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## POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF NEGATIVITY

As was announced I am going to speak about the political significance of negativity and about the ways of constructing the category of negativity.

I am going to start from a point which might seem marginal to the main subject of the talk, but which is going, in fact, to lead us straight into the centre of it. I am going to start discussing the classical distinction between idealism and materialism.

There are a lot of confusions about the opposition idealism-materialism. And the most common one is the identification of this problem with the question about the existence or non-existence of an external world of real objects. This problem has nothing to do with the alternative idealism/materialism, because here the pertinent distinction is the one between idealism and realism. A philosophy like Aristotle's, for instance, which by no stretch of imagination can be conceived as materialist, is, however, a clearly realist one. And even the philosophy of Plato is still a realist philosophy, given that for him the world of forms exists outside the mind, which contemplates it in a heavenly place. In fact, the existence of a world of real objects was never called into question by ancient philosophy. It was assumed as a simple fact. We have to arrive at modern philosophy, to a philosophy such as Berkeley's, to find the idea that the existence of a world of external objects is entirely dependent upon mind. But even a philosophy like Hegel's, which is regarded as absolute idealism, does not at all deny the existence of a world of real objects. Even more, it emphasises the fact that this world of real objects does not only exist but necessarily exists.

So the first thing required to understand the distinction between idealism and materialism is to put aside the debate between idealism and realism. In fact, the concept of idealism as opposed to materialism has a completely different meaning from the one it has in its opposition to realism.

In the opposition materialism/idealism the real issue is whether the real can be ultimately reduced to the rational. That is to say — if the ultimate reality of the objects existing outside our minds — our individual minds — is in itself thought.

Now, from this point of view both the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato were predominantly idealist, because they were philosophies centred around

the concept of form. Form was conceived both as a category of mind, and as the ultimate reality of the object. That is to say — form is that which the mind and the object have in common. In a famous passage of his treatise on *De Anima* Aristotle said that the soul is in some sense everything. One important consequence of this view about the ultimate intelligibility of the real is that the real is the universal. If I speak about this table I will say that it is brown, that it is rectangular, that it is a table, etc. All these determinations are applicable to a plurality of objects. But what is the *it*, which receives all these predications? Obviously, if there is such an *it*, this *it* cannot be known. It's radically unintelligible because it is what cannot be subsumed under the concept. This ultimately residue that cannot be subsumed and mastered by form is what ancient philosophy called *mater*. In an idealist philosophy as Hegel's the attempt is made precisely to eliminate this ultimate residue of matter. The assertion that the real is rational, that the real can be reduced and mastered by the concept, is the essence of all kinds of metaphysical — idealistic in this particular sense — thought. It is, of course, a matter for discussion to what extent Hegel lives up to the expectations of this formula; for instance, in his *Logic* he introduced the category of contingency at some point and through in this »matter« that he tried to eliminate reemerge again in his analysis. But as a project, the idealist project in this sense of idealism — not opposed to realism but to materialism — is what has constituted the kernel of western metaphysics. That is to say — the real is ultimately form, and so the being and the entity of objects ultimately coincide.

It is important to see that materialist philosophies in the classical sense or even in the modern sense, do not break at all with idealism. Even more, I would argue that the philosophy of Marx is still to a large extent idealist. And materialist philosophies do not break with idealism because matter is still conceived as a concept (as a universal); that is to say, as a form which can be rationally grasped. In fact in a passage of his *Logic*, Hegel says that materialism has been the first historical form of idealism, that is to say a primitive form of idealism, because it had conceived matter as a conceptually graspable entity. Democritus for instance, conceived the ultimate substance of reality as atoms, and described these atoms. But the categories of this description are still concepts, that is to say, form.

In this sense the dialectical inversion that Marx carries out in Hegelian philosophy does not change the substance of the latter. It still depends on the basic categories of traditional metaphysics. If you say that it is not consciousness that determines existence, but existence that determines consciousness existence is still for him something which can be grasped in terms of conceptual and rational categories. The social totality is therefore conceived by him as a rational and intelligible object. And in this sense his dependence on the whole spirit and the main trends of classical metaphysics is clear. Here, however, I would like to argue that this is only one moment of Marxian thought; the moment in which his materialism is perfectly compatible with the categories of Hegelianism and of classical metaphysics.

But there is another movement in Marx's thought which — though incipient — involves a movement towards materialism understood in a more radical sense. This second movement is what I would call relationalism. By this I am referring to his argument that the ideas in the minds of human beings are not a separate realm, but one which is related, interconnected, with every-



thing — with all the other components of social or material reality. It is this second movement which starts the weakening of the privileged ontological location of »essential forms«. His formulation by Marx is, however, hopelessly inadequate, given that Marx's relationalism is conceived in terms of the dichotomy base/superstructure. And the relation between the two — irrespectively of this being conceived in terms of causality or logical derivation — implies that there is a starting point — the base — out of which we can reconstruct the social totality in terms of intelligible form. That is to say, we are still in the Hegelian terrain of the rationality of the real.

But today we have other forms of dealing with this relational moment which permit a movement away from rationalism and idealism. And it is to this aspect that I am going now to refer.

Here, and this is a subject that we discussed in this same room one year ago, we are in the center of the transformation of philosophical thought in this century, which has largely been a movement away from idealism. Important moments in this trend are Wittgenstein and post-analytical philosophy on the one hand, and the reformulation of the phenomenological project to be found in the work of the later Heidegger, on the other. But also, as I have argued last year, within the so-called post-structuralist tradition there is a radical break with essentialism centered in the critique of the sign.

So, let me first discuss relationalism in the context of Saussurean linguistics to introduce later within its categories an element of negativity which leads to a break with metaphysics, with idealistic philosophy and with this centrality of the notion of form.

Saussure conceived identities as being purely differential, that is to say as purely relational. If I am saying »father«, I can only understand what I mean if I have also the terms »mother«, »son«, etc. That is to say that the term »father« is not a *one to one* relationship with an object, but is constituted within a system, as a position in a system of differences.

In this sense, the presence of something is never mere presence, because in order to constitute this very presence I have to make reference to something which is absent. In terms of Derrida anything has the trace of something different from itself. It is this moment of »difference« what prevents the fixing of the identity as mere presence. However, this relational moment can be easily »colonized« by the metaphysical notion of form, given that it is enough that we conceive this system of differences as a closed system, as it was considered by Saussure, to have the transference of the notion of presence, from the individual units to the relational totality which gives its meaning to each of those units. That is to say, relationalism as such, as far as it is conceived as a closed ultimate breaking away from an essentialist philosophy.

We have two possible ways out of this ultimate essentialism present in the structuralist tradition.

One possibility is to conceive of the proliferation of difference as an infinitude; that is to say, that instead of conceiving presence as a closed system of differences, we assert that this system is never closed and that there is a constant overflowing of the signifier by the signified. (This is, as you know, the notion of »symbol« present in the romantic tradition.) I do not think that this notion of the overflow of the signifier by the signified in post-structuralism has added more than a new version of the old conception of the symbol in German romanticism.



There is, however, another possibility, which has been explored in the book which I have written with Chantal Mouffe. It is the following: instead of asserting the infinite movement of difference and the impossibility of any last fixity, we can fix the moment of the impossibility as such. That is to say that through the movement of differences we don't see simply that movement, but also the impossibility of fixity as such. And the problem is now how to fix this impossibility. Now, with this, we are moving slightly the terrain of analysis. We are trying to see to what extent the movement of differences is revelatory of something else. Now, when a concept is revelatory it shows through a lack which is hidden in it, something which cannot be represented in a direct form. To give you just one classical example: the analysis of the broken hammer in *Being and Time*. When the hammer is broken something which is lacking the real being of the hammer is shown. As long as you are using the hammer the being of hammer is not revealing itself as such. It's only through the fact of being broken that it is shown. Now, what we have tried to show in our book is that in social relations this moment of negativity which is revelatory — in the sense of *alétheia* — in the sense of unveiling, is essentially linked to social antagonisms. That is to say, social antagonism, (which we have discussed at length last year so I am going over this point again) is never »objective« but, on the contrary, it shows the limits of any possible objectivity. Social antagonism cannot be ultimately explained, because antagonism constitutes the limit of any explanation and as a consequence it cannot be expressed directly in language, because language only exists as an attempt to fix that which antagonism subverts. That is to say, antagonism is revelatory both in the sense of Heidegger, — *alétheia*, a truth of things, not a truth of judgement — but also in the sense of Wittgenstein, as when he draws in the *Tractatus* the distinction between saying and showing. Saying, in some way, shows something which is not strictly said.

Now, with this, we arrive at the central point of my argument, which is the one concerning the historicity of being. The historicity of being, — the restoration, if you want, of the ontological difference — is established through showing the mere historical and contingent character of the being of objects. That is to say, the impossibility of reducing Being (*esse*) to entity (*ens*). Here, I think we are also very close to the notion of the real in Lacan. That is to say, the real is that which prevents the full closing of a symbolic system. If there were not this element of lack, the symbolic would always be closed as a totality. But as far as there is the real there is an impossibility of the symbolic of closing itself. Now, if you remember the beginning of my talk about the distinction between materialism and idealism, and our characterization of idealism as that which reduces the real to form, here we have the exactly reversed situation. And, I think, this opens the way to a deepening of the materialist project. The real is that which disrupts and shows the historical and contingent character of »form«. In this sense, discourse theory in the way we are trying to develop it, is a commitment which goes far beyond a mere epistemological or ontological stance. It's the attempt of showing how the being of objects, far from being fixed and simply »given« to the contemplation of human beings, is socially constructed through their actions.

With this notion of negativity we've reached the following point: antagonism is a disruption of form, a dislocation of form, which shows the contin-



gency and historicity of Being and, consequently, cannot be retrieved by any kind of positivity — it cannot, for instance, be retrieved by a cunning of reason which shows the positive work of reason behind the apparent irrationality of antagonism, evil etc.

I would like now to move to the second part of my presentation, which is an attempt to use these notions in order to make a critique of the classical Marxist notion of class struggle. Let's start analysing the capitalist relation of production. According to Marx it is the main locus of social antagonism in capitalist society, and it is established between the capitalist who extracts the surplus value from the worker and the worker who is deprived of his surplus labour. Now, this relation, if it is conceived as form, has nothing to do with the capitalist and the worker as concrete social agents but only with the economic categories of which they are bearers. The worker is there present only as »seller of his labour power«. So, we have to forget everything about concrete workers and concentrate on this economic category. Where does the antagonism capitalist/worker lie? One first solution would be to say that there is an antagonism because the capitalist extracts the surplus value from the worker, who is, consequently, deprived of it. But from such a deprivation does not logically follow that there should be an antagonism. There is antagonism only if the worker *resists* the extraction of his surplus value by the capitalist, but this resistance cannot be logically derived from the category »seller of his labour power« as such. Classical political economy dealt with this problem by introducing one further assumption — the assumption of the *homo oeconomicus*. This involves the assertion that all social agents are profit maximizers. And, in that case, of course, there is antagonism, because everything is reduced to a zero-sum game between the capitalist and the worker for the appropriation of the surplus value. But no Marxist theoretician has assumed that the worker is a profit maximizer. The latter is, in fact, an entirely arbitrary assumption which can explain some types of behaviour but which cannot be given the status of a general »social a priori«. But if we drop this assumption, the emergence or not of an antagonism in the capitalist relation of production still has to be explained.

One second possible line of argument, which would certainly be more correct, would be to say: if the salaries, the wages, go below a certain point, there are many things that people cannot do. They cannot have access to some means of consumption, they cannot send children to school, they cannot live as they have done before etc., etc. But in that case the antagonism does not take place *within* the capitalist relation of production as such but *between* the relation of production and an identity that the social agents have *outside it*. That is to say that we find again »negativity« in the sense that we have defined before. The capitalist relation of production, in that case, becomes the source of an antagonism as far as it negates something which is external to it.

Two things follow from this argument: The first is that as far as we conceive social negativity in this way the antagonism is constitutive and cannot be reduced to any ultimate positivity. That is to say, it cannot be reduced to form. And secondly that if there is an antagonism or there is no antagonism at all, depends on how this subject, these workers, the actual workers of flesh and bones, and no longer the mere economic category is constituted as a subject outside the capitalist relations of production. And in that case everything comes to a plurality of discourses, social struggles, constitution



of subjectivity in a variety of social relations. Anti-capitalism in this sense, will be the historical and contingent result of struggles which are taking place all over society, and is not limited to that privileged field constituted by »capitalist relations of production« in the classical analysis.

The two basic points I want to make here are the following:

First, that the nature and degree of the resistance against capitalist relations of production will crucially depend on the consciousness of their rights that people have in a certain historical moment. For instance: if people through a set of historical struggles are constituted as subjects conscious of their rights to have equality of opportunities in education, and if this becomes in society something which is part to the common sense of people, in that case they are going to resist attempts in any sphere to put into question those rights. So, when we are speaking about the importance of the new social movements, or of the potential importance of them, the point to be emphasized is that extend a conception of rights, equality etc. to larger and larger areas of social relations, instead of conceiving them as the result of struggles which take place in a limited sphere of the social fabric. It is important to remember that the one of the first and radical attempts to break with economism within Marxism — the one of Georges Sorel — postulated precisely the constitution of a mythical subject as a subject constituted around a juridical consciousness. That is to say — around discourses concerning rights.

The second point — which would require another paper to be fully developed — is that these discourses concerning rights and concerning antagonism involve the centrality for social analysis of the category of »social dislocation«. The most important element to be retained from classical Marxism is the notion that capitalism only expands historically by dislocating increasingly larger spheres of social relations. Certainly Marx thought that, at the same time that this dislocation was taking place, something new and fully positive was created as a dialectical answer. But if we abandon this second and Hegelian side of the argument, we simply remain at the level of social dislocation and social negativity, and the historical perspectives remain open and largely indeterminate. There are no longer privileged and predetermined agents of historical change. But it is precisely because of this that it is possible to conceive a multiplicity of struggles »at the human scale« which are creating a new kind of social imaginary, far more democratic than in the past, because it is no longer conceived as the revelation of the »necessary laws of history«, but as a purely contingent and historical construction.