

God Only Knows

Ernesto Laclau discusses why marxism as a system of thought is outmoded

In a *Marxism Today* seminar which I attended some months ago, a document setting the agenda of the discussion asserted: 'The end of a notion of some logic to history gives greater weight to ideology and ethics in constituting radical polities'.

I do not entirely disagree with that formulation, but I would argue that it is ambiguous, because it can involve two entirely different assertions. The first is that political identities, in the fragmented world of present-day societies, are far more complex than anything that the traditional Left has previously imagined. This is only too true. But its meaning can also be constructed in terms of a subtle and perverse dialectic of replacement - that the classical logics of history should be replaced by something else which would occupy the same structural place as these logics.

Let us just consider the debate about whether the working class is still the main historical subject or if the latter's role has passed to the new social move-

ments. I would argue that this way of formulating the problem is still imprisoned by the old approach which it attempts to supersede, because it maintains the idea that there has to be a *single* privileged agent of historical change, defined by a historical and social totality which can be rationally grasped. But it is precisely this last assumption which has to be questioned, and, if one does so, the whole discussion over who is the privileged agent of historical change becomes meaningless.

It is convenient to pause here for a moment, because this notion of a radical intelligibility of the social, which assigns a precise location to all its partial internal processes, is one of the main obstacles to the understanding of the nature of contemporary social struggles and their political consequences. We have to remember that the idea that history and society could be referred back to an ultimate rational ground which explains the totality of its processes is a relatively new one. This

imperialism of 'reason' was absent from ancient and medieval thought, only starting to affirm itself at the beginning of modern times.

I would even add something: this all-embracing role of reason is the distinctive mark of modernity, and it resulted from the conflation of the notion of reason, as elaborated by classical antiquity, and the Christian notion of an eschatological representation of the totality of the real. Ancient philosophy did not assert that rationality can exhaust with its categories the totality of the real. Aristotle, for instance, distinguished between *form*, which is the rational universal inscribed in all existing things, and *matter*, the purely contingent and accidental which escapes the grasp of rationality. Even Plato's 'demiurge' did not create the world out of nothingness, but imprinted the eternal forms in a pre-existing matter. So, the ambition of modern thought, to explain the totality of what exists in terms of an ultimate rational ground, is something profoundly alien to ancient culture.

On the contrary, the idea that the totality of what exists can be explained from a single ground is a distinctive trait of Christianity, in which the creation is a creation out of nothingness, and God is the absolute source of all existing things. This absolute ground is certainly not 'rational' from the point of view of human reason, because the ways of the Lord are inscrutable, but we have an eschatological picture of the future of cosmic dimensions through revelation. In this way, Christianity introduced two notions which were crucial for the constitution of the modern outlook: the idea of an absolute source of everything that exists, and the assertion that there is a necessary sequence in the course of future events which we know through revelation. The notion of a 'necessary logic of history' first emerged in theological garb.

At the beginning of modern times, with the eclipse of God, a significant shift in this intellectual paradigm was to take place. Modernity retained from the Christian vision both the affirmation of an absolute ground of the real, and the aspiration to a total representability of history as a necessary sequence of events. The only difficulty was that, since God was no longer available, both the ground and the necessary succession have to be explained by principles internal to the world, and in this way reason is called to play a far more fundamental role than it ever did in the past.

Modern rationalism, from Descartes to Spinoza and from Hegel to Marx, is characterised by this new pretension of subsuming the totality of the real under a unified system of categories. Hegel's assertion that everything which is real is rational is the highest expression of an intellectual trend which penetrates and dominates the totality of modern thought. Marx's 'deter-

mination in the ultimate instance by the economy', and the 'necessary laws of history' are not far away.

It is this tendency to think in terms of 'ultimate grounds' and closed totalities which survives today in many discussions - like those concerning the new social movements - even when marxism is, at least formally, in question. The tendency is to abandon the actual content of marxist categories while maintaining the formal structural locations which that content occupied in a rationalist scheme, which thereby is not questioned in the least. It is accepted that the working class cannot play the eschatological function attributed to it by marxism; but this is immediately followed by the search for a new revolutionary actor - students, women, the masses of the Third World - without realising that the crisis of the eschatological representation of history renders meaningless the whole notion of a 'revolutionary actor' in its traditional sense.

Let us go back, for a moment, to the Middle Ages. We have said that, from the point of view of human reason, the succession of events in the eschatological series is contingent and irrational, only known through revelation. Modern thought occupied that eschatological terrain, making reason play the role of a secularised God. But if we are today moving away from all eschatology - either of a theological or a secularised kind - we are only left with the radical contingency of history and society, with a plurality of historical processes and events; and these do not lead back to an ultimate ground which would fix their meaning once and for all.

This does not imply, of course, that social life is a meaningless ensemble of chaotic events. What it *does* imply is that, whatever meaning historical events have, this meaning is pragmatically and hegemonically constructed through social struggles; it is always going to be precarious and threatened by opposite tendencies and, consequently, there is no 'objective meaning' out of which all historical events could be explained according to a unified scheme. It is my contention that this new intellectual condition of our post-modern age, far from being the occasion for any nostalgia for the lost ground, should be the source of a new optimism. For the blurring of the 'certainties of history' allows us to advance democratic causes in a far more consistent manner than in the past. It is this which I will try to demonstrate in the rest of this article, exploring some of the dimensions and democratic possibilities which follow from social contingency.

Inherent to modern secularised eschatologies is the assertion that social emancipation is going to be the historical achievement of a 'universal class' - that is, of a social agent representing pure human essence, dispossessed of all differential specificity. Proletarians do not have a motherland. For marxism,

the genesis of a universal class was conceived precisely as a process involving the destruction and cancellation of all particularisms and social differences. The simplification of social structures under capitalism would lead to an increasing proletarianisation and to a final confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the vast masses of the dispossessed.

A very important difference between Christian eschatologies and their secularised versions should be pointed out here: while in religious eschatologies the saviour of humanity - who belonged to a supernatural order - could only act historically by incarnating himself in a limited and finite body, for classical marxism the proletariat as a universal class was the product of history itself and in that sense it did not require any incarnation. But very quickly, the dialectic of incarnation imposed itself onto marxism. The gap between the actual consciousness of the workers and the universal task which they were supposed to fulfil was expressed in a split between what was called the 'materiality of the class' and its historical interests, which were to be incarnated by the party. But, capitalist society, far from moving in the direction of an increasing social homogenisation, is, on the contrary, dominated by a proliferation of particularisms and differences, and therefore the gap between concrete agents and universal tasks steadily widened. Under these conditions, the logic of incarnation had to be increasingly used in all attempts to make political action compatible with marxist eschatology.

Now, a relation of incarnation presupposes that there is an insurmountable chasm between what is incarnated and the body in which the incarnation takes place. A limited historical actor has been attributed a limitless historical task. The insurmountability of the gap between task and body was bridged in religious discourse by a divine decision; but in the case of a secular incarnation, the attribution of the task can only be a self-attribution. The totalitarian character of this operation is clear; a certain historical actor does not speak from his own limited position, but claims that his position is the locus of the universal. He does not establish a dialogue with other, equally limited historical actors in order to construct a collective will, but asserts, on the contrary, that his discourse is the only valid one, and claims to have a knowledge that all the others will *necessarily* disappear.

It is important to realise that this totalitarian tendency would not have emerged if industrial societies had actually evolved in the direction of an increasing homogenisation of the social structure; for in that case, everybody would have spoken from the same location, universality would have been an actual social fact, and no incarnation would have been necessary. But when these societies evolved in the opposite

direction and became increasingly fragmented and dominated by all kinds of particularisms, the totalitarian dangers of the universalistic discourse became only too visible.

So, what makes the rationalistic discourse of the 'ultimate instance of the social' and the 'logic of history' totalitarian is their denial of particularism and difference. But this already shows that the condition for the deepening of the democratic process is a dispersal of power through a proliferation of differences. Instead of the universal task of a privileged historical actor, there is an increasing plurality of social agents who construct their demands from particular viewpoints, none of whom can claim to represent humanity as such. Whatever more universal values exist in a certain community will not be the expression of any pre-existing essence, but rather the result of a pragmatic and unstable construction which starts from a multiplicity of points on the social fabric. The eclipse of the rational ground of history - in which, as we have seen, marxism, along with the whole of modernity, believed - and the increasing fragmentation of present-day societies, are thus the preconditions for an advance in a democratic direction.

Let us not, however, paint a too rosy picture. For if universalism does not necessarily lead in a democratic direction, particularism does not do so either. The assertion of differential identities can be done in terms of an exclusionary discourse which can easily lead into all kinds of intransigency and xenophobia. There is actually no particularistic identity - even the apparently more libertarian - which cannot be constructed in these anti-democratic terms. The reasons for this are clear. Particularism means the construction of a social identity around an issue or a specific geographical, ethnic, sexual or social location. Now, given that there is no longer any rational ground ensuring a necessary articulation between the various identities of the participating social agents, no guarantee exists that the assertion of one identity, which we would consider as democratic, would necessarily be linked to others which we would consider equally so. All kinds of combinations are possible here. Just a superficial glance at the world scene would be enough to convince us of that.

The crisis of the communist regimes in the Eastern bloc is a good example of what I am saying. In one sense they certainly represent the collapse of eschatological universalism. The world of the Internationals, the assertion of a human and socialist identity against and beyond all particularisms, have culminated, with the history of communism in the 20th century, in a tragedy whose epic dimensions are proportionate to its ambitions. What we have called the dialectic of incarnation found its full development in communist totalitarianism. The insurmountable gap

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between the universality of the task and the limited and finite body incarnating it found its logical conclusion in the revenge of the body, which asserted its particular identity through the corruption of a bureaucracy, through massive repression in the name of human freedom, through the denial of civil rights in the name of emancipation, through inefficiency and waste in the name of rational planning.

But in a second sense we are starting to see today that the assertion of particularism, which in eastern Europe is becoming the substitute for the universalistic chimera, is showing us a spectacle which is far from appetising: ethnic confrontation between communities, xenophobia, anti-semitism, and the resurgence of all kinds of traditional and obscurantist identifications. This is not the whole panorama, and certainly there are also trends in eastern European societies which are moving in a democratic direction, but the negative phenomena are massive enough to require us to pause a moment to reflect on their meaning.

My answer is broadly the following: the absence of a ground of the social means that whatever form of social articulation exists is going to be the result of a laborious process of political construction, which creates new habits, new forms of thought, new forms of relation between people. In other words, it means the creation of a political tradi-

tion. But this is precisely what an authoritarian regime makes impossible. So its sudden overthrow does not bring to the fore a fully-fledged democratic alternative, but rather liberates forces which have had no time to learn how to constitute a democratic community. In these circumstances, people tend to assert their immediate, particular identities as the only thing they have, in order to find points of reference in a new and disorientating political landscape. This is why the sudden collapse of an authoritarian regime is generally followed by a period of anarchy and civil unrest. The French revolution and the early stages of the Hispano-American republics in the 19th century are good examples of this. And the events in eastern Europe and the complex process of the South African transition towards a post-apartheid society show the same phenomenon in our time.

So, if neither universalism nor particularism are by themselves capable of ensuring the path towards a democratic society, what would? Is democracy, perhaps, a Utopian dream, to be destroyed by the exclusionary alternative between totalitarian universalism and anarchic particularism? My answer is that the political games which one can play are not exhausted by referring to the extreme situations that these two poles represent. The gap between the limitation and particularism of *all* social agents and the need for a force which acts in the name of the whole

community can certainly not be bridged, but that is precisely what makes democracy possible. For if the gap were bridged, one particular segment of society would have become, once and forever, the pure incarnation of the community's universality.

But if the gap cannot be bridged, any incarnation is going to be purely temporary, and this opens up the possibility of an alternation of different groups in power. A ground of the social is needed in order to give to society a certain image, shape and orientation. But since, at the same time, that ground is ultimately impossible, it cannot acquire the character of an absolute foundation, as it can only exist in the precarious form of a hegemonic construction which constantly shows the traces of its transient character. This is the way in which democracy - the greatest political creation of the last two centuries - tries to mediate between universalism and particularism. If the rationalism of modernity, with its ambition of controlling the ground of society, left us the poisoned gift of an unresolved tension between universalism and particularism, the post-modern renunciation of such a ground opens the way to a mediation between the two and, in this sense, makes possible the development of the full potential of the democratic revolution.

Ernesto Laclau is the director of the centre for theoretical studies at Essex University.

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