



Publication details, information for authors and referees and full contents available at: <http://global-discourse.com/>

ISSN: 2043-7897

Suggested citation:

Sinnerbrink, R. (2010) 'Review of "The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek" by Geoff Boucher', *Global Discourse* [Online], 1: II, available from: <<http://global-discourse.com/contents>>.

All copyrights of this article are held by the author/s.

The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek by Geoff Boucher

Review by Robert Sinnerbrink¹

At a time when the prospect of socialist revolution seems rather remote, Geoff Boucher's *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* is a rousing clarion call; an ethico-political plea to retrieve Marxist thought from its post-Marxist reduction to ideology critique. To this end, Boucher develops an admirably powerful reconstructive critique of the 'dialectical' stages in the development of the "new postmarxian field of discourse analysis and radical democratic politics" (2). In a manner recalling the young Axel Honneth, Boucher maps the essential conceptual contours of the contemporary post-Marxist paradigm, showing how it is indebted to Althusser's seminal structuralist essay on "Ideological State Apparatuses", and how it then spawns a series of 'dialectically' connected moves that transform Althusser's structuralist theory of subject formation into a 'post-structuralist' theory of ideological hegemony.

The decisive post-Marxist text is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), which elaborates a "new theory of discourse in support of their radical democratic programme" (3). Laclau and Mouffe, according to Boucher, introduce a twofold shift in the Althusserian framework: an alternative theory of discourse and ideological hegemony that draws on post-structuralist philosophies of difference; and an abandonment of orthodox Marxist theory and politics in favour of a radicalised (liberal) democracy that reflects the political dispersion of ideological struggles. Boucher's challenging task in *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* is thus to map and critique the theoretical development of this postmarxist field from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to the three way 'trialogue' between Laclau, Judith Butler, and Slavoj Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality* (2000).

In the course of this remarkable critical reconstruction, Boucher develops a line of critique that is reiterated with each of the four authors analysed. Postmarxist theorists, he argues, fall foul of the 'historicist trap' in three distinctive ways: 1) by eschewing universalist theoretical and political claims, which relativises their theories of ideology such that these lapse into performative contradiction; 2) by embracing a radicalised form of liberal democracy (Laclau and Mouffe) that extinguishes any remnants of 'socialist strategy' in favour of particularist cultural politics (Butler); or 3) by advocating an unstable and untenable form of ultraleftist critique that fails to ground itself either normatively or theoretically (Žižek). The alternative, Boucher avers, is to perform a quasi-Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the postmarxist paradigm, integrating its critical transformation of structuralist Marxism but rejecting its reduction to ideology critique and postmodern liberalism.

¹ Robert Sinnerbrink, Department of Philosophy, Macquarie University, Sydney.

Boucher begins his critical reconstruction by mapping the emergence of postmarxism following the collapse of Marxist theory and socialist politics throughout the 1980s, the democratic revolutions of the late 1980s and subsequent political disappointment that followed in their wake (p. 19 ff.). The shift “beyond Marxism” in the 1990s was couched in the rhetoric of “New Times, New Social Movements, New Democracy” (19), with Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* serving as standard bearer for this emerging movement. The key move was to argue that the New Social Movements (NSM) had historically refuted the old Marxist paradigm; what the “New Times” demanded, therefore, was new theory that would better articulate the heterogeneous and particularist alliances that required greater recognition of identity claims across a wide and diverse range of marginalised subject positions (19-20).

The upshot of this shift, however, was to abandon class politics and economic analysis in favour of cultural politics and ideology critique, now recast as a politics of contingency, difference, and cultural rights (20-21). Marxist theory, including Critical Theory (Habermas), was rejected in favour of poststructuralism in theory and postmodern liberalism in politics. The problem, however, was that this reduction of radical democracy to postmodern politics was accompanied by fatal forms of cognitive and moral relativism; these undermined the kinds of communal, solidaristic, or universalist claims that would otherwise give substance to postmodern political subjectivity. Although equating theory with ideology, postmodern critical theory nonetheless engaged in ideology critique, relying on an unacknowledged normative basis that remained inconsistent with its avowed relativism.

This general line of critique is deepened in Boucher’s critique of Laclau and Mouffe. The starting point of their shift into a discursive politics lies in a selective reading of Althusser that deconstructs its universalist elements, relativises its epistemic claims, and emphasises the discursive and constructed character of knowledge, subjectivity, and social reality (38-42). This combination of deconstructivist Marxism and radical discursive constructivism, unmoored from universality by a postmodern culturalist-historicist turn, delivers Laclau and Mouffe with a postmarxist theory and politics that strongly resembles a radical postmodern liberalism (71-74). Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which Boucher deftly describes as the *History and Class Consciousness* of the postmodern (77), amounts to a deconstructed Hegelianism: a complex synthesis of “Structuralist Marxism and Gramscian political hermeneutics with motifs drawn from post-structuralist and contemporary theory” (77).

At stake was Laclau and Mouffe’s aim to replace the “Jacobin imaginary” of Marxist-Leninism with a radical democratic libertarianism that would extend the “Democratic Revolution of Modernity” (78 ff.). Their hermeneutic levelling of the difference between discourse and practice, however, had the unwelcome effect of revealing the speculative and dissonant moments of implicit totality that clashed with their attempts to construct a poststructuralist social theory with strong materialist commitments (78-79). These “crop circles” in the postmarxist theoretical field become emblematic, for Boucher, of the underlying inconsistency between postmarxism’s relativist discursive politics, and its claims to radical democracy and historical efficacy. Boucher’s counterproposal to Laclau and Mouffe (and to Butler and Žižek), is to advocate for a return to elements of Althusserian structuralist Marxism and updated forms of economic Regulation Theory and 1990s Eurocommunism.

Judith Butler's politics of performativity is subjected to essentially the same critique as Laclau and Mouffe theory of hegemony, which is hardly surprising since Butler's post-structuralist theory of performativity is presented as a radical gender-oriented variant of it. This critique applied in particular to Butler's ambiguous concept of performativity, which both enacts a repetition constituting gendered forms of subjectivity, while also being open to being re-enacted, through subversive repetition, by subjects that are paradoxically both discursively constructed and seemingly voluntarist-resistant. The latter, however, is impermissible according to Butler's synthesis of deconstructed Hegelianism and post-structuralist Althusserianism. Indeed, Butler reads Althusser's ISA essay, according to Boucher, "upside-down"; not for understanding how structures generate subjectivities but rather for how subjectivities might transform material institutions and corporeal realities (129). For Boucher, however, Butler's attempt to construct a subjectless conception of agency, and to develop an account of performativity that would explain how subversive repetition is possible, nonetheless requires an individualist model of normative subversion and the cultural-political contestation of limits (129 ff.). Like Laclau and Mouffe, Butler's radically discursive form of postmarxist cultural politics, which could be described as a "postmodern existentialism", remains enveloped by a radicalised liberalism (162).

The post-Marxist thinker who does push this line of thought into new but problematic territory is Slavoj Žižek, who advances Laclau and Mouffe's deconstructive theory of hegemony by rewriting it in the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis (165). Indeed, Žižek's originality is to have developed a "Lacanian dialectics" deeply indebted to Hegel: an extension of the Althusserian theory of ideology that enables him to argue that the "unruly unconscious subject is the by-product of ideological interpellation", while at the same time circumventing "the historical problematic of postmarxist discourse analysis" and endorsing a qualified form of (Hegelian) universalism (165). This Hegelian-Lacanian theory of ideology and structuralist account of subjectivity, Boucher remarks, also has the virtue of providing an "ethical basis for democratic socialism" (165).

At the same time, Žižek is driven, apparently by Lacanian premises, to develop a renewed Cartesian conception of subjectivity that also entails "ethical decisionism and political voluntarism" (166). Žižek's political trajectory culminates, however, with a provocative defence of Leninism and a revamping of the Lukácsian proletariat as the "identical subject-object of history" (166). Boucher identifies the theoretical source of Žižek's lurch into ultraleftism and metaphysical decisionism in his embrace of a Schellingian metaphysics, a shift that has its correlate, Boucher argues, in Žižek's erroneous reading of the Lacanian 'graph of desire', which places undue emphasis on the dispersion of the ego and unity of the unconscious (166). This shift culminates in a model of the subject mired in the drives that regresses from Žižek's earlier emancipatory conception of subjectivity, and posits instead an irrationalist core to subjectivity that remains vulnerable to the kind of "Jacobin imaginary" Laclau and Mouffe had successfully overcome.

The implication of Boucher's expert but arcane analysis is that Žižek deprives himself of the resources available within orthodox Lacanian theory to endorse the kind of rational autonomy required for a plausible model of democratic politics. Instead, Žižek increasingly embraces an 'irrationalist' conception of the fundamental aggression of the human subject in its incessant battle with the death drive. Boucher locates this shift in Žižek's work in the late 1990s (from *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996) to *The Ticklish Subject* (1999)), arguing that Žižek abandons his universalist

commitments to radical democracy and rational autonomy in favour of an ‘end of history’ eschatology in which the ‘acephalic’ subject of the drives might enact a revolutionary transformation of a global capitalist system in terminal breakdown.

Boucher’s brilliant immanent critique of all three positions (Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, Žižek) shows through close critical analysis the failure of these theorists to avoid the relativist trap, save for a problematic embrace of either postmodern liberalism or ungrounded forms of ultraleftist politics. What Boucher does not acknowledge sufficiently, perhaps, are the historical, political, and ideological factors that might also explain the particular trajectories taken by these four fascinating thinkers. Žižek’s theoretical shift during the late 1990s to early 2000s, for example, is arguably motivated by the desire to respond to contemporary geopolitical events as well as the increasingly authoritarian turn of neoliberal democracy following the Sept. 11 attacks and subsequent ‘War on Terror’. Boucher’s emphasis on the paradigm-shifting force of Žižek’s dalliance with Schellingian metaphysics places a heavy burden on this aspect of Žižek’s model of the subject and of politics. Does Žižek’s theory of subjectivity, and moreover his theory of ideology, remain fatally embedded within this obscure metaphysical framework? Can the Lukácsian figure of the “identical subject-object of history” assume the heavy theoretical burden that Boucher places on it in his critique of Žižek?

Hegel too (as Žižek shows) has Schellingian moments in which the unconscious subject of the drives is presented as the Ur-form of subjectivity (the Hegelian ‘Night of the World’). Moreover, the Hegelian theme of recognition—promulgated by Axel Honneth and to which Boucher signals his allegiance—has an earlier French incarnation (from Alexandre Kojève to Sartre and Frantz Fanon) in which the radical negativity of the subject is firmly underlined. Hence the French existential-Hegelian emphasis on the conflictuality of desiring relations, the irreducibility of struggle, even violence, within human social-historical relations. Finally, Žižek is perhaps better regarded as a neo-Marxist ‘Leftist Knave’—gadfly critic of the status quo whose provocations are permissible so long as they are not enacted—rather than a dangerous neo-Leninist. Instead of programmatic theorising or revolutionary strategy, Žižek opts for incisive ideology critique: the timely critical subversion of prevailing normative frameworks within a crisis-ridden global capitalism. It is not only post-Marxist theorists who remain caught within the charmed circle of ideology.