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A Reply to Revolutionary Subjectivity in Post-Marxist Thought: The Case of Laclau and Badiou by Oliver Harrison

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Harrison's article explores the continuing relevance of Marx and Marxism to so called post-Marxist theorists, notably Laclau and Badiou, and with particular reference to their accounts of revolutionary subjectivity. I have no quibble with his account of the key elements of Marx's account of revolutionary subjectivity – the centrality of productive labour to the subjective realisation of revolutionary consciousness, and how, for Marx, this is tied to objective tendencies immanent to the development of capitalism. Harrison goes on to demonstrate that both Laclau and Badiou reject the central components of this account: they do not believe that there are objective tendencies immanent to capitalist development which necessitate a particular form of revolutionary subjectivity; they do not think that history has a subject, and they refuse the idea that society can be considered as an immanent totality. Despite this, Harrison demonstrates that both authors draw upon the Marxist tradition in their accounts of political subjectivity – Laclau on Gramsci and Badiou on Mao.

Harrison's article marks an important intervention insisting on not rejecting Marx, but on reading again and again Marx's legacies, in light of critique. Indeed Marx haunts the present, undermining its self-certainty in a variety of different forms. These are not spectres to be exorcised, but legacies which have an affectivity in the present. However, this work of remembrance, of working through, was not adequately performed by those scholars influenced by Laclau's work in particular. In this sense Laclau's acolytes have for the most part accepted his critique of Marx, without rereading Marx in light of this critique. Harrison's focus on revolutionary subjectivity offers one route through this legacy. He is right to insist upon the continued relevance of both Marx and Gramsci to Laclau's account, while marking the distance that Laclau takes from these accounts especially in relation to the idea that the proletariat has either a privileged or a necessary relation to progressive politics. I want to say a little more about this account, in relation to two key moments in Laclau's work – totality and equivalence.

Harrison notes that whilst Laclau rejects the idea that society could ever be a fully constituted totality, now or in the future, he nonetheless accepts the 'aspiration for totality' – totality understood as a horizon rather than as a ground. Why though should we accept this so called aspiration for totality? On Laclau's account it is precisely this lack (in both the subject and the object, society) which drives repeated acts of identification on the part of the subject. If however this ideal of a self-constituting totality was always a fantasy, if it is in part a fantasy generated by the theoretical presumptions of both structuralism and a certain version of Hegelian idealism, why should the ghost of structure return in the guise of a desire which

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forever eludes our grasp? This assumption, so central to post-Marxist accounts of subjectivity, allows ill thought out concepts of subjectivity to re-enter through the back door, despite the awareness of their limitations. The more interesting question would require an exploration of how a subjectivity reconciled to its own decentring could engage in a revolutionary politics which refuses, *a priori*, the aspiration for totality.

A second aspect of Laclau's account noted by Harrison also requires rethinking. Laclau insists that a counter hegemonic subjectivity is built through chains of equivalence, and that these equivalential chains are secured through the emergence of empty signifiers. This account is again all too familiar, and is now taken for granted by most post-Marxist scholars. What is never noted is that it was Marx who first used the term equivalence in relation to the money form. Money in fact functions as the perfect empty signifier: rendered wholly independent of any physical form, money allows for the exchange of equivalents in a manner which renders obsolete the peculiarities of the production processes required for the consumption of commodities. This fetishism of the commodity is central to any understanding of both the hegemony of capital today, and the sundering of the particularities which may have resisted the logics which go with the money form in its digitalised instantiation. Marx, however, always returns to a universal which this universal equivalent ultimately presents, even if unsuccessfully. The labour theory of value requires that we accept that abstract labour is ultimately at the sources of all equivalent value. Leaving aside for a moment the limits of Marx's account, what this brief discussion indicates is the tendency of post Marxist accounts to focus on forms of equivalence which require articulation by a political subject, as opposed to more abstract logics, such as those of capital, which seem to operate anonymously behind the backs of subjects, so to speak.

If Laclau's account of the subject is limited in part by its unrequited reliance upon the very forms of structuralism it rejects, what of Badiou? Harrison rightly notes that Badiou does not consider the subject only in terms of failed acts of subjectification. Instead, Badiou's subjective truths relate to different truth procedures, with their own particular logics, as well as to the surprise associated with the emergence of a subject when demonstrating fidelity to an event. Moreover, Badiou acknowledges the dangers associated with a politics of truth which cannot come to terms with the unnameable of the situation – that which finally prevents any situation from being at one with itself. The rejection of dogmatic fidelities here echoes Laclau's critique of the totalitarian possibilities of a politics of truth. Badiou though relies too heavily on this account of the event, and thus of an account of political subjectivity which seems miraculous in relation to an existent situation. If politics is reserved for those moments when the very principle structuring a political order is put in to question, then politics becomes a rare event, dissociated from the daily struggles to change the worlds in which millions live.

It is here that Harrison makes his intervention, arguing that both Laclau and Badiou go too far in rejecting Marx's account of social production. He suggests that a better path to follow might be that of Hardt and Negri, in particular their account of immaterial labour which maintains a focus on the politics of reproduction while outlining the possibility of a post-capitalist politics. However, these comments are all too quick and do not take us much further than the conclusion that Laclau too quickly dismisses – class –, while Badiou has no account of hegemony which might ground political interventions. The real question concerns the transformation in the production and reproduction of human life in the past three decades, through the

financialisation of everyday life, and how this relates to the gradual evisceration of social democratic politics so obvious today. Here we may well begin with Marx and his account of equivalence. However, that would require another article.