false consciousness; second, it lies along the path of the working class’ eventual triumph, and is therefore unworthy of concern. This same assurance engenders complacency in the face of economic downturn, since hard times prepare the grounds for socialist victory. Hall disparages this tacit approval of worsening of economic conditions, together with the belief that generates it: “They forget how frequently in recent history the ‘sharpening of contradictions’ has led to settlements

³⁵² Ibid., 3.

and solutions which favoured capital and the extreme right rather than the reverse.”³⁵³

This attitude on the part of the Left resulted in further erosion of its power; quietism is hardly a solution to working-class hardship.

Still other Labor leaders have responded by moving closer to the center. This process began in response to Britain’s own backlash, a reaction to the 1960s. The administrations of the 1970s were certainly center-left; they distinguished themselves by ceding ground to the Right during the worst of that decade’s recession. Hall recalls a Labor government that was conciliatory to capital in a way that aggravated the impoverishment of workers. This was a party

just centrist enough to persuade the working class to be pushed and bullied by the Labour pragmatists into tolerating a dramatic rise in the rate of unemployment and a dynamic, staged lowering of working-class living standards.³⁵⁴

The Left at this time asked trade unions to freeze pay increases; at the same time, they cut social spending. In effect, both the Right and the Left demanded concessions from the working class, and the Left failed to hold out any hope for improvement.

To be more precise, the Left failed to pursue political territory according to “the expanded, multifaceted and hegemonic conception of politics as a ‘war of position’ with which (however instinctively and intuitively) Thatcherism always works.”³⁵⁵ First, it failed to recognize the working class as a site of contestation—that is, as *in its essence* contestable, subject to transformation. From an orthodox perspective, the working class

³⁵³ Ibid., 40.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 22.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

identity is defined according to its economic function; it is non-negotiable. The Left therefore made no effort to hegemonize the working class, to defend it, re-win and reconstitute its base. Second, the Left failed to recognize that it could and should appeal to so-called “cultural factors”. “It is a struggle,” Hall writes,

to realize the interconnectedness of things which in our prevailing commonsense are kept separate. Hence the view that moral, social, familial, sexual, cultural questions have nothing to do with the ‘struggle for socialism’.³⁵⁶

From an orthodox perspective, so long as economy is politically paramount, moral and cultural facets of identity *are* (indirectly) addressed. After all, these “other” concerns are merely reflections of what is happening at the economic level. To address them directly would be redundant; worse, it would risk perpetuating capitalist ideology. While Labor, then, continued to speak the language of economism to a diminishing audience, Thatcherites discovered and wielded an expanded conception of political subjectivity, one which re-drew the lines between Left and Right. The Left, Hall writes, neglected to conduct such a “‘politics’ of the subjective moment, of identity,” which left it “without a conception of the subjects of its projects, those who it [makes] socialism *for* and *with*.”³⁵⁷

Hall’s discursive analysis of Thatcherism demonstrates the divergences between orthodox Marxism and discursive Marxism. His insight into British politics illustrates the theoretical advantages of the latter. In addition, the distance between the strategies of Labor and those of the Thatcherites, and the respective failure and success of each,

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 249. Hall contends here that the rejection of non-economic factors as relevant to political subjectivity derives also from the implicit patriarchal and masculinist values of the socialist movement.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.

illustrates the practical difference that theory can make. With Hall's example in mind, I would like to return in Chapter 5 to the theory of hegemony, and to *Kansas*.

Chapter Five

Back to Kansas

In this chapter, I bring Laclau and Mouffe's version of discursive Marxism to bear on the puzzle of *Kansas*. I argue that their theory of hegemony provides the understanding of working-class conservatism that eludes Frank, just as Hall's analysis demystifies Britain's turn to the Right. I follow the same path here as I did in examining Hall's examination of Thatcherism: I begin by revisiting the ideological strategies employed by conservatives, as detailed by Frank, this time examining them from a hegemonic perspective; I give a postmarxist reinterpretation of the Democratic political strategies he describes, and then extend my application of the theory to a related, but more contemporary instance of the struggle for hegemony: conservatives' ideologically-fueled attempt to derail healthcare reform. I conclude the chapter by considering an objection to Laclau and Mouffe's postmarxism.

More than Rhetoric

Laclau and Mouffe's relevance to the analysis of this dissertation lies in their reinterpretation of the function of ideology vis-à-vis political identities. Ideology does not, as orthodox Marxism claims, obscure one's true identity, which orthodox Marxism links to one's class. Rather, ideology is in part constitutive of political identities. Ideology is a symbolic component of discourse, and reveals the world and our place in it in a

particular way. The practice of hegemony enlists ideology in the attempt to command more of the political field. Meaningful ideological productions are constructed according to the logics of difference and equivalence. Both operations establish an opposition between terms that serves to distinguish them. The terms established by the logic of difference are associative; that is, they are connected to other signifiers internal to an identity. Discourses in which the logic of difference is largely in operation structure identities “through non-adversarial, ‘positive’ difference’.”³⁵⁸ By contrast, equivalence operations are built around antagonism. Laclau and Mouffe, following Lacan, posit that every subject experiences a fundamental and pervasive lack in her identity, and an accompanying desire to fill that lack. Equivalence relations capitalize on this by offering a kind of fixation of identity, “suturing” the identity closed, as it were. They do so by giving symbolic form to those potential differences that lie beyond a meaning or identity. In this, they reach past the positive differences to include what is lacking as part of the identity, in effect, offering a prosthetic extension of identity. The inclusion of what lies beyond is expressed as “not-*x*”, where “*x*” is a positive aspect of the identity. The same move that brings closure to an identity, though, reveals its fundamental vulnerability, since that which lies beyond the positive aspects of identity is incorporated as an obstacle to the completeness of that identity: that which is “not-*x*” represents a threat to my identity, even as it is constitutive of my identity. Equivalence is the means by which a common enemy can become the basis for an alliance, for solidarity between persons or

³⁵⁸ Townshend, Jules. "Laclau and Mouffe's Hegemonic Project: The Story So Far." *Political Studies* 52, (2004): 271. These discourses do not depend on the establishment of, in hegemonic terms, antagonism.

groups that otherwise share little in common. Discourses in which the logic of equivalence dominates produce increasingly polarized political opponents. Laclau observes that “a populist discourse...which tends to dichotomically divide society into two antagonistic camps will tend to expand the equivalential chains.”³⁵⁹ As I describe below, maneuvers of equivalence, more than difference, produce the political divisions that Frank laments.

Frank spends considerable time on the ways in which issues of social conscience have been exploited to divide the nation, otherwise known as the “culture wars”. One of the ‘fronts’ of the culture wars that Frank focuses on is the abortion controversy, in particular, Operation Rescue’s carefully engineered interruption of Wichita’s “abortion industry” in 1991. Frank’s analysis of the impact of the Summer of Mercy attributes its success to economic factors. Pro-life activism, he claims, is aimed at Kansas’ poor and working-classes. Although the demonstration carried a moral message, it in fact ran a well-worn course along a ‘real’ division between economic classes. This manifested at the political level in increased enmity between working-class Cons and upper-class Mods. The true impact of the Summer of Mercy, Frank argues, was to remind the working class that conservative Republicans, not moderates, had their interests at heart. Frank shares the orthodox perspective, then, that ascribes political conflict, in this case between Con supporters and Mod supporters, as class conflict, in this case between the working and upper classes.

³⁵⁹ Ernesto Laclau, “Roots,” 6.

Yet it is possible to interpret the pro-lifers' display as a paradigm case of hegemonic politics. One of the questions that the theory of hegemony seeks to answer is how a particularistic movement such as the pro-life movement, with which only a segment of the citizenry identifies, can come to occupy a larger portion of the political field, and can do so, moreover, in such a way that alters the identities of the movement, its supporters, and the political field. Wichita's "Summer of Mercy" was calculated to draw attention to the abortion debate, but it also aimed to absorb more moderate voters, and to displace moderate Republicans currently holding office. It did so by demanding that moderate Republicans, "choose up sides and join the fight".³⁶⁰ This ultimatum illustrates the role that equivalence relations serve in a hegemonization. At the political level, the incompleteness of the pro-life identity means that it is able to express the interests of few, not all. However, according to the theory of hegemony, it is possible for a group to enlarge its membership by establishing equivalence relationships, relationships of opposition between itself and an enemy.³⁶¹ In this case, Midwestern pro-lifers targeted the hated "RINOs"—Kansas' "Republicans in name only"—as the enemy they would define themselves against. Moderate Republicans are in this way absorbed into the pro-life identity as an empty signifier; "Moderate Republicanism" becomes virtually meaningless in the pro-life discourse. Or rather, it becomes meaningless in comparison

³⁶⁰ Frank, 92.

³⁶¹ Alternatively, pro-lifers might avail themselves of the logic of difference in order to add to their numbers. The logic of difference undercuts antagonisms by making a positive difference out of a signifier that has been part of a chain of equivalences. For example, if the pro-choice faction identifies pro-lifers as "not feminist", pro-lifers might try to incorporate feminism into the pro-life identity. The desired result would be to bring feminists into the camp. Briefly, the logic of difference hegemonizes by making friends with a former enemy.

to the meaning it has for moderate Republicans. If the equivalence relationship is successful, pro-lifers, and not moderate Republicans, will control the meaning of the moderate Republican identity. The activists' attempt at hegemonization presented themselves as anti-abortion, the only true Republicans, *and* not-RINOs. Although this last label would appear to add nothing, it makes identification with moderate Republicanism very unappealing, as it has nothing to offer to voters. In discursive terms, the pro-lifers have displaced an element in the Republican identity such that it is merely a placeholder, a floating signifier.

As this example demonstrates, hegemony enables social analysis to progress beyond the rather uninformative verdict that the pro-life movement simplifies matters, polarizes voters. Employing the concept of hegemony allows us to describe these operations in more than a cursory manner. Hegemony can describe the means by which simplification is carried out: by the subversion of meaning-constituting differences (the positive elements in a discourse) and their conversion into empty signifiers built around an antagonism—that is, by the establishment of equivalence relations. The theory can also account for the motivation to make an enemy of the Other; this derives from the felt deficiency of an identity or interpretation. Equivalence gives expression to this by naming the Other as an obstacle to the complete actualization of an identity, or to complete control over an interpretation. Orthodoxy would attribute Operation Rescue's success either to the necessary development of the essence of the social, or to an illusory divergence from that path of development; these exhaust its explanatory possibilities. Hegemony abandons economic essentialism as an explanatory principle. Instead, it

draws on discourse theory in articulating a logic of the social that begins with the premise that ultimately it escapes total determination by a single principle. Rather, we can best understand the social as operating as signification does: meanings and identities are determined only provisionally by relationships of difference, the potential for re-positioning of which will always threaten any attempt at unitary determination. This understanding permits, even anticipates, the occurrence of the unexpected—that many among the working class would vote Republican based on the abortion issue alone.

Frank examines another significant battle in Kansas' culture war: the much-publicized debate over the teaching of evolution in the public schools. He emphasizes that here, just as in the abortion debate, conservatives have taken on a battle that they cannot hope to win. Yet Frank's diagnosis for this is unsatisfying: conservative politicians distract their supporters with unwinnable moral battles so that they can push through policies that harm those same supporters. These battles, he claims, are *merely* symbolic; they do not address the "real" problem: those policies that make the rich richer and the poor more impoverished. In contrast, discourse theory rejects the distinction between "symbolic" and "real" as an absolute or substantial one. It recognizes that symbolic productions are inextricable from material contexts and effects, and disregarding this inextricability, or even emphasizing their analytic separability, sacrifices relevant information. Such is the case for Frank's interpretation, which, in dismissing conservatives' anti-abortion strategy as mere rhetoric, misses the transformation it effects on the political field. This transformation cannot be captured adequately as misplaced anger, as Frank has it. The Right's hegemonization of the

working class fundamentally alters the nature of that class, such that its economic interests are re-positioned in relationship to other elements. That is, economic matters come to have a different significance, a lesser importance, and there is no “real” substratum against which this may be checked.³⁶²

Here again, a hegemonic analysis attends to the oppositional relationship between evolutionary science and conservatism, indicative of an equivalence articulation. The significance that evolutionary theory has in scientific discourse is undermined by this operation, and conservative discourse articulates “evolutionism” as the mirror opposite of conservative values; that is, “evolutionism” reflects a negative image of the conservative identity. Conservatives are moral, God-fearing, humble, ordinary folk. Evolutionists are amoral nihilists, atheists, elitists. This description expands the conservative identity in a direction that is likely to significantly broaden its appeal. Even the nominally religious, for example, are suspicious of atheists, and therefore might opt for conservatism over a scientific atheism.³⁶³ Again, the effect of the equivalence maneuver is that the meaningful choices are reduced to two: arrogant atheism or down-home piety.

Frank’s analysis suffers in a similar manner in regard to the ‘mythical’ conservative identity. He argues that those conservatives who stand to lose economically from Republican rule have been taken in by a compelling narrative, one in which they are

³⁶² “Economy”, of course, has the potential to take on more meanings than what it does in orthodox Marxism or in American conservative discourse. We might interpret Frank’s effort as an attempt to ‘take back’—that is, to hegemonize—“economy” for a contemporary progressive agenda.

³⁶³ Of course, Kansas’ School Board battles are but one episode in a series of maneuvers establishing this opposition between conservatism and science. As Mark Noll traces in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, this antagonism dates back to the early days of fundamentalism, the secularization of the Ivy Leagues, and the Scopes Trial. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

featured as heroes. This narrative depicts both the conservative and her opponent in terms of virtues (or vices) and lifestyle choices. Frank laments that the notion of “class” has been entirely divorced from its true, economic sense. Worse, there is an opposition between “class-as-taste” and class defined by one’s place in the economy, and the latter notion is rejected as passé or vulgar.³⁶⁴ Laclau and Mouffe would agree with Frank that “class” no longer signifies economic status in conservative discourse, and that this is in part the product of Republican ideology. But to say that that ideology, that that interpretation of class is therefore *deceptive* is to betray a commitment to a particular notion of truth and falsehood according to which language is able unproblematically to comprehend and express the “fact of the matter”. Discourse theory’s conception of signification as a product of relationships among differentially-positioned terms, relationships that are ever subject to rearrangement, challenges that picture. According to discourse theory, the meaning of “class” vis-à-vis “economy” is not fixed. What Frank dismisses as mere ideology is the means by which “class” has become opposed to “economy”. In hegemonic terms, Republican ideology has articulated “class” to moral and spiritual issues, thereby incorporating them as moments within conservative discourse. At the same time, this ideology has articulated “class” to “economy” by designating the latter as equivalent to all that does not properly belong to the concept of “class”. That is, in this discourse, economic matters are taken to have no bearing on class membership and boundaries. This discourse thus asserts a way of distinguishing between

³⁶⁴ Conservative political discourse opts for moral or spiritual convictions as the ultimate determinants of civic identity. Not coincidentally, this mirrors orthodoxy’s economism. I will discuss this in more detail below, in connection with conservatism’s spiritualization of social problems.

those who continue to frame class in economic terms (many Democrats, unions) and those who identify their class membership in non-economic terms (conservatives, some Democrats).

Frank implies, however, that the economic source of our social conflicts is evident if we take a harder look at the “class-as-taste” narrative. This has Red-staters shopping at Wal-Mart, making their own coffee, and being content with the education they received, while Blue-staters shop at Whole Foods, frequent Starbucks, and wear their professionalism on their sleeves. These are not matters of taste, Frank points out, but matters of money. The corporatization of political identity along income lines is no accident—it indicates that the true divide is between the haves and have-nots, not between those with humble tastes and character and those with elitist tastes and character. Again, Frank’s remarks align with the orthodox story, in which ideology both depends on and distortedly represents true social relations, which is to say *economic* relations.

The theory of hegemony is able to accommodate Frank’s observations in two ways. First, it is able to recognize the relevance of economic factors to political identity. It contends, though, that these factors are not the ultimate determinants of political identity. They cannot be, insofar as they themselves do not lie outside of discourse. Even those things we take to be bare, material facts cannot have meaning except in relationship to different aspects of a way of life. My household budget may be constant, but I can understand my income as evidence of exploitation, as a spiritually significant burden I must bear, or as a temporary state of affairs on my road to attaining the American dream. In the first case, I understand “income” in relationship to capitalist

production. In the second, I understand it in relationship to aspects of a religious worldview—what that worldview has to say about suffering and material possessions and comforts. In the third case, its meaning arises from its relationship to a cultural mythos. Given that discourse precedes and structures significance in this way, political intervention will always be effected at the level of discourse. Since discourse is what enables “economy” to have any meaning for us at all, it would be self-defeating as well as impossible to try to reach beneath it. Laclau and Mouffe would agree with Frank, then, that economic factors do matter, but the way that they matter cannot be determined independently of discursive conditions and operations.

Second, the theory of hegemony can account for the patterns of meaning and practice that become sedimented over time, such that they come to appear “natural” or “essential”. It can explain the tendency of poorer folks to shop at Wal-Mart. *Contra* Frank, this tendency cannot easily be explained by income levels, since what one can “afford” is known to be elastic, particularly in a consumer-driven economy. One’s available income is not given, but is understood in relation to a number of social institutions and practices: advertising, together with the laws that restrict it (or fail to do so); lines of credit that expand income at the borrower’s whim; lifestyle norms (what one *must* have as part of social belonging); and family expectations, to name a few. One’s inclination to frequent particular businesses can be similarly elaborated. These transactions, interactions, and social facts are not easily changed, or even articulated. Indeed, there is typically no need to do so, and therein lie their stability and invisibility. This stability of discourse, of those factors that make meaning-making possible, provides

the grounds for hegemonic practice. Hegemonization then takes political territory by reconfiguring existing meaningful relationships of the kind that I have just described, and fixing them in a particular way, in consonance with a particular political project. This destabilizes a preexisting order to a greater or lesser extent. But it also means that hegemony must begin with order, with stable patterns of meaning, with “sedimented discourse”. These are the patterns that Frank describes when he finds a correlation between income levels and preference for four-dollar lattes. Frank’s explanation is that income levels *cause* the preference, but a discursive explanation includes income as one term among many that give significance to who I am and what I need.

Just as misleading as the rhetoric that aims to divert the public’s attention from the import of the economy, Frank claims, is rhetoric that draws their attention to it. Kansans have chosen congressional leaders who sing the praises of the free market and curse the welfare state. They have, moreover, convinced their constituencies of the virtues of economic policies that are, in fact, harmful to those folks. As we know, Frank explains the popularity of this message with lower-income conservatives as the consequence of a mass deception. Laclau and Mouffe suggest that it is more fruitful to examine the ways in which ideology connects with various facets of identity such that some are thematized and others elided. In this case, Republican discourse concerning economic policy effectively forecloses many possible meanings that “economy” might have, and many meanings it has had in the past. For example, in spite of the fact that post-Depression Republican presidents accepted the necessity of a planned economy (perhaps with the exception of Reagan), any hint of ‘planning’ or ‘managing’ the

economy is omitted from Republican economic ideology. Also omitted is the end that planned economies aim to realize (or approximate): material equality. Finally, there is no acknowledgement that the middle class as we know it, which figures so idyllically in conservative ideology, is the product of planned economy. The theory of hegemony explains these omissions not as a deception, but as the realization of a potential inherent in signification. The meaning of any term or identity is possible, in part, because of its articulable and re-articulable oppositions to other terms.

I return shortly to a discussion of the particular oppositions that constitute the rhetoric surrounding the economy, and the contributions that these have made in popularizing the conservative cause. It is first important to understand the positive differences that constitute the conservative identity. Recall that the articulations that enlarge political territory by incorporating non-antagonistic differences into an identity operate according to the “logic of difference”. The ideology of the Right has operated in this way in identifying the Right as the defender of the free market. This might appear *prima facie* as just another plank in the Republican platform. On a hegemonic reading, however, the resurrection of pre-Depression notions of the economy is a complex articulatory maneuver, and their acceptance as commonplace indicates the substantial success of the Republicans’ attempt to hegemonize “economy”. In large part, this maneuver has consisted in defining “economy” in terms of “freedom”. It is not as simple as equating the two, however; recall that “freedom” is what Laclau and Mouffe call a “floating signifier”. That is, it is the kind of term that can take on a number of meanings, and thus the kind of term for which different interests must compete if they want to

incorporate it into their project—to control its meaning, as it were. “Freedom” is given a particular content in Republican economic discourse by its opposition to other terms in that discourse. It is connected with, among others: imperatives of self-determination and private property; American democracy; creativity; self-actualization; and American dominance. By extension, the economy is also connected with these notions. This maneuver of difference lends conservative ideology appeal to a number of interest groups. Most obviously, it appeals to corporate interests, to shareholders—Marx’s capitalists. But it also appeals to those with small business aspirations, and to entrepreneurs. Significantly, its broadest message has the potential to appeal to most citizens, and even to those who pursue citizenship, in its invocation of the (mythical) American way of life.

Operations of equivalence further refine the meaning of “economy/freedom”, even as they permit a wider variety of interests to identify with the conservative movement. The chief enemy of the free market in conservative ideology, to which I have already alluded, is the welfare state. In its opposition to the state, the free market stands against interference, against redistribution, against taxation, against bureaucracy. In this opposition, equivalence operations mark the site of an antagonism. It is not simply the case, then, that equivalence distinguishes conservatism from social democracy; conservative ideology seeks to establish that the tenets of social democracy are a fundamental obstacle to the conservative identity, to conservatives’ realization of their political goals. The appeal of free market ideology for working-class conservatives, then, has two sources. In the first place, “economy” is connected with notions of self-

determination—that is, with the notion of freedom in the private sphere—according to the logic of difference.³⁶⁵ Meanwhile, “economy” is opposed to an interventionist state according to the logic of equivalence, where that state signifies *only* an obstacle to freedom in the private sphere. Thus the working class’ embrace of Wall Street-friendly policies comes to make good sense. Kansan conservatives vote the way they do not out of some deep pathology, but to preserve control over their lives—a cherished American goal. Those who, from Frank’s perspective, should not be predisposed to vote Republican are drawn to the party’s message. Specifically, they identify the enemy of the free market as *their own* enemy, and this commonality (effected by equivalence) ties them to that vision of the economy.³⁶⁶

One important implication of this view is that the Republican party’s wooing of the working class does not amount to bait-and-switch; or at least, not in the “wolves preying on sheep” sense that Frank invokes. If one reason to reject Frank’s “mass deception” claim is the impossibility of unitary meaning, another issues from the transformative effects of articulation. A truly hegemonic articulation attempts to link local interests into a larger project, so that the ‘part’ comes to identify as the ‘whole’. This is no mere combination of interest groups in which each retains its identity.³⁶⁷ Rather, it is an alliance that alters the identities of its participants, as the significance of

³⁶⁵ The “private sphere” is associated by this same logic with a patriarchal notion of the family, and often with religious values. Again, “the state” signifies all that would undermine the “traditional family” and those terms that constitute the discourse of the family—what might be called “family values”.

³⁶⁶ In this way, the theory of hegemony discursively interprets “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”.

³⁶⁷ If that were the case, identities would be defined external to the conditions within which they emerge. Orthodox Marxism, for example, posits a certain constellation of political identities that exist in a capitalist society. These are economically-defined categories, and the determinative character of the economy is unadulterated by historical, social, or political factors.

those identities is reconfigured into a new system of differential relations. So, while Frank's attention is focused entirely on the rightward shift in working-class voting, a hegemonic analysis notes that neoliberalism also assumes a new form. Whatever the original intent of neoliberal Republicans may have been, they no longer stand over and against the working class. They are not in a position to control the working class; they have become imbricated with that class such that "us" and "them" must be more carefully interpreted. In the wake of this hegemonization that links traditionally working-class values to *laissez-faire* economics, wealthy Republicans, for example, can no longer easily embrace socially liberal policies. Frank's account of the fate of Kansas' "Mod Squad" illustrates this point. Once the working-class comes to understand itself as socially conservative and as quintessentially Republican, and once this is recognized as a political movement, socially moderate Republicans must assume a defensive posture. This is a symptom that the hegemonization is succeeding: political identities have been redefined on both sides of the equation.

The commitment to *laissez-faire* blinds conservatives to what are, according to Frank, the real mechanisms that fuel cultural degradation. Consider conservatives' frequently voiced complaint that the media has a leftist bias. According to Frank, media bias is not liberal, but corporate. Our media represent one more capitalist industry, oriented toward profit; this orientation manifests as sensationalism, and conservatives are accordingly offended. Laclau and Mouffe might agree that the media is profit-driven; they would likely agree with Frank that the pursuit of profit pushes the media to greater vulgarity, and even that conservatives fail to see this. But the more salient points from a

hegemonic perspective are, first, that the nature of the media has been interpreted in a way that does not exhaust its meaning. Frank makes this point himself insofar as he offers at least two impressions of the media in *Kansas* (his own and the conservatives'). Second, then, the media has been articulated to the conservative cause in a particular way: it functions as an enemy. Conservatives define themselves against an antagonistic media that threatens all they hold dear. Attaching the epithet "liberal" to the media underscores this, as it stands for everything "conservative" does not. Therefore, Frank's thesis that the *true* meaning of the media consists in its corporatized character actually obscures the discursive quality of such claims. This obscurity in turn impedes insight into the use to which conservatives put their own claims about the media, and by extension, into the methods by which these claims might be controverted. In short, the commitment to economism covers over certain political mechanisms that are brought to light and explained by the hegemonic model.

Frank makes a final nod to the orthodox notion of ideology in his examination of the role of religion for Kansas' working-class conservatives. In part, Frank's estimation of this otherworldly orientation echoes Marx's own—religion pacifies those who are materially disadvantaged and politically frustrated. At the same time, however, Frank recognizes that religion motivates conservatives to political action, owing to their belief that social ills issue from morally and spiritually bankrupt public policy. The net effect is what Frank describes as political martyrdom: religiously-minded conservatives toil in God's name so that *Roe v. Wade* will be reversed; when their efforts inevitably fail, they can find solace in the promise of heavenly reward. This guarantee relieves their elected

officials from considerable pressure to produce real change in cultural arenas, thus providing politicians with great incentive to identify as religious, and to integrate religious language into political rhetoric.

The same analytical commitments that move Frank to diagnose the culture wars as mere distraction move him to puzzled sympathy for Kansas' religious conservatives, whose strategies are so backwards. Frank is not explicit about whether he believes that religion has an appropriate place in the political arena, but his evaluation here is telling. Like religious conservatives, Frank accepts the opposition of spiritual to material concerns. But like orthodox Marxists, he claims that the former do not really make contact with the (material, economic) mechanisms that produce the social world. By contrast, discourse theory can understand religious language as embedded in, creating and re-creating the material world. Ideology, even with a heavenly orientation, has a material character; its significance lies not only on the coherence of its symbolic form, but also in those practices, habits, objects, and institutions that lend it intelligibility and are reinforced or altered by its impact. Laclau and Mouffe's commitment to a discursive ontology provides them with grounds from which to take up Gramsci's valuation of the moral and spiritual dimensions of ideology. These are not in their essence foreign to politics, to political identity, or to the material world. The ontological underpinnings of the theory of hegemony therefore do not permit the political import of religion to be reduced to "mere distraction"; religion does not distract from political identity, it is potentially constitutive of political identity.

Orthodox Marxism anticipates quietism from those with a religious orientation. Likewise, Frank's economic commitments provide him with the means of explaining why conservatives do not demand the earthly success of their political efforts. But he is not in a position to say much about how religious ideology could elicit such efforts to begin with. "False consciousness" begins to look like a rather anemic explanation in consideration of Frank's own examples: the pro-lifers who cross state lines to be arrested for their cause; or Tim Golba, whose blue-collar salary and precious free time are devoted entirely to travelling, speaking, and all manner of agitation on behalf of the rights of the unborn. There is not simply an epistemic attitude, much less one that is passively received, but a very practical, even strategic, civic engagement. From a hegemonic perspective, religion plays a discursive role similar to that of other terms that can assume multiple meanings—that is, empty signifiers. Empty signifiers play a central role in what Laclau and Mouffe call the "openness of the social"—that is, the impossibility of "society" to have a final meaning. Empty signifiers are those terms that can most easily be integrated into a number of discourses. At the same time, this emptiness enables their simultaneous function as an organizing term within a discourse, one in terms of which other signifiers become meaningful. These "nodal points" are would-be centers of a discourse. As an empty signifier, then, faith can also serve as a nodal point, as a privileged term within conservative discourse. That it so serves is borne out in *Kansas*: as Frank demonstrates, many conservatives understand the imperative to be politically

active and also the quality of that action in reference to their faith.³⁶⁸ The centrality of faith is evident in the very nature of the conflicts—over school prayer, or evolution, for example. It also manifests in the conservative myth that America is a Christian nation, and that the Founding Fathers were men of faith.

The real distance between hegemonic and orthodox explanations of the political function of religion can be seen in what is gained by regarding religion as an empty signifier. The meaning of “religion” is not given; it cannot obviously be elaborated as the dictum that “the best things are the more eternal things.”³⁶⁹ It is not necessarily the case, then, that the power of religious language lies in its reference to a reality higher than the material world. Rather, the meaning of religious belief and practice emerges in the way it is articulated to other, and potentially diverse, signifiers and practices. Consider, for example, the distance between the Quaker’s refusal to register for Selective Service and the Israelite’s pious fulfillment of her mandatory tour of duty. This difference illustrates that “religion” can be articulated to different political projects; that is, its meaning can be elaborated in different ways. It does not have a single meaning and a single effect on those for whom it is politically relevant.

Once the relative emptiness of “religious faith” is recognized, its specific form in Kansan politics also becomes visible. Clearly, conservatives have adopted “god-fearing” as part of their political identity; that is, it is a positive difference in conservative

³⁶⁸ Laclau gives “order” as an example of an empty signifier that is also a nodal point in Hobbesian discourses, which envision society as fundamentally chaotic and brutal. *Emancipation(s)* (London, Verso: 1996), 54.

³⁶⁹ William James, “The Will to Believe,” *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 25.

discourse. From a non-hegemonic perspective, this is not very informative, since most Americans identify as theists. However, conservatives' articulation of faith to socially conservative public policy is more than religious expression. At least since the rise of the Christian Freedom Foundation, Christian conservatives have sought to control the meaning of "god-fearing", which strategy establishes a common political base with others who think of themselves as people of faith.³⁷⁰ The positive aspect of this maneuver—that is, that aspect of the conservative identity established by the logic of difference—lies in its fundamentalist quality. Conservatives regard the tenets of their faith as simple, self-evident, accessible to anyone with a conscience and a Bible. These tenets are (notoriously) non-negotiable, and the penalty for failure is damnation. This approach differs markedly from that of mainline Protestant traditions, which tend to be ecumenical, and theologically and socially moderate, or even liberal.³⁷¹ Significantly, the religious character and language of mainline Protestantism is not a feature of the American political landscape; fundamentalism, on the other hand, dominates, and therefore influences the public perception of what it is to be religious.

Precisely because fundamentalists cannot represent all varieties of believer, they must resort to operations of equivalence in their quest for hegemony. Their most obvious enemy is the atheist. As I indicated above, the battle against evolutionism is waged on

³⁷⁰ Chip Berlet, "The New Political Right in the United States", in *Confronting the New Conservatism: The Rise of the Right in America*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 84. Other notable Christian Right groups that began in the same era (1970s-80s) were the Religious Roundtable, the Moral Majority, the Council for National Policy, Concerned Women for America, and the Christian Coalition.

³⁷¹ I have in mind here Unitarians, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Quakers, nearly all of which have their conservative factions, but which, on the whole, could not be characterized as "fundamentalist" denominations.

this ground.³⁷² Conservatives' identification as "not atheists", where "atheism" is relatively void of meaning except in its opposition to fundamentalist Christianity, has served as a unifying feature of the conservative identity. Less obvious antagonists are homosexuality, environmentalism, or feminism, yet each of these has been articulated as a threat to faith. Perhaps the most unifying of these enemies has been homosexuality. Not everyone is interested or equipped enough to discuss the theological subtleties of the longstanding Christian prohibition of homosexual practice. But many agree that it is "unnatural", or can grasp that "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," and are therefore inclined to ally with conservatives against homosexual-friendly policy and politicians on the basis of this equivalence—that is, on the thesis that homosexual practice is against God's plan for human life, that it is ungodly. Note that it need not be the case that these folks are actually motivated by religious reasons. It is likely that they are motivated by a very deep cultural taboo against homosexual practice. But conservatives' articulation of anti-homosexuality to faith to their larger political agenda provides the opportunity for the general public to identify with or against them, and in the terms of conservative discourse.³⁷³

³⁷² More broadly, the antagonistic opposition to atheism serves as the basis for conservatives' rejection of scientific authority. This serves their political cause in a number of ways: if science is biased against faith, that may be grounds to reject stem cell research or findings on the biological basis of homosexual orientation.

³⁷³ The cultural battle over homosexuality is particularly illustrative of hegemonic practice. Bush-Cheney-Rove's blatantly political Defense of the Family Act, which sought a Constitutional definition of marriage, was a paradigmatic maneuver of equivalence. It was eminently successful at establishing an anti-homosexual antagonism that, at least, further solidified conservatives' support of Republicans, and, at most, won more voters to the conservative cause. However, the issue also provides an example of how the logic of difference can operate to hegemonize: in response to the Act, a number of religious groups have sought to incorporate homosexuality as a potential difference of religious identity; that is, they have tried to establish the compatibility of homosexual practice and religious faith. Episcopalianism has received the

Hegemonizing Wealth

Frank contends that the American Left was an unwitting accessory to the conservative hegemonization of the working class. It is no secret that contemporary Democrats have sought to distance themselves from their former, more progressive stance, and certainly from their more radical projects that aimed at true social democracy, such as Johnson's Great Society. As the party has shifted to the center, differences between Democrat and Republican have diminished, particularly in the area of economic policy. Democrats' growing fiscal conservatism has meant that the party can no longer sell itself as the champion of the downtrodden; consequently, it holds a diminishing attraction for the poorer and working classes, which partially explains their migration to the conservative camp. This was not an unmotivated surrender on the part of the Left, Frank argues—Democrats shifted away from working-class concerns, but shifted towards alliances with wealthy liberals who could better fund political campaigns. In Frank's assessment, this move represents a concession to capital, a purely pragmatic strategy.³⁷⁴ Frank's rejection of this new strategy seems to rest on moral and not theoretical (orthodox) grounds: he implies that the party, as representatives of true liberalism, should

most attention for their inclusive efforts, which included appointing an openly gay man (Gene Robinson) as bishop. If successful, this would undermine the divisiveness of conservatives' equivalence maneuver.

³⁷⁴ Frank is not the first to criticize the Left for conceding too much; as I summarized in Chapter 2, this evaluation has a long and contentious history in Marxist politics. It derives from orthodox notions of class and the dialectic of history. According to these, class distinctions are finally dissolved only after Labor and Capital are polarized to the greatest extent. Labor's alliance with Capital therefore signals the hindrance of utopia; such alliances should for this reason be regarded with suspicion or rejected outright.

continue in its role as advocate for the disenfranchised. However, this normative conception of left liberalism's identity ultimately derives from orthodoxy. He also seems to give his own pragmatic reasons against an alliance between the Left and business interests, contending that it undercuts the main distinction between Left and Right, thereby alienating voters who were drawn to a distinctive Leftist platform. Yet again, it is orthodoxy that frames political divisions in economic terms, and therefore it is orthodoxy that determines that the possession or lack of wealth is the main distinction between Right and Left.

From a hegemonic perspective, the Democrats' strategy is a response to the Right in kind; while the Right has sought to hegemonize the working class, the Left has sought to hegemonize the upper class. Both have successfully redefined their own political identities and those with whom they have allied. Both have attained political power (two-term presidents, Clinton and the second Bush) as a result of their redefinition. For its part, the Left has incorporated elements of free market ideology into its identity by means of the logic of difference. Those who identify with the platform—including the wealthy and those of the working class who continue to vote Democratic—are transformed by the identification. The hegemonic model explains this as a true transformation of class identity, not simply a deviation. Although the model allows that preexisting discursive formations may make some articulations more likely than others, there is no essence that ultimately determines political identities. The lack of essence does not bar a reactivation of the Left's traditional identity, or of the working class'

traditional identity, but Laclau and Mouffe allow us to interpret these possibilities as hegemonic projects, not as a return to a true nature.

Beyond Kansas

The Republican party's hegemonization strategies did not falter when Bush the younger left office. If anything, President Obama's election breathed new life into their opposition to "Big Government" and loose morals. In hegemonic terms: regime change sharpened the antagonisms around which equivalence articulations center. Furthermore, the strategies and rhetoric of the Right continue to produce bafflement among Democrats, just as they did for Frank. In the interest of demonstrating the relevance of hegemonic analysis to the post-Bush political environment, I consider a more recent example of the Right's attempt to expand their grip on the electorate: the debate over health care reform. I look at several examples of strategies aimed at broadening the Right's appeal by recalibrating existing equivalence articulations.

The resources of a hegemonic analysis provide insight into the reasons health care reform becomes significant at a particular time. From an economic perspective, the inefficiency and rising costs of a third-party payer system are longstanding reasons to reform health care. From a social democratic perspective, both the widespread inaccessibility of health care and the injustice of market mechanisms that currently determine accessibility and quality speak in favor of reform. The pragmatic and normative reasons for reform are nothing new, however. We might look, then, to the

national recession that began just before President Obama took office; the rise in job loss and concurrent loss of health insurance by many Americans has brought the issue to the fore. Or, we might consider the 2008 presidential race—in particular, President Obama’s promise of reform. This promise rendered the issue politically significant because of its centrality to his public image. The success or failure of reform could therefore determine the success or failure of his presidency.³⁷⁵

Hegemony accounts for the weight of each of these factors in a particular way. First, although it may examine the pragmatic or normative reasons given for or against reform, it does not regard these reasons on their own terms. A hegemonic analysis looks beyond these reasons to both the discourses that give them significance and the logic according to which they are formulated. This approach constitutes the critical kernel of hegemonic analysis. Second, in recognizing the discursive formations that imbue our words and actions with significance, hegemonic analysis attends to the historical peculiarities that shape political movements and alliances. Though historical events may be patterned, these patterns are not readily apparent; moreover, “deviations” can be as significant as the patterns themselves. For example, although the current recession has often been cast as 1929 redux, a hegemonic analysis tries to identify what is lost in such an assimilation.³⁷⁶ Finally, a hegemonic interpretation of politics understands the

³⁷⁵ It is notoriously difficult to define a “successful presidency”; what counts as “success” has quite a bit to do with one’s political persuasion, and also with the historical distance from which one judges. That said, I have in mind here a small-scope rubric: being able to make good on at least some campaign promises, having a good working relationship with Congress (or at least not an overly-contentious one), popularity, a second term, avoiding major disasters in governance, and maintaining good relationships with other nations.

emergence of an issue as the outcome of articulatory operations. These frame the issue in conjunction with moments of other discourses. In a significant sense, the issue does not exist prior to the articulatory operations that either succeed or fail in lending it momentum; that succeed or fail, in other words, in hegemonizing political territory. According to a hegemonic analysis, then, health care reform became an issue because the Obama administration *made* it an issue. The administration did not achieve this by rational argumentation, nor was the issue's prominence simply caused by a chain of events. Rather, health care reform was built, constructed using a variety of materials, and according to a discursive logic.³⁷⁷

Republicans' primary tactic in the debates was to heighten the anti-statist rhetoric that has so successfully unified their constituency since the Reagan years. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the political power of equivalence discourses such as anti-statism lies in their 'enlarging' effect. Every identity constituted by positive differences will always be incomplete; it will never include every difference, and it will always be vulnerable to mutation by the differences that lie outside the identity. In identifying themselves as "opposed to Big Government", Republicans extend the party identity via conflict. If successful, this has the effect of appealing to those who feel strongly about bureaucracy.

³⁷⁶ Postmarxism's resistance to comprehending history under simple schemas has at least two sources. To recap, these are: first, the explanatory and political failures of orthodox Marxism, which relies on a one-dimensional narrative of the trajectory of history; and second, the reliance on Foucaultian thought, which conceives of the "unity" of a discursive formation as constituted by "regularity in dispersion", where that regularity does not lie in a common object, institution, mechanism, or agent. Though Foucault's meaning is debatable, I believe that Stuart Hall demonstrates its application when he considers the impacts of globalization, new labor practices, working-class patriarchy, and other factors that Labor overlooks by characterizing Thatcherism as one more instance of false (class) consciousness.

³⁷⁷ To reiterate, the assertion that politics follows a discursive logic is just to say that political maneuvers are best understood by comparison to signification—to the factors and operations that permit meaningful symbolic productions.

This opposition was deployed preemptively in the health care debate: before reform efforts had begun in earnest, before Democrats had even submitted a proposal, Republican leaders referred to the specter of the proposal as a “government takeover of health care”.³⁷⁸ This characterization continued throughout the debate and survived the passage of the reform bill. In a brief response to the passage of the bill, Republican Mike Pence stated that “House Republicans...are determined to continue to take our case against this government takeover of health care to the American people...The American people oppose a government takeover of health care.”³⁷⁹ The meaning of “government” here, as well as its capacity to pose a threat, derive from the truncated elaboration it receives in the discourse of the Right; “truncated” because its meaning consists only in its contrast to the differentially-constituted conservative identity. Republicans regard the individual’s freedom as paramount, where “freedom” is understood in classically liberal terms.³⁸⁰ “Government”, then, stands for all that would undermine this privilege: “invasive”, “patronizing”, and “arbitrary”, in other words, all that signifies an obstacle to the realization of the conservative identity.

The anti-statist maneuver included familiar strategies, slightly modified to accommodate the issue at hand. For example, Republicans repeatedly invoked the threat of economic stagnancy that, they assert, accompanies state oversight. A member of

³⁷⁸ Jill Jackson, “House Republicans Offer Health Care Plan,” CBSNews, June 17, 2009, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-5093897-503544.html (accessed May 2, 2010).

³⁷⁹ GOP.gov Press Release, “Pence: ‘One More Speech About the Same Bad Bill Isn’t Going to Change Any Minds in America’”, (GOP.gov: Press Release, March 23, 2010), <http://www.gop.gov/press-release/10/03/23/pence-one-more-speech> (accessed March 29, 2010).

³⁸⁰ I have described these terms above; briefly, this is a *laissez-faire* ideal according to which the individual has sovereignty over his private property.

House Minority Leader John Boehner’s staff, for example, referred to the successfully passed reforms as “the Democrats’ job-killing takeover bill”, while Pence’s response promised continued Republican opposition to the “job-killing tax increases” that the bill would impose.³⁸¹ Moreover, Republicans continued to make such accusations in spite of President Obama’s rebuttals, and with no recognition that both parties were in uncharted territory. In doing so, they are relied on an equivalence strategy that has worked for them time and again; in this incarnation, it aimed to fix the meaning of health care reform by casting it as the enemy of a healthy economy. It did so by incorporating “health care reform” into an already-existing chain of equivalences whose terms signify only “that which the Right stands against”. Articulations of this sort do not follow the rules of reason, but the rules of discourse. Boehner, for example, attacked a House reform bill based on its length. “All you need to know is there are 1,990 pages...That should tell you everything.”³⁸² Lee Terry, another Republican Representative—and a lawyer—complained about the language of the bill, saying that “it’s written in legalese.” Clearly, Republicans have grasped that the impact of rhetoric does not lie in its rational consistency. Rather, its appeal lies in the promise to hegemonize; to fix the meaning of terms that cannot be fixed, to simplify issues that are hopelessly complex, and to bring closure to identities that are constitutionally open to change. For Republicans, this

³⁸¹ Marin Cogan and Glenn Thrush, “In Wake of Health-Care Debate: Was GOP Response Ugly Politics or Reaction to Dems’ Arrogance?,” *POLITICO*, March 23, 2010, http://www.twincities.com/allheadlines/ci_14739861 (accessed March 29, 2010). Pence’s response cited above in *GOP.gov*.

³⁸² Brian Montopoli, “Republicans Attack Size of House Health Care Bill,” *CBSNews*, October 30, 2009, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-5463699-503544.html (accessed March 29, 2010). Montopoli notes that “spending bills routinely exceed 1,000 pages, as do some other bills...Bush’s 2007 budget bill,” for example, “was 1,482 pages long.”

fixation is accomplished by amplifying an antagonism, thereby unifying their base against the enemy: Big Government.

In their opposition to Democrats' proposals for health care reform, Republicans opposed measures that would insure all Americans, proposing instead programs that would reinscribe inequality. These counter-measures included such features as permitting insurance companies to provide across state lines, or creating high-risk pools; the former would presumably increase competition and lower costs, but would likely be accompanied by a decrease in quality of care. The latter would effectively penalize those with health conditions by charging them outrageous premiums. At the same time, Republicans employed populist language in their rejection of reform. Pence's response, for example, recalled Alexander Hamilton's words: "here sir, the people govern".³⁸³ While both Republicans and Democrats presume to speak in the name of the American people, the reforms proposed by Republicans would have benefitted the few, and were thus antithetical to the spirit of populism. The theory of hegemony is able to explain the transformation of populism such that "the will of the people" no longer derives its meaning from opposition to the wealthy, as it did in the early 20th century. Right-wing populism depends upon antagonism between the many average citizens and Big Brother—the State that micromanages its citizens. This strategy was evident in Senator Mitch McConnell's remarks following an early vote on health care legislation, in which he described the Democratic approach to reform as "this sort of arrogant approach that

³⁸³ Pence, GOP.gov.

everybody sort of shut up and sit down, get out of the way, we know what's best for you."³⁸⁴

Two of the Right's more potent attacks cast the government as an enemy to one of our most basic liberties—our bodily integrity. In the midst of the health care debates, a government panel proposed new guidelines for mammography tests; these pushed the recommended age for regular screenings back from 40 to 50, and from every year to every other year. Republicans' interpretation of these guidelines was accomplished by two discursive maneuvers. First, they established a connection between the guidelines and the concept of "rationing". In fact, a group of Republican congresswomen held a press conference specifically to "warn that access to mammograms could be restricted."³⁸⁵ Representative Jean Schmidt commented, "that's why I was so outraged by it...every year, I'm allowed to have a mammogram, because that's what the recommendations are. My fear is it'll be every two years, and then maybe every three years."³⁸⁶ Evidently, the elaboration of the meaning of the guidelines according to the logic of difference—by articulating them to "rationing"—is only one piece of the puzzle, for "rationing" is not inherently a threat, and not sufficient to provoke outrage. Indeed, rationing efforts have historically been connected to patriotic sentiment, manifesting an allegiance to "we" over "I"; this was highly valued during World War II, for example.

³⁸⁴ Karen Tumulty, "Republicans Plot Their Health Care Attack Strategy," *Time*, November 23, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1942128,00.html> (accessed March 29, 2010).

³⁸⁵ Mara Liasson, "GOP Uses Mammogram Study to Attack Health Bill," *NPR*, November 19 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120562882> (accessed March 29, 2010).

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Schmidt's expression of outrage indicates an antagonism and thus the operation of the logic of equivalence. It draws attention to the threat of encroachment by a faceless bureaucracy on the private sphere. The new guidelines, Republicans claimed, illustrated the way in which the government could intrude upon the doctor-patient relationship, curbing the individual's right to determine what kind of care she needs.

Another equivalence maneuver, articulated early on in the debate, established this same opposition: on the one hand, the individual's right to bodily integrity, to self-determination, and to the prescriptive authority of her doctor, all of which are taken to belong to the private sphere; on the other hand, the government, which would limit the freedom of individuals (doctor and patient) by limiting access to resources, with potentially fatal consequences. This time, Republicans warned that according to a pending House bill, "Congress would make it mandatory...that every five years, people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner, how to decline nutrition."³⁸⁷ Former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was responsible for giving this mythical measure its inflammatory name: the "death panels". One conservative news outlet even compared the death panels to Nazi programs that euthanized the disabled.³⁸⁸ The measure, which in fact provided for *optional* end-of-life counseling, was dropped from the bill. The effectiveness of the "death panels" epithet,

³⁸⁷ Sharon Begley, "The Five Biggest Lies in the Health Care Debate," *Newsweek*, August 29, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/214254> (accessed April 30, 2010). Republican Betsy McCaughy, former lieutenant governor of New York, is quoted here. She first expressed this on a radio show. McCaughy's political career was catapulted by her 1994 critique of the Clintons' proposed health care reforms.

³⁸⁸ Jim Rutenberg and Jackie Calmes, "Rumor Dogging Health Care Reform has Mainstream Roots; Conservative Journals Initiated Insinuations that Led to 'Death Panel' Talk," *International Herald Tribune*, August 15, 2009, in LexisNexis [database online]; accessed March 29, 2010.

however, did not consist in the exclusion of end-of-life counseling from the bill, or even in the accuracy of the title. A hegemonic maneuver such as this is effective if it successfully fixes the terms of the debate according to the articulation; if, that is, it convincingly establishes that Democrat-led health care reforms are symptomatic of a totalitarian threat, and wins adherents to conservatism on the bases of that equivalence articulation.

The specter of “death panels” also served as ammunition in a second type of equivalence maneuver: that establishing health care reforms as a promotion of the “culture of death”. The idea that Democrat-led reform would lead, at worst, to euthanizing the elderly or at best, to public acceptance of euthanasia, was fueled by conservative Jim Towey, “director of the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives under George W. Bush”.³⁸⁹ A *Wall Street Journal* op-ed written by Towey claimed that “a 1997 workbook from the Department of Veteran Affairs,” which had been out of circulation for two years, “pushes vets to ‘hurry up and die’.”³⁹⁰ Equivalence maneuvers typical of the culture wars aim at polarizing voters by offering them the choice between “x, what we, the Republican party offer”, and “not-x, offered by liberals”. The latter is not simply opposed to the former, but poses a threat to the former. In this case, Republicans sought to reinforce their socially conservative ranks by drawing attention to the ways in which health care reform threatens the valuation of life as such. If effective, this maneuver

³⁸⁹ Begley.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

could lead to more widespread rejection of health care reform on the basis of its immoral implications.

A similar Republican strategy attempted to enlist the pro-life movement in its rejection of reform. Throughout the debates, Republicans made it clear that they would oppose any bill that provided federal funding for abortions. This opposition was demonstrated during a House discussion on the place of abortion in the reform bill, when Republican Representative Randy Neugebauer, shouted “It’s a baby killer!” from the House floor.³⁹¹ Fanning the flames of the abortion debate here followed the same pattern as other battles in the culture wars: it targeted citizens “on the fence”. There are a number of moderate Catholics, for example, who favor public policy that offers relief to those in need, as universal health care would, but who also oppose abortion. In drawing attention to the possibility that a health care bill would provide public funding for abortion, the Right drew attention to an antagonism between these moderates and pro-choice Democrats. If these moderates had joined the Right in their opposition to health care proposals over the abortion issue, it could have proven fatal to the reform effort.³⁹² However, it would have meant a successful hegemonization of health care measures by means of an equivalence maneuver. That is, the Right would have successfully fixed the

³⁹¹ Ashley Southall, “Order in the House, Please,” *New York Times Prescriptions Blog*, March 23, 2010, <http://prescriptions.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/23/order-in-the-house-please/> (accessed March 29, 2010).

³⁹² Dan Gilgoff, “Abortion Debate Could Make or Break Health Care Reform,” *US News*, September 14 2009, <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/religion/2009/09/14/abortion-debate-could-make-or-break-healthcare-reform.html?PageNr=2> (accessed May 2, 2010).

significance of health care reform in accordance with their agenda; they would have convinced enough of the citizenry to achieve political gain.³⁹³

Throughout the life of the health care issue—from its appearance in the presidential race to its codification in various reform proposals—its terms have been contested by Democrats as well as Republicans. For its part, the Obama administration spearheaded a hegemonization effort by linking health care reform, first, to fiscal responsibility, and second, to social democratic ideals such as substantive equality.³⁹⁴ Framing the issue in terms of fiscal responsibility amounts to an attempt to seize Republican territory, as “fiscal responsibility” is generally understood as a plank in the Republican party platform. President Obama’s call for fiscal responsibility hinged on establishing an opposition to those who profit by driving up costs: insurance companies. One of the administration’s top advisors, for example, characterized insurance reform as protection against “the sort of mercurial judgments of insurance bureaucrats.”³⁹⁵ Under the umbrella of this opposition, the administration could appeal to Republican voters without refuting the Party’s claims; a refutation would put the disagreement in

³⁹³ As it turned out, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops remained opposed to the bill that was passed, while a broad coalition of nuns supported it. See Mitchell Landsberg, “Nuns in U.S. Back Healthcare Bill Despite Catholic Bishops’ Opposition,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/18/nation/la-na-healthcare-nuns18-2010mar18> (accessed May 2, 2010).

³⁹⁴ A discourse analysis attends to the fact that meaning-making relies on the articulation one thing *instead of another*. The health care debate brought forward a multitude of reasons in favor of health care, most of which were not articulated into the emerging discursive formation. Those selected were likely projected to have the greatest resonance and impact, and therefore to have the greatest potential to increase the administration’s political power.

³⁹⁵ Sheryl Gay Stolberg and David M. Herszenhorn, “Two Sides Take Health Care Debate Outside Washington,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/03/health/policy/03healthcare.html> (accessed May 2, 2010).

Republican terms and thereby give them a home court advantage. By contrast, Democrats' equivalence maneuver located a new enemy to the nation's financial health: Big Business, and not, as Republicans would have it, Big Government.³⁹⁶

The Obama administration had to tread lightly in articulating its vision of social democracy, given that conservatives' caricature of "tax and spend" liberals, the chief promoters of a bloated, expensive, and inefficient State is the commonsensical understanding. This picture is associated with Democrats' historical support of programs that redistribute resources in a way that aims to empower the disenfranchised. Consistent with this record, President Obama continued to assert the importance of universal access to affordable health care. However, his message is combined with the promise that reform would reduce the deficit, and that most Americans' taxes would not increase. In this way, the administration sought to reinterpret its party's traditional commitment to social justice as compatible with a sensible budget.³⁹⁷ This articulation seeks to win voters by inclusion, not exclusion; by dissolving antagonism rather than building around it. Specifically, it follows the logic of difference, and takes aim directly at conservatives' equivalence discourse in which "Democrat" signifies one who is hostile to a state living within its means.

Despite this (ultimately successful) hegemonic effort, many on the Left remain baffled by right-wing strategies. As a result, the Left responded to these strategies in

³⁹⁶ Strictly speaking, it was not "the Democrats" who led this effort, but the Obama administration and a handful of Congressional Democrats (Pelosi, Waxman, *inter alia*).

³⁹⁷ Of course, Obama is not the first Democrat to implement this tactic; many have noted his administration's similarities to Clinton's, both in staff and strategy.

ineffectual ways throughout the debates, in the same ways as it did during George W. Bush's presidency: by dismissing the Right's political plays as absurd, by trying to reason with the Right, or by analyzing its ideology for inconsistencies. Such responses all presume that rationality is the norm. For example, in response to the most extreme "death panels" accusations—those that compared the proposed reform measures to Nazi programs—former Senator Tom Daschle confidently claimed that "almost automatically, you have most of the audience on your side...Any rational normal person isn't going to believe that assertion."³⁹⁸ Daschle is probably correct in his belief that if the average American is asked whether Democrats are in favor of exterminating the elderly, she will respond in the negative. But this fact does not exhaust the significance of what is, *prima facie*, a polemical comparison between Democrat-proposed reform measures and the programs of a totalitarian regime, for the weight of "bare facts" is determined within discourse. Health care reform likewise gains its significance from the discourse in which it is embedded, and discourse is constructed by successful articulations that establish differences and equivalences between "health care reform" and other terms. The Right's claims, even if false, have the potential to link Democrat-led reforms to a totalitarian state, and it is in terms of articulations such as these that the public will understand health care reform.

Consider also President Obama's meeting with Republicans in January of 2010, after the health care debate in Congress had become intractable. The meeting was ostensibly an attempt to reason with Republican members of Congress who seemed

³⁹⁸ Rutenberg and Calmes.

opposed to reform as a matter of principle, in the hopes of reestablishing some bipartisanship. The President opened the meeting remarking,

I'm looking forward to taking your questions and having a real conversation...And I hope that the conversation we begin here doesn't end here; that we can continue our dialogue in the days ahead...It's only through the process of disagreement and debate that bad ideas get tossed out and good ideas get refined and made better...I want us to have a constructive debate.³⁹⁹

These comments are consistent with the interest in bipartisan cooperation and dialogue that Mr. Obama expressed as a presidential candidate.⁴⁰⁰ Yet a hegemonic analysis explains why the President's efforts are unlikely to pay off in light of the strategies employed by the Right. The Right's ideology is not dialogical; its purpose is not a refinement of ideas through critical exchange. Rather, it is hegemonic; its purpose is to control an ever-larger portion of political territory by shaping the discourses within which social identities, values, activities, and resources become meaningful.

Where the Left does not assume that Republicans will act rationally, it continues to assume that they *should*. In a scathing critique of the right-wing rhetoric surrounding the health care debate, "based mainly on lies about death panels and...that reform will undermine Medicare," Paul Krugman finds Republicans' defense of "unrestricted Medicare spending" blatantly inconsistent with their ideological commitment to small

³⁹⁹ Barak Obama, "Obama at House Republican Retreat in Baltimore," transcript, *Huffington Post*, January 29 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/29/transcript-of-president-o_n_442423.html (accessed May 4, 2010).

⁴⁰⁰ While this might be interpreted as "one step back" to the Administration's "two steps forward" in hegemonizing the terms of the debate, it need not be. Some analysts speculated that the President was not, in fact, trying to reason with the Right, but to expose their dearth of ideas for reform and their unwillingness to cooperate in a matter that has direct bearing on something conservatives claim to hold dear: fiscal responsibility.

government, and to their track record on this issue since the 1980s.⁴⁰¹ Krugman observes that Reagan, the hero of

the modern Republican party...was a fierce opponent of Medicare's creation, warning that it would destroy American freedom...In the 1990s, Newt Gingrich tried to force drastic cuts in Medicare financing. And in recent years, Republicans have repeatedly decried the growth in entitlement spending that is largely driven by rising healthcare costs.⁴⁰²

According to Krugman, the GOP has abandoned *its own party identity*, an identity well-established over the last thirty years, in assuming the role of 'defender of the social safety net'. Krugman looks for, and fails to find, coherence in this position. Again, the theory of hegemony emphasizes that political identities are fundamentally subject to change. That "Republican" gains its meaning from a discursive formation makes some maneuvers more likely than others, some options more 'live' than others. However, that formation is essentially open to mutation, making even "contradictory" articulations possible. In this instance, an equivalence relation targets the Democrats' health care plan as an enemy to seniors' quality of life. This is a way of giving significance to health care reform. There is not one way, but several ways to understand health care reform; the theory of hegemony explains how, for the purpose of advancing a political project, different groups try to fix the significance of terms so that it *appears* that that meaning is *the* correct one.

This chapter concludes my demonstration of Laclau and Mouffe's contribution to Marxist thought. The value of the theory of hegemony is evident, first, in the extent to

⁴⁰¹ Paul Krugman, "Comment & Debate: Guided by Spite: Venom from Republicans is Familiar, but This a New Low—and it's a Clue to America's Core Problems," *The Guardian (London)*, October 6 2009, in LexisNexis [database online]; accessed March 29 2010.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

which it can explain the power of conservative discourse—especially its power over the working class; and second, in the comparison of this hegemonic explanation with that given by Frank. Conservatism's influence over the working class cannot, as orthodoxy would have it, be easily explained as deception. As my hegemonic analysis shows, conservatism genuinely appeals to its audience by articulations that integrate their interests into the conservative cause.

Conclusion

My explanation and application of hegemony would be incomplete if I did not acknowledge the objections that many have raised to the theory since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was published. These have taken the form of direct responses to Laclau and Mouffe, but are also derivable from responses to poststructuralist thought in general. Jürgen Habermas, for example, is one of the most consistent and sharp critics of structuralist-inspired thought, which, as I showed in Chapter 3, provides the foundations of the theory of hegemony.⁴⁰³ The Habermasian objection is not surprising given that, *prima facie*, his project differs greatly from that of poststructuralist thinkers: while Habermas seeks to identify and exploit the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment, Foucault and Derrida seek to make visible its victims, caesurae, and endemic contradictions. From a Habermasian perspective, Laclau and Mouffe's account of the political is theoretically inadequate and insufficiently subtle in that it works with only one type of social action, thereby occluding the normative aspects of social interaction

A significant branch of Habermas' social theory centers on his theory of communicative action, which "places linguistic processes of reaching understanding...as the mechanism for coordinating action, at the focal point of interest."⁴⁰⁴ Habermas' theory begins with, and seeks to explain, the remarkable phenomenon of social action coordination; that is, how individuals in society manage to align their actions based on a

⁴⁰³ See especially *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

⁴⁰⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 106.

shared understanding.⁴⁰⁵ He develops a typology of social interaction that is grounded in a reconstruction of the features of everyday communications. His analysis of these features articulates the skills, resources, and presuppositions of participants in communication. According to this analysis, actors in modern societies coordinate their behavior by linguistically-mediated processes that aim *either* at reaching consensus *or* at exerting influence.⁴⁰⁶ In communicative action—that is, action oriented toward consensus—participants’ claims about the world are distinguished by their provisional status. That is, participants in communication who aim to come to agreement implicitly recognize that others may challenge their claims, and they are (implicitly) willing to defend their claims by an exchange of reasons.⁴⁰⁷ In this way, communicative action establishes solidarity by the “unforced force of reason.”⁴⁰⁸ By contrast, “participants in strategic action instrumentalize one another as a means for achieving their respective

⁴⁰⁵ Maeve Cooke, *Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas’ Pragmatics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 5.

⁴⁰⁶ Habermas has both a sociological and a psychological account of the “decentered” understanding of those who live in modern societies. The former draws heavily on Max Weber’s examination of modernization; the latter depends upon Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s reconstructions of cognitive and moral development, respectively. In modern societies, agents take a more or less “reflective” attitude towards the world. For the sociological account, see Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Tom McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). For the psychological account, see “Reconstruction and Interpretation in the Social Sciences,” in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

⁴⁰⁷ Moreover, participants recognize that different sorts of reasons are appropriate depending on what kind of claim is being made; they distinguish between empirical truth claims, which refer to the objective world, normative validity claims, which refer to the social world, or expressive claims, which refer to the subject’s inner experience. See Cooke, 10.

⁴⁰⁸ Thomas McCarthy, Introduction to *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, xvi.

success...They deal with other persons and with their own inner nature as though these were states of affairs, or entities in the physical world.”⁴⁰⁹

If we accept Habermas’ differentiation of linguistically-mediated social coordination into consensus and success-oriented types of action, then, at the very least, Laclau and Mouffe have made a glaring omission in their elaboration of “the social”. This explanatory inadequacy, though, is only as serious as its practical consequences, and these can be drawn by contrast to the consequences of the inclusion of communicative action for Habermas’ social theory. Where, for Habermas, communicative action provides a dialogical conception of rationality, Laclau and Mouffe can only speak of the logic of signification; thus social actors’ capacity to be responsible to each other for their beliefs and desires disappears behind a system that functions seemingly independently of these. More importantly, Habermas’ reconstruction of the presuppositions that communicative action lays the foundation for his discourse ethics. Discourse ethics in turn provides a procedure for identifying morally valid norms. Compare this to Laclau and Mouffe’s (or Stuart Hall’s) account of, say, the claims of ideology. Hegemonic theory offers no principled way of distinguishing between the claims and strategies of Thatcherism and those of Labor. It can offer no reason to prefer the rhetoric of conservatism over that of social democracy; worse yet, it can offer no principled basis for preferring democracy over totalitarianism. From a hegemonic perspective, all political actions are alike in that they strategically aim to appropriate a greater share of social

⁴⁰⁹ Cooke, 20.

power.⁴¹⁰ Again, at the very least, this fails to explain a key aspect of social experience, namely, that our political decisions seem justifiable to us, and that we do engage in practices of justifying our political persuasions to each other. If we take this dimension of experience seriously, Laclau and Mouffe's characterization of social life seems asymmetrical.

Although Habermas provides a ready counterpoint to poststructuralism, we need not range so far to find the worry expressed here. Simon Critchley, a defender of Derridean thought, finds fault with Laclau and Mouffe's theory on grounds akin to those of the Habermasian. Critchley claims that Laclau and Mouffe oscillate between an overly-developed descriptive apparatus and an underdeveloped normative stance in their analysis of hegemonic politics, and that the consequences of this oscillation threaten to undermine their endorsement of democracy:

If the theory of hegemony is simply the description of a positively existing state of affairs, then one risks emptying it of any critical function...If the theory of hegemony is the description of a factual state of affairs, then it risks identification and complicity with the dislocatory logic of contemporary capitalist societies.⁴¹¹

One can hear echoes here of Max Horkheimer's cautions concerning the danger inherent in excessively empirical (he had in mind positivistic) theorizations of social phenomena: they risk unwitting complicity in the systems they describe as operating independently of human action or desire.⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ In hegemonic terms, "power" measures the extent to which social subjects or groups have fixed the meaning of certain signifiers (e.g., "freedom", "democracy", "marriage") or identities.

⁴¹¹ Simon Critchley, "Is There a Normative Deficit in the Theory of Hegemony?" in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, eds. Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (New York: Routledge, 2004), 117.

These objections, however, must be understood in light of the scope of Laclau and Mouffe's project. Laclau and Mouffe aim to provide a theoretically consistent account of political agency and identity, one that avoids the foundationalism and dualism of orthodox Marxism. In addition to accommodating the potentially multiple and constitutionally unstable significances that make hegemonic politics possible, their theory can also explain the basis upon which different political interests and groups forge alliances. Their reliance on a Lacanian notion of subjectivity also shores up a Marxian weakness by making sense of the motivations of political actors. In brief, then, postmarxism seeks to provide an account of social and political dynamics that is explanatorily 'thick' and theoretically consistent. I have tried to show by way of exegesis and application that it realizes both of these goals.

Laclau and Mouffe radically reinterpret Marxism, collapsing "base" and "superstructure" into discourse, deconstructing class determinism, translating reification as the effect of successful hegemonization—an effect that is, however, essentially renegotiable. Theirs is a Marxism that overcomes the theoretical and practical limitations of orthodoxy while still providing a systematic account of society, even a society that is fragmented by specialized interests and by diverse local movements.

Of course, orthodox Marxism may seem an easy target and the theory of hegemony is not alone in its attempt to provide a general account of society that can make sense of contemporary events and alliances. Yet the theory of hegemony does

⁴¹² Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 188.

provide for a particularly subtle understanding of these, as my analysis of conservative hegemony is meant to demonstrate.

Bibliography

- Althusser, Louis. "Contradiction and Overdetermination." In *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster, 87-128. London: Verso, 2005.
- . "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- Ancel, Judy. "Offshoring the Kansas Economy." University of Missouri—Kansas City (2005). <http://www.umkc.edu/labored/documents/OffshoringtheKansasEconomy> (accessed March 14, 2008).
- Barthes, Roland. *Elements of Semiology*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bartels, Larry. "What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington D.C, September 1-4, 2005).
- Begley, Sharon. "The Five Biggest Lies in the Health Care Debate." *Newsweek*, August 29, 2009. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/214254> (accessed April 30, 2010).
- Benhabib, Seyla. *Critique, Norm, Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Berlet, Chip. "The New Political Right in the United States." In *Confronting the New Conservatism: The Rise of the Right in America*, 71-106. New York: New York University Press, 2007.
- Bernstein, Eduard. "Die heutige Sozialdemokratie in Theorie und Praxis." In *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx*, by Peter Gay. London: Collier, 1962.
- . *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation*. New York: Schocken, 1961.
- Boucher, Geoff. *The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek*. Melbourne: re.press, 2008.
- Butler, Judith. "What is Critique?" In *The Judith Butler Reader*, edited by Sara Salih with Judith Butler, 302-322. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.
- Calhoun, Craig. *Critical Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995.

- Center for Economic Development and Business Research 1999. "City of Wichita." Profile of Wichita. <http://www.wichita.gov/NR/rdonlyres> (accessed March 7, 2008).
- Cooke, Maeve. *Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas' Pragmatics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.
- Critchley, Simon. "Is There a Normative Deficit in the Theory of Hegemony?" In *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, edited by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart, 113-122. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Differance." In *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, 1-28. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- , "Differance." In *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, edited by Peggy Kamuf, 59-79. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- , "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences." In *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, 278-293. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Dews, Peter, ed. *Habermas: A Critical Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Anne B. Effland. "U.S. Farm Policy: The First 200 Years." *USDA Agricultural Outlook* (March 2000). <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/agoutlook/mar2000/ao269g.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2008).
- Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso, 1985.
- Evans, Eric J. *The Great Reform Act of 1832*. New York: Routledge, 1983.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1972.
- Frank, Thomas. *What's the Matter with Kansas*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004.
- Fraser, Nancy and Axel Honneth. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. Translated by James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke Joel Golb. New York: Verso, 2003.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1998.

- Gilgoff, Dan. "Abortion Debate Could Make or Break Health Care Reform." *US News*, September 14 2009.
<http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/religion/2009/09/14/abortion-debate-could-make-or-break-healthcare-reform.html?PageNr=2> (accessed May 2, 2010).
- Gramsci, Antonio. "Notes on the Southern Question." In *Selections from Political Writings 1921-26*. London: International, 1978.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *On the Pragmatics of Communication*. Edited by Maeve Cooke. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.
- . "Reconstruction and Interpretation in the Social Sciences." In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson, 21-42. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.
- . *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity*. Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987.
- . *Theory of Communicative Action*. Translated by Tom McCarthy. Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.
- Hall, Stuart. *The Hard Road to Renewal*. London: Verso, 1988.
- Heffernan, William D. "Agriculture and Monopoly Capital." *Monthly Review* 50, no. 3 (July-August 1998): 51.
- Horkheimer, Max. "Traditional and Critical Theory." In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, 188-243. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- How, Alan. *Critical Theory*. New York: Macmillan, 2003.
- Howarth, David. *Discourse*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000.
- Howarth, David, Aletta J. Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis, ed. *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Hunter, James Davidson. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Perseus, 1991.
- Hutchings, Kimberly. *Kant, Critique and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- James, William. "The Will to Believe." In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1-31. New York: Dover, 1956.

- Laclau, Ernesto. *Emancipation(s)*. London: Verso, 1996.
- "Glimpsing the Future." In *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, edited by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart, 279-328. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- "Philosophical Roots of Discourse Theory." University of Essex.
<http://www.essex.ac.uk/centres/TheoStud/onlinepapers.asp>. (accessed March 12, 2009).
- Lakoff, George. *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004.
- Laqueur, Thomas. "Revolution and Reform, 1815-1851 (lecture, UC Berkeley, History 5: European Civilization from the Renaissance to the Present."
<http://itunes.Berkeley.edu>. Fall 2007.
- Lenin, Vladimir. *Letters From Afar*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964.
- "What is to Be Done?" In *Collected Works*, 347-530. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing, 1961.
- Liasson, Mara. "GOP Uses Mammogram Study to Attack Health Bill." *NPR News*. November 19 2009.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120562882> (accessed March 29, 2010).
- Linda Lobao and Katherin Meyer. "The Great Agricultural Transition: Crisis, Change, and Social Consequences of Twentieth Century US Farming." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2001): 103-124.
- Obama, Barak. "Obama at House Republican Retreat in Baltimore." Transcript, *Huffington Post*, January 29 2010.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/29/transcript-of-president-o_n_442423.html (accessed May 4, 2010).
- Oliver Marchart. *Post-Foundational Political Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Marx, Karl. "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 3-7. London: Norton, 1978.
- "The German Ideology." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, translated by Robert C. Tucker, 146-200. London: Norton, 1978.

- Marx, Karl and Freidrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Miller, Steven. "Kansas Aerospace Industry Forecast." Center for Economic Development and Business Research, Wichita State University. <http://webs.wichita.edu/cedbr/KSaero.pdf> (accessed March 14, 2008).
- Mouffe, Chantal. *On the Political*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Muccigrosso, Robert. *Basic History of American Conservatism*. Edited by Hans L. Trefousse. Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2001.
- Noll, Mark. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- PNREAP. "Shift-Share Analysis of Employment Growth." Kansas Regional Economic Analysis Project. <http://www.pnreap.org> (accessed March 7, 2008).
- Rehg, William. *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jurgen Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Scott, Robert E. "The High Price of 'Free' Trade." Economic Policy Institute. <http://www.epi.org> (accessed March 14, 2008).
- , "U.S.-China Trade 1989-2003." Economic Policy Institute. http://www.epi.org/workingpapers/epi_wp270.pdf (accessed March 14, 2008).
- Smith, Anna Marie. *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Smith, Steven B. *Reading Althusser*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis. *Lacan and and Political*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Stonecash, Jeffery. "Scaring the Democrats: What's the Matter with Thomas Frank's Argument?" *The Forum* 3, no. 3 (2005): Article 4.
- Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz. "State and Society, 1880-1930." In *The Hard Road to Renewal*, by Stuart Hall, 95-122. London: Verso, 1988.
- Thomassen, Lasse, ed. *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

- Townshend, Jules. "Laclau and Mouffe's Hegemonic Project: The Story So Far." *Political Studies* 52 (2004): 271.
- Trotsky, Leon. "En Route: Thoughts on the Progress of the Proletariat Revolution." In The Marxist Internet Archive. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/ch07.htm>. (accessed May 4, 2010).
- Trotsky, Leon. "The Proletariat and the Russian Revolution." In 1905. The Marxist Internet Archive. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/ch24.htm> (accessed May 4, 2010), sec. 2.
- Tumulty, Karen. "Republicans Plot Their Health Care Attack Strategy." *Time*, November 23, 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1942128,00.html> (accessed March 29, 2010).
- U.S. Census Bureau . "1994 Industry Code Summary." CenStats Databases. <http://censtats.census.gov> (accessed March 14, 2008).
- . "2004 Industry Code Summary." CenStats Databases. <http://censtats.census.gov> (accessed March 13, 2008).
- . "Fact Sheet for Johnson County." <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed February 24, 2008).
- . "Fact Sheet for Mission Hills." <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed February 24, 2008).
- . "Population Estimates July 2006." American Fact Finder. <http://factfinder.census.gov> (accessed March 25, 2008).
- Wichita Chamber of Commerce. "Business and Industry." <http://www.wichitakansas.org/business> (accessed February 26, 2008).
- Winders, Bill. "Sliding Toward the Free Market: Shifting Political Coalitions and U.S. Agricultural Policy 1945-1975." *Rural Sociology* 64, no. 4 2004: 467-489.
- Wolin, Richard. *The Frankfurt School Revisited and Other Essays on Politics and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2006.